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Distance Education feedback in the pandemic: reflecting on HOU student preferences

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Abstract

The quality of the feedback provided in Distance Education has been explored in a number of studies (see, e.g., Calfoglou, 2010, Malliotaki, 2019, Georgountzou & Calfoglou, 2019 on Hellenic Open University feedback processes specifically) and the learner's solitude and need for support have been pointed to. On the assumption that these elements are more likely to be accentuated in the pandemic, the present study presents and reflects on data exploring student preferences with regard to written feedback on assignments and dissertations collected over a number of years in the 'Teaching English as a foreign/international language' postgraduate programme of the Hellenic Open University, focusing on the link to the missing face-to-face contact experience. The data discussed are responses to questionnaire items reflecting students' choices in terms of explicitness, evaluativeness, tentativeness, interrogatives or affirmatives and reveal an overwhelming predilection for explicit, tentative, non-judgemental feedback portraying a genuine attempt at meaning reconstruction on the part of the tutor, who is thus expected to act as an engaged collaborator and supporter (cf. Calfoglou, 2010). We argue that this encounter with the Other needs to be reinforced in DE, especially in times of uncertainty, as in the pandemic, and that this can be done through a reconfiguration of the student-tutor role, following Biesta's (2006, 2010, 2012) idea of the education process seen as relational. This may open up interesting paths in Distance Education research and practices on both tertiary and other levels of education, beyond the constraints of the pandemic.

Keywords: *DE, written feedback, dialogic feedback, relational educational processes, tentativeness, explicitness*

Περίληψη

Το θέμα της ανατροφοδότησης στην εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευση έχει αποτελέσει αντικείμενο έρευνας (βλ. Calfoglou, 2010, Malliotaki, 2019, Georgountzou και Calfoglou, 2019, μεταξύ άλλων, σχετικά με τις διαδικασίες γραπτής ανατροφοδότησης στο Ελληνικό Ανοικτό Πανεπιστήμιο) και η μοναξιά καθώς και η ανάγκη στήριξης του φοιτητή έχουν επισημανθεί. Θεωρώντας ότι η πανδημία επιφέρει επίταση των στοιχείων αυτών, η παρούσα μελέτη παρουσιάζει και συζητά δεδομένα που καλύπτουν σειρά ετών και βασίζονται στις προτιμήσεις των φοιτητών ως προς τη γραπτή ανατροφοδότηση των εργασιών και της διπλωματικής τους στο πλαίσιο του Μεταπτυχιακού Προγράμματος Διδασκαλίας της Αγγλικής ως Ξένης/Διεθνούς γλώσσας, εστιάζοντας στη σύνδεση με την παντελή έλλειψη διαζώσης εμπειρίας. Τα δεδομένα αντλήθηκαν από απαντήσεις φοιτητών σε ερωτηματολόγιο οι οποίες διαφοροποιούνται ως προς την αναλυτικότητα και τη

σαφήνεια, το κριτικό πνεύμα, τη διακριτικότητα, τον καταφατικό ή ερωτηματικό χαρακτήρα της ανατροφοδότησης και αποκαλύπτουν μια ιδιαίτερα εμφανή προτίμηση σαφούς και αναλυτικής, διακριτικής ανατροφοδότησης, με έντονη την παρουσία ερωτήσεων και την εμπλοκή του διδάσκοντα ως υποστηρικτικού συνεργάτη στην ανασύσταση του νοήματος (Calfoglou, 2010), όπου απαιτείται. Υποστηρίζουμε την αναγκαιότητα συνάντησης με το Άλλο στην ΑεξΑ εκπαίδευση, ιδιαίτερα σε περιόδους ανασφάλειας, όπως η πανδημία, καθώς και την επίτευξη του στόχου αυτού μέσω της αναθεώρησης του ρόλου του καθηγητή και του φοιτητή, σύμφωνα με την αντίληψη της εκπαιδευτικής διαδικασίας ως σχεσιακής (Biesta, 2006, 2010, 2012). Αυτό ενδεχομένως θα άνοιγε νέους δρόμους στη διερεύνηση της εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευσης σε όλες τις εκπαιδευτικές βαθμίδες, πέρα από τους περιορισμούς της πανδημίας.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά: *εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευση, γραπτή ανατροφοδότηση, διαλογική ανατροφοδότηση, σχεσιακές εκπαιδευτικές διεργασίες, διακριτικότητα, αναλυτικότητα, σαφήνεια*

Introductory

Feedback and students' perception of it is a frequently visited research issue, for it is evident to all involved in the teaching profession that discontent over its form and focus is quite diffuse, while, in practical terms, it more often than not fails to produce the desired effect, namely that of providing systematic support for the learner. Especially in the area of Distance Education (henceforth DE), where face-to-face student support is scarce to non-existent, the need for a more structured approach to feedback provision is imminent and it is only to be expected, even on the basis of anecdotal evidence alone, that doing away with all face-to-face contact, due to the pandemic, gives the issue further urgency. It is, therefore, the aim of the present work to investigate the feedback issue by exposing DE students to specific instances of feedback provision and expecting them to select the ones they favour most. The examples used have been taken from the written feedback provided on student assignments and dissertations in the 'Teaching of English as a Foreign/ International language' but the principles governing them are applicable in Greek programmes, too, following the necessary linguistic adaptation, of course. Underlying this research focus is the assumption that, as pointed out in related studies (e.g. Calfoglou, 2010; Κάλφογλου, 2003), non-judgemental, non-threatening, dialogic feedback may be needed in order for the DE student's tension and solitude to be alleviated, for the physical distance between the student and the tutor to be somehow bridged and for more efficient results to be obtained. Especially within the context of education processes in the pandemic, the relational element may be most acutely needed.

The paper is organised as follows: section 1 presents the theoretical framework, section 2 focuses on the methodology adopted, sections 3 and 4 involve the presentation and discussion of the research findings respectively and section 5 provides some concluding remarks.

The theoretical framework

Feedback is very closely related to one's attitude towards a text and its author and can thus be manipulative of the author's work or treat it as subject to engaged reading (Calfoglou, 2010). Earlier studies (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982; Sommers, 1982; Straub, 1996, 1997a/b; Ziv, 1984, among others) argue against teacher appropriation

of the student's text and in favour of the teacher abandoning the roles of "gatekeeper", "proofreader" and "authority figure" (Probst, 1989) to become a "facilitator", a "diagnostician", "a motivator", a "collaborator" and a "fellow explorer" (Straub, 1997a, p. 225). Interestingly, a collaborator and fellow explorer is bound to engage in interactive, dialogic feedback, rather than simply stating a problem with no attempt to involve the student as an interactant. Malliotaki (2019) underscores the importance of teacher-student dialogic feedback as a means of battling 'transactional distance' in DL (Moore, 1991, 1993), while through Steen-Utheim & Wittek's (2017) operationalization of dialogic feedback practices we obtain the notions of 'emotional and relational support' as well as of 'the other's contribution to individual growth'.

This idea of the empathetic tutor-collaborator is being considered in the present work through the lens of the following facets of written feedback: explicitness, evaluativeness and tentativeness. Explicitness indicates awareness of the student's need for guidance, evaluativeness, in the sense of adopting a judgemental tone, as in the case of negative evaluative adjectives, for instance, marks the comeback of the 'authority figure' referred to above, while tentativeness, namely the use of mitigators aimed at alleviating the effect of criticism (Holmes, 1990), is yet another indication of the reader's concern for the writer's feelings. The importance of these written feedback attributes is, we believe, further underlined by the impersonality of the distance teaching mode, as written feedback seems to be the principal form of tutor-student interaction.

Yet, there is no agreement with regard to these points in the literature. Tentativeness and mitigation in particular are regarded as a double-edged knife; on the one hand, there is evidence that praise or hedges, such as modals moderating the critical tone of the feedback, may be particularly welcome (see, e.g., Cho et al., 2006; Nilson, 2003; Saddler & Adrade, 2004) but, on the other, a number of researchers (Ferris, 1997, 2003; Hayes & Daiker, 1984; Mantello, 1997; Zamel, 1985; see also discussion in Hattie & Timperley, 2007) argue against them on the grounds that they can mislead learners. Subordinating the modal or interrogative form of the comment to clarity regardless of form, Ferris, in an interview with Calfoglou (2019, p.70), actually states that "questions are fine as long as they're not too abstract. Being clear and constructive -- giving students feedback they can understand and apply -- is more important than the form of the feedback" (see also Ferris, 1997; cf. Ferris, 2014).

All of the above sources, however, refer to feedback provision in the non-distance context. Though not particularly researched in this respect, the distance factor may make a world of a difference, for the student receiving written feedback online is more or less in a position of defence (see Georgountzou & Calfoglou, 2019). Unless there is a follow-up session with the tutor, clarifying issues where necessary or resolving misunderstandings, if any, direct feedback will leave its indelible stamp and, if inappropriate, intensify the sense of isolation (Malliotaki, 2019). The DE tutor is therefore teetering on a tight rope: on the one hand, misinterpretation due to tentative phrasing of a comment may be more intense in the absence of face-to-face contact (Hyland, 1998; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Sugita (2006) provides evidence in favour of the helpfulness of imperatives rather than statements or questions in student revision. On the other hand, however, HOU distance learning students seem to favour what they refer to as 'politeness' and 'non-offensiveness' in the articulation of feedback comments (Calfoglou, 2010; Georgountzou & Calfoglou, 2019; Κάλφογλου, 2003). The need for moderate, non-judgemental feedback also emerges clearly in peer feedback related research in the DE mode. Here are the words of a feedback provider: "My intention was to encourage deeper reflection upon mistakes, so I avoided

judgemental comments” (in Georgountzou & Calfoglou, 2019, p. 229). It is therefore evident that the issue needs to be explored further.

Further insight into tentativeness and non-evaluativeness could be obtained from Holmes’s (1984) discussion of question tags. Holmes identifies tags as expressing either a modal or an affective meaning and refers to the former as ‘speaker-oriented’, expressing some uncertainty and “requesting reassurance, confirmation, agreement” (p. 54) and to the latter as ‘addressee-oriented’, further branching off into ‘facilitative’ or ‘softening’. As noted in her work, facilitative tags are meant to facilitate “the addressee’s participation in the interaction” while softening ones “express politeness or the speaker’s concern for the addressee’s feelings, e.g. softening force of criticism” (pp. 54-55; see discussion in Svendsen, 2019). Both facilitation (of text revision) and softening of criticism could be said to underlie tentative phrasing in written feedback. If seen as components of teacher or tutor support, the elements of explicitness, non-evaluativeness and tentativeness could be strongly linked to what has been referred to in the literature as ‘positive academic emotions’, such as “enjoyment, interest, hope, pride and relief” (see Lei et al., 2018, p. 1 and references therein). Writing can often be a stressful ‘emotional and cognitive activity’ (McLeod, 1987, p. 427), so teacher support in the form of kind, non-judgemental but also enlightening feedback is badly needed. Macklin (2016) advocates the use of a ‘compassionate reading response’, which involves the use of questions, as these encourage students to “disagree with (the teacher’s) judgments and assumptions as a teacher-reader” (p. 98) and may also invite them to adopt a more active and autonomous approach to writing (Straub, 1997b). Research in the context of DE in particular demonstrates the importance of non-interventionist, ‘facilitating discourse’ in teacher-learner online interaction rather than direct instruction (Wang et al., 2021), and this could well be seen as supportive of facilitative, explicit, tentative, non-judgemental feedback.

The methodology

As already noted, the research presented was conducted with the help of a questionnaire composed of various types of actual content-related feedback provided on HOU student written output and variations thereof. It was thus expected to yield more revealing data than the use of made-up comments, as respondents would be able to relate to the feedback options personally. More specifically, in a total of 10 question items, all in multiple choice format with four options, respondents were presented with feedback varying in terms of a combination of (a) explicitness, involving less or more analytical comments and/or proposing an alternative course of action, (b) evaluativeness, in the form of an adjectival phrase (e.g. ‘deficient’), (c) tentativeness, in the sense of qualifying a feedback statement through the use of mitigators, as in ‘might somehow’, for example, (d) the use of affirmative or interrogative forms. For example, the first question allowed students a choice among the non-explicit, non-judgemental underlining of the problem point, an explicit and evaluative-judgemental comment (‘Your tone is overpersonal at this point’), an explicit and highly judgemental comment (‘Too personal for an academic piece of writing’) and an also explicit and highly judgemental comment including a remedial suggestion (‘Too personal; you could have said “One of the main criteria involved in ... is ...” instead’). Another example is the choice among the strongly judgemental ‘I find your arguments obscure’, the non-evaluative, tentative and interrogatively put ‘I’m not sure I understand what you mean. Could you please make it clear?’, the also non-evaluative and tentative but also exploratory-remedial ‘I’m not sure I understand what you mean. Are you suggesting that ...?’ and the evaluative and non-tentative but

also remedy proposing ‘I find your arguments obscure. You should have ...’. The hypothesis underlying the specific research design was that non-judgemental, tentative, explicit feedback, especially when involving an alternative course of action or engaging in a dialogue of some kind with the student through the use of a question, would be strongly favoured. Of the 10 questions included, one involved a form-related issue and has therefore been left out of the present discussion.

The questionnaire was distributed online to 128 students attending a specific module of the ‘Teaching English as a Foreign/International Language’ post-graduate HOU programme, over a period of four years, and respondents were expected to decide which of the types of feedback provided in each question item they would respond to more positively as writers as well as to explain why, if possible. Justification of their responses was expected to shed further light on what each type of feedback meant to them. Participant choices for all question items were mounted on SPSS and frequencies were computed and schematically represented in the form of bar charts, appropriate for categorical variables. Double choices were marked as ‘Other’. Participants’ justification of their answers, though not as forthcoming as expected, lent itself to qualitative analysis. The results are presented below.

The results

The findings revealed an overwhelming advantage for tentativeness and non-evaluativeness along with explicitness, especially when a proposed alternative is included, while interrogatives also held sway. More specifically, as demonstrated in Figure 1 below,

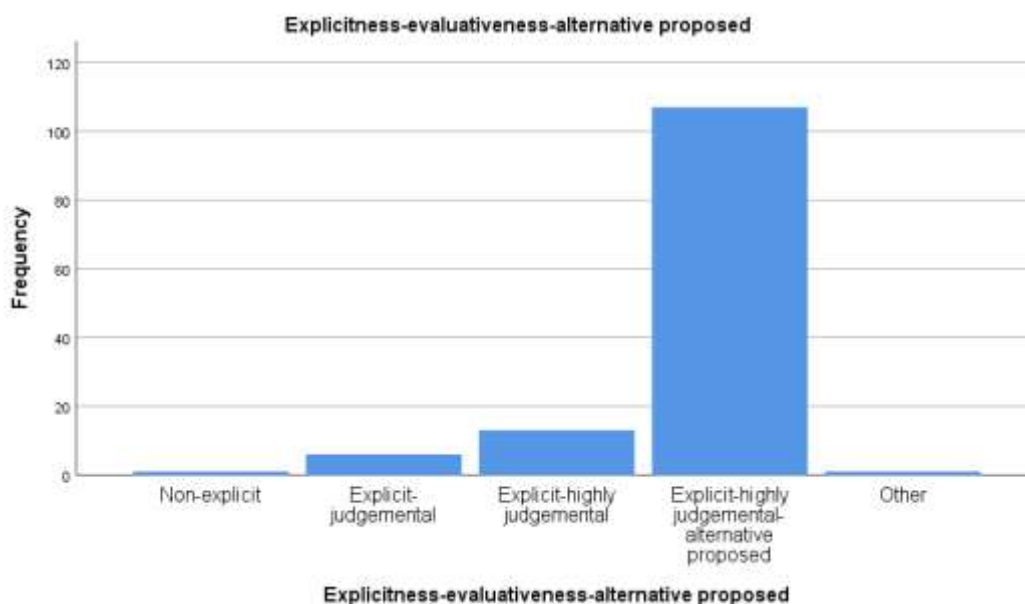


Figure 1. Explicitness-Evaluativeness-Alternative Proposed

though highly judgemental, the explicit comment which suggested an alternative, indicating the tutor’s attempt to develop a discursive relationship with the student’s output, namely ‘Too personal; you could have said ...’, got 83.6 % of the preference total, defeating both its non-explicit and its highly judgemental, no improvement suggestion counterparts. This suggests that the effect of proposing a remedy may counterbalance that of evaluativeness and judgemental tone.

In Figure 2, we can see that responses were almost equally divided between the non-judgemental and explicit, example-providing comment ‘There are linking problems in your text. Consider, for instance, ...’ (39,8%) and the also explicit and example-providing, albeit moderately judgemental ‘In line 10, paragraph 2, the linking is somewhat deficient. This is also the case a few lines further down, where ...’ (39,1%). Third came the moderately judgemental ‘The overall spirit of the text indicates awareness of the complexity of issues but the linking of the component parts is more or less deficient’, which also includes the mitigating element of praise (15.6%):

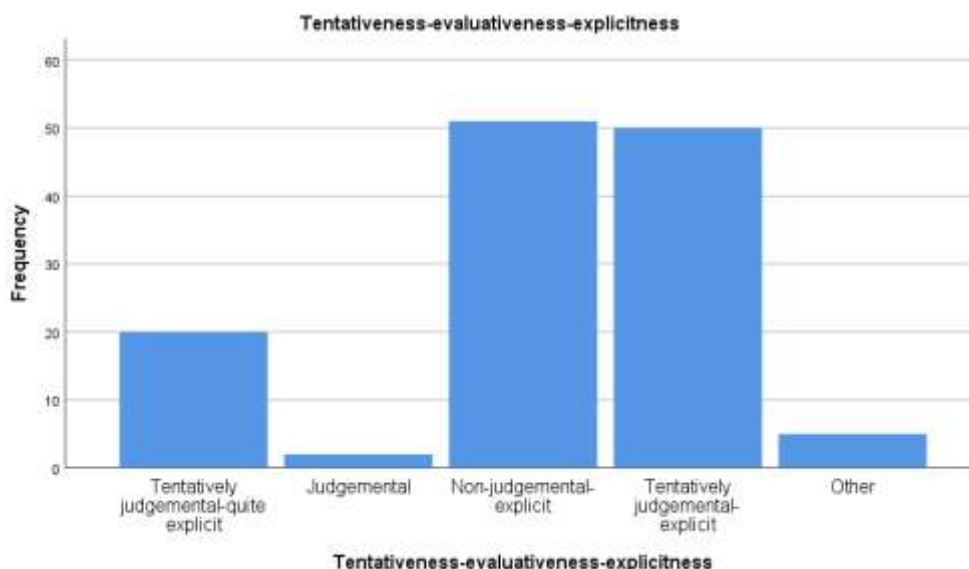


Figure 2. Tentativeness-Evaluativeness-Explicitness

Once again, the remedial action element seemed to moderate evaluativeness effects, though not so much as in the previous item.

Questions were treated very favourably, as can be seen in Figure 3 below:

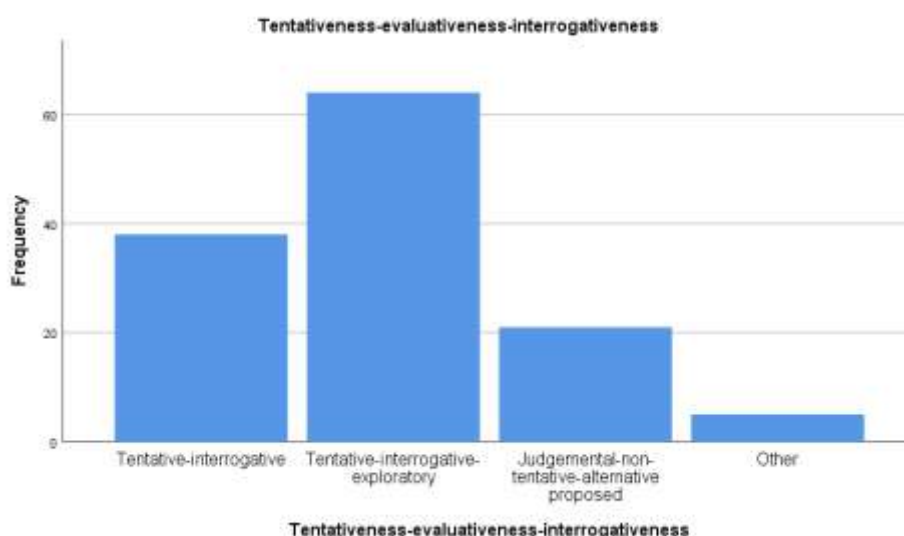


Figure 3. Tentativeness-Evaluativeness-Interrogativeness

This may have been especially the case due to the exploratory nature of the question posed in the most popular response (50%), namely ‘Are you suggesting that ...?’. In this particular case, the tutor acts as a highly engaged reader probing into the possibilities arising out of the tutee’s writing. The specific response ‘respects the subjectivity of argumentation’, according to a respondent. In their justification, respondents generally refer to the interesting function of questions: ‘Questions seem more indirect and intimate to me, as if we were talking in person’, they are ‘more personal’, they ‘trigger reflection’, they are like ‘real time communication’ and create ‘a sense of dialogue between the teacher and the student’, while also being ‘less authoritative’. The question is also given primacy in the next two items, obtaining 46.1% and 48.4% respectively, as can be seen in Figures 4 and 5 below. Figure 4 demonstrates a particularly increased advantage for the response which mitigates the criticism through the use of an interrogative, namely ‘Does the second statement follow from the first?’, a comment on the lack of cohesion/coherence in the learner’s text counteracting its explicit but bluntly put competitors ‘Linker missing’, ‘No cohesion’, ‘No coherence’. The last two may have fared badly also because of their use of metalanguage, an interesting issue beyond the scope of the present discussion:

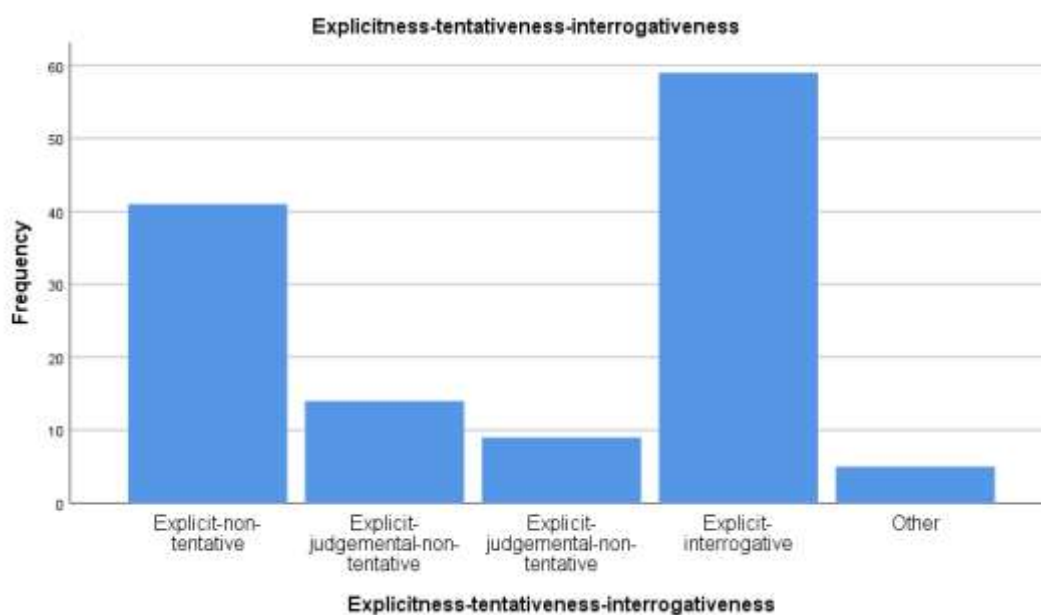


Figure 4. Tentativeness-Interrogativeness-Evaluativeness

Similarly, Figure 5 demonstrates the advantageous position of both the tentatively phrased question ‘Yes, but need it always be so?’ and of the remedy alluded to in ‘How do you define “skills integration”?’, which urges the learner to reconsider their definition of the specific concept:

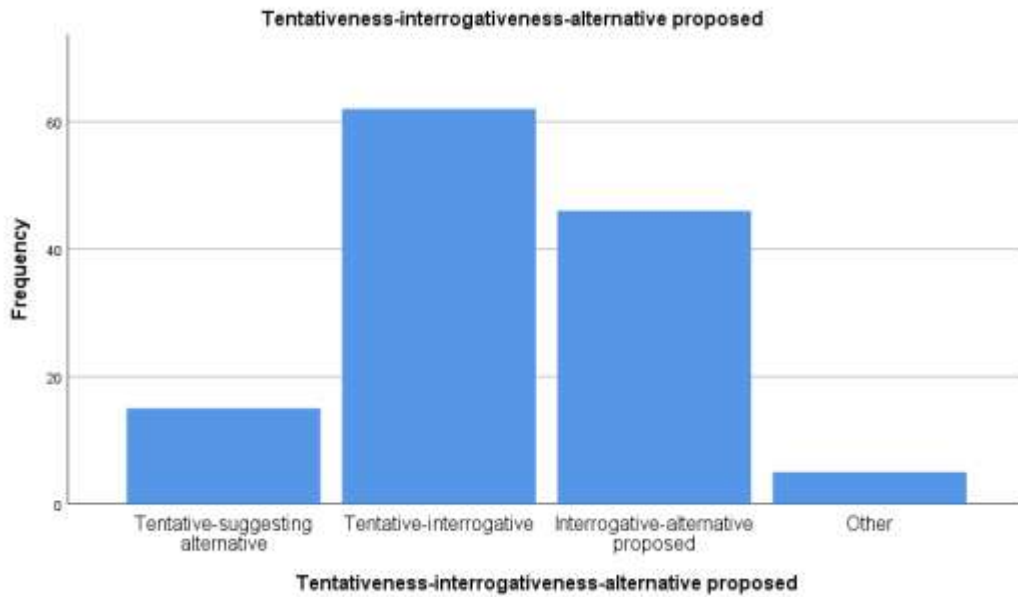


Figure 5. Tentativeness-interrogativeness-alternative proposed

Responses to the next item, presented in Figure 6, portray students' preference for what they refer to as 'polite, non-offensive' feedback, as '... might be/is somehow inconsistent' received a total of 78.1%:

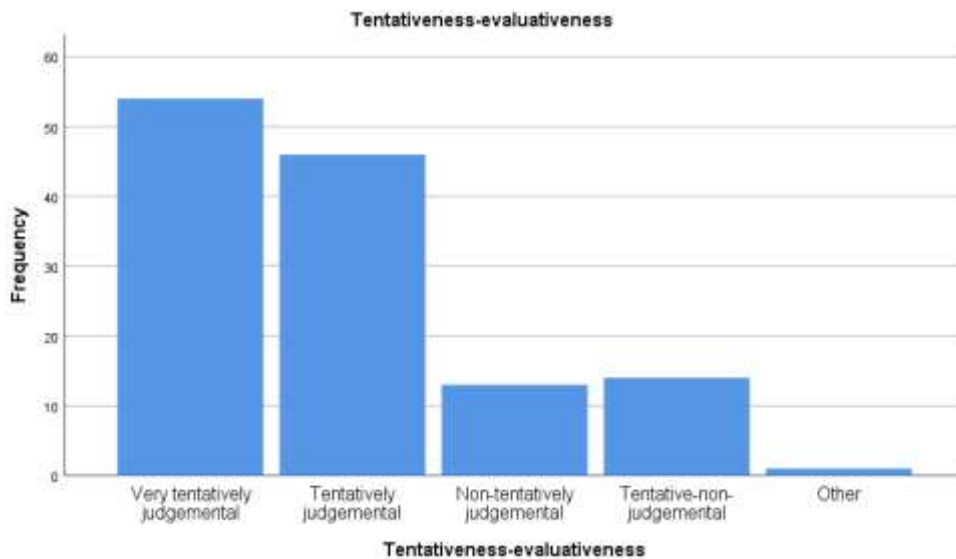


Figure 6. Tentativeness-Evaluativeness

Interestingly, students opt for tentative, albeit judgemental, evaluation rather than for its non-judgemental garden path one, namely 'is marked by inconsistency', which only got 10.9%.

The next item presented participants with a choice among the tentative and non-judgemental 'I would question this association', the tentatively judgemental, interrogative 'Is this association appropriate, however?', the bluntly judgemental 'This association is inappropriate' and the tentatively judgemental, affirmative 'I was wondering if this association is appropriate'. Once again, as we can see in Figure 7,

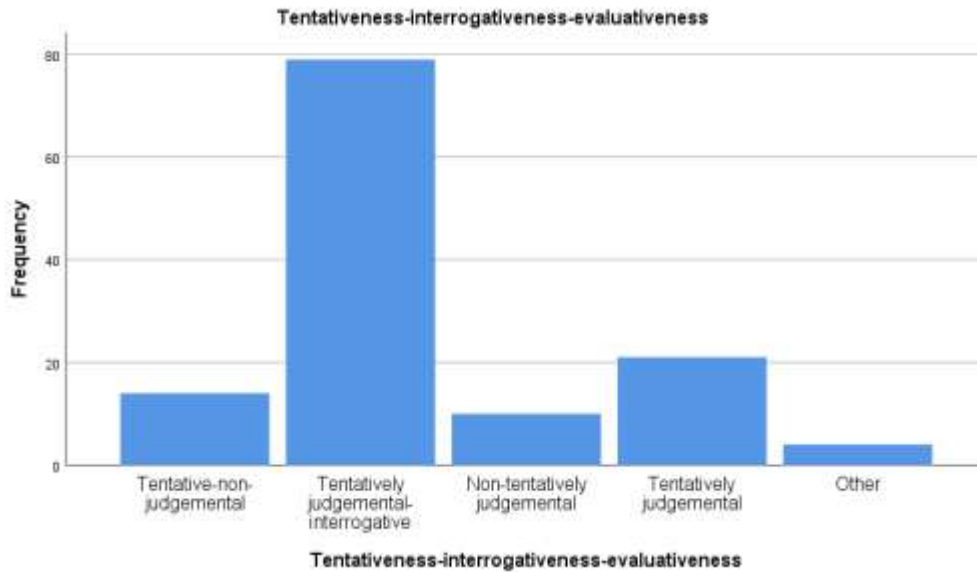


Figure 7. Tentativeness-interrogativeness-evaluativeness

the tentatively judgemental option in the form of a question received 61.7% of the response total, defeating its non-evaluative and mildly evaluative counterparts. This is, once again, strong evidence in favour of feedback being provided in the form of questions.

The power of proposing remedial action is resumed in the next item and Figure 8, where students' predilection is mirrored in the overwhelming majority of answers (75.8%). Thus, tentativeness, as in 'This point could have been put more concisely', minimally represented in students' responses, was dramatically enhanced by the presence of an alternative, as in 'This point could have been put more concisely, as in ..., for example'. On the other hand, however, when the alternative proposed appeared in a non-tentative, peremptorily put statement, like 'This point should have been put more concisely, as in ..., for example', only 18.8% responded to it positively, which suggests that this peremptory tone is unwelcome:

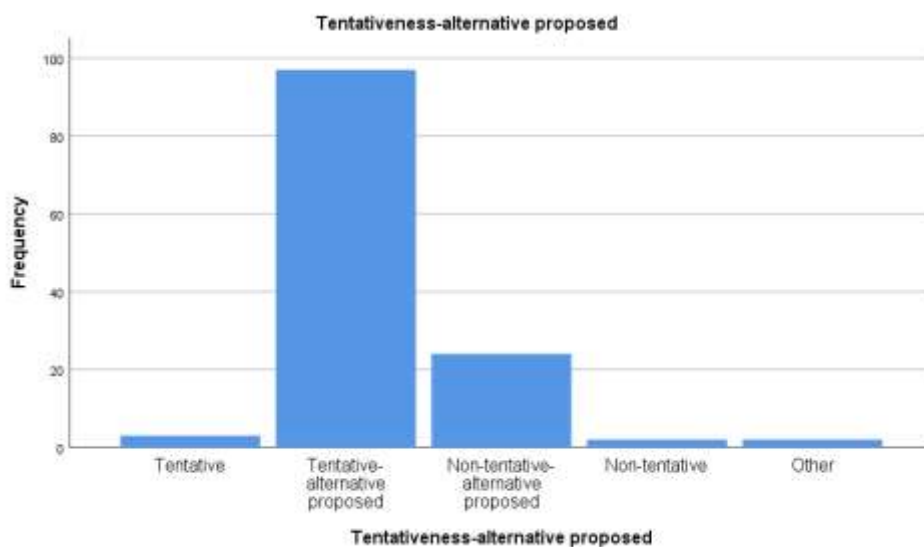


Figure 8. Tentativeness-Alternative Proposed

Finally, the effectiveness of the interrogative combined with tentativeness is further illustrated in the last item, where the specific option, namely ‘Wouldn’t it be best if you modified this activity to make it suit your students’ needs?’, obtained 48.4%:

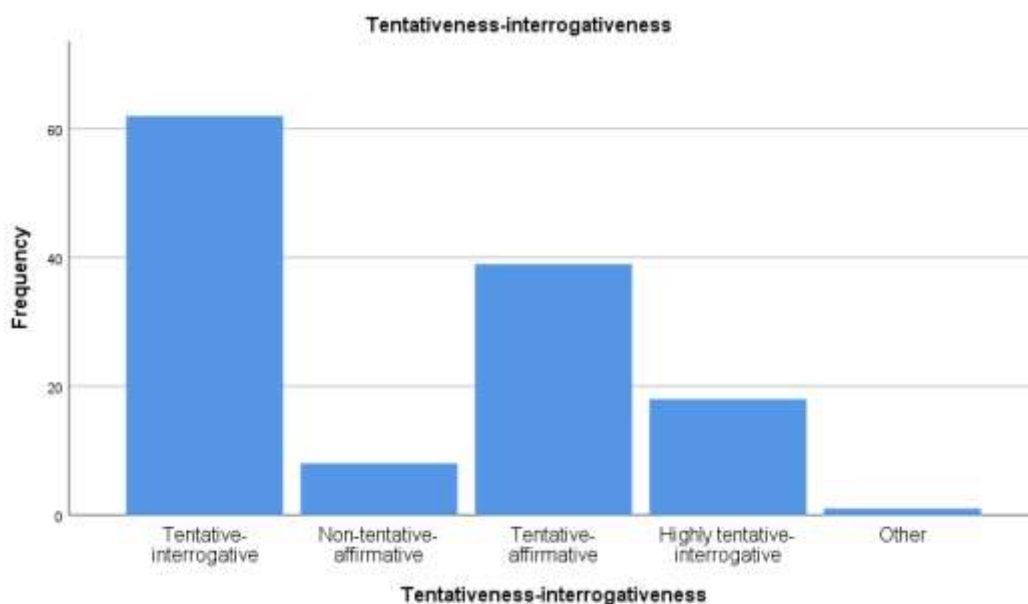


Figure 9. Tentativeness-interrogativeness

The second choice was the also tentative, though affirmative (‘It would be best if ...’), which indicates that mitigation is an important parameter to take into account in providing (distance) feedback.

Discussion

Despite its shortcomings, arising mostly out of the difficulty of controlling for variables when dealing with actual instances of tutor feedback on learner output, our findings revealed some interesting facts, confirming our hypothesis. Even though judgemental or non-tentative responses, like ‘I find your arguments obscure. You should have ...’ are selected in some cases, ‘leaving no space for doubt’, according to the justification given (cf. Ferris, 1997), the overwhelming majority of the choices made were non-judgemental, tentative, explicit and proposed a course of action. Both the concern for the author reflected in the types of feedback chosen and the obvious interactional move involved in questions suggest that written feedback in DE needs to be treated as an interpersonal act, negotiating and redesigning the meaning designed by the student-writer (cf. Calfoglou, 2010), or, in other words, that DE feedback needs to be dialogic.

If pursued systematically, this could entail tremendous changes in the educational process. The encounter with the Other is in serious trouble in DE, so we need to conceive of ways to achieve it, and feedback dialectics along with an attenuated teacher presence (Wang et al., 2021) may be one of them. However, if both students and teachers are involved in the meaning-making process as co-authors, “the student/teacher binary” will be made “redundant” and this would “offer a justification for the kind of emancipatory, critical and democratic (teacher) education in which there can be *epistemic equality* (Murriss & Verbeek, 2014)” (Murriss, 2017, p.3). Indeed, reconfiguring the roles of the teacher and the student is a demand that has emerged most clearly as a result of the pandemic lockdown and online education. The

flipped classroom, an idea that has been around for some time and that has gained popularity in the pandemic, questions teacher-student relationships but still treats teachers and students as totally distinct entities. The point missed, according to Biesta (2006, 2010, 2012), is that the educational process is relational, so the binary, whether it gives the student or the teacher primacy, as in student- and teacher-centred approaches respectively, is a misconception. The problem, according to the scholar, is the excessive focus on learning, a focus, we would add, that is intensified by the constraints of the pandemic. As he goes on to suggest, ‘learnification’ “hides the importance of content, purpose and the ‘who’ or the subjectivity of the teacher in the educational relationship” (see Murriss, 2017, p.4). This may be in line with the point raised earlier regarding direct instruction and overloaded knowledge transmission being unwelcome in online education.

There is an important lesson to be learnt from the use of questions, too, and, perhaps, from tentativeness generally, though questions have been treated as distinct in the present work to underline the relational element they give rise to and support. As proposed by respondents in our research, questions trigger thinking while also ‘treating what is ‘correct’ as something to consider’, that is, not axiomatically. Reconceptualising the notion of correctness may clear mitigation of its unwelcome uncertainty, legitimising perplexity. As suggested in Murriss (2017, p.9), “the educator hasn’t got the answers but stings the student with his/her perplexity”, like Socrates, “who questions others, not from a position of assumed knowledge but rather from a position of self-confessed ignorance” (Matthews, 1999, p. 89).

Concluding thoughts

But how much perplexity can the distance learner tolerate? Though we are far from stating with certainty what kind of feedback truly benefits learners (cf. ZhaoHong, 2021), helping them improve, our findings point to the need for explanatory comments and guidance but also for the freedom of thought allowed through discreet, non-judgemental feedback. A collaborative discussion between the tutor and the student over the feedback provided (Blair & McGinty, 2012; Macklin, 2016) may help retain a balance. In any case, the need for a positive educational experience is most pressing nowadays and it is important to realize that education cannot be a one-way process, no matter whether controlled by the teacher or by the learner. Reimagining our identity and subjectivity in a relational process, as explained above, may help bring about the positivity we all yearn for.

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