0442

Separated by a Common Language of Assessment? Undertaking a Linguistic Analysis of Assessment Documentation

Harry West[1], Luke Rudge[1]

[1]*University of the West of England, Bristol, United Kingdom*

Research Domain: Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract: Assessment and feedback are a key part of the student experience in higher education. Despite advances in practice in recent years, universities still frequency receive low student satisfaction scores in this area. Reasons for this may include discrepancies in the understanding and interpretation of the language used in assessment. As part of a wider QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project, this paper reflects on the process of performing linguistic analyses across a broad range of assessment documentation with four partner institutions in the UK. Corpus linguistic analyses were undertaken using Sketch Engine to identify frequently used and salient terms in assessment documentation across the partner institutions. This informed the next stages of the project to measure student comprehension and levels of understanding of the language identified. This paper presents the findings of the linguistic analysis and reflects on the process of working in collaborative partnership across different institutions.

Paper: Universities often receive low student satisfaction scores in surveys for assessment (Yang & Carless, 2013). In particular, perceptions of inconsistency and unreliability are a cause of concern for students (Bloxham et al., 2016). However, a truly standardised system is unlikely, not least due to the often indeterminate nature of many terms used in Higher Education contexts (Morrish and Sauntson, 2020), thus elements of subjectivity and variability are expected (Yorke, 2011). There have been ongoing efforts to reduce inconsistency however, such as the development of standards-based assessment through publication of marking criteria which are generic and student focused (Alonzo et al., 2019).

The benefits of clear assessment documentation are well-established (Freeman and Lewis, 1998). These include that students can compare their work with past performance (Rowntree, 1987) and gain an understanding of what is required at different levels (Neil et al., 1999). Different practices exist which make use of such assessment documents/criteria, including supporting students through self-assessment (Lew et al., 2010), using annotated exemplars during feedback (Bell et al., 2013; Worth, 2014), adopting a dialogic feedforward approach (Hill & West, 2020), or through co-creation of marking criteria (Orsmond et al., 2000). The literature suggests that when students meaningfully engage with and reflect upon assessment documentation, performance is improved, and the benefits of assessment literacy are realised. However, these practices do, to various extents, assume a common understanding of the language used in assessment documentation amongst both students and staff.

As part of the QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project exploring the language of assessment, this paper reflects on the process of undertaking a linguistic analysis of a range of assessment documentation, including assessment briefs, module learning outcomes and specifications, marking criteria and grading descriptors, and student-facing university policies. Each of the four UK partner institutions on the project performed equivalent corpus analyses of their analogous documentation, with the goal being to apply corpus linguistic methodologies to query the language used (McEnery and Hardie, 2012). This provided insight into identifying common and key terms and phrases relating to assessment, marking and the regulation of assessment (e.g. critically analyse, describe), and the level of performance (e.g. excellent, good, poor). Each institution complied documentation from across 17 subject clusters, mapped according to the UK HECoS CAH1 codes – the clusters were chosen where at least 3/4 of the partner institutions were delivering large programmes.

The documentation was compiled and analysed using the software package Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2014), made available via the EU Horizon 2020-funded ELEXIS project. One main corpus was compiled in each institution, each consisting of four subcorpora: 1) assessment briefs, 2) learning outcomes, 3) marking criteria and grade descriptors, 4) university policies relating to assessment. The word count of each institution's main corpus was checked to ensure parity (i.e., a maximum discrepancy of 5,000 words between the largest and the smallest count).

Each corpus was queried from two broad perspectives. Firstly, a word frequency analysis of common parts of speech (i.e., nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) was undertaken to identify recurring lexis within assessment documentation (e.g., critically and grounding). Secondly, a keyword analysis identified statistically salient single and multi-word terms relative to a corpus of everyday British English usage: the English Web 2020 corpus (e.g., innovative thought and rigorous argument). In both instances, manual confirmation was employed to remove false-positives (e.g., the verb to be and its conjugated forms) and to investigate how lexis/terms are used in context via collocational analysis.

Finally, the top 50 results of each query across institutions were then compared to identify lexical patterns, discrepancies and, ultimately, the terminology that would feedforward into the next stage of the larger project investigating the level of student comprehension of these terms via the use of a survey and focus groups. The broader project permits us to determine the extent to which there is a common understanding of frequently used language in assessment documentation, but as alluded to above, this could only be completed in a robust manner by accurately following supportable linguistic methodology and theory.

We also reflect on the opportunities and challenges afforded by working across four partner institutions in undertaking this analysis. Whilst each institution collated their own documentation and undertook their own analyses, coordination was still required to ensure equivalent documentation was included in the corpora and that the results were comparable. Whilst working across institutions provided a number of benefits, challenges were also faced, such as differences in the format of and language used to name and describe documentation.

References: Alonzo, D., Mirriahi, N. & Davison, C. (2019), The standards for academics' standards-based assessment practices, Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, Vol.44(4), 636-652.

Bell, A., Mladenovic, R. & Price, M. (2013), Students' perceptions on the usefulness of marking guides, grade descriptors and annotated exemplars, Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, Vol.38(7), 769-788.

Bloxham, S., den-Outer, B., Hudson, J. & Price, M. (2016), Let's stop the pretence of consistent marking: Exploring the multiple limitations of assessment criteria, Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, Vol.41(3), 466-481.

Freeman, R. & Lewis, R. (1998), Planning and implementing assessment, London: Kogan Page.

Hill, J. & West, H. (2020), Improving the student learning experience through dialogic feed-forward assessment, Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, Vol.45(1), 82-97

Kilgarriff, A., Baisa, V., Bušta, J., Jakubíček, M., Kovář, V., Michelfeit, J., Rychlý, P. & Suchomel, V. (2014), The Sketch Engine: ten years on, Lexicography, Vol.1, 7-36.

McEnery, T. & Hardie, A. (2012), Corpus Linguistic, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Morrish, L. & Sauntson, H. (2020), Academic Irregularities: Language and Neoliberalism in Higher Education, London: Routledge.

Neil, D.T., Wadlet, D.A. & Phinn, S.R. (1999), A generic framework for criterion-referenced assessment of undergraduate essays, Journal of Geography in Higher Education, Vol.23(3), 303-325.

Orsmond, P., Merry, S. & Reiling, K. (2000), The use of student derived marking criteria in peer and self-assessment, Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, Vol.25(1), 23-38.

Worth, N. (2014), Student-focused assessment criteria: Thinking through best practice, Journal of Geography in Higher Education, Vol.38(3), 361-372.

Yang, M. & Carless, D. (2013), The feedback-triangle and the enhancement of dialogic feedback processes, Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, Vol.18(3), 285-297.

Yorke, M. (2011), Summative assessment: Dealing with the measurement fallacy, Studies in Higher Education, Vol.36(3), 251-273.