Supervisors’ oral feedback on HDR student writing

A criterion-based approach

Dr Bronwen Dyson
bronwen.dyson@sydney.edu.au
For Higher Degree Research students, feedback constitutes:

“… “a major, if not the major, form of instruction” (Bitchener, Basturkmen & East (2010, p.82).

- Written feedback provided on student drafts.
- **Oral feedback** provided in meetings, either before or after drafting.

Limited research on supervisory feedback, particularly oral feedback.

Largest study (Paré, 2010, p. 107) concludes that advisors’ spoken comments are “often ambiguous, enigmatic and coded – that is saturated with meaning, but difficult to understand”.

So, is supervisors’ oral feedback **ambiguous & difficult to understand**?

Argument: Writing criteria can reveal whether or not there is a lack of clarity - or any other problem - in supervisors’ oral feedback and so should be more widely used.
Paré (2010, 2011): questionnaire & recorded meetings of large number of Canadian Humanities and Sciences supervisors.

Argues that advisors “struggle to articulate implicit knowledge”, e.g.

I think the information is there but I have two main points about it. One is that I think it should be a bit more focused. ... The other comment is to, I don’t know, firm it up, I suppose. ... I’d like more numbers, I suppose. ... So that my general feeling is that the chapter itself ... should be put within a slightly bigger box for the committee (2011, 61-62).

However:

Analysis is broad-brush.

Learning is not measured, despite the conclusion that the feedback is “difficult to understand”.

› Shows supervisors perceive a range of feedback types e.g. oral + written.

› Meetings have various aims & characteristics e.g. talk/listen vs address omissions.

› Problems e.g. some do not hold meetings (2/35).

› Suggest classification of written feedback using speech acts e.g. “Perhaps do X” = ‘suggesting’ (cf Kumar & Stracke, 2007).

› However:

› No analysis of actual meeting practices.

› No mention of writing criteria, which could provide a more direct link with the writing than speech acts.
Research questions

› So, little research on supervisors’ oral feedback on thesis writing, none on learning but the suggestion of some problems & the potential of writing criteria not yet explored.

› Research questions:

(1) How successful is supervisors’ oral feedback, as measured by a set of writing criteria?

(2) In what ways could writing criteria guide this feedback?
Case study 1
Student - female, Cantonese-speaking, IELTS: 6.5.

Case study 2
Student - female, Mandarin-speaking, IELTS: 8.

Data
Fortnightly meetings audio-recorded & transcribed.
8 one-hour sessions (4 per case study).
Data analysis: the criteria

MASUS writing criteria to assess strengths & weaknesses (Bonanno & Jones, 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>5 criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Use of source material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Structure and development of the argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Academic writing style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Grammatical correctness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Qualities of presentation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- 25 sub-criteria e.g.
  - B
    - Genre is appropriate to the task
    - Clear focused thesis statement
  - E
    - Paragraphing reflects essay structure …
Student learning

- Measured by ‘uptake’, an optional move in which the learner responds to feedback on a gap in his/her knowledge (Ellis, Basturkmen & Loewen, 2001, p. 286).
- Uptake an early sign of learning.

Moves & episodes

- Feedback & learning analyzed as:
- Moves: Utterances within a turn or over adjoining turns relating to a single sub-criterion.
- Episodes: One or more moves relating to a single Area e.g. A or more than one Area e.g. A & B.
Findings: Feedback moves

Majority of feedback in Areas A & B (95.78%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A (Use of source material)</th>
<th>B Structure and development of the argument</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>42.46%</td>
<td>53.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N = 262)</td>
<td>(N = 329)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most relevant data is employed e.g. *I think (author) and (author) obviously are very good for this, I have to see them in here* (DA 2, 1:222)

Genre is appropriate to the task e.g. *So I think this might become a short separate chapter on its own after this long chapter* (DA 1, 1:336)
## Findings: Feedback moves (2)

### Minority of feedback in Areas C, D & E

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C: C</td>
<td>Academic writing style</td>
<td>0.16% (N = 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D: D</td>
<td>Grammatical correctness</td>
<td>0.16% (N = 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E: E</td>
<td>Qualities of presentation</td>
<td>3.89% (N = 24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appropriate lexis</td>
<td>e.g. Like this uh. herausforderung’ right which I still don't understand right (DA 1, 4: 160)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clause structure</td>
<td>e.g. Yeah this is a run-on sentence (DA 2, 1: 119)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other qualities of presentation</td>
<td>e.g. It's a bit long I think (DA 1, 4: 48)</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Findings: Feedback episodes

Majority of feedback episodes combine Areas A & B

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>A+B</td>
<td>Other combinations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.35% (N = 75)</td>
<td>16.90% (N = 95)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>61.03% (N = 343)</td>
<td>49% (N = 8.72)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DA 2: [B] And then you say, look how a whole style ... has merged in China and outside China, following the success of (title). Right. ... [A] And then I think it would be great to just go through some newspapers and do you know what I mean? Student 2: Yeah. (DA 2, 4: 182-185)
Findings: + or - feedback

More feedback on inappropriate than appropriate writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8.75% (N = 54)</td>
<td>91.24% (N = 563)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical evaluation of evidence</td>
<td>Focused thesis statement</td>
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<td>e.g. <em>That was excellent, ... I like how you say there's a gap obviously because there's all this stuff on Chinese American literature and nothing on very recent ... migrants.</em> (DA 2, 1: 129-131)</td>
<td>e.g. <em>But I think that what's missing there is why are you looking at the specific points that you talk about?</em> (DA 2, 1: 35)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Findings: Effect on learning

Majority of uptake in Areas of main feedback. Less uptake than feedback. A+B feedback episodes produce half the uptake.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>%</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>A+B</th>
<th>Total N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>617</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uptake</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Feedback & uptake on A:

DA 2: So my big question was ... why are you using (author) in your thesis? ...
Student 2: I think that the context that (author) uses this concept is different from my context. (2, 1: 9-10)
How successful is supervisors’ oral feedback, as measured by a set of writing criteria?

Successful and not-so-successful:

- **Fine-tuned awareness of criteria A & B & their sub-criteria**
  - Important counter-evidence of Paré’s (2010, 2011) conclusion of ambiguity.
  - Humanities’ language-savvy supervisors.

- **Little attention to C, D & E**
  - Problematic given difficulties at micro-level (e.g. Cooley & Lewkowitz, 1997).
  - Although, written feedback on micro-level (Bitchener, Basturkmen & East, 2010).

- **Episodes zigzagged across Areas A & B**
  - Problematic given difficulties with Area B (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006)
  - Bitchener et al. (2011): written feedback ‘piles up’ functions.

- **More feedback on weaknesses than strengths**

- **More feedback than uptake**
  - Not just due to ‘ambiguity’ as in Paré (2010, 2011), but range of factors.
In what ways could writing criteria guide this feedback?

MASUS could guide supervisors’ feedback by:

› Developing skills in providing clear feedback on criteria A & B & their sub-criteria.
› Encouraging attention to C, D & E since often errors occur & are repeated in these Areas.
› Fostering a focus on specific Areas, especially ones which pose particular difficulties e.g. B.
› Creating greater balance between feedback on strengths & weaknesses.
› Thereby, fostering greater balance between feedback & uptake.
Conclusion: a criterion-based approach

- Study contributes to the limited research on supervisors’ oral feedback.
- Suggests that this feedback is not problematic in ways previously indicated but in some new ways.
- Highlights the value of writing criteria, specifically MASUS, as a framework for analyzing & strengthening supervisors’ oral feedback.
- Provides a direct link between the oral feedback & the writing.
- Limitations: A small sample from Humanities which does not test potential of criterion-based approach.
- Future research: Widen the disciplinary lens, trial a criterion-based approach & consider effect on student writing.
Thank you!

Bronwen.dyson@sydney.edu.au

Postgraduate Writing

Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences

University of Sydney
References


