

# Analyzing Written Formative Feedback

*Patterns, Genre, Content and Strategies*



Author: Jonas Gramsby

Supervisor: Maria Bäcke

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Campus Helsingborg

## **Abstract**

The aim of this essay is to analyze written formative feedback to investigate whether there are certain patterns and differences in feedback given to students with different grades. This is done to expand the knowledge about what the genre of written formative feedback looks like in a Swedish school setting and what it can mean for the students and their teachers. By applying a *move*-analysis developed by Mirador (2000) and a critical discourse analysis based on *modality* and *transitivity*, it has been possible to gain some information about how the social relationship between teacher and student is portrayed and maintained. This study has found that there are differences in written formative feedback depending on which grade the students are associated with. This means that the genre of written formative feedback is dependent on grades and not fully coherent. If further knowledge is gained on these differences, they can be used strategically to create a better setting for feedback reception and interpretation. Material used in this essay is written formative feedback given to 38 different students in Skåne, Sweden. The feedback is written by two different teachers at two different upper secondary schools. The material was gathered and anonymized by the students' teachers and written consent has been given to use it in this essay.

**Keywords:** Written formative feedback, genre, discourse analysis, *move*-analysis

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## Introduction

To create a positive culture for assessment is one important aspect behind student motivation and willingness to learn according to Skolverket (2014). One of the tools used to do this is by working with formative assessment. The process of formative assessment consists of many different parts and activities, wherein written feedback is one such instance. How feedback is presented and what is communicated in it are important factors behind student learning and motivation (Irons, 2008; Wiliam, 2011; Mutch, 2003). Formative assessment is popular and often well suited for a positive learning environment in schools but there is a lack of research on the actual language used when providing written feedback (Yelland, 2011). This essay aims to investigate the form and content of written formative feedback to enhance the knowledge of feedback as a genre and as a discourse. Further knowledge in this area will help teachers think about how they write feedback and hopefully strengthen the quality of it.

Questions that I will try to answer in this essay are:

What signifies the genre and discourse of written formative feedback in a modern Swedish context?

Are there differences in the feedback given to students with different grades?

If so, what do these differences mean and how can they be strategically used by the teacher to improve the effects of formative feedback?

To answer these questions a genre analysis created by Josephine Mirador based on *moves* in language will be used. *Moves* are certain linguistic features that take specific forms and carry explicit meaning (Mirador, 2000). The *moves* found in the analyzed material will then be quantized and further theorized using critical discourse analysis based on Winther Jørgensen's & Phillips' adaption of Fairclough's theory of transitivity and modality. This

type of research is quite rare and as far as I know, has never been done in a Swedish school setting.

## **Theory**

This section separates formative assessment from summative assessment. It continues by explaining benefits and problems of formative feedback and investigates feedback as a genre.

### **Formative assessment**

This essay analyzes what written formative feedback looks like and if there are specific feedback patterns that can be said to occur more often when it comes to certain grades. To be able to do this we must separate formative assessment from summative assessment.

Summative assessment is basically any assessment activity that generates a mark or grade which is used to judge a student's performance. This is usually done at the end of a course or after a unit within a course (Irons, 2008). Formative assessment is not focused on grading or judging a student, instead the focus is on providing information to help the students learn and reach a higher grade (Irons, 2008; Wiliam, 2011; Skolverket, 2014). Black & Wiliam (1998) as well as Mutch (2003) have argued that formative assessment needs to be an ongoing process that involves all activities in the classroom.

Formative assessment is built on three main pillars that constitute the foundation for the whole process. Firstly, the students need to know what the goal is, secondly, they need to know where they are in relation to the goal and finally, they need to know how they should proceed to be able to reach the goal (Skolverket, 2014; Irons, 2008; Wiliam, 2011). Leahy, Lyon, Thompson, & Wiliam (2005) have evolved these pillars into five key strategies for the teacher and these are now used in Swedish schools as a basis for formative assessment (Skolverket, 2014). The key strategies are as follows:

1. Clarifying, sharing, and understanding learning intentions and criteria for success.
2. Engineering effective classroom discussions, activities, and learning tasks that elicit evidence of learning.
3. Providing feedback that moves learning forward.
4. Activating learners as instructional resources for one another.
5. Activating learners as owners of their own learning.

## **The effects of formative assessment**

Formative assessment can be one of the most effective ways to raise student learning and this has been stated in several studies and research syntheses (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie, 2009; Yeh, 2009). Positive effects can be seen on student motivation, learning and performance (Irons, 2009; Wiliam, 2011). However, there are some question marks on how to implement an effective way of working with formative assessment. Formative assessment is no easy process and there might be hard to find a universal solution that works for all teachers and students. Boström (2017) has shown that implementing formative assessment does not necessarily mean better results and that teachers can have severe difficulties with adapting to this new way of working. Failing to fulfill the whole process of formative assessment was pinpointed as the main reason for not affecting student learning. A teacher that is not used to working with formative assessment needs to reevaluate their role as a teacher as well as how to think and how to use one's pedagogical habits (Black, 2015; Shoenfeld, 2014).

The other aspect of how effective formative assessment is, relates to how students respond to the feedback. There are several different outcomes from providing students with feedback, they can react positively or negatively or they can simply not care (Mutch, 2003; Zumbrunn, Marrs & Mewborn, 2016). According to Mutch (2003) and Black & Wiliam (1998), feedback must be given in a context that the students fully understand.

Without clear goals and strong connections between the feedback and the intended learning outcomes there is too much room for misinterpretation or ignorance.

In a study conducted by Zumbrunn et. al. (2016) it was evident that a majority of students reacted positively to feedback. The reason could be either because they liked hearing what they are good at or what they need to improve. It could also be because it provoked a positive feeling of heightened self-esteem or a sense of care as well as creating a friendlier relationship with the teacher. Those students who reacted negatively to feedback usually felt very criticized and that the feedback generated a sense of lost self-esteem. Some of the students did not care and thought that the teacher could not possibly say anything worth listening to. Mutch (2003) found that negative comments were more common than positive ones and that students with lower grades received more negative feedback than those with better grades. These are important factors to consider when writing feedback because it can be hazardous being overly critical to the weaker students. Ivanic (1998) has shown that negative comments easily hurt students and that the notion of “face” is a sensitive matter. Comments directed to the student and not to the assessed material can affect the student’s “face”. The “face” is similar to the student’s self-image and their sense of self-esteem. By keeping all negative comments associated with the text in question and not blaming or questioning the student, the student’s “face” is protected and they can handle the feedback more objectively.

Formative assessment has been shown to have a greater effect on weaker, rather than stronger students. For it to work it is important that the feedback is about specific qualities in their work, with advice for improvement and without comparisons with other students (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Irons, 2008). It is also a question of how the feedback is presented. Studies have shown that positive comments should come before negative ones to build trust and minimalize hostility (Crook, Gross & Dymott, 2006).

## Feedback as a genre

Genres are how things get done, when language is used to accomplish them. They range from literary to far from literary forms: poems, narratives, expositions, lectures, seminars, recipes, manuals, appointment making, service encounters, news, broadcasts and so on.

(Martin, 1985, p. 250)

Genres are specific types of texts or means of communication with its own structures and contexts. A certain genre has its own way of beginning, continuing and ending (Swales 1990). Feedback as a genre has been investigated by both Yelland (2011) and Mirador (2000) and they found that feedback consists of various key aspects that can be labelled and modelled into systems.

Formative feedback is often written by a teacher who belongs to a specific discourse community. A discourse community can be said to have its own way of communicating, having its own genre and its own lexis when using a communicative approach towards previously set goal (Swales, 1990; Yelland, 2011). Teachers can communicate well with other teachers who often have the same basis and understanding of what the goals are but students are not always on the same level (Yelland, 2011).

Mirador (2000) poses the question whether genre such as feedback is reader- or writer based, is it built on a cultural pattern with teachers or students in focus? A study by Ruegg (2015) suggests that teachers communicate in a way that students do not always understand. When students give feedback to each other there are less misunderstandings than when it is written by the teacher. This suggests that teachers and students belong to separate discourse communities. Another factor supporting the theory of separate discourse communities was suggested to be the relationship between teacher and student and that the students are closer to each other when it comes to proficiency and therefore have a better understanding of each other (Ruegg, 2015). Both Yelland (2011) and Ruegg (2015) suggest that students need to be involved in the feedback process and practice self- and peer-



evaluation to better understand the genre of feedback. By investigating the concept of feedback as a genre it is evident that Mirador (2000), as well as Yelland (2011), can see specific linguistic choices made by teachers that constitute certain forms and patterns. These forms and patterns will be used in this essay to analyze the written feedback material.

## **Discourse analysis**

Fairclough (1995) has the view of a discourse being the use of language in a specific social practice and that a discourse analysis can tell us something about how sociocultural practices work and function. A discourse can also be seen as an active way of expressing one's position in society in relation to someone else's (Fairclough, 2017). In this system, all social practices have their own limitations and possibilities when it comes to how language can be used.

According to Winther Jørgensen & Phillips (2000), the concept of discourse contains an idea that language is structured in patterns that we follow when we act in certain social domains.

One such domain could for instance be written formative feedback directed from teacher to student. Each domain has its own specified way of speaking and certain things are brought up or left out. Fairclough (1995) stresses that what is absent in a text is equally important as what can be seen in a text. The unsaid can be something that simply is not mentioned for certain reasons or is taken for granted. Because of this, texts can be seen as social procedures where two fundamental processes occur, cognition and representation of the world and social interaction.

According to Fairclough (1995), a text can contain several different discourses.

A text with changes in discourse practice signals a change in the social order but a text with a non-changing discourse signifies a maintained and traditional social practice. Certain discourses can, according to Fairclough (2017) also be operationalized to achieve wanted goals. This is done by applying strategies in the interaction of the interlocutors. By carefully

choosing how to formulate written text as the interactive media between teacher and student it should be possible to strategically use words, phrases and *moves* in a way that promotes learning, motivation and a positive relationship between the interlocutors.

## Method

The method in this essay is two-fold. The first part is a *move*-analysis which analyzes what is communicated in the feedback and what, if any, patterns occur in the material. This will then be generated into quantized data. The second part is a critical discourse analysis based on transitivity and modality. This means a combination of quantitative and qualitative procedures. This has been done to make it possible to see whether there are patterns in how feedback is presented to the students and what these patterns can tell us about the discourse of written formative feedback and its impact on the relationship between teacher and student. Fairclough (1995) states that critical discourse analysis can and should be used in combination with other methods to ensure a better validity of the results.

### *Move*-analysis

Mirador (2000) acknowledges that the term *move* has been used in many different situations to describe the basic interaction between teachers and students but it has never been clearly defined exactly what it is or how it works. The term *move* is defined by Mirador as such;

MOVE is the logical manoeuvre adopted by the communicator/s in written or spoken discourse. Such manoeuvre is evident in the unified functional meaning of a sentence or group of sentences in a written or spoken text. The sentence or group of sentences have a single unifying purpose in relation to the context in which it occurs.

(Mirador, 2000, p. 47)

Mirador (2000) defines twelve different *moves* in written feedback and in this essay, those twelve have been the basis for the analysis. By dividing all the written feedback into *moves*, it has become clear which of these *moves* are more common than others and

whether certain patterns emerged in written formative feedback in a Swedish school context. The twelve *moves* are General Impression (GI), Recapitulation/Referencing (RR), Suggesting Improvement (SI), Highlighting Strengths (HS), Calling Attention to Weakness (CAW), Affective Judgement (AJ), Exemplification (EX), Evidentiality (EV), Juxtaposition (JU), Positivising (Pos), Probing (Pr) and Overall Judgement (OJ). Each of these have specific meaning and five of them are defined by certain linguistic forms. For a thorough explanation, see Appendix 1 and 2.

Yelland (2011) poses some critique to the fact that not all *moves* are defined by form but my intention was not to go to depths with linguistic features of the actual *moves*, instead I aimed to analyze what the teachers bring up and leave out in their written feedback. Linguistic features became important for the sake of the critical discourse analysis. Yelland (2011) has also questioned the *move* CAW saying that it is not defined properly in Mirador's model. Instead he has gone further into the definitions of *moves* and come up with a *move* called Managing Negative Comments (MNC) to further enhance how to interpret material. This specific *move* could have been suitable to use in some instances but I opted to stay true to the model constructed by Mirador.

By systematically going through the feedback material and comparing each sentence to Mirador's template it has been possible to mark each sentence by its own distinct *move*. This made it possible to investigate whether there are emerging patterns in written feedback and/or what *moves* can be associated with different grades.

The feedback material was divided into groups of courses and further into subgroups of grades within the courses. Doing so made it possible to see what *moves* are associated with each group/subgroup.

## Critical discourse analysis

After the *move* analysis, a discourse analysis was made to be able to tell how feedback is communicated and what it means for the social order of teacher/student. By doing this it is possible to discuss the discourse of written formative feedback.

For the purposes of this essay, Winther Jørgensen's & Phillips' (2000) adaptation of Fairclough's critical discourse analysis has been used. This is a textual analysis with focus on how the language is used and what it signifies. The focus has been the grammatical elements of *transitivity* and *modality*. By using strategies in language, it is possible to ascertain one's power over another person (Fairclough, 2017). Two of these strategies can be transitivity and modality and in this essay, I have investigated how teachers use language in written formative feedback to portray their relationship with their students. Whether the use of these elements is part of a strategy applied by the teacher have remained uninvestigated and unanswered, but by shedding light on the concept itself, it will hopefully inspire teachers to think twice about how they write feedback and how it is received by the students.

*Transitivity* is analyzed to see how/if events are connected to the subject/object. A strong connection means strong agency and a weak connection yields weak agency. One example could for example be the passive sentence "50 nurses were fired yesterday". This type of sentence structure indicates that the event just happened by itself, all responsibility is taken away from the agent. The only focus is the event itself and not the factors/agents behind it. Another way of doing the same thing is by *nominalization*, which is the exchange of a whole process with a noun. For example; "there were a lot of discharges at the hospital".

*Modality* signifies how much the speaker can stand behind their statement. It can range from high modality to low modality where high modality signifies that the speaker

makes a 100 percent claim on the truth and low modality means a low claim. The use of modalities has an impact on the social relationship within the discourse. Modality can be expressed in many ways. Two examples of low versus high modality is; “I think that it is raining outside” or “It is raining outside”. The first sentence indicates a weak affinity with the statement and the second sentence indicates high affinity. Affinity can be lowered further by *hedging*.

By doing a qualitative analysis of the quantized data based on *moves* in the written feedback material it has been possible to define what the discourse of feedback can look like and whether there might be different discourses within feedback affected by factors such as grade.

Fairclough (1995) states that a big problem with textual analysis is the use of translated data. Therefore, all quotes have remained in its original language.<sup>1</sup>

## **Material and sampling**

It was very difficult finding material for this type of research which meant spending a lot of time trying to find teachers willing to share their feedback material. After having contacted several schools in the vicinity and getting no responses or no signs of interest in taking part in the study I managed to secure some material through contacts. Because of this, there is no sense of randomness in the sampling of the material and it cannot be said to represent much more than the teachers who wrote it. The generalizability of this study will be very low but as a concept of analyzing feedback, it will hopefully promote further research.

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<sup>1</sup> Translations are provided in Appendix 5: Translations

The material consists of written feedback given to students in two different courses from one school in northwestern Skåne in Sweden and of written feedback to students in one class in a school in the more central parts of Skåne. Some of the material was written by a teacher candidate during their VFU but since this material was approved by their supervisor and handed out to the students, I consider it valid for the intentions of this essay. This material was written during the spring of 2017. The rest of the material was written by an in-service teacher during 2014/2015. All material is written after Skolverket revised the syllabus in 2011. In total, feedback given to 38 different students are analyzed in this essay.

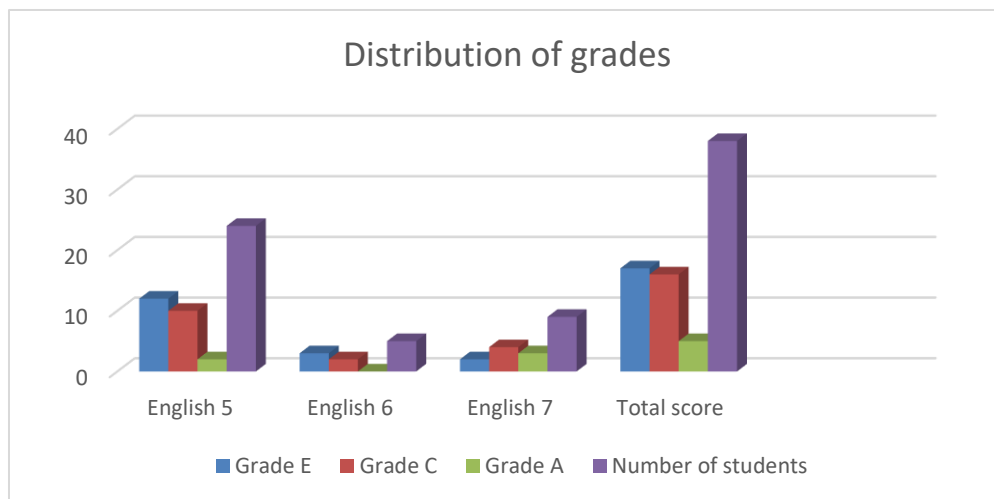
Since some of the students to whom the feedback material was directed were under the age of 18, some ethical issues needed to be dealt with. All students needed to be given information about the essay's aims and how the material was to be treated in accordance with the Ethical review act:

**Research subjects less than 18 years of age**

*Section 18* If the subject of the research is over 15 years of age, but has not attained the age of 18 and realizes what the research entails for his or her part, he or she shall personally be given information about the research and shall consent to the research in the manner described in sections 16 and 17.

One of the schools also had the policy to gather written consent from all students who were to share material that concerned them. The information about the essay was given to them in the form of a written information sheet including an inquiry of their consent. This was handed out by their teachers and then collected by the same person with their signatures of approval, (see appendix 3). All the feedback material was then anonymized by the teachers and sent to me. Consent has been documented and archived but since all material is totally anonymous, the students' signatures have not been sent to me. Not one student declined to share material concerning them.

In total, there are 24 feedback sheets in the course English 5, 5 sheets for English 6 and 9 sheets for English 7. Since there is such a big difference in the number of participating students for each course, I have opted not to make any comparisons between courses, instead the focus lies on differences in grades. The students were not given a definite grade for their work but received a rubric showing them where they landed for each graded category. They also received written feedback on their work. In this essay, the grades will be treated as belonging to the highest grade where all boxes are ticked for that specific level, making it a division between grades A, C, and E.



English 5 is in this system divided into the subgroups of 12 with the grade E, 10 with the grade C and 2 with the grade A. English 6 makes 3 with the grade E and 2 with the grade C. For English 7, we have 2 with the grade E, 4 with the grade C and 3 with the grade A.

I also received some material written by in-service teachers during a course at the University of Østfold in Norway. Because this material was not meant to be read by students and never was, I decided not to use it in this essay.

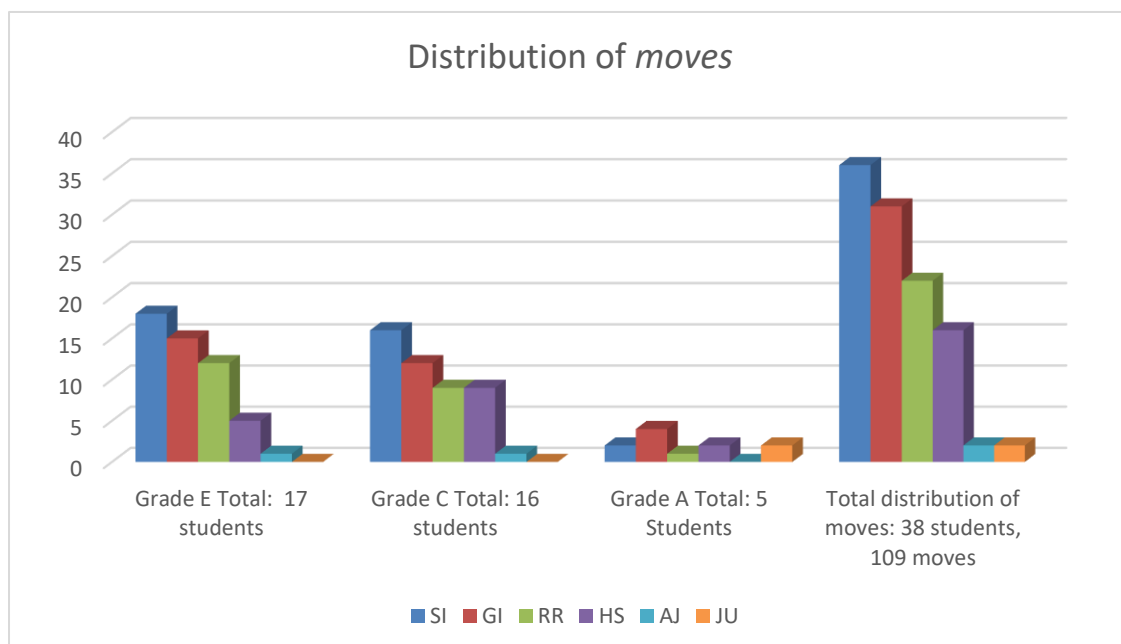
## Analysis

The analysis starts with a demonstration of all the sentences in the feedback material divided into *moves*. This is followed by a presentation of the division of *moves* over courses and grades. The final part of the analysis is a discourse analysis where the emerging patterns are specially investigated using critical discourse analysis of modality and transitivity.

### Move analysis

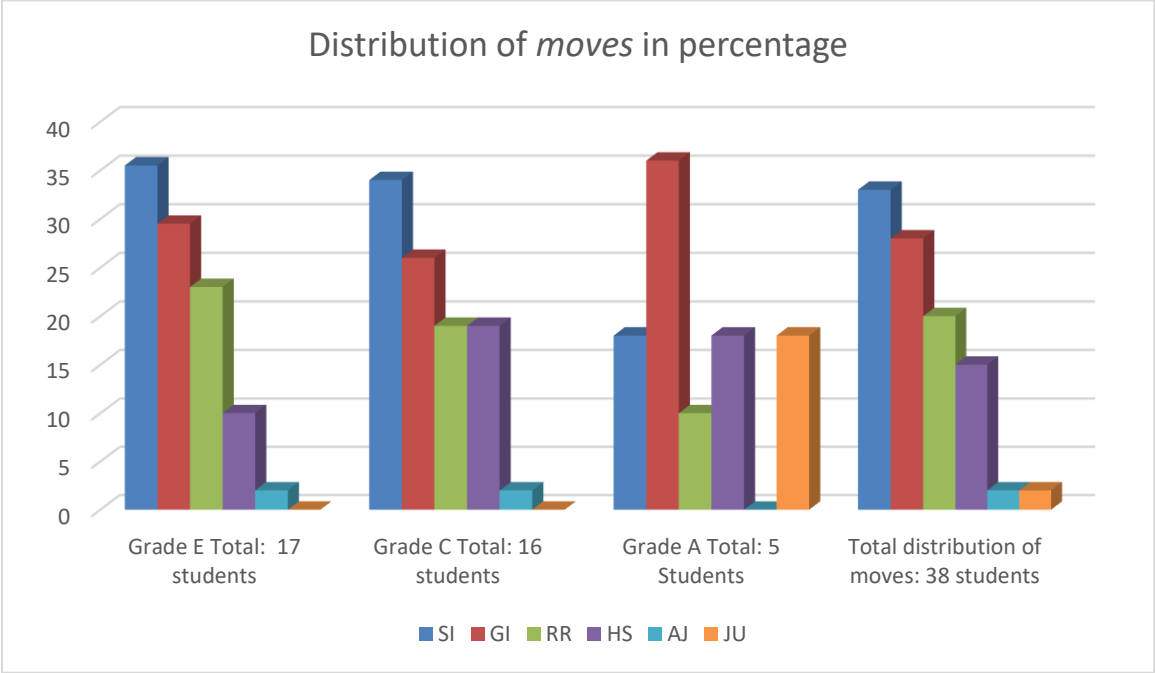
#### What *moves* are there within the material?

By applying Mirador's *moves* to the written feedback material it becomes evident that some patterns are more common than others. It is also clear that only six of the twelve *moves* are present, and that two of those are only used on two occasions each. The six moves being used are SI, GI, RR, HS, AJ, JU, in order from most used to least used. Suggested Improvement (SI) is exactly what it sounds like, it is proactive in nature and recommends specific ways in which the assignment can be improved. General Impression (GI) is an initial comment that tells the students how the tutor perceives the assignment. This can be directed both to content





and skill. Recapitulation/Referencing (RR) states what has been accomplished in the assignment in relation to graded criteria. Highlighting Strength (HS) points out content- or skill-related aspects of the assignment that are particularly good. Affective Judgment (AJ) is personal in its approach and reflects the tutors own thoughts, not connected to the grading criteria. Juxtaposition (JU) is similar to SI but functions by posing one positive comment against a negative comment.



The distribution of the different *moves* can be seen in these diagrams. The first diagram is an overview of the number of *moves* relative to the number of students for each grade. The second diagram is presented in percentage to show the differences in nature of given feedback for each grade. Here we can see that HS becomes more common with higher grades in expense of RR and SI. GI is common in all the grades and SI is most frequent in the lower grades.

## **Emerging patterns and some exceptions.**

The most commonly used pattern is that of GI, RR and SI. The feedback starts with a General Impression of the text, continues with a Recapitulation/Referencing and ends with Suggested Improvements. This pattern is dominantly used for the Grade E students in English 5 and English 6, but also on many occasions for the Grade C students in the same courses. There is however a slight shift emerging in the pattern of written feedback connected with higher grades. For the grade C in English 5 and 6, the patterns HS, RR, SI or GI, HS, SI, are more common and in the grade A the pattern HS, RR, SI is the only one being used.

Many of the written comments are very similar both in the sense of pattern and outline but also regarding what is being said. One thing that is worth mentioning is that very few of the comments are personalized in a way that differs one feedback sheet from another, reasons behind this is only speculative but could be either because the students are very similar in their writing or that the lack of time hinders further details to be included. Another aspect is that tangible, hands-on comments on how to improve are very simple and have a strong connection to the rubric for assessment in the lower grades but becomes more intricate and detached to the rubric the higher the grades are. This can be related to the fact that formative assessment has been proven by Black & Wiliam (1998) to be more effective with weaker students. My initial interpretation shows that students on the lower scale of the grades get more comments based on things related to what is being graded and can therefore adapt to what is expected of them. Of course, there is also the fact that there is more room for improvement for these students. The first example is from English 5, grade E and represents the most common pattern and outline. The second example is from the same course but with the grade A.

Din text både redogör för och kommenterar välgrundat novellens handling och berättarteknik. Snyggt jobbat! **GI**<sup>2</sup>

Texten för också en diskussion över novellens starkare och svagare sidor. **RR**

Diskussionen hade blivit mer välgrundad av förslag till förändringar. **SI**

Din text är mycket tydligt anpassad till uppgiften och tangerar mycket snyggt alla kunskapskrav i matrisen. Snyggt jobbat! **GI**

Texten största styrka är att du relaterar din diskussion och dina kommenterar både till novellens helhet/detaljer och genretypiska drag. **HS**

För att göra texten starkare hade du kunnat använda ett större ordförråd och haft en mindre del egna åsikter. **SI**<sup>3</sup>

These patterns can be connected to the feedback method *two stars and a wish* developed by Dylan Wiliam. The idea of this concept is to provide the student with two things that they have done well and one thing that they need to improve (Wiliam, 2011). Having this method that is applied equally to all students can, according to Crook et.al. (2006) be a factor to ensure that the students feel comfortable receiving negative feedback.

It is also worth noting that when the pattern of GI, RR, SI is altered in the lower grades, it often occurs to give praise to something which was not graded in this specific task or something that was graded but stands out in relation to the other graded aspects for the task. This can be seen by comparing the written formative feedback with the attached rubric.

For English 7 the written feedback comes in a completely different shape. This material is not written based on *two stars and a wish* and has no distinct pattern that the teacher follows. There are some things that we can see in all grades for English 7 and that is that almost all the material starts with a GI. In cases where GI is not present at all it is replaced by an HS which is similar to what has been seen for English 5 and 6. SI is the most used *move* but it is only featured in the grades E and C. For the highest grade, there are no

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<sup>2</sup> The acronyms in bold; **GI, RR, SI, HS, AJ** and **JU** are my *move*-descriptions of the written feedback.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 5: Translations; Translation 1

Suggested Improvements at all, negative remarks come in the form of Juxtaposition, JU. This is done by posing a positive comment in relation to a less positive one. For the grade E, we mainly see a General Impression and one or several Suggested Improvements. Just like Mutch (2003) found, negative comments are more common the lower the grades are and positive comments become more common the higher the grades get. This can be seen in the material by how Highlighting Strength replaces the General Impression on several occasions in the Grade C and how SI is less frequent at the same time.

The Affective Judgement, AJ, only occurs twice in the feedback material. The general pattern for English 5 and 6 is by starting either with a GI or HS and including a praise saying *Good Job* or *Well done*. I have chosen to include them in the initial GI or HS because they do not constitute a *move* by themselves and does not really express more than an extension of the original *move*. On one occasion this is altered, instead of including the comment with general positive praise, the comment *Extremely interesting reading!* (Grymt intressant läsning!) follows. This is one of few occasions where the actual content in the text is commented on and where the teacher shares their own personal opinion of the content.

Texten redogör välgrundat för novellens handling med speciellt fokus på den psykologiska faktorn i relation till dina egna åsikter. **GI** Grymt intressant läsning! **AJ**<sup>4</sup>

English 5, grade E

As mentioned, this is not used on many occasions and the lack of it could be both positive as well as negative. The research done by Zumbrunn et. al. (2016) suggests that these types of comments are very positive because it builds a closer relationship between student and teacher and also helps as an enhancer of self-esteem. A reason why these comments could be argued to be left out is for example that the teacher's credibility as an objective assessor can be questioned.

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 5: Translations; Translation 2

## What *moves* do not occur in the material?

A quite significant discovery is that only half of the twelve *moves* can be found in the feedback material. Those left out are Calling Attention to Weakness (CAW), Exemplification (EX), Evidentiality (EV), Positivising (Pos), Probing (Pr) and Overall Judgement (OJ). (See Appendix 1 for further details). These are mainly focused on giving further comments on negative aspects of the work or to elaborate and give more detailed comments on previous statements. To stay away from the use of too many negative comments can be good as suggested by Crook, Gross & Dymott (2006) and Zumbrunn et. al. (2016). The focus on negative aspects is not sought after and does not enhance student learning or motivation unless they are made with constructive instructions on how improve, which of course is time-consuming and no guarantee for success. Other *moves* such as EX and EV is based on providing references to other sources and examples to the student which also is time-consuming for the teacher and perhaps more suitable to do orally, face-to-face. The use of more elaborate and constructive comments such as EX, EV and OJ would of course be good, but for the teacher to have time to give these comments to all students is probably impossible.

As mentioned earlier, Yelland (2011) has given some critique to Mirador's model of it not being precise enough. On this note I have found something in the material that cannot be defined. The use of general praise that is often included in the GI and HS for all instances in the courses English 5 and 6 could be seen as a *move* itself since it does not have to be attached to anything else. I have chosen to include it in the initial *moves* on all occasions but one where it expresses the teacher's personal opinion. To include the *move* General Praise (GP) could be a way to further enhance Mirador's *move* analysis

## Discourse analysis

This section will be divided into two separate parts, the first one is focused on transitivity, mainly how events in a text are connected to the subject/object. A strong connection between the action and the agent means that the text has strong *agency*. By investigating the level of agency, we can see how the relationship between student and teacher is modelled in the written formative feedback. The second part focuses on the modality of the text. This is based on how the text is written and whether it expresses the writer's own opinions or if it contains a strong sense of claiming the truth. These two small textual elements can be seen as strategies used by the writer to ascertain a certain power relationship between teacher and student (Fairclough, 2017).

### Transitivity.

The analyzed written formative feedback shows quite different levels of agency depending on which course, grade and what *move* it belongs to. By looking at an example taken from English 5 with the grade E we can see the most common *move* pattern and the most common sentence structure of those particular *moves*.

Din text redogör välgrundat för novellens handling vad gäller både helhet och detaljer. Snyggt jobbat! **GI**

Texten både kommenterar och diskuterar novellens handling och berättarteknik, i viss utsträckning välgrundat. **RR**

Texten hade blivit mer välgrundad av en mer explicit diskussion och kommentarer kring berättartekniken. **SI**<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix 5: Translations; Translation 3

In none of these sentences is the student present as an agent. The teacher refers to the student's achievement by saying *your text* and *the text* instead of addressing the student directly. Overall the writer keeps quite a distance to the intended reader by not addressing them personally. We can also see that nominalizations are quite common in English 5 and 6. This example is taken from English 5, grade C.

Redogörelser, diskussioner och kommentarer är välgrundade och i viss utsträckning nyanserade. Bra jobbat! **GI**<sup>6</sup>

This lack of agency means that the text is in total focus and that all other factors are left out of the equation. There is no focus on student achievement, ability or proficiency other than what the text itself holds.

If we compare this to feedback from the same course but with the grade A, it is possible to see a different picture.

Din text är mycket tydligt anpassad till uppgiften och tangerar mycket snyggt alla kunskapskrav i matrisen. Snyggt jobbat! **GI**

Textens största styrka är att du relaterar din diskussion och dina kommentarer både till novellens helhet/detaljer och genretypiska drag. **HS**

För att göra texten starkare hade du kunnat använda ett större ordförråd och haft en mindre del egna åsikter. **SI**<sup>7</sup>

The GI has the same way of reflecting agency as in the lower grades but then we see that in HS and SI the student is addressed as the writer directly by using *you*. This is seen in several places in the higher grades, most commonly in relation to HS. This means that comments associated with a more positive grade often contain a higher sense of agency. Appraisals are you-directed in many cases instead of giving praise to the text itself, although we see those kinds on several occasions as well.

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix 5: Translations; Translation 4

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix 5: Translations; Translation 5

For English 7 the sense of agency is strong throughout all grades. The students are referred to as the writer directly in all cases and the feedback is constantly you-directed. This example demonstrates how agency is the same in English 7 for both negative and positive comments:

The strength in this essay is that you manage to follow a strict formal structure and you carry out your work in a strict professional manner. **HS** Your English does not quite live up to this high standard all the way. **SI** (...)

Grade C

There could be several reasons why this is the case and one can only speculate. Suggested factors could be that the relationship between teacher and students is so good that there is no risk of directing negative comments directly towards the student. It could also be because there simply has been no thought behind the use of a strong agency in the provided feedback. This is something that would have to be investigated further, but to lift awareness of how language is used to provide feedback is important and could strengthen both the relationship between teacher and student but also the effectiveness of written formative feedback (Fairclough, 2017; Wiliam, 2011; Zumbrunn et. al., 2016). To use strategies in the interaction between teacher and student can, according to Fairclough (2017) be a great way to establish the wanted relationship between the two interlocutors.

Overall, agency becomes more associated with positive comments and higher grades but no definitive pattern can be established. By keeping the agency to a minimum, it is easier not to hurt a student's "face" The question of how to pose negative critique to something that a student has put a lot of work into has been investigated by Ivanić (1998) who means that the notion of "face" is very sensitive. Even though written formative feedback is not a face-to-face action it is easy to hurt the feelings of a student by formulating "face"-threatening comments on their work. Therefore, it is important to keep the language as directed towards the actual text and not to the student's involvement in it. The results are not quite as coherent as one would have wanted to say something absolute about this phenomenon, but a stronger agency associated with higher grades could be a way to



strengthen student self-esteem and keep students with lesser grades more focused on the assignment itself than their feelings.

### **Modality.**

Fairclough (1995) has stated that different modalities are associated with specific discourses and that objective modality indicates a higher position in that specific social order.

What is obvious in the feedback material is that total objective modality is the most common way of expressing all the *moves* as long as it is positive and stays connected to the criteria for assessment. Objective modality is expressed by using verbs such as *is* and *are*, indicating that something is true. This means that the teacher makes a strong claim of expressing the truth and being the all-knowing in the social order. When the teacher comments on other things such as content for example, there is sometimes a shift in modality, this type of shift does not happen often but it is possible to see a difference.

By looking at a few different examples is possible to see the differences in how modality is expressed in different *moves*:

Your language is very rich, expressive and fluent. **HS – English 7, grade C**

Textens diskussion kring berättartekniken är välgrundad och tar upp flera olika aspekter. **RR**

Textens diskussion hade blivit mer välgrundad om den innehållit förslag till förändringar av novellens handling. **SI**<sup>8</sup>

The HS and RR both contain a strong modality by stating pure facts but the SI is merely suggesting improvements and does not demand a strong modality in this case.

In SI, it is very common to use words such as *could have* and *would have*. This is a modality based on providing suggestions on alternative ways in which the student could

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix 5: Translations; Translation 6

have performed better without stating that something must be in a specific way. A stronger modality in this case would have been to use *should* but that would infer that something must be done in a certain way. In places where the student has not achieved a perfect fulfilment on the basic criteria, the modality in the SI is strengthened by the use of *need* instead of *could* or *would*.

För att diskussionen skulle bli mer välgrundad hade texten behövt mer förslag till förändringar.  
**SI English 5, Grade E<sup>9</sup>**

The fact that teachers use a very strong objective modality is not that surprising. If the teachers were to express themselves by saying things such as *I think* or *in my opinion*, it would mean that their assessment is up for debate. A strong modality is a way of maintaining the power relationship between teacher and student. This can be seen as what Fairclough (2017) would call an operationalized discourse to maintain the wanted relationship.

## Discussion

The discussion tries to tie all results together and compare it with previous research and thoughts of how formative feedback should be presented to students.

### What does it all mean for feedback as a genre/discourse

Both Mirador (2000) and Yelland (2011) found feedback to constitute a genre of its own but gave no specific explanations of what it actually means. By looking at the *moves* and the patterns they form, it is possible to elaborate on Swales' (1990) description of each genre having its own way of starting, continuing and ending. For the analyzed material, we can

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix 5: Translations; Translation 7

certainly say that the most common way of initiating feedback is by stating the General Impression, GI. This is most often followed by RR, Recapitulation/Referencing or HS, Highlighting Strengths and ends with SI, Suggesting Improvements. There are of course some minor differences, but overall, the pattern is that positive remarks or general statements of the work itself come before negative remarks. This goes in line with the research by Mutch (2003) suggesting that feedback should be presented with positive comments before negative ones. The results of the analysis in this essay shows that the discourse of written formative feedback contains a high level of modality and on many occasions a total lack of agency. The language is highly objective and does, for the most part, not include personal opinions and comments on the actual content. To expand on this and to have a chance to improve student self-esteem and motivation, it could be a good idea to address Ivanic's (1998) findings about "face". The fact that students can get hurt if negative comments are directed directly to them instead of the work that they have produced should also mean that positive comments directed to them and not to the text, could work as an enhancer of self-esteem and motivation. To separate the address of positive comments to the student and negative comments to the text, could be even more important when it comes to students with lower grades. To adapt strategies and an operationalized discourse such as this would be one way to achieve the sought-after results (Fairclough, 2017).

Mirador (2000) believes that some moves are obligatory in a specific genre and that some belong to the genre but are optional to use. Mirador never did a quantized analysis of her material which is something she says is necessary to establish what *moves* are obligatory or not. This is exactly what I have done in this essay, and I have come to some conclusions. The size of the analyzed material would of course have to be considerably larger but the emerging pattern is that for written formative feedback, the absolute necessity is Suggested Improvement, SI. Even though SI as its own *move* is not present in all the feedback

material, there is still some evidence of tips on how to improve. If it does not come in the form of SI it is in JU. It would not be formative feedback if it did not provide the student with ideas on how to make progress (Wiliam, 2011). What this means for feedback as a genre is that there are no exact *moves* that are necessary per se, but there is information that has to be included for it to be formative feedback.

GI is also very common but can be enhanced and replaced by HS, RR and JU, and are so on many occasions. The use of AJ can probably be a positive enhancer of the student's self-esteem but can at the same time undermine social order between teacher and student, because it opens the floor for debate.

Mirador (2000) has identified a number of patterns when it comes to written feedback but the results that I have found are quite different. The material being analyzed in this essay does not include all the *moves* defined by Mirador and can therefore not follow the patterns she has identified. In this essay, there has been a clear focus on differences in *moves* between grades, which, I believe, has never been done before, and the results are quite interesting. The analysis suggests that there is a difference in the patterns and therefore in the genre of feedback based on what grade the student is given.

## **Conclusion**

By using a *move*-analysis developed by Mirador (2000) and a critical discourse analysis based on *transitivity* and *modality*, it has been possible to examine the characteristics of written formative feedback in a Swedish school setting. This essay has shown evidence of some differences in the patterns of written formative feedback based on grades and the use of modalities and agencies of different strength. I have also made some suggestions on useful strategies related to operationalizing certain discursive elements to enhance the students' reaction to the given feedback.

A *move* is a small unit within a genre that carries a certain meaning. There are some differences in the written feedback based on what grades the students are associated with and this is shown in the different patterns consisting of *moves*. *Moves* found and applied in the analyzed material are Suggested Improvements, SI, General Impression, GI, Recapitulation/Referencing, RR, Highlighting Strength, HS, Juxtaposition, JU and Affective Judgement, AJ.<sup>10</sup> The shift in patterns often goes from GI, RR, SI to HS, RR, SI depending on the grade. Higher grades are more associated with Highlighting Strength and less associated with Suggested Improvements in relation to the assessed criteria. When the system of *Two stars and a wish* was not used we even saw that students with higher grades did not even receive any Suggested improvements. Even though a system such as *Two stars and a wish* is used, it is no guarantee for creating a unanimous genre of written formative feedback.

The most common *move* in written formative feedback is that of SI, Suggested Improvement. As previous research has shown by Mutch (2003), I too can confirm that negative comments are more common in relation to lower grades even though these students might be the ones in most need of positive praise. The second most common *move* is that of General Impression, GI, which, just as SI, becomes less frequent the higher the grades are. Even though the *move* SI is not present in every sheet of feedback, it is still evident that constructive comments based on how to improve have to be included for it to actually constitute formative feedback.

Written formative feedback in the analyzed Swedish school setting is highly objective and contains for the most part a low sense of *agency* when it comes to negative or neutral comments. On the other hand, positive comments are more associated with stronger *agency*. This is something that can, and probably should, be used as a strategy to improve

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<sup>10</sup> For a full description of Mirador's moves, see Appendix 1.

student motivation and learning. Suggested Improvements often have low *modality* unless it is something that needs to be done to fulfill the basic requirements. This can be seen as an operationalized discourse or strategy, and stipulates the social order between teacher and student.

The genre of written formative feedback is a bit hard to define. The material suggests that it might not be one single genre but several different depending on the grade. As the analysis show, both patterns in *moves*, and levels of *modality* and *transitivity* change when the grades change. Swales (1990) states that a genre has its own way of starting, continuing and ending, this means that for feedback to be a single genre of its own, all feedback, without connection to grades, should have similar patterns. From the analyzed material, we can see different patterns based on grades. This either suggests a base for different genres or a change in the relationship between student and teacher based on grades. According to Fairclough's theory of changing discourses, a change in discourse means a change in the social relationship between its interlocutors (1995).

Even though this essay has come to some conclusions, further research, including a larger sampling size, is needed to fully understand what the genre of written formative feedback looks like and how strategies can be used to enhance its effectiveness.

## **Practical implications**

Since formative assessment is such a big part of how teachers toil to expand student learning and motivation, it is important to have great knowledge of how it is best done. This essay gives some insight into how feedback can be written and some suggestions on what specific patterns and comments might mean for the student. It is of course hard for a teacher to constantly evaluate their own written feedback, but by having knowledge about what *moves* and what types of *transitivity* and *modality* they are using, it is possible to think about what

the feedback convey. By addressing minor factors in the form of the feedback and in the actual language, it is possible to affect the student's perception of the feedback itself (Crook, et al., 2006; Ivanic, 1998; Zumbrunn et. al., 2016). Patterns in *moves* and the use of strong *agency* can mean a difference in how the student is affected by the feedback. There seems to be a difference in the patterns and language of feedback depending on grades. Minimizing these differences could be one step towards better feedback. By applying specific strategies built on insight into *modality*, *transitivity* and *moves*, it is possible for teachers to write more effective feedback to improve student learning and motivation.

## **Limitations**

The material that has been analyzed in this essay is too limited to be able to draw any absolute conclusions, but some emerging patterns can still be seen. For a clearer and more convincing result to arise, a larger sampling size, involving more teachers and more students, would have to be included. The generalizability of this study is therefore low, but it still provides some useful insights into the characteristics of written formative feedback. Even though the results of this essay cannot represent more than the participating teachers themselves, it can still provide useful tips and ideas of how to improve one's feedback.

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Appendix 1: The 12 Moves by Mirador (2000).

### **General Impression (GI)**

usually found as an initial or overview statement; states in general how tutor perceives the assignment; comment can cover both content and skill; adjectival in nature.

This review has provided ample evidence of the literature concerned with the issue of music as a specialist subject and the controversies surrounding that position.

### **Recapitulation/Referencing (RR)**

repeats/states what the student has accomplished in the assignment in terms of scope; often 'sectional' in approach; You-directed.

You cover the range of methods and sources of information, and show informed and due caution about reliability.

### **Suggesting Improvement (SI)**

proactive in nature; recommends specific steps/action on how assignment can be improved: comparative forms in the positive and modality

Domley's points might be explored some more.

### **Highlighting Strengths (HS)**

citing the points (skills or content-related) found positive in the assignment. The comments on the qualitative/quantitative style of the literature was excellent.

### **Calling Attention to Weakness (CAW)**

suggestion made about a perceived loophole in the assignment; weakness defined.

Would confidence in music be a better phrase?

### **Affective Judgement (AJ)**

personal in approach; affirms an idea or choice adopted by student in the assignment: usually "I-directed."

I enjoyed reading your paper (Charmaigne).

### **Exemplification (EX)**

citing of examples to elaborate on previous comment; sequential in nature; applicable as an extension of GI statement and/or any comment by tutor.[You have demonstrated a good understanding of the research process.]

YOU MAKE APPROPRIATE REFERENCE TO THE LIMITATIONS OF  
THE PROJECT DESCRIBED HERE AND PRESENT SUGGESTIONS FOR  
ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES AND METHODOLOGIES

### **Evidentiality (EV)**

citing of facts or pieces of evidence to stress a point previously made or to offer additional bits of information.

Breaktime and the School: Understanding and Changing Playground Beha.y i.Q.ur.2 P.  
Blatchford and S Sharp, Routledge, was reviewed by the TES on April 22nd!

### **Juxtaposition (JU)**

comment generally aimed at suggesting improvement for the paper; characterised by posing a seemingly favourable comment against a seemingly less favourable comment.

- Some of your tables and figures could have been more effectively presented—though, for the most part, they are clear and appropriate.

### **Positivising (Pos)**

a seemingly positive comment usually found between seemingly two less favourable comments.

[Your justification for using his model was not fully developed, nor did you explain why you moved the children towards generalisation first rather than fluency building. How did the multi-sensory approach to spelling explain the children's retention of the skill? Could the meaning you imposed to the abstraction using a puppet have been significant (and motivating)? The speed at which they generalised suggests that perhaps they didn't need fluency building: how would X 's model. have related to your data?]

- THE WORK IS WELL PRESENTED AND CLEARLY ARGUED USING THE LITERATURE EFFECTIVELY TO SUPPORT YOUR STATEMENTS. [More critical analysis in your evaluation would have avoided subjectivity and overgeneralisation, and enabled you to draw more specific conclusions related to your aims and the theoretical frameworks offered.]

### **Probing (Pr)**

posing of questions to lead student to probe into an idea/option taken in the assignment.

- [I also don't think you have thought in depth enough about what it is that makes music different.] WHY IS IT DIFFERENT OR IMPORTANTLY PERCEIVED TO BE DIFFERENT FROM OTHER SUBJECTS?

### **Overall Judgement (OJ)**

usually found as a summing-up idea; provides an overall assessment of the quality of work presented.

' On the whole, a very promising and extremely interesting and useful piece of work.

Appendix 2:

### **The Linguistic Forms that Occur with Particular Moves**

The analysis of written feedback revealed that certain linguistic forms occur with particular moves. The following provides a list of these forms.

#### **General Impression (GI)**

Form: adjectival

Examples:

This is a THOUGHTFUL and PRECISE study... • This is an EXCELLENT piece of work...  
VERY WELL-WRITTEN.

A THOROUGH and WELL-STRUCTURED examination of...

This is a SUCCINCTLY WRITTEN study...

A VERY CAREFULLY PUT TOGETHER, WELL RESEARCHED and CLOSELY ARGUED paper....

#### **Suggesting Improvement (SI)**

Form: modality; comparative

Examples:

A tabular or diagrammatic presentation of some of the findings WOULD  
HAVE BEEN revealing for the school

You COULD HAVE POINTED out that...

More critical analysis in your evaluation WOULD HAVE AVOIDED subjectivity....

X's points MIGHT BE EXPLORED some MORE.

Your original design WOULD HAVE PROVIDED BETTER evidence for or against the Hawthorn effect....

Rather than a summary you COULD HAVE WRITTEN an abstract.

#### **Affective Judgement (AJ)**

Form: I-directed

Examples:

I LIKED the close attention to the details of the studies you examined.

I LIKE the use you make of sub-headings within the text.

I ENJOYED reading your paper.

I LIKED your tracing of the origins of the idea of GM schools back to the Omega report. I LIKE your model on p. 10. why don't you build an article around it for one of the journals?

- I LIKE your notes on data production, thus you produce a refreshingly practical set of conclusions with useful indicators for future enquiry.

### **Calling Attention to Weakness (CAW)**

Form: strong negatives

Examples:

Your justification for using his model was NOT fully developed, NOR did you explain why you moved the children towards generalisation first rather than fluency building.

The result of results is NOT always accurate.

The qualitative methods you used are NOT introduced and justified in your methodology chapter.

I also DON'T THINK you have thought in depth enough about what it is that makes music different.

### **5. Juxtaposition**

Form: conjunctions

the methodology was SOUNDLY ARGUED in principle, THOUGH LITTLE MENTION was made of her own role as a key player and how this may have skewed responses.

Some of your tables and figures COULD HAVE BEEN MORE effectively presented—THOUGH, for the most part, they are CLEAR AND APPROPRIATE.

Your review of the literature is GOOD—THOUGH I WOULD HAVE PREFERRED a summary of the issues after the introductory session RATHER THAN integrated with your own research findings.

This piece of work DEMONSTRATES A GOOD GRASP of interview techniques. I WOULD, HOWEVER, HAVE LIKED to see you use the data better by including more quotes in your presentation of research findings.

## Information om Språklig analys av Formativ Feedback

Denna undersökning syftar till att undersöka hur skriftlig formativ feedback formuleras av lärare verksamma på gymnasienivå i Sverige. Du tillfrågas härmed om att ge samtycke om utlämning av den feedback/återkoppling som är skriven av din lärare i samband med bedömning av dina uppgifter.

Denna undersökning syftar till att bidra till en ökad förståelse för hur feedback kan se ut, samt ge förslag på hur man kan effektivisera formativ bedömning för ett ökat lärande.

De som ingår i denna undersökning kommer att vara alla klasser i engelska som din lärare har bedömt det senaste året. Det kommer även att göras förfrågningar på andra skolor i Skåne. Just din medverkan är viktig för att säkerställa ett så brett utbud av material som möjligt.

Det kommer inte att kräva något aktivt deltagande från din sida utöver detta medgivande. Allt material kommer att anonymiseras innan det når mig och det finns därmed ingen risk att uppgifter om dig eller någon du känner kommer att komma ut. När materialet sedan når mig kommer en språklig analys att göras utifrån en lingvistisk analysmodell.

Undersökningen kommer att presenteras i en uppsats vid Lunds Universitet. Om intresse finns kommer jag gärna till er och berättar om resultaten nästa år.

Ditt deltagande i undersökningen är helt frivilligt. Du kan när som helst avbryta ditt deltagande utan närmare motivering.

Tack för din medverkan!

10/10 – 2017 Helsingborg

Jonas Gramsby

Lärostudent vid Lunds Universitet

0761712007

[jonas.gramsby@gmail.com](mailto:jonas.gramsby@gmail.com)

Maria Bäcke

Handledare HKR

0442503351

[maria.backe@hkr.se](mailto:maria.backe@hkr.se)



Appendix 4: Rubric for assessment.

	E	C	A
Diskussion kring novellens starkare och svagare sidor med förslag till förändringar.	Texten för en <b>översiktligt</b> diskussion kring novellens handling eller berättarteknik med enstaka förslag <sup>11</sup> till förändringar.	Texten för en <b>välgrundad</b> diskussion kring handling och berättarteknik med enstaka förslag till förändringar.	Texten för en <b>välgrundad och nyanserad</b> diskussion kring handling och berättarteknik med både positiva och negativa förslag.
Kommentarer på novellens helhet och detaljer utifrån diskussionen.	Texten kommenterar <b>översiktligt</b> på novellens helhet eller enstaka detaljer främst i relation till egna åsikter.	Texten kommenterar <b>välgrundat</b> novellens helhet och enstaka detaljer i relation till egna åsikter och berättarteknik.	Texten kommenterar <b>välgrundat och nyanserat</b> novellens helhet och detaljer, i relation till berättarteknik.
Redogörelse av handling och detaljer i sammanfattningen.	Texten redogör <b>översiktligt</b> för handlingen i allt väsentlighet men missar viktiga detaljer.	Texten redogör <b>välgrundat</b> för handlingen och lyfter fram viktiga detaljer.	Texten redogör <b>välgrundat och nyanserat</b> för handlingen som helhet i relation till flera viktiga detaljer.

<sup>11</sup> Idéer och tankar kring hur historien hade blivit bättre/sämre genom förslagna förändringar.

## Appendix 5: Translations

### Translation 1:

Your text both explains and comments justifiably on the novel's action and narrative technique. Nice work! **GI**

The text also includes a discussion of the stronger and weaker pages of the novel. **RR**

The discussion had become more well-founded by proposals for change. **SI**

Your text is very clearly adapted to the task, very nicely equals all the knowledge requirements in the matrix.

Nice work! **GI**

The text's greatest strength is that you relate your discussion and your commentary to the novel's entirety / detail and genre-typical features. **HS**

In order to make the text stronger you could have used a larger vocabulary and had fewer of your own opinions.

**SI**

### Translation 2:

The text explains justifiably for the story's action with particular focus on the psychological factor in relation to your own opinions. **GI** Extremely interesting reading! **AJ**

### Translation 3:

Your text explains justifiably for the novel's storyline regarding both the entirety and the details. Nice work! **GI**

The text both comments and discusses the novel's storyline and narrative technique, to some extent well-founded. **RR**

The text had become more well-founded by a more explicit discussion and comments about the narrative technique. **SI**

### Translation 4:

Reports, discussions and comments are well-founded and to a certain extent, nuanced. Good work! **GI**

**Translation 5:**

Your text is very clearly adapted to the task, and very well touches upon all the knowledge requirements in the matrix. Nice work! **GI**

The text's greatest strength is that you relate your discussion and your commentary to the novel's entirety / detail and genre-typical features. **HS**

In order to make the text stronger you could have used a larger vocabulary and had a smaller part of your own opinions. **SI**

**Translation 6:**

The text's discussion about the storytelling technique is well founded and addresses several different aspects. **RR**

The text's discussion had become more well-founded if it contained suggestions for changes to the story's plot.

**SI**

**Translation 7:**

In order for the discussion to be more well-founded, the text would have needed more suggestions for changes.

**SI**