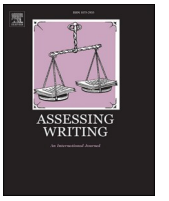
Assessing Writing 57 (2023) 100756

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Assessing Writing

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/asw



Peer-feedback of an occluded genre in the Spanish language classroom: A case study

Ana Castaño Arques [a,*,1], Carmen López Ferrero [b,2]

[a] Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages, University of Oxford, OX1 2JF, UK
[b] Department of Translation and Language Sciences, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Carrer de Roc Boronat, 138, 08018 Barcelona, Spain

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Peer-feedback
Occluded genres
Language learning
Writing
Spanish
Feedback literacy

ABSTRACT

Learning how to write occluded genres is an elusive task (Swales, 1996) – even more so in the case of students writing in a second or additional language. To achieve discourse competence in the use of one of these genres, in this case the 'statement of purpose' typical of post-graduate programme admission forms, it is first necessary to fully understand its features at both the macrotextual and microlinguistic levels (Gillaerts, 2003; Bhatia, 2004). This qualitative study focuses on the writing of learners of Spanish as an additional language to analyse whether feedback provided by peers impacts the quality of the statements of purpose they write. Through a dual discourse analysis of their written work and in-class interactions during peer- feedback sessions, our study finds that, when properly trained and using tailored assessment tools, students can use peer-assessment profitably to improve the quality of their statements of purpose, as well as to acquire appropriate metalanguage to guide others. Our results thus reconfirm the beneficial effects of helping students to achieve feedback literacy.

1. Introduction

The impact of peer-feedback on writing has been the subject of a variety of studies (see, for example, the recent studies by Fernández (2022); Cano-García, Pons-Seguí and Fernández-Ferrer (2022). Nevertheless, the degree to which peers (students, in this instance) are proficient, or 'literate', in the giving of feedback is an emerging line of research which deserves further exploration (Carless & Boud, 2018; Henderson, Phillips, Ryan, Boud & Dawson, 2019; Nieminen & Carless, 2022; Chong, 2021; Esterhazy, de Lange & Damşa, 2021), particularly since the concept of feedback literacy is complex, involving as it does both skills and attitudes, especially when we are dealing with the assessment of discourse competence.

In the present study we analyse the way in which students of Spanish as a second or "additional" language give feedback in the classroom to their peers during the composition of a statement of purpose to help them develop their discourse competence.

2. Literature review: occluded genres and student feedback literacy

The genre 'statement of purpose'– a kind of letter typically required of graduate programme applicants in which the candidate sets

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: ana.castanoarques@mod-langs.ox.ac.uk (A. Castaño Arques).
[1] ORCiD ID 0000-0002-6661-7906
[2] ORCiD ID 0000-0001-9348-1461

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2023.100756
Received 21 January 2023; Received in revised form 7 June 2023; Accepted 9 June 2023
Available online 15 June 2023

out their qualifications and motivation for applying – is what Swales (1996) characterises as an *occluded* genre, that is, a genre whose features are 'hidden' to the writer, usually because they are trying to produce it without prior experience, and the features of what will constitute a successful product (a statement of purpose which enhances their chances of admission to the programme, for example) are often deliberately not made available to them. In order to 'de-occlude' a genre of this sort, it is necessary to give them a clear understanding of the features that characterise the genre by, for example, analysing examples and relating their features to those of genres from the same family, in this case, the epistolary family (López Ferrero & Atienza Cerezo, 2022). It is these features that can subsequently serve as the basis for students to assess the work of their peers and provide constructive feedback on it.

Taking into account the difficulties in accessibility to statements of purpose and the need for explicit training on its features, our paper aims to answer this research question: what impact does peer-feedback have on Spanish-as-an-additional-language learners in their writing of an occluded genre? To answer this question we will analyse data collected during a course in Spanish offered to university students with a variety of first languages but a comparable intermediate level of competence in Spanish. A key concept to analyse the data collected is the theoretical construct of *student feedback literacy* and *peer-feedback*.

Student feedback literacy is defined in the recent literature as the ability of a student to seek, understand, make available and produce assessment information that will enable a fellow learner to improve both their performance (in this case, of discourse competence) and the learning strategies they use in that performance (Henderson et al., 2019). Experts in student feedback literacy emphasise its multifaceted nature as an individual as well as a social and cultural process that requires critical agency on the part of the student (Sutton, 2012; Carless & Boud, 2018; Han & Xu, 2020; Nieminen & Carless, 2022). Various authors have argued that feedback offered by someone who is 'feedback literate' is characterised by the following features:

- it is based on suggestions for improvement or alternative solutions;
- it is contextualised, that is, anchored in learning objectives;
- it focuses on what can be learned;
- it can dynamically adapt to the individually different needs of learners;
- it offers precise and detailed information, and
- it is reiterative, with constant feedback on learning strengths and weaknesses (Carless & Boud, 2018; Henderson et al., 2019).

In the work cited above, Carless and Boud (2018) highlight how *peer-feedback* processes can be conducive to learners becoming feedback-literate, as "responsibility for feedback is placed in students' hands; there are opportunities for dialogue; the process involves learning to make judgments; and there is potential for feedback loops to be closed through student action" (ibid, p. 1320). In relation to our research question, peer-feedback has also been proven to be effective in previous studies, although these show a mixed picture in terms of the actual impact that peer-feedback has on student written work.

Peer-feedback helps students improve their written work, as several previous studies have shown (Nelson & Murphy, 1993; Paulus, 1999; Tuzi, 2004, in Gao et al., 2019). When compared to self- and teacher-feedback, the impact of peer-feedback is more complex to gauge. A review of qualitative studies published between 2005 and 2014 (Yu & Lee, 2016) cited studies that find that students incorporate teacher' and classmates' comments in similar proportions (Xu & Liu, 2010, in Yu & Lee, 2016), while others find that teacher-feedback is acted upon in higher rates than peer-feedback (Yang, Badger & Yu, 2006; Zhao, 2010, in Yu & Lee, 2016). However, Zhao's study (2010) also found that students understood better the meaning of the comments provided by peers, as opposed to those provided by teachers.

A meta-analysis of 25 quantitative studies on the same area (Huisman, Saab, van den Broek & van Driel, 2019) finds more conclusive evidence of the positive impact that peer-feedback has on students' writing. It finds that students improve their writing to a higher degree after engaging in peer-feedback than after taking part in self-assessment, and that both peer-feedback and teacher-feedback had similar rates of impact on student's written work. This is confirmed by other studies in second-language settings (Pham, Huyen, & Nguyen, 2020).

This paper aims to contribute to this field, by finding out the impact that peer-feedback has in the written quality of an occluded genre, and also in the development of students' feedback literacy. In order to achieve that, in the following sections we analyse the feedback that a group of Spanish language learners offered to their peers about the genre statement of purpose, how they understood and used this feedback to improve their written discourse competence.

Table 1
Gender, nationality and degree programme of participants.

Participant	Gender	Nationality	Degree programme
A	F	French	MA in Translation
B	F	French	BA in Marketing
C	F	Italian	BA in Spanish studies
D	F	French	BA in Applied Languages
E	F	French	BA in Languages and International Business
F	F	French	BA in Languages and International Business
G	F	British	BA in Languages

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

Data were gathered from seven students from various European countries who were studying at a university in northern Spain during the 2018–2019 academic year, all but one of them doing so as part of their undergraduate studies in the context of the European Union's Erasmus inter-university exchange programme (see Table 1). The Spanish host university offered a range of Spanish-as-an-additional-language modules to cater for the needs of international students, one of which was a writing module at level B1 (Council of Europe, 2020). The group had 29 students, and this study focuses in the written production of seven of those who gave informed consent and completed the task fully.

The aim of the writing module was to develop students' ability to recognise and reproduce the discursive features that characterise various written genres in Spanish. Classes took the form of two sessions per week. The data analysed in this paper comes from a four-session unit devoted to writing statements of purpose. A more detailed description of the aim and activities carried out in each of the four sessions is given in Table 2.

Prior to their participation, all seven participants were informed about the aims of the research project and what their participation in it would entail. They all voluntarily signed an informed consent form.

3.2. Data

To analyse the impact of peer-assessment and feedback on the written work of the participants, we gathered both written and oral data. The written data comprised 1) the participants' first drafts of their statements of purpose, 2) their second drafts, and 3) the comments each of them received from other students in their peer-assessment grids. The average word count for both drafts was approximately 300 words, and the average for student feedback comments was roughly 80 words total per grid.

The oral data consisted of audio-recordings of 1) the conversations (average duration: 3.5 min) of two pairs of participants (C and G, and B and D) as they exchanged feedback in session 4 and 2) the comments made by four participants (A, B, C and D) during the focus group discussion (duration: 36 min). All audio recordings were transcribed to facilitate analysis.

3.3. Analysis

All the data were analysed qualitatively to highlight the improvements made by students after the peer-feedback received. With the exception of the transcript of the focus group discussion, genre-based discourse analysis was used to identify each text's macrotextual and microlinguistic features, as these provide cues which evidence the progress and improvement being made in the second versions of the texts. These features are defined as follows:

- Macrotextual features comprise the rhetorical moves which characterise statements of purpose, such as *establishing credentials and personal parameters* (e.g. the writer's name), *greeting the reader, introducing the applicant and letter's objectives* and *ending politely*. These categories come from Bhatia (2004) and Gillaerts (2003) work on application letters.
- The microlinguistic features comprise lexical and grammatical items such as *boosters*, *hedges*, *attitude markers* and *discourse markers* that are functionally important in this particular discourse genre because they allow the writer to show courtesy, and modalise and provide cohesion to the discourse. They can often be cross-referenced with rhetorical moves at the macrotextual level. These microlinguistic categories come from discourse analysis studies on metadiscourse and modalisation (Hyland, 2005) and discourse markers (among others, Schiffrin, 1987; Redeker, 1990).[3]

The full list of macrotextual and microlinguistic categories of relevance to the study are defined in Table 3, along with the letter or number code assigned to them for the purpose of labelling the data using the Atlas.ti22 qualitative analysis programme.

Occurrences of both macrotextual and microlinguistic features were counted in students' drafts and peer-assessment grids to identify changes between first and second drafts and were used as a proxy for impact of peer-feedback (as seen in previous studies on feedback literacy i.e. Han & Xu, 2020). Table 4 shows the number of macrotextual features in the first and second drafts, as well as references to those in the peer-assessment grids. It also includes specific examples of those, to show how the data were coded. Table 5 does the same for microlinguistic features.

In order to assess the degree of communicative appropriateness of the student-written drafts, we used a checklist of all the features identified by Bhatia (2004) and Gillaerts (2003) as characterising statements of purpose (see Appendix, López Ferrero, Atienza Cerezo, & Carrillo del Saz, 2020). We will first show the general trends which emerged after the number of occurrences of macrotextual and microlinguistic features in both the first and second drafts were counted. We will then focus on the work of three participants whose individual evolution between first and second drafts exemplified patterns present within the group as a whole, and will attempt to explain them according to the theoretical framework of feedback literacy under 5. Discussion.

[3] For a more in-depth description of these categories and their use in analysing statements of purpose in applications to MA programmes, see López Ferrero & Bach, (2016).

Table 2
Outline of classroom sessions making up the unit on statements of purpose.

Session	Aim	Activities
1	Introduction to the genre	The teacher guides pair discussions aimed at raising awareness about 1) the social value and aims of statements of purpose, 2) their writers' and readers' goals, and 3) the way information is typically structured in these statements.
2	Analysis of exemplars	Students work in pairs to analyse exemplars[a] and to identify the prototypical rhetorical moves and functions of the genre.
3	Negotiation of assessment criteria	Based on their analysis of exemplars, students negotiate among themselves the assessment criteria and the descriptors which would characterise a successful statement of purpose. Students then find an MA programme on the internet that matches their own interests and then complete pre-writing activities to select and organise the information they will provide in the first draft of their statement, which they will prepare as homework.
4	Peer-assessment	Students bring the first draft of their statement to class and work in pairs to assess each other's work using assessment grids based on the criteria which they have previously agreed on as a group. As homework they will use this feedback to write a second draft of their statement.

[a] The exemplars were taken from a corpus of authentic statements of purpose (see López Ferrero & Bach, 2016)

Table 3
Categories labelled in the data and the codes used to do so in Atlas.ti22.

Macrotextual categories	Code
Establishing credentials	**a**
Entitling the letter	**b**
Referring to situational parameters	**c**
Greeting the reader	**d**
Persuading the reader	**e**
Introducing the applicant and letter objectives	**f**
Reasons for applying	**g**
Expressing future expectations	**h**
Ending politely	**i**
Final salutation and signing	**j**
Microlinguistic categories	
Boosters	**1**
Hedges	**2**
Attitude markers	**3**
Self-mention elements	**4**
Reader mention	**5**
Rhetorical questions	**6**
Discourse marker (DM) of discourse structure	**7**
Oriented-argumentative DMs	**8**
Counter-argumentative DMs	**9**

4. Findings

Results of the peer-feedback processes are presented in the following sections. Initial drafts, peer-feedback, and final drafts of students' statements of purpose are analysed with this purpose in the following sections.

4.1. Occurrence rates of genre features in first and second drafts

After coding the first and second drafts, as well as the peer-assessment grids and the transcripts of oral comments made during peer-feedback, we detected several recurring patterns in how the seven participating students attempted to improve their first drafts[4] in terms of using the macrotextual and microlinguistic categories. With regard to macrotextual features, as shown in Table 4, the average number of occurrences did not change dramatically between drafts 1 and 2, with almost all the first drafts including most of the rhetorical moves identified by Bhatia (2004) and Gillaerts (2003), and those from which some were absent in the first draft including them in the second.

These low numbers can be accounted for by the fact that the analysis software (Atlas.ti22) counts the number of coded passages instead of words, and such passages occurred in relatively low numbers because of the relatively small number of participants. However, we observe that almost all rhetorical moves (except for *entitling the letter*) are present in most drafts, and the ones that are not appear in those fields in the second drafts, following explicit suggestions made during peer-feedback, as we can see in the following examples, relating to (1) *referring to situational parameters*, (2) *introducing the applicant*, (3) *reasons for applying* and (4) *expressing future expectations*:

[4] Of these seven participants, Students B-C provided feedback to each other, as did the pairs Students D-G, and Students E-F. Student A received peer-feedback from another student in the group who did not complete the assignment task and whose work is therefore not included in the study.

Table 4
Total number of occurrences of macrotextual categories from student-written drafts and peer-feedback comments, written and oral, in the full dataset.

	Total number of occurrences		
Macrotextual category	Draft 1	Draft 2	Assessment grid
a. Establishing credentials	7	7	1
a. Entitling the letter	0	0	0
a. Referring to situational parameters	6	7	3
a. Greeting the reader	7	7	9
a. Persuading the reader	6	7	1
a. Introducing the applicant and letter objectives	8	9	5
a. Reasons for applying	6	8	6
a. Expressing future expectations	6	7	1
i. Ending politely	4	4	0
a. Final salutation and signing	7	7	7

(1).
La estructura está adecuada pero falta la información para contactar (correo electrónico y número de teléfono).

'Your letter structure is appropriate but contact details are missing (email and phone number)'

(Student G, Assessment grid)

(2).
Puedes especificar un poco mas el contenido de tu presentación personal.

'You could be more specific in your personal introduction'

(Student E, Assessment grid)

(3).
Y también creo que el párrafo donde explicas tus experiencias puedes incluir también las lenguas que hablas, porque no lo has escrito. Como que hablas francés, que sé que es, eres de madre francés, pero hablas también inglés muy bien, y si tienes algunos certificados como IELTS.

'I also think that [in] the paragraph where you talk about your experiences, you can also include the languages you speak, because you haven't done that. Like, for instance, that you speak French, because I know that your mum is French, but you also speak English fluently, and also if you have certificates like IELTS'

(Student C providing feedback to Student B orally, transcript)

(4).
El cuerpo de la carta contiene razones buenas que apoyan la aplicación, pero podrías añadir unas expectativas para el futuro.

'The main body of your letter provides good reasons that support your application, but you could include some expectations about the future'

(Student D, Assessment grid)

At the microlinguistic level, though for some categories the number of occurrences from draft 1 to draft 2 remains constant or rises only slightly, there are others that show quite dramatic increases, as can be seen in Table 5.

Specifically, instances of *attitude markers* and *self-mention elements* rise by more than 15% in second drafts as a whole and the number of *discourse markers of discourse structure* increases by over 40%. These are resources which improve the organization of the

Table 5
Total number of occurrences of microlinguistic categories from student-written drafts and peer-feedback comments, written and oral, in the full dataset.

	Total number of occurrences		
Microlinguistic category	Draft 1	Draft 2	Assessment grid
1. Boosters	48	51	0
2. Hedges	22	26	0
3. Attitude markers	58	72	0
4. Self-mention elements	163	197	0
5. Reader mention	60	60	3
6. Rhetorical questions	0	0	0
7. Discourse markers (DMs) of discourse structure	14	24	9
8. Oriented-argumentative DMs	8	8	0
9. Counter-argumentative DMs	3	3	0

information in the statement of purpose but, interestingly, in contrast to what we see with regard to macrotextual categories, in their feedback comments students make very few comments about microlinguistic features, with the notable exception of *DMs of discourse structure* – (5) and (6) are example from *DMs* peer-feedback:

(5).

Puedes utilizar más nexos y conectores para conectar más las ideas.

'You could use more connecting words to link your ideas better'

(Student B, Assessment grid)

(6).

Cada párrafo tiene una idea y son conectados, pero falta conectores. .

'Each paragraph conveys one idea and they are linked, but the text lacks connecting words'

(Student F, Assessment grid)

Given the high frequency of use of discourse markers – especially in second drafts – and the nine references to them in feedback comments, these seem to have drawn particular attention from students. *Attitude markers* and *self-mention elements*, on the other hand, are not explicitly mentioned in any peer-feedback comments and therefore the sharp increase in the number of occurrences of these elements in the second drafts cannot be accounted for by peer-feedback.

However, an analysis of co-ocurrences between macrotextual and microlinguistic categories allows us to see that both *attitude markers* and *self-mention elements* overlap with the macrotextual category *reasons for applying* at the macrotextual level, as seen in Fig. 1. This overlap is important because it helps us explain some of the changes between first and second drafts, as we explain later.

We can see an example of this overlap in (7), a passage from a student's second draft which was labelled as pertaining to the macrotextual category *Reason for applying. Attitude markers* have been highlighted in boldface and *self-mention elements* are underlined.

(7).

*Particularmente **interesada** en las lenguas y culturas extranjeras y en los intercambios, estoy **segura** de que el sector de la traducción es el dominio en el que **quiero** trabajar. Mi certeza es muy **reflexionada**.*

'[I am] especially **interested** in foreign languages and cultures and exchanges and I am **convinced** that the translation sector is where I **want** to work. I have thought very **carefully** about this.'

(Student D, second draft)

Given the overlap between these features and the macrotextual one, the increase in the use of attitude markers and self-mention elements can be explained by different factors. The peer-feedback could have impacted on this improvement, as the second version fits better the genre features of a statement of purpose, even if students did not explicitly mention these. And we are referring not only to the effect of the peer-feedback received, but also to the effect of the one they provided to their peer, as students may have been inspired by reading the peer student's text which they had assessed. This was mentioned by the participants in the focus group which took place after the teaching intervention:

(8).

*viendo los tipos de textos de los otros compañeros, podemos ver "Él ha hecho esto, yo no lo he hecho, lo puedo adjuntar yo también, así que mi carta de motivación puede ser mejor de lo que es ahora", así que es interesante ver lo que han hecho los otros compañeros para **tener más ideas de cómo mejorar** nuestra propia carta de motivación y el tipo de texto en general.*

'by looking at other classmates' types of texts, we can see "He has done this, I have not done this, I can include it too, so my motivation letter can be better than it is now", so it is interesting to see what other classmates have done **to get more ideas on how to improve** our own motivation letter and the type of text in general'

(Student B, Focus group transcription)

Additionally, students seemed fully aware of the need to present clearly and in detail their *reasons for applying* to the MA programmes, and referred explicitly to that rhetorical move in the feedback they provided to their peers, as shown in (9) and (10) (see Table 4 above):

(9).

Y también creo que el párrafo donde explicas tus experiencias puedes incluir también las lenguas que hablas, porque no lo has escrito. Como que hablas francés, que sé que es, eres de madre francés, pero hablas también inglés muy bien, y si tienes algunos certificados como IELTS.

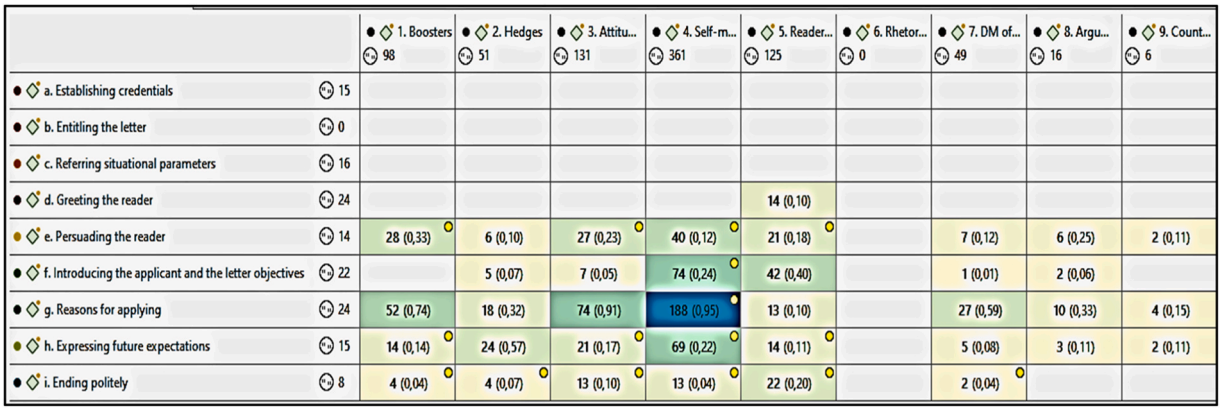
'I also think that [in] the paragraph where you talk about your experiences, you can also include the languages you speak, because you haven't done that. Like, for instance, that you speak French, because I know that your mum is French, but you also speak English fluently, and also if you have certificates like IELTS'

(Student C providing feedback to Student B orally, transcript)

(10).

La carta está clara, puedes anadir unos argumentos para venderte mejor.

'Your letter is clear, [but] you could add some arguments to 'sell' yourself better.'



	1. Boosters 98	2. Hedges 51	3. Attitu... 131	4. Self-m... 361	5. Reader... 125	6. Rhetor... 0	7. DM of... 49	8. Argu... 16	9. Count... 6
a. Establishing credentials 15					14 (0,10)				
b. Entitling the letter 0									
c. Referring situational parameters 16									
d. Greeting the reader 24									
e. Persuading the reader 14	28 (0,33)	6 (0,10)	27 (0,23)	40 (0,12)	21 (0,18)		7 (0,12)	6 (0,25)	2 (0,11)
f. Introducing the applicant and the letter objectives 22		5 (0,07)	7 (0,05)	74 (0,24)	42 (0,40)		1 (0,01)	2 (0,06)	
g. Reasons for applying 24	52 (0,74)	18 (0,32)	74 (0,91)	188 (0,95)	13 (0,10)		27 (0,59)	10 (0,33)	4 (0,15)
h. Expressing future expectations 15	14 (0,14)	24 (0,57)	21 (0,17)	69 (0,22)	14 (0,11)		5 (0,08)	3 (0,11)	2 (0,11)
i. Ending politely 8	4 (0,04)	4 (0,07)	13 (0,10)	13 (0,04)	22 (0,20)		2 (0,04)		

Fig. 1. Atas.ti22 screen capture showing co-occurrences of microlinguistic and macrotextual codes.

(Student C, Assessment grid)

We can therefore conclude that peer-feedback has a noticeable impact even in areas which are not the particular focus of that feedback. As shown above, the increased use of some microlinguistic features (e.g. *self-mention elements* and *attitude markers*), which was one of the key differences between first and second drafts but was not mentioned by students in their feedback comments. A hypothesis that might explain these changes may be that their peer's comments on the macrotextual moves raised their own awareness of these, as they say on the following reflection in the focus group:

(11).

Me ha gustado mucho la [actividad] de los compañeros porque hemos podido ***discutir y reflexionar*** *sobre también nuestra propia, nuestro propio borrador del trabajo y estaba muy bien. Era útil para perfeccionar nuestro trabajo.*

'I really liked the [activity] with the classmates because we were **able to discuss and reflect on our own**, our own draft work and it was very good. It was useful to improve our work.'

(Student C, Focus group transcription)

4.2. Patterns of improvement resulting from peer-feedback

The analysis offered above of the overall trends in changes between first and second drafts would suggest that peer-feedback does have an impact on students' written work, at both macrotextual and microlinguistic levels. However, we are also interested in how students may respond to peer-feedback individually in different ways. We will explore this issue by looking at the specific cases of Students A, B and E. We have chosen these three students because they exemplify varying degrees of progress (minimum in A, partial in B and substantial in E) in their improvement between the first and second drafts. In this section, we describe qualitatively their work, using the criteria in the Appendix cited above, which is based on the genre's features identified by Bhatia (2004) and Gillaerts (2003). We believe that their patterns of reaction to feedback exemplify trends that are present in the full group, which has implications for teaching, as we will discuss later. Nevertheless, the small size of the group makes this work a case study, as highlighted in the title of the paper.We will refer to the patterns exemplified by these three students respectively as Patterns I, II and III.

4.2.1. Pattern I (Student A)

Student A's first draft of her statement of purpose accurately conveyed a professional and public image of herself and addressed the readers (the admissions committee for an MA programme in literary translation) in an appropriately formal register. She successfully selected the facts from her educational and professional background that were most relevant to the communicative situation. She organised the information according to the typical sections in a statement of purpose and followed the prototypical rhetorical moves for this kind of letter, using a range of discourse markers to help the reader follow her arguments. Her use of linguistic resources such as boosters, hedges and attitude markers was varied and appropriate.

This first draft was read by a peer, who acknowledged the successful aspects of the letter and made a few suggestions about punctuation (e.g. replacing the comma with a colon after the initial greeting, or removing the accent in the connecting word *porque*), but did not suggest improvements at either the macrotextual or the microlinguistic level. As a result, Student A's second draft presented neither major nor minor improvements.[5] The assessment was discourse genre-based (as can be seen in the checklist on Appendix), so

[5] It is worth noting that Student A was the only participant who was a post-graduate student, having already completed an undergraduate degree in translation, and thus slightly older than her classmates. She may therefore have been able to draw on either her own prior experience of writing at least one successful statement of purpose or her wider exposure to different discourse genres in general.

that spelling or grammar errors produced in a text by L2 writers were not the object of the process of peer-feedback – in our analysis we therefore consider feedback not focused on the specific genre features (see Tables 4 and 5 above) as low quality feedback.

A similar trend was observed in the statements of purpose written by Students C, F and G, whose first drafts were mostly successful and whose second drafts showed only minimal improvements. However, in their cases, this lack of improvement was not due to having received low quality feedback. In fact, their peers provided effective feedback with relevant and constructive suggestions, as we can see in (12) about the feedback received by Student C in the assessment grid:

(12).

La carta está clara, puedes anadir unos argumentos para venderte mejor.

'Your letter is clear, [but] you could add some arguments to 'sell' yourself better.'

(Student C, Assessment grid)

Also in (13) about Student F and in (14) about Student G:

(13).

Cada párrafo tiene una idea y son conectados, pero falta conectores.

'Each paragraph conveys one idea and they are linked, but the text lacks connecting words'

(Student F, Assessment grid)

(14).

Los argumentos son muy claros, lo único es que hubiera podido relacionar aún más los párrafos entre sí.

'Your arguments are very clear, the only thing is you could have connected the paragraphs even more'

(Student G, Assessment grid)

In spite of this good quality feedback, participants C, F and G failed to take it on board.

4.2.2. Pattern II (Student B)

Student B's first draft was accomplished and appropriate because it met many of the features identified by Bhatia (2004) and Gillaerts (2003), although not as many as student A's. B's first draft partially conveyed a professional image of herself. She adopted a formal and appropriate tone to address her readers and selected appropriate events from her previous academic experience to tie in to her application, but she did not mention any previous working experience and referenced personal aspects (like a previous trip) that were not entirely appropriate for a statement of purpose. However, she did follow the typical structure and rhetorical moves, and in her first draft deployed some appropriate linguistic resources typical to the genre, like discourse markers, boosters or hedges, albeit not in a varied way.

This first draft was read by Student C, who suggested that B should expand on her reasons for applying by citing specific examples from her linguistic background and academic credentials, as can be seen in (15):

(15).

Y también creo que el párrafo donde explicas tus experiencias puedes incluir también las lenguas que hablas, porque no lo has escrito. Como que hablas francés, que sé que es, eres de madre francés, pero hablas también inglés muy bien, y si tienes algunos certificados como IELTS.

'I also think that [in] the paragraph where you talk about your experiences, you can also include the languages you speak, because you haven't done that. Like, for instance, that you speak French, because I know that your mum is French, but you also speak English fluently, and also if you have certificates like IELTS'

(Student C providing feedback to Student B orally, transcript)

She also encouraged B to use a wider variety of connecting words, as we have cited in (5) above. Student B took this feedback partially on board, and rephrased and expanded on her own background and motivations to apply for the MA. Her use of self-mention elements increased as a result of this feedback (from 14 instances to 22), as did her use of boosters and discourse markers, but in a very limited way (only one more of each category in the second draft).

This limited pattern of use of genre-specific features – whose use is considered an improvement in the awareness of the type of text being witten– was observed also in the work of another participant (Student D). In both cases, the participants received better genre-focused feedback than in the case of Student A, and acted on it, but only partially.

4.2.3. Pattern III (Student E)

Student E's initial draft was not a successful first attempt at writing a statement of purpose. It was short (157 words, compared to the average of 287) and its content was superficial. In terms of macrotextual features, it was a partially appropriate attempt – it established her credentials, included situational parameters, and had appropriate initial and final salutations. However, it did not succeed in conveying an appropriate self-representation of her as a candidate. She did not appeal to the reader in complimentary tones at the beginning, and her explanation of her reasons for applying was superficial and more implicit than explicit.

Her peer, Student F, provided her with effective feedback, which highlighted both macrotextual and microlinguistic areas in which the draft could be improved. Examples of microlinguistic features are (16) and (17) about *reader mention*:

(16).

El estilo es formal, pero usas poco el usted.

'The style is formal, but you seldom use 'usted''

(Student E, Assessment grid)

(17).
Falta también unos datos de la universidad.

'[Your letter] also lacks some information about the university'

(Student E, Assessment grid)

It included suggestions that E should expand her personal presentation, give more details to and strengthen her arguments, and more effectively connect the ideas in her text. Student E took most of these suggestions on board, and, as a result, her second draft was a closer approximation of the genre: it was clearer in terms of her motivations, it presented explicitly a variety of plans linked to her potential completion of the MA programme, and it addressed the reader in polite and formal tones. In terms of microlinguistic features, her second draft letter still did not deploy boosters, but showed a wide variety of connecting words, which rendered her statement of purpose one of the most cohesive in the sample.

In her case, feedback had the most noticeable impact, which is partly a testament to her lower starting point and to the effectiveness of the peer-feedback which she received. However, it also reflects her openness to incorporating the suggestions she received. In that sense, although Student E does not incorporate all the feedback she receives, we observe that she does use it effectively overall (as evidenced by the increase in macrotextual and microlinguistic features between her first and second drafts). The three patterns of peer-feedback and its impact are summarized in Table 6.

5. Discussion

In order to explain the greater impact of peer-feedback in the case exemplifying Pattern III, we need to go back to the features of effective feedback that we outlined at the beginning of this article (Henderson et al., 2019). Looking at the feedback comments that students received in Tables 4 and 5, we note that they meet most of the criteria to be considered effective. First, it is *contextualised*, as it refers explicitly to the characteristics of statements of purpose which students were aiming to produce. It also *focuses on features that can be learned*, in this case, the macrotextual and microlinguistic features of statements of purpose which were the focus of the class, so that students did successfully learn how to use them, as evidenced by their written work. Finally, the comments are mostly *detailed* and specific: with a few notable exceptions –e.g. (2) cited above–, suggestions tend to be concrete and actionable, with regard to both macrotextual –see (1), (3) or (4) above–) and microlinguistic features –e.g. (5), (6) or (16) cited before–. If they had received vague feedback and had not been able to understand what was expected of them, this could have been a reason why some students – particularly those displaying Pattern I – did not take on board the feedback that they received. However, as we have seen, students received detailed, clear, and actionable feedback.

Conceivably, students might have been prevented from incorporating peer-feedback due to lack of practice – this teaching intervention took place at a moment in the term when students were just being introduced to peer-feedback processes, and therefore had had as yet few opportunities to become accustomed to them. Whatever the reason, we observe that, in accordance with Carless and Boud (2018) classification, the participants in this study show feedback-literate behaviours and attitudes relating to *appreciating feedback* and *making judgements*.

We can therefore conclude that, while most students played an active role in providing feedback to their peers, and they did so mostly in effective ways, their readiness to themselves accept and act on such feedback was more limited. This leads us to conclude that learners need specific training in how to give and receive peer-feedback – in short, in feedback literacy – and in developing strategies for acting on it. This should help them to "close the feedback loop" (Carless & Boud, 2018), something that future research can look at through the lens of the feedback literacy framework.

6. Conclusions

Our initial study aims were to find out what the impact of peer-feedback would be on Spanish as an additional language learners' written work and attitudes. After the analysis presented above, it could be possible to hypothesise that, as long as it is combined with prior explicit training in the discourse genre in question including the analysis of exemplars –thus, in effect, 'de-occluding' the genre – peer-feedback may have an impact.

With prior training and practice, students can acquire the necessary tools and metalanguage to help their peers to write more

Table 6
Patterns of peer-feedback.

	First draft	Peer-feedback	Second draft
Pattern I	strong	ineffective	largely unchanged
Pattern II	with both strengths and weaknesses	partly effective	partly improved
Pattern III	weak	effective	greatly improved

appropriate samples of the genre. When it is guided by means of checklists appropriate to the genre, students can give comprehensible feedback focused on specific microlinguistic and macrotextual features, as we have seen. The impact of this type of feedback on the quality of writing could be tested in future studies comparing our findings with those of other group of students following a different process of writing.

However, our analysis also shows that students who achieve high degrees of appropriateness in their first drafts benefit to a lesser degree from peer-feedback, perhaps in part because the greater quality of their writing requires more sophisticated feedback than their peers can provide. This points to the need for feedback that is dynamic and tailored to the specific needs of individual students, and also to the need for students to be trained in how to receive and use that feedback. Prior quantitative studies have identified rater training as the factor that has the greatest impact on peer-feedback (Li, Xiong, Hunter, Guo, & Tywoniw, 2020), and future studies could look at how training students in the rationale and dynamics of feedback can increase the degree to which learners benefit from it. The feedback literacy framework provides some useful tools in this respect, which, in addition to explicit training for students faced with the production of occluded genres, could maximise the value of peer-feedback activities in the language classroom.

Ethical approval

This study obtained the ethics certificate by the Institutional Committee for Ethical Review Projects (CIREP) at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra; CIREP Approval Number: 247.

Informed consent from participants

All the participants voluntarily signed an informed consent sheet. Their identities have been pseudonymised and any data that could lead to their identification has been removed or changed.

Funding

This paper was supported by the research project Inter_ECODAL: *Interculturality and intercomprehension assessing plurilingual discourse competence: digital student feedback literacy* (reference PID2020-113796RB-I00/MICINN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033), co-funded by "Research Challenges" R+D+i Projects, Ministry of Science and Innovation (MICINN), Spain, and Spanish State Research Agency (AEI).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Ana Castaño Arques: Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Writing – Original Draft, Visualisation. **Carmen Lopez Ferrero**: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of Competing Interest

There are no financial or non-financial competing interests to report.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, ACA. The data are not publicly available because they contain information that could put the privacy of the participants at risk.

References

López Ferrero, C., Atienza Cerezo, E., & Carrillo del Saz, J. (2020, online). *Mapa plurilingüe de géneros discursivos*. Accessed at https://www.upf.edu/web/ecodal/inventario-de-generos.

Bhatia, V.K. (2004). *Worlds of written discourse: A genre-based view*. A&C Black.

Cano-García, E., Pons-Seguí, L., & Fernández-Ferrer, M. (2022). Efectos de los tipos de *feedback* entre iguales en los trabajos escritos. *Profesorado: Revista Dèlelőtt Currículum York Formación del Profesorado, 26*(1), 127–148. https://doi.org/10.30827/profesorado.v26i1.13929

Carless, D., & Boud, D. (2018). The development of student feedback literacy: Enabling uptake of feedback. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 43*(8), 1315–1325. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2018.1463354

Chong, S. W. (2021). Reconsidering student feedback literacy from an ecological perspective. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 46*(1), 92–104. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2020.1730765

Council of Europe. (2020). Common European framework of reference for languages: learning, teaching, assessment. Companion volume with new descriptors. Council of Europe Publishing.

Esterhazy, R., de Lange, T., & Damşa, C. (2021). Performing teacher feedback literacy in peer mentoring meetings. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 1–14*, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2021.1980768

Fernández, S. S. (2022). Feeback interactivo y producción escrita en la enseñanza del español LE/L2. *Journal of Spanish Language Teaching, 9*(1), 36–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/23247797.2022.2055302

Gillaerts, P. (2003). A textlinguistic and genological approach to the letters of application. *HERMES-Journal of Language and Communication in Business, 31*, 105–117.

Han, Y., & Xu, Y. (2020). The development of student feedback literacy: The influences of teacher feedback on peer feedback. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 45*(5), 680–696. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2019.1689545

Henderson, M., Phillips, M., Ryan, T., Boud, D., Dawson, P., Molloy, E., & Mahoney, P. (2019). Conditions that enable effective feedback. *Higher Education Research & Development, 38*(7), 1401–1416. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1657807

Huisman, B., Saab, N., van den Broek, P., & van Driel, J. (2019). The impact of formative peer feedback on higher education students' academic writing: A Meta-Analysis. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 44*(6), 863–880. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2018.1545896

Hyland, K. (2005). Stance and engagement: A model of interaction in academic discourse. *Discourse Studies, 7*(2), 173–192.

Li, H., Xiong, Y., Hunter, C. V., Guo, X., & Tywoniw, R. (2020). Does peer assessment promote student learning? A meta-analysis. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 45*(2), 193–211. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2019.1620679

López Ferrero, C., & Atienza Cerezo, E. (2022). Cartografiar géneros discursivos: rutas para evaluar la competencia discursiva plurilingüe. *Revista de Lingüística y Lenguas Aplicadas, 17*, 71–83. https://doi.org/10.4995/rlyla.2022.15597

López Ferrero, C., & Bach, C. (2016). Discourse analysis of statements of purpose: connecting academic and professional genres. *Discourse Studies, 18*(3), 286–310. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445616634553

Nelson, G. L., & Murphy, J. M. (1993). Peer response groups: Do L2 writers use peer comments in revising their drafts? *TESOL Quarterly, 27*(1), 135–141.

Nieminen, J. H., & Carless, D. (2022). Feedback literacy: A critical review of an emerging concept, 20220719 *Higher Education*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00895-9.

Paulus, T. M. (1999). The effect of peer and teacher feedback on student writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 8*(3), 265–289.

Pham, V. P. H., Huyen, L. H., & Nguyen, M. T. (2020). The incorporation of qualified peer feedback into writing revision. *The Asian Journal of Applied Linguistics, 7*(1), 45–59.

Redeker, G. (1990). Ideational and pragmatic markers of discourse structure. *Journal of Pragmatics, 14*, 367–381.

Schiffrin, D. (1987). Discourse Markers. Cambridge University Press.

Sutton, P. (2012). Conceptualizing feedback literacy: knowing, being, and acting. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 49*(1), 31–40. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2012.647781

Swales, J. (1996). Occluded genres in the academy: The case of the submission letter. *Academic writing: Intercultural and Textual issues*, ., 45–58.

Tuzi, F. (2004). The impact of e-feedback on the revisions of L2 writers in an academic writing course. *Computers and Composition, 21*(2), 217–235.

Xu, Y., & Liu, J. (2010). An investigation into anonymous peer feedback. *Foreign Language Teaching and Practice, 3*, 44–49.

Yang, M., Badger, R., & Yu, Z. (2006). A comparative study of peer and teacher feedback in a Chinese EFL writing class. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 15*(3), 179–200.

Yu, S., & Lee, I. (2016). Peer feedback in second language writing (2005–2014). *Language Teaching, 49*(4), 461–493. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444816000161

Zhao, H. (2010). Investigating learners' use and understanding of peer and teacher feedback on writing: A comparative study in a Chinese English writing classroom. *Assessing Writing, 15*, 3–17.

Ana Castaño Arques holds a PhD in Language Sciences by Pompeu Fabra University (Spain) and an MA in Teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language by the University of Barcelona. She teaches at University of Oxford. Her research revolves around critical literacy among language learners and feedback practices.

Carmen López Ferrero holds a PhD in Philosophy and Education Sciences by University of Barcelona and she is Associate Professor at Pompeu Fabra University (Spain). She is an established researcher in the field of applied linguistics and currently leads the Interculturality and Intercomprehension Assessing Plurilingual Discourse Competence (Inter_Ecodal) research group.