

Beyond correction: The communicative functions of written feedback on research proposals

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Abstract

Written feedback on postgraduate research proposals remains an important yet insufficiently explored aspect of academic socialisation, particularly within L2 university contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa. This study examines the communicative functions of proposal readers' written feedback comments on master's students' research proposal, a genre that occupies a transitional and analytically distinct position in postgraduate education. Using Holmes' (2001) language functions and qualitative content analysis design, the study analysed written feedback comments drawn from forty (40) master's research proposal drafts in an English Studies programme. The findings revealed four major communicative functions in the feedback comments: directive (56%), referential (32%), expressive (11%), and metalinguistic (1%). Directive feedback emerged as the dominant function, indicating a tendency for proposal readers to engage in dialogic feedback and guided inquiry, over simply be prescriptive in their feedback comments. Referential feedback indicated sustained attention to multiple dimensions of academic writing quality. Expressive feedback revealed a marked imbalance between disapproval and approval comments, which raises concerns about the motivational dimension of postgraduate feedback practices. Metalinguistic comments, although fairly limited in frequency, indicated problems of language clarity and suitable academic register. The findings show that written feedback on master's research proposals is a complex and multifunctional communicative practice through which proposal readers perform evaluative, mentorship and academic socialisation roles concurrently. The study offers empirical evidence from an underrepresented African L2 postgraduate context and has pedagogical implications for supervisors, and proposal readers seeking to improve feedback quality and student writing growth at the postgraduate level.

Keywords: feedback comments, communicative functions, master's students, postgraduate education, research proposals

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1. Introduction

In postgraduate education, research proposals writing introduces students to disciplinary academic norms and practices, making it a crucial component of postgraduate education. It is expected of master's students to identify research problems, engage critically with the body of existing literature, and provide a clear methodology for their intended research. However, many postgraduate students find it difficult to organise their ideas, justify their methodological choices (Abdullah, 2023; Denscombe, 2012), and keep their research proposals academically consistent and coherent. In such instances, proposal readers' written feedback comments become an important pedagogical tool for assisting students in developing their academic writing skills.

Studies on written feedback have constantly emphasised the relevance of helping students to improve their writing and revision skills. Written feedback has long been recognised as the most preferred means of communication between supervisors and their students (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Ferris, 1995; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). According to research on L2 writing, written feedback motivates students to revise their drafts and improve the quality of their writing (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995; Leki, 1991). Similarly, Hyland and Hyland (2006) assert that feedback encourages learning through revision and allows students to interact with the members of their academic community. Written feedback is thus understood as a communicative process in which supervisors and instructors negotiate meaning with students (Hyland & Hyland, 2001), rather than a simple task in correction.

In postgraduate education, feedback on written drafts is used as a type of advanced academic training, introducing the supervisee to academic community norms, values, and communicative practices (Hyatt, 2005; Kumar & Stracke, 2007). Feedback comments received during the proposal writing phase heavily inform the supervisory relationship. Kumar and Stracke (2007) argue this can foster a power relationship where one party possesses expertise and institutional authority while the other is still learning the conventions of academic writing practices. Lave and Wenger (1991) call this the master-apprentice model of learning. This tension is most apparent during the proposal stage, before the student has established the intellectual authority that a finished body of research would provide. The ability to communicate effectively in response to written feedback has been recognised as a crucial professional skill in postgraduate education (Phillips & Pugh, 2005), yet Hyland and Hyland (2001) have drawn attention to the tendency of feedback research to overlook these interpersonal dimensions in relation to informational content.

While there is a growing body of literature on the communicative functions of written feedback, there are still considerable gaps. Kumar and Stracke (2007) and Leng (2014) have made significant contributions to understanding how feedback functions as written communication between supervisors and students, but their research focused on doctoral thesis drafts and undergraduate ESL writing, respectively, neither of which captures the distinct demands of the master's research proposal. Although Saeed, Al Qunayeer, and Al-Jaberi (2021) and Yu and Lee (2013) have begun to attend specifically to feedback on research proposals, their investigations were conducted in Malaysian and Hong Kong institutional contexts, where supervisory conventions and student L2 profiles differ substantially from those in Sub-Saharan Africa. Also, while a few studies have begun to investigate supervisory feedback practices in Ghanaian universities (Lomotey & Obli, 2025; Owusu, 2017), they have primarily focused on feedback delivered during the thesis-writing period. The master's research proposal constitutes a transitional and analytically distinct genre, as it necessitates epistemological positioning and methodological justification, unlike undergraduate assignments; however, it is produced prior to the student attaining the intellectual authority conferred by sustained research experience, distinguishing it from doctoral thesis chapters. To the best of our knowledge, no known study has investigated the communicative functions of

proposal readers' written feedback on master's students' research proposals within an African L2 university context. This gap is particularly noteworthy, as research on postgraduate feedback practices in Ghana and similar African context remains limited, and the sociolinguistic and pedagogical factors influencing feedback in these contexts require focused empirical investigation. This study, therefore, investigates the communicative functions of written feedback comments on master's students' research proposals in a Ghanaian university.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews the theoretical framework, and studies on written feedback comments on students' writing in higher education.

Theoretical framework- This study used Holmes' (2001) language functions framework as a theoretical basis to explore the communicative functions of written feedback comments on master's students' research proposals. Holmes (2001) categorises language functions into six types; referential, directive, expressive, metalinguistic, poetic and phatic. The first three are generally accepted by linguists as the core elements of any interaction, derived from basic features of communication: the message (referential), the addressee (directive) and the speaker (expressive) (Holmes, 2001). The referential function is about providing accurate and objective information about the world; in the context of written feedback, proposal readers can use this function to inform students about the quality of their work, highlight areas that need to be revised. The directive function is used to give directions, make suggestions, or seek clarification, and it is especially useful in feedback contexts when the proposal reader wants to assist the student through what changes are required and how revision should continue. The expressive function conveys the speaker's feelings, attitudes, and opinions, which in written feedback can take the form of praise, disapproval, encouragement, or personal engagement with the student's work. The remaining three functions, including metalinguistic, poetic, and phatic are present in language broadly and have secondary relevance to the current study, especially the metalinguistic function may occasionally emerge when proposal readers comment directly on a student's use of language, writing style, or clarity of expression. This theory offers a useful analytical lens for investigating not just what written feedback communicates, but also how it functions as a written speech between proposal readers and the master's students.

Empirical Review- Written feedback on students' writing has long been acknowledged to be more than a neutral pedagogical exercise; rather it is a highly communicative practice that serves multiple functions. Feedback has instructive, corrective, evaluative and relational purposes (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Feedback comments shape the quality of students' texts, their academic writing experiences, and their participation in scholarly academic communities. Thus, feedback is inherently dialogic as a communicative process through which students negotiate meaning, develop disciplinary literacy, and construct their academic identities (Turner, 2023). In reaction to this complexity, a number of studies have tried to classify written feedback in terms of its communicative functions. For instance, Kumar and Stracke (2007) identified three major functions of supervisory feedback on PhD thesis drafts: referential, directive and expressive. Referential comments relate to challenges of content, organisation and structure; directive comments gave explicit instructions, suggestions or corrections; and expressive comments communicated evaluative stances such as praise, criticism or personal opinion. Interestingly, the supervisee found expressive feedback to be most valuable as it gave recognition and motivation rather than mere textual correction. Leng (2014) also found that directive and expressive functions were particularly important in an ESL undergraduate context, and that students in her study preferred directive feedback more because of its explicit guidance for revision. Xu (2017) found that referential feedback was the most frequent type of feedback, with supervisors attending to organisational and linguistic issues rather than giving praise or direct instruction. On the contrary, Bastola (2021) found expressive feedback as dominant. It was postulated that supervisors' time constraints and students' language proficiency levels contributed to this pattern. Similarly, Basturkmen, East and Bitchener (2014) discovered that directive feedback was most frequent when supervisors were addressing issues of content, coherence and cohesion. Such differences suggest that the communicative functions of written feedback are highly context-dependent, shaped by disciplinary expectations, institutional cultures and individual supervisory practices.

The literature also shows the interpersonal and emotional nature of feedback. Supervisors are conscious of the language they use to manage interpersonal relations. Hyland and Hyland (2001) observe that praise comments are often used strategically to lessen the impact of criticism. Carless (2006) indicates that positive feedback promotes student engagement, while negative or dismissive feedback can demotivate students from writing. On the contrary, Nurie (2018) and Gedamu and Gezahegn (2021) reveal that positive comments were not often used in many supervisory contexts and feedback was criticism-based. This imbalance raises important questions as to whether feedback adequately performs its communicative function of supporting student academic development.

Studies on research proposals adds more evidence to the complexity of communicative functions in supervisory discourse. Saeed, Al Qunayeer and Al-Jaberi (2021) studied written feedback on research proposals in a Malaysian university and revealed that feedback contained directive, referential and expressive functions on content, organisation, language accuracy and appropriateness. Importantly, students interacted with the feedback not only cognitively but also emotionally and metacognitively, indicating that the communicative effect of feedback is more far-reaching than the intentions of supervisors or the interpretations and responses of students. Similarly, Yu and Lee (2013) found considerable differences between supervisors in their feedback approaches; one supervisor used direct instructions extensively while another preferred interactive questioning strategies. Their findings further confirm that individual supervisory styles and institutional conventions affect communicative functions.

In general, written feedback is described in the literature as a complex, multifunctional practice that goes far beyond error correction to include instruction, evaluation, motivation and academic socialisation. However, these insights leave important gaps. Much of the extant research has focused on the undergraduate writing context and supervision of doctoral theses with little focus on the communicative functions of feedback on research proposals of masters' students. The gap is especially prevalent in L2 contexts like Ghana where studies on postgraduate feedback practices remain limited.

3. Methodology

This section presents the research design, research setting and participants, data collection procedure, data analysis.

Research design - The research design for this study was qualitative content analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Content analysis refers to the systematic examination of written texts and symbolic materials, including images, films, and other forms of communicative content (Neuman, 2007). It is regarded as a nonreactive method because the textual or symbolic material being analysed is generated independently of the researcher, which reduces the researcher's influence on the data (Neuman, 2007). This approach therefore enables a rigorous examination of the areas of focus in proposal readers' written feedback on master's students' research proposals.

Context and Participants - The participants for this study were second-year postgraduate Master's students from Humanities (English Studies) at the University of Cape Coast. The University offers a two-year Master of Philosophy degree programme for students, and thesis writing is a requirement for all students. Before students progress to write their thesis, they are mandated to first write and defend their research proposals based on their chosen topics of interest. These research proposals are then given to readers based on their areas of expertise ahead of the students' research proposal defence. The selected proposal readers read and provide useful feedback comments in the proposal drafts. These feedback comments provided by proposal readers are the focus of the present study. The present study seeks to explore the communicative functions of proposal readers feedback comments on master's students research proposals. For the purpose of this study, a total of forty (40) master's students took part in the research. These participants were students who wrote and submitted their research proposals to the Department of English at the University of Cape Coast. The study used a purposive technique to select the participants for the study. Purposive sampling procedure was used due to the following reasons: first, the research proposal must be an MPhil research proposal from a second-year student. Second, the study

incorporated participants who had interacted with their proposal readers with respect to the research proposal drafts. Also, the research proposals selected for the study must have handwritten comments in them from the students' proposal readers, since it is not all research proposals that contain handwritten comments. The choice of the purposive sampling procedure aided in gathering data that provided precise response to the objective for the study.

Data collection- The data for the present study constitute forty (40) research proposals from master's students. The research proposals were gathered from master's students from English Studies from the Department of English at the University of Cape Coast. The forty (40) research proposals collected were enough for the study since, according to the concept of saturation in data collection, they represented the "optimum number necessary to enable valid inferences to be made about the population" (Marshall, 1996: 522). After the collection of the research proposal drafts, we created a word document where we typed in all in-text handwritten comments from proposal readers. The in-text handwritten included all comments written by the proposal readers in the research proposals, which were mostly written in the margins of the proposal drafts and some are between the lines. These comments could be assumed as the proposal readers' views expressed as though they were having interactions with the students.

Data analysis- We developed an analytical framework from the data. This analytical framework was designed to identify the communicative functions embedded in proposal readers' feedback and to understand how language is used to influence, inform, evaluate, or guide students' academic writing. We perused the entire feedback comments one by one to develop a categorisation system. We considered the communicative functions of the comments by analysing what the feedback comments do. We then categorised the feedback comments based on the fundamental speech functions (Holmes, 2001: 259). We finally classified the comments based on four fundamental speech functions: directive (comments that get the student to do something), expressive (comments that express the reader's feelings), referential (comments that provide information and make references and supervisors' evaluative stance), and metalinguistic (comments that focus on language usage). These classifications are based on the fundamental components of interactions. We further developed sub-categories of each of the major categories except metalinguistic: directive (suggestions, instruction and clarification), expressive (approval and disapproval), referential (editorial, organisation and content). We adapted the sub-categories from previous studies on communicative functions of feedback comments (Ferris et. al., 1997; Kumar & Stracke, 2007; Leng, 2014; Saeed et. al., 2021). We generated frequency counts for each category to determine the distribution of speech functions across the dataset. It is imperative to note that some of the comments overlap and could fall under more than one category and it was challenging to categorise them because they appeared to serve two pragmatic functions at the same time. This observation supports Holmes's (2001) view that a single utterance can convey multiple functions simultaneously. We resolved this by seeking help from a research assistant. Textual instances for each feedback type are presented in the analysis and discussion section of the study.

Ethical Considerations –The researchers adhere to all ethical protocols to protect the rights of all participants. We obtained ethical clearance from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of UCC to enable us to observe all ethical protocols. Obtaining the voluntary participation of all participants, whether directly or indirectly involved, was seen to be essential to the outcome of this study. Participants received information to help them make an informed choice about joining the study and were also given the option to withdraw if they later chose not to take part. After securing their informed consent, we upheld key ethical principles, including maintaining their anonymity and ensuring the confidentiality of the data. We informed the participants that their responses would be anonymised and kept confidential for only research purpose.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents frequency distribution of feedback comments according to the major speech functions and their subcategories across English Studies.

Table 1*Frequency Distribution of Feedback based on communicative Functions*

Speech Function	Subcategory	Total	Percentage (%)
Directive	Clarification	152	37
	Instruction	60	15
	Suggestion	16	4
Referential	Content	76	19
	Organisation	41	10
	Editorial	12	3
Expressive	Disapproval	35	9
	Approval	8	2
Metalinguistic		6	1
Total		406	100

As shown in Table 1 above, directive comments constitute the majority (56%) of all feedback, followed by referential (32%), expressive (11%), and metalinguistic (1%) functions. The analysis reveals a structured hierarchy of communicative functions that align with established pedagogical practices in higher education. The findings indicate that proposal readers' feedback comments are highly structured and purposeful, with each function playing a distinct pedagogical role. The distribution pattern reflects the dual role of proposal readers as evaluators, gatekeepers, and mentors, as argued by Hyland and Hyland (2006), who maintain that feedback functions simultaneously as a regulatory and developmental tool.

Directives

Directives comments attempt to get the students to do something (Holmes, 2001). The *Directive* function emerged as the most dominant category, underscoring the instructional nature of supervision in academic writing. The prevalence of directive feedback comments (57%) confirms supervision as essentially instructional, which confirms Kumar and Stracke's (2007) recognition of feedback as academic training. This result confirms previous research's focus on feedback as guidance rather than simple evaluation (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). The dominance of directive function reflects the proposal readers' role as both mentor and gatekeeper, where explicit guidance becomes essential for developing academic writers. The *Directive* function has three sub-categories: *clarification*, *instruction*, and *suggestion*.

Directive-clarification was the most received directive comments (37%) from proposal readers. These comments require additional information regarding questioning students for a stronger clarification of the ideas that have already been stated in their research proposals (hereafter, RPs). Comments on *clarification* invited the student to justify, clarify or expand unclear ideas. This form of feedback acts as an overall guide for students, as it indicates both what aspects of their RPs need revision and how to approach those changes. A key characteristic of *clarification* comments is the use of questions that prompt students to provide further clarification. These are comments that provided specific directions and helped students to properly refine their proposals in order to aid their thesis writing journey.

The use of questions to prompt students to elaborate their ideas suggests that proposal readers prioritise dialogic engagement over prescriptive instruction. The high frequency of clarification comments indicates proposal readers' recognition that RPs writing requires deep reflection and justification rather than surface-level compliance with format requirements. The prevalence of clarification aligns with constructivist pedagogical approaches where learning occurs through guided inquiry (Vygotsky, 1978). Some comments include:

Extract 1

- a. *What theory will you use?*
- b. *What is the problem of this study?*
- c. *How is this theory related to the present study?*
- d. *How much is "a few"*

- e. *How do you know?*
- f. *So what is the research problem?*

These comments from *Extract 1* above demonstrate readers' commitment to developing students' metacognitive awareness, consistent with Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) principles of effective feedback that promotes self-regulation. These *clarification* comments reflect what Leng (2014) calls the "elicitation function," which pushed students to justify or explain their thinking and choices. Such feedback supports dialogic engagement and enhances metacognitive reflection, essential for developing independent academic writers.

Proposal readers appeared to acknowledge that employing more *directive clarification* in feedback enabled them to supply comprehensive and valuable information, with the proposals serving as a direct reference point for this feedback function. The findings of this study align with earlier studies that indicate that feedback provides students with direction and guidance to enhance future work (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Nicol, 2010). Written feedback proves valuable for RP development, as *directive-clarification* feedback offers students precise comments on how to revise their work (Kumar & Stracke, 2007). Proposal readers' comments also frequently sought theoretical and conceptual clarity, often probing the coherence between research questions, objectives, and literature.

Directive-Instruction is the second most commonly received directive feedback with 15%, (refer to Table 1). In this study, proposal readers placed relatively less emphasis on providing directive instruction comments on various aspects of students' RP drafts. This outcome is unsurprising, considering the masters' students were graduate-level university students; readers might have assumed that such students were sufficiently mature to interpret direct revision instructions without the need for extensive clarification. This finding is consistent with prior scholarship showing that as learners' proficiency levels rise, they become better equipped to identify and correct their own errors (Ferris, 2006; Ghandi & Maghsoudi, 2014). Comments that instruct students are typically imperatives that tell the student exactly what to do. These feedback comments are very useful to the students in their revision and the main thesis writing.

These feedback comments provided masters' students a sense of direction since the comments instruct them exactly what needed to be done and corrected. This confirms Lindemann's (1987) claim that effective feedback should be focused, clear, applicable and encouraging to enhance effective revision. As posited by Hyland and Hyland (2006), feedback provides a sense of direction to writers. These comments are prescriptive in nature, focusing on correcting, restructuring, or modifying aspects of the student's RPs. Ferris (1997) and Bitchener et al. (2005) posit that instructional feedback is particularly effective when clarity and specific areas are emphasised, which helps students understand exactly what revision is expected. The following are some instruction comments:

Extract 2

- a. *Join this paragraph*
- b. *Remove all this*
- c. *Introduce properly this second theory*
- d. *Delete*
- e. *Provide conceptual framework.*
- f. *Reframe this statement.*
- g. *Give us evidence*
- h. *You should give us some of them in the background.*

From *Extract 2* above, functionally, the proposal readers employed imperative sentences with the exception of the last sentence, which begins with second person pronoun "you". All the sentences begin with action verbs

that instruct the students to take certain actions regarding their work. These feedback comments also explicitly informed and offered the students clear directions on what to do in their proposals (Hyland & Hyland, 2006). This guides the students to know ‘what’ and ‘where’ they have gone wrong in their proposal writing process and how they can correct and improve them. This corroborates Hattie and Timperley (2007), who posit that a supervisor who provides effective comments is the one who offers information on how the writer can improve and continue with the writing task. The above feedback comments such *Delete* and *Reframe this statement* also illustrate what Kumar and Stracke (2007) call the “authoritative tone” in feedback, where the supervisor prescribes changes to ensure structural coherence. Such directive imperatives like “*Remove this*” serve a didactic function, reinforcing the proposal reader’s control over the student’s progression in the writing process.

Directive-suggestion was the least directive comments made by proposal readers with 4%. These comments come in the form of statements and are less directive compared to instruction comments. *Suggestion* comments offer alternative ideas or approaches, but do not specify a particular revision. They tend to be more dialogic and collaborative in tone. As Carless (2006) indicated, suggestive feedback promotes student ownership of the writing process, but still directs improvement. It also aligns with Sadler’s (1989) definition of formative feedback, where students are partners in their own learning process. Some *directive-suggestion* comments include:

Extract 3

- a. *Consider using Van Leeuwen’s framework*
- b. *This could be improved by relating the problem to the existing literature on the texts understudy*
- c. *A table would have been helpful*
- d. *Consider sampling technique that would cater for the selection of schools*
- e. *You could explain the design better*
- f. *You can consider the stratified sampling technique by forming the strata based on different characteristics*

These comments above (3a-3f) are more dialogic. They aim to encourage revision while maintaining student agency. As Leng (2014) argues, suggestions signal partnership rather than authority. For instance, comment like *Consider using Van Leeuwen’s framework* appeared as genuine proposal, reflecting preference for negotiated meaning-making.

Referential

Referential feedback conveys factual or descriptive information related to content, organisation, or editorial issues regarding students’ RPs. This demonstrates proposal readers’ attention to factual accuracy and structural completeness towards students’ RPs. It accounted for 32% of the total feedback comments. Referential function has three sub-categories: *content* (19%), *organisation* (10%), and *editorial* (3%), which reveal proposal readers’ systematic attention to multiple dimensions of academic writing quality. Pedagogically, such comments are useful in that they direct students’ attention to particular elements of their work that require revision, thus assisting them in aligning their writing with the academic standards (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). In the context of feedback practice, this function manifests when proposal readers provide comments that inform or clarify aspects of a student’s RPs without expressing personal judgments or emotions. The comments support students in recognising the current state of their work and understanding how to enhance it.

Referential-Content comments identify missing theoretical, empirical, or contextual elements. The focus on content-related referential feedback is consistent with RP demands for theoretical grounding and methodological clarity. This pattern illustrates what Swales (1990) calls genre-specific expectations in academic writing, where readers of research proposals are disciplinary gatekeepers, responsible for seeing that established conventions are followed. These comments focus on factual or informational aspects of the student’s RPs, such as lack of concepts, lack of theoretical input, lack of clarity in scope or lack of clarity in the description of their methodology. These comments describe what is present and absent in terms of research content. Some comments include:

Extract 4

- a. *There can't be sub-problem and problem*
- b. *There is no focus*
- c. *Your purpose is not linked to research questions*
- d. *You don't have delimitation of the study.*
- e. *The justification is very weak*
- f. *I don't see the element of diachronicity in the objectives.*

Content-related comments from 4a-4f function to draw students' attention to core academic requirements such as the need for a clear conceptual framework or a statement of delimitation. Such feedback comments often align with genre expectations in academic writing (Swales, 1990), which require writers to state their research problem, purpose, theoretical orientation, and scope clearly. The comments are largely neutral in tone and offer clear, actionable insights, which make them particularly effective in supporting self-regulated learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). However, if not followed up with explanatory guidance, content-related referential comments may not always be sufficient, especially for novice researchers like master's students. According to Carless (2006), the pedagogical value of feedback increases when clarity and justification accompany the observation.

Referential Organisation comments focus on the logical structuring of ideas in students' RPs. These comments focus on the logical structure, flow, and coherence of the student's writing. They point out disconnected ideas, weak transitions, absence of clear headings, or poor sequencing of arguments. The following are some extracts from the dataset:

Extract 5

- a. *There is no link between the paragraphs.*
- b. *There is no systematic presentation.*
- c. *The research context should be separated from other elements.*
- d. *The various subheadings of the proposal have been captured.*

Feedback comments like *There is no link between the paragraphs* reveals a breakdown in coherence, which is vital for maintaining textual integrity. Likewise, *Separate research context from the other elements* indicates a structural flaw that may impede the reader's understanding of how various parts of the research proposal relate. Organisation-related referential feedback supports students in constructing logically sequenced, clearly partitioned, and reader-friendly texts, which is central to academic discourse conventions (Hyland, 2013). These comments align with what Bitchener, Young, and Cameron (2005) identify as "text-structure feedback", which is an essential component in developing students' academic writing proficiency.

From a pedagogical standpoint, proposal readers' comments on organisation are crucial because students often struggle with macro-organisation which is the overarching structure of a research document. Effective referential comments help students revise their work for logical progression and internal consistency, thereby enhancing both readability and argumentation. Comments such as *There is no systematic presentation* and *There is no link between the paragraphs* are referential statements that diagnose problems with text structure and coherence. Such comments help students to organise their RPs according to the expected format and order of sections. This is consistent with Hyland's (2013) observation that disciplines with more standardised genres tend to emphasise structural coherence and linear logic in academic writing. Some comments on organisation are more focused on rhetorical flow and argument structure, as in comments such as *Separate research context from the other elements* or *Table must be represented in a more informative manner*. Such comments are typical of the discursive nature of the Humanities where meaning is constructed through different argumentation and cohesive presentation of ideas.

Referential-Editorial comments are those which concern surface features, e.g., issues of formatting and presentation. Editorial comments are aimed at technical aspects of writing including formatting, referencing, and style. These are mostly mechanical or superficial observations which are related to standards of correctness and presentation. Particularly useful for developing students' awareness of academic writing conventions, editorial referential feedback can help students learn to reference consistently and format appropriately. However, students might miss the reason for these norms if no further clarification is provided. Thus, combining *referential* comments with brief metalinguistic explanations can increase its instructional value (Lee, 2008). Some comments include:

Extract 6

- a. *Debold all words in bold and the years.*
- b. *Remove years from bold.*
- c. *Avoid bolding words unnecessarily*
- d. *Too many points are listed without any elaboration.*
- e. *Seek professional help in your references*
- f. *Font size is too small.*

These comments (6a-6f) provide an illustration of what Hyland and Hyland (2006) refer to as “surface-level feedback” and while they may appear minor, failure to attend to them can influence the reader's perception, particularly in formal evaluative contexts such as thesis examination or peer review. Editorial comments are a crucial part of the writing process of aligning students' work with the norms and style guidelines of academic writing. They are often viewed as lower-order concerns (Ferris, 1997), but they are essential for improving the professional appearance and credibility of academic texts. These comments, superficial as they may be, are important in ensuring that the proposal is consistent with institutional formatting standards, which are particularly emphasised in disciplines that combine academic and administrative requirements. These comments demonstrate the various aspects of academic literacy that students must master: the what (content), the how (organisation) and the presentation (editorial). Each subcategory has a distinctive role in the student's writing process. To illustrate, referential content-related feedback is aligned with disciplinary knowledge, organisation-related feedback maintains coherence and flow, and editorial feedback guarantees compliance with academic conventions (Twumasi, 2021). Referential comments are a potent tool for scaffolding academic performance and developing autonomy in student writers.

Expressives

Expressive feedback communicates the proposal reader's opinion and affective stance towards the student's RPs. *Expressives* often arise from the readers' immediate emotional responses to the quality of the student's RP. The modest presence of expressive feedback (11%) reveals readers' awareness of the emotional dimension of learning, consistent with Dowden et al.'s (2013) findings on emotions mediating feedback perceptions. *Expressives* add emotional tone, which reflect approval, disapproval, encouragement, or impact how students perceive the feedback. According to Hyland and Hyland (2001), *expressive* comments modulate the interpersonal tone of feedback and can influence how students interpret and respond to criticism.

The expressive function has two sub-strands: *approval* and *disapproval*. The results indicate a significant disparity between disapproval comments (9%) and approval comments (2%), suggesting that supervisors were more likely to give negative evaluative comments. This seems to contradict the balanced feedback approach advocated by Hyland and Fiona Hyland (2001) who suggest the integration of criticism with positive feedback. Similar trends were observed in the study by Gedamu and Gezahegn (2021) and Nurie (2018), where the supervisory input was overwhelmingly negative. However, Kluger and DeNisi (1996) postulate that feedback can be positive or negative, and both can aid learning and progress.

Expressive-Disapproval comments highlight the weaknesses in masters' students RPs. *Disapproval* comments

express proposal readers' dissatisfaction with certain sections of the student's RPs. These constructive comments help student to revise their RPs and prepare towards the main thesis, leading to the process of discovery and improvement in their writing. Nevertheless, the findings of this study suggest that readers may need to reconsider their feedback approaches, given that negative feedback can have a greater impact than positive feedback (Brunit, Huguet & Monteil, 1999). Again, when supervision is dominated by an excessively negative tone in feedback, students may become emotionally worried or feel overwhelmed by challenges (Price et al., 2010).

It is, therefore, essential for proposal readers to support masters' students in managing negative emotions triggered by critical feedback by pairing such comments with positive and encouraging remarks as effective feedback should be focused, clear, practical, and motivating (Lindemann, 2001). *Expressive disapproval* comments range from softened criticisms to emotionally charged statements, such as:

Extract 7

- a. This is not necessary.
- b. You are not serious.
- c. The context is not well written.
- d. This is not critical enough.
- e. This is too broad.
- f. What gross stubbornness is this?
- g. This is stubbornness and willful determination not to learn.
- h. This is really unnecessary here.

The underlined phrases indicate the disapproval elements of each comment. Comments like 7a and 7h show the proposal readers' disagreement with what their students presented in their drafts. The above comments are constructive and may be beneficiary to the students. These comments help students to discover new meanings from what their readers write in their RPs. However, according to Hyland and Hyland (2006), disapproval comments, when not mitigated, can create a high-stakes environment that may hinder learning. While negative feedback is sometimes necessary to prompt revision, excessive or harsh disapproval can demotivate students (Leng, 2014). While disapproval is important, excessive negative comments as Leng (2014) suggests could impede learning, especially in L2 contexts like Ghana.

Expressive-Approval comments encourage students to articulate their ideas and seek validation for them from their proposal readers. *Expressive approval* was the least used expressive sub-category, with 2% appearance. *Approval* feedback affirms the student's effort and the quality of specific sections. *Approval* feedback provided students with positive energy, some sense of achievement and boost students' confidence in the writing process. Positive feedback increases the likelihood that students will return to or persist in an activity and self-report higher interest in the writing activity (Deci et al., 1999). While some scholars argue that negative feedback enable students to gain deeper learning from criticism (Goldstein, 2004), students have suggested that feedback should be positive, consistent, timely, and clear, maintaining a balance between praise, constructive suggestions, and critical remarks on their work (Bitchener et al., 2011).

Some previous studies have shown that feedback incorporating praise can be effective, as it evokes a positive emotional response, which is often associated with greater motivation, higher aspirations, and enhanced academic performance among students (Akin-Little et al., 2004; Gee, 2006). Hyland and Hyland (2006) argue that praise comments are important part of balanced feedback, especially in early drafts such as the research proposals. Straub (1997) similarly argued that praise feedback should be expressed specifically and revealed that students valued positive comments on their writing, especially when the praise was detailed and precise. The following are some examples of *approval* comments:

Extract 8

- a. *The write-up is good.*
- b. *Good attempt*
- c. *This is interesting.*
- d. *Good attempt but needs polishing.*

In *Extract 8*, it is evident that feedback on approval is given as a way of rewarding students according to their progress. Praise comments given to students improved their confidence, sense of pride and joy in completing their writing tasks. Such positive feedback can be a source of encouragement, motivating students to write better. According to Leki (1991), teachers can inspire students to revisit and refine their drafts, while other studies (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995) indicate that this process contributes to the development of students' writing abilities. *Approval* comments were sometimes hedged or paired with critique. For instance, *Good attempt; but needs polishing* comes with a critique. Praise comments soften criticism and foster a positive feedback environment (Bitchener et al., 2005; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Proposal readers need to provide more positive comments on students' RPs to encourage effective engagement among master's students.

Metalinguistic

Metalinguistic feedback comments (1%) focus on language use including clarity, grammar, and vocabulary. The relatively low focus on metalinguistic features contrasts sharply with writing feedback that places more emphasis on language mechanics (Bitchener et al., 2010; Zamel, 1985). Such a pattern is a reflection of a positive shift toward content-based supervision which prioritises meaning over form, which is in line with research that has called for a holistic approach to feedback rather than a surface approach (Ferris, 2003; Lee, 2004). However, the minimal metalinguistic attention may also reflect assumptions about students' language proficiency that could disadvantage L2 writers who benefit from explicit language guidance (Hyland, 2005). *Metalinguistic* comments provided by proposal readers guide students to reflect on the language itself such as its structures, rules, and usage rather than solely focusing on content or meaning. Holmes (2001) indicates that metalinguistic function involves language used to discuss or analyse language itself. These functions are pivotal in fostering students' grammatical accuracy and language awareness.

The limited use of metalinguistic may stem from the assumption that language mechanics are secondary to methodological rigour. This result was anticipated, since English Studies students are expected to have a higher standard of linguistic expression. Examples of *Metalinguistic* comments include:

Extract 9

- a. *Sentence is not meaningful.*
- b. *Check sentence structure.*
- c. *This sentence is incomplete and not meaningful.*
- d. *You need to be very careful and meticulous about your language and -writing.*

These comments (9a-9d) focused on students' use of language in their proposal drafts. Proposal readers place a premium on language precision, clarity of expression, and academic tone. Proposal readers likely expect students to demonstrate command of linguistic nuances in their drafts.

5. Conclusion

The study investigated the communicative functions of written feedback comments on research proposals of master's students in a Ghanaian university, using Holmes' (2001) language functions framework. The findings revealed four communicative functions: directive (56%), referential (32%), expressive (11%) and metalinguistic

(1%). The dominance of directive feedback, particularly its clarification comments (37%), suggests that research proposal readers prefer dialogic interaction to prescriptive instruction, prompting students to justify and elaborate their ideas rather than just follow the format rules. Referential feedback comments helped to improve students' academic writing by identifying content gaps, structural problems and editorial issues. Expressive feedback was limited but had an impact on the affective domain of supervision with disapproval comments (9%) outweighing approval (2%). This imbalance has implications as excessive negative feedback comments can demotivate students and discourage them from engaging with the revision process (Carless, 2006; Leng, 2014). The existence of metalinguistic feedback (1%) indicates a positive content-over-form orientation, albeit this may disadvantage L2 writers who gain from explicit attention to language (Hyland, 2005).

The study showed that providing written feedback comments on master's research proposals is a complex, multifunctional communicative act in which proposal readers train, evaluate, and socialise students into disciplinary academic practices. According to Kumar and Stracke's (2007) results on PhD supervision, the supervisor-supervisee relationship in this context reflects a master-apprentice dynamic in which feedback serves as the primary means of academic induction. The results also imply that proposal readers have a more balanced affective approach by combining disapproval comments with praise of student effort, consistent with the principles of effective feedback established by Hyland and Hyland (2006) and Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006). The provision of clear, focused motivational feedback comments are essential to supporting master's students at this transitional and intellectually demanding stage of their academic journey.

The findings have pedagogical implications for postgraduate supervisors, instructors, and proposal readers. Proposal readers and thesis supervisors should be aware of the communicative functions of their feedback, understanding that the balance of directive, referential, and expressive functions influences not only the quality of students' revised proposals, but also their confidence, motivation, and long-term development as academic writers. Institutional support in the form of feedback literacy training for both supervisors/proposal readers and students would help to improve the productivity and diversity of feedback comments at the postgraduate level.

This study could be expanded in a number of ways by future research. To determine if the patterns found here are unique or representative of larger supervisory cultures, comparative research could examine communicative functions of written feedback across disciplines, or institutions. Also, research that combines textual analysis with interviews may also shed light on how students understand and respond to various communicative functions as well as the motivations behind proposal readers' feedback choices.

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