

# VOICES AND VIEWS: ENGLISH LANGUAGE ISSUES FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES



## Editors

Susana Liruso  
Florencia Giménez



FL  
Facultad  
de Lenguas



UNC

Universidad  
Nacional  
de Córdoba

Colección  
**Lecturas del mundo**

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Susana Liruso  
Florencia Giménez

**Editors**

Gabriela Helale  
María Gimena San Martín  
Antonela Percara  
Andrea Canavosio  
Natalia Dalla Costa  
Angélica Gaido  
Débora Amadio  
Natalia Gallina  
Laura Flores Calvo

**Authors**



## **Editors**

Susana Liruso

Florencia Giménez

## **Revision**

Paula Faletti

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## **Editorial Design**

la  
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ISBN 978-987-47362-0-8

Córdoba: Facultad de Lenguas UNC, 2019.



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Introduction .....	6
Assessing the practicum: The relationship between cooperating teachers' beliefs and actual practices Gabriela Helale .....	10
Scaffolding the learning-to-teach process in EFL Teacher Education: An analysis of the tutoring sessions between a practicum supervisor and the student-teachers María Gimena San Martín .....	48
Supervisors' feedback in ELT practicum as perceived by student teachers and (their) supervisors Antonela Percara.....	87
The impact of mistakes at the micro level of pronunciation on the assessment of English Phonetics and Phonology II students' oral performance Andrea Canavosio .....	120
Towards enhancing EFL academic literacy: The effect of genre-based instruction on summary-response writing Natalia Dalla Costa .....	163
Writing about acquired disciplinary knowledge: On contextual relevance Angélica Gaido .....	212

Morality on the stand: The strategic invocation of cultural knowledge in lay-witness examination Débora Amadio .....	256
Managing accountability in public discourse: Evasion strategies at the Iraq War public hearings in the United Kingdom Natalia Gallina .....	289
The construction of subjectivity in <i>The Blind Assassin</i> and <i>Tracks</i> Laura Flores Calvo .....	327

## Introduction

English is the language of communication around the world. In this context, English language professionals are expected to be prepared more than ever to face the challenge of using English in different fields and for different purposes. While undergraduate education provides professionals with the fundamentals of their areas of expertise, postgraduate education aims at expanding that knowledge, thus enhancing graduate studies and fostering training in specific fields.

*Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba*, acknowledging its graduates' need to go deep into the study of the English Language, offers since year 2000 a program that satisfies the needs of those working in the field of English, either as teachers, translators or researchers. The MA program *Maestría en Inglés* promotes the development of theoretical knowledge of Applied Linguistics and Literature. While the former aims at building the theoretical basis needed for reflection on and research in the field of English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL), the latter aims at going deep into the study and critical analysis of literary works.

Considering its state-of-the art training courses, the MA program has successfully undergone quality benchmarking evaluation processes by the National Council of Evaluation in Argentina. The program has attracted an important number of national and international students and has also received prestigious visiting lecturers from different countries, mainly



England and the United States. In turn, MA graduates have been appointed in joint teaching/research positions within the MA program, assuring its sustainability.

The articles in this collection reveal profound knowledge of the fields addressed in the MA course of studies. They are based on selected MA theses and dissertations on Applied Linguistics and Literary Studies. The collection focuses on EFL teacher training, pronunciation assessment, academic writing, Critical Discourse Analysis and literature.

Gabriela Helale explores the variables that intervene in the assessment of the practicum and focuses on teacher cognition. She examines and analyses the relationship between cooperating teachers' beliefs and their actual practices in assessing student teachers' performance during the teaching practice lessons. The study highlights that cooperating teachers seem to concentrate on different criteria to determine what constitutes good teaching and evaluate student teachers' performance.

María Gimena San Martín's research study continues to explore the practicum in an EFL Teacher Education program but from the point of view of supervisory roles and skills. She sets out to examine how a practicum supervisor scaffolds the student teachers' learning-to-teach process in the context of one-to-one tutoring sessions. The results contribute to a better understanding of scaffolding in its several dimensions.

Antonella Percara also directs our attention to supervisory feedback and looks at the perceptions held by EFL student teachers and university supervisors involved in the teaching



practicum. The data collected furthers the characterization of supervisory feedback and deepens the existing knowledge about feedback in the teaching practicum context.

Andrea Canavosio presents a study that revolves around EFL pronunciation assessment. Information deriving from different sources allowed the researcher to measure the influence that micro-level pronunciation mistakes have on the marks assigned to undergraduate EFL students' oral performance. The findings intend to contribute to the field of EFL assessment and to encourage more research on this area in educational contexts.

Natalia Dalla Costa proposes a quasi-experimental research study that investigates the effect of genre-based instruction on the process of teaching summary-response writing to EFL university students. The study shows the effectiveness of genre-based instruction as a powerful pedagogical tool with students at an advanced level of language proficiency.

Angélica Gaido's article delves into written text production about acquired disciplinary knowledge in the context of assessment at university. Grounded on Systemic Functional Linguistics, the study casts light on the complexities involved in writing about disciplinary knowledge, thus enriching pedagogical interventions.

Debora Amadio draws on situated Discourse Analysis to study ideologically motivated discourse practices in an institutional setting, the courtroom. She looks into the discursive construction of a version of the past in lay witness examinations. This study shows that litigants ask questions skilfully designed to activate





mental representations associated with acceptable routine behaviour in public. It concludes that cultural assumptions are related to the dimension of morality.

Natalia Gallina examines the testimonies of political and military elite witnesses in the context of the Iraq War public hearings. From the perspectives of situated Discourse Analysis, Conversational Analysis and Narrative Studies, the work deals with ways of managing accountability in public discourse and concludes that strategic public discourse represents an instrument of social manipulation and hegemonic control.

Laura Flores Calvo explores the concept of female subjectivity. Through the analysis of two contemporary novels, *The Blind Assassin* by Margaret Atwood (2000) and *Tracks* by Louise Erdrich (1988), her work focuses on the role that social and interpersonal forces as well as bodily experiences play in the construction of female subjectivity.

This collection as a whole ponders over current issues and concerns in the English language and aims to encourage further inquiry and reflexion. It constitutes the outcome of thorough study and analysis of up-to-date theoretical frames and sustained fieldwork. As the title of the publication reveals, we hope that the diverse articles will constitute a point of departure to foster future *Voices and Views*.



Assessing the practicum: The  
relationship between cooperating  
teachers' beliefs and actual practices

Gabriela Helale



**Gabriela Helale** holds a degree in English Language Teaching and Translation from Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Argentina. She also holds an MA in English and Applied Linguistics from the same institution. She teaches English as a Foreign Language at Monserrat Secondary School, Argentina. She is a former lecturer in the chairs of Methodology and Practicum I. Her research interests include Second Language Acquisition and Teaching English as a Foreign Language.



## Abstract

Becoming a competent teacher entails affording student teachers (STs) the opportunity of observing experienced qualified teachers as well as carrying out teaching practices over an extended period of time. One of the most significant and dominant approaches to the teaching practice has been that of supervised field experience in which STs are “supported by purposeful coaching from a cooperating teacher who offers modelling, co-planning, frequent feedback, repeated opportunities for practice, and reflection upon practice, while the ST gradually assumes more responsibility for teaching” (Goodnough, Osmond, Dibbon, Glassman, & Stevens, 2009, p. 285). The practicum is also a means of assessment (Villanueva de Debat, 2010) since the main goal the teaching practice pursues is to certify that STs meet the qualifications of the teacher education program. This qualitative research study aims to examine and analyse the relationship between cooperating teachers’ (CTs) beliefs of and their actual practices in assessing STs’ performance during the practicum. More specifically, the



research objectives focus on analysing what criteria CTs place emphasis on when they assess lessons taught by STs, what criteria determine a pass or a fail in the practicum, what kind of difficulties CTs encounter when they assess the teaching practice and how their beliefs correlate with their actual practices. The study is carried out in a five-year English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education program at Facultad de Lenguas (FL), Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (UNC). The participants are 12 CTs who have vast experience supervising STs. Data are collected from three types of instruments: open-ended questionnaires, observation reports and follow-up interviews. Findings show that CTs seem to concentrate on different criteria to assess STs' performance. In addition, there are points of agreement and disagreement between what CTs think that should be assessed during the practicum and what they actually assess. The results also indicate that different types of difficulties arise in the assessment of STs' performance.



## 1. The Problem

During the practicum, student teachers (STs) are granted the opportunity to apply all the theoretical knowledge they have gained in EFL Methodology courses, reflect upon teaching procedures, techniques, strategies, and skills, and learn new methodological approaches. Furthermore, the practicum is a means of assessment (Villanueva de Debat, 2010) since the main goal the teaching practice pursues is to certify that STs meet the qualifications of the teacher education program. The existing literature on assessment of the practicum suggests that agreement on what is to be assessed and how cannot be taken for granted and that various interpretations of teacher effectiveness coexist. Goe, Bell, and Little (2008) highlight the lack of consensus on what teacher effectiveness implies in the practicum since there are not “generally agreed-upon methods for evaluating teacher effectiveness” (p. 2).

Thorny issues lie in establishing specific criteria against which STs’ performance will be assessed (Bailey, 2006), determining what good teaching is, and variables of the context where the teaching practice is carried out (Smith, 2007). Furthermore, two parties are usually involved in supervising and assessing STs’ performance in the practicum: CTs, who are school-based teachers who take STs into their classrooms and supervise STs’ performance; and university mentors (UMs). At the same time, the dual purpose of assessment of the practicum, formative and summative, is considered to be one of its most problematic



components (Smith, 2010) as assessment evinces a judgmental decision about STs' performance and feedback for STs' improvement and growth.

The complexity of specifying clear indications of what to assess or what good teaching is may lead the assessment of the practicum to be determined by a number of variables, one of the most important of which is to be found in the CTs' beliefs. In other words, a main aspect that exerts a significant influence on how assessment can be carried out in the practicum lies in teachers' beliefs. Borg (2006) claims that beliefs guide teachers' actions and behaviour in the classroom. The study of teacher cognition in teacher training programs is of both theoretical and practical concern since teachers' mental constructs are known to be crucial in decision making and in building a theory of teaching and learning (Borg, 2003). Teacher cognition has been defined as "what language teachers think, know and believe" (Borg, 2006, p. 1). According to Borg, beliefs constitute a structured set of principles which are drawn from teachers' prior experiences, school practices, and teachers' individual personality. In spite of the long research interest in teacher cognition, it is still complex to understand the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their actual teaching practices.

The purpose of this study is to qualitatively examine and analyse the relationship between the CTs' beliefs of and their actual practices on the assessment of STs' performance during the practicum in a five-year EFL undergraduate program at Facultad de Lenguas (FL), Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (UNC). More



specifically, this research attempts to identify CTs' beliefs about what criteria they pay attention to when assessing STs' teaching practice lessons, to inquire into the difficulties encountered by CTs when assessing STs' teaching practice lessons, and to identify and establish points of agreement and disagreement between the CTs' beliefs of and their actual practices on the assessment of STs' teaching practice lessons.

## **2. The Approach to the Problem**

Assessing STs during the practicum is a multi-faceted task as its nature, goals, and procedures are perceived as controversial. On the one hand, assessment ought to provide STs with feedback to foster reflection and improvement. On the other hand, assessment possesses a summative and judgmental aim intended to qualify effective teachers. Besides, the object of assessment is not clear: Do we assess teaching performance or competence, what is good teaching? How can acceptable STs' performance be measured? Furthermore, teaching is subjected to several contextual and social factors that affect performance. These types of questions add more tension and confusion to the assessment process. The purpose of this study is to look into the CTs' beliefs of and actual practices about assessment to contribute to the search for developing a more critical understanding of the complex nature of assessment in teacher education and appropriate assessment processes.





This study is grounded in teacher cognition research which has attracted considerable interest since the 1970s. Borg (2003) suggests that beliefs are thoughts, perceptions and assumptions which are strong enough to guide practice. In a similar vein, Barcelos (2003) considers that beliefs are not only cognitive concepts but also social constructs formed out of experiences. Although much research has been carried out in the area of CTs', STs' and UMs' beliefs about assessment, studies comparing CTs' perceptions about assessment and their actual practices have not received as much attention. Hence, this study has decided to explore teacher beliefs, namely CTs' beliefs and practices, for two reasons. First, the research literature does not yet provide sufficient evidence-based answers to the above questions and tensions. Secondly, the study of CTs' beliefs and actions may provide useful insights to refine constructs to measure, standards required, and assessment tools. The present research aims to enhance studies about teacher cognition, more specifically, studies about the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices and to point out new possible directions in which further research could develop.

This research study was conducted at a five-year EFL teacher education program at FL. STs in their fourth year take the first of two EFL Methodology courses in order to acquire the knowledge and develop the skills necessary to undertake their first practicum. Before STs start their teaching practicum, they have already taken methodology courses in Philosophy of Education, Pedagogy, and Educational Psychology. The first EFL



Methodology course in fourth year lasts two semesters and the practicum is carried out during the second one. In fourth year, STs take the first EFL Methodology course plus Practicum One. The practicum comprises two periods of teaching practice sessions at different levels and institutions: secondary schools and the Language Centre which belongs to FL. This was a qualitative study involving twelve CTs from the Language Centre. The objective of this research was to examine and analyse the relationship between the CTs' beliefs of and their actual practices on the assessment of STs' performance during the practicum; therefore, the selection of subjects was based on identifying and choosing CTs that could provide useful insights about the phenomenon under research. The participants had been supervising STs for more than 10 years and were regularly assigned STs in their courses. Three types of instruments were designed and deployed to gather data to examine and analyse the relationship between the CTs' beliefs of and their actual practices on the assessment of STs' performance during the practicum: (a) an open-ended questionnaire administered to all the CTs; (b) a written report with two open-ended questions about a ST's performance which was completed by ten CTs; and (c) a semi-structured face-to-face interview with five CTs in order to elicit further views and make comments on their answers in the questionnaire. The major intended use of the questionnaire was to gain insight into the CTs' beliefs about the criteria for assessing the practicum. The main objective of the report was to enquire about the participants' beliefs and their actual practices. The report sought



to examine and analyse convergences and divergences between the CTs' beliefs about what should be assessed and what they actually did assess in a real context. This instrument was a narrative appraisal of the STs' performance, specifying the criteria that were most followed by the CTs to decide on a pass or fail. The principle that guided the design of the interview was to provide the CTs with the opportunity to extend the information stated in the questionnaire. The CTs were required to specify, clarify, and provide further information about their answers in the questionnaire. The data obtained from the questionnaire was analysed following an inductive content analysis approach (Hatch, 2002). In order to ensure and enhance the validity and reliability of this qualitative study, triangulation, peer validation and sampling procedures were followed (Creswell, 2009).

### **3. Results and Discussion**

This qualitative study explored the relationship between the CTs' beliefs of and their actual practices on the assessment of the STs' performance during the practicum. The aim was to examine the extent to which the CTs' beliefs are reflected in their practices. It was not the objective of this study to simply confirm or disconfirm whether the CTs' beliefs are followed in their practices or not.



### **3.1 Criteria followed by the CTs to assess STs' teaching practice sessions**

The first objective of this research was to identify the CTs' beliefs about what criteria they pay attention to when they assess the STs' teaching practice lessons. All the CTs express very definite beliefs about what to assess during the practicum (Table 1). The CTs emphasize a large number of items encompassing different and varied dimensions of teacher effectiveness that they take into consideration in their assessment. The results indicate that the CTs remarkably draw their attention to aspects connected with the STs' pedagogical knowledge and skills that may account for their beliefs of what constitutes satisfactory teacher effectiveness.



Domain	Category	Items	N =
STs' PEDAGOGICAL KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS	Class management	checking understanding of concepts and instructions	6
		attentiveness to learners' needs	5
		clarity an precision in explanations and / or intructions	4
		ability to stimulate participation of all learners	4
		ability to keep learners' discipline	3
		ability to rephrase / reformulate explanations and / or instructions clearly	3
		use of varied correction techniques	3
		ability to adapt their L2 to the learners' level	3
		ability to manage time	2
		ability to spot learners' mistakes	1
		ability to monitor learners' activity	1
		ST' talking time	1
		ability to follow the group pace/rhythm	1
		<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>37</b>
	Lesson planning skills	task sequencing	6
		variety of activities	5
		clear objectives	5
		use of transitions	1
		selections of materials	1
		effective presentation of a grammar item	1
		<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>19</b>
	Lesson development	ability to adapt their plan to the class situation	5
		ability to follow their lesson plan	3
		<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>8</b>
	Teaching and learning	assigning homework	2
		use of audiovisual aids	2
		use of communicative activities	1
		<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>5</b>

Domain	Category	Items	N =
STs' SOCIO-AFFECTIVE SKILLS AND PERSONAL QUALITIES	Attitudes toward the practicum	rapport (with CTs and learners)	8
		involvement in the class	5
		responsability	2
		enthusiasm	2
		interest in the teaching practice	1
		willingness to improve	1
		interest showed in the preparation of the class	1
		<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>20</b>
		creativity	1
		sense of humor	1
		receptivity	1
		self -confidence	1
		<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4</b>
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>24</b>	
STs' SUBJECT MATTER KNOWLEDGE	Use of L2	accuracy	10
		fluency	1
		<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>11</b>
	Content knowledge	knowledge of the topic to be taught or practised	5
		<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>16</b>		
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>109</b>	

Table 1. Criteria Taken into Account by the CTs



The findings are consistent with other studies (Faletti, San Martín, & Helale, 2014; Helale & San Martín, 2010; Hudson, 2013; Merç, 2015; Ong'ondo & Borg, 2011; San Martín & Helale, 2011; Sedumedi & Mundalamo, 2012; Villanueva de Debat, 2010; Yüksel, 2014) that also found that CTs', STs' or UMs' perceptions about good teaching in the practicum tend to look into pedagogical knowledge, techniques, and attitudes the STs should master and demonstrate in their lessons.

It can therefore be concluded that the CTs' evaluation of teacher effectiveness during the practicum appears to focus on assessing a final product: whether STs are able to competently demonstrate a considerable diversity of skills, techniques, and attitudes or not. The fact that STs are novices who are just starting with their first teaching experiences and that teacher effectiveness is an evolving process (Çelik, Arikan, & Caner, 2013) seems to be disregarded by the CTs' demands. It may be hypothesized that the CTs strongly focus on assessing the STs' effective demonstration of teaching knowledge and skills since technical competence may seem to determine teaching effectiveness and ensure effective lessons. Along these lines, Villanueva de Debat (2010) explains in her study that the CTs are “more concerned about craft knowledge and expect from STs technically well managed classes that will not hinder their learners' learning or waste precious instruction time” (p. 74). The strong emphasis on STs' pedagogical knowledge and skills may confirm Al-Malki and Weir's (2014) findings that the CTs appear to conceive the ST as someone who possesses “the



requisite pedagogical, content knowledge, and effective strategies for preparing and teaching a series of lessons” (p. 37).

Data in this study suggest that, in addition to technical and pedagogical knowledge and skills, the CTs also consider socio-affective skills, personal qualities, and subject matter knowledge. Under STs’ socio-affective skills and personal qualities, the CTs focus on interpersonal skills, attitudes, and personal features, such as involvement in the class, responsibility, enthusiasm, creativity and self-confidence, which the STs should display toward the practicum. It can be argued that, in this light, STs need to meet several requirements in different domains to pass the practicum since the type of assessment the CTs carry out comprises different areas. At the same time, it can be contended that the CTs may appear to address a criterion-referenced approach which relates the STs’ performance to criteria of teacher effectiveness. Wallace (1991) explains that a criterion-referenced assessment approach defines a pass or a fail in relation to explicitly stated, measurable, and observable criteria. In contrast, a holistic assessment approach focuses on examining global and general performance since certain aspects of teaching cannot be easily and objectively specified by behaviouristic criteria. The question is if STs can be demanded in their early stages of the practicum to fully demonstrate mastery and apply extensive and detailed teaching techniques, skills, and desirable teacher attitudes. Leshem and Bar-Hama (2008) conclude in their study that STs preferred a holistic approach to an analytical approach for the evaluation of their lessons. STs also state that





they need criterion-based assessment, which is objective and explicit. The authors observe that STs view the lesson as having different parts and not as a whole entity so that the sum of the parts enacts quality of teaching. Teaching requires knowledge, skills, and good attributes but it is impossible to sample and aim at all the desirable skills STs must demonstrate in the practicum as teaching is a social activity influenced by numerous contextual aspects. Thus, there is a need to define what teacher effectiveness is in the practicum so it becomes a true developmental learning experience.

With respect to aspects that should or should not be assessed during the practicum, the findings show that five participants assert that the only criterion that should not be considered is time management. Concerning time management, the CTs claim that STs will be able to manage class time “when they get experience in teaching”. Noticeably, this is the only reference found to STs’ learning through experience. Only three CTs out of twelve seem to have a more formative view of assessment by arguing that assessment should be carried out with a “certain degree of flexibility” or “in a progressive way”. These three CTs claim that assessment should not be very demanding when STs start the practicum since “STs need a lot of help for their first lessons”, and that “it’s very difficult for STs to teach lessons 1 and 2 because they need to bear in mind a lot of aspects for the class to be effective”. In brief, these CTs argue that improvement should be considered. Based on these findings, it can be concurred that CTs are more predisposed to believe that assessment should



be targeted toward the product, measuring successful STs' skills and abilities, rather than towards the process which would be more concerned with delivering feedback for improvement of performance. Goe, Bell, and Little (2008) make heavy claims on the fact that the assessment of teacher effectiveness has to foster improvement, that is, assessment should identify areas in which teachers are performing well or with which they may need further assistance. At the same time, it seems that there are no priorities in STs' assessment, that is, all the skills and behaviours are equally important. Consequently, it is essential to prioritize what is important to assess.

### **3.2 Defining a pass or a fail**

The analysis of the findings related to the CTs' definitions of a pass or fail suggests that the CTs have more reasons to fail a teaching practice session than to pass it. The CTs' views about teacher effectiveness during the practicum seem to be blurred between the performance expected of an expert and a novice teacher; that is, STs are strictly supposed to comply with a full list of competencies to pass their teaching practice lessons. The criteria followed for failing a teaching practice session are more detailed and varied, whereas the ones for passing a teaching practice session concern STs' pedagogical knowledge and skills domain. Hence, STs' pedagogical knowledge and skills, subject matter knowledge, socio-affective skills, and personal qualities have been contemplated in the CTs' decisions for failing, which



suggests that STs' performance has to satisfy several and different criteria for not being awarded a fail. The CTs appear to direct their assessment focus to what STs still need to attain or further need to improve rather on what STs have already accomplished and what they can demonstrate in a satisfactory way. Zeichner (1996) states that the practicum provides STs with an opportunity to learn and grow as future teachers; it is not an instance for demonstrating abilities or skills. The author believes that the practicum has to aim at helping STs understand their teacher role, analyse multiple perspectives on teaching events, discuss practices, and promote their capacities for ongoing learning about teaching. Teacher effectiveness in the practicum should include a reasonable and harmonious balance of socio-affective skills, pedagogical knowledge and skills, subject matter knowledge, and personal qualities. In a similar vein, Leshem and Bar-Hama (2008) emphasize that "teaching is a web of interrelated dimensions," some of which are clearly observable while others are not (p. 264). In light of this, assessing effectiveness in the practicum cannot consist in ascertaining whether STs are able to demonstrate these skills or not. Instead, teacher trainers should better define what is to be assessed by establishing priorities and suggesting different levels of acceptance for STs' performance.

As stated above, it seems that STs will pass the practicum if they are able to satisfy full-scale and divergent criteria the CTs believe are required learning outcomes. Similar results are observed in a study by Tillema, Smith and Leshem (2011) who found that CTs concentrated more on assessing performance against set



standards while STs preferred a guidance-oriented assessment. Galán and López Pastor (2012) also observe STs' preference for formative assessment in their study, as this type of assessment would promote reflection and improvement. In contrast, Tillema and Smith (2009) observed that the fact whether CTs followed an assessment of learning or an assessment for learning approach did not yield better results in the STs' performance. On the one hand, STs had difficulties attempting to put the guidelines for improvement into practice and, on the other hand, they perceived that assessment of learning did not possess clarity about defined criteria for determining competence. In this respect, Smith (2010) argues that these two assessment approaches, formative and summative assessment, cause considerable tension and increase complexity in the assessment process since it is very demanding "to have the role of supporter and judge" (p. 37). The evidence from this study appears to indicate that the CTs perform "the role of judge" and they focus their attention on what STs do right or wrong. In a similar vein, Ong'ondo and Borg's (2011) study found that CTs provided evaluative and directive feedback. They regarded what STs did well or not and assigned grades to various categories of pedagogical knowledge and skills. In light of this, assessing effectiveness in the practicum cannot consist in ascertaining whether STs are able to demonstrate these skills or not. Instead, teacher trainers should better define what is to be assessed by establishing priorities and suggesting different levels of acceptance for STs' performance.



### 3.3 Difficulties in the assessment process

This study also aimed at inquiring into the difficulties encountered by the CTs when assessing STs' teaching practice lessons. The CTs state that they have problems assessing some aspects related to STs' pedagogical knowledge and skills among which aspects related to lesson development are the most mentioned. The CTs claim that STs are very often too concentrated on finishing all the activities they have planned, so they tend to "rush through the sequence of activities", which leads to problems with the pace of the class. Consequently, the CTs do not know whether to pass a lesson when a ST shows lack of sensitivity to what is happening in the class or how learners are responding. Difficulties are also reported when assessing lesson planning skills. The CTs argue that it is very difficult for them to pass a lesson when they observe in the lesson plan that the selection of materials is poor or when the sequencing of activities is not "the one they would follow". In this respect, the CTs claim that even though the UMs supervise all the STs' lesson plans, "sometimes UMs do not pay attention if there are oral communicative activities. Sometimes STs bring so many extra things, games, for example, and we have a syllabus to follow and we need to cover all the coursebook material". To a lesser degree, problems in assessing the use of teaching and learning resources are also observed in the CTs' responses. The CTs find it problematic to pass a teaching practice session when "STs do not take full advantage of audiovisual aids". It can be observed from the findings that the CTs have difficulty assessing



different levels of performance or aim for high quality of teaching performance.

It is worth noting that the participants of this research who have vast experience supervising STs still have difficulties assessing the practicum. When analysing the criteria that are difficult to be assessed by these CTs, it is interesting to observe the use of adjectives and adverbs such as “poor”, “take full advantage of audiovisual aids”, “good”, “properly” to describe STs’ performance. Similarly, Faletti, San Martín, and Helale (2014) noted in their study of UMs’ feedback that the predominance of negative judgments over positive ones tends to indicate that UMs focus rather on aspects STs need to improve than on what STs are able to demonstrate. In other words, it can be claimed that the CTs in this study are likely to aim at what STs further need to accomplish. These findings demonstrate that many challenges persist in trying to assess teacher effectiveness, since it is impossible to enumerate exhaustively the good attributes of teaching competence (Smith, 2010) and to demand a high degree of rigour in STs’ performance.

The CTs mention several aspects that they believe are problematic in the assessment of the practicum. However, such items do not constitute assessment criteria. Of great interest is the fact that the CTs assess STs’ socio-affective skills and personal qualities for question 1 in the questionnaire, but they state they have difficulties when they attempt to assess attitudes and personal traits: “It is very difficult to assess the extent of a ST’s involvement in the practicum”; “I do not know what to do



when a ST is too shy; I think it is her personality”; “Some STs do not show interest or enthusiasm in the lessons they prepare; they just comply with the practicum requirements. I do not know what to do in those cases: if to lower the grade of the teaching practice session or just concentrate on the fulfilment of the objectives of the lesson”. These comments point out the CTs’ concern trying to measure or even grade STs’ emotional commitment. In this respect, Higgs (2014) considers “the *immeasurables* of practice”, that is, those features of practice that are less observable and measurable. These include “personal knowledge derived from life experience, engagement with the situation, practice artistry, and wisdom” (p. 257). The author explains that the practicum offers STs the possibility to construct and articulate knowledge and skills in order to become sound professionals. Generally, the author argues that assessment focuses on explicit aspects of practice that are easily observable and measurable. However, there are STs’ capabilities and attributes that are difficult to measure. Higgs claims that teacher education programs need to re-think assessment procedures to better assess STs’ commitment to the teaching profession because assessing the immeasurable requires re-interpreting assessment and developing approaches that capture the rich reality of the teaching practice. It is important to recognize that the teaching practice is a highly complex process in which multiple variables play a role: social skills, emotional attributes, psychological dispositions, for instance. Higgs believes that assessment needs to be re-defined in order to include more complex and invisible aspects of practice. The author suggests



using multiple sources of assessment, asking STs to reflect upon their performance abilities. A major focus on formative assessment, feedback, and opportunities to improve may be needed. In a similar vein, Allen (2011) states that relationships among the practicum actors are difficult and this “generates emotional interactions among stakeholders that can place strain upon individuals and compromise the quality of their practicum experience” (p. 748). It is essential to seek new ways to enhance the assessment process so as to capture the complete teaching practice reality and provide STs with opportunities to reflect upon the commitment and values that underpin their performance in the practicum.

The CTs also refer to difficulties they feel hinder their ability to assess teaching practice lessons. These include lack of time to provide the ST with feedback about the lesson taught, lack of fluent contact among the three actors of the practicum (ST, CT, UM), the CTs’ lack of familiarity with the theoretical background of the EFL methodology course, the number of STs assigned to each CT. These organizational factors do not determine a pass or a fail for a ST’s teaching practice session but highlight certain fragility of the collaborative arrangements between UMs and CTs. In a similar vein, Ong’ondo and Borg (2011) claim that there are structural difficulties surrounding the teaching practice, such as CTs’ time constraints for feedback, poor communication between CTs and UMs, and lack of coordination between university and schools. Although these limitations do not facilitate STs’ professional growth and reflection, they do not play a role in





obtaining a pass or fail mark. In an attempt to develop more meaningful university-school partnerships, there seem to be areas related to the management of the practicum that need critical revision or changes.

The CTs in this study also allude to the way the practicum is managed at FL and mention several problems that affect their supervision of STs. These results confirm findings from previous studies. For example, Al-Magableh's (2010) study yields similar results. The author found problems connected to transport, lack of clear guidelines for the training course, the number of STs a CT is assigned, among others. Likewise, lack of communication between UMs and CTs was stressed in Ong'ondo and Borg's (2011) and Allen's (2011) studies. These results show that there may be aspects that are defective or not working smoothly in the practicum, for example, the relationship between CTs and UMs, lack of guidelines for supervision, and absence of training of CTs as assessors. However, these aspects do not constitute aspects to be assessed; they call for a deeper change in the way the practicum is managed, instead. At the same time, the results reveal that CTs tend to perceive their role of being a CT as an extra burden. This is in line with Koskela and Ganser (1998, as cited in Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014) who observed that supervising a ST is seen as an additional activity to regular teaching work. CTs feel they are pulled into a cooperative relationship with the teacher education program in which supervising STs' pedagogical abilities may seem to develop naturally.



### **3.4 Convergences and divergences between the CTs' beliefs and actual practices**

The last objective of this research was to identify and establish points of agreement and disagreement between the CTs' beliefs of and their actual practices on the assessment of STs' teaching practice lessons. Both consistencies and inconsistencies could be found in the CTs' beliefs and practices. There is high degree of congruence between the CTs' practices and their reported beliefs as observed in the criteria followed for passing the ST's lesson. In so doing the CTs followed the criteria they believe should be the core of assessment.

Although when evaluating the ST's performance the CTs do not take into account all the criteria they think should be considered, some belief stability is observed as they assess the same items in practice. This conclusion is supported by Zheng (2009) who states that teacher beliefs determine planning, decision making, and actions in the classroom. Nonetheless, some inconsistencies are reported between the CTs' beliefs and practice. The CTs demonstrate discrepancies in their beliefs about what a pass is and the criteria followed for passing the ST's teaching practice session. In practice, the CTs assess more than STs' skills for managing a lesson. Furthermore, the comparative analysis of the CTs' definitions of a pass and fail reveals that the CTs appear to direct their attention to what STs need to attain instead of the skills or procedures STs can demonstrate adequately. It is difficult to know why CTs have more reasons to fail a ST's lesson than to



pass it, but I hypothesize that this is so for two reasons. First, the CTs may have high academic standards about what teacher effectiveness in the practicum involves. Secondly, the majority of CTs may seem to demand from STs a certain kind of professional and experienced, effective teacher's performance as evinced by the great number of items they believe they should assess. It is important to recall that STs are undertaking their first practicum and are struggling to accommodate and assimilate the theory taught in the EFL Methodology course to be able to carefully transfer it to their teaching practice. What STs will gain and develop with teaching experience is not considered. There is only reference to this aspect by one CT.

Another source of considerable disparity lies in the assessment of STs' socio-affective skills and personal qualities. It is noted that the CTs place emphasis on STs developing different types of attitudes toward the practicum. Nevertheless, these attitudes and personal qualities can hardly be measured accurately and on a systematic basis. Personal attitudes such as sense of humour, receptivity or self-confidence, and attitudes such as involvement in the class, responsibility, interest in the teaching practice, and willingness to improve cannot be items to be assessed. Attitudes and personal qualities towards the practicum may be points discussed in a feedback session between the CT and the ST. It seems that the attempt to assess STs' attitudes and personal qualities would place more emotional strain upon STs, which is in line with Allen's (2011) claims about the emotional strain STs face in the practicum.



Other divergences between the CTs' practices and their reported beliefs are observed in the difficulties faced during assessment. The CTs indicate that they have problems assessing some aspects related to STs' pedagogical knowledge and skills. More specifically, they claim that they have problems trying to assess the STs' selection of materials or appropriate and productive use of audiovisual aids, for example. Nevertheless, according to the data obtained from the reports, some CTs actually assessed those skills. These results confirm the findings of a study by Farrell and Lim (2005) in the field of grammar teaching who found that teachers had set complex beliefs about grammar teaching that sometimes were not evident in their classroom practices for diverse reasons.

It can be concluded that there are points of agreement and disagreement between the CTs' beliefs and their actual assessment practices. A more likely explanation for these differences is to be found in Basturkmen, Loewen, and Ellis's (2004) study. The authors explain that teachers tend to express their beliefs in the abstract, drawing on their technical knowledge, but when faced with the class situation, teachers rely more on their practical knowledge. In such cases, the authors suggest that "it may be better to view stated beliefs as potentially conflictual rather than inherently inconsistent" (p. 268).



## 4. Impact and Conclusions

This study aimed at shedding light on what CTs believe about what should be assessed during the teaching practice and what they actually assess in practice. As discussed above, the CTs' beliefs inform teacher education from the following three perspectives. First of all, The CTs hold very strong beliefs about what should be assessed in the practicum. STs' teaching effectiveness is judged as related to teaching skills, attitudes, and subject matter competence—domains already discussed in the literature of teacher effectiveness. A lot of weight is assigned by the CTs to STs' effective use of class management techniques. Secondly, the CTs' focus of assessment seems to be on what STs cannot do successfully. Thirdly, some of the CTs' beliefs are translated into practice, specially, those connected to the criteria for failing teaching practice sessions. Furthermore, the assessment focus appears to be on what STs have not accomplished yet or cannot perform well. Assessment needs to be redirected to offer opportunities for scrutiny, reflection, and recommendations for improvement.

It can be observed from the findings that assessment is a complex process linked to the CTs' beliefs about what should be assessed and the actual aspects they deem relevant for passing or failing teaching practice sessions. Graham (2006) states that the CTs embody the practical field with experience in teaching. Their valuable and practical teaching experience may be used to further specify criteria for teacher effectiveness in the practicum.



In the same vein, the demands for better articulation between university instruction and school-based learning have been repeatedly put forward in the literature; the gap between theory and practice is depicted as the Achilles heel of teacher education programs (Darling-Hammond, 2012). The most significant implication would lie in the need for UMs and CTs to jointly define what is understood by teacher effectiveness in the practicum and to determine, on that basis, which teaching skills and behaviours are expected from STs and can be best displayed in their teaching practice.

What follows from the results is that the CTs tend to pass judgment in a bipolar way as if a skill were simply “absent” or “present” instead of considering different degrees of achievement. The findings highlight an urgent need to develop assessment instruments to define and identify different levels of performance, and keep record of the development of STs’ knowledge and skills as they move through their practicum program.

A deeper change in the way teacher effectiveness in the practicum is conceived of by the CTs is required. Such a change would necessarily imply changes in what CTs may demand from STs since teacher effectiveness cannot consist of being able to successfully apply a set of teaching skills and display ideal attitudes and behaviours. Measuring teacher effectiveness has to be carried out on a comprehensive basis, tracking the development of STs’ teacher effectiveness from novice to more expert. It is necessary to remember that assessment involves making choices and it is therefore not advisable to concentrate on



too many aspects that, instead of providing a wider picture, just make assessment more arduous.

There is an urge to better define how to measure teacher effectiveness in the practicum. Rorrison (2010) argues that teacher educators need to reflect on their own role as mentors, since they should consider assessing progress and development rather than full attainment of knowledge and skills. In a similar vein, Zeichner (2010) envisages the assessment process as an opportunity for professional development and not as a time for STs to demonstrate mastery of skills. Chetcuti and Buhagiar (2014) claim that becoming an effective teacher is “a continual, active process rather than a product” (p. 40). However, STs have to be awarded a final grade for their teaching practice sessions in order to fulfil the institution’s requirements regarding the accreditation of knowledge and skills. Summative assessment is necessary to provide evidence that STs have met the required teaching standards. The tensions between formative and summative assessment are a further problematic point. As reported by the findings of this research, the CTs’ beliefs seem to be strongly focused on measuring achievement rather than considering improvement and progress. The challenge, therefore, is to try to strike a balance between these two types of assessment. Smith (2010) calls for an improvement in the quality of assessment so that it can meet the formative and summative functions. The author suggests that this empowerment process can be achieved by means of different practices: feedback, dialogues, and reflection among all the actors in the practicum



triad. In the same vein, Coll, Taylor and Grainger (2002) argue that STs should not leave the practicum with just a pass or a fail. Instead, STs can finish their practicum with a profile portfolio of their abilities, strengths, and weaknesses, which can be used as an assessment tool. The need for accountability, that is, grading STs and certifying that they have met the standard requirements of the teacher education program, presents a greater conflict. Research studies that explore the tensions between formative and summative assessment advocate that such tensions can be exploited as sources of teacher learning and development. It can be suggested that establishing reasonable performance criteria in the practicum and using multiple assessment instruments so that all voices are included (STs', CTs', and UMs') may provide better opportunities for using assessment to enhance professional learning.

One final note has to do with the role of CTs. Leshem (2012) observes that in most cases CTs are selected “on the basis of years of experience and do not go through any training before undertaking their mentoring duties” (p. 419). More attention should be paid to preparing CTs for their roles and responsibilities. This can be achieved through workshops in which CTs critically examine what they think, believe and know about supervising STs, to raise their awareness and lead them to reflect upon principles that may underpin their actions and decision making. The findings indicate that the CTs' job is more grounded in teaching experience. The role of CTs should be to help STs grow and develop through inquiry, reflection, and experimenting





in a real class situation. Because of this, CTs should grade performance in a progressive way taking into consideration improvement and progress. In order for CTs to become partners in the assessment of STs and share responsibility for assessment, they need training as stakeholders. This renders it necessary for UMs to organize meetings and training sessions for CTs. Such meetings can help clarify the goal and expectations of supervision, encourage collaboration between UMs and CTs, and “bridge the communication gap” (Ibrahim, 2013, p. 44). Perhaps, these training sessions may be conducted twice a year, at the beginning of the academic year and, then, at the end of it. At the same time, it may be necessary and laudable that CTs get some kind of reward for their role as stakeholders.

The findings of this study are important, I feel, since they enable teacher educators to gain deeper understanding and insights into a problematic issue as the assessment of the practicum. Analysing CTs’ beliefs and practices has been a valuable experience and I hope their voices and actions help me to improve the teacher education program at my University. There is certainly much more to investigate in this field.



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Scaffolding the learning-to-teach process  
in EFL Teacher Education: An analysis of  
the tutoring sessions between a practicum  
supervisor and the student-teachers

María Gimena San Martín





**María Gimena San Martín** is a lecturer in EFL Methodology and a Practicum supervisor at the EFL Teacher Education programme at Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Argentina. She is also the coordinator of an online postgraduate programme. She holds an MA in English and Applied Linguistics and an EFL Teaching degree from Facultad de Lenguas. Her research interests include teacher education, EFL methodology, and technology-assisted language learning and teaching. She is currently working on student-teachers' emotions and beliefs during the practicum and on context-sensitive materials development. Her research is framed within a qualitative design.



## Abstract

Helping learners go through their evolving zones of proximal development and gradually develop more complex developmental levels requires teachers to carefully scaffold their students' learning. Scaffolding has been defined as an interactive dialogic construct in which all the participants involved play a crucial role. The literature reveals that most research in scaffolding has focused considerable attention on the multiplicity of types of support that teachers can provide. The distinct features of scaffolding are still not completely understood. This research study seeks to examine how a supervisor scaffolds the student-teachers' learning-to-teach process in the context of one-to-one tutoring sessions in an EFL Teacher Education programme in Córdoba, Argentina. The audio recordings of the sessions were transcribed verbatim and both macro- and micro-level analyses were carried out. Two main frameworks –the Model of Contingent Teaching and the Contingent Shift Framework– were employed to describe how scaffolding unfolds and measure



to what extent scaffolding occurs in the one-to-one tutoring sessions. The findings indicate that scaffolding implies two main phases: diagnosis and intervention. In the former, the supervisor was found to elicit considerable information from the student-teachers and challenge them the most, whereas in the latter, she offered help mainly by means of feedback, explaining and instructing, and challenged them the least. Furthermore, about 50% of the interactions analysed were found to be contingent, and thus scaffolding instances, since she adapted her degree of control to their level of understanding. Although links can be established between the strategies deployed by the supervisor and supervisory roles and skills, the ways in which the supervisor's scaffolded help is realized should be understood in relation to the function it serves and how it accommodates the student-teachers' level of understanding in order to accurately depict the scaffolding process.



## 1. The Problem

Supporting learners to go through their evolving zones of proximal development (ZPD) has always been a key feature of a teacher's role. Fulfilling these roles requires teachers to take careful and gradual steps to provide adequate scaffolding as they need to address their learners' needs and effectively support them to promote and enhance learning.

In my experience as a university supervisor in the practicum at the EFL Teacher Education Programme at *Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba*. I have always been concerned with the question of how and to what extent my role as supervisor enhanced the student-teachers' development. It led me to reconsider different issues such as the ways in which I conducted the tutoring sessions and the post-observation conferences, as well as the power relations and the degree of involvement that each of the participants, including me, developed. Much of the literature has reviewed teacher's supervisory and/or advisory roles and skills. Nevertheless, Randall and Thornton (2001) claim that scant attention has been given to the recipients of that advice. It was a deep concern about questioning my own supervisory role without neglecting the part played by the student-teachers that triggered this research study. Consequently, I decided to conduct research on scaffolding since its interactive nature would enable me to trace how supervisors tailor what they say and do according to what student-teachers say and do in an attempt to meet their learning needs.



Few studies are grounded on a sound theoretical and methodological definition of scaffolding. They have mainly centred on only one of the features of scaffolding such as the use of intervention strategies, diagnostic strategies or contingency. This investigation intends to contribute information to the existing research by exploring the multidimensional construct of scaffolding in the one-to-one tutoring sessions between a practicum supervisor and the student-teachers in an EFL Teacher Education programme.

## 1.1 Research questions

- The present research study seeks to provide an answer to the following questions:
- How is scaffolding manifested in the one-to-one tutoring sessions?
- To what extent does the supervisor scaffold the student-teacher's learning-to-teach process?
- How do the situated features of scaffolding relate to supervisory roles and skills?

## 2. The Approach to the Problem

The present study is mainly framed within a qualitative methodology and has a case study design since scaffolding was



studied in its naturally-occurring setting and within a specific context and group of participants.

## **2.1 Context and participants**

This study took place in an EFL Teacher Education programme at a Teacher Education College in Córdoba, Argentina. This four-year-programme allows undergraduates to earn certification in TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language) at pre-school, primary and secondary school levels.

The present investigation was carried out in the context of the 4th year Practicum. It was particularly concerned with the weekly one-to-one tutoring-sessions in which the supervisor and the student-teachers met in order to discuss lesson plans, voice concerns, comment on previously taught lessons, and exchange views on the changes made to the lesson plans after being suggested by the supervisor by email, among other issues.

One Practicum supervisor and ten student-teachers participated in the study. The supervisor is a graduate EFL teacher with 23 years of teaching experience. She has supervised both in-service and pre-service teachers and taught EFL methodology courses for nine years. At the time of data collection, the supervisor had already supervised and assessed all the student-teachers during the previous practicum. The student-teachers were all 4th year students, who were undertaking the last practicum before majoring in TEFL. Their ages ranged from 21 to



55. Only 3 student-teachers had considerable previous teaching experience.

All the informants agreed to participate voluntarily in the study and gave informed consent. They were informed that the study was on the role of the tutoring sessions as a formative stage; however, exact details were not disclosed so as to avoid any bias. Participant anonymity and confidentiality were maintained at all times. The informants were identified by the letters **T** (i.e., the supervisor) and **S** (i.e., the student-teachers). All the names they mentioned during the interactions were deleted except for the initial letter. The setting and the participants were described with caution so as not to disclose the identities of either the people involved or the institution where the study was carried out.

## 2.2 Data collection

All the tutoring sessions between the supervisor and each student-teacher were audio-recorded so as to gather accurate and detailed data as well as a verbatim account of everything that was said. I provided the supervisor with a digital recorder; since the sessions were one-to-one, no other equipment was necessary. We agreed that the supervisor would record the tutoring sessions herself and that I would not be present to avoid influencing the participants' behaviour and to be as little obtrusive as possible. Some limitations should not be overlooked, however. For instance, some parts of the interactions might have been omitted by the supervisor and recording the conversations might have impacted



the participants' behaviour to some extent, so claims should be carefully made.

## 2.3 Data analysis

Data analysis involved a deductive design (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Since some pre-established analytic categories to describe and measure scaffolding are already available, I made use of the data-analysis frameworks devised by van de Pol (2012). Nevertheless, I followed an open-ended data-led procedure and allowed newly conceived categories to emerge and be included in the analysis.

### 2.3.1 Model of Contingent Teaching

Drawing on the Model of Contingent Teaching (MCT) (van de Pol, 2012), all teacher turns within each fragment were coded as: step 1 (diagnostic strategy), step 2 (checking the diagnosis), step 3 (intervention strategy) or step 4 (checking the student's understanding) and cycles of contingent teaching were identified. A cycle comprised the combination of steps taken by the supervisor; for example, 1-3 (step 1 + step 3). Afterwards, all interaction fragments were coded for contingency. A fragment was considered *contingent* if the supervisor first made use of a diagnostic strategy and then provided assistance, which was tailored to meet the student-teacher's needs or level of understanding. A fragment was coded as *non-contingent* if no





Step	Strategy	Realizations
1	<b>Diagnostic strategy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) posing a diagnostic question</li> <li>b) reading the student-teacher's work (lesson plan)</li> <li>c) listening to the student-teacher's explanations/choices</li> <li>d) diagnostic prompts</li> </ul>
2	<b>Checking the diagnosis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) summarizing and/or paraphrasing what a student said</li> <li>b) asking the student whether something is correct</li> </ul>
3	<b>Intervention strategy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) feedback</li> <li>b) hints</li> <li>c) instructing</li> <li>d) explaining</li> <li>e) modelling</li> <li>f) questioning</li> <li>g) giving opinions</li> <li>h) providing alternatives</li> <li>i) miscellaneous</li> </ul>
4	<b>Checking the student's understanding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) asking a question</li> <li>b) eliciting an explanation</li> </ul>

Table 1. Realizations of Steps 1 to 4



diagnostic strategy was employed and immediate support was provided by the supervisor. All step 1, 2, 3 or 4 turns were further classified according to their realization in keeping with the analytic categories provided by van de Pol, Volman, Oort, and Beishuizen (2014). After a preliminary scanning of the data, other realizations were added. Table 1 shows the possible realizations of each step.

### **2.3.2 Quality of diagnostic strategies**

All the diagnostic strategies were coded following the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Forehand, 2005) to explore the complexity of the cognitive processing that the supervisor encouraged the student-teachers to engage in. Each diagnostic strategy was coded as (a) remembering, (b) understanding, (c) applying, (d) analysing, (e) evaluating, or (f) creating.

### **2.3.3 The Contingent Shift Framework**

The following phase involved micro-level analysis of the scaffolding process; therefore, only a sample of the whole data set was analysed. Drawing on the Contingent Shift Framework (CSF) (van de Pol, 2012), three-turn sequences were identified. Secondly, all the supervisor's turns were coded for the degree of teacher control. Thirdly, all the student's turns were coded for their level of understanding. Finally, every three-turn sequence was categorized for contingency. A sequence was considered contingent when the supervisor increased control after the



student-teacher produced an incorrect response or decreased control in reaction to a correct response.

In keeping with Creswell (2003), several steps were taken to create reader confidence in the accuracy of the findings, namely: methodological triangulation through multiple data analysis instruments; rich and thick description; carrying out research in a context other than my own; presenting negative or discrepant information as well as peer debriefing.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

The results are presented in two sections. The first describes how scaffolding unfolds in the tutoring sessions and the second examines the degree of scaffolding or, in other words, the extent to which the supervisor managed to adapt her support to the student-teachers' level of understanding.

The data analysed consist of 24 tutoring sessions, which varied in length, ranging from six to nineteen minutes. The sessions were further divided into 102 interaction fragments.

#### **3.1 How scaffolding unfolds**

Bearing in mind the MCT, no instances of step 4 were found in the whole data. The supervisor was found to use only incomplete cycles. 1-3 cycles (58%) were the most frequent ones. 1-2-3 cycles (38%) were also found but their frequency of occurrence was



lower than that of 1-3 cycles. Only four instances of 3 cycles (4%) were observed.

### 3.1.1 Contingency

Contingent cycles occurred most often (96%); very few non-contingent cycles were found (4%). In the contingent interactions, the supervisor resorted to different diagnostic strategies in order to provide adequate help and address the student-teachers' specific needs and/or difficulties. In these cases, the teaching cycles were 1-3. On other occasions, the supervisor gathered some information about the student-teachers' understanding and further inquired them to make sure that the assumptions she was making were accurate. In these cases, the teaching cycles were 1-2-3. Resorting to a step 2 turn enhanced the diagnostic phase and provided the supervisor with more precise information and, consequently, tools to give contingent support. The following example illustrates a contingent interaction fragment, which consisted of a 1-2-3 cycle (session 13). Each step has been identified at the end of the corresponding turn.

(1) **T:** OK, tell me (Step 1)

(2) **S:** They [the students] are studying *have got*, so I thought that as earlier this morning they were reviewing it, they have already studied it, they are reviewing it.

(3) **T:** Then you don't need to present it as a new topic. Right? (Step 2)

(4) **S:** I don't have to present anything new.

(5) **T:** (T is reading) (Step 1)

(6) **S:** So, this is the exercise. They have to complete with the negative form or the other way around (?). I have problems with the timing.



**(7) T:** What about a warming-up? You haven't included anything in, you just, it's like you get into the classroom and say OK, *hello, open the books*. Have you thought of anything like that? (Step 3)

**(8) S:** To be honest, I did it so quickly.

**(9) T:** Because I think you...

**(10) S:** I'm going to come tomorrow, so that's why I wanted you to correct some things.

**(11) T:** I'd suggest you include a warming-up, especially because they don't know you, you don't know them, so something to break the ice that might be related to the topic or not; but it's like a lead-in for practice, in this case, because you are not going to introduce anything. It would be interesting, it would be the best actually, so leave that. OK, let's move on to the next part but, please, for tomorrow think about something through which they can actually remember, recycle, whatever in connection to, in this case, *have* and *has got*. So first this exercise, then, you have the warming-up and after that, you move to this exercise. (Step 3)

**(12) S:** Right as a way to start ...

**(13) T:** Besides, you won't be sure whether they remember the topic or not. The warming-up activity can help you to check that, how much they remember; because if you start with an exercise like this one without having checked if they remember, then, maybe, they cannot do it and the activity is spoiled and ... (Step 3)

**(14) S:** Right, so that they know this topic well and can move into the following exercise smoothly.

**(15) T:** That's right, the warming-up activity can also consist in rearranging the elements into a sentence, something fast. (Step 3)

**(16) S:** Now I remember the teacher [the cooperating teacher] told me that she had asked the students to bring pictures of Monsters Inc. to describe them, but they didn't have enough time to do it, so I was thinking of doing it next Monday.

**(17) T:** OK, let's hope they bring them again to class. (Step 3)

**(18) S:** All of them brought the pictures this morning and asked her: *Can we work with the pics?* They were really interested, so maybe I could work with the two leading characters during the warming-up so as to ...

**(19) T:** That would be fine. (Step 3)

**(20) S:** Maybe I could ask them a few questions or ...

**(21) T:** Because they already know the interrogative form. (Step 3)

**(22) S:** Yes.



(23) T: It'd be great then; you engage the students, check if they can do the activity and see if they remember the topic or not. (Step 3)

(24) S: So I'd do this activity to practice *hasn't* and ...

(25) T: Great!. (Step 3)

In the example above, the supervisor prompted the student-teacher to explain the choices she had made for the upcoming lesson (step 1) and learnt in turn 2 that she had to work with the structure *have got*. The information provided helped her assume that the student-teacher had planned a revision lesson, so in turn 3 she checked whether her assumptions were correct (step 2). She restated the student-teacher's explanation by referring to the idea of *revision* as *not presenting a new topic*. The supervisor went on reading the lesson plan (step 1) to gain further insights into the student-teacher's decisions and this diagnostic activity was enhanced when the student-teacher showed and briefly explained to the supervisor the first activity she had chosen. The information provided in turn 6 helped the supervisor identify a weakness: the lesson plan lacked a warming-up activity. The different instances of support (step 3) which follow in the interaction aimed to address this perceived difficulty. Turns 7, 11, 13 and 15 helped the student-teacher first think about including a warming-up activity and then consider the underlying reasons and a possible alternative. In turns 16, 18 and 20, the student-teacher came up with her own activity to start the lesson. Then,

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1. The original interaction was in Spanish.



the supervisor specifically helped her as regards this activity as it can be seen in turns 17, 19, 21, 23 and 25. This interaction fragment can be considered contingent since the support the supervisor gave was intrinsically linked to a particular weakness she had spotted.

The MCT specifies a sequence of steps which are not necessarily fixed since each step may appear more than once in a given interaction fragment. However, one would expect step 2 to follow step 1 and step 3 to follow either step 1 or step 2, for example. A closer look at the data evinced that sometimes the order of these steps was reversed. In some of the interactions (21%), the supervisor was found to complete a 1-3-2 teaching cycle. In other words, the supervisor first helped the student-teacher with what he/she required and later checked her own understanding of the information she had obtained through diagnostic means. These fragments were considered contingent because they all comprised a diagnostic strategy the supervisor could draw on to provide support.

Non-contingent interactions consisted of only a step 3 turn. In these interactions, the supervisor provided help immediately without first gathering diagnostic information. The student-teachers initiated the interactions and raised an issue or concern they had. A non-contingent interaction is illustrated by the example that follows (session 2). Each step has been identified at the end of the corresponding turn.



- (26) S: And then exercise number 7 is rearrange, the same thing, I mean, the first time in class, I'm just revising, I cannot show things maybe I want to.
- (27) T: No problem. (Step 3)
- (28) S: Maybe for later.
- (29) T: But you've been asked by the teacher. (Step 3)
- (30) S: Right, I have to continue.
- (31) T: If it was a substitution class...
- (32) S: That would be my chance...
- (33) T: That would be your chance, so it's just fine. The thing is how you would go through this (Step 3)
- (34) S: In English and in Spanish.
- (35) T: Right, with your own style, that's the important thing here. Don't worry about a bit of revision. Don't worry, you might have to introduce a topic or not in these training classes (Step 3)
- (36) S: She told me later, the difference between *will* and *going to* and I'll try to do it inductively.
- (37) T: So we'll see then.

In this example, the student-teacher was concerned about not having the freedom to choose and/or design her own activities, as seen in turn 26. The supervisor addressed this concern immediately in turn 27 till the end of the interaction (turns 29, 33 and 35), which rendered the fragment non-contingent, as the supervisor did not make use of any diagnostic strategy to have a clearer picture of the student-teacher's understanding.

### 3.1.2 Diagnostic strategies: type

In the interaction fragments analysed, 225 diagnostic strategies were identified. As regards their type, *posing a diagnostic question* was observed to be the most frequent strategy (45%) followed by





*reading the student-teacher's work (29%), listening to the student-teacher's explanations / choices (19%) and diagnostic prompts (7%).*

In the first interaction fragment analysed above, the supervisor first made use of a diagnostic prompt (turn 1) to encourage the student-teacher to start explaining her lesson plan and become acquainted with her decisions and choices. Later on, she went on reading the lesson plan (turn 5) to gain more information. Two different types of strategy were used in the same interaction fragment, which seemed to reinforce the diagnostic phase and gradually helped the supervisor gather more precise information and build up a more detailed profile of the student-teacher's ZPD.

### **3.1.3 Diagnostic strategies: cognitive level**

Since they required some kind of response from the student-teachers, 155 diagnostic strategies were further analysed. Seventy diagnostic strategies were left out because they elicited no response.

The larger number of diagnostic strategies elicited, the more complex types of processing, since they encouraged the student-teachers to analyse, evaluate and/or create (64%). Fewer instances were found at the less complex end of the continuum (36%) in which the student-teachers were stimulated to remember, understand and/or apply information. *Creating* (51%) was by far the most frequent cognitive activity since the supervisor stimulated the student-teachers to put different elements together to plan and create a coherent and appropriate lesson for a given group of



students or to explain how they would execute an activity or carry out an activity differently. An example is presented below. The diagnostic questions that promoted *creating* are in bold.

*Excerpt 1 (Session 16)*

**S:** (after commenting on and self-assessing her performance the previous lesson and immediately before starting to explain her lesson plan for the upcoming lesson to the supervisor) And actually what the teacher told me was to correct the homework, it's 40 minutes so she told me to correct the homework and actually, for example, I remember when I was observing ... this exercise that you have to say if you ...

**T:** Whether it's tense for *has* or *is*.

**S:** For example here, *Her mother's American*, and they say *is and why?* and she tried to make them notice which is the difference in every single sentence so...

**T:** So again **how are you planning to go about this?**

**S:** That's why I'm thinking because I don't know if 40 minutes to correct the homework, I think it's too much, but I don't know.

**T:** Yes. **The idea is...?**

**S:** She told I had to correct it, everything, yes.

**T:** Let's try as long as you get...

**S:** But I don't know if I have to plan something else or not...

In excerpt 1, the diagnostic questions encouraged the student-teacher to explain how she would design a teaching sequence, bearing in mind that the cooperating teacher had asked her to check several activities which had been assigned as homework. In order to do so, she had to make different decisions to set the lesson objectives and plan a coherent lesson without neglecting the cooperating teacher's requests.

Secondly, we found instances of the lowest cognitive level of *remembering* (29%). In the context of this research,



the supervisor fostered remembering by eliciting from the student-teachers key concepts and/or definitions, principles underlying the sequencing of the activities, and choice of techniques, among others. The following example illustrates the diagnostic questions that promoted *remembering* (in bold).

*Excerpt 2 (Session 11)*

**T:** (after listening to the student-teacher explain the warm-up activity she was planning to use) (T is reading). Now, **can you include a warming-up activity in the presentation stage?**

**S:** No, it isn't a presentation. (S is Reading).

**T:** All right.

**S:** I say this myself, for example: *The cat is behind the bed.*

**T:** Then, that'd be part of the presentation stage<sup>2</sup>.

The supervisor sought to make the student-teacher retrieve information about two stages of a lesson, warming-up and presentation, so that she could distinguish between the stages and answer the question she had posed.

Thirdly, 9% of the diagnostic strategies stimulated *analysing*, for example by considering the suitability of an activity in relation to the overall aim of the lesson, predicting difficulties a given activity may give rise to, questioning a decision and/or analysing possible difficulties, among others. The diagnostic questions that promoted *analysing* (in bold) are illustrated by the following example.

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2. The original interaction was in Spanish.



### Excerpt 3 (Session 2)

**S:** (after explaining the warm-up activity) So then I'll move to this exercise.

**T:** Do you have the exercise?

**S:** It says "Do you agree with any of these statements?" So I'm going to write on the board.

**T:** So how are you going to go about this? Are you going to translate? Because ...

**S:** Yes, *Housework is a waste of time. ¿Les parece que la tarea de la casa es una pérdida de tiempo? Sí, no, yes, no*, I don't know how they would react.

**T:** Right. The thing is just not to waste time. **What do you expect the outcome of this to be?** Because if they are going to answer in Spanish, maybe you can tell them to answer *yes* or *no*, all right? **So what they are supposed to do is to understand what?**

**S:** This is just a warm up, it's another step.

**T:** All right, what I mean is, because if you are going to translate the sentences, then the answer is expected to be in Spanish. **What would be exactly the point?**

In excerpt 3, the supervisor encouraged the student-teacher to question the activity she had planned. Firstly, she made her analyse the output the students would produce as well as the thinking process they would engage in. Secondly, the supervisor encouraged her to relate the intended outcome of the activity to its overall purpose. It can be seen that the diagnostic questions fostered not only analysing the activities but also relating them to other macro-level aspects such as the aim of the lesson or the potential difficulties.

Fourthly, we found instances of *evaluating* (5%). In all the examples identified, the supervisor asked the student-teacher to reflect on and assess a particular aspect of the previous lesson he/she had taught or the lesson itself in general terms. In the following excerpt, the supervisor encouraged the student-teacher



to evaluate timing. The diagnostic questions that promoted *evaluating* are in bold.

#### *Excerpt 4 (Session 16)*

**S:** (after briefly self-assessing an activity carried out the previous lesson) And actually I had time to do everything so...

**T:** Yes, **how did the timing go then?**

**S:** Yes, it was...

**T:** Fine. **You finished everything just in time?**

**S:** Yes, yes I did it.

In the example, the supervisor first asked a broad question to foster *evaluating* and then introduced a criterion to help the student-teacher self-assess.

Four percent of the diagnostic strategies analysed aimed at eliciting the student-teachers' *understanding* of different dimensions or aspects of the teaching practice. In the tutoring sessions, *understanding* was mainly realized by requiring the student-teachers to provide examples of the expected outcome of an activity, exemplify the output the students were expected to produce, and distinguish different types of activities, among others. The following example illustrates this cognitive level. The diagnostic questions that promoted *understanding* are in bold.

#### *Excerpt 5 (Session 11)*

**S:** (after discussing the presentation stage and receiving feedback on some changes to be made) This one. They have to circle the correct preposition.



**T:** They need to have enough information at this point. To do this exercise, they should have understood everything. OK, right.

**T:** (T is reading) 2 and 3, OK.

**S:** From the workbook

**T:** **What type of activities are they?** This is 3.

**S:** 2 is controlled because they have to<sup>3</sup> ...

**T:** Make a sentence, using cues...

**S:** And here they have to produce more output.

In the excerpt, the supervisor asked the student-teacher to explain the difference between activities 2 and 3 in the lesson plan. In order to reply, she had to bear in mind what each activity involved, how much help was provided for the students, as well as what language they had to produce. Understanding all these aspects helped her to classify the given activities into controlled, guided or free.

Finally, 2% of the diagnostic strategies aimed at encouraging the student-teachers to engage in *applying*. In the data analysed here, *applying* meant stating objectives for the lesson or supplying actual instructions for the activities chosen. The following example illustrates this cognitive level. The diagnostic questions that promoted *applying* are in bold.

### *Excerpt 6 (Session 19)*

**T:** (after listening to the student-teacher describe two recognition activities to review vocabulary related to family members) (T is reading). Then they're going to reinforce...

**S:** They have to choose one member of the family and describe him.

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3. The original interaction was in Spanish.



**T:** Perfect. The aim is missing here. **What would the aim be?**

**S:** It should be “*students have to describe the (pairs) of the member they have already chosen*”.

**T:** Good, very well. The exponent is OK, too...

In excerpt 6, the supervisor asked the student-teacher to identify and formulate an objective for the lesson. She had to use her knowledge of how to set goals and objectives in order to provide one.

### 3.1.4 Checking the diagnosis

Seventy-two strategies deployed by the supervisor aimed at checking her diagnosis. As regards their realizations, *summarizing and/or paraphrasing what a student has said* was observed to be the most frequent strategy (76%) followed by *asking the student whether something is correct* (24%).

### 3.1.5 Intervention strategies

A total of 523 intervention strategies were found in the whole data set. The analysis showed that each interaction fragment contained multiple instances of intervention strategies. Three kinds of intervention strategies were found to occur most frequently. In decreasing order, they were: *feedback*, *explaining* and *instructing*. *Hints* and *questioning* followed in terms of frequency. The following strategies—*modelling*, *providing alternatives*, *giving opinions* and *miscellaneous*—occurred the least with quit



similar frequencies of occurrence. Figure 1 shows the frequency distribution of all the intervention strategies.

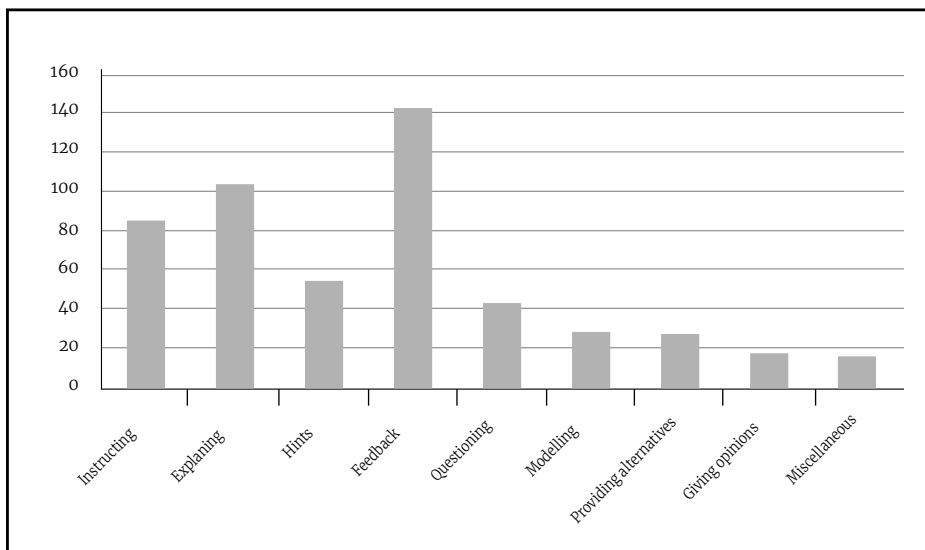


Figure 1. Frequency distribution of intervention strategies.

The first interaction fragment analysed in 3.1.1 (turns 1-25) provides evidence of the numerous intervention strategies found per fragment. The supervisor identified the lack of a warming-up activity as a weakness in the lesson plan. In turn 7 she raised the student-teacher's awareness of this lack so as to help her. Since she seemed not have thought about a warming-up activity, as seen in turn 8, the supervisor immediately decided to explicitly





tell her what to do in turn 11 (instructing). The need for a warming-up was reinforced by means of a lengthy explanation of the reasons underlying this type of activity, which extended over several turns (11, 13, 15, 21 and 23), along with the supervisor's own opinion (turn 11) and a suggested warming-up activity (turn 15). After the first string of help, the student-teacher came up with her own warming-up activity (turn 18), so more instances of support followed (turns 19, 23 and 25). They mainly consisted in providing positive feedback as the supervisor appeared to agree with the proposal put forth by the student-teacher.

### 3.2 The degree of scaffolding

The micro-level analysis was undertaken on the basis of the CSF. A total of 67 three-turn sequences were identified and analysed for contingency. A slightly higher percentage of contingent sequences (52%) was found in the corpus. However, the percentage of non-contingent sequences was not much lower and amounted to 48% of the sequences. The following excerpt illustrates a contingent sequence.

**(38) T:** OK, I want to know ... because it says: "then they check". How are you going to check the activity?

**(39) S:** Read all together in the end because first, I want to read the dialogue, I mean for the whole class, with them so they follow. And then they will see the pictures, to complete. For example, *empty the dishwasher*, they know all that, or *do the vacuuming*, they know all from previous classes. And then checking in the end because maybe they miss one part, one verb tense. That's all.

**(40) T:** They won't need to check spelling, for example, because it's something they have?



In the example, the supervisor asked a broad question which encouraged the student-teacher to explain how she would check the activity (turn 38). The supervisor's degree of control was *low* since she did not provide new information but tried to elicit it from the student-teacher herself. In the following turn (39), the student-teacher only addressed the supervisor's question at the end of the turn, since most of the explanation she provided referred to how she would execute the activities rather than how she would check them. The supervisor only got to know when and why she would check the activity. The student-teacher's understanding was coded as *partial understanding* because she seemed to answer the supervisor's question to some extent but her answer did not provide a full elaboration. The supervisor's turn in 40 showed that she expected other aspects such as spelling to be included in the student-teacher's explanation. Since it was the supervisor who introduced this new information (spelling) and elicited a response on this from the student-teacher, this turn was coded as *high control*. In summary, the sequence was coded as contingent because the supervisor increased the control she exercised due to the partial understanding that the student-teacher appeared to have regarding how to check the activity. It seemed to be necessary to provide more focused information in order to guide the student-teacher into thinking about the issue of spelling when checking vocabulary activities.

The excerpt that follows presents a non-contingent interaction fragment. In this excerpt, the participants were talking about using as much English as possible in the lesson. This issue was



spontaneously raised by the student-teacher and immediately addressed by the supervisor.

(41) T: Yes, if you see that the teacher looks at you like OK, *stop* because she ...

(42) S: The idea then is again to help them, to be useful to them.

(43) T: Of course, if you see they don't understand, you have to stop and see.

In turn 41, the supervisor dropped a hint by suggesting that the student-teacher should look at the teacher to see whether the use of the L2 was appropriate, so it was coded as *high control*. Then, the student-teacher's turn (42) seemed to show *good understanding* as she was aware of the need of using the L2 to help the students. However, the following supervisor's turn (43) included a *higher degree of control* because it gave a more complete explanation. In summary, the sequence was non-contingent because the supervisor increased the control she exercised even after the student-teacher had demonstrated to have a good understanding regarding how and/or to what extent to use the target language in the lesson. It did not seem to be necessary to add any extra information after the student-teacher's turn, but the supervisor did it anyway.

The two examples described above illustrate the major trends of contingent and non-contingent sequences observed in the corpus. However, other interesting observations could be made. To start with, most of the supervisor's turns which were coded as diagnostic strategies were also coded as either lowest or low degree of control, whereas most of the supervisor's turns which were coded as intervention strategies were also coded as either



highest or high degree of control. This trend can be interpreted as an abrupt change from a low to a high degree of control. Another common scenario showed that the supervisor tended to keep the highest control in both of her turns, which was mainly found to occur even after the student-teacher had evinced good understanding. The student-teachers were provided with more information in the second turn even when it did not seem to be necessary. Finally, another significant scenario was found during the analysis. Almost all the three-turn sequences in which the student-teacher's understanding was coded as either *no/poor understanding* or *partial understanding* were classified as contingent whereas the majority of the sequences in which the student-teacher's understanding was good were classified as non-contingent. This part of the analysis indicated that the supervisor displayed a tendency to increase her level of support both when necessary to address a given difficulty and when not really necessary in cases in which the student-teacher succeeded in understanding.

In the following paragraphs, I draw together the three research questions with the research findings. The first question was how scaffolding is manifested in the one-to-one tutoring sessions. The findings suggest that the scaffolding process comprises two main phases: a diagnostic and an intervention phase. During the former, the supervisor resorted to either step 1 or both step 1 and step 2. The latter phase comprises multiple and simultaneous ways of offering help, which lends support to the use of synergistic scaffolds (Tabak, 2004).



The fact that complete teaching cycles consisting of steps 1-2-3-4 were not identified is noteworthy. The supervisor was found not to check the student-teachers' new learning after providing help. It appears as if she assumed that teaching necessarily amounted to learning. The lack of step 4 indicates that, in spite of acting contingently, the supervisor did not pave the way for true scaffolding to occur since she did not make sure whether fading and transfer of responsibility were appropriate. A similar finding was reported by van de Pol (2012).

As regards patterns of contingent and non-contingent teaching cycles, several research studies (Nathan & Petrosino, 2003; Oh, 2005; Ruiz-Primo & Furtak, 2006) have found contingent teaching to be scarce. In contrast to these findings, the present research has found the practicum supervisor to act contingently most of the time. Along similar lines, both Chin (2007) and Mercer and Fisher (1992) found teachers to provide contingent support because they showed evidence of offering situated help and thus, adjusting to the knowledge base of the students.

In the present study, the supervisor made use of qualitative diagnostic strategies in order to collect in-depth information. Significant similarities have been revealed by van de Pol et al. (2014), who found teachers to elicit more extensive answers or demonstrations of understanding when diagnosing their students' actual understanding. As regards the kinds of cognitive processing required from the student-teachers, most of the diagnostic strategies fostered higher cognitive levels. This could be due to the dynamics of the tutoring sessions, in which the



interactions moved from the general (e.g., explaining the choices and decisions behind a lesson planning) to the more specific (e.g., eliciting details).

Regarding the supervisor's actual support, she resorted to multiple intervention strategies. Although some of the strategies she made use of have also been identified in teacher education by other researchers (Cartaut & Bertone, 2009; Engin, 2012; Gwyn-Paquette, 2001; Waring, 2013), most of these studies also reported on other numerous skills. These differences may be motivated by the nature of the tasks that the students carried out as well as the types and the level of the difficulties they faced and the teachers needed to resolve.

The second question posed by this research study sought to reveal to what extent the supervisor scaffolds the student-teacher's learning-to-teach process. The analysis indicates that about 50% of the sequences analysed were contingent. Previous findings by Nathan and Kim (2009) and Pino-Pasternak, Whitebread, and Tolmie (2010) support the same frequency of distribution of contingent and non-contingent interactions. Van de Pol and Elbers (2013) found that teachers in their study acted non-contingently because they either kept the same level of control upon poor/good understanding or decreased their control upon poor/partial understanding. They mainly acted contingently when they increased their control upon poor/partial understanding. The findings regarding contingent interactions are supported by the results reported here as well. However, non-contingency is mainly manifested in the present study by



either keeping the same level of teacher control or increasing it when the student-teachers have shown good understanding. Pino-Pasternak et al. (2010) reported similar results as they found parents to underestimate their children's understanding, resulting in more help and little challenge.

The third question posed by this research study aimed at examining how the situated features of scaffolding relate to different supervisory roles and skills. In keeping with Hennissen, Crasborn, Brouwer, Korthagen, and Bergen (2008), most of the diagnostic strategies the supervisor employs fall within a non-directive supervisory style since she resorts to asking questions and listening actively. Along the same lines, prompting and questioning were also reported to be associated with a less directive supervisory style by Gwyn-Paquette (2001). On the other hand, the most frequently used intervention strategies fall within a directive supervisory style as the supervisor resorts to, for instance, appraising, giving feedback, expressing one's own opinion, offering strategies and instructing (Hennissen et al., 2008) as well as assessment and advice (Waring, 2013). Hennissen et al. (2008) also found novice mentors to be more prescriptive. However, the supervisor in this research had considerable experience in mentoring and supervision but seemed to adopt a more directive style at a certain stage in the tutoring sessions, which may be grounded in the roles that each participant is expected to play. Copland (2010) claimed that asymmetric power relations characterised feedback situations, so in some contexts, the supervisor may be expected to play a more central role



since he/she is the more knowledgeable person. The reversal of the supervisor's roles from a non-directive to a more directive supervisory style may be also understood as an indication that the kinds and the level of the difficulties and/or weaknesses that she encountered and needed to address after the diagnostic phase may have prompted a higher degree of teacher intervention.

The two frameworks employed for the analysis of scaffolding (MCT and CSF) have revealed some recurrent patterns. To start with, the supervisor adopted a more learner-centred approach at the beginning of the interactions and gradually shifted to a more teacher-centred approach at the end. This is supported by the fact that the diagnostic strategies elicited mainly higher levels of cognitive processing, whereas the intervention strategies tended to provide the student-teachers with information rather than elicit it. These results are consistent with the ones suggested by the analysis of the CSF. Most of the supervisor's turns which were coded as diagnostic strategies were also coded as either lowest or low degree of control, whereas most of the supervisor's turns which were coded as intervention strategies were also coded as either highest or high degree of control. The supervisor was found to elicit information from the student-teachers in the first turn, but then provided information herself to help them and elicited little or no information. Secondly, the most frequent intervention strategies were feedback, explaining, and instructing. In a similar vein, the analysis of the CSF also revealed that the supervisor's help mainly implied a high or highest degree of teacher control.





## 4. Impact and Conclusions

The present study aimed to contribute to the understanding of the construct of scaffolding and its measurement. The MCT and CSF (van de Pol, 2012) proved to be useful to reconstruct how scaffolding unfolds and distinguish scaffolding from non-scaffolding. Consequently, these frameworks may be included in the curriculum in teacher education and development to enrich the theoretical discussions of the concept of scaffolding and show teacher educators and teachers how to actually scaffold their students' learning. In particular, the frameworks can help teachers become aware of the importance of a diagnostic phase to tailor the help they provide. In addition, the findings of this research heighten the need for teacher educators to redefine their roles in the learning-to-teach process. The scaffolding phenomenon described here involves a more developmental supervisory role (Bailey, 2006), one which conceives of learning as a socially mediated process (Vygotsky, 1978). Along these lines, teachers should devote more time to dialogue and collaborative construction of knowledge in the tutoring sessions and, at the same time, they should elicit ideas and concepts from students through strategies such as hints and questioning rather than telling them what to do by instructing and/or explaining. These findings clearly call for shifting the responsibility from teachers onto learners and, thus, truly placing them at the centre of the learning process. All in all, scaffolding should entail accurate



diagnosis, followed by less direct help but more challenge to the students.

To conclude, scaffolding is a complex and dynamic phenomenon which is gradually shaped by the participants' intervention modalities and, at the same time, it influences the participants' ongoing interactions. What both the supervisor and the student-teachers do and say are closely intertwined since they are two sides of the same coin. Even though the analysis of scaffolding may, on the surface, seem to focus solely on the supervisors' roles and skills, it necessarily incorporates the student-teachers' perspectives since true scaffolding is characterized by its interactive dialogic nature (Puntambekar & Kolodner, 2005; Stone, 1998; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991; Wertsch, 1979). Consequently, this study has attempted to narrow down a gap in research by including the recipients of the teacher's help (Randall & Thornton, 2001) in the analysis. In addition, scaffolding is mainly related to a developmental view of teacher education, one which stresses the learning-to-teach process. The goal of scaffolding was achieved to some extent because the supervisor managed to diagnose the student-teachers' level of understanding and provide contingent support by adapting her help to their understanding. Whether and to what extent fading and transfer of responsibility occurred in this context after high levels of teacher control should be further researched.



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Supervisors' feedback in ELT practicum  
as perceived by student teachers and  
(their) supervisors

**Antonella Percara**



**Antonella Percara** is an EFL teacher from Universidad Autónoma de Entre Ríos, Argentina, and she holds an MA in English and Applied Linguistics from Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Argentina. She is a Specialist in Education and Technologies from the Argentinian Ministry of Education. She teaches Linguistics, Language, and Civilisation and Culture of the English Speaking Countries at the EFL Teacher Education programme at Universidad Autónoma de Entre Ríos and English Literature and North American History at the EFL Teacher Education and Translation programmes at Universidad Adventista del Plata, Argentina. She was awarded the British Council Language Assistant Scholarship and was selected by the U.S. Embassy in Argentina to participate in the Young Adult Literature and ESL Methods programme offered by Michigan State University.





## Abstract

The purpose of this research study was to investigate the perceptions of supervisory feedback of student teachers and university supervisors involved in the teaching practicum, in four English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher education programmes at three public universities from the central region of Argentina. The sample, which was selected according to student teachers' and university supervisors' interests and availability, consisted of two groups, twenty-four student teachers and eight university supervisors from the four EFL teacher education programmes. Data were obtained by means of a questionnaire, which included closed-ended and open-ended questions, and semi-structured interviews. In order to allow for the concurrent analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, a mixed methods approach was employed. After considering the perceptions of the student teachers and the university supervisors participating in this research study, the findings suggested a characterisation of supervisory feedback that contributed to deepening the existing



knowledge about feedback in the teaching practicum context. Moreover, the results obtained provide relevant information to understand, interpret, and anticipate the impact of supervisory feedback on student teachers and university supervisors in the English Language Teaching (ELT) practicum.



# 1. The Problem

*The boat paused shuddering.- Shall it sink  
Down the abyss? Shall the reverting stress  
Of that resistless gulph embosom it?  
Now shall it fall?  
("Alastor", Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1792–1822)*

These questions, which trigger dramatic suspense after a frail boat approaches a whirlpool, may be considered an analogy to student teachers' uncertainties, anxieties, and tensions during their teaching practice<sup>1</sup>. Metaphorically speaking, student teachers are expected to "pilot their boats" in order not to "sink", "fall" or "lose direction" –that is to say, they have to successfully apply the theoretical knowledge gained during their course of studies to school-based practical experiences (Rawlins & Starkey, 2011). However, as Allen (2011) explains, it is challenging for pre-service teacher education programmes to find a balance between the theoretical and the practical aspects of the profession.

The teaching practice is meant to provide for the authentic context within which student teachers experience the complexities and richness of being a teacher (Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009) and, in some cases, student teachers' expectations for practicum, based on their prior experiences and observations of teachers, may not correspond with the reality in the field. As a result, student

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<sup>1</sup> *Teaching practice*: Used in this chapter interchangeably with the term *practicum*, defined by Choy, Wong, Goh, and Low (2013) as "school attachments for the purposes of either observing other teachers in action and reflecting on it, or being involved in, observed, and assessed while one is 'practising teaching'" (p. 2).



teachers may underestimate the complexity of the teaching task, and their optimism may be tarnished when confronted with the realities and complexities of these tasks (Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990).

Therefore, in the same way in which a pilot navigating a boat needs instruments to measure wind direction and a nautical chart to be informed about distance, latitude, and longitude to plot a course, student teachers need information about how to integrate what they learn at university with their activity in the workplace (Bates, Bates, & Bates, 2007). This information, or feedback—term that will be used in this article—, becomes a central component in initial teacher education (Brandt, 2008; Copland, 2009; Farr, 2011; White, 2009). It should address both the cognitive and motivational factors by giving students the information they need to understand where they are in their learning and what to do next, helping them feel that they have control over their own learning (Brookhart, 2017).

Feedback, then, is a powerful tool to enhance “continuous learning, development and professional growth” (Smith, 2010, p. 37) and its unique potential for making learning to take place is made clear by Bellon, Bellon, and Blank (1991) when they state that “academic feedback is more strongly and consistently related to achievement than any other teaching behaviour . . . this relationship is consistent regardless of grade, socioeconomic status, race, or school setting” (p. 277).

To deepen the existing knowledge of feedback and the role it has in the teaching practicum, it appears essential to understand student teachers’ and supervisors’ experiences and perceptions



of supervisory feedback. This research study represents one step towards this goal by investigating the perceptions of supervisory feedback of student teachers and university supervisors that were involved in the teaching practicum in four EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher education programmes at three public universities from the central region of Argentina during the academic year 2012.

Recalling student teachers' and supervisors' memories and perceptions of supervisory feedback is a way of promoting reflection and generating changes based on true experiences and relations. As Männikkö-Barbutiu and Rorrison (2011) point out,

through gaining a greater awareness of the particularities of the lived experience of the student teachers and the mediating pre-conditions that frame the practicum we can contribute to our common knowledge about teacher education in general and the practicum in particular. Besides, we will argue, becoming a teacher and being a teacher have certain universalism which makes it possible for us to recognise through comparison of sayings, doings and relatings, what makes a particular practice architecture work and where we might envisage changes. (p. 45)

## **2. The Approach to the Problem**

### **2.1 Context of the study**

This research study was carried out at four EFL teacher education programmes, at three public universities from the central region of Argentina. Although the teaching practicum is dealt with in specific ways related to the particular contexts where each university is immersed, the programmes comprise the practicum



in the 4th and/or 5th year of studies and follow a “partnership model”. According to Mattsson, Eilertsen, and Rorrison (2011), partnership models are based on agreements between a university and local schools that have been carefully selected and which are expected to offer a good educational environment as well as grant opportunities for practicum learning.

The site-based experience in schools provides pre-service teachers with opportunities to apply the theoretical aspects of their coursework to the real-world context of the classroom, trying to bridge the theory-practice gap. During the practicum experience, student teachers observe other teachers teaching, plan lessons, and teach at different levels of education. Mentor teachers and/or university supervisors observe and assess student teachers in their host classes and provide after class feedback (verbal or written). Therefore, feedback acts as an essential means of communication between the supervisors and the future teachers.

## **2.2 Participants**

The sample consisted of two groups: (a) six student teachers from each of the four EFL teacher education programmes. The student teachers had already finished their practicum experiences thus, their contributions regarding their individual, personal, and subjective perceptions of supervisory feedback were expected to be exempt from any tension arising from the role of evaluation in the teaching practicum; and (b) two university supervisors



from each of the four EFL teacher education programmes. The supervisors were responsible for observing and providing feedback to the student teachers during their field experiences.

Throughout this article, the EFL teacher education programmes will be referred to as *Programme A*, *Programme B*, *Programme C*, and *Programme D*.

## **2.3 Research design and data collection instruments**

The present study used a mixed methods research design that allowed for the concurrent analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data. Dörnyei (2007) states that “a mixed methods approach can offer additional benefits for the understanding of the phenomenon in question” (p. 47). The methodology was exploratory and descriptive since the variables as well as the theoretical background were practically unknown and the nature of the problem could not be measured only quantitatively (Creswell, 1994). To allow for the collection of more comprehensive data on the perceptions of supervisory feedback in the teaching practicum, the following instruments were applied: (a) a questionnaire, including open-ended and closed-ended questions; and (b) a semi-structured face-to-face follow-up interview in order to triangulate data.



### 2.3.1 The questionnaire

The questionnaire investigated the participants' perceptions of supervisory feedback in the ELT (English Language Teaching) practicum. Both groups –student teachers and supervisors– answered the same questions in the same order and, although all the participants possessed a very good command of the target language, the questionnaire was designed in Spanish to minimise any pressure and to make clear that there was no intention to evaluate the respondents' use of English. The questionnaire, based on the surveys designed by Rawlins and Starkey (2011) and Farr (2011), consisted of five sections: (a) giving feedback to observed student teachers: respondents were asked to indicate how often they received or provided feedback (always after each lesson, sometimes after each lesson, never after each lesson) and had to provide a value to the frequency chosen (positive, negative, indifferent). Respondents were also able to add other frequencies and values in an open space available at the end of the section; (b) describing supervisory feedback: participants had to specify how often (always, sometimes, never) supervisory feedback included comments such as “you did very well” or “good idea”, made reference to the lesson plan, considered the students' learning, and referred to the student teachers' classroom management techniques. The frequency chosen had to be assessed according to three options: positive, negative, indifferent. An open space was left so respondents could add other possibilities; (c) communicating feedback to student





teachers – strategies employed: respondents had to indicate the frequency (always, sometimes, never) and value of that frequency (positive, negative, indifferent) according to five items: written after each lesson, oral after each lesson, informal discussions, discussion forums organised by the supervisors, and e-mail. In case respondents wished to include other strategies, an open space was included at the end of the section; (d) relationship between student teachers and supervisors through giving and receiving feedback: respondents had to indicate frequency (always, sometimes, never) and assess the frequency chosen (positive, negative, indifferent) taking into account the following points: “I tell him/her what to do”, “I orient him/her”, “I let him/her be creative”, “I value his/her ideas and experiences”, “I don’t formulate suggestions to improve the practice”, “I’m structured”, “I reject dialogue”, and “I’m confrontational”. Respondents were asked to provide a concrete example or situation experienced whenever they chose the option “sometimes”; and (e) about supervisory feedback: this section was subdivided into five items. In (e.1) respondents were asked to select the most predominant or frequent feelings student teachers experienced after receiving supervisory feedback. The list included the following adjectives: stimulated, motivated, respected, uncomfortable, indifferent, frustrated, self-confident, enriched, angry, surprised, confused, independent, self-critical, and uncertain. Other feelings/emotions could be added in a separate box; (e.2) this item enquired about the benefits of received or given feedback; (e.3) this item asked participants to mention the negative aspects of received



or given feedback; (e.4) respondents were asked whether they believed supervisory feedback promoted a process of reflection-action that benefited future teachers. In all cases participants had to justify their answers; (e.5) participants had to explain why supervisory feedback helped or did not help student teachers to acquire self-confidence to face a group of students.

The questionnaire included a final item in which respondents could include other aspects they considered important about supervisory feedback.

The questionnaire was piloted with six student teachers and two supervisors from Programme A once the practicum carried out during the academic year 2012 had finished. No changes were introduced to the questionnaire since the pilot study showed that instructions were clear and participants provided the information required.

Participants signed a consent form which informed them about the research purposes, the anonymity and confidentiality of the data collected as well as about their voluntary participation and prerogative to withdraw from the study at any time. Each participant completed the questionnaire individually and, for participants located a long distance from the researcher, online completion was allowed.

### **2.3.2 The follow-up interview**

In order to triangulate data, and with the purpose of confirming, disputing and/or extending the data obtained through the



questionnaire, a semi-structured interview was designed. Hence, although there was a set of pre-prepared guiding questions and prompts, “the format was open-ended and the interviewee was encouraged to elaborate on the issues raised in an exploratory manner” (Dörnyei, 2007). Each one-to-one interview lasted from about 40 to 60 minutes and the interview guide included six sections: (a) greeting and introduction to the interview; (b) presentation of the objectives of the interview; (c) interviewee’s personal information; (d) content questions; (e) final closing question; and (f) final greeting. A student teacher from each of the universities involved in the study was randomly selected and interviewed. All the participants were asked the same questions, although not necessarily in the same order or wording, and the interviewer supplemented the main questions with various probes. The interview was piloted with three student teachers who had finished their practicum experience in the academic year 2011 and, since the format and questions appeared to be clear, no changes were made. All the interviews were carried out in Spanish, recorded, transcribed and conducted by the researcher in person. In the case of participants residing in a province different from that of the researcher, Skype v6.14.0.104 was used to facilitate communication. Before recording the interviews, the interviewees’ consent was obtained and the researcher guaranteed the confidentiality and anonymity of the data. In-person interviews were recorded with the S-Pen Voice application for the Samsung Galaxy Note series, an application that assures



high quality audio and allows the researcher to take notes while recording.

## **2.4 Data collection and analysis**

### **2.4.1 The questionnaire**

Thirty-two copies of the questionnaire were distributed and the return rate was of 100%. Twenty-four contained the responses of student teachers and eight had been answered by supervisors.

The data reported in the questionnaires were classified and, therefore, analysed according to whether they were obtained from closed-ended or open-ended questions.

To analyse the data generated from the closed-ended questions, the statistical software SPSS (Ver. 19) was used.

In order to obtain insights or issues not captured in the closed-ended questions, the following steps were taken to analyse the data generated from the open-ended questions:

- (1) Responses were transcribed into a Microsoft Word document.
- (2) Transcriptions were carefully read and key words and phrases were highlighted.
- (3) Common emerging themes were identified.
- (4) Coding categories were developed.
- (5) Responses were labelled with their corresponding coding categories.
- (6) Sub-themes were recognised.



Frequencies for each of the sub-themes were specified according to: student teachers, supervisors, student teachers from each of the four ELT programmes investigated and supervisors from each of the four ELT programmes studied.

The process described above was employed to analyse the answers to the last four questions of the questionnaire: mentioning the benefits of received or given feedback, pointing out the negative aspects of received or given feedback, expressing whether supervisory feedback promotes a process of reflection-action that benefits future teachers or not, and explaining why supervisory feedback helps or does not help student teachers to acquire self-confidence to face a group of students.

The participants used their own words to answer the open-ended questions and, from the analysis of the data obtained, a number of themes and sub-themes emerged. For instance, when mentioning the benefits of supervisory feedback, the following phrases were highlighted: “It helped me to improve the use of the board”, “It pointed out my role as a teacher”, and “I improved the way in which I planned my lessons”. Therefore, the theme “improvement of the teaching practice” was identified.

## **2.4.2 The follow-up interview**

Three student teachers volunteered to be interviewed (one from Programme A, one from Programme C and one from Programme D) and they were provided with the opportunity to highlight both negative and positive comments on their perceptions of



supervisory feedback. The data gathered were transcribed and individually analysed to identify common themes, following the same steps taken to analyse the data generated from the open-ended questions of the questionnaire.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

This study investigated the perceptions of supervisory feedback of student teachers and university supervisors that were involved in the teaching practicum in four EFL teacher education programmes at three public universities from the central region of Argentina during the academic year 2012.

The results show that both groups of participants –student teachers and supervisors– agree on the fact that feedback is always provided after each lesson and positively value that frequency (see Table 1). Moreover, student teachers indicate that receiving feedback regularly, or at least at specific points during their teaching practice (such as at the beginning, middle, and end), is crucial to measure progress and improve.



Participant	Frequency - Value	Occurrences	%
<b>Student teachers (n=24)</b>	Always after each lesson - POSITIVE	19	79,2
	Sometimes after each lesson - POSITIVE	4	16,7
	No answer	1	4,2
	<b>Total</b>	24	100,0
<b>Supervisors (n=8)</b>	Always after each lesson - POSITIVE	7	87,5
	Sometimes after each lesson - POSITIVE	1	12,5
	<b>Total</b>	8	100,0

Table 1. *Distribution and Value of Communication of Supervisory Feedback according to Student Teachers and Supervisors*

Most of the student teachers and the supervisors state that it is positive to receive or provide feedback that includes encouraging comments, makes reference to the lesson plan, refers to the students' learning, and provides information about the student teachers' classroom management techniques (see Table 2).



Feedback description		Student teachers (n=24)		Supervisors (n=8)	
		Occurrences	%	Occurrences	%
<b>Encouraging comments</b>	Always	20	83.3	7	87.5
	Sometimes	3	12.5	0	0
	Never	0	0	0	0
	No answer	1	4.2	1	12.5
<b>Reference to the lesson plan</b>	Always	16	66.7	8	100
	Sometimes	8	33.3	0	0
	Never	0	0	0	0
	No answer	0	0	0	0
<b>Student's learning</b>	Always	14	58.3	6	75
	Sometimes	9	37.5	2	25
	Never	0	0	0	0
	No answer	1	4.2	0	0
<b>Student teacher's classroom management techniques</b>	Always	20	83.3	8	100
	Sometimes	4	16.7	0	0
	Never	0	0	0	0
	No answer	0	0	0	0

Table 2. Description of Supervisory Feedback according to Student Teachers and Supervisors





These findings are consistent with previous studies that showed that student teachers prefer to be given feedback that acknowledges the kind of activities included in the lesson plan and that makes reference to their interaction with the group of students (Leshem & Bar-hama, 2007). Moreover, confirming White's (2007) findings, student teachers express that systematic and objective feedback is positive for their professional development and, in agreement with Viáfara González (2005) and Smith (2010), student teachers expect feedback to clearly indicate what their strengths and weaknesses are. Nevertheless, regarding whether supervisory feedback is perceived as structured or not, most of the participants indicate that sometimes it is, but appear to prefer feedback that is “never structured”. Some supervisors explain that, at the beginning of the practicum, their feedback is structured with the intention of making it easier for student teachers to understand it.

With regard to the strategies to communicate feedback, all the student teachers and the supervisors always receive or provide written feedback after each lesson. They positively value this strategy but also reveal that verbal feedback should complement the written comments. Particularly, student teachers and supervisors from Programme A coincide in that it is necessary to add a verbal instance for them to express their opinions, clarify doubts, and discuss aspects that cannot be covered by written feedback alone. It is encouraging to compare these results with those obtained by Babkie (1998 as cited in White, 2007), who



maintains that both spoken and written feedback need to be given, and that each should cover positives and negatives.

The results show that, although student teachers consider them essential, oral strategies to communicate feedback are infrequent. This finding is in agreement with Rosemary, Richard, and Ngara's (2013) study which showed that a common problem during the teaching practice resides in the lack of dialogue between supervisors and supervisees, which may impinge on the effectiveness of supervision. The participants reveal that, even though feedback never rejects dialogue, they sometimes or never participate in informal discussions or forums organised by their supervisors. According to White (2007) and Ferguson (2011), student teachers expect to be given feedback in spoken format and Smith (2010) describes feedback as the basis for dialogue.

In general, student teachers and supervisors reveal that they never receive or provide feedback via e-mail, a strategy Le Cornu and White (2000) found to be appropriate for the final practicum, since it reduces the stress associated with supervisors' observations and increases independence.

With respect to the relationship between student teachers and supervisors through feedback, participants' responses show that sometimes it is necessary that supervisors tell student teachers what to do. This is the case, for example, when student teachers need help to plan a lesson or manage a class. In addition, the results reveal that feedback always orients future teachers, and participants positively value this frequency. Orientative feedback occurs, for example, when student teachers ask for



ideas to implement in their lessons or when they need to make some changes to their lesson plans. Supervisors state that their orientations encourage student teachers to become critical and independent by helping them to take their own decisions.

Most of the participants recognise that supervisory feedback is never confrontational, always promotes creativity, and always values student teachers' ideas and experiences. As an example, student teachers point out the instances when they intend to innovate in their lessons by inventing their own games or activities and are consequently praised by their supervisors. These findings further support the idea of González Ramírez (2012) who concluded that feedback increases the possibilities of instruction by encouraging student teachers to try new methodologies and activities that they would not try otherwise. Furthermore, participants observe and appreciate that supervisors always formulate suggestions to improve the teaching practice. However, some supervisors point out that they do not formulate suggestions when they consider that student teachers should have some choice and control to become independent professionals. This idea is consistent with Brandt's (2008) and Gürsoy's (2013), who suggest that, in order to develop autonomy, future teachers should explore and identify their weaknesses themselves.

Student teachers and supervisors agree on the fact that, after receiving supervisory feedback, student teachers most frequently feel self-critical, stimulated, enriched, respected, and frustrated. This last feeling mainly occurs when student teachers receive feedback for the first time and the supervisor



focuses on weaknesses rather than on strengths. However, once the student teachers get used to the supervisors' comments, they perceive feedback as an opportunity to become better teachers. Other feelings mentioned by both groups of participants, but to a lesser extent, include motivated, uncertain, surprised, and self-confident. Surprisingly, unlike the supervisors, a few student teachers state that feedback makes them feel independent, a feeling that supervisors reveal they would like to inspire in their students. Uncomfortable and indifferent are also indicated by student teachers and confused is only mentioned by the supervisors.

It is interesting to note that, as a student teacher from Programme A points out, feedback that contains expressions such as adequate or acceptable, without further explanations, is not sufficient and described as shocking. These comments are consistent with Ferguson (2011) who explains that more personal feedback is perceived to have a greater relevance to personal learning, whereas feedback such as one-word, short unexplained responses, ticks, or crosses are of no value at all.

Hence, participants consider that negative supervisory feedback is: mostly focused on weaknesses, not informed about the characteristics of the class being taught, and evaluative and written without allowing for dialogue to take place. Furthermore, two difficulties emerged from the qualitative analysis of the interviews: (a) the supervisors' lack of time to observe the student teachers teaching; and (b) the incongruence caused by



being supervised by more than one teacher, a situation also found problematic by Rosemary, Richard, and Ngara (2013).

For feedback to be reflective, supervisors have to consider student teachers' emotional blocks and help them overcome their fear, nervousness, and anxiety (Soykurt, 2010). However, according to a supervisor from Programme C, feedback that is too centred on student teachers' feelings may overlook fundamental aspects of the teaching practice itself. As a consequence, the quality and effectiveness of supervisory feedback may be reduced.

Both the student teachers and the supervisors that participated in this research study agree that feedback can be beneficial and promote reflection-action as well as self-confidence to face a group of students if it focuses not only on weaknesses but also on strengths (see Table 3). Moreover, as expressed in the interviews, most of the student teachers consider this type of feedback to be essential to improve the teaching practice and develop personal/professional skills. As Viáfara González (2005) found out, it is important to use friendly observation instruments because they encourage reflective processes such as self-evaluation and self-inquiry.

Student teachers and supervisors claim that supervisory feedback should reflect the supervisors' expertise by offering tips, advice, and suggestions, including strategies based on the supervisors' own experiences (see Table 3). Besides, as commented during the interviews, student teachers consider that feedback should always provide opportunities for interaction with their supervisors if the goal is to promote reflection and critical thinking.



THEMES	SUB THEMES	STs	STs	STs	STs	STs	SUP	SUP	SUP	SUP	SUP
		(n=24)	PA	PB	PC	PD	(n=8)	PA	PB	PC	PD
<b>Type of feedback</b>	Detailed - objective	7	2	1	3	1					
	Verbal	6	3	1	1	1	1				
	Focus on weaknesses- strengths	9	2	3	2	2	1		1		
	After the lesson – Relaxed atmosphere	1	1								
	Promotion of self-reflection / Focus on feelings						6	2	1	2	1
<b>Supervisors' expertise</b>	Suggestions –Advice– Experience	10	3	5	1	1	1				1

Table 3. *Reasons Why Supervisory Feedback Promotes Reflection–Action. Distribution of References Made by the Student Teachers and the Supervisors*

Note. ST= Student teachers; SUP= Supervisors; PA = Programme A; PB = Programme B; PC = Programme C; PD = Programme D



On the whole, the results of this study support previous research (Bunton, Stimpson, & Lopez-Real, 2002) that showed that written feedback that is less structured, allowing for more descriptive and questioning comments, is likely to encourage a reflective approach to teaching. Moreover, as suggested by Brinko (1993), the findings illustrate that the way in which feedback is conveyed is relevant to determine its efficacy. For Brinko, it should be provided in a psychologically safe environment and it should reduce student teachers' uncertainty by allowing for interaction. In addition, Villanueva de Debat (2010) found out that "student teachers appreciated being offered suggestions for improvement and being praised for their strengths, which had a positive influence on their self-confidence" (p. 76).

Student teachers interviewed also highlight that, while observing a student teacher teaching, supervisors should be careful not to influence the lesson in any way and try to remain as "invisible" as possible. As regards the student teachers being observed, they should behave as if they were not "being evaluated". For student teachers, feedback is more likely to be authentic if the attitudes before-mentioned are followed. As Ferrier-Kerr (2009) suggests, it is important that those involved in the teaching practice develop environments of co-participation in the practicum which enable professional relationships to be established and which can contribute to developing new insights into supervisors' and student teachers' practices.



## 4. Impact and Conclusions

*Knowledge gives one the power to act and to make critical decisions.*  
(Kanter, 1999)

The findings analysed suggest some possible implications for teacher education. Firstly, the results have shown the importance of using complementary strategies to communicate supervisory feedback. As Harrison, Lawson, and Wortley (2005) point out, supervisors (or mentors) should consider the student teacher's needs and provide varied reflective practice strategies to help them become more critical and autonomous professionals.

For the participants involved in this study, written supervisory feedback that identifies strengths and weaknesses and that is detailed, systematic and objective helps student teachers to focus on those aspects that need improvement. Rawlins and Starkey (2011) recommend that verbal feedback in the form of informal meetings or forums organised by the supervisors should also be incorporated as a regular strategy to communicate and discuss supervisors' comments. In addition, informal verbal discussions are quick and are consistent with the idea that feedback should be given in a timely manner (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Secondly, supervisory feedback that orients, suggests, advises and contains encouraging comments is recommended. According to Sadler (1989), quality feedback that is non-evaluative promotes learning. Sadler highlights the importance of providing feedback that is helpful to identify the gap between student teachers'





current level of achievement and a higher level in order to close that gap as well as to “feedforward” judgements on performance into future work.

Thirdly, the importance of supervisors’ expertise in the promotion of reflective practices through feedback has been highlighted. According to Mc Donald (2004), supervisors’ professional knowledge, their curriculum, and their interpersonal skills are essential for student teachers’ development of their own teaching style. However, as Farr (2011) points out, there may be a conflict between the more expert professional wanting to relinquish control in a scaffolded way and the student teachers wanting to be constantly tutored by their supervisors. It is necessary that student teachers and supervisors discuss their roles in the feedback process to avoid intuitive assessment and to create a common basis for formative as well as summative assessment (Smith, 2010). Moreover, supervisors need to keep up-to-date in terms of professional knowledge, curriculum knowledge, learning and teaching styles, and resources in order to be successful and effective supervisors (Mc Donald, 2004).

Finally, continuous reflection and re-examination of student teachers’ perceptions, expectations and professional learning is needed since, as the world progresses, they are constantly being redefined. Supervisors need to ensure that student teachers have opportunities to develop reflective practice and to discuss their learning progress during the teaching practicum. As Quesada Pacheco (2005) explains, “learners have so many things to say.



They are the ones who are affected by our teaching, so getting feedback from them is productive” (p. 14).

Quoting Santayana (1905), “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (p. 284). By gently sharing their valuable thoughts and perceptions of the practicum, student teachers and supervisors participating in this study contributed to a better understanding of supervisory feedback. By recalling their memories, participants gave information on what they perceived as weaknesses and strengths during a key stage of initial teacher education. The information they provided is unique, based on their own experiences as leading actors of the teaching practicum. Yet, it can be extrapolated to other contexts where feedback is a central component. The challenge resides in remembering what can be improved and not forgetting what can be repeated.



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The impact of mistakes at the micro  
level of pronunciation on the assessment  
of English Phonetics and Phonology II  
students' oral performance

Andrea Canavosio





**Andrea Canavosio** is an English Teacher, a Sworn Translator, and a Licentiate in English Language and Literature, graduated from Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Argentina. She holds an MA in English and Applied Linguistics and is currently working on her doctoral thesis in the same institution. She is a lecturer in English Language II and Phonetics and Phonology II in the English Department. She is a researcher Level III with SECyT<sup>1</sup>. Since 2004 she has been part of different research teams in the fields of academic writing and phonetics and phonology. She is now a member of a research team that studies the role of prosodic features in oral academic discourse in Spanish.

1. SECyT (Secretaría de Ciencia y Tecnología) is the Secretariat of Science and Technology.



## Abstract

This study aims at determining the impact of mistakes at the micro level of pronunciation on the assessment of undergraduate EFL (English as a foreign language) students in the context of the subject *Phonetics and Phonology II* at Facultad de Lenguas (FL), Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (UNC). More precisely, the study aims at (a) identifying the micro-level mistakes, both segmental and suprasegmental, that students produce during *Phonetics and Phonology II* final oral exams, and (b) determining the impact of these mistakes on their performance assessment. To meet the objectives, the samples were collected during final oral exams and the marks students got were registered. Then the samples were analysed so as to identify the micro-level mistakes; the mistakes were classified following Morley's (1994) taxonomy. Last, statistical tests were run in order to determine the impact of mistakes on the final mark assigned to participants. Errors at the segmental level were the most frequent ones. In fact, inaccurate production of vowels and consonants constituted almost 50% of



the total number of identified mistakes. Mistakes made in the assignment of prominence and in the choice of intonation were the least frequent ones. Results of the linear regression analysis showed that micro-level mistakes had a significant impact on the mark assigned to the participant: the more mistakes students made at this level, the lower the mark they received. Lastly, the multiple regression analysis revealed that the problems in the assignment of prominence/rhythm seem to be the mistakes which most influenced the final mark given to students. On the other hand, the mistakes made in the production of vowels and consonants were the ones which seem to have least influenced the final mark students got.

## 1. The Problem

Language assessment has always attracted the attention of foreign language teachers and researchers. It is a crucial point in the field of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) and as a second language (ESL)<sup>1</sup> because of the importance of the data gathered during the assessment process and the decisions and consequences involved in it. Those in charge of assessing foreign language students' linguistic abilities have a great responsibility, which confronts them with several questions and dilemmas that are not always easy to deal with.

Effective communication is one of the main aspects taken into account when assessing the oral production of students of English as a foreign language, and the essential role played by pronunciation cannot be ignored. Pennington (1996), for instance, stresses that phonology should not be ignored because ignoring it means not paying attention to “an aspect of language which is central to the production, the perception and the interpretation of many different kinds of linguistic and social meanings” (p. 6).

Morley (1994) highlights the importance of pronunciation in communication claiming that non-native English speakers who have pronunciation problems may experience several serious difficulties such as “complete breakdown in communication,

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1. Even though in *second language* and *foreign language* learning environments the contexts and, consequently, the amount and quality of input are different, in this study, the terms will be used interchangeably because the underlying fundamental psycholinguistic processes involved are similar in both situations (Gass & Selinker, 2008).



ineffectual speech performance, negative judgements about personal qualities, anticipatory–apprehensive listener reactions, and pejorative stereotyping” (p. 69).

Focusing on the suprasegmental level, Clennell (1997, p. 117) claims that “failure to make use of appropriate pragmatic discourse features of English intonation may result in serious communication breakdown” and points out a series of possible problems. First, the propositional content of the message may not be fully understood. Second, the illocutionary force of the utterance might also be misunderstood. Finally, inter-speaker cooperation may be reduced and conversational management may be weakened. Summing up, pronunciation is essential to the achievement of communication efficiency and it has to be taught and assessed accordingly, even more so in the case of English taught at university level, like in the case of the present investigation.

I have always been interested in language assessment, especially in the assessment of oral production. I find it fascinating to consider all the aspects that need to be taken into account when scoring students’ oral performance and I have always wondered which aspects are given more importance at the time of rating such complex phenomena. In my experience as a teacher of English phonetics and phonology, I have often found myself in the dichotomy of whether rating students’ oral production taking into account only those aspects included in the course syllabus or considering features taught in previous courses



as well. My interest in such questions was the leading force for this project.

This study aims at determining the impact of mistakes at the micro-level of pronunciation on the assessment of undergraduate EFL (English as a foreign language) students in the context of the subject *Phonetics and Phonology II at Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (FL)*. More precisely, the study aims at (a) identifying the micro-level mistakes, both segmental and suprasegmental, that students produce during *Phonetics and Phonology II* final oral exams, and (b) determining the impact of these mistakes on their performance assessment. To meet the objectives, the samples were collected during final oral exams and the marks students got were registered; then the samples were analysed so as to identify the micro-level mistakes; the mistakes were classified following Morley's (1994) taxonomy; last, statistical tests were run in order to determine the impact of mistakes on the final mark assigned to participants.

## **2. The Approach to the Problem**

### **2.1 Theoretical framework**

#### **2.2.1 Communicative Language Ability**

Bachman (1990) pointed out that in order to make inferences about language ability on the basis of performance in language tests, it is necessary to define this ability or construct clearly



and precisely, taking into account particular testing situations, purposes, test takers, and Target Language Use (TLU) domain. Based on the earlier work on communicative competence of scholars such as Hymes (1972), Munby (1978), Canale and Swain (1980) and Savignon (1983), Bachman included the discourse dimension in his description of *communicative language ability* (CLA). For Bachman (1990, p. 84), CLA “consists of both knowledge, or competence, and the capacity for implementing or executing that competence in appropriate, contextualised communicative language use”.

Thus the framework of language ability proposed by Bachman (1990) and Bachman and Palmer (1996, 2010) includes two main components: *language knowledge* (or *language competence*) and *strategic competence*, which is described as “a set of metacognitive strategies that manage the ways in which language users utilise their different attributes (e.g., language knowledge, topical knowledge, affective schemata) to interact with characteristics of the language situation” (Bachman & Palmer, 2010, p. 44). These authors claim that metacognitive strategies contribute to planning, monitoring, and evaluating language users’ problem-solving ability.

Bachman and Palmer (1996, 2010) describe language knowledge as the domain of information in memory which the language user makes use of in order to interpret and to create discourse. As shown in Figure 1, language knowledge includes two broad subcategories: (1) *organisational knowledge*, which controls the formal elements of language so that the language user can



produce and/or comprehend grammatically acceptable oral and written texts; and (2) *pragmatic knowledge*, which enables the language user to produce and/or interpret discourse by relating the texts to their meanings, to the language users' intentions, and to features of the language use setting (Bachman & Palmer, 2010).

Organisational knowledge is further divided into two subcomponents: a) *grammatical knowledge* and b) *textual knowledge*. Pragmatic knowledge is divided into a) *functional knowledge* and b) *sociolinguistic knowledge*. The knowledge of phonology is included as one of the subcomponents of grammatical knowledge, which makes reference to the way in which language users produce and comprehend accurate sentences and utterances (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). The components of grammatical and pragmatic competence are closely related to each other; they are interdependent. They “all interact with each other and with features of the language situation” and “this very interaction between the various competencies and the language use context characterises communicative language use” (Bachman, 1990, p. 86).





**I Organisational knowledge** (how utterances or sentences and texts are organised)

**A. Grammatical knowledge** (how individual utterances or sentences are organised)

- 1) Knowledge of vocabulary
- 2) Knowledge of syntax
- 3) Knowledge of phonology/graphology

**B. Textual knowledge** (how utterances or sentences are organised to form texts)

**II Pragmatic knowledge** (how utterances or sentences and texts are related to the communicative goals of the language user and to the features of the language use setting)

**A. Functional knowledge** (how utterances, or sentences, and texts are related to the communicative goals of language users)

- 1) Knowledge of ideational functions
- 2) Knowledge of manipulative functions
- 3) Knowledge of heuristic functions
- 4) Knowledge of imaginative functions

**B. Sociolinguistic knowledge** (how utterances, or sentences, and texts are related to the features of the language use setting)

- 1) Knowledge of genres
- 2) Knowledge of dialects/varieties
- 3) Knowledge of registers
- 4) Knowledge of natural or idiomatic expressions
- 5) Knowledge of cultural references and figures of speech

Figure 1. Areas of language knowledge (Bachman & Palmer, 2010, p. 45).

As can be seen in Figure 1, knowledge of pronunciation–*knowledge of phonology*– is one of the different competencies that make up grammatical knowledge. These competences–*knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax and phonology/graphology*– “govern the choices of words to express specific significations, their forms, their arrangement in utterances to



express propositions, and their physical realisations, either as sounds or as written symbols” (Bachman, 1990, p. 87).

What is remarkable about Bachman’s framework of CLA is that it relates competence and performance and presents a general model of language use on language tests that involves, as stated in Bachman and Palmer (1996, p. 62), “complex and multiple interactions” of factors, such as language ability, test method and test setting characteristics, personal characteristics of test takers and random measurement error. Moreover, the framework can be used to describe “performance on language tests” (Bachman, 1990, p. 348), and to assess the different language components separately. In this study, the focus will be on some of the features which are part of the knowledge of pronunciation and which, following Morley (1994), can be said to belong to the micro-level elements of pronunciation.

## **2.1.2 The Dual Focus approach to English pronunciation**

On the basis of the communicative perspective to the teaching of English pronunciation, Morley (1994) puts forward the “Dual-Focus Program Philosophy”, according to which pronunciation, an integral and essential part of communication, is said to include elements belonging to two different levels: a micro level and a macro level (see Figure 2).

The macro level has to do with speech performance and global patterns. It encompasses general elements of communicability,



which aim at developing discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. This macro dimension focuses on components of communicative oral discourse such as “overall precision and clarity”, “overall fluency”, and “overall speech intelligibility level” (Morley, 1994, p. 78).

The micro level pays attention to the phonetic and phonological competence, e.g. to the production of vowels and consonants, stress, rhythm, intonation, volume, pauses, and adjustments. This level refers to the production of discrete elements of pronunciation, which have an impact on speakers' intelligibility.

<b>Micro Level</b>	<b>Macro Level</b>
<p><i>Speech production: discrete points (a focus on specific elements of pronunciation)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Clarity and precision in articulation of consonants and vowel sounds</li> <li>· Consonant combinations both within and across word boundaries; elisions; assimilations</li> <li>· Neutral vowel use; reductions; contractions</li> <li>· Syllable structure; phrase groups and pause points; linking words across word boundaries</li> <li>· Overall rate of speech; variations in pacing; rhythm; stress and unstress</li> <li>· Overall volume; sustaining energy level across an utterance; intonation patterns and pitch change points; vocal qualities</li> </ul>	<p><i>Speech performance: global patterns (a focus on general features of communicability)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Overall precision and clarity in contextualised speech, both sounds and suprasegmentals</li> <li>· General vocal effectiveness in oral discourse; communicative use of vocal features</li> <li>· Overall fluency in ongoing planning and structuring of speech as it proceeds</li> <li>· Overall speech intelligibility level</li> <li>· General communicative command and control of grammar</li> <li>· General communicative command of vocabulary words and phrasal units</li> <li>· Overall effective use of appropriate and expressive nonverbal features of oral communication</li> </ul>

Figure 2. Dual Focus: speech production and speech performance (Morley, 1994, p. 78).



As already stated, in the present study, special attention will be placed on the micro level of pronunciation and both segmental and supra segmental features will be taken into account. As to the segmental features, we will focus on individual sounds that speakers use to form words or larger stretches of speech. As to the suprasegmental features, we will consider aspects such as rhythm, word stress, prominence, and pitch movement.

### **2.1.3 Pronunciation assessment**

Assessment is a complex process and it seems to be even more complex in the case of pronunciation. Acknowledging the complex and elusive nature of pronunciation, Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (1996) point out that there are features which are unique to pronunciation that influence “how evaluation is carried out, how feedback is provided, and, at which stages of instruction is most appropriately given” (p. 341). Similarly, and referring to the assessment of oral performance, Luoma (2004, p. x) mentions difficulties such as the fact that it involves raters’ “instantaneous judgements about a range of aspects”, one of which is “the sound of speech”, which includes features such as “individual sounds, pitch, volume, speed, pausing, stress, and intonation”; that is, raters need to pay attention to a myriad of features that occur simultaneously.

An important factor involved is the raters’ subjectivity. It is the rater who decides on the score or rating that represents the level of students’ performance during the assessment process. Different



questions may influence raters' judgement and it is essential to try to minimize unwanted effects. Rater standardization meetings with explicit assessment criteria and the use of rating scales can contribute positively.

So, a further aspect to consider when dealing with assessment, and in this particular case with pronunciation assessment, is the scoring method used by raters. There are, of course, different methods and each has advantages and disadvantages. In the context of this investigation, for example, raters assess students' pronunciation performance "impressionistically", i.e., "without an explicit scale" (Weigle, 2002, p. 149). However, the use of rating scales is usually recommended in the literature<sup>2</sup>.

No matter which scoring method the rater chooses to use, the construct proposed for the test needs to be clearly defined; that is, the aspects that are going to be taken into account when scoring must be explicit and clear. In the case of pronunciation, for instance, the rater will need to know whether the focus is on macro-level features or on micro-level features, or on certain segmental or suprasegmental features.

Finally, it should be pointed out that when numerical scores are needed, like in the case of this study, Carr (2000), for instance, states that there are "inherent limitations involved in reducing

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2. Rating scales are usually divided into *global* (sometimes called *holistic* or *unitary*) and *analytic* (sometimes called *componential*). *Holistic scales* consider language ability as "a single unitary ability", whereas *analytic scales* "incorporate the notion that language ability consists of multiple components and that it involves separate *analytic* ratings for each of the specific components in the construct definition" (Bachman & Palmer, 2010, p. 238).



complex performances to one or more numerical ratings” so it seems that greater care must be taken so that these scores represent level of achievement or performance as accurately as possible.

In short, multiple aspects must be taken into account when assessing oral language ability in general and pronunciation in particular. There are a number of intervening factors or characteristics that need special attention, such as the complexity of the skill *per se*, raters’ subjectivity at the time of scoring, and the instruments and scoring methods involved.

## 2.2 The study

### 2.2.1 Context of research

This study was carried out at FL with students who become EFL teachers and/or translators after completing a five-year programme of study. Students receive specific training in English pronunciation during three years through three annual subjects: *Pronunciation Practice*, in first year, *Phonetics and Phonology I*, in second year, and *Phonetics and Phonology II* in third year.

Following Morley’s (1994) communicative perspective to English pronunciation and her “Dual-Focus Program Philosophy”, we can state that the main focus of the courses *Pronunciation Practice* and *Phonetics and Phonology I* is on the micro level of pronunciation, which pays attention to discrete elements of the phonetic and phonological competence, i.e., to the



production of vowels and consonants, stress, rhythm, intonation, volume, pauses, and adjustments.

The present study was specifically carried out in the context of the subject *Phonetics and Phonology II*. The focus of this third year course is mainly on the macro level of pronunciation. As explained in the theoretical framework, the macro level has to do with speech performance and global patterns. It encompasses general elements of communicability which aim at developing discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. This dimension focuses on components such as “overall precision and clarity”, “overall fluency”, and “overall speech intelligibility level” (Morley, 1994, p. 78).

### **2.2.1.1 Phonetics and Phonology II**

The first classes of *Phonetics and Phonology II* are devoted to reviewing concepts such as rhythm, tone unit, prominence, and tone. Then, and within the theoretical framework of *Discourse Intonation*, new concepts and features are introduced: key and termination, pitch sequence, and reading orientation. Furthermore, intonation and topic structure, the intonation and role of discourse markers, and the correlates of intonation are discussed and practised.

In order to pass *Phonetics and Phonology II*, students must take a final examination which is only oral for students in good standing (i.e., those who have already passed two term tests). During these oral exams, students are required to read aloud known



and unknown texts and to make a two minute oral presentation on a topic assigned by the teacher. Students must use phonetic, phonological and paralinguistic features effectively.

As it is clearly stated in the course syllabus, when assessing students' communicative pronunciation achievement during final oral exams, teachers do not ignore the micro level of pronunciation. However, as already mentioned, the focus is on the students' production of features at the macro level, such as general intelligibility, general fluency, general communicability, and paralinguistic features.

It is possible to say that the *Phonetics and Phonology II* final oral exam serves as an indicator of abilities that are of particular interest in the context of assessment; that is, it constitutes an essential source of information which allows teachers to make decisions within an educational context.

Figure 3 presents the features of assessment for *Phonetics and Phonology II* final oral examination.



PHONETICS AND PHONOLOGY II FINAL ORAL EXAM	
Construct	Syllabus-based
Testing conditions	Formal Explicit
Testing method	Performance
Purpose	Achievement Summative
Decision involved	High-stake
Scoring method	Subjective Impressionistic
Interpretation of scores	Criterion-referenced

Figure 3. *Phonetics and Phonology II* final oral exam: features of assessment.

Regarding the test construct, i.e., “aspects of knowledge or skill possessed by the candidate which are being measured” (McNamara, 2000, p. 13), it can be labelled as *syllabus-based*, as the course syllabus serves as the frame of reference used to establish the language knowledge or skills expected from the test-takers. Besides, as the test is administered under certain previously established conditions, it becomes an instance of *formal* and *explicit* assessment.



As to the testing method, the *Phonetics and Phonology II* exam can be labelled as a *performance test* because pronunciation is assessed through specific acts of communication, such as reading aloud and oral presentations.

As regards its purpose, this test can be classified as an *achievement test* because it is associated with the process of instruction: the test is administered at the end of a course to see whether students have achieved the goals set in the syllabus and it has a *summative* purpose.

As to the decisions made in this assessment situation, they can be categorised as *high-stake decisions* because the result of the test will determine whether the student will pass the course.

In FL, there is no institutionalized standardization of raters and the teachers of the chair *Phonetics and Phonology II* assess and grade (using a scale that goes from 0 to 10)<sup>3</sup> students' production impressionistically, i.e., without using a specific explicit scale with descriptors. In addition, since the evaluators judge the appropriateness or correctness of the students' response based on their own interpretation of the scoring criteria, the assessment can be described as *subjective*.

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3. The following is the scale provided by the university (the author's translation) and used in all formal assessing contexts at university level:

MARK	CONCEPT
10	Outstanding
7-8-9	Very good
5-6	Good
4	Adequate
1-2-3	Inadequate
0	Fail



## 2.2.2 Research questions

The following research questions were postulated:

- (1) Which mistakes at the micro level of pronunciation, both segmental and suprasegmental, are identified in the oral production of *Phonetics and Phonology II* students during final oral exams?
- (2) Which impact do mistakes at the micro level of pronunciation, both segmental and suprasegmental, have on the assessment of *Phonetics and Phonology II* students' performance during final oral exams?

The previous research questions gave rise to the following objectives:

### *General objective*

To study the impact that mistakes at the micro level of pronunciation, both segmental and suprasegmental, have on the assessment of *Phonetics and Phonology II* students' oral performance in the corpus collected during a final oral exam at FL.

### *Specific objectives*

In the collected corpus:

- (1) To identify mistakes at the micro level of pronunciation both segmental and suprasegmental.



(2) To determine the frequency of occurrence of the different kinds of micro-level pronunciation mistakes both segmental and suprasegmental.

(3) To establish the impact that the identified mistakes have on *Phonetics and Phonology II* teachers' assessment of oral performance.

## 2.2.3 Methodology

### 2.2.3.1 Participants and corpus

The corpus consisted of 49 recordings of short oral presentations participants gave during their *Phonetics and Phonology II* final exam. It was decided to study the oral presentation and not the reading aloud part of the exam because during the oral presentations students speak more spontaneously.

Numbers were assigned to the recorded samples so as to keep anonymity; they became S1, S2, S3, S4, S5 and so on up to S49 (S = sample). The number of samples allowed for statistical processing of the data collected.

The students, who were randomly selected, were not given details about the purpose of the study but were made sure that the procedure would not affect their performance whatsoever. The raters were the four teachers who belong to the *Phonetics and Phonology II* chair; they were not given any details about the study either.



### 2.2.3.2 Questionnaire

So as to gather additional information, the raters were asked to answer a questionnaire especially designed by the author. The objective was to find out the raters' opinion about the oral exams and rating criteria. It was expected that the collected data might contribute to the interpretation of results and the drawing of conclusions. It could also be the point of departure for further research on the field.

It should be pointed out that in this research study the terms *error* and *mistake* are used interchangeably. Consequently, the focus is on pronunciation problems independently of whether they are the result of “deviations from the standard use” (Mestre, 2011, p. 207), which show L2 learners' interlanguage, i.e., a simplified distorted representation of the target competence, or the result of the “faulty use (or misuse) of competences” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 208). Any failure identified at the micro level of pronunciation in the students' performance was registered, no matter its origin.

### 2.2.3.3 Procedures

The samples were collected during the *Phonetics and Phonology II* final oral exams students took in November–December and then in February–March. A high-quality digital device was used to record the oral presentations. As usual, students' performances were rated impressionistically by a board composed of three



teachers. The researcher took note of the mark assigned to each student and she also wrote down additional information if necessary.

Once all the samples had been recorded, the raters were asked to answer the questionnaire. Each sample was thoroughly analysed by the researcher so as to identify the mistakes belonging to the micro level of pronunciation. The mistakes were registered and classified using an identification grid.

### **2.2.3.4 External raters**

In order to check the reliability of the analysis carried out by the researcher, three teachers, external to this study and specialized in the area of English phonetics and phonology, were asked to use the grid to identify micro level pronunciation mistakes in five of the collected samples. The teachers had been previously trained in the use of the identification grid and, as they are experienced teachers, one standardization session was enough to clear out doubts about categories and registration procedures. Then, the t-test was used to compare the means of the mistakes identified by the researcher and the means of the mistakes detected by the three external raters in each micro-level mistake category.

The t-test showed no significant differences. That is, the results showed that the differences between the mistakes identified by the external raters and those registered by the researcher are not statistically significant.



### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Preliminary analysis

The first statistical analysis done on the collected data was a descriptive one: the total number of micro-level mistakes found in the samples was computed; the mistakes were grouped into six different micro level categories: (1) production of vowels, (2) production of consonants, (3) production of weak forms, (4) production of endings and consonant clusters, (5) assignment of prominence, and rhythm and (6) intonation.

Figure 4 shows the type, percentage, and, between parentheses, the number of micro-level mistakes identified in the 49 samples.

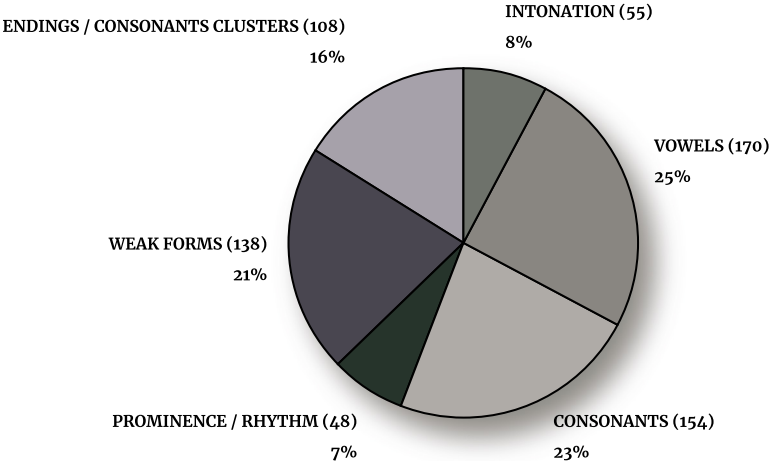


Figure 4. Type, number and percentage of micro level mistakes found in the samples.



Errors at the segmental level were the most frequent ones. In fact, inaccurate production of vowels and consonants constituted almost 50% of the total number of identified mistakes.

As it was stated in the description of the context of this study, the segmental features of English constitute one of the main teaching-learning objectives of the first-year subject *Pronunciation Practice*. In addition, segments are further reviewed and practiced in second year. However, contrary to what might then be expected, most of the *Phonetics and Phonology II* students who participated in this study still have problems with the production of segmental features.

The concept of language transfer might explain why students make an important number of errors at the segmental level. According to Odlin (1993), language transfer is the influence that results from similarities and differences between the target language and any other previously acquired language. Hence the differences between the Spanish and English phonological systems might have negatively and strongly influenced the pronunciation of the students who participated in this study, who are all native speakers of Spanish. In other words, as Carrier and Falk-Ross (2005) state, students may have difficulty in perceiving and producing the English sounds that do not exist in Spanish and may replace them with Spanish ones.

The persistence of errors at the segmental level might also be explained on the basis of the phenomenon known as *fossilization*. As pointed out by authors such as Selinker (1969), Long (2003), Larsen-Freeman (2006), and Han (2009), it is possible to find





features in a student's interlanguage which become fossilized, that is, they remain far from the target form in spite of optimal learning conditions. It might be argued that the learning conditions for the students who participated in this study are not optimal because of lack of permanent exposure to the target language and scarcity of opportunities for in-class practice. Furthermore, it might even be speculated that it was these students' individual pronunciation aptitude that did not allow them to acquire more accurate articulatory habits.

Results also showed that, of the total number of mistakes identified at the micro level of pronunciation, those made in the assignment of prominence and in the choice of intonation were the least frequent ones. What is more, the students who did make mistakes belonging to these two categories, made a maximum of three mistakes. This significantly lower number of mistakes identified at the suprasegmental level (15%) might be attributed to the explicit systematic reinforcement and practice carried out in *Phonetics and Phonology II* during the first two months.

At a higher level of generalization, it may also be argued that, for Spanish speakers, English prominence and intonation patterns seem to be easier to produce than English consonant and vowel sounds. This might be attributed to the similarities that prominence and intonation patterns in English and in Spanish share. Both are intonation languages, even though Spanish speakers use a much narrower pitch range for intonation contours (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996). In both languages, speakers use rising tones at the end of repetition or echo questions, inverted



questions and tag questions; both languages offer their speakers four different pitch levels<sup>4</sup> (Chela-Flores & Chela-Flores, 2003; Farías, 2013). Furthermore, in the two languages content words are usually more prominent than structural words. Another feature they have in common is that Spanish and English speakers use prominence to highlight new or relevant information and to express contrast (Ferreiro & Luchini, 2015). On the other hand, there are many differences when it comes to the phonemic inventories of these two languages; the quality and quantity of sounds differ considerably from one another.

## **3.2 Micro-level mistakes and marks**

In order to determine the relation between the number of mistakes belonging to the micro level of pronunciation and the mark students got, two statistical tests were run on the data collected: linear regression analysis and multiple regression analysis.

### **3.2.1 Linear regression analysis**

The linear regression analysis is used to predict the value of a variable (dependent or outcome variable) based on the value of another variable (independent or predictor variable). In the case of

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4. See Chela-Flores and Chela-Flores (2003) for more details on the differences and similarities between English and Spanish intonation.



this research study, the dependent variable is the final mark and the independent variable is the number of micro-level mistakes made by students.

Figure 5 shows the relation between number of micro level mistakes and marks.

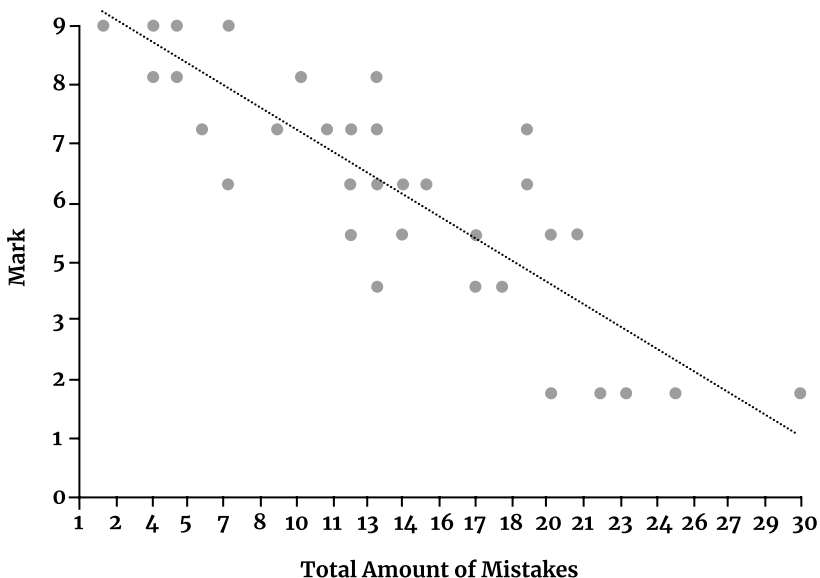


Figure 5. Linear regression analysis done to the collected data.

To begin with, results of the linear regression analysis showed that micro-level mistakes had a significant impact on the mark



assigned to the participant: the more mistakes students made at this level, the lower the mark they received. In this test, the relation between the total number of micro-level mistakes made by each student and their marks was considered without discriminating between different mistake categories.

It may then be said that even though the micro level of pronunciation is not included as one of the focal points in the *Phonetics and Phonology II* syllabus, errors at this level appear to have had an impact on the assessment of students' oral performance.

It should be pointed out that there was a small number of students with a similar amount of micro-level mistakes but with considerably different marks. For example, two students made 20 mistakes each and one of them (Sample 27) got a five, while the other one (Sample 47) got a two. The difference in the scores may be related to the kinds of mistakes they made. In Sample 27, most mistakes registered belong to segmental features, mostly consonants, vowels and weak forms, whereas in Sample 47, the number of mistakes was distributed in a more balanced way through the six categories considered in this study. This difference might have to do with the functional load of the mistakes and, obviously, with the raters' evaluation of how the errors affected students' communicative competence during the exam. Certain segments have a much higher frequency of occurrence than others so they may be given priority by teachers during assessment because of their impact on intelligibility and communicability. As what counted in this study was the total



number of micro-level mistakes, no discrimination was made as to whether the total number meant the repetition of the same mistake or the occurrence of different errors, which might influence raters' assessment in different ways. Teachers may have chosen not to take into account the repetition of the same mistake when deciding on the mark.

Another reason for these differences could be related to the value given by raters to informal assessment done throughout the year. *Phonetics and Phonology II* teachers monitor, test and listen to their students numerous times during the whole academic year. The mark given in a final examination may be based not only on the student's specific performance during that exam but also on the work the student had done in class.

Finally, the difference in the marks could also be related to the students' speech performance at the macro level of pronunciation, which was not taken into account in this study. A student may produce sounds clearly and precisely and may assign prominence in an effective way, for instance, but may have problems in their overall fluency and intelligibility, which might affect their communicability. On the other hand, a student may be comfortably intelligible, fluent and effective when communicating but may make several micro-level mistakes while speaking.

There might have been other aspects that influenced the raters' scoring criteria that were not taken into account in this study. As it was previously mentioned, raters judge the correctness of students' performance based on their own subjective



interpretation of the scoring criteria. Moreover, the assessment is impressionistic because no explicit rating scale is used except the numerical scale 0–10. Raters select which aspects to focus on or to give more importance to considering the course objectives and content. However, their decisions may be also influenced by their beliefs, knowledge, and experience.

Another aspect to take into account when analysing rating criteria is the nature of oral assessment. *Phonetics and Phonology II* teachers face the challenging task of paying attention to micro- and macro-level pronunciation features while listening to a student for a short period of time. After the performance, they are required to translate that into a numerical rating. Taking into account a myriad of aspects simultaneously and reducing such a complex phenomenon to a simple number may be difficult and may cause raters to make mistakes or to vary the criteria depending on the circumstances.

### 3.2.2 Multiple regression analysis

The multiple regression model enables us to determine the individual or conjoint influence of several independent variables on a dependent variable. In the case of this study, this model allows us to analyse the individual and conjoint influence of the six categories of micro-level mistakes on the marks *Phonetics and Phonology II* students were given during the final oral exam.

In Figure 6, we can observe the results of the multiple regression analysis done to the data collected. The *Beta* column



shows the number of points deducted from the final mark per micro-level mistake made. The mistakes which seem to have more impact on the mark belong to the categories Prominence/Rhythm and Endings/Consonant Clusters. That is, whenever either of these two types of mistakes occurred, an average of 0.55 points was deducted from the participant's final mark. Considering the points deducted, the mistakes that follow in importance or impact on the final mark were the mistakes in intonation, which deducted an average of 0.30 points each time they occurred; intonation was followed by weak forms (0.29). Statistically speaking, the mistakes students made in the production of segmental features were the least significant in terms of impact on the score: 0.22 points deducted per each consonant mistake and 0.18 per each vowel mistake.

	Beta (points deducted)
Vowels	-0.18
Consonants	-0.22
Prominence / Rhythm	-0.55
Endings /Consonant Clusters	-0.29
Endings /Consonant Clusters	-0.55
Intonation	-0.30

Figure 6. Multiple regression analysis done to the collected data.



In Figure 7 there are two graphics: the one on the left presents micro-level mistakes organized in terms of frequency of occurrence in the data collected (from most frequent on top and with bigger font, to least frequent at the bottom and with smaller font), whereas the one on the right organizes the mistakes in terms of influence or impact on the final mark (most influential on top and with bigger font and least influential at the bottom and with smaller font). As can be seen in the left hand side graphic, mistakes in the production of segmental features were the most frequent ones, whereas mistakes in suprasegmentals were the least frequent.

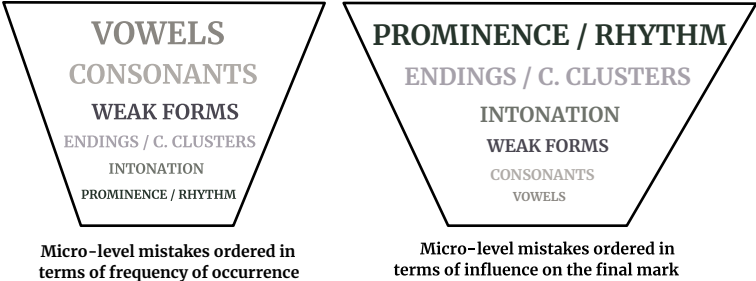


Figure 7. Comparison between micro level mistakes frequency of occurrence and influence on the final mark.

Conversely, in the graphic on the right it can be observed that the problems in the assignment of prominence / rhythm





seem to be the mistakes which most influenced the final mark given to students. The three least frequent mistakes registered, in Prominence/Rhythm, Intonation and Endings/Consonant Clusters, seem to have been considered of paramount importance by raters at the time of assessing students oral performance. Apparently, the least frequent mistakes were the most influential ones. On the other hand, the most frequent mistakes, the ones made in the production of vowels and consonants, seem to have been the errors which had the lowest impact on the mark assigned to students. The order of the categories in the graphic on the left is almost the opposite of their order in the graphic on the right.

*Phonetics and Phonology II* teachers usually pay special attention to the assignment of prominence and to the production of endings and consonant clusters because the meaning is usually distorted when prominence is wrongly assigned or if an ending is mispronounced. For example, if a student fails to pronounce the ending of the past form of a regular verb, even though the interlocutor may understand the utterance because of contextual cues, he or she needs to make an additional effort to do so. Furthermore, as Solé Sabater (1991) claims, word, sentence stress, and rhythm are “the backbone of English pronunciation” (p. 147) because they are features that affect the production of other crucial features, such as realization of segments, syllabic structure, morphology, syntax, and, ultimately, meaning. Pennington (1996) claims that it is the inappropriate use of intonation (flat, monotonic, unusual intonation, for example) and wrong stress placement that “interfere with intelligibility” (p. 253).



### 3.3 Questionnaire to teachers

A questionnaire was administered to three *Phonetics and Phonology II* teachers so as to find out their opinions on the oral exam and rating criteria. It was thought that their answers might be useful when interpreting the results and drawing conclusions.

First, they were asked whether they assign more importance to micro or macro level features at the time of assessing *Phonetics and Phonology II* students' oral performance. The three teachers who answered the questionnaire claim that they pay more attention to the production of features belonging to the macro level of pronunciation (Overall Precision and Clarity or Communicative Effectiveness, Overall Fluency, and Overall Intelligibility) than to micro-level features. One of them, for instance, justifies his position by claiming that the aim of the course is that students acquire a level of English pronunciation that allows them to be understood by English-speaking people all over the world, without paying attention to unnecessary micro-level features. He goes on saying that the main objective of pronunciation courses is that students become comfortably intelligible. Another teacher justifies her answer stating that even though *Phonetics and Phonology II* students are trained in the production of features belonging to both the micro and the macro level, because these levels depend on each other, the macro-level features are more important in this context. She asserts that communicative effectiveness when reading aloud and when



speaking spontaneously cannot be reached without mastering the macro-level features.

In the second question, teachers had to state how relevant (from 1 to 5, 1 being “not important” and 5 being “extremely important”) they consider the production of micro-level features when assessing *Phonetics and Phonology II* students. All the teachers consider that the production of micro level features, both segmental and suprasegmental is important or very important because it is the basis for the production of macro-level features. One of them supports her opinion by asserting that it is impossible for an EFL student to reach intelligibility or communicative effectiveness without producing vocalic distinctions or consonant clusters, or without assigning appropriate prominence to an utterance. In a similar line, another teacher claims that these students are being trained to become professionals of the language, so they may be pronunciation models in the future. Thus, they should aim at improving their pronunciation as much as possible both, at the micro and macro level.

In the last question, teachers had to order the micro-level features considered in this study in terms of the importance assigned to them during *Phonetics and Phonology II* oral exams. Two teachers claim that mistakes in the assignment of prominence or rhythm and in pitch movement are the ones that most influence assessment. They state that mistakes in the production of these features may completely change the meaning of the utterance, whereas mistakes in the production of consonants and vowels are usually not so serious, as meaning



can be recovered from the context more easily. On the other hand, one of the teachers considers the production of vowels to be the most important micro-level feature, followed by weak forms and endings and consonant clusters. Something worth mentioning is that the three teachers who participated in the study agreed on placing the production of consonants as the least influential feature.

The answers of the interviewed teachers support the results that showed that the identified micro-level mistakes in the assignment of prominence or rhythm and in intonation (tone choices) were two of the most influential features at the time of assessing the participants' pronunciation. The teachers stated that the misuse of these suprasegmental features may produce serious problems in meaning, changing the emphasis and information load in an utterance. Similarly, Gilbert (2012) asserts that if prominence is correctly assigned, listeners will understand the message even though there may be mistakes in the production of individual sounds, whereas when the sounds are clear but prominence is inappropriate, meaning problems may arise.

#### **4. Impact and Conclusions**

The results of this study have an impact on teacher and student practices both inside and outside the classroom. There follow some implications that should be taken into account by those involved in the assessment process.

Stressing the importance of seeing language as one single system which is divided into different subjects or courses only



for pedagogical and practical reasons is key when training professionals-of-the-language-to-be. This implies that students need to understand that the content and the skills developed in one course serve as building blocks for what is studied in the rest of the courses. In the case of pronunciation, micro-level features are the foundation upon which macro-level features stand. In order to reach a high proficiency level, all components of the system must be mastered.

Even though the focus of *Phonetics and Phonology II* is on macro-level features, teachers may offer extra practice and resources to improve micro level features. This might be done offering pronunciation workshops organised by teachers and student assistants. Another extremely useful tool is the course virtual classroom. In this platform, an endless number of tasks may be uploaded so that students choose the ones that will help them improve the micro-level features they are having trouble with.

Peer and self-assessment tasks are also crucial in the development of pronunciation skills. Being able to watch or to listen to one's oral performance or to the performance of peers and identify positive aspects and features that need to be improved is the first step towards autonomy in pronunciation learning. Peer and self-assessment pronunciation grids focusing on micro-level features may be designed so that students can record themselves and assess their production and their classmates'.

Furthermore, class discussion and analysis of the aspects that are part of the pronunciation construct could also be beneficial. All the people involved in the assessment process must know



which features are being assessed and what impact each feature has on the overall pronunciation performance, and thus, on the final mark.

Regular board meetings to discuss assessment criteria are also necessary, so that the members agree on the importance given to each pronunciation aspect during assessment. In this respect, the use of a rating scale could be helpful to reach inter-rater reliability. Moreover, meetings and workshops of teachers belonging to the three pronunciation courses (*Pronunciation Practice*, *Phonetics and Phonology I* and *Phonetics and Phonology II*) could also contribute to agreeing on the standards required in each course as regards micro- and macro-level features.

Those in charge of assessing foreign language students' linguistic abilities have a great responsibility, which confronts them with several questions and dilemmas that are not always easy to deal with. As it has been stated, this study has intended to provide more information about the process of pronunciation assessment at higher education and to determine how different aspects influence the final mark assigned to students. As Weigle (1998) stated, "it is not enough to be able to assign a more accurate number to examinee performances unless we can be sure that the number represents a more accurate definition of the ability being tested" (p. 281). Doing research and studying the multiple aspects of language assessment in educational contexts will definitely contribute to making this process more transparent, objective, and fair for all the participants involved.



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Towards enhancing EFL academic literacy:  
The effect of genre-based instruction on  
summary-response writing

**Natalia Verónica Dalla Costa**



**Natalia Verónica Dalla Costa** holds a degree in English Language Teaching and a Licentiate degree in English Language and Literature. She also holds an MA in English and Applied Linguistics from Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Argentina. She lectures in English Language I, II and IV, and also teaches graduate courses. She is currently working on her doctoral thesis entitled *The Argumentative Essay from Multiple Sources: Genre-based Instruction and a Contextual Analysis to Promote Autonomy in English as a Foreign Language Academic Literacy*. She has participated in research projects on writing in English as a Foreign Language since 2001.



## Abstract

This study investigates the effect of genre-based instruction on the process of teaching summary-response writing to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university students at an advanced level of language proficiency. A quasi-experimental research design was followed and quantitative and qualitative methods to collect and analyse the data were employed. The participants were one instructor, two raters and a group of 46 EFL students attending the fourth year of five-year Teacher Training, Licentiate and Translation Studies Programmes in an Argentinian university. The subjects were administered a pre-test requesting them to write a summary response before instruction. After a ten-week period of instruction, a post-test was administered. Two independent raters scored students' summary responses using an analytic scoring scale. The quantitative data collected from the tests were analysed using two statistical tests, namely, Cohen's Simple Unweighted Coefficient and Wilcoxon Rank Sums. Results



indicated that the difference in means between pre- and post-test scores was statistically significant. The information gathered was triangulated with the analysis of summary-response writing strategies, the data provided by pre- and post-study questionnaires and self-assessment checklists administered to the students, and interviews with the instructor. The results support the hypothesis that genre-based instruction is an effective pedagogical tool to teach summary-response writing to EFL university students at an advanced level of language proficiency.



## 1. The Problem

Within this area of foreign language learning, a recurring theme is the need to help students enhance their academic literacy, the reading and writing skills that are essential in academic settings. Nowadays, academic literacy is necessary for improving one's educational and professional opportunities. Williams and Snipper (1990) define it as “the ability to process and interact with . . . ideas preserved within the specific domains of educational institutions” (p. 8). Indeed, for university-level students in Argentina, English as a foreign language (EFL) reading and writing are vital to academic success. Academically literate individuals can summarise, evaluate and, eventually, write about the information gained from reading. However, Johns (1981) stresses that students of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) are weak in these essential skills. This may stem from lack or inefficient teaching of academic literacy skills and genres at secondary school, so achieving academic literacy requires explicit instruction. This study, which aims to tackle that problem, examines the effect of genre-based instruction on teaching summary-response writing to enhance EFL academic literacy.



## 2. The Approach to the Problem

### 2.1 Definition of literacy

Traditionally, literacy has meant the ability to read and write, but now it also involves an awareness of how these skills interact, and are used to construct knowledge in particular social contexts. It is then possible, as Kern (2009) suggests, to define literacy not only from a linguistic, but also from a cognitive and even a social perspective. The expanded notion of literacy acknowledges that reading and writing are connected to other abilities. This is why reading and writing can be integrated within the framework of an integrated-skills approach (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992) that recognises the relationships between reading and writing, as many academic tasks that require reading also involve writing from the same texts. So far, a comprehensive model of L2 reading-writing connections does not exist but it is possible to turn to available models of reading and approaches to writing.

### 2.2 EFL literacy instruction

When we contemplate literacy theories and the pedagogies that stem from them, it is possible to see reading and writing as products or processes (Wallace, 2008). In the traditional product views of the 1960s and 1970s, the core was the formal properties of texts and the learner was considered passive. In the learner-focused process views that emerged in the 1970s, the focus was on





students' active process of individual construction of meaning, not form. Learner-centered approaches have radically changed literacy theory, research, and practice from a focus on form to a focus on students' meaning-making processes. However, most of these models of reading and approaches to writing have failed to consider the social contexts in which texts are interpreted and produced, and the genres used in those contexts. Since the 1980s and 1990s, interest has shifted to a contextual approach, which Johns (1997) calls *Socioliterate*. This approach accounts for the texts, roles, and contexts that students encounter as they acquire EFL academic literacy. In this view, literacy is acquired through exposure to discourses in various social contexts in which individuals develop knowledge of genres. I will discuss models of reading and approaches to writing, and then turn to genre-based literacy instruction, an example of the Socioliterate approach.

### 2.2.1 Models of reading

There are three main metaphorical models of reading: bottom-up models that depict reading as a mechanical process in which the reader passively decodes each word letter-by-letter, top-down models that assume that the reader actively controls comprehension directed by goals and background knowledge, and interactive models that assume that elements from bottom-up and top-down views can be combined (Grabe, 2003). One of the most influential of these models relevant to the present study is Kintsch's (1988) *Construction-Integration Model*.



This model stems from the works of van Dijk and Kintsch (1978, 1983) and van Dijk (1977, 1978, 1980, 1985). The construction component of the model depicts readers as generating information from the text via word recognition, syntactic parsing, and proposition formation. This information is consolidated by an integration process. Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) identify three levels for the comprehension of texts: surface linguistic form, propositional textbase, and situation model. The first level is the surface representation of words and sentences, where linguistic relations are processed and short-term memory intervenes. The second level is the representation of the semantic structure of the text, where the relations between sentences and the global topic of the text are established with the intervention of long-term memory. The third level is the representation of the situation in which the text was produced, activated by the text on the basis of knowledge of the world. During reading, semantic meaning units equivalent to phrases and clauses are built. These are called *semantic propositions* (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). Certain propositions are stored in memory and the microstructure of the text is reduced to its macrostructure, which equals a summary. This is achieved by means of *semantic information reduction operations* (van Dijk, 1977) that transform propositions of the textbase or micropropositions into macropropositions or main ideas. This is possible thanks to a group of cognitive processes that van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) called *macrostrategies*; these include *copy/deletion*, *selection*, *generalisation* and *construction/integration*.



## 2.2.2 Approaches to writing

The three orientations to writing instruction are product-, process- and genre-based approaches. Product approaches focus on form. Process approaches emphasise the writer's cognitive processes, and genre-based approaches address the social context of text production. Hyon (1996) has described the three most prominent genre-based approaches. The Sydney School, the New Rhetoricians, and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). These traditions share the goal of analysing writing in particular contexts, but differ in their intellectual frameworks, educational settings, focus, and use of genre in the classroom. Researchers in ESP are interested in genres as tools for teaching the kinds of writing required of non-native speakers in academic and professional contexts.

## 2.3 Genre-based literacy instruction

The notion of genre is based on the idea that members of a community recognise the texts they use and draw on their experiences to understand and produce such texts. Genres have been defined as “staged, goal-oriented social processes” (Martin, 1993, p. 142), and as “effective ways of getting things done in familiar contexts” (Hyland, 2002, p. 116). The most influential genre-analysis approach has been established by Swales (1990). His framework is based on the analysis of learners' needs and on genre analysis, the examination of the moves or schematic



structures that make up a genre, and their lexico-grammatical realisations. Genre-based pedagogies employ the notion of scaffolding that emphasises the role of interaction with peers and experienced others in learning. The concept has been elaborated into *the teaching-learning cycle* proposed by Feez (1998). This is referred to as a *visible pedagogy* (Hyland, 2007), which shows the process of learning a genre as a series of stages. However, the controversies over the effectiveness of genre-based teaching highlight the need for examining its effects.

## 2.4 Summary-response writing

The summary response has been described as an act of literacy that places demands on reading, writing, and critical thinking. It belongs to the family of tasks called reading to write or writing from sources. In fact, summary writing is a kind of bridge between the texts university students have to understand and those they have to produce (Klein, 2007). It makes linguistic, cognitive, and social demands on the subject: the production of a text by means of reformulation rather than reproduction, the construction of the meaning of the source text, and the adaptation to a communicative situation in a particular social context (Perelman, 2008). This is achieved by means of van Dijk and Kintsch's (1983) *semantic information reduction operations* or macrostrategies that include copy/deletion, selection, generalisation and construction/integration.



The generic structure of a summary response has two sections. The summary section summarises the source text and consists of two moves: an introductory sentence and summary sentences. The response section describes the strengths and weaknesses of the text and consists of three moves: a statement of opinion agreeing or disagreeing with the source text, response sentences, and a concluding sentence. Although the summary response is a valuable genre in academic settings and studies of summary writing in English as a native language have revealed that instruction facilitates summarisation (Brown & Day, 1983; Brown, Day & Jones, 1983), little is known about how EFL students perform this task.

Among the few studies that focus on summary writing at university, Campbell (1990) documented how native and non-native speakers use information from a background reading text. The results demonstrated that non-native speakers relied on copying as the primary method of text integration. In other studies (Johns & Mayes, 1990; Keck, 2006), L2 undergraduate students were also found to rely more on source texts, delete main ideas and distort the meaning of the original. In a similar line of research, in the local context of this investigation, Morra (1996, 1999, 2002, 2003) carried out studies with EFL university students that revealed that the explicit teaching of summary writing has a positive effect.

As regards research into summary-response writing, among the few L1 studies devoted to this genre, Mathison (1996) investigated how undergraduate students wrote critiques and



indicated that they performed the task as a personal response and did not contextualise it within a disciplinary framework. In the area of EFL, Teramoto and Mickan (2008) analysed experiences in writing a critical review and pointed out that students often face difficulties due to their lack of experience in this genre. This reveals the need for more investigations.

## **2.5 Objectives of the present study**

The general objective of this study is to investigate the effect of genre-based instruction on the process of teaching summary-response writing to EFL university students at an advanced level of language proficiency. The specific objectives are to assess whether genre-based instruction in summary-response writing has positive effects on:

- (a) the ratings of students' task performance (collected via test scores);
- (b) observable performance (via analysis of students' summary responses);
- (c) students' abilities and attitudes towards genre-based instruction, and their self-perceptions (via questionnaires and self-assessment checklists); and
- (d) teacher attitudes towards genre-based instruction and materials (via interviews).



## 2.6 Research question

This study intends to answer the following research question: Is genre-based instruction an effective pedagogical tool to teach summary-response writing to EFL university students at an advanced level of language proficiency?

## 2.7 Methodology

This is a quasi-experimental study with no random assignment (one-group, pre- and post-test design) based on quantitative and qualitative methods to collect and analyse the data. It was carried out at Facultad de Lenguas (FL), Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (UNC) during the first semester of the 2010 academic year. This institution offers five-year Teacher Training, Licentiate and Translation Studies programmes in EFL. The subjects were students attending English Language IV, the advanced level at which summary-response writing is taught. A total of 46 students participated in this study. The rest of the participants were one instructor and two raters.

The materials used were genre-based classroom materials aimed at developing the students' knowledge of the genre, an instructor's pack providing guidelines for following the genre-based approach, and a raters' pack providing guidelines for assessing students' performance. In addition, this study employed the following data collection instruments: two summary-response writing tasks, questionnaires (to collect demographic



information about the subjects, information about their abilities and attitudes to summary-response writing and genre-based instruction), self-assessment checklists, and teacher interview protocols (to collect information about the instructor's attitudes to the genre-based approach and materials).

A pre-test was administered at the beginning of April. The subjects received a ten-week period of instruction in summary-response writing. The instructor raised students' awareness of the generic structure of the summary response using genre-based classroom materials, which included five types of activities based on *the cycle of teaching and learning* (Feez, 1998, p. 28):

***Building the social context of the target text:*** promoting students' understanding of the purpose of the text, audience, register, and the roles and relationships of those who read and write it.

*Sample task 1: Read the text and answer the questions that follow in pairs.*

- (a) *What is the text about?*
- (b) *Who can write such a text? To whom? What is the intended audience of this text?*
- (c) *Why was this text written? What is its social purpose?*
- (d) *What is the relationship between the writer and the intended reader?*
- (e) *What is the style/register of the text (formal, semi-formal, informal)?*
- (f) *What is the possible social context or location of the text?*
- (g) *Have you read or written a text like this one before?*

***Modelling:*** deconstructing the genre to analyse its generic structure (i.e., prototypical rhetorical patterns or organisational structure) and language (i.e., lexico-grammatical features)





through language scaffolding tasks, e.g. familiarisation, model manipulation, controlled and guided composition.

*Sample task 2:* Using your knowledge of the generic structure and linguistic features of the genre, read the source text below and reorder the scrambled strips of paper containing the sections of a summary response into a coherent whole so that they follow a logical order.

***Joint construction of the text:*** creating the target text in collaboration with the teacher and peers to relinquish responsibility to the students as they gain control of the genre and confidence in writing. They are guided through the process by means of strategies for generating content, planning, drafting, writing, revising, and editing texts.

*Sample task 3:* In pairs, read the text below and write a summary response. Compare your summary response with that of another pair.

***Independent construction:*** removing scaffolding, allowing students to create texts by themselves and gradually shifting responsibility onto the learners who work through several drafts, consulting the teacher and peers only as needed, and evaluating their progress.

*Sample task 4:* Read the text below and write your first draft of a summary response. Use the self-assessment checklist, peer feedback and revision planning teacher-student conference forms to assess your performance and obtain feedback.



**Linking related texts:** relating the summary response to other texts and contexts by comparing the use of related genres in the same context (e.g. essays from sources, book reviews, annotated bibliographies, and literature reviews) and the same genre in other contexts. This provides opportunities for critiquing and manipulating the genre.

*Sample task 5: Investigate how the summary response is related to other genres that occur in the same or a similar educational institution (i.e., essays from sources, book reviews, annotated bibliographies, literature reviews).*

After this instruction, a post-test was administered. Pre- and post-study questionnaires and self-assessment checklists were also administered to the students, and interviews were held with the instructor.

For the analysis of the ratings of students' performance in summary-response writing tasks, two raters scored students' texts using an analytic scoring scale based on 100 points. The raters scored each of the traits of the summary response (i.e., content, organisation, lexico-grammatical features, context, and mechanics). A final mark was obtained adding up the scores given to each trait and dividing the resulting number by five, the total number of traits. This percentage was transformed into a score on a scale from 1 to 10.

For the analysis of summary-response writing strategies, textual data were broken up into chunks using the clause as the unit of analysis. Each of these chunks was assigned a category which represented a summarisation or a response strategy. The



resulting nominal variables were tallied in frequency counts, and the relative frequency was shown as a percentage. Reliability checks of the coding through *peer checking* (Dörnyei, 2011) were conducted asking a second coder to code a part of the data and reviewing the agreement.

The summarisation strategies used by students were categorised on the basis of van Dijk and Kintsch's (1983) macrostrategies: copy (exact copy, near copy or attempted paraphrase), deletion of secondary ideas, selection of main ideas, generalization, and construction/integration. The critical response strategies used by students were categorised using the guidelines provided by Brehens and Rosen (1982), Browne and Stuart (1998), Dobson and Feak (2001), Podis and Podis (1984), Quitman Troyka (1987), Reid (1988), Swales and Feak (2009), and Wallace and Wray (2008). These strategies were classified into evaluating content (e.g., agreeing, partly agreeing, or disagreeing with the author), presenting one's analysis of source text content and taking a position, justifying one's position (e.g., examples, reasons, consequences, personal anecdotes, background reading material, etc.) and evaluating style (language and rhetorical devices).

For the analysis of questionnaires and self-assessment checklists, the students' responses were reported in raw frequencies and relative frequencies. For the analysis of interviews with the instructor, the answers were transcribed and content analysis was conducted. The interview data were analysed in terms of three categories (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 58): *experiential factors* (the teacher's educational and professional experiences),



*pedagogical factors* (beliefs about writing instruction) and *contextual factors* (opinion about the context of instruction). The information gathered was triangulated.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Results of the ratings of students' performance in summary-response writing tasks

##### 3.1.1 Reliability

Interrater reliability was calculated and this process yielded an interrater reliability percentage of 74%. This showed a good level of agreement between the two raters. Cohen's (1960) Kappa was also used to determine interrater reliability. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for pre-test scores and Table 2 shows the agreement between the raters in the pre-test.

Variable	Median	SD	CV	Min.	Max.	P(05)	P(50)	P(95)
<b>Rater 1</b>								
Pre-test score	2.04	0.47	22.97	1.00	3.00	1.00	2.00	3.00
<b>Rater 2</b>								
Pre-test score	2.07	0.57	27.77	1.00	3.00	1.00	2.00	3.00
<b>Raters 1 &amp; 2</b>								
Pre-test score	2.00	0.56	27.89	1.00	3.00	1.00	2.00	3.00

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Pre-Test Scores (N=46)



Rater	Rater 2				Total
	Pre- test scores				
	1	2	3		
Rater 1	1	2	2	0	4
	2	4	28	4	36
	3	0	1	5	6
Total	6	31	9		46

Table 2. Agreement between the Raters on Pre-Test Scores (N=46)

In the pre-test, the minimum score assigned by each rater was 1 while the maximum score was 3. When analysing the agreement between the raters in the pre-test, Cohen's simple unweighted coefficient determined a statistically significant value of 0.451 ( $p < 0.0001$ ). This indicated a good level of agreement. For this reason, the average of pre-test scores assigned by both raters (2) was considered. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for post-test scores and Table 4 shows the agreement between the raters in the post-test.



Variable	Median	SD	CV	Min.	Max.	P(05)	P(50)	P(95)
<b>Rater 1</b>								
Post-test score	5.65	1.25	22.13	3.00	9.00	3.00	6.00	7.00
<b>Rater 2</b>								
Post-test score	5.46	1.13	20.70	3.00	7.00	3.00	6.00	7.00
<b>Raters 1 &amp; 2</b>								
Post-test score	5.48	1.17	21.34	3.00	8.00	3.00	6.00	7.00

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Post-Test Scores (N=46)

Rater	Rater 2						Total
	Post-test scores						
	3	4	5	6	7 or more		
<b>Rater 1</b>							
Post-test scores	3	3	0	0	0	0	3
	4	0	4	1	0	0	5
	5	0	2	7	1	0	10
	6	0	1	1	14	1	17
	7 or more	0	0	0	5	6	11
<b>Total</b>	3	7	9	20	7		46

Table 4. Agreement between the raters on Post-Test Scores (N=46)

Coefficient of interrater reliability (K=0.647)



In the post-test, the minimum score assigned by each rater was 3 while the maximum score was 9. When analysing the agreement between the raters in the post-test, Cohen’s simple unweighted coefficient determined a statistically significant value of 0.647 ( $p < 0.0001$ ). This indicated a good level of agreement between the raters. For this reason, the average of post-test scores assigned by both raters (5.48) was considered. The ratings of students’ performance were not normally distributed. Therefore, a non-parametric test was used, Wilcoxon Rank Sums. This test compares two sets of scores from the same group before and after the treatment. Results indicated that the mean difference between pre- and post-test scores was 3.48 points. This difference in means is statistically significant ( $p < 0.0001$ ). Table 5 shows the mean difference between pre- and post-test scores and Figure 1 displays the cumulative proportions of post-test score gains.

Mean difference	Pre -test mean	Post -test mean
-3.48	2.00	5.48

Table 5. Mean Difference between Pre- and Post-Test Scores



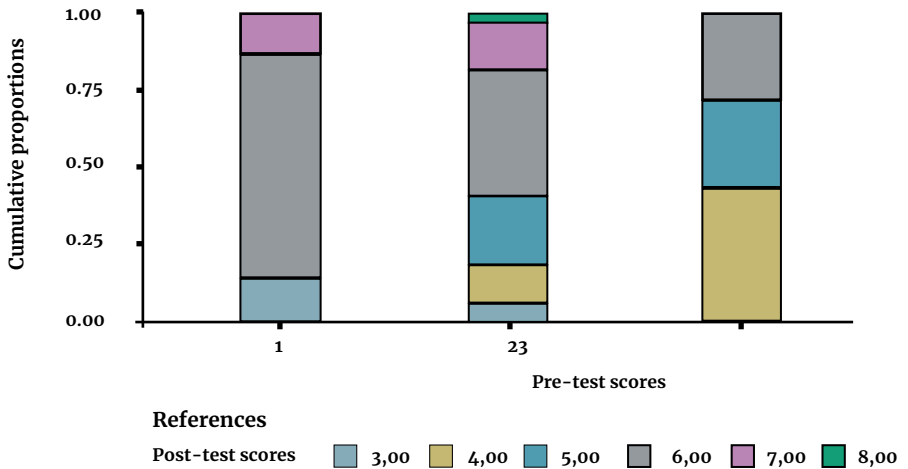


Figure 1. Cumulative proportions of post-test score gains.

This figure shows that the students that obtained the lowest scores in the pre-test obtained the greatest gains in post-test scores. Significant differences in the performance of the group between the pre- and the post-test may be considered evidence of the positive effect of genre-based instruction.

### 3.2 Results of the researcher’s analysis of summary response writing strategies

The reliability checks through peer checking yielded a reliability percentage of 78% and Cohen’s simple unweighted coefficient determined a statistically significant value of 0.361 ( $p < 0.0001$ )



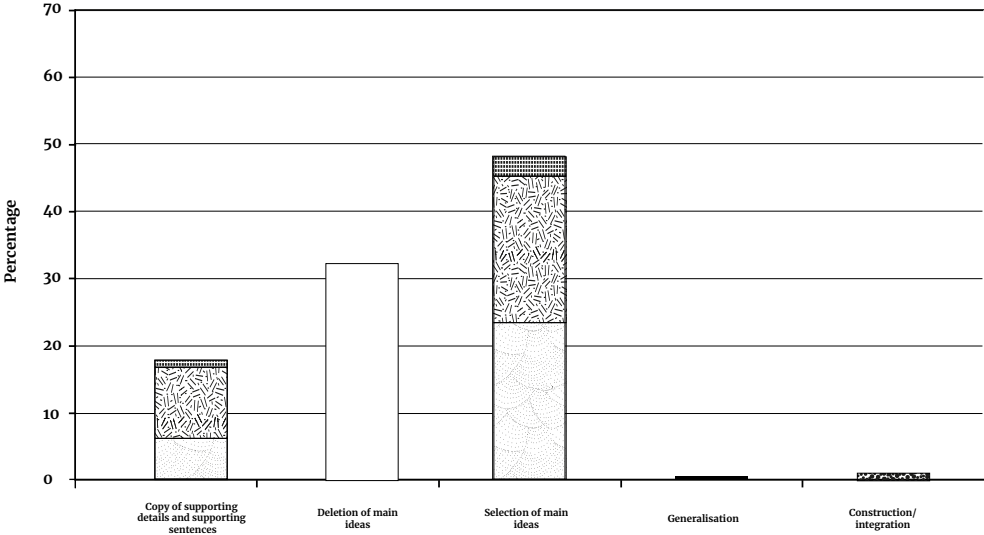


in the pre-test and of 0.800 ( $p < 0.0001$ ) in the post-test, which indicated a good level of agreement.

### 3.2.1 Summary writing strategies

#### 3.2.1.1 Pre-test summarisation strategies

The pre-test summary section was characterised by the use of ineffective summarisation strategies that involved local or microstructural reformulations. Figure 2 shows the summarisation strategies used in the pre-test.



## Reference

### Copy of supporting details and supporting sentences

- Attempted paraphrase
- Near copy
- Exact copy

### Deletion of main ideas



### Selection of main ideas

- Attempted paraphrase
- Near copy
- Exact copy

### Generalisation



### Construction / Integration



Figure 2. Pre-test summarisation strategies.

Even though the most frequent strategy was the selection of main ideas, which represented 48.44% of the total of summarisation strategies in the pre-test, these main ideas were mostly presented by means of copy (i.e., exact copy and near copy with very little attempted paraphrase). The strategy of selection was followed in frequency by the strategy of deletion

of main ideas (32.44%). After this strategy, there came the strategy of copy of supporting details and supporting sentences (17.80%). The more effective strategies of generalisation and construction/integration represented a very small percentage of the total of strategies used (0.44% and 0.88%). In fact, students' strategies were mostly limited to exact copy and near copy with minimum attempted paraphrase, so the resulting summaries were basically literal. Some were a series of quotations and revealed the strategies of copy and deletion. Students considered summary writing as a task involving the selection of content and preservation of linguistic forms. This reveals lack of self-confidence, which characterises novice writers (Perelman, 2008).

### **3.2.1.2 Post-test summarisation strategies**

The post-test summary section was characterised by the use of more effective summarisation strategies that involved global or macrostructural reformulations. Figure 3 shows the summarisation strategies used in the post-test.



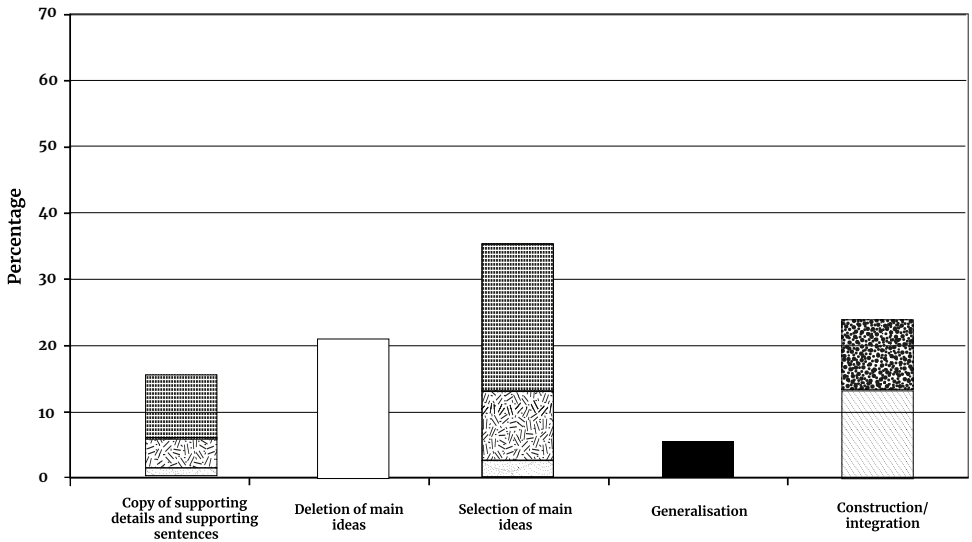


Figure 3. Post-test summarisation strategies.

The most frequent summarisation strategy in the post-test was also the selection of main ideas, which represented 34.82% of the total of summarisation strategies used in the post-test summary section. However, unlike the main ideas selected in the pre-test, these main ideas were mostly presented by means of attempted paraphrase and near copy, with very little exact copy. The strategy of selection was followed by the more effective strategy of construction/integration (23.81%). Students typically constructed the main idea in the introductory paragraph of the source text and integrated the main ideas in the concluding paragraph. After this strategy, there came the strategy of deletion of main ideas

(20.83%). Next came the strategy of copy of supporting details and supporting sentences (15.18%). Nevertheless, again, these supporting details and sentences were mostly presented by means of attempted paraphrase and near copy with very little exact copy. The effective strategy of generalisation was also used (5.36%). Students' strategies were not limited to copy and deletion, so the resulting summaries also revealed the strategies of selection of main ideas by means of attempted paraphrase, generalisation and construction/integration. Students considered the summary as a task involving the selection of content and reformulation of linguistic forms. This reveals the self-confidence of expert writers (Perelman, 2008).

The comparative analysis of the summarisation strategies used by students in the pre- and post-test indicated that, in the post-test, students' summaries improved both qualitatively, in relation to the greater use of the more effective strategies of selection of main ideas by means of attempted paraphrase, generalisation and construction/integration, and quantitatively, in terms of length and main ideas included. In pre-test summaries, subjects worked at a local or microstructural level using ineffective strategies of the copy and delete type whereas, in post-test summaries, they worked at a global or macrostructural level using more effective macrostrategies. In fact, according to van Dijk and Kintsch (1983), mastering macrostructural strategies is harder than using microstructural ones. These results are consistent with previous investigations (Brown & Day, 1983; Campbell, 1990; Johns & Mayes, 1990), which found that L1 and L2



novice students use local rather than global strategies and rely on copy as the method of text integration. They are also in line with studies (Brown & Day, 1983; Morra, 1996, 1999, 2002, 2003) that revealed that instruction facilitates summarisation.

It is possible to state that there have been positive changes in the summarisation strategies used by students in the post-test. The change to more effective strategies can be attributed to the teaching of genre conventions. These results correlate with the ones obtained in the response section.

## **3.2.2 Critical response strategies**

### **3.2.2.1 Pre-test response strategies**

The pre-test response section was characterised by the lack of critical response or the use of ineffective response strategies, which were mostly evaluative but did not reveal critical analysis. Figure 4 shows the response strategies used in the pre-test.

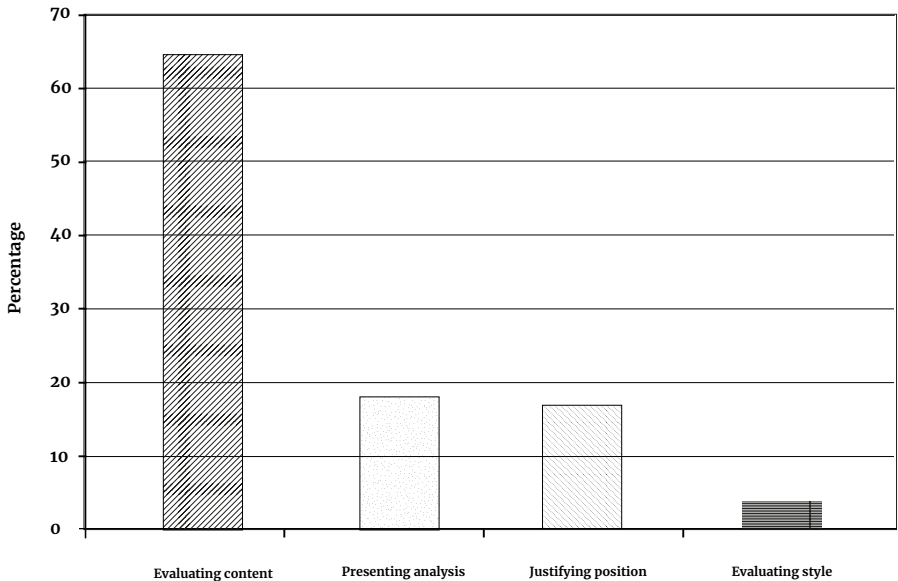


Figure 4. Pre-test response strategies.

Thirty-five per cent of the pre-tests lacked a response section and, in those that had one, the most frequent strategy was evaluating content, which represented 64.22% of the total of response strategies used in the pre-test response section. This strategy was mostly employed by means of reference to the source text, agreement with the author, and assessment of the evidence provided. There were virtually no responses that partially agreed or disagreed with the author, and there was no identification of hidden assumptions or recognition of faulty reasoning. The



strategy of evaluating content was followed in frequency by the strategy of presenting one's analysis (17.43%). After this strategy, there came the strategy of justifying one's position (16.51%). These justifications were only provided by means of examples, causes and reasons, consequences, explanations, and conditions. The strategies of evaluating style represented a very small percentage of the total of strategies used (0.92% and 0.92%). The lack of critical response and the scarce use of the more effective strategies of presenting one's analysis and justifying one's position revealed that these responses were not a reflection of critical analysis but a superficial evaluation or reproduction of the source text. These strategies showed students' poor understanding of the source text, difficulties to analyse it, and lack of knowledge about the genre. This reveals the lack of self-confidence that characterises novice writers (Perelman, 2008).

### **3.2.2.2 Post-test response strategies**

The post-test response section was characterised by the use of more effective critical analysis strategies that involved presenting and justifying one's position satisfactorily. Figure 5 shows the response strategies used in the post-test.





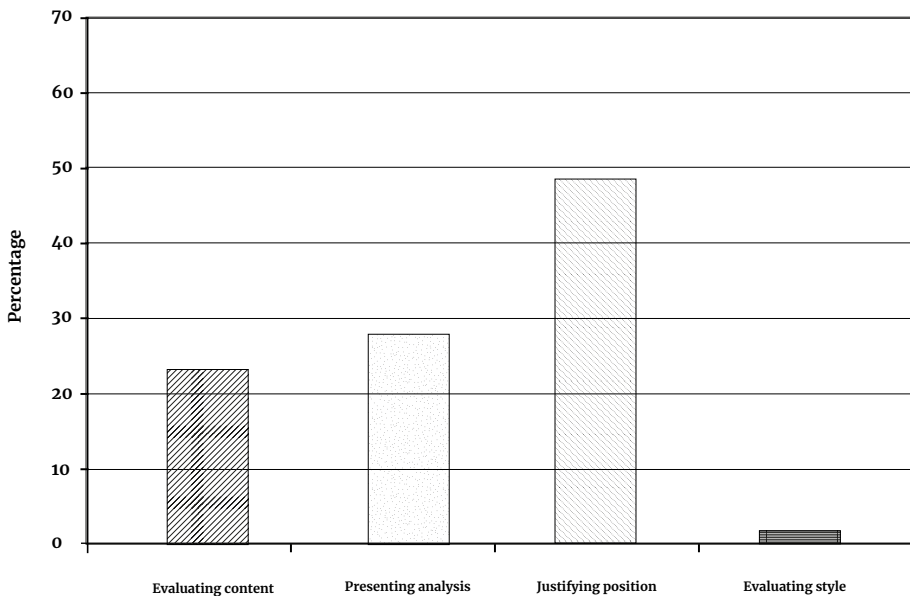


Figure 5. Post-test response strategies.

All post-tests had a response section and the most frequent response strategy was justifying one's position, which represented 48.61% of the total of response strategies used in the post-test response section. Unlike the justifications in the pre-test, these justifications were not only provided by means of explanations, consequences, examples, causes/reasons, and conditions, but also by means of reference to background reading material, personal anecdotes, and facts/statistics. The strategy of justifying one's position was followed in frequency by the strategy of presenting one's analysis (27.51%). After this strategy, there came the strategy of evaluating content (23.24%). However,



this strategy was not only employed by means of agreement with the author, reference to the source text, and assessment of the evidence provided, but also by means of partly agreeing and even disagreeing with the author. The strategies of evaluating style represented a very small percentage of the total of strategies used (0.43% and 0.21%). Nevertheless, on the whole, the wider variety of response strategies and the use of more effective strategies revealed that these responses were a reflection of an evaluation of the source text based on critical analysis. The strategies used showed students' understanding of the source text, their ability to question it and relate it to prior knowledge, and knowledge about the genre. This reveals the self-confidence that characterises expert writers (Perelman, 2008).

The comparative analysis of students' response strategies shows that, in the post-test, students' responses improved both qualitatively, in relation to the use of the more effective analytical strategies of presenting and justifying one's position, and quantitatively, in terms of the length of the response. In fact, in the pre-test, students appear to have written according to the *knowledge-telling model* reproducing the content of the text whereas, in the post-test, they wrote according to the *knowledge-transforming model* (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) since they reformulated source text content. In fact, pre-test response strategies are in agreement with the ineffective strategies reported by Mathison (1996) who also found that students performed this task as a personal response instead of building an argument for or against the information in the text,



and concentrated more on summarising than on responding. The inefficient response strategies in the pre-test are also similar to those reported by Teramoto and Mickan (2008) who documented that students faced difficulties due to their misunderstanding of the critical dimension and the purpose of the genre and tended to privilege the author's interpretation instead of analysing alternative interpretations.

On the basis of the preceding results, it is possible to state that there have been positive changes in the response strategies used by students in the post-test. In conclusion, the results of the analysis of summarisation and response writing strategies seem to indicate that there were gains in the post-test due to the treatment received.

### **3.3 Results of questionnaires**

#### **3.3.1 Demographic information about the subjects**

The pre-study questionnaire revealed that the group was homogeneous as regards native language, age, lack of experience in summary-response writing, and the number of years spent in the English programme. The students were 22 years old on average. Thirty-five were female and 11 were male. They had studied English for seven years on average before entering FL. Thirty-one of these students entered FL in the year 2007, so they were in their fourth year, which corresponds to English Language IV, when the study was carried out. According to information



provided by the FL Teaching Department and the Department of Statistics, this sample was representative of the population investigated.

### 3.3.2 Information about the subjects' abilities

*Question 3 (pre- and post-study): Evaluate your abilities to summarise and respond critically to a text.*

Table 6 summarises the answers to this question.

Summarising		
	Pre-test	Post-test
	No. (%)	No. (%)
<b>Very good</b>	9 (20%)	8 (17%)
<b>Good</b>	29 (63%)	33 (72%)
<b>Fair</b>	7 (15%)	5 (11%)
<b>Weak</b>	1 (2%)	0 (0%)

Responding		
	Pre - test	Post - test
	No. (%)	No. (%)
<b>Very good</b>	6 (13%)	3 (7%)
<b>Good</b>	24 (52%)	28 (61%)
<b>Fair</b>	15 (33%)	14 (30%)
<b>Weak</b>	1 (2%)	1 (2%)

Table 6. Students' Abilities to Summarise and Respond Critically to a Text (N=46)



These results showed that, in the pre-study questionnaire, students were aware that their abilities to summarise texts and respond to them were not very good and some of them were even aware that their abilities were fair or weak. A comparative analysis of students' perceptions of their abilities in the pre- and post-study questionnaires revealed that, after receiving instruction in summary-response writing, fewer students considered their abilities to summarise and respond to a text fair or weak and more students regarded these abilities as good. The number of students who found their abilities very good decreased slightly. Therefore, students perceived that their abilities improved. Given that students became aware of the generic conventions, it is not surprising that the number of students who considered their abilities very good decreased. A possible explanation for this is that students developed *genre knowledge* (Hyland, 2007, p. 56), that is, they became aware of the complexity of the genre.

*Questions 1 and 2 (post-study): After receiving genre-based instruction in summary-response writing, do you consider that your ability to write this genre improved?*

In the post-study survey, 33 students (72%) answered that their ability to write a summary response had improved, 13 students (28%) responded that their ability had improved partly and none (0%) reported that the ability had not improved. This finding is similar to that obtained by Trebucq (2005) who also reported that the subjects in her study considered that genre-based instruction improved their ability to write a business report.



### 3.3.3 Information about the subjects' attitudes

Questions 1 and 2 (pre- and post-study): How difficult is the task of writing a summary response?

Table 7 below summarises their answers to this question.

<b>Difficulty of the tasks</b>	<b>Pre -test No. (%)</b>	<b>Post- test No. (%)</b>
<b>Easy</b>	0 (0 %)	3 (7 %)
<b>Relatively difficult</b>	19 (41 %)	31 (67 %)
<b>Difficult</b>	26 (57 %)	10 (22 %)
<b>Very difficult</b>	1 (2 %)	2 (4 %)

Table 7. Difficulty of Summary-Response Writing Tasks (N=46)

These results revealed that, in the pre-study questionnaire, none of the students found summary-response writing easy and most of them considered it a relatively difficult or difficult task. In contrast, in the post-study questionnaire, although the percentage of students who regarded summary-response writing as very difficult increased slightly, at least a few students found



the task easy and more students considered it relatively difficult rather than difficult. These results showed that, after instruction, the difficulty of the task diminished.

*Questions 3 and 4 (pre- and post-study): How important is the ability to write a summary response for your academic and professional future?*

Their answers to this question are summarised in Table 8.

<b>Importance of the ability</b>	<b>Pre-test No. (%)</b>	<b>Post-test No. (%)</b>
<b>Very important</b>	32 (69%)	36 (78%)
<b>Important</b>	10 (22%)	4 (9%)
<b>Relatively important</b>	4 (9%)	6 (13%)

Table 8. *Importance of Summary-Response Writing (N=46)*

These results revealed that, even if the number of students that considered their ability to write a summary response relatively important increased slightly in the post-test, more students found the task very important, which indicates that they



became aware of the relevance of this genre to their academic and professional future.

*Questions 5 and 6 (post-study): Do you consider that the way in which you learnt to write a summary response (i.e., analysing its purpose, generic structure, and lexico-grammatical features) is effective and enhances your academic literacy?*

In the post-study questionnaire, 43 students (93%) reported that the way in which they learnt to write a summary response was effective, 3 students (7%) answered that it was partly effective, and none of the students (0%) responded that it was not effective. These results were encouraging because they revealed that most students considered that the way in which they learnt to write a summary response was effective and enhanced their academic literacy.

*Question 7 (post-study): Does the way in which you learnt to write a summary response limit your creativity or make you feel self-confident?*

Thirty-six students (78%) answered that the way in which they learnt to write a summary response made them feel self-confident, and 10 students (22%) responded that it limited their creativity. The finding that genre-based instruction made most students feel self-confident may be attributed to the fact that *genre knowledge* (Hyland, 2007, p. 56) enabled students to acquire the generic conventions and writing skills needed to participate in their academic community.





Question 8 (post-study): Evaluate the following aspects of the materials used for genre-based instruction in summary-response writing: (a) quantity of activities, (b) quality of activities, and (c) rubrics.

Table 9 summarises their answers as regards the quantity of activities and Table 10 summarises their answers in relation to the quality of activities.

Quantity of activities	No. (%)
Too many	6 (13%)
Appropriate	40 (87%)
Insufficient	0 (0%)

Table 9. Quantity of Activities (N=46)

Quality of activities	No. (%)
Very good	24 (52%)
Good	20 (44%)
Fair	2 (4%)
Weak	0 (0%)

Table 10. Quality of Activities (N=46)



Regarding the rubrics, 45 students (98%) replied that these were clear, and one student (2%) answered that they were confusing. The fact that 40 students (87%) considered that the quantity of activities was appropriate, 44 students (96%) regarded the quality of activities as very good or good, and 45 students (98%) found the rubrics clear showed that the materials designed for this study seem to have been suitable for this group of students. On the whole, the students' perceptions of genre-based instruction were favourable. Students' answers to the post-study questionnaire revealed that their abilities and their attitudes improved after the treatment.

### **3.4 Results of self-assessment checklist**

Immediately after the pre- and post-tests, students were asked to assess their performance in summary-response writing by putting a tick (✓) next to the activities they considered they had done properly, and a cross (×) next to those activities they were not sure if they had carried out properly or believed that should be improved. Table 11 summarises students' answers:



Checklist question		Frequency of response		
		Pre-test No. (%)	Post-test No. (%)	Gains No. (%)
<b>Content and organisation:</b>	✓	30 (65%)	34 (74%)	
Summary section	✗	16 (35%)	12 (26%)	4 (9%)
<b>Content and organisation:</b>	✓	22 (48%)	30 (65%)	
Response section	✗	24 (52%)	16 (35%)	8 (17%)
<b>Language use:</b>	✓	32 (70%)	36 (78%)	
Lexico-grammatical features	✗	14 (30%)	10 (22%)	4 (9%)
<b>Context:</b>	✓	33 (72%)	38 (83%)	
Purpose, audience and register	✗	13 (28%)	8 (17%)	5 (11%)
<b>Mechanics</b>	✓	35 (76%)	36 (78%)	1 (2%)
	✗	11 (24%)	10 (22%)	

Table 11. *Differences in Self-Assessment Checklists between Pre- and Post-Test (N=46)*

These results revealed that, as expected, there were gains in students' self-assessment between the pre- and post-test. There may be two possible explanations for the fact that the gains were not very considerable. First, even if many subjects considered that they carried out the activities to complete the summary-response



writing task effectively in the pre-test, this may be due to the fact that students may have initially underestimated the difficulty of the task. Another possible explanation is that the high number of ticks in the pre-test checklist may have been the result of the *desirability effect* (Dörnyei, 2011, p. 54) by which subjects give positive answers in order to meet the teacher's expectations. Nevertheless, in all aspects, there were gains in the post-test, which demonstrates that students believed that they improved.

### **3.5 Results of interviews with the instructor**

The instructor is an EFL teacher who holds the Chair of English Language IV, and was chosen on the basis of her experience in teaching EFL university students at an advanced level. She has taught writing to such students for more than ten years.

As regards pedagogical factors, in the post-study interview, the instructor confirmed that the genre-based approach was an effective tool to teach summary-response writing to EFL university students at an advanced level. She maintained that the *teaching-learning cycle* was an efficient way of sequencing tasks as long as there was time available within the course schedule. She stated that the scaffolding on the part of the instructor required in the early stages of learning a genre reflected a teacher role that was necessary rather than restrictive. In her view, genre-based pedagogies serve to counteract some of the negative consequences of methodologies that have resulted from



communicative approaches which emphasise the process of writing at the expense of the final product.

In terms of contextual factors, in the post-study interview, the instructor expressed that both the genre-based materials and the activities designed for this study were effective and suitable for the context. She believed that these facilitated the teaching and learning processes for three main reasons. First, the materials were elaborated taking into account the objectives of the course and the level and difficulties of the students. Second, the materials were relevant to the course, and the activities were adequately graded. Third, all the tasks were presented in a single set at the beginning of the academic year, which was beneficial from the point of view of class planning and time management.

The teacher emphasised that the genre-based approach seemed to have had a positive effect on students' performance. She noted it had a considerable impact on students' abilities, their attitudes and self-perceptions in relation to summary-response writing. The instructor concluded that this study represented a thorough investigation of genre theory and its practical application to the teaching of summary-response writing which was both pedagogically and contextually appropriate.

#### **4. Impact and Conclusions**

The triangulation of the results obtained makes it plain that genre-based instruction is an effective pedagogical tool to teach summary-response writing to EFL university students in the



context of this study. These results could contribute to enhancing the teaching of EFL reading and writing in the English Language courses offered at Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba. They could also be applied to other academic literacy courses aimed at developing awareness of effective summary writing strategies and ways of responding critically to texts.

A future line of investigation could assess the effect of genre-based instruction on the process of teaching summary-response writing to students at other levels. Moreover, since the subjects in this study had experience in writing academic English, a follow-up study could be carried out including inexperienced subjects, for example, secondary school students, and experienced subjects, for instance, graduate students. The present study could also be replicated in other contexts, i.e., tertiary institutions. There is also need for studies with larger groups of students and longitudinal studies investigating the long-term effect of the treatment.

It has been my intention to illuminate the potential of genre-based pedagogy for the teaching of EFL literacy. However, although effective literacy instruction practices may be described, they cannot be prescribed but can only be achieved when teachers adapt instruction to their learners' needs. I hope this study has contributed to a greater understanding of how literacy might most appropriately be taught, and thrown light on the complex processes of academic reading and writing, which are worth exploring further since only by so doing is it possible to move towards enhancing EFL academic literacy.



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# Writing about acquired disciplinary knowledge: On contextual relevance

Angélica Gaido



**Angélica Gaido** holds an MA in English and Applied Linguistics. She lectures in Text Grammar at Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Argentina. Her current research focuses on the relationship between knowledge about language, reading and writing skills development and content learning. Her areas of interest and publications revolve around language literacy, genre pedagogy, and functional aspects of grammar and language.



## Abstract

This work explores written text production about acquired disciplinary knowledge in the context of assessment at university. The analysis focuses on the contextual appropriateness of texts written in examinations, considering their relevance in relation to the demands of task instructions. The objects of analysis are texts produced in the *Grammar II* course by students in the teaching, translation and research-oriented English study programs at Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba. Drawing on the theoretical and methodological tools of the "Sydney School" (Martin & Rose, 2008; Rose & Martin, 2012), which relies on the general conceptual framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1985a; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), the study describes the contextual features that impose restrictions on students' written texts and analyzes the generic configuration of the responses to determine whether they achieve their goals. The findings show that the unexpected structural configuration of the responses and the lack of



expected phases in the textual development are visible sources of ineffectiveness. As was hypothesized, the inability to adapt the acquired conceptual constructs to the demands of the new context seems to be a major source of failure. Although the study has been carried out in a foreign language and in a specific field, it has been based on the belief that many of the problems observed are also present in texts produced in other disciplines and in the L1. The results of these explorations are expected to contribute to a thorough understanding of the complexities involved in writing about disciplinary knowledge in different contexts and thus enrich pedagogical interventions.



## 1. The Problem

Being actively involved in university life implies learning the types of activities that are conventionally carried out in this context together with the language required to perform them. This is certainly a complex achievement, as academia is about the construction and dissemination of specialized disciplinary knowledge, activities that are far away from the common-sense doings of everyday life and based on different demands from those required in previous stages in the educational process. Students' apprenticeship into a field implies learning the ways in which the discipline construes and structures its knowledge, predominantly in written forms, and also being able to produce written texts using that knowledge in contextually relevant ways.

One of the primary purposes of disciplinary writing at university is knowledge demonstration, which generally occurs in the context of formal assessment. Students take courses in which they acquire specialized knowledge and then are required to produce texts showing their competence to account for discipline-specific conceptual constructs. Disciplinary writing is eminently about field construction and thus, ideational meanings –those related to content– are a core issue. However, writing about acquired disciplinary knowledge also demands abilities to make those meanings in new environments with different purposes. Effective text production in this context involves understanding the conventionalized requirements of assessment at university, interpreting the goals established by task instructions, and being





able to follow the necessary steps to achieve the purpose of the written activity.

The production of successful texts is not only tied to the knowledge of content but also to the ability to adapt the acquired conceptual constructs to the demands of new contexts. This implies the flexible manipulation of field-specific knowledge so that it can be restructured into different generic configurations that meet the requirements of the assessment task. The structuring of content is a highly relevant component of textual coherence, since a text that lacks appropriate content organization will probably fail to achieve its goal independently of how accurate the construction of field may be. In general, the obstacles students face are associated to the technicality and abstraction of the new disciplines. However, this study is based on the hypothesis that, in many cases, what undermines the effectiveness of students' texts is an organization of information that fails to match the demands of the context. The analysis thus focuses on the structuring of disciplinary knowledge in students' written productions in the context of assessment and on the appropriateness of the organization of information in those texts. The aim is to explore whether students produce texts with the expected generic configuration, including the stages and phases required to achieve their goals.

The objects of study are texts produced by students of the course English Grammar II<sup>1</sup>, which is taught in the teaching,

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1. The course is taught in the third year of the English programmes. The students' level of language proficiency is expected to be upper-intermediate, though it is rather uneven.



translation, and research-oriented English study programs at Facultad de Lenguas (FL), Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (UNC). These students share the difficulties described above, with the additional complexity of having to do most of their academic work in a foreign language. The written productions, part of a more extensive examination, are about a linguistic phenomenon studied in the course.

The analysis draws on the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), whose foundations were laid by M. A. K. Halliday (1978, 1985a, 1985b) and which was further elaborated by Hasan (1985, 1995) and Matthiessen (1995, 2009). In particular, this work rests on the concept of genre developed within a variety of the model proposed by Martin (1992, 1994, 1995, 1997), which has evolved in Australia since the early 80s.

A functional analysis of the texts and of the semiotic complexities involved in their production is expected to shed light on the problems students face when they need to use language meaningfully in a given context.

## **2. The Approach to the Problem**

### **2.1 A model of language in context**

SFL proposes a comprehensive model of language in context that allows us to understand the ways in which human beings use language for the realization of different meanings as they engage in social life. Language and context are two inseparable



constructs: a social reality is itself an "edifice of meanings" –a semiotic construct loaded with social values– and language is one of the semiotic systems that realizes that social reality. Thus context and text may be understood as aspects of the same process (Halliday, 1985b, p. 5; Halliday & Martin, 1993, p. 26). Figure 1 illustrates the model of language in context and the relationship of mutual predictability that holds between both. The text, as an instance of the linguistic system, realizes an instance of the context.

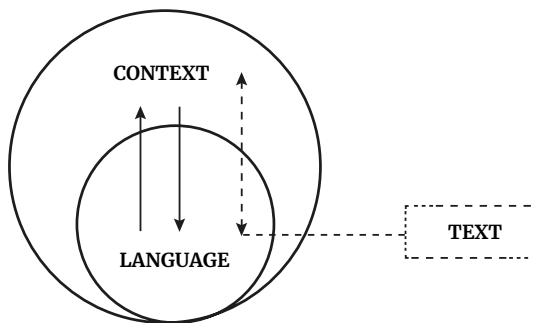


Figure 1. Language, context and text.

As texts always unfold in a context, they are to be interpreted in the environment in which they occur: “Texts are social processes and need to be analyzed as manifestations of the culture they in large measure construct” (Martin, 1992, p. 494).



Halliday (1978) designed a model of language in which the context of a text is construed as a semiotic system (or systems) manifested through language (among other semiotic systems):

The semiotic structure of the situation is formed out of the three socio-semiotic variables of field, tenor and mode. These represent in systematic form the type of activity in which the text has significant function (field), the status and role relationships involved (tenor) and the symbolic mode and rhetorical channels that are adopted. (p. 122)

The field, tenor, and mode together determine the text through the specification of what Halliday calls the "register". These register variables, which model the immediate context of situation, are reflected in the choices made within the linguistic system which, as stated above, are instantiated in texts. This is outlined in Figure 2 below.

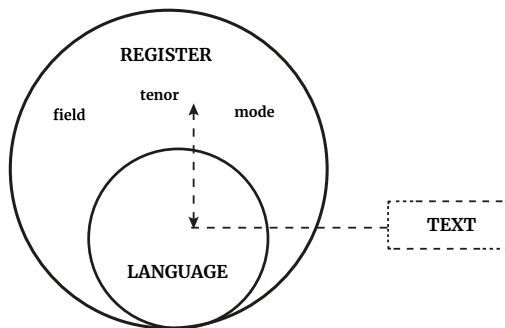


Figure 2. Register variables, language and text.



Drawing on Bakhtin’s (1986) work on speech genres, Martin (1992) proposes a stratified interpretation of context in which there is a plane above the immediate context of situation: the context of culture (also Eggins & Martin, 1997). This is a plane of higher abstraction and can be interpreted as a system of social processes or genres, with register functioning as its expression form and language functioning as the expression form of register. The following figure illustrates the stratification of context into two planes. The recontextualization of register within a broader context of social processes implies that genres are realized through configurations of register variables, which, in turn, are realized through linguistic choices:

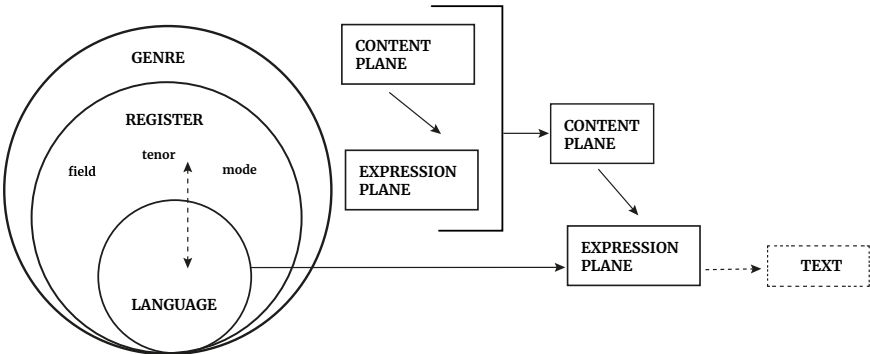


Figure 3. A stratified model of context as language’s content plane.



Genre is a semiotic category of the context of culture. Martin (1984) defines it as “a staged, goal-oriented purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture” (p. 25). This social activity is realized through register: a genre is a particular configuration of register variables of field, tenor and mode that enacts the social practices of a given culture (Martin & Rose, 2007, 2008). This conceptualization, which implies that a genre is not conceived of as a linguistic unit but as a social process, is grounded in two fundamental aspects: its purpose, or social function, and the steps that are followed in order to achieve that purpose.

The objectives that govern a genre generate text structure (Martin, 1992, p. 505). That is, the text, as the linguistic dimension of the goal-oriented social process, displays a compositional structure or "schematic structure" that hierarchically and sequentially organizes the social purpose of the genre (Figure 4). In general, the achievement of this purposeful activity implies more than one step so the schematic structure is generally made up of stages (more than one) through which more specific goals are achieved. Each stage in the genre contributes a part of the overall meanings that must be made for the genre to be accomplished successfully (Eggins, 2004, p. 59). In turn, stages, which are highly predictable segments in each genre, consist of one or more phases that vary in relation to field (Rose, 2006).



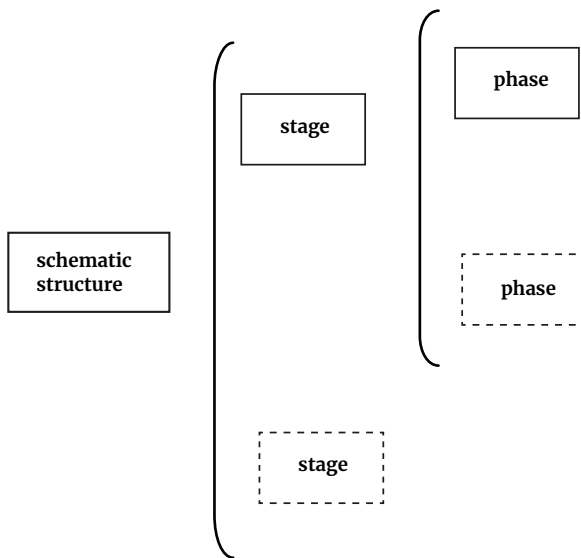


Figure 4. Generic layers of structure.

Genres have predictable compositional structures, which are realized by relatively stable linguistic forms that respond to the more or less standardized character of social activities. The schematic structure of the text, which is generated at the level of genre, is in turn realized through more specific choices within register. Each genre can be produced in a variety of situations, so the overall goal of a text is realized through selections within a more immediate context plane organized into field, tenor and mode.

## 2.2 Towards a systematic classification of genres and texts

Martin (1992) suggests that the similarities and differences between text structures, which define text types, can serve to formulate genre networks. Martin and Rose (2008) propose a systemic organization of genres that accounts for their relatedness. Genres are grouped according to their central purpose as "engaging", "informing" or "evaluating" genres. As informing genres are the ones typically involved in knowledge acquisition and demonstration in undergraduate education, this study focuses on three genre families whose main communicative purpose is to inform: reports, explanations and procedures. Figure 5 sets out a taxonomy of informing genres and their structural realization through stages that hierarchically and sequentially organize their goals.





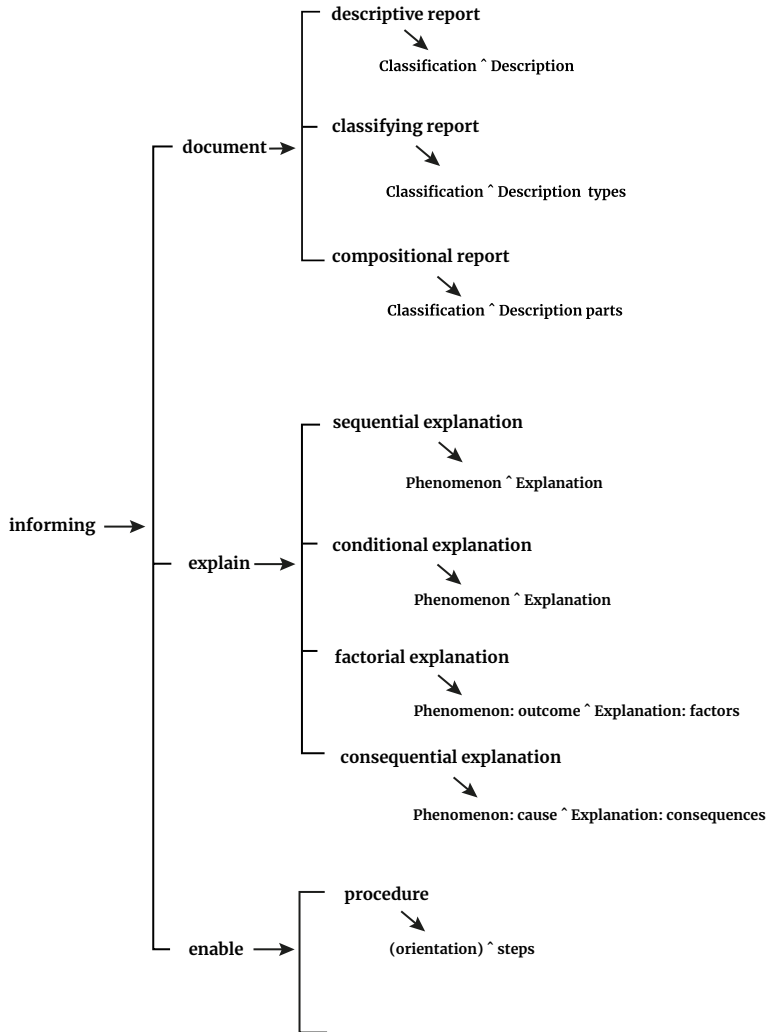


Figure 5. Informing genres and stages (Adapted from Veel, 1997, p. 171).



Within the broader goal of informing, the terms “document”, “explain”, and “enable” cover a range of functions and purposes for the genres under scrutiny. So the goal of a descriptive report, for example, is to be read as informing, more specifically, documenting by classifying and describing a phenomenon or entity.

### **2.3 Contextual aspects of students’ written productions**

Within the SFL model of language, texts cannot be understood independently of the social environment in which they are produced. Language is a semiotic system whose function is to make meanings in context and thus, any instance of language in use should display correspondences with semiotically relevant aspects of context. These tenets about the functional nature of language and its dialectical relationship with the more abstract semiotic systems of context impose methodological considerations that are relevant for the analysis of students’ written productions. In particular, texts as objects of study cannot be looked at as self-contained linguistic artifacts, precisely because they are instances of social processes.

As already mentioned, every text is the instantiation of a goal-oriented activity which is realized through patterns of meanings related to the type of institutional activity that is carried out (field), the roles of the language users engaged in communication (tenor) and the role of language in the interaction (mode).



As regards the field of discourse, it is relevant to mention that the institutional setting is undergraduate education and the goal to be achieved through text production is assessment, which involves knowledge demonstration. In any learning cycle, students have access to disciplinary knowledge through different types of texts, both spoken and written, and then they are expected to be able to demonstrate what they have learnt in different ways. Within the subject area of grammar, students are supposed to be able to display sound reasoning skills when describing or explaining linguistic phenomena (though this also holds for any field of study at university). This involves the ability to conceptualize different aspects of the complex semiotic system of language and also to display institutionally valued reasoning processes, which involve the capacity of clarifying and expanding on concepts, and linking the realm of abstraction with concrete examples.

It is also relevant to consider that students' texts, independently of the genre they belong to, are not spontaneously produced; instead, they typically emerge as a response to task instructions given by teachers as part of the academic training in discipline-specific knowledge. Thus students' written productions cannot be analyzed or understood without accounting for the genre with which they interact.

In terms of genre, task instructions are procedures whose goal is to direct students to do discipline related activities. These texts orient the type of activity that the students are expected to do, requiring actions such as conceptualizing, exemplifying,



explaining, identifying, and comparing, among others, which involve complex cognitive skills. The schematic structure of task instructions unfolds in steps that regulate students' performance. As we know, genres generally develop in more than one stage; however, these types of procedures may be brief and specific, presupposing steps that are assumed to be part of the students' knowledge about certain field-specific procedures. For instance, task instructions may demand conceptualization and exemplification but most probably they will not explicitly require that students relate the concrete instances to the concepts, even though it will be an expected phase in the response. These types of implied sequences are characteristic of procedures in undergraduate academic settings, as students are expected to be already acquainted with different cognitive mechanisms required to carry out the demanded activities. The task instructions impose restrictions on the field and on the generic configuration of the response: they narrow down the required conceptual domain and they also determine the generic configuration of the response that the students must produce, as they orient the type of process that should be carried out—for example explaining, describing or classifying.

The nature of task instructions and the restrictions imposed by the genre lead to the consideration of the tenor of the situation. Task instructions have a regulative function and establish a complex interpersonal relationship between teacher and student. They impose asymmetrical roles for the interlocutors as the initiating move in the exchange is produced by the expert and



addressed to a non-expert who has to interpret and comply with restrictive demands. On the other hand, there is frequent contact between both interactants, which may be a source of conflict as in general terms it implies that "more can be left unsaid" (Martin, 1992, p. 531).

Students' responses then are not autonomous texts. Task instructions function as a "contract" that establishes what kind of features students' productions should display (Natale & Stagnaro, 2014; Vázquez, Pelliza, Jakob, & Rosales, 2006), and if the restrictions imposed are not understood and complied with, the responses will be perceived as incoherent. The interpretation of task instructions is thus an essential dimension in the production of coherent texts. So if the genre of the response is not the expected one, for example, the text will be perceived as discontinuous and incoherent, even if it develops accurate conceptual knowledge.

The task as a whole can be described as a co-constructed text in which both teachers and students are text producers and addressees at the same time: the former elaborate the procedure and assess the response, whereas the latter interpret the procedure and produce the response. This is an interactive situation in which one genre engages in dialogue with the other. But the conditions of this interaction are those inherent to the written mode, which adds complexity to the exchange and thus to students' text production. In spite of the task's apparent joint construction of meanings, there is no immediacy in the exchange and thus text interpretation and production are to be entirely carried out by the



students. Besides, the responses are expected to display context independency as they are the only semiotic system students can rely on to make the intended meanings. In other words, in spite of the dialogical nature of the communicative event, students' productions are expected to be written, monologic texts.

## 2.4 Task instructions design and data collection

To collect data for text analysis I designed a set of instructions that was meant to be part of a more extensive examination on different resources for text creation. The target of the designed task instructions was conceptual knowledge on the linguistic phenomenon of *reference*, which was one of the assessed topics together with other cohesive resources, syntactic relations between clauses, and logico-semantic relations. Reference was chosen as the topic of the task because of the acquaintance of the students with the resource: it is addressed in the first years of the grammar and language courses students take both in their L1 and L2 and it is revisited in our course from a Systemic-Functional perspective. The familiarity with the resource was expected to allow students to devote more attention to the required conceptualizations, the metalanguage needed to build up the field accurately, and relevant features of textual organization. Another aspect considered for the elaboration of the task was that the answer should transcend knowledge reproduction, that is, mere repetition of the information accessed in the source texts read for the development of conceptual knowledge. The length of



the response was pre-determined (10–12 lines), imposing further restrictions on the selection of relevant concepts.

These considerations gave rise to the following task<sup>2</sup>:

*What are the similarities and differences between endophoric and exophoric reference? Illustrate with relevant examples. (10–12 lines)*

## 2.5 Scope of analysis

Considering that the texts written by students are not autonomous but related to a set of instructions to which students respond, the generic analysis of the instructions was taken as the point of departure to predict the generic configuration of the response.

Task instructions are procedural genres that can vary in relation to the type of activity demanded (verbal or non-verbal) and also in their length (one or more steps may be taken to direct students to perform the activities required for knowledge demonstration). In this case, the activities to be carried out are indicated in two steps: the first one requires conceptualization, whereas the second one demands exemplification.

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2. The exam in which the task was included was done by 51 students belonging to the evening shift of the course *Grammar II*. The analysis focused on dimensions related to the sequential organization of information in texts, overlooking other types of linguistic problems which, though relevant, were not the object of the present study.



**Step 1** *What are the similarities and differences between endophoric and exophoric reference?*

**Step 2** *Illustrate with relevant examples.*

This procedure arguably presupposes a third step, which is the elaboration of the relationship between the examples and the conceptualization demanded. It may be speculated that this third step is not explicitly stated, as in academic settings students are assumed to know that being able to establish relationship between concepts and examples is an expected reasoning activity in the process of knowledge demonstration.

The first step restricts both the aspect of field to be developed in the response and the way in which these experiential meanings should be schematically organized. The field is narrowed down to the description of features of endophoric and exophoric reference that should be organized as a descriptive report structured in phases of similarities and differences. That is, the features of endophoric and exophoric reference are not expected to be mentioned in relation to each one of the types, as would be the case of a classifying report, but they should be organized around their commonalities and differences. On the other hand, the second step in the task instructions anticipates a further phase within the required description: the exemplification of the concepts developed.

The analysis of the procedure reveals that the expected genre is a descriptive report, which, as already mentioned, prototypically





unfolds through two stages: Classification ^ Description. In this case, the classification stage is considered to be optional, as the information to be potentially included there has already been mentioned in the task instructions. That is, a potential Classification stage in the response would refer to the existence of commonalities and differences between endophoric and exophoric reference and, as that is information already mentioned in the instructions, it may be omitted. This is so because, as the response is complementary to the task instructions, it can afford to be elliptical as long as the negotiated content can be recovered from the previous move (Martin & Rose, 2007, p. 223).

In line with the analysis above, the expected schematic structure<sup>3</sup> of the response was:

stages: (Classification) ^ Description

phases: similarities ^ differences ^ examples ^ elaboration  
of examples

Since genres are not fixed, formulaic activities (Macken & Slade, 1993; Martin, 1993, 1994), some degree of variability was expected in relation to the predicted schematic structure of the texts. Apart from the optional realization of a Classification stage,

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3. The analysis of the schematic structure of the texts follows these conventions: (a) the horizontal lines signal boundaries between functional components of texts; (b) the round brackets and labels in the left-hand column signal stages in texts; and (c) the round brackets and labels in the right-hand column signal the phases that realize textual stages.



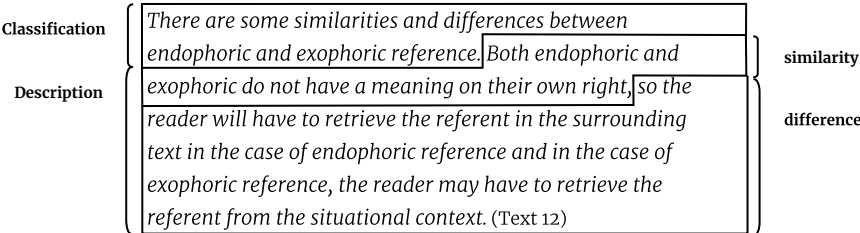
it was speculated that additional stages might be included in some texts for the sake of expansion of certain meanings and that phase sequencing could have alternative realizations.

### 3. Results and Discussion

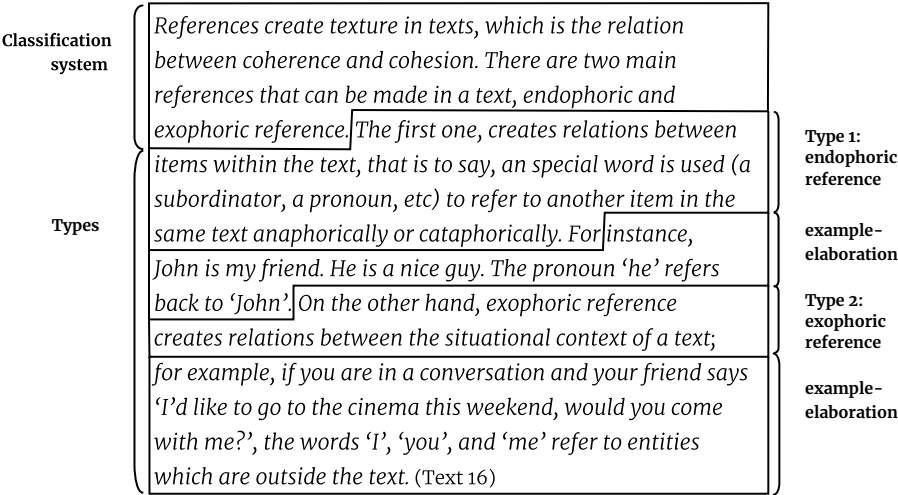
An analysis of the compositional structure of the responses shows that many of the texts in the corpus do not display the expected structural configuration, which reveals the existence of obstacles in the successful achievement of the goal of the activity. Whereas 27 out of 51 texts contain the functional components determined in the task instructions, that is, similarities, differences, examples, elaboration, the other 24 texts fail to do so.

Within the texts that do not display the predicted compositional structure, some recurrent patterns can be identified.

a. Description of similarities and differences without exemplification and/or elaboration phases:



b. Classification of endophoric and exophoric reference as different types of the same phenomenon instead of description of similarities and differences between them:



c. Classification of types of reference and lack of elaboration and/or exemplification :



Types

*Endophoric reference has to do with the relation between items that are inside the text, but in different clauses. These items cannot be fully decoded except for referring to another item mentioned in the same text. It makes the text cohesive.*

**Type 1:  
endophoric  
reference**

*As regards exophoric reference, it has to do with coherence since the reference is in the context and not within the text. It helps establish a relation between the text and the situational context (what is being said, the people involved in the situation, and the role language plays in the interaction).  
(Text 1)*

**Type 2:  
exophoric  
reference**

d. Failure to describe similarities/differences between endophoric and exophoric reference:

Description

*The difference between endophoric and exophoric reference is that endophoric reference is the one found inside the text.*

**difference**

*For instance, in the text when it says: 'It seems to get at the causes', it refers back mindfulness might be really important.*

**example  
elaboration**

*Also, in the text when it refers to the decline of cognitive control. 'This happens among healthy adults'. This refers back to the decline noticeably in the 70s and 80s.*

**example  
elaboration**

*On the other hand, exophoric reference is the reference that cannot be tracked in the text but outside of text.*

**difference**

*For example, in the text in the first paragraph the author writes: 'the X-box'. This is an element that has no referents present in the text but that can be inferred from everyday life or the general knowledge of the technological world. (Text 45)*

**example  
elaboration**



Table 1 summarizes the description of the compositional structure of the texts in the corpus:

<b>Texts with expected functional components</b>			<b>27</b>
<b>Texts without expected functional components</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. No examples/elaboration</li> <li>b. Classification of endophoric/exophoric reference <b>with</b> examples/elaboration</li> <li>c. Classification of endophoric/exophoric reference <b>without</b> examples/elaboration</li> <li>d. No similarities/differences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9</li> <li>11</li> <li>2</li> <li>2</li> </ul>	<b>24</b>

Table 1. *Compositional Structure of Responses*

The most recurrent problems observed in the structure of the response are: (i) the generic configuration as a classification of types of reference -endophoric and exophoric- instead of a description of their similarities and differences (b & c in Table 1), and (ii) the absence of phases of exemplification and/or elaboration of examples (a & c in Table 1). Although all these responses fail to display the expected phases, they seem to pose obstacles of a different nature. Whereas the lack of exemplification



is detrimental to the process of knowledge demonstration, the failure to address the aspects required in the task instructions also renders the text incoherent or at least problematic, and requires a greater effort on the part of the reader to make sense of the students' texts as a response to the task instructions.

### **3.1 Classifying report: an unexpected genre**

The presence of classification phases of endophoric and exophoric reference in some responses raises the issue of coherence. In these cases there seems to be an interruption of textual continuity, as the development of a classifying report in the task response counters the expectations created in the instructions. As has already been mentioned, although the task instructions do demand information about endophoric and exophoric reference, they determine at the same time the organization of this information into aspects that both types of reference share and features that distinguish one from the other. Therefore, the responses that taxonomize endophoric and exophoric reference and describe features of each one of the types in turn produce a sense of discontinuity or textual incoherence.

Many of the answers that present this structural configuration show conceptual accuracy and seem to be coherent if they are read as texts in their own right and not as part of an interaction. The response below, for example, classifies reference into endophoric and exophoric and describes each one of the types, providing relevant examples and elaborating on them:



Classification system	Reference can be endophoric and exophoric. The former type of reference can be a cohesive device that is used to refer to an element explicitly mentioned in a discourse. Endophoric reference can be anaphoric –when it points at an element that was mentioned earlier in discourse– or cataphoric– when it points at an element that will be mentioned later.	Type 1: endophoric reference
	For example, in ‘I met a girl. Her name is Jane’, ‘her’ makes anaphoric reference to ‘a girl’, whereas in ‘He told me who she is. She’s his girlfriend’, ‘she’ makes cataphoric reference to ‘his girlfriend’.	
Types	On the other hand, exophoric reference points at an element that is part of the communicative context of the discourse’s occurrence, and so it can never be a cohesive device.	Type 2: exophoric reference
	For example: ‘I don’t know where I left my wallet’; in this case, ‘I’ and ‘my’ makes reference to the speaker. (Text 13)	

Although this production presents an accurate conceptual development, it turns out to be problematic when read as a move in the task instructions-task response exchange, which is a semantic unit and thus needs to be considered as a whole. From this perspective then, texts whose responses classify and describe endophoric and exophoric reference look rather incoherent as there seems to be no continuity between the moves. This becomes more noticeable if task instructions and response are read together:



*What are the similarities and differences between endophoric and exophoric reference? Illustrate with relevant examples.*

*Reference can be endophoric and exophoric. The former type of reference can be a cohesive device that is used to refer to an element explicitly mentioned in a discourse. Endophoric reference can be anaphoric –when it points at an element that was mentioned earlier in discourse– or cataphoric –when it points at an element that will be mentioned later... On the other hand, exophoric reference...*

As the task instructions revolve around similarities and differences and the response classifies endophoric and exophoric reference, there is an interruption in the textual continuity, which renders the text problematic.

Whereas in the expected responses about similarities and differences the presence of a classification stage seems to be optional and appears not to make any difference, its occurrence in responses that classify endophoric and exophoric reference seems to have a particular impact. The instructions *What are the similarities and differences between endophoric and exophoric reference* presuppose the existence of commonalities and differences between both types of reference and may thus be taken as a form of classification. Therefore, no relevant difference is perceived between descriptive reports that include a classification stage and those that do not. In contrast, the inclusion of a classification stage in the responses that classify reference as endophoric and exophoric appears to have an impact on the texture of the texts.

The classifying reports that start with a classification stage, like text 13 above, seem to be more problematic since the expectation of similarities and differences as structural





components is straightforwardly contradicted. That is, the reader expects the description of similarities and differences between two types of reference but instead gets a classification of these types.

In the cases mentioned above, the classification stage seems to interrupt textual continuity, thus making the text problematic. However, the responses that unfold around endophoric and exophoric reference (classifying reports) which lack that stage also look discontinuous. This can be seen in the following example:

*What are the similarities and differences between endophoric and exophoric reference? Illustrate with relevant examples*

<b>Types</b>	<i>Endophoric reference is realized through the interpretation of a lexical item within the text by recouring to another term, which may precede or follow the content word (referent) it is referring to,</i>	<b>Type 1: endophoric reference</b>
	<i>for example in ‘these effects generally decline by the third year, if not sooner’, the adverb sooner is an instance of endophoric reference since it points back to ‘by the third year’, which is information that is found in the text itself.</i>	<b>example elaboration</b>
	<i>On the other hand, exophoric reference is realized through the context in which a text is produced, that is to say, part of the information we as readers/listeners need,</i>	<b>Type 2: exophoric reference</b>
	<i>has to be found outside the text,</i>	<b>example elaboration</b>
	<i>such as in the sentence ‘Look at that!’, the reader/listener has to turn to the context in which the interaction is taking place so as to retrieve the meaning of the demonstrative pronoun that. (Text 2)</i>	



Even lacking a classification stage, the response above describes each type of reference in turn, without explicitly referring to similarities and differences. It is the teacher-reader, then, who has to reconstruct the text as a response to the task instructions.

### **3.2 An interpretation of the development of unexpected stages and phases**

The development of unexpected phases of endophoric and exophoric reference in the response may be related to the complexity of the cognitive mechanisms required to manipulate conceptual knowledge so that it becomes an adequate response to those instructions. One could speculate that the obstacle some students face is not only task comprehension but also the difficulty or inability to follow the logical steps required to produce an adequate response. That is, students seem to manage to describe features of endophoric and exophoric reference, but they fail to organize them around similarities and differences, for which they should be able to compare those features, group them and reorganize them in the text they produce. All these cognitive mechanisms are implied in the task instructions and students should be able to activate them to produce effective texts.

An analysis of the organization of experiential meanings in the responses that unfold in phases of endophoric and exophoric reference reveals some recurrent patterns. The texts that display these phases instead of similarities and differences tend to



mention certain descriptive features first in relation to one type of reference and then in relation to the other, as shown in the following classifying report:

Types	<p><i>Exophoric reference may be retrievable from the immediate context of situation. It makes reference to the shared immediate context. It is non-cohesive.</i> For example, if</p>	} <b>Type 2: exophoric reference</b>
	<p><i>somebody says to you ‘Put it there’ and we are in the same place at the same time, you will be able to decode ‘it’ as referring to whatever object that person is pointing at.</i></p>	} <b>example-elaboration</b>
	<p><i>Endophoric reference, on the other hand, may be retrievable from elsewhere within the text. Frequently, the identity of the participants have been given at an earlier point within the text. It is endophoric reference which creates cohesion.</i> For</p>	} <b>Type 1: endophoric reference</b>
	<p><i>example: ‘Although Jhon and Susan fight all the time, they still want to go on with their relationship’. The personal pronoun ‘they’ refers to ‘Jhon and Susan’, and it can be inferred from within the text. (Text 30)</i></p>	} <b>example-elaboration</b>

A schematic representation of the experiential meanings in this text is shown in Table 2:



## Descriptive category

Phenomenon / Descriptive category	Exophoric reference	Endophoric reference
Nature of the phenomenon	(points to) retrievable participants	(points to) retrievable participants
Location of the referent	situational context	textual context
Realization	(pronouns) <sup>4</sup>	pronouns , ....
Contribution to cohesion	-	✓

Table 2. Schematic Representation of Experiential Meanings in Text 30

The table above shows that this text somehow contains the experiential meanings expected—features of endophoric and exophoric reference. However, what appears to be the problem in cases like this one is that students fail to structure the conceptual knowledge so that it can be read as a response to the task instructions. Since the conceptual knowledge (or at least part of it) is present in these texts, it is the teacher-reader who has to

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4. Exemplified but not labelled.



carry out this restructuring process in order to give coherence to the texts produced by the students.

The following chart (Figure 6) illustrates the missing process:

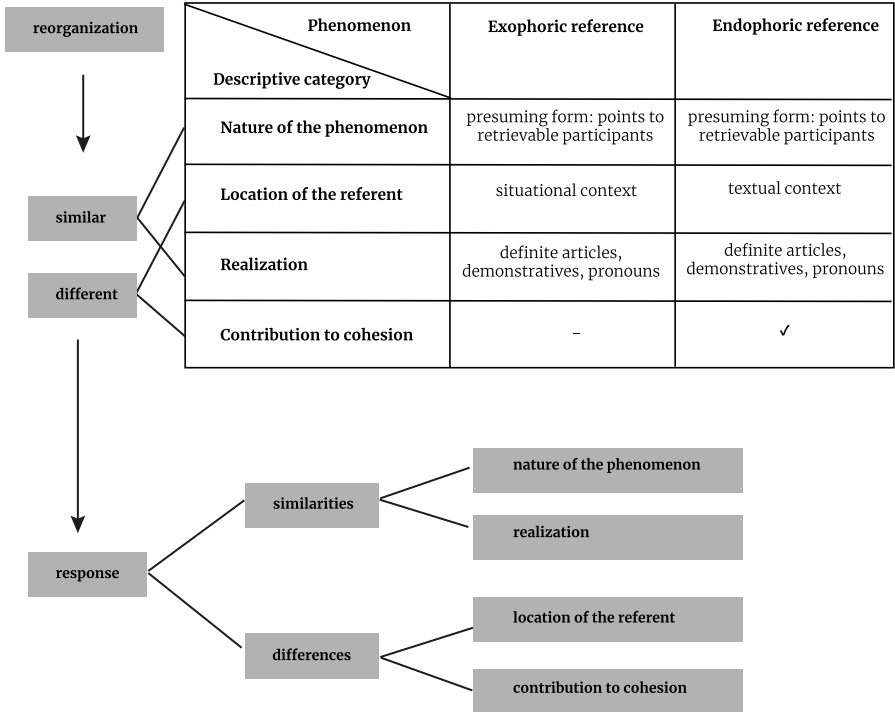


Figure 6. The process of turning a list of features into an appropriate response.

This process of reorganization of the descriptive features of the phenomena under analysis seems not to have preceded the students' responses. And this lack of reconfiguration of the experiential meanings in the texts deprives them from their continuity with the task instructions.

### **3.3 Absence of exemplification or elaboration phases**

The absence of exemplification and elaboration phases in descriptive reports about similarities and differences does not directly obstruct the conceptualization process. However, it harms the overall effectiveness of texts, whose goal is to demonstrate acquired knowledge. Apart from developing relevant theoretical aspects of a restricted field, students are expected to show a thorough conceptual understanding, for which the ability to illustrate abstract concepts with concrete examples and to elaborate on the relationship between the examples and the previous conceptualizations is of great importance and thus generally required. In the texts under study in particular, examples are explicitly required and they are thus an expected phase whose absence creates a sense of incompleteness in the response.

The following examples show three texts with overall accurate conceptual developments<sup>5</sup>, which differ in the degree of achievement in relation to illustration and exemplification.

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5. Grammatical problems have been overlooked.



Whereas the first text contains all the expected phases, the second one lacks the elaboration phase and the last one misses out both exemplification and elaboration phases.

**Example 1**

Description	<i>Endophoric as well as exophoric reference are resources that have the function of adding unity to the text. In both cases we need to resort to something else rather than the reference item to fully understand the meaning of it.</i>	similarity
	<i>In the case of endophoric reference, the referent is in the text as in the case ‘Paul is a very good friend. He always listens to me’. (Reference: he, referent: Paul)</i>	difference example elaboration
	<i>In contrast, exophoric reference is the kind of reference in which we have to resort to something which is outside the text in order to get the complete meaning of the reference word.</i>	difference
	<i>In the following example ‘I love cooking’ the pronoun ‘I’ makes reference to the writer of the message and in order to make sense of it we need to resort to the outside of the text. (Text 42)</i>	example elaboration

**Example 2**

Classification	<i>Reference is one of the cohesive devices used by grammatical cohesion to create unity and uniformity in a text. Reference can be either endophoric or exophoric.</i>	similarity
Description	<i>Both share a relation of identity, that is to say, the grammatical item that performs these functions refers to another item, and the reader must retrieve the latter to find out the identity of the former.</i>	
	<i>It is ‘where’ the reader needs to go to find out this identity that makes the difference. While in endophoric reference, the referent is within the text, in exophoric reference the referent is outside or in the surroundings of the text.</i>	
	<i>To illustrate these ideas we can take into account the following examples: ‘Paul bought a house. <u>It</u> is beautiful’. ‘Things are difficult at home <u>now</u>’. (Text 22)</i>	example



### Example 3

Description	<i>Both endophoric and exophoric reference help the writer to make a text coherent; that is, to provide semantic ties which result in a unified whole.</i>	} similarity
	<i>However, they vary greatly in terms of the referents they stand for. In the case of endophoric reference, it points to elements that are mentioned in the text, either anaphorically or cataphorically. Furthermore, endophoric reference not only provides coherence to the text but also cohesion, since it helps create a semantic unity, and at the same time it provides linguistic ties between the different participants that appear in a text. On the other hand, exophoric reference points to elements outside the text, that is, elements that are part of the situational context. Consequently, it cannot be considered as a cohesive resource, because it doesn't create linguistic unity between the elements along the text. (Text 39)</i>	

In the successive reading of the texts, the degree of goal achievement decreases. The first example (Text 42) describes similarities and differences between both types of reference, provides examples that illustrate both the different contexts of retrieval and the fact that in both cases there is a presumed identity, and elaborates particularly on one of them, explaining why it is necessary to rely on the context of text production to retrieve the full identity of the reference form used. On the other hand, the second example (Text 22) provides conceptualizations about commonalities and differences and introduces two





examples but fails to specify the relationship between the example and the theory. Finally, the last example (Text 39) lacks a reference to concrete examples to illustrate the concepts introduced in the first two phases, and thus fails to fulfil one of the demands of the task instructions, which explicitly require exemplification.

The absence of exemplification and elaboration phases might be attributed to the inability to relate abstract concepts to concrete examples. Going from abstraction to concreteness or departing from an instance to make generalizations are mechanisms that require a thorough conceptual understanding of the disciplinary field under study, an issue that becomes even more challenging when it comes to conceptualizing about language.

#### **4. Impact and Conclusions**

Written knowledge is constructed in and through language, so talking about disciplinary writing without talking about the linguistic system itself appears to be hardly conducive to accurate, thorough diagnosis and effective intervention. The theoretical framework developed by SFL proves to be rich, useful, and productive for the development of linguistic education as it establishes systematic and consistent links between language and context, accounting for the functional dimension of the system.

Writing about the concepts and content of a subject is part of a learning process that starts with students' access to the texts in



which those meanings are constructed. Disciplines organize their knowledge through typical genres that are instrumental for their conceptualization. Thus an explicit analysis of the schematic structures those genres generate and the configurations of systematic language choices that realize them is essential to enable students to access those meanings. Systematic reflections on the disciplinary purpose of the texts and on how that purpose is linguistically realized constitutes a key resource for academic literacy, as it fosters the development of schemata for these conventionalized forms of language use.

But writing effectively also involves the ability to reorganize the content that has been learnt so that it can be appropriately used in new contexts. As some of the analyzed texts show, learning about how a linguistic phenomenon is conceptualized does not directly imply the ability to do different things with that information, to "package" it into different structural formats. This highlights the importance of interventions that foster the restructuring of the same content into different genres to promote the flexible manipulation of knowledge.

Another relevant dimension to consider is that writing to demonstrate learning in a discipline does not occur freely but in the context of an assessment task designed by teachers. This brings about a new contextual dimension that also needs to be made explicit. What is the purpose of this new situation? What type of interaction is it? What are the restrictions imposed? What are the constraints that the written mode imposes? The answers to these questions cannot be presupposed. Making them visible, discussing them, working out the relationships between these



contextual factors and linguistic dimensions is also an essential aspect of disciplinary writing in undergraduate education. The task itself should become the object of analysis as its wording encodes both field restrictions and the type of doings required, with expected stages and phases. If this is not understood, the response on the part of the students is likely to be no more than a guessing game. It is important to remember, though, that even if these conditions are grasped, there will be no appropriate response unless the required knowledge has become manipulable and flexible enough so that it can be adjusted to this new context and reorganized according to the new requirements. A further functional complexity that creates great difficulty for students and should thus be worked upon is related to the specificities of the written mode of meaning. The linguistic choices typical of the written mode and their relationship to the contextual aspects of context independency and delayed feedback should be uncovered as they constitute a major obstacle in the production of cohesive texts.

Disciplinary writing is a social activity which presupposes complex processes of knowledge development. Thus a thorough understanding of this activity and the ways in which its development can be fostered should help address the complexities students face. The functional approach enlightens the ways in which language construes knowledge as a socially situated activity. It is to be hoped that the results of these explorations will be found useful in other disciplines, in other languages (including the L1), and in other educational levels.



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Morality on the stand: The strategic invocation of cultural knowledge in lay-witness examination

Débora M. Amadio





**Déborá M. Amadio** holds an MA in English and Applied Linguistics. She lectures in Linguistics at Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Argentina. Her research has focused on interactional mechanisms strategically deployed by institutional participants in face-to-face interactions. Her work has appeared in books and leading journals including *Discurso & Sociedad* and *Revista de la Asociación Latinoamericana de Estudios del Discurso*. She currently leads a research team that studies communicative practices at organizational and institutional settings.



## Abstract

Grounded in the theoretical perspective of situated discourse analysis (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2001, 2003; van Dijk, 1999), this article explores the discursive construction of a particular version of the past in an institutional setting. It examines courtroom discourse in order to analyze discursive mechanisms oriented to the generation of implicit content favourable for one of the parties in the conflict. The data come from the official transcripts of a notorious criminal case that took place in the US in 2002. For this study, face-to-face interactions between litigants and lay witnesses were analyzed. Previous research studies carried out in comparable institutional contexts (Ehrlich, 2002; Matoesian, 2005) have detected different interactional mechanisms aimed at discrediting witnesses on the stand; however, none of them accounts for the relationship between socio-cognitive aspects and contextual factors at play in strategic interactions. This study shows that litigants ask questions skilfully designed to activate mental representations



included in situation models (van Dijk, 1999) and associated with acceptable routine behaviour in public. It is observed that routine ways of acting are invoked in order to generate inferences about the similarities between expected behaviour and concrete past behaviour exhibited by one of the parties in the conflict. By being compatible with a group's alleged typical conduct, concrete behaviour is constructed as "normal". In addition, the evocation of social expectations is used to construct a past conduct as marked, particularized, and peculiar of a person to whom such conduct is attributed. The analysis of implicit content generated gradually as the negotiation of meanings progresses indicates that the function of the evocation of cultural knowledge is to damage or enhance an individual's face (Goffman, 1967). The conclusions derived relate to the cultural assumptions connected with the dimension of morality that guarantee the effectiveness of the cognitive and interactional strategy described.

## 1. The Problem

In witness examinations, the construction of an interested version of reality can be carried out through a variety of textual devices which include the exploitation of lexical choices (Eades, 2006) and rhetorical resources such as metaphors (Cotterill, 2003; Danet, 1980; Luchjenbroers & Aldridge, 2007). Regarding the strategic use of reference terms and other linguistic features, Felton Rosulek (2008, 2009) argues that, during closing arguments, the representation of the defendant is related to the communicative goals sought by each side. An interesting finding in these studies is that, while the prosecution and the defence differed in the ways they represent or silence parties involved in the conflict, “the lack of variation among the forms used by prosecution lawyers and those used by defence lawyers suggests that they are all working from the same understanding of how to create representations of social actors that will fit their goals” (Felton Rosulek, 2009, p. 27).

In the context of sexual assault cases, numerous studies have identified discursive mechanisms through which defence attorneys damage the credibility of rape victims during cross-examination. A recurrent strategy involves eliciting information that alludes to the victim’s sexual history (Conley & O’Barr, 1998; Ehrlich, 1998, 2001; Matoesian, 1993, 2001), which results in the generation of damaging implications about the moral character of the victim. Ehrlich (2007) analyzes rulings of judges at four different stages of a criminal sexual assault case in Canada. She argues that judges’ strikingly different interpretations of



representations of women's behaviour during sexual assaults reveal an orientation to ideological assumptions. These cultural ideas or "norms of intelligibility" (p. 472) associated with gendered practices of consented or coerced sex serve, in part, as the basis on which judicial decisions are made.

From the point of view of conversation analysis, interactional mechanisms that allow for the generation of damaging implications have also been identified (Drew & Sorjonen, 1997; Kompter, 1994). Using data from a rape trial, Drew (1992) analyzes a mechanism that consists in asking questions (or a pair of adjacent questions) that contain representations of the past that challenge the version of the reality defended by the witness. The two contradictory versions "are implicated in, and portrayed through, the description of 'facts'" produced by each participant (Drew, 1992, p. 516). The author concludes that the main function of this mechanism is to discredit the witness on the stand. In a similar vein, Conley and O'Barr (1998) suggest that the generation of implicit meanings that are detrimental for the witness on the stand is a discursive strategy that litigants exploit quite frequently in examinations.

Using a corpus of face-to-face interactions between litigant lawyers and lay witnesses produced in a criminal trial in the US, the present study is concerned with the generation of implicit detrimental content which is favourable for the version of the past upheld by the parties in the conflict. It looks at interactional mechanisms through which litigants lead a witness into verbalizing types of information that are convenient for



the version of reality they support. It examines the effects of activating cultural knowledge at particular moments of an examination and its relation to the construction of an interested reading of the past. As will be shown, litigants combine questions that elicit information about events experienced in the past with those that request information about actions routinely performed in different types of social situations. I will argue that in lay-witness examinations, the evocation of shared knowledge is never random or unmotivated. On the contrary, it takes place at crucial moments of an examination, particularly when the nature of a contested past behaviour or event is at stake.

## 2. The Approach to the Problem

The theoretical perspective adopted is that of situated discourse analysis (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 2003). From a socio-cognitive view of discourse, van Dijk (1993, 1999), and van Dijk, Ting-Toomey, Smitherman, and Trautman (1997) argue for the need to detect the concrete ways in which knowledge, discourse and culture are related. This perspective, rooted in the premise that discourse is doubly conditioned by matters that are cognitive and social in nature, has provided useful conceptualizations about the workings of discourse in the perpetuation of ideologically motivated discourse practices. In order to account for the impact of recurrent and habitualized ways of conceiving of and talking about different social categories and experiences, I resort to the concepts of *event model*, *situation*



*model*, and *context model* because they help describe orientations to and manifestations of shared cultural knowledge and how their evocation can be put to serve specific communicative purposes. According to van Dijk (1999, p. 108), when an individual experiences an event, they construct a mental representation of that event, which is stored in the episodic memory. This type of mental model, or event model, is subjective because it represents a personal experience and it reflects a person's opinions about an interpretation of an event. In this way, when a person speaks about a past experience, what is manifested in discourse is the individual's knowledge about a particular cognitive model they have constructed for that event. Individuals also have access to stored knowledge about social situations that they may not have experienced directly. A situation model is a cognitive structure that contains subjective representations of different kinds of social situations. Evidently, information stored in event models and in situation models tends to overlap; in this way, "social representations are materialized in mental models" (van Dijk, 1999, p. 109). Finally, knowledge related to the type of communicative event that is taking place constitutes a type of cognitive model called context model (van Dijk, 1999, p. 11). This type of model contains information related to the place and time in which a communicative event takes place, the circumstances surrounding it, the participants involved, and their attitudes towards the event. While the information stored in event models is relatively stable, context models represent the changing nature of discourse production and comprehension and they tell people



how to behave appropriately in a given communicative situation and, therefore, how to accommodate the way they speak in different contexts (van Dijk, 1999, p. 112).

Talk that takes place during witness examinations studied not only concerns information about past actions and states that may have led to the alleged crime. Surprisingly, litigants frequently guide witnesses into verbalizing content associated with everyday situations such as actions typically carried out by friends, habitual behaviours exhibited by adults at parties, among others. The explicitation of this kind of content enables the generation of inferences that are convenient for the version of the past advocated by the litigant. It will be shown that litigants deploy interactional mechanisms that allow them to control when witnesses speak about specific past events and when they are to speak about actions generally performed in everyday social situations.

In the analysis sections, two different interactional mechanisms that litigants initiate repeatedly are examined. These mechanisms are characterized by the combination of two types of questions; those that request information about specific past behaviours and those that request information about routines. As will be shown, the strategic invocation of shared knowledge plays a crucial role in the construction of different readings of past conducts and events.





## 2.1 The Westerfield criminal case

The data analyzed derive from the written official records and footage of a criminal trial that took place in San Diego, California, in the year 2002. In June 2002, David Alan Westerfield was brought to trial for the crimes of kidnapping and murdering 7-year old Danielle van Dam and the misdemeanour of possession of child pornography. Both the trial and the disappearance of the girl received broad media coverage. Local and US national TV stations and journalists were stationed outside the van Dam residence during the 23-day long search for the missing child, and outside the courthouse during the trial that lasted almost two months. The trial itself was broadcast live on local and national TV during the summer of 2002, which featured most of the hearings. The defendant, David Westerfield<sup>1</sup>, was found guilty of kidnapping and murdering the victim and sentenced to the death penalty.

The prosecution, led by District Attorney Jeff Dusek, based their case primarily on DNA evidence; blood, hair and fingertips belonging to the victim were found on Westerfield's jacket and inside his motor home. The prosecution also put forth the allegation that the accused was sexually attracted to young girls, which triggered his uncontrollable drive to kidnap Danielle. On the other hand, the defence, led by Steven Feldman, raised doubts about the forensic evidence presented by the prosecution,

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1. In this study, pseudonyms are not used because the names of all the persons involved in the case were made public in 2001.



particularly on the time of death. An entomologist for the defence, for example, argued that the child could not have died earlier than February 16, many days after Westerfield had been put under 24-hour police surveillance. The other main argument put forth by the defence was that the lifestyle exhibited by the child's parents, which included alcohol and drug consumption and sexual partners swapping, was what put Danielle at risk since it was an open invitation for strangers to have access to their home. The defence also attacked the van Dams for not being forthcoming about their lifestyle to the police, which contributed to casting doubt on their credibility.

### **3. Findings and Interpretation**

#### **3.1 Past actions as instances of social routines**

An aspect of the version of the past that the prosecutor proposes is that Brenda van Dam, the victim's mother, and her friends' public conduct was unmarked or expected. This is at odds with the defence's claim that Brenda and her friends' behaviour was peculiar and incongruent with everybody else's when they were having a girls' night out at Dad's, a local bar.

The extract below shows prosecutor Dusek examining Sean Brown, one of the witnesses for his side. At the time of the crime, Brown was working as a manager at a pub at which the van Dams and the defendant used to spend their nights. The witness is giving testimony about Brenda van Dam's and her friends'



conduct at Dad's one week before the child went missing. This extract illustrates the combination of questions about the night of the events with those that aim at activating shared knowledge about going out to a pub.

### **Text 1. During direct examination (Trial day 3)<sup>2</sup>**

- (a) **District attorney Dusek:** *You indicated that there was a band there that evening?*
- (b) **Sean Brown:** *On the 25th, yes.*
- (c) **District attorney Dusek:** *What happened when the band starts playing?*
- (d) **Sean Brown:** *People get up, dance.*
- (e) → **District attorney Dusek:** *Is that what they're supposed to do?*
- (f) **Sean Brown:** *Yes.*

Text 1 illustrates one of the steps that the prosecutor takes in order to construct Brenda van Dam's public behaviour as expected. Because prosecutor Dusek defends the claim that Brenda was doing nothing out of the ordinary, he guides the witness into talking about habitual adult behaviour at pubs. First, the prosecutor makes a connection between representations that derive from an event model (as in turn [a] *You indicated that there was a band there that evening?*) and general knowledge about

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#### 2. Conventions for transcription:

- . indicates falling tone
- , indicates a turn internal pause
- (.) indicates a short pause of not more than 2 seconds long
- underlining indicates speech delivered fast
- Fami - indicates self-repair
- [ ] square brackets indicate beginning and end of overlap
- ((reading)) double parentheses indicate comments by the analyst



similar situations. The question in (c), *What happened when the band starts playing?*, elicits information about a past event, *what happened*, and it invokes knowledge about the recurrent behaviour of adults in pubs, *when the band starts playing?*. In the witness's answer in (d), *People get up, dance*, the event is represented as a habitual action. The use of *people* helps construct the action as a generalized behaviour without any specification of gender. At this moment of the interaction, the meaning of *people* is ambiguous because it can refer both to every person who goes out to any pub in the community and to the patrons that were spending that evening at the specific bar talked about. At this point, these two possible interpretations are useful for the prosecutor; however, this ambiguity will disappear later on as the negotiation of meanings moves forward. In addition, the explicitation of shared knowledge like the one invoked here is exactly what the prosecutor seeks because it paves the ground for a comparison between common ways of acting and a specific past behaviour.

With the following question in turn (e), *Is that what they're supposed to do?*, the situation model GOING OUT TO A PUB<sup>3</sup> is activated because the information requested alludes to knowledge about typical adult behaviour at pubs; in this case, the fact that in bars people dancing to music is habitual. As we will see below, prosecutor Dusek will make sure that other features of

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3. In this article, capital letters indicate cognitive models.



the situation model GOING OUT TO A PUB get evoked later in the examination of Sean Brown and in other examinations as well.

One of the arguments put forth by Westerfield's defence attorneys is that Brenda van Dam's and her friends' conduct at the bar was at odds with the behaviour of other patrons. The claim upheld by defence attorney Feldman is that the three women were openly flirtatious with men and women and that this kind of conduct sets them apart from other patrons at Dad's pub.

Let us now see how the prosecutor guides Sean Brown into saying that Brenda van Dam and her friends were doing nothing out of the ordinary. The extract transcribed below occurs at the beginning of the re-direct examination of Sean Brown. It shows prosecutor Dusek asking Brown specifically about the conduct exhibited by Brenda van Dam and her friends. It is necessary to mention that during cross-examination, defence attorney Feldman had raised doubts about the way the police force had collected evidence, and different witnesses declared that the police reports of their interviews did not reflect their depositions. The focus here is how prosecutor Dusek controls the direction of the interaction so that the witness is made to compare Brenda's behaviour with that of other patrons at the bar.

## **Text 2. During re-direct examination (Trial day 3)**

- (a) **District attorney Dusek:** *Do you remember the first thing you told me?*
- (b) **Sean Brown:** *This was an incorrect statement.*
- (c) **District attorney Dusek:** *What was an incorrect statement?*
- (d) **Sean Brown:** *The statement that the officer had wrote down.*



- (e) **District attorney Dusek:** *That statement was what?*
- (f) **Sean Brown:** ((reading from a copy of the transcripts)) *That she was (.) “Mr Brown”, who was me, “stated that they ((referring to Brenda and her friends)) were partying hard and flirtatious with men and so forth”.*
- (g) **District attorney Dusek:** *That wasn’t true?*
- (h) **Sean Brown:** *No. The way I saw it is Brenda and her girlfriends were out there having a fun time (.) as, as girlfriends do, and they were- they were not partying hard. I think of partying hard I’m thinking like a beer a shot or a drink a shot a drink a shot a drink a shot. They weren’t doing that. They were there to have a good time. They were in good spirits but they were having fun, that’s all.*
- (i) → **District attorney Dusek:** *Did they ((referring to Brenda and her friends)) appear to be behaving any differently than the other patrons at your place?*
- (j) **Sean Brown:** *No, not at all.*

Through the first two questions, prosecutor Dusek induces the witness to say that the police report was inaccurate because that is beneficial for the version of the past he endorses. In turn (e), *That statement was what?*, the litigant requests a specification. The section of the written document that gets verbalized is related to the witness’s statements about Brenda van Dam and her friends’ behaviour: *That she was (.) “Mr Brown”, who was me, “stated that they ((referring to Brenda and her friends)) were partying hard and flirtatious with men and so forth”.* The yes-no question *That wasn’t true?* in turn (g) is oriented to provoke the verbalization of a kind of content that is beneficial for the version of the past endorsed by the prosecutor. In turn (h), Sean Brown gives details about the women’s behaviour that challenge the claim that *they were partying hard and flirtatious with men and so forth*. First, the witness represents the past event as *Brenda and her friends were out there having a fun time*. The behaviour exhibited by the three



women gets compared with the typical behaviours of *girlfriends*. Then, the witness explicitly challenges the claim that Brenda and her friends' conduct was somehow marked by evoking a feature associated with the situation model PARTYING HARD, *I think of partying hard I'm thinking a beer a shot or a drink a shot a drink a shot a drink a shot*. With regard to the expected way of partying hard, which includes the feature “drinking uninterruptedly”, Sean Brown represents Brenda and her friends' actions as incompatible with it: *They weren't doing that. They were there to have a good time. They were in good spirits but they were having fun, that's all*. With the following question in turn (i), *Did they appear to be behaving any differently than the other patrons at your place?*, the prosecutor elicits a comparison between the conduct exhibited by the three women and that of the other patrons. The provoked answer, *No, not at all*, further confirms the claim that prosecutor Dusek upholds, i.e., that there is nothing out of the ordinary in the way the women behaved. In this way, the prosecutor's claim that the three women's behaviour is congruent with everybody else's gets ratified by the witness on the stand.

The next case further illustrates the interplay between the verbalization of the particular and the evocation of cultural knowledge. In the following extract, prosecutor Dusek claims that when adults go out to bars, they drink, dance and party. Sean Brown's testimony, analyzed above, took place during the third day of public hearings. Thirteen days later, Glennie Nasland, a witness for the defence, is also led to activate the situation model GOING OUT TO A BAR. Text 3 shows the witness being asked to



talk about the events that took place at Dad's bar the night of the crime.

### Text 3. During cross-examination (Trial day 16)

- (a) **District attorney Dusek:** *What were you doing?*
- (b) **Glennie Nasland:** *I was hanging out with my friends, too.*
- (c) **District attorney Dusek:** *Were you drinking?*
- (d) **Glennie Nasland:** *Two drinks.*
- (e) **District attorney Dusek:** *Were you dancing?*
- (f) **Glennie Nasland:** *Yes.*
- (g) **District attorney Dusek:** *Were you partying?*
- (h) **Glennie Nasland:** *Yeah.*
- (i) **District attorney Dusek:** *Basically everybody in there was drinking, weren't they?*
- (j) **Glennie Nasland:** *Yeah.*
- (k) **District attorney Dusek:** *And a lot of people were dancing?*
- (l) **Glennie Nasland:** *Yes.*
- (m) **District attorney Dusek:** *Guys dancing with girls?*
- (n) **Glennie Nasland:** *Yeah.*
- (o) **District attorney Dusek:** *Girls dancing with girls?*
- (p) **Glennie Nasland:** *Yeah.*
- (q) **District attorney Dusek:** *Guys dancing with guys?*
- (r) **Glennie Nasland:** *No.*
- (s) **District attorney Dusek:** *They don't do that, do they? This Susan [girlfriend-]*
- (t) **Glennie Nasland:** *[Yeah. ]*
- (u) **District attorney Dusek:** *[that you introduced  
the defendant to, is she an Asian extraction?*
- (v) **Glennie Nasland:** *Yes.*

In turn (a), prosecutor Dusek asks a question that elicits information about a specific past event, *What were you doing?* After the witness's answer, *I was hanging out with my friends, too*, the prosecutor asks a series of questions through which





characteristics of the situation model GOING OUT TO A PUB are evoked. The questions *Were you drinking?*, *Were you dancing?*, *Were you partying?*, whose propositions get all confirmed, request information about Nasland's past actions. Simultaneously, they function as arguments in favour of the claim that those kinds of behaviour constitute routines performed at a bar. The question in turn (i), *Basically everybody in there was drinking, weren't they?*, contains an extreme case formulation. As Pomerantz (1986) and Edwards (1994, 1995) argue, the use of extreme case formulations contributes to constructing the activity described as something *everybody* does, which "serves to normalize the activity" (Edwards, 1994, p. 217). The generalization is expressed by means of representing the agent of drinking with the indefinite pronoun *everybody* that has a non-specific and general reference which, in this case, includes the people at Dad's bar. Furthermore, the design of turn (i), a declarative followed by a tag, allows the prosecutor to present the information as if it was shared. The use of a tag also makes relevant a confirmation as the preferred second pair-part, which the witness provides in turn (j). In this way, the litigant guides the witness into agreeing with his view that drinking at bars is an unmarked behaviour. The question in turn (k), *And a lot of people were dancing?*, contains another generalization. Here, the partitive *a lot of* is used to construct dancing as a characterizing feature of the habitual behaviour of adults in pubs. After the witness's confirmation in turn (l), the litigant asks further questions that activate knowledge related to the mental model DANCING; *Guys dancing with girls?* and



*Girls dancing with girls?* In this case, the generalized nature of the activities reported is expressed through the use of plurals, which contributes to backgrounding the conduct of individual actors like Brenda and her friends because the attention is put on general patterns of behaviour. With *Guys dancing with guys?*, the prosecutor requests a confirmation associated with another routine carried out by adults at pubs. In turn (r), Nasland does not confirm the proposition and after that, in turn (s), prosecutor Dusek echoes the witness's answer *They don't do that, do they?* The sequence ends with the introduction of a new topic, *This Susan girlfriend ....*

In previous testimonies, the issue of Brenda van Dam dancing with guys and girls was frequently revisited. The argument put forth by Westerfield's defence is that Brenda had danced with various male and female partners provocatively and that such behaviour was inappropriate, that is, a socially sanctioned way of acting in a public place. What prosecutor Dusek is doing here, through questions like the ones analyzed so far, is guiding his interlocutor into adhering to his claims. The construction of subtle, controversial aspects of the past is carried out gradually throughout the hearings and it involves provoking comparisons between specific past actions and generalized patterns of adult behaviour.

The following text is taken from the cross-examination of a witness for the defence. In this case, prosecutor Dusek is interviewing Ryan Tyrol, who was also at Dad's bar the night of the events.



## Text 4. During cross-examination (Trial day 17)

- (a) **District attorney Dusek:** *Anything unusual about the way they ((referring to Brenda and her friends)) were dancing?*
- (b) **Ryan Tyrol:** *Same as everyone else.*
- (c) **District attorney Dusek:** *Nothing out of the ordinary?*
- (d) **Ryan Tyrol:** *Not really.*
- (e) **District attorney Dusek:** *Not making a scene of themselves on the dance floor?*
- (f) **Ryan Tyrol:** *No.*
- (g) **District attorney Dusek:** *Did you see Brenda van Dam and her friends leave?*
- (h) **Ryan Tyrol:** *Yes, I did.*

In turn (a), prosecutor Dusek asks the witness to contrast a particular action, *the way they were dancing*, with expected ways of dancing evoked with the use of *anything unusual*. In (b), *Same as everyone else*, the witness resorts to an extreme case formulation and represents the observed behaviour as congruent with that of other patrons. The question in (c), *Nothing out of the ordinary?*, a reformulation of the question in turn (a), aims at restating a key proposition. Next, with *Not making a scene of themselves on the dance floor?*, the prosecutor invokes another feature of the mental model DANCING, that is, making a scene of oneself on the dance floor. The witness does not confirm this, which functions as a further support for the prosecutor's claims.

In the examinations under study, the witnesses who gave testimony about the events that took place at Dad's bar the night of the crime were systematically asked about the nature of the behaviour exhibited by the three women, which suggests that



that issue is key for the version of the past upheld by each side. The interactional mechanism analyzed consists in combining questions about a specific past conduct with those through which the scripted nature of the activity is invoked. The cumulative effect of the implications from the various witnesses' answers aims at constructing Brenda and her friends' behaviour as congruent with the canons of public conduct. As has been shown, the prosecutor resorts to invoking routines performed in public places in order to match the women's actions with them. Constructing specific past actions as socially shared imbues those actions with normalizing characteristics, and this guarantees that an implicit evaluation gets generated. Therefore, the ultimate aim of the mechanism that consists in comparing past actions with behaviours presented as frequent, expected, and thus "normal" is to positively evaluate parties involved in the conflict.

In the next section, we will see that the activation of cultural knowledge can be exploited in order to achieve the exact opposite effect. The sequences that will be examined below show the efforts of the litigants to construct specific past actions as incongruent with social expectations.

### **3.2 Particularizing past behaviours**

In this subsection, we will see that alluding to shared patterns of adult conduct is useful to construct a past behaviour as particular to the parties involved in the conflict. The fragment below shows prosecutor Dusek cross-examining Glennie Nasland, a witness for



the defence. At this point, it has to be noted that Nasland is a key witness for the defence because she claims that on February 1st, David Westerfield was drunk when he left the bar. An argument put forth by Westerfield's defence is that the defendant's state of intoxication would have made it impossible for him to drive back home, break into the van Dam's residence in the middle of the night, kidnap the child and leave the house unnoticed.

The sequence transcribed next illustrates how evoking expected ways of conduct can be used to the detriment of the witness on the stand. In order to challenge the witness's claim that Westerfield was drunk when he left the bar, prosecutor Dusek resorts to the invocation of features of the mental model BEING A FRIEND.

### **Text 5. During cross-examination (Trial day 16)**

- (a) **District attorney Dusek:** *You described Mr Westerfield's condition that night as drunk?*
- (b) **Glennie Nasland:** *Yes.*
- (c) **District attorney Dusek:** *Did you drive him home?*
- (d) **Glennie Nasland:** *No.*
- (e) **District attorney Dusek:** *Is he a friend of yours?*
- (f) **Glennie Nasland:** *Yes.*
- (g) **District attorney Dusek:** *Are you concerned about his safety?*
- (h) **Glennie Nasland:** *Yes.*
- (i) **District attorney Dusek:** *Did you have a car?*
- (j) **Glennie Nasland:** *Yes.*
- (k) **District attorney Dusek:** *How far did he live from Dad's?*
- (l) **Glennie Nasland:** *Five minutes away I think.*
- (m) **District attorney Dusek:** *Did you have anything to do that night?*
- (n) **Glennie Nasland:** *No.*
- (o) **District attorney Dusek:** *Were you drunk?*



- (p) **Glennie Nasland:** *No.*  
(q) **District attorney Dusek:** *You were sober enough to drive a good friend home-*  
(r) **Glennie Nasland:** *[Yes.]*  
(s) **District attorney Dusek:** *[if he] was drunk?*  
(t) **Glennie Nasland:** *Yes.*  
(u) **District attorney Dusek:** *You chose not to?*  
(v) **Glennie Nasland:** *I guess so, yeah.*  
(w) **District attorney Dusek:** *He really wasn't that drunk, was he?*  
(x) **Glennie Nasland:** *Yes, he was. He was drunk when he left the bar.*

What is interesting about this sequence is how the prosecutor lays the grounds for his attack through a series of questions that evoke the expected behaviour of people who find themselves in the same situation as the witness. In turn (a), *You described Mr Westerfield's condition that night as drunk?*, prosecutor Dusek gives voice to Nasland's claim that Westerfield was drunk the night the alleged crime was committed. In order to argue against this, the litigant asks questions that invoke the typical conduct of people in a situation in which a friend gets drunk in a bar and needs to be driven back home. The question in (c), *Did you drive him home?*, evokes an action that is presented as the expected way of acting; that is, in cases in which a person gets drunk, a friend will drive them home. As the witness does not confirm this, prosecutor Dusek asks a series of questions (from turn [e] to turn [u]) through which he invokes potential impediments for not having acted as expected. There are questions that allude to Nasland's close relationship with the defendant and to the moral obligation of assisting friends in need, such as *Is he a friend of yours?* in turn (e) and *Are you concerned about his safety?* in (g). The confirmation



to each of these questions is the provoked response that allows Dusek to ask further questions that invoke other possible reasons for not helping a friend: *Did you have a car?* (turn [i]), *How far did he live from Dad's?* (turn [k]), *Did you have anything to do that night?* (turn [m]), and *Were you drunk?* (turn [o]). Next, with *You were sober enough to drive a good friend home if he was drunk?* (turns [q] and [s]), the prosecutor expresses an evaluative comment that aims at stressing Nasland's seemingly incongruent behaviour and putting into question the veracity of the proposition expressed in the conditional *if he was drunk*. With *sober enough*, the degree of Nasland's state of intoxication is presented as the minimal condition necessary for driving *a good friend home*. In addition, categorizing Westerfield as *a good friend* alludes to the moral obligation of friends in the evoked situation and suggests that Nasland's (lack of) action is, at least, incompatible with social expectations. With *You chose not to?* in turn (u), prosecutor Dusek challenges the witness's version of the past by inquiring about her lack of action. The exceptional nature of Nasland's lack of action is used by the prosecutor as an argument against her claim. In the absence of "good reasons" for not having acted as expected, in turn (w), *He really wasn't drunk, was he?*, the prosecutor openly challenges the witness's claim. Here, the use of a declarative sentence followed by a tag induces the interlocutor to produce a confirmatory answer. Even so, the witness resists the attack by sticking to her version of the events, *Yes, he was*, and restating her claim, *He was drunk when he left the bar*.



Sequences like this show how, through strategic questioning, a litigant retrieves information about specific actions (or lack of action) so that they get contrasted with expected behaviour. Inferences about mismatches between the witness's past behaviour and social expectations are generated throughout sequences of turns and they result from the implications of each of the witness's answers. The evocation of assumed expected conducts functions as a way through which the version of the past endorsed by the witness is challenged because of the implication that the witness did not act as they were supposed to. Therefore, alluding to mismatches between past actions and social expectations allows litigants to discredit witnesses for the opposition.

As will be shown next, alluding to the peculiar nature of past behaviours is used to discredit not just the witness on the stand but also other parties involved in the conflict. In the extract below, the defence attorney is examining Duane Blake, one of his own witnesses. They are talking about Brenda and her friends at Dad's on two consecutive Friday nights, January 25th and February 1st. In turns that are not reproduced in this article, Duane Blake says that there was nothing out of the ordinary in the way the three women were behaving during the night of January 25th. However, Brenda and her friends' public conduct on the following Friday night is represented as deviant. This is illustrated in the extract below.





## Text 6. During direct examination (Trial day 17)

- (a) **Defence attorney Feldman:** *With regard to their ((referring to Brenda and her friends)) behaviour on the 1st of February, was it different than their behaviour on the 25th of January?*
- (b) **Duane Blake:** *Somewhat.*
- (c) **Defence attorney Feldman:** *Can you please describe how?*
- (d) **Duane Blake:** *Most of the behaviour was the same as far as having some cocktails, just kind of running around, doing whatever you do in Dad's cafe in the evenings like that Both occasions their tail feathers were up.*
- (e) **Defence attorney Feldman:** *What does that mean?*
- (f) **Duane Blake:** *How can I phrase this without being rude?*
- (g) **Defence attorney Feldman:** *Accurately.*
- (h) **Duane Blake:** *Looking for a man, okay.*
- (i) **Defence attorney Feldman:** *Okay. Did you form that opinion as to all three, one, two?*
- (j) **Duane Blake:** *No, just two.*
- (k) **Defence attorney Feldman:** *Which two?*
- (l) **Duane Blake:** *Denise and Barbara.*
- (m) **Defence attorney Feldman:** *All right.*

Having established that the three women behaved “as expected” during the night of January 25th, defence attorney Feldman elicits information about the women’s behaviour on February 1st. The witness’s answer, *Somewhat*, is followed by a request for specification in (c), *Can you please describe how?* In turn (d), the witness represents the women’s behaviour as comparable to that exhibited by them the preceding Friday evening, *Most of the behaviour was the same*. The witness also invokes features of the situation model GOING OUT TO A PUB, which include drinking alcohol, moving around the premises, and *doing whatever you do in Dad’s cafe in the evenings like that*. The generalized nature of these activities is expressed with the generic use of the second person



pronoun *you*, which refers to all the people who attend Dad's *in the evenings like that*, meaning Friday nights as opposed to "quieter" weekday nights. After that, Blake mentions a kind of behaviour that is particular to the three women he is talking about, *Both occasions their tail feathers were up*. In this case, the represented behaviour is attributed to Brenda and her friends through the use of the possessive adjective *their*. The function of the question in (e), *What does that mean?*, is to make explicit the semantic content of an everyday idiomatic expression which is metaphorical. Turns (f), *How can I phrase this without being rude?*, and (g), *Accurately*, constitute an embedded sequence that suggests the witness is attentive to the context model. The metacommunicative comment expressed in (f) implies that the nature of the behaviour is harmful to the women talked about. The delayed answer to the question in turn (e) is provided in (h), *Looking for a man, okay*. This provoked response is exactly what the defence attorney is seeking because it makes explicit a sexualized conduct that is attributed to specific parties involved in the case. In addition, the verbalization of the behaviour triggers implicit evaluations about the kind of persons the three women are. In turn (i), defence attorney Feldman requests a specification, *Okay. Did you form that opinion as to all three, one, two?* The sequence ends with the witness's answer in turn (m), in which he attributes the observed behaviour to Denise and Barbara.

This example illustrates multiple instances in which the defence attorney triggers harmful representations of Brenda and her friends' past behaviour. Eliciting a comparison between an



unmarked behaviour and another one that stands out because it is particular to specific individuals aims at provoking an evaluation of the particularized behaviour. In the examinations under study, the past actions that are represented as peculiar are frequently associated with sexualized public conducts. In turn, the explicitation of sexualized behaviours generates implicit evaluations about the three women talked about because they are claims about their moral standing. Therefore, initiating the mechanism that allows constructing past behaviours as particular actions is one way through which witnesses for the other side can be discredited.

#### **4. Impact and Conclusions**

The analysis of the negotiation of controversial past events shows that, during lay-witness examinations, the prosecution and the defence counsels strategically invoke shared cultural knowledge. The effort to construct the nature of contended past behaviours and events as scripted or deviant is related to the version of the past each litigant endorses and the identity of the witness on the stand. Previous studies have suggested that litigants frequently make use of questions designed to provoke implications that are damaging for the version of events put forth by the witness, particularly during cross-examinations (Conley & O'Barr, 1998; Drew, 1992; Eades, 2006; Kompter, 1994). As we have seen in previous sections, the interactional mechanisms aimed at triggering comparisons between particular past conducts and



assumed routine patterns of behaviour is a strategy that functions to either enhance or attack the positive face of individuals involved in the case. We have seen that invoking the sexual nature of an event in which a witness was involved allows litigants to raise doubts about the morality of the individual in question. As other studies focusing on the role of cultural assumptions associated with sexualized conduct have revealed (Ehrlich, 2002, 2007; Matoesian, 1993), this chapter has shown that provoking implicit evaluations about a witness's sexualized behaviour is a discursive strategy frequently used by litigants during the examination of lay witnesses.

The interactional conflict centres, at times, on whether a specific past behaviour coincides with the cultural expectations evoked and, at others, on the negotiation of the nature of a past event. The conflict is rarely about whose definitions of moral behaviour are evoked. The recurrent use of offensive lines of questioning (Larson & Brodsky, 2010) associated with moral issues tells us something about the sort of discursive actions that institutional participants are licensed to perform. As part of the institutionally relevant activities (Drew & Sorjonen, 1997), litigants are allowed to perform discursive actions like sanctioning and implicitly judging non-institutional participants' past conduct and personality attributes. When they routinely attack witness credibility during examinations, they recurrently cast doubt upon witnesses' moral standing. As regards witnesses, they typically carry out supplementary actions: they justify themselves and their actions, they provide reasons for their assumed "unfit" past



behaviour, and they strive to fit into the expected behaviour. They seldom challenge an accusation of low moral standing or reject a line of questioning for being irrelevant, insulting or out of place. Therefore, the social asymmetry between litigants and witnesses is also reflected in the differential access to perform certain types of discursive actions during an examination.

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Managing accountability in public discourse:  
Evasion strategies at the Iraq War public  
hearings in the United Kingdom

**Natalia Susana Gallina**



**Natalia Susana Gallina** holds an MA in English and Applied Linguistics and a PhD in Language Sciences from Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Argentina. Her doctoral thesis was entitled *Communicative Practices in Inter-American Human Rights Institutions*. She has been working as a lecturer in the chair of Linguistics II at Facultad de Lenguas since 2012. She has taken part in several research projects at this institution since 2008. At present she is a member of a research group called “Communicative Practices in Institutional and Organizational Contexts”, subsidized by SECyT<sup>1</sup>. Her main research fields are Discourse Analysis, Pragmatics and Interactional Sociolinguistics.

<sup>1</sup>SECyT (Secretaría de Ciencia y Tecnología) is the Secretariat of Science and Technology.



## Abstract

This chapter is part of a larger study examining the testimonies of political and military elite witnesses in the context of the Iraq War public hearings. These hearings were carried in London, United Kingdom, from 2009 to 2011, as part of the Iraq War Inquiry to find out the nations' role in this controversial military operation. During its public hearings, the inquiry board heard evidence from a variety of politicians, including Prime Minister Tony Blair and his successor Gordon Brown, and top-rank military officers at the time of the invasion, including Chief of Air Staff Marshal Jock Stirrup and Chief of Defence Staff General Michael Walker. These testimonies were made public and available to a wide audience via streaming. From the perspective of situated Discourse Analysis and the associated disciplinary strands of Conversational Analysis and Narrative Studies, this article examines how political witnesses construct versions of reality in public hearings and argues for the contestable nature of such versions. An exploration of conversational dynamics shows that



elite witnesses are allowed to disregard the obligations defined by their situational roles as interrogators fail to gain, exert and maintain interactional control. It is possible to suggest that these witnesses benefit from special licenses which ultimately permit them to shape content, form, and information flow. The general objective of this study is to contribute to an understanding of ways of managing accountability in public discourse. The specific objectives are to describe the discourse strategies employed by political witnesses in testimonies, to evaluate their implications in the circulation of social representations, and to establish connections among discursive strategies, interactional alignments, and socio-political conditions. This study concludes by tapping into the dialectical link between discourse and society unveiling the particular ways in which strategic public discourse represents an instrument of social manipulation and hegemonic control which, far from generating genuine public dialogue, works to manufacture a false sense of debate as well as an equally false sense of consensus.



## 1. The Problem

The Iraq War began on March 20th, 2003 and ended on August 19th, 2010 with the start of Operation New Dawn. From the beginning, it was controversial because the decision to go to war was made by two countries, the United States and United Kingdom, without a formal authorization by the United Nations. On April 30th, 2009, British troops ended combat operations in Iraq after six years of service in the country. With troops returning home, in a context of increasing domestic discontent, the British Labour government could no longer resist the calls made by citizens and interest groups who required their political leaders to account for their decisions to take Britain to war. The Labour government launched an official inquiry into the UK's involvement in Iraq to be run by a private *ad-hoc* committee. Its public face, the public hearings, started on November 24th, 2009, at a crucial period when Britain approached a General Election. The official mandate of this public inquiry was ascertaining the facts of what had happened and identifying the lessons for the future. In doing so, accountability was frequently discussed at the sessions. That is, the inquiry board questioned witnesses to determine their responsibility for the failure of the operation and the management of the war and, in turn, the witnesses used the opportunity to locate and negotiate blame.

The public hearings of the Iraq War inquiry thus provide a propitious site for the investigation of the discursive management of accountability and the sense-making and impression-



management mechanisms underlying such complex phenomenon in contemporary public discourse. Despite the growing importance of public inquiry testimonies for constructing a sense of shared meanings for a society, we know very little about the concrete details of this practice which mediates our interpretation of socially accountable actors. In this light, the present study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the complex interplay of discursive strategies in oral testimonies designed to generate partial narratives of the Iraq War and deflect accountability.

The antecedents for this study can be found in Ehrlich and Sidnell (2006, 2008) and Sidnell (2004). They analysed the oral testimony of the then-premier of Ontario, Canada, Michael Harries, in the context of the Walkerton public inquiry in 2001. They examined the oral performance resources used by this politician in his testimony with a focus on the mechanisms through which he managed to avoid having to account for possibly blameworthy actions. They found that Harries successfully employed different verbal manoeuvres to deflect disruptive constructions of the events with embedded attributions of responsibility. Particularly, they discussed the function of non-conforming type of answers, the denial of damaging presuppositions and the use of extreme case formulations. They showed that politicians use these strategies to cope with difficult situations including responding to hostile or communicative conflict questions. They also proposed that political equivocation can be explained in terms of face management. Another important antecedent can be found in the work of Matoesian and Coldren (2002) and Matoesian (2005).



This author examined a questioning strategy in trial cross-examination designed to control an evasive witness and found that “nailing down an answer” often involves the manipulation of multidimensional strategies and linguistic ideologies.

Other studies which illuminate the present one have focused on the discourse strategies through which different kinds of socially accountable public actors manage personal and institutional responsibility. Abell and Stokoe (1999) described the verbal strategies that Princess Diana used in a televised interview to manage blame in relation to her divorce with Prince Charles. MacMillan and Edwards (1999) examined how the British press worked to play down their responsibility for the death of Princess Diana. Atkinson (1999) examined the linguistic practices of medical doctors and in-training doctors in the construction of professional responsibility in case presentation during medical rounds. He explained how zones of responsibility are carefully delineated among medical professionals. Achugar (2007) and Oteiza and Pinto (2008) have worked on the representation of the Chilean and Spanish dictatorships in official documents and textbooks and have contributed to a discussion of the effects of impersonal structures in deleting responsibility, silencing injustices, and restoring a sense of social order.

The questions that orient this study are three. First, what discourse strategies do political witnesses draw upon in the construction of responsibility in the public hearings of the Iraq War Inquiry? Second, how does the use of these strategies vary according to category membership? That is, how do politicians



with long trajectories and plenty of experience in public speaking vary in their choice of strategies from those who are starting their political careers? Third, what effects result from the use of these discourse strategies?

The hypotheses that guide this study are also three. First, given the socio-political conditions surrounding the speech event and the closeness to the General Election, it is plausible to expect politicians to work out blameless accounts of the past. Second, because of their prominent role as accountable figures, it can be expected that politicians will be most preoccupied with upholding a positive image. Third, due to their experience in public speaking, political leaders are expected to deploy a complex set of discourse strategies.

The general objective of this study is to contribute to an understanding of ways of managing accountability in public discourse. The specific objectives are to describe the discourse strategies employed by political witnesses in oral testimonies, to evaluate their implications in the circulation of social representations, and to establish connections among discursive strategies, interactional alignments, and socio-political conditions.

## **2. The Approach to the Problem**

This study is grounded on the epistemological paradigm of social constructionism in discourse analysis in the traditions of Potter (1996), Fairclough (2000), van Dijk (1997), and Wodak, de





Cillia, Reisigl, and Liebhart (1999). This perspective rejects the essentialist view of discourse as a reflexion of social reality and focuses upon what is constructed in interaction and the world views that are produced, maintained, and contested through discourse. Fairclough (1995) defines discourse as a complex social and semiotic practice:

I shall use discourse to refer primarily to spoken or written language use, though I would also wish to extend it to include semiotic practice in other semiotic modalities such as photography and non-verbal (e.g., gestural communication). But in referring to language use as discourse, I am signalling a wish to investigate it in a social-theoretically informed way, as a form of social practice. (p. 131)

He views discourse as a complex process and product inevitably bound up with causes and consequences at different levels of society and cognition. This view informs the present approach to discourse as a socially significant mode of action.

The concept of discourse strategies has been a prominent one in linguistics and discourse studies since the early 70s. Gumperz (1982) originally referred to discourse strategies as “the communicative functions of linguistic variability and its relation to speakers' goals” (p. 29). Wodak (2001) remarked that “by strategy we generally mean a more or less accurate and more or less intentional plan of practices (including discursive practices) adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological, or linguistic aim” (p. 73). She emphasises the systematic ways of using meaning making practices for achieving success in



particular areas of social life. Carranza (2008) noted that the concept of discourse strategy cannot be exhausted by the limited meaning of a means to an end as she recognized “the fuzzy limits between behaviour that can be considered automatic and behaviour that can confidently be called strategic” (p. 33). In this way, she avers that automatic and calculated choices combine and coexist in texts and thus, not all choices can be regarded as the product of deliberate design. In spite of this, she notices that the speech of politicians can be confidently characterized as strategic as it represents the work of a team of specialists.

Drawing upon a theory of ideology which centres on the discourse-ideology link, this study seeks to expose the ideological function of discourse by exploring the system of beliefs that are evoked in textual manifestations. “Ideologies are defined as basic systems of fundamental social cognitions and organizing the attitudes and other social representations shared by members of a group” (van Dijk, 1995, p. 243). They involve a set of systems of beliefs (ideas, thoughts, judgements, and values) which provide more or less efficient frameworks for the interpretation of social groups, their actions, and their relations with other groups. On the basis of the pioneer work of Habermas (1989) on the public sphere and its distinction between the apparatus of the state and public areas of citizen discourse, this study explores a set of ideas manifested in official public discourse which are central to a conception of the public sphere in democratic systems.

The methodology consists in description, interpretation and explanation (Fairclough, 1989). The analytical task departs from



a detailed description of the formal or surface properties of the corpus and their combinations and proceeds to examine their effects in their context of production and reception. The design is process-oriented, that is, it is flexible and open to changes as deeper understanding is gained from working with the data. The data consist of the digitalized video recordings of oral testimonies produced at the public hearings of the Iraq Inquiry in the UK. Working with a public forum allowed for access to large amounts of data. Three criteria were used to construct a manageable corpus: visibility, category membership, and time frame. On the basis of visibility, I decided to dispense with video recordings where witnesses were not fully visible at all times or where the angle of the camera was not beneficial. On the basis of category membership, I narrowed the scope for research subjects by focusing only on two particular categories, namely, top-rank military officers (Generals, Commanders and Air Marshals) and top-post politicians (Prime Ministers and Cabinet Members). Finally, on the basis of a time frame, I decided to include only those testimonies produced at the first round of public hearings, that is, from 29th January until 8th March, 2010. This period was significant in the United Kingdom because it coincided with the run-up to the General Elections which were to be held on the 6th of May. The result of this selection process yielded approximately 18 hours of video recordings comprising the oral testimonies of six witnesses produced in the run-up to the General Elections in the United Kingdom. The collection of the data included downloading the selected videotaped testimonies and their transcripts from an



official website (<http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk>) and saving them as computer data files and back-up copies ensuring high quality.

The analytical procedures were adopted from the research traditions of Conversational Analysis (Pomerantz, 1984, 1986; Sacks, 1995; Schegloff, 2007a, 2007b) and Narrative Studies in interactional contexts (Carranza, 1998, 2006, 2010; Cotterill, 2003; De Fina, 2009). These traditions are compatible as they share a core objective: a search for understanding the ways in which speakers engage in meaning making activities. After several readings of the transcripts and viewings of the videos, sequences were identified where the phenomenon of interest occurred. To delimit a sequence, identifiable boundaries were searched such as interactional turns, exchanges and topic shift. The action(s) in the sequences were characterized by answering questions such as what is this participant doing here? What interactional goals orient this participant's actions? Then, the packaging of the actions was described considering the selection of semiotic resources. Finally, the findings were interpreted in light of the contextual information and the relevant literature available.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

In the context of the public hearings of the Iraq War inquiry, participants in the role of witnesses used their turns at talk to transform, destroy or evade conflicting representations of reality which positioned them as responsible agents for putting the country at war and for doing so on the worst possible footing. To



this end, they employed a vast repertoire of discursive strategies so that, as they fulfilled their interactional roles and answered questions, they simultaneously accomplished other actions such as avoiding responsibility, attributing blame to others, and justifying their behaviour. The analysis of the corpus revealed the systematic use of several evasion strategies. They were classified as: overt refusal to answer, reformulation, impersonalization, script-formulation, counterfactual account, and lesson-deriving frame. They appeared in interaction when a speaker perceived they may be charged with a fault or wrongdoing and they responded to the perceived accusation through well-coordinated actions on different levels of discourse organization. Thus, it is argued here that these strategies work together as part of a deliberate attempt to skirt round accountability by cutting off the grounds for an accusation. For reasons of space, only three of these strategies will be discussed in this article drawing on the cases identified in the testimony of political leaders. These are: overt refusal to answer, reformulation and script-formulation.

### **3.1 Overt refusal to answer**

An overt refusal to answer is a type of non-conforming action in which a speaker overtly fails to provide an answer when it is required. According to Ekström (2009), the announced refusal to answer is a form of non-answer announcing that in the actual situation the person will not do what they are asked to. Examples of overt refusals include “I don’t answer those types of



questions” and “I’m not going to talk about it”, in which speakers simply decline to answer a question. As Ekström points out, overt refusals tend to be more face-threatening than their covered counterparts. Yet, they do present the advantage of making justifications possible. Indeed, as will be shown in the cases discussed below, announced refusals can be strategically framed by explanatory accounts which present them as no-fault actions and manipulate issues of accountability by modifying their status as illegal evasions.

In the institutional interaction under study, answers to questions display different forms and degrees of alignment. A non-answer is what Schegloff (2007b) describes as a response serving to distance the respondent from the question and from the activity of answering. Respondents may opt to mitigate a refusal by enacting self-explanatory accounts such as the inability account, the “I can’t answer” account, and the unwillingness account, the “I don’t want to/should not answer” account. These accounts present a refusal as appropriate action by describing the speaker as unable to answer or as reluctant to undertake the action requested because it is considered unacceptable or inappropriate. In the context of the public hearing, the risks of overtly refusing to answer are enormously high because this action may lead to foregrounding issues of accountability and characterizing a speaker as being overtly in contempt of the committee. Such non-compliant behaviour can be considered illegitimate and thus be subjected to disapproval or condemnation due to participant roles of accountable figures. In what follows, a witness’ refusals will be



examined to show how they are designed to avoid an answer and to deflect issues of accountability for such evasion.

The first case to be discussed was taken from the testimony of former Labour Foreign Secretary David Miliband. The sequence begins when Sir Roderic Lyne, often regarded as the toughest inquisitor on the committee, asks the witness to evaluate the legitimacy of former Prime Minister Tony Blair's argument for the invasion of Iraq. This question foregrounds a disagreement within the Labour government over this issue and thus poses a conflict for the witness who is required to take a stance.

SIR RODERIC LYNE: as Foreign Secretary,  
do you share your predecessor, Jack Straw's, view  
that regime change is an improper  
and unlawful objective for British foreign policy?

RT HON DAVID MILIBAND: I think that,  
as someone said to this Committee,  
I'm not a lawyer  
and I'm certainly not an international lawyer,  
so I wouldn't want to –

SIR RODERIC LYNE: you have very good international lawyers advising you.

RT HON DAVID MILIBAND: I have very good international lawyers advising  
me and certainly there was no current case  
where we are pursuing regime change  
as a matter of military policy.

The witness avoids facing this conflict by overtly declining to express an opinion. This face threatening act is redressed by an unwillingness account which frames the requested action as inappropriate for the witness. As Miliband acknowledges, this justification account has already been used in the context of this



inquiry by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown when faced with a similar question. As we see in the following turns, even when this account is questioned by the interrogator, the witness still manages to resist a compliant answer by producing a less overt form of non-answer which aligns with the initial request but departs from its agenda. This refusal to answer is clearly marked. Remarkably, David Miliband voted in favour of the policy of regime change when the decision was taken to Parliament. And, under the Westminster System, Miliband assumed collective responsibility when the decision was made in the Cabinet Office. Thus, he is accountable for his support of the policy and, consequently, he should be able to explain his arguments for doing so.

The next case provides further evidence for Miliband's non-committal answers about the legitimacy of the Iraq War. This time the interrogator asks him to consider the *topoi* of danger and threat as arguments for the need to undertake a military operation.

SIR RODERIC LYNE: now, if the United States and the United Kingdom  
had not invaded Iraq in March 2003,  
do you believe that  
we would now be facing a situation  
where Iraq would be competing with Iran,  
both on nuclear weapons capability  
and in support of terrorist groups?

RT HON DAVID MILIBAND MP: that's obviously  
a very, very important question  
and an unanswerable one.





As in the previous case, the witness meets the interrogator's request for a yes or no answer with an overtly evasive answer. On this occasion, he designs his refusal as appropriate conduct by acknowledging the interesting nature of the question but evaluating the question as inherently flawed at the same time.

These cases illustrate how a political witness works to avoid responsibility for a governmental decision based on unsustainable grounds as well as accountability for refusing to answer a question in the context of the public inquiry by employing carefully designed explanatory accounts. The fact that interrogators eventually accept these refusals and do not enforce compliance provides a first glimpse into the special status enjoyed by elite witnesses and the permissiveness displayed by the interrogators who allow witnesses to control the flow of information. As Pullinger (2004) remarks, the claims made by the Labour government during the run-up to the invasion are very hard to sustain at present. This difficulty is manifested in the recurrent use of refusals to answer.

### **3.2 Reformulation**

A more covert form of non-answer frequently involves the use of reformulation. It consists in returning to a previous discourse unit or interactional turn in order to transform it and produce a new version which is perceived as more satisfying. In the words of Fairclough (1989), "a (re)formulation is . . . the rewording of what has been said, by oneself or others, in one turn or a series



of turns or indeed a whole episode” (p. 136). Reformulations may be used for purposes of manipulation and control as a way of leading participants into accepting a particular version of events and limiting their options for future contributions. From an interpersonal communication viewpoint, reformulations are differentiated mainly depending on who is being reformulated and what is being reformulated (Fetzer, 2002). Stivers and Hayashi (2010) investigated the use of reformulation in transformative answers, “answers through which question recipients retroactively adjust the question posed to them” (p. 1). Two main types of transformations were identified: “question-term transformations” and “question-agenda transformations”. The former modifies, qualifies, specifies, or replaces a speech segment embodied in a question so that a speaker responds to a somewhat different proposition. The latter changes the focus of a question by rearranging the lists of matters to be discussed in the answer. Like refusals to answer, transformative answers resist the constraints of a question which respondents identify as problematic. Yet, this type of behaviour presents a more covert form of evasion as respondents do fill in an answer slot with a “collaborative”, but not required, type of contribution.

In this section, two emblematic cases of transformative answers will be discussed to illustrate how witnesses exploit this strategy to dodge a question by manipulating issues of relevance and appropriateness in adjacency pairs. The first case shows Tony Blair modifying the terms of a yes/no question to avoid an incriminatory answer. This exchange begins when Sir Roderic



Lyne directs him to consider the effectiveness of the policy of containment prior to 9/11.

SIR RODERIC LYNE: in the period up to September 11, effectively, would it be right to say that containment, as a broad strategy, had been effective, was still sustainable, needed reinforcing, was expensive and difficult? that's, roughly speaking, what we have heard from some earlier witnesses, including Sir John Sawers, who was working for you at the time. he said: "I think it was working, but the costs of it were quite high and there were risks to the various elements of our policy that we wanted to reduce" Would that be a fair summary?

RT HON TONY BLAIR: I think the way I would put it is this: that the sanctions were obviously eroding, we couldn't get support for them. this so-called smart sanctions framework, we actually, prior to September 11, couldn't get support for at that time. so we were in a bit of a difficulty there, and, of course, the fact is that Saddam as I say, we had taken military action in 1998. there was a very long history, of course, of the dealings with Saddam. one of the things I have done for the purpose of the Inquiry is go back through my speeches prior to September 11 and --I mean, I have actually got one or two of them here ((continues))



In response, Blair provides a relevant but non-conforming type of answer. That is, rather than directly confirming or challenging the evaluation presented by the interrogator, Blair introduces an alternative assessment which is marked by the use of a turn-initial metapragmatic frame “I think the way I would put it is this”. What follows is a reformulation of the effectiveness of containment realized by the replacement of the gerund “working” for “eroding” in “the sanctions were obviously eroding”. This reformulation is designed to undermine potential implications of accountability for disbanding a workable policy. The underlying logic is: if a policy is eroding then it is right to move away from it.

The following case comes from the testimony of Blair’s successor, Gordon Brown. This sequence begins when the Chairman asks him to confirm a conflicting account about the limits that the Treasury, under his direction, put on the military budget for funding the military operation in Iraq.

THE CHAIRMAN, SIR JOHN CHILCOT: just looking at the need for  
urgent operational requirements,  
which arise out of the actual military enterprise  
the Treasury set limits on  
how much the MoD could spend  
on preparation and UORs  
and from time to time  
when a request was made  
you raised those limits incrementally?

RT HON GORDON BROWN: can I put it the other way round?

THE CHAIRMAN: of course.

RT HON GORDON BROWN: Sir John



if I may.  
we didn't set limits on the expenditure on UORs  
or on equipment.  
we made estimates about what they would need  
and said, "If you need more,  
you come back to us".  
so there was no limit set.  
there were allocations made  
to show that money could be spent immediately,  
but I think  
you know, I have got the different urgent operational requirements  
that were agreed to  
and they were all paid,  
they were all paid.  
so it wasn't a question of there being a limit  
beyond which you couldn't go.  
at all times we said,  
"here is money that is available now  
for the equipment needs you need to address.  
once you have spent that, then we are prepared"  
and always were ready to and actually did deliver more.

In turn, Brown requests permission to reformulate the account presented by the Chairman, "can I put it the other way round", and permission is granted right away "of course". What follows is a correction of the previous statement by means of a denial "we didn't set limits" followed by a reformulation "we made estimates" codified lexically in the replacement of "limits" for "estimates and allocations". In this way, rather than simply accepting or denying a previous version, Brown works to replace it with a more satisfactory one. This account presents the witness's perspective on the funding of the military operation. It enacts a positive characterization of the witness who is represented as



giving the Ministry of Defence the money it needed, increasing their spending and accepting their requests. This account also shifts accountability to the military chiefs by problematizing their spending and indirectly blaming them for not providing the necessary military kit for the troops in Iraq. In this sequence, we see one more time that evasion strategies can be only fully deployed by a speaker if the interlocutor takes the steps that make it possible.

Questions place significant constraints not only on the action that the recipient is expected to produce next, but also on the design that the action can take. Yet, there are mechanisms through which a question recipient can resist the direction and relevance constraints of a question. One particularly effective mechanism is that of reformulation. This evasive device allows witnesses to twist the conditions imposed by the previous turn and exert control over the development of their own turn at talk and, through it, over how reality is represented and understood. Questioners can, in principle, hold question recipients accountable for providing equivocal answers. This is, indeed, the hallmark of institutional contexts (Drew & Heritage, 1992). Yet, in practice, interrogators frequently do not do so and allow witnesses to provide alternative descriptions. Such descriptions conveniently qualify and replace versions of the past which are perceived as unfavourable. This interactional flexibility allows witnesses to manipulate the interaction and to put forward less problematic versions of the past. As Gephart and Robert (2011) highlight, the controversial conversational dynamics observed in the context



of the inquiry testimonies affect the representation of history which results from it. Since public accounts establish what is accountable, these testimonies help to consolidate an official version of the past designed to help society enact fantasies of control and restore a sense of social order.

### **3.3 Script-formulation**

From a socio-constructivist perspective, different narratives can be built for an argumentative effect. Several studies have demonstrated the dialectical process whereby one way of representing social reality helped to legitimate one way of understanding it. Many of these studies (Chang & Mehan, 2007; Ferrari, 2007; Gelpi, 2010) have focused on the processes by which politicians and governments worked to put forward coherent positions in relation to the 2003 occupation of Iraq. Edwards (1994) points out that descriptions of events are “potentially arbitrary, variable, rhetorically designed, or interactionally occasioned” (p. 214). He argued that representational choices are important because they allow us to examine how events may be constructed as individual occurrences (breach-formulations) or predictable and generalized routines (script-formulations). Specifically, the action of scripting refers to describing events as predictable, generalized and typical. Scripts are ways of presenting an event by establishing a generalization from specific actions so as to construct regularities. They function to make actions and events appear as perfectly normal, “what everybody or anybody would



do, as a routine, not needing any special account” (Edwards, 1994, p. 217). Some linguistic resources frequently associated with the action of scripting are: extreme adverbs and pronouns such as never, always, nobody, and everybody (Pomerantz, 198, Sacks, 1995); verbs with iterative or durative aspect; deictic shift (Lavandera, 1984); high epistemic and deontic modality; pluralisation (Edwards, 1994) and factual conditional clauses.

In what follows, we will discuss how political witnesses manipulate scripting devices when taking an adversarial or defensive stance. The discussion centres on how these mechanisms allow witnesses to hide or eliminate irregularities or abnormalities so as to make events appear normal. The first case comes from the testimony of the former Prime Minister Tony Blair. Here, the interrogator asks him to account for the decisions he made with former U.S. President George W. Bush during their private discussions at Bush’s ranch in Crawford, Texas, in April 2002.

BARONESS USHA PRASHAR: can we then come to Crawford?  
because you had one-to-one discussions  
with President Bush  
without any advisers present.  
can you tell us  
what was decided at these discussions?

RT HON TONY BLAIR: there was nothing actually decided  
but let me just make one thing clear about this  
one thing that is really important  
I think when you are dealing with other leaders  
is you establish  
and this is particularly important





I think, for the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom  
and the President of the United States  
you establish a close and strong relationship.  
you know, I had it with President Clinton  
and I had it again with President Bush  
and that's important.  
So some of it you will do in a formal meeting  
but it is also important  
to be able to discuss in a very frank way  
what the issues were.

Blair responds by categorically and emphatically denying the damaging proposition that a secret decision was made at this meeting. Through this evasive move, he introduces new standards of relevance and reformulates the nature of the event. The following narrative represents his controversial conduct of international affairs as standard practice. The use of a factual conditional clause, “when you are dealing with other leaders, you establish a close and strong relationship”, presents his closed-door policies as natural. The movement away from the deictic centre realized by the switch from the first-person pronoun (I) to the generic second-person pronoun (you) contributes to the representation of a routine. Finally, the insertion of the discourse marker “you know” in this section frames this characterization as shared making it more likely to be interpreted as such.

By generalizing personal experience in this way, Blair works to represent his actions as unremarkable, what any head of government would do, and to counteract alternative representations, such as the one presented by former British ambassador to Washington Sir Christopher Meyer, in which



Blair's policy of closed-door negotiations is problematic. As similarities of experience are typically used as indicators of existing social conditions, the presentation of experience as generalized effectively functions to hide irregularities and to make a case for the legitimacy of those actions. Contrasting representations of experience in the Iraq Inquiry is paramount for reconstructing the past, since material evidence is scarce (correspondence was not found) and there are no records of or witnesses to the discussions between Blair and Bush.

The following sequence comes from the testimony of Gordon Brown. This sequence begins when the interrogator remarks on his surprising lack of participation in the pre-war discussions and elicits a confirmation for the awkwardness of this situation.

SIR RODERIC LYNE: do you feel that  
there should have been a Cabinet Committee  
set up before the conflict happened  
one was set up immediately afterwards  
to deal with it  
that people like you  
should have been represented on?  
I think  
if I'm right in interpreting your answer  
to Baroness Prashar  
you hadn't actually been at Mr Blair's *ad hoc* meetings  
on the subject  
that he told us about.  
you weren't at his meeting at Chequers in April 2002  
which was an important one.  
you weren't at his meeting on 23 July 2002  
which was an important one.  
there wasn't a Cabinet Committee



and yet the Cabinet now  
had to take this very big decision  
over whether or not to go to war.  
Shouldn't you have been cut in earlier?

RT HON GORDON BROWN MP: I have to say that  
traditionally the Chancellor has never been  
on these committees  
and I don't think it happened previously.

SIR RODERIC LYNE: on War Cabinets in the past?

RT HON GORDON BROWN MP: when it came to the War Cabinet  
being constituted  
the Chancellor was a member of that.  
as I understand it  
previously in other instances  
the Chancellor  
under previous governments  
had not been a member  
of the War Cabinet.

SIR RODERIC LYNE: you were widely seen  
as one of the most influential members of the Cabinet  
as the most likely successor  
accurately to the then Prime Minister.

RT HON GORDON BROWN MP: it is very kind of you  
to say all this  
but the fact of the matter is  
I did not feel at any point  
that I lacked the information  
that was necessary  
that I was denied information  
that was required.  
but my role in this  
was not to second guess military decisions  
or options.  
my role in this  
was not to interfere  
in what were  
very important diplomatic negotiations



that was what the Prime Minister  
and the Foreign Secretary  
and the Defence Secretary  
were involved in.  
my role in this was first of all  
as Chancellor of the Exchequer  
to make sure that the funding was there  
for what we had to do  
and we did make sure that  
that happened  
and secondly  
to play my full part as a Cabinet member  
in the discussions that took place  
and that is indeed what I did.  
and when the Cabinet met on the Monday  
before the Tuesday vote  
in the House of Commons  
I spoke at the Cabinet  
and made my position clear.

In his first answer turn, Brown simply invokes a script based on tradition in order to justify his lack of participation: “traditionally the Chancellor has never been on these committees”. This script is challenged by the interrogator twice. The second time, the interrogator reminds the witness that he was not just any minister but “one of the most influential members of the Cabinet”, which evokes the assumption that he was supposed to be part of the discussions. In response, Brown deploys a more detailed scripted description of his job responsibilities as Chancellor of the Exchequer and Member of Cabinet, which characterizes his lack of involvement in the pre-war discussions as normal by presenting the realm of foreign affairs as being essentially outside his zone of



responsibility: “my role in this was not to second guess military decision”, “my role in this was not to interfere”. In this way, the witness works to hide the anomalies surrounding his absence from discussions. Noteworthy, an alternative event description was produced in the public hearings by the former International Development Secretary Clare Short. In her testimony, Brown’s lack of participation in government discussions is represented as a breach with tradition. Specifically, she claimed that Brown had been noticeably excluded from Blair’s inner group discussions as their relationship at that time was at its lowest point. She also remarked that she got the impression that Brown did not agree with Blair’s decision but that he decided not to speak out.

As Chirrey (2011) remarks, the use of script-formulations encourages audiences to interpret events and actions as having generalized and recognizable formats. The examination of script-formulations in inquiry testimonies shows that witnesses frequently rely on the use of scripts to make descriptions of events fit into generalized narratives. This strategic move plays an important role in presenting a persuasive case for the blamelessness of the speaker. As discursive productions, scripts are simple ways in which speakers hide personal agency and responsibility for their actions by presenting them as coherent representation of experience while managing to hide controversial details. The functionality of scripts resides on their power to make accounts appear common-sense and hence to prevent further inquiry.



The examination of evasion strategies in inquiry testimonies shows that political witnesses draw on similar patterns as they communicate and offer an interpretation for their actions. These strategies appear in situations in which witnesses perceive they may be charged with a fault and consequently they respond to the threat by undermining conflictive accounts and constituting other more favourable ones. As Martinez Guillem (2009) states, “the main goal of speakers when constructing their own accounts is to implicitly or explicitly discredit the versions of other accounts” (p. 730). The examination of discourse strategies in inquiry testimonies has unveiled different ways through which socially accountable figures work meticulously to avoid accountability for mentoring an illegitimate, if not illegal war, putting millions of innocent lives at risk and lying to and deceiving the general public. Given the magnitude of these offenses, exposing the moves through which witnesses work to get away with them is of utmost importance as it represents the basis for challenging their behaviour and the mental models their discourse produce for understanding a significant socio-political event.

#### **4. Impact and Conclusions**

By taking an approach to the study of discourse which acknowledges its situatedness, I have revealed some of the constitutive features of the testimonies produced by political witnesses at the Iraq War Inquiry in the United Kingdom and the discursive construction of accountability that results from them.



The examination of the data showed the recurrence of discourse strategies at different levels. In this article, I have centred my analysis on those verbal behaviours which can be called strategic, that is, “part of an overall plan that underlies multiple linguistic realizations at a variety of levels in a text and is meant to forward the speaker’s communicative and interactional ends” (Carranza, 2008, p. 33). I have discussed how the use of these discourse strategies contributes to the constitution of carefully elaborated texts which selectively foreground some aspects of reality while they hide others. The analysis of the data also shows different ways in which discourse strategies are deployed to manage issues of responsibility in discourse at a historically, politically and socially significant event. The analysis of these testimonies of high profile politicians in the context of a televised public hearing has proven to be particularly worth of attention because of their wide circulation and of their significant effect in shaping world views.

Fraser (1990) has linked developments in late modernity with an increase in accountability in modern societies, particularly, due to the availability of open access information and the ubiquity of social reflexivity and risk assessment. These developments have made institutional practices more visible and thus institutions and institutional members more accountable. The findings of this study point out some weaknesses in accountability management in relation to the discursive practices surrounding the Iraq War public hearings in the UK. These findings highlight that major developments in contemporary democracies have,



in fact, contributed to making key institutions less accountable by developing ubiquitous covering-up practices such as the one exposed by this study, namely, governmental whitewashing. As organizations are now more exposed, the most prevalent rationale behind modern institutions is that it pays to invest in legitimization procedures designed to maintain the perception of positive performance. An example of this is the recent season of public inquiries modern democratic societies have undergone. If not handled appropriately, these inquiries run by governmentally friendly *ad-hoc* committees and funded completely by taxpayers may represent nothing but strategically designed media cover-ups which systematically pursue a politics of deception. While it cannot be denied that public exposure of governmental practices has increased, current perfunctory investigations have often staged up displays of accountability in order to manipulate a confused audience. What has surfaced here is an interesting paradox. Contemporary democracies are perceived as being more open, reflexively oriented and critical. Yet, they are characterized by the use of more sophisticated mechanisms of centralized covering-up practices. In this clash, the catchy rhetoric of governmental transparency and openness in late modernity can only be interpreted as ideological since visibility seats uneasily beside the reality of secrecy, bureaucracy, public deception, and inaccessibility to real institutional agendas.

Two fruitful directions for inquiry have emerged in the making of this research but for reasons of space could not be addressed here. One area is the intricate interplay between semiotic





layering in mediated public discourse. Because comprehension and production of discourse do not solely depend on linguistic expression, it is pressing to address the complementary and supplementary interplay among various communicative modes. Another fecund area of inquiry for socially oriented discourse research consists in the limits of democracy exposed by the discursive practices in so-called advanced democratic societies. I have in mind the critical examination of governmental whitewashing practices such as perfunctory investigations manifesting a dichotomy between their rhetoric of openness, transparency, visibility, and accountability, and their reality of closed-door negotiations, opaqueness, and legal immunity for those in power.



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The construction of subjectivity in  
*The Blind Assassin* and *Tracks*

Laura Flores Calvo



**Laura Flores Calvo** is a teacher of literature for middle education from the Uruguayan Institute of Teacher Education. She has a Diploma in Education from FLACSO. She also holds the Cambridge Diploma of English Studies and the Cambridge Certificate of Overseas Teachers of English. She has an MA in English and Literature from Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, Argentina. She is currently in the fourth year of her PhD in Linguistics at the Pontifical Catholic University, Chile. She has worked as a teacher of English Language and Literature at the Uruguayan Institute of Teacher Education since 1995.





## Abstract

In the second half of the 20th century, due to significant changes in the ways of understanding the humanities and the arts, literary studies increased their interest in the concept of subjectivity. This article is predicated on the understanding that the subject is culturally and intersubjectively constructed and crossed by social forces (Foucault, 2008a). It is further assumed that the body is the subject; therefore, all bodily experience is subjective, and subjectivity is unthinkable without considering the whole complexity of human intellectual, emotional, and physical dimensions. Finally, this paper focuses on female subjectivity, which is here viewed as changeable and always unfinished, open to external forces, and fragile. This openness is made apparent in the female subject's confrontation with the substances that flow through her body openings, as discussed by Kristeva (1982). This work explores how two contemporary novels, *The Blind Assassin* by Margaret Atwood (2000) and *Tracks* by Louise Erdrich (1988), construct feminine subjectivity as crossed by social and



interpersonal forces, where bodily experiences are inherent to subjectivity. The bonds of female characters are examined in relation to the contexts and conflicts in which they find themselves and the role their bodies play in the construction and the limitations of their subjectivities. Finally, the question of the subject's freedom in the context of a socially defined and open subjectivity is discussed.



## 1. The Problem

The concept of subjectivity is a central concern in literary studies, as well as in the study of any of the humanities. Historically, changes in the understanding of subjectivity are a reflection of changes in culture. In the second half of the 20th century, the academic focus on subjectivity gained prominence as part of the linguistic turn, leading to a prolific number of books on subjectivity in literature.<sup>1</sup>

For the purpose of this study, it is assumed that the subject is culturally and intersubjectively constructed, crossed by innumerable forces that are not dictated by “nature” but rather are inherent to social life. Another feature of this view of subjectivity concerns the role the body has in subjectivity. Unlike traditional divisions between the soul<sup>2</sup> and the body, in this perspective the body is the subject. This means that all bodily experience is subjective, and that subjectivity is unthinkable without considering the whole complexity of human intellectual, emotional, and physical dimensions.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Some of these books, all published after 1980, centre on the Modernist exploration of subjectivity and/or the consequences of the linguistic turn in subjectivity in literary studies. In fact, Modernism is the major breakthrough of the 20th century in terms of how subjectivity is conceived. It came early in the century, with the artistic production of T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, among others. Modernism itself was affected by the impact that psychoanalysis—the theory that chose the word “subject” instead of “individual”—had on the humanities and the arts (See Ashmore & Jussim, 1997; Brown, 1989; Carroll 1982; Farrell, 1994; Seigel, 2005; Sheehan, 2002; Smith, 1988; Whitebrook, 2001; Zink, 1999).

2. Interestingly, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* online defines: “Self: the ‘I’ as experienced by an individual. In modern psychology the notion of self has replaced earlier conceptions of the soul” (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/533337/self>).

3. Psychoanalysis, which in fact is not the theoretical framework used in this study, is predicated on the view that the human subject is inextricably tied to its context.



Because context is a fluid and changeable factor, subjects –in all the dimensions they comprise– have difficulties discerning the limits between what pertains to them and what does not. The unending changes that subjects suffer due to that openness to their contexts give this view of subjectivity its dynamic quality, since it is always unfinished, open to external forces, and fragile.

Within the framework of this concept of subjectivity, the purpose of this study is to explore how two contemporary novels, *The Blind Assassin* by Margaret Atwood (2000) and *Tracks* by Louise Erdrich (1988), construct feminine subjectivity as crossed by social and interpersonal forces, where bodily experiences are inherent to subjectivity. This exploration examines the kinds of bonds the female characters establish in relation to the contexts and conflicts in which they find themselves, and the role their bodies play in the construction and the limitations of their subjectivities. I will seek to study the patterns of the relationships among these characters, and to analyze them in their contributions to understanding subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> Finally, in this article I aim to study the role the body plays in the chosen subjects, focusing on the open limits of their bodies and the confusion this brings to the subjective and intersubjective borders.

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4. Traditional novels and theories consider characters to be “the persons represented in a dramatic or narrative work, who are interpreted by the reader as being endowed with particular moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities by inferences from what the persons say and their distinctive ways of saying it —the dialogue— and from what they do—the action. The grounds in the characters' temperament, desires, and moral nature for their speech and actions are called their motivation” (Abrams, 1999, p. 32). Even though “recent structuralist critics have undertaken to dissolve even the lifelike characters of traditional novels into a system of literary conventions and codes which are naturalized by the readers” (Abrams, 1999, p. 33), this article will base the study of subjectivity in the construction of characters and narrators.



Both novels deal with pairs of female main characters with problematic bonds which reveal conflicts that highlight the fragility and instability of the subjects involved. The conflicts are shown in certain bodily experiences the protagonists undergo, such as female sexuality and maternity, which involve trespassing the limits of the body.

I will also examine how the utterly different cultural contexts shape subjectivity: the Canadian patriarchal society between 1930 and 2000 (*The Blind Assassin*) and a cultural clash in a Chippewa reservation in northern Minnesota at the beginning of the 20th century (*Tracks*). Despite contextual differences, both novels have in common that their pair of female protagonists have very close and conflicting bonds that affect their sense of identity and their experience of themselves as subjects. These pairs multiply the possibilities of critical reflection on contemporary subjectivity.

I shall analyze the novels from a sociocritical perspective (Angenot, Dalmasso, & Boria, 1998), exploring subjectivity as it appears in the social discourse through the two novels. The focus on the historical and social context that the sociocritical perspective fosters will allow me to explore the particular modes of female subjectivity that the texts construct and, at the same time, will strengthen and support one of the central views of this study, which is that subjectivity is a dynamic process and concept subject to historical changes.

In connection with subjectivity, the main topic of discussion, it must be added that my analysis is based on Foucault's (1984, 1994, 2003, 2008a, 2008b) writings in this field and is complemented by



specific concepts taken from Kristeva's (1982) theory of abjection. In addition, certain concepts that Butler (1990) develops from Foucault also contribute to my theoretical scaffolding.

I will use the Comparative Method to establish a dialogue between the two texts, and will single out the differences and similarities in the particular conflicts related to female subjectivity presented in the two novels. For this purpose, I will first compare the construction of subjectivity in the novels and after that, I will draw conclusions about the views of subjectivity these texts construct.

## **2. The Approach to the Problem**

Subjects in the current work are regarded as “subjected” (held tight) to society by forms of power that control social life. These forms of power come from each social group, class, or single subject. Therefore, the forces that dominate the subject are also the subject's source of power. Foucault's statement that “the soul is the prison of the body” is taken in this study as representative of his idea that the “soul”, the net of micro powers (acting at the level of the person) that shape subjectivity, is the force that makes subjects stay in their places and maintain their subjection. The body is ruled and designed by the soul. The subject is necessarily social and cultural, and s/he is defined in that very dimension. In this view, subjects cannot think outside their own interactive and inter-subjective souls. All concepts, values, ideas, and attitudes cross through this inter-subjective net.



Accordingly, the subject is not defined by an essential, unique, transcendental soul that can be thought of as independent from the body, or even inhabiting the body. The subject's soul is made by the technologies of subjectification, which are the forces and infinite circumstances and experiences in which the individual micro forces of power act upon the subject and, in turn, are responded to, resisted by, or received by the subject.

This perspective of subjectivity is productive and flexible. It claims that an interaction of social and emotional forces runs through the subjects and makes them subjects. It is this very interaction that makes subjectivity open and unfinished; forces from its immediate and wider surroundings make subjects unstable, prey to power, and always open to others and to new experiences and meanings. This instability causes subjectivity to be experienced as provisional, temporary, and ongoing. A myriad of crossing forces creates conflicts and responds to conflicts. From the point of view of an exploration of subjectivity, conflicts help us perceive, identify, and even understand some of the social and intersubjective forces running across subjectivity.

In order to help us think of subjects and their body as “run across” by “inner” and “outer” forces that break through the limits or borders of the supposed whole, at the level of the body, the skin may well be thought of as the “limit”—the external surface that encloses and defines the body— containing it within the unit. These concepts are parallel to Kristeva's (1982) ideas of *le corps propre* and abjection, which also contribute to the understanding of this view of subjectivity.



Abjection is an experience of emotional confusion the subject has when the simple biological fact that fluids break into our body acquires a psychological and existential dimension, destroying our image of our body as clearly defined from the outside world. The fluids that pierce the subject's body may be perceived as a threat, since this transit of fluids may infect our sense of identity and individual security. Kristeva (1982) understands that the subject's attempts to reject what our body produces are evidence of our efforts to strengthen our own subjectivity. It is clear why the most literal dimension of abjection is connected with the feminine, especially with the maternal: as Kristeva (1982) asserts, it was the mother's body which was most connected to those crossing points, when she delivered, nursed, and cleaned the undefined body of the baby.

I will compare the construction of subjectivity in the novels, in order to explore similarities and differences in ways that allow us to reach conclusions as to how feminine subjectivity is constructed in these contemporary texts. This analysis ultimately aims to consider the subject's freedom in the light of the awareness of what particular ties keep one subject to oneself and to others.

In short, the aim of this study is to analyze the main female characters in both novels to explore the view of subjectivity the texts present, particularly addressing the question of whether subjects are perceived as open to others or closed in themselves as essentially defined units. In any of these cases, the idea that the soul is a complex net of social forces and expectations





that defines these subjects will be explored, together with the question of whether these subjects experience themselves as free to change or if they feel so constrained that freedom of choice is beyond their possibilities.

### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1 Introduction

Comparing the texts offers valuable insights into the aim of this study: to understand how *The Blind Assassin* and *Tracks* construct subjectivity. Thinking of subjectivity as a continuum that has at one extreme the humanistic model and at the other, the analysis of the modes of subjectification and objectification offered by Foucault (2008a), it is to be concluded here where these two texts stand. Similarly, it may be noticed how Kristeva's (1982) concepts of open subjectivity and abjection are productive to complete the view of subjectivity offered by these novels, and how drawing a comparison between both may contribute to a better understanding of subjectivity. Since themes are connected to different episodes, and the different episodes in both texts are crossed by different themes, for the sake of organization this comparison is structured in five parts. Firstly, I will offer a discussion of how the narrative features and structures are similar in the novels and how each novel has one central female character that we only know through the narrative of another character (or characters). Secondly, I will carry out a discussion of



how the two main female characters in each book are intertwined and have indistinct boundaries between themselves and the other half of their pairing. In the third place, I will discuss the contextual aspects of relevance in both texts, such as capitalism, corruption, social class, ethnic conflicts, and mainly, patriarchy in both novels. Patriarchy is not just a feature of the context but a major theme and a significant ideological tenet in Western society as present in both texts, though with different weight. The fourth part will be a reference to the body in subjectivity as seen through sexual experiences, which, with the single exception of the couples Fleur and Eli in *Tracks* and Iris and Alex in *The Blind Assassin*, are humiliating, violent, and/or dangerous. In many cases, these experiences lead to pregnancies, some of which end in miscarriage or abortion and some of which end in live births. A section will be devoted to rapes, a particular kind of sexual experience of importance in both texts. The final part presents the conclusions.

### **3.2 Narrative features**

The narrative features to be discussed here are the novels' structures and their narrators. The novels have similar structures of intertwined texts and different narrators in charge of each text, which imposes an open and flexible configuration of subjectivity. The overlapping texts combine a number of connected stories, offering varied perspectives. *The Blind Assassin* was defined as a palindrome, with a mirroring structure interwoven by two texts: a



memoir in which Iris Chase jots down her past life and her present reflections, and a dystopian fantasy, also called *The Blind Assassin*, authored by Laura Chase but actually written by Iris. Throughout this novel there are also a set of media clippings, presented in chronological order, that contribute to the creation of the socio-historical context. *Tracks* is also structured as two intertwined narratives: Nanapush's oral account to his granddaughter Lulu and Pauline Puyat's account of her adolescence.

The structure of interwoven narratives, recurrent in contemporary fiction, matters to the construction of subjectivity in that it leaves readers to carry out the job of making connections and interpreting them. Narrative structures cannot be disentangled from narrators. By employing different narrators to tell components of the story, texts present multiple points of view and prevent any authoritative explanation that might have been given by a single narrative voice.

In *The Blind Assassin* there are several Irises: the girl in Avilion, the young lover of Alex Thomas, the elderly lady looking back to it all. Moreover, there is a main character, Laura, who comes to the readers only through Iris's narratives. Likewise in *Tracks*, apart from the narrators Nanapush and Pauline, there is a Pauline in Nanapush's story and a Nanapush in Pauline's account. In both texts, there are main characters that readers only get to know through the voice of others. This happens with Laura in *The Blind Assassin*, who readers know through her sister's voice. In *Tracks*, Fleur is a protagonist whose voice is not directly heard but created by the two overlapping texts.



These structures confer the texts a Janus's structure: one face of the text tells about the narrators and the other one tells mainly about the voiceless main characters and about their concerns and perspectives. This kaleidoscopic effect enforces the texts' openness and the uncertainty experienced by the characters as they develop their own senses of self and their understanding of subjectivity.

Finally, these technical aspects are relevant in that they address the main question of this study: there are both similarities and differences in the subjects these novels construct, but in any case, the openness and unfinished concept is clear in that it is not monologically given. Much on the contrary, there is uncertainty and instability on the subjectivities that are constructed by a myriad of elements where no minor portion is in the eye of the beholder.

### **3.3 Dualities in protagonist pairs**

In both novels, female subjectivity is made prominent by the arrangement of female protagonists in pairs. Duality between feminine protagonists is a major feature to understand the relevance of intersubjective bonds in the construction of subjectivity, an influential aspect that portrays how women in these texts are open to the surrounding others. Mostly, these dual feminine bonds lay bare the coexistence of feelings of jealousy together with love and care.



In *Tracks*, duality consists in Pauline's envy of Fleur, clearly expressed in the episodes at the meat shop in Argus. This jealousy was explained in connection with how differently Pauline and Fleur experience their similar situations as orphan members of the Chippewa within a group of white European males. It is important to consider that Pauline expected protection and consolation from Fleur, a sort of female complicity, which Fleur never showed. Pauline's very low self-esteem moves her to both admire and envy Fleur's Chippewa pride. Pauline also admires Fleur because of the effect she has on men, in contrast to what Pauline thinks of herself. This mixture of strong need and admiration with the frustration of Fleur's indifference makes Pauline's jealousy highly destructive. It is this irrational jealousy that causes Pauline to reject Fleur the only two times Fleur came to her for help. When Fleur was being raped she cried Pauline's name in Chippewa. Pauline closed her eyes and put her hands on her ears and did not go. This happens again when Fleur miscarries her second baby. She requests Pauline's help but Pauline stays put, without any clear reason. Pauline is motivated by a deep vengeful feeling of dark psychological origin. Indeed, guilt is one of the overtones of this complex bond, whose confusion is best portrayed by Pauline's dream in which she shouted through Fleur's mouth and Pauline's blood poured from Fleur's wounds. The confusion of boundaries with Fleur deeply affects Pauline, making her feel that the limits between them are blurred.

In *The Blind Assassin*, there is also jealousy in the dual conflict of the feminine protagonists, increased by the emotional



confusion of sisterly love. The sisters' life experience has led Iris to have trouble in separating her own identity from that of Laura. The confusion of identities is particularly clear and vivid in the imagery Iris uses to describe the sisters' relationship. For example, the image of the empty gloves that continue "holding hands" once the girls had taken them off. The gloves seem to represent that unity that ties the sisters together. Another example, this time of conflictive jealousy, is the photograph of Iris, Alex, and Laura that Laura copies twice and then cuts out. One copy only shows Alex and Iris, and Laura is cut out of it. That would be Iris's own photo of her alone with Alex. The other copy shows Alex and Laura, and Iris is cut out of it. That would be Laura's own photo of her alone with Alex. There is confusion in Iris's when she sees Laura wearing her dress. Iris has a strange impression that instead of her sister the one she was looking at was her own double. The book was written by both sisters, as Iris explains: she was the material writer but the stories, the conflicts, the feelings, belonged to both sisters.

The confusions are different in both novels. In *Tracks* Fleur is a strong woman who does not need Pauline's support or affection. Much on the contrary, Pauline is the one who keeps on looking for Fleur's attention. However, Fleur is not even aware of Pauline's emotional confusion. Pauline is too much of a stranger for Fleur to keep thinking about her.

In *The Blind Assassin*, Laura is an extremely sensitive woman who has suffered all sorts of grief and even aggression in her life, unlike Fleur. Though she had been strong enough to protect Iris



from learning the truth about Richard's abuses, she needs her sister Iris, her only real emotional attachment apart from her fantasies and daydreams about Alex Thomas. Many times in the novel Iris wonders if Alex has ever made love to Laura, since she knows Alex is the only man Laura cared about. The hostility of Iris's words to her sister before her death is clearly responded by Laura's committing suicide in Iris's car.

Both narrators, Iris and Pauline, show in their stories the confusion of identity they suffer, as well as their difficulties to distance themselves from their object of envy. This blurring of limits has to do with their merging with the other one, which extends in different ways to their bodies. As is it has just been shown, in both pairs there are moments in which the confusion of identities results in such intimate closeness and identification with the other one that the limits between them become blurred and cause ambiguity and emotional confusion.

All in all, it is clear that subjective limits exist in these novels, even though they do not divide subjects as isolated, sealed units. The openings that Kristeva (1982) calls the *abject* appear in both novels in different situations that affect these doubled characters, in which their bodies' openings and the transit of elements inside and outside them become the mental image of a pierced subject, that is not clearly divided from the others, such as Iris from Laura or Pauline from Fleur. Although the situations are very different, both stress these women's love and care, on the one hand, and their hostility on the other.



These emotional conflicts between main female characters account for an affective confusion that helps to construct an open and dynamic view of subjectivity, instead of showing it as a fixed, essential entity. All these situations stress the indeterminacy of these females' subjective boundaries, manifested in situations that generate the illusion of the subject's unity.

### **3.3.1 A note on subjects and contexts**

Iris and Pauline, the narrators, often doubt whether subjects can be different from individual others or from social discourses. Iris thinks that Laura's view of herself is not clearly different from the way others, the family, see her. In fact, it is not clear if there is any subjective reality that can be extricated from the views prevalent in those surrounding subjects. Iris does not see any clear cut difference between the subject and the social context, in this case.

In the case of *Tracks*, it is clear that cultural identity brands all characters, to the extent that each of them becomes the arena where the cultural clash takes place, and the clearest case in this sense is Pauline, who was born a Puyat Chippewa but decides to declare she is white and Catholic, joining the nuns and changing her name. Pauline's conflict shows that there are no clear boundaries between subjects and cultural ideologies since the latter exist in the former. It takes Pauline time and suffering to adopt her new identity as Sor Leopolda, although she understands being Chippewa will only give her loss and oppression.





This brings us back to Foucault's concept of the soul as socio-cultural construction. Do we make ours the ideas we are born into? And I would add, do we have any chance, any choice, or any other source of ideas? This goes to the centre of the question of subjectivity, the place of the soul, the mind, the social and cultural.

Foucault explains that the subjectification of subjects to power/knowledge is necessary in order to become social subjects. The toll for sanity, as psychoanalysis proposes, is the entrance into the symbolic order by means of language and the law of the father. If we do not enter the symbolic, then we stay within a pre-Oedipal, psychotic world.<sup>5</sup> This is not a conscious option; to socialize we have to learn the limits. However, there is individual freedom of choice, as Sor Leopolda may prove.

### 3.4 Contexts

The novels' socio-historical contexts have in common patriarchal ideology, of utmost relevance in both texts as it is, in fact, a major theme. There are also similarities in the critical view of Western ideologies about economic matters, specifically those regarding the role that profit-making plays in a capitalist society, basic in the idea of success and achievement. Both novels also denounce corruption in connection with economic gain and

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5. However, Kristeva (1984) claims that the pre-Oedipal does not disappear but stays over in what she calls the semiotic order.



power. Notwithstanding these larger similarities, these topics are differently dealt with, due to more specific contextual aspects, such as the social class conflict in *The Blind Assassin* and the ethnic conflicts in *Tracks*.

Dealing with patriarchy is crucial in novels that deal with feminine subjectivity.<sup>6</sup> It must be noted that *The Blind Assassin* constructs a rigid view of patriarchy as prevalent in the Canadian society<sup>7</sup> of the early 20th century. In fact, patriarchal abuse and the objectification of women define the novel. Against this background, the text constructs feminine subjects as fragile, submissive, and vulnerable in many ways. The novel abounds in episodes that reveal how women had no say in decisions, whether personal in nature or in the world of business and work. One example is how Iris's father traded his daughter (or both his daughters, perhaps) to Richard in return for a button factory and the security of the employees; another example is Iris's marriage itself; Laura's admittance in the mental asylum by virtue of a masculine pact is yet another.

At the same time, women are part of the patriarchal values since they help men to keep their positions of power. This can happen by means of active cooperation, as is the case of Winifred, or by means of silent acceptance in exchange for comfort and

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6. Patriarchy is prominent in Atwood's political agenda, and the feature is shared by *Tracks*, as shown in the episodes in Pauline's text in *Argus* (Chapter 1).

7. This contextual aspect is reinforced by the corruption of the government and the collusion of the upper classes (Nazism, blackmailing, vested interests, and immorality), an immoral conspiracy that both sisters suffer.



privilege, as is the case of Iris —who, by the way, accepts the rules of the game and finds consolation in her love affair with Alex. This can even happen to innocent Laura, who keeps silent about her sexual abuse at Richard’s hands in order to protect her sister.

Episodes where patriarchy is relevant in *Tracks* are connected to white men outside the reservation, such as Fleur’s experience in Argus<sup>8</sup> where the men could not put up with a gambling woman who, besides, always won. Similarly, Pauline suffers the patriarchal authority of the same white men in Argus who ignore her since, she claims, she is not attractive.

As for the differences, the major one resides in the prominence of patriarchal values in *The Blind Assassin*, working together with other political and social aspects that are clearly denounced in the novel. In *Tracks*, though, the context of ethnic conflicts focuses most of the novel on different issues. In this sense, for example, Pauline’s experience of being ignored on account of her ugliness is equally connected to her lack of self-esteem due to her rejection of the native inheritance in her mixed blood.

Other contextual matters where there are similarities include the critical view of Western society regarding the role that money plays in both novels, both in connection with power and corruption. In *The Blind Assassin*, economic power and social class are major topics. In fact, together with the criticism of Nazism, they share a place of primary importance in the novel’s political

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8. Rapes will be discussed in themselves later on, though there is no denying their connection with patriarchal authoritarianism and abuse.



agenda, as seen in mentions of the news and social chronicles in the newspaper and magazine clippings. This can be seen in the obsequious attitudes that all the politicians and businessmen show toward each other as part of a huge campaign of mutual enrichment by the corrupt offering of favours.

Similarly, in *Tracks*, some clans take advantage of the political situation of ethnic conflict in those days. The privileged clans are those who have members who can read and write and few scruples to keep the land and the money of other Chippewa. The connection with the white European majority is implied in the fact that, before the Indians —first settlers— were made to buy the land, they were allotted in the reservation. This implied that they had to work for money and that their priority would not be their well-being but the payments. Before the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887 Indians did not have to pay for their land.

The dimension of corruption is very different in both novels, and so is the extent of the protagonists' involvement in dirty business.<sup>9</sup> The display of hypocrisy and the rigidly organized class system in *The Blind Assassin* clearly differs here from the ethnic conflicts in *Tracks*.

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9. The question of whether money is a temptation to those who already had the seed of corruption inside—the Morrisseys? The Kashpaws?—or whether it is the beginning of corruption since it makes it possible to gain and profit at the expense of others, is not the main point here.



### 3.5 Sexual experiences: miscarriages, deliveries, and rapes

There are a number of bodily experiences in the texts that affect subjectivity. Most sexual experiences in both novels consist of humiliating situations suffered by both pairs of protagonists. Laura is humiliated by Richard; Fleur is raped by the white men in Argus. Iris suffers sexual intercourse where she is often beaten by her husband. In her sexual encounters with Napoleon, Pauline puts herself in a place of contempt, shame, and scorn.

The fact that in each novel there is one case of happy and satisfying sexual intercourse—Fleur and Eli in *Tracks* and Alex and Iris in *The Blind Assassin*—seems to show that in these universes there is room for them, against possible generalizations about sexuality in the texts.

In each novel, some of the sexual experiences result in miscarriage. When Helen and Fleur suffer pregnancy loss, they are forced to confront the fact that their open subjectivities are not under their full control. In other words, the instability and even fragility of feminine subjectivity are made relevant in these situations that characters in both novels have to endure.

The contexts in which the miscarriages occur, as well as the women who undergo pregnancy loss, differ in many ways. Iris and Laura's mother was expecting her third baby in spite of the warnings given by the doctor. Fleur loses her second baby, unable to stop the bleeding and keep the baby. Both situations reveal feminine weakness and their confrontation with their inability



to control inner elements that flow out of their body. This creates a sense of fear and anxiety that Kristeva (1982) identifies as abjection.

Another result of sexual experiences connected with *le corps propre* is found in births. There are two deliveries in *Tracks*: Fleur's delivery of Lulu, the retelling of which lacks details, as Nanapush, the narrator, was not present and can only describe the comings and goings of the women who assisted Fleur. The other is Pauline's delivery of Marie, perhaps the most disturbing case of bodily experience connected with motherhood, the limits of the physical body, and abjection. As was already discussed, the struggle to lose the baby first, the effort made not to part from the baby when the moment of the delivery comes, and the denial to even look at her when the baby is finally forced outside her are aspects that call the reader's attention to them since they are sick, and disturbed behaviours. There is no pleasure, joy, or pride in this experience of motherhood. Pauline experiences her body, once more, as a source of suffering.

Regarding the situations of humiliating and violent sexual experiences that appear in both novels,<sup>10</sup> Fleur and Laura are victims of the most violent episodes of harassment, including Laura's abortion. In spite of the bestiality and aggression of the very acts, neither Fleur's nor Laura's rapes are described with any detail. In the case of Fleur, it makes sense that Pauline, who was

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10. Rape is a frequent punishment for women in patriarchal contexts.



not a visual witness and feels particularly guilty, prefers to skip the details. As for Laura's rape, Iris is the only narrator; she also feels guilty and only learns about the rapes after Laura's death.

Comparing the attitudes and situations of Laura and Fleur as raped women, it is interesting that both keep the humiliation to themselves. The silence of the abused is an indicator of their powerlessness and loneliness. Fleur's silence is her own protection and a consequence of her contempt for white Western males. Laura, on the other hand, tries to protect her sister from such a devastating situation.

Back to the reservation, Fleur finds she is pregnant and she has the strength to recover her dignity and self-respect. She becomes stronger as a person, builds a family and reinforces her place as a member of the Chippewa tribe. Unlike Fleur, Laura is unable to build a new life after her rapes. The pregnancy ensuing from Richard's rapes ends up with Laura sent to a mental asylum where she is forced to have an abortion. This abuse, which does not happen to Fleur, leaves Laura in a position of extreme weakness, since she cannot even blame herself for a decision she regrets. She is left humiliated and lonely and she can only daydream about a future with Alex, whom she had not seen for ages. She is thus too vulnerable to handle the news of Alex's death and of Iris having been his lover for years. One clear conclusion is that while Fleur has Lulu to live for, Laura has no one and is left surrounded by death and emptiness.

It is clear that both Fleur and Laura, as well as Iris and Pauline, have the freedom to make some choices. Fleur is able to overcome



the violent act that caused her pregnancy and to become a mother and build a family, but she cannot accept that the loss of her identity comes with the loss of her family land. Therefore, she sends Lulu to a boarding school and vanishes from the reservation. Pauline makes another radical choice, showing more than any other of these female characters how far she is ready to go to achieve what she considers a better life, which provides her with the sense of identity and belonging she misses so much. Laura cannot find a way to live her life. Suffering is overpowering for her; her response to the lack of sense is suicide. Iris lives a long life, suffers the terrible loss of her daughter Aimée, and ends up dedicating her writing to her granddaughter Sabrina. In an act parallel to Nanapush's story to Lulu, Iris wants to offer her granddaughter the opportunity to redefine her identity, to reinvent herself as the descendant of the revolutionary Alex rather than the sick and corrupt Richard.

The experiences that all these feminine characters undergo in connection with their subjectivity and the body, from the perspective of Kristeva's (1982) concept of abjection, show how the openings in the female body make women confront the openness of their subjectivity, highlighting how this lack of closure happens in the body as well as in the mind and emotions. This view of subjectivity, as well as its political implications for feminine subjects in the context of both historical situations, was explored in a range of situations the novels include as part of these women's subjective experience.





## 4. Conclusions

The comparison between both novels reinforces the concept of subjectivity that frames this work, particularly in an open and flexible view of subjectivity that overcomes rigid categories and comes closer to a definition of subjectivity as an unfinished and changing experience crossed by social forces and in permanent interaction with the others.

First, both texts have main characters who undergo bodily experiences that also help them understand their own subjectivity. Second, the bodily experience of openings, as represented by situations in which the subject is confronted with her body's orifices, supports *le corps propre* as an ideological construction. The fact that substances and fluids cross the limits of the body confronts the subject with a way to understand that the body's openings to the outside world coincide with subjectivity's openness and instability. In fact, like the body, the subject is not a unique essence closed and fixed from birth to death. Third, both texts construct a view of subjectivity as crossed by socio-cultural tensions and pressures, as well as affected by intersubjective bonds, in the same way in which they show numerous cases of bodies that are not closed units but open to the world in different ways. Finally, as Butler (1990) states, these novels show that the subject is able to reinvent herself and is not essentially defined and determined from birth, as Iris tells her granddaughter Sabrina, and as both Pauline and Lulu, after Nanapush tells her his narrative of her life, choose to do.



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Rector | Dr. Hugo Oscar Juri  
Vicerrector | Dr. Ramón Pedro Yanzi Ferreira



Decana | Dra. Elena del Carmen Pérez  
Vicedecano | Mgtr. Martín Capell

Secretaria de Posgrado | Dra. Graciela Ferrero  
Prosecretaria de Ciencia y Tecnología | Dra. María José Buteler



