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TẠP CHÍ KHOA HỌC XÃ HỘI, NHÂN VĂN VÀ GIÁO DỤC

COMPLIMENTS IN ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE FEEDBACK: IMPLICATIONS IN L2 WRITING CLASSROOMS

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Abstract: Complimenting is known as a complex speech act which may serve various functions in interaction. In the genre of writing, complimenting often serves as a positive evaluation and as criticisms or suggestions for improvement. To bring positive feelings for the writers, writing tutors in writing centers often incorporate compliment acts in their asynchronous e-feedback. It is commonly recognized that the main goal of giving feedback in the domain of L2 writing is to help students do better writing and consequently enhance the quality of their work. This is true to both writing tutors in the writing centers and L2 writing instructors in different contexts of teaching and learning L2 writing. This paper aims to discuss the role of the speech act of compliments in asynchronous online feedback from writing tutors and further explore the implications of the compliment act for teacher feedback in L2 writing classrooms.

Key words: compliments; asynchronous online feedback; teacher feedback; L2 writing instruction.

1. Introduction

What are the compliment strategies used in asynchronous online feedback? What are the functions of the compliments used in asynchronous online feedback? Should L2 writing teachers give compliments on their feedback? These are interesting questions being asked by many writing tutors working at writing centers in higher education institutions. In everyday conversations, compliments such as *I like your hat!* or *you're doing great* are often understood as utterances that refer to something good and as verbal gifts that the addresser gives to the addressee (Holmes, 1988). Most often perceived as positive speech acts, such compliments aim to satisfy the hearer's positive face wants (Lau, 2025) and to facilitate the conversation.

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In the genre of writing, the compliment act was supposed to contain positive comments about various aspects of writing such as the paper (i.e. the writing product), the writer (i.e. the addressee), the writing process, and the rhetorical effect (i.e. the impact of the writing product on the reader) (Johnson & Roen, 1992). Example [1] contains a compliment written by an American graduate female tutor (Sadie) on September 9th of 2020 in a public research university in the South Central region of the United States:

[1] "Hi Ekaterina! With the allotted time, I was able to read through your Literature Review chapter twice, and provided comments throughout. *Overall, your writing is extremely polished, and you present your discussion of previous literature clearly and effectively. The narrative you create is also very easy and enjoyable to follow, and each section leads naturally to the next.* I was hard-pressed to find areas of revision, and highlighted sections that caused me pause, typically due to the following reasons."

Sadie's feedback consisted of many types of compliments. The feedback first contained a general compliment about the paper ('Overall, your writing is extremely polished,'), and a compliment about the writer of the paper (', and you present your discussion of previous literature clearly and effectively'). Her feedback finally consisted of a compliment about the effect of the paper on the reader ('The narrative you create is also very easy and enjoyable to follow, and each section leads naturally to the next'). Sadie's feedback ended with few suggestions that may help to improve the paper. The compliments like Sadie's were very common in online feedback involving asynchronous writing tutoring sessions in a public research university in the South Central region of the United States.

2. Asynchronous writing tutoring sessions

Asynchronous writing tutoring (or e-tutoring) sessions have been very common in many public research universities in America, especially under the Covid-19 pandemic. In recent years, the writing center tutoring service has also received lots of attention from many English-medium universities in Vietnam, for example at International University (VNU-HCM). Students were required to upload a writing product or an assignment when making an appointment. Detailed comments throughout the assignment that pointed out major and minor errors for revision together with overall comments from the tutor (henceforth called e-feedback) would be sent back to the students within 48 hours.

It is also important to emphasize that e-tutoring sessions do not offer students any opportunities for questions, response to tutors' comments, raising new issues or actively engaging with tutors during the revision process (Kourbani, 2018). Written comments were the only means of communication between tutors and students. According to Samburskiy and Quah (2014), error feedback was effective in helping students produce more accurate texts, and so asynchronous e-feedback deeply and directly influenced the revision process of students. Due to the significant importance of asynchronous e-feedback in students' revision process, the question emerging was whether or not giving compliments in asynchronous e-feedback can contribute to students' revision process and enhance writing quality.

For writing tutors, one way to show politeness in the context of peer feedback was to pay compliments on students' writing and ideas. Finding something positive to say about a student's writing was significantly important as compliments can make students accept negative evaluation more easily (Sabatino & Rafoth, 2012). Yet, not many tutors may understand how written compliments form and function in improving the writer and revising the paper as well.

Written compliments on the one hand can serve as a positive speech act to enhance students' revision process. Written compliments on the other hand can be used as sarcasm or disapproval to put someone down (Johnson & Roen, 1992). Under those circumstances, giving compliments in asynchronous e-feedback can produce a negative effect or misinterpretation on students' revision process.

In the genre of writing, a compliment often performs two major functions, as positive evaluation and as criticisms and suggestions for improvement.

3. Positive evaluation

A written compliment like *your in-text citations are well-constructed and accurate according to APA guidelines* was a good example of a compliment that functions as positive evaluation. This kind of compliment contained positive evaluative terms (or positive comments) such as 'well-constructed' and 'accurate', and conveyed a sense of agreement and approval between the tutor and the writer. Compliments as positive evaluation frequently contain positive comments about the paper, its writer, the writing process and the rhetorical effect (Johnson & Roen, 1992). Thus, compliments as positive evaluation tend to work as a positive speech act and aim to create positive feelings for the writer. This kind of compliment disregards criticisms or suggestions for revision.

4. Criticisms and suggestions for improvement

Another function of compliments in written interaction is to offer criticisms and suggestions for improvement (Johnson & Roen, 1992). Written compliments, such as Examples [2] and [3] extracted

from Sadie's collection of e-feedback, mainly offered suggestions for improvement:

[2] "Overall, your writing is engaging, and offers interesting support and insight in the discussion. *The following are just a few strategies to consider*,"

[3] "Overall, the citations looked great. *One thing you will want to revise throughout is moving the page numbers to be next to the date in your parentheticals (except when it comes to block quotes, because block quotes are weird)*."

Aside from compliments as positive evaluation simply containing positive comments, compliments as criticisms and suggestions for improvement sound more constructive, including both positive comments and specific suggestions for revision.

The main aim of such compliments is to offer specific suggestions for revision. On the part of the writer, such compliments may constitute face threatening acts and discourage the writer or even make them give up. In order to show politeness and mitigate criticism, online tutors usually offer praise before criticism (Sabatino & Rafoth, 2012), so compliments as criticisms and suggestions for improvement more frequently contain positive comments prior to specific criticisms or suggestions. The main message of this kind of compliment was not to attribute credit to the person addressed, but to draw specific suggestions for the revision process.

5. Teacher feedback in L2 writing

To bring positive feelings for the writer when receiving feedback and to make the revision process more effective and less tortured, writing tutors in writing centers were encouraged to give compliments in asynchronous e-feedback before offering criticisms or suggestions for improvement. Should L2 writing teachers give compliments on their feedback?

Working as a lecturer in a public research university in Vietnam, I was often told to give low scores and be too harsh on students' essays and various drafts of undergraduate theses though my intention was to motivate students to do better writing. I remember one foreign student under my thesis supervision was irresponsible for her work and so careless in her thesis writing that frustrated me a lot, and as a result I gave her seriously negative feedback. I have never thought that she got hurt for that. A few days after she successfully defended her thesis, she scheduled an appointment with me in person to say thank you but unexpectedly she cried in front of me. She said that she was hurt by my feedback though she knew I wanted her to do better. This is an interesting story that brings us back to the question: *Should L2 writing teachers give compliments on their feedback?*

In L2 writing instruction, teachers providing feedback on students' essays and other kinds of writing products was an important part to help students do better writing. Traditionally, teacher feedback was more product-oriented (i.e. too much focus on discourse level form (Yu, 2021) while teacher feedback, according to the process and genre-oriented approach to writing, put an emphasis on audience, writing purposes, and the writer's processes. The main focus of writing was on the content development and its appropriate genre structures (Yu, 2021). Language accuracy and discourse level form (Goldstein, 2004; Lee, 2017) will not receive priority in teacher feedback from a genre L2 writing teaching perspective.

However, teachers giving feedback on students' writing was so time-consuming and labor-intensive as the majority of L2 writing classes in Vietnam are very big in size. Further, research shows that students were often reluctant to engage with feedback (Xu et al., 2024, p. 1). Teachers may spend a huge amount of time giving feedback on students' writing, students may not appreciate their teachers' time and effort when receiving feedback. Students, especially undergraduate students, may feel overwhelmed with lots of feedback in one piece of writing (Yu, 2021). The question emerging is how to help students accept teacher feedback positively and engage with their teacher feedback? To address this question, research in teacher feedback suggests L2 writing teachers analyzing students' needs and improving feedback strategies (Lee et al., 2015). To partly address this question, the paper proposes some techniques for giving compliments in teacher feedback in L2 writing instruction.

6. Techniques for giving compliments in teacher feedback in L2 writing

As discussed earlier, in the genre of writing, a compliment may perform two major functions, as positive evaluation and as criticisms and suggestions for improvement. For positive evaluation purposes, teacher feedback can focus on positive comments about the writing product, about the writer, about the writing process, and about the rhetorical effect (i.e. impact of the paper on the reader). Feedback like criticisms or suggestions for revision should be given after a compliment. Teachers can use either formulaic compliments (see Table 1) or formulaic and non-formulaic compliments (see Fig 1) in their feedback.

Table 1. *The six compliment formulae (Source: Mackiewicz, 2006, p. 18)*

No	Formula	Abbreviation of the Formula	Constructed Example
1	noun phrase + is/looks + (really) + adjective	NP is ADJ	The introduction is really good.
2	pronoun is (really) a adjective + noun phrase	PRO is a ADJ NP	It is a really good introduction.
3	you + verb + (a) + (really) + adjective + noun phrase	You V a ADJ NP	You wrote a really good introduction.
4	Adjective + noun phrase	ADJ NP	Good introduction.
5	You + verb + (noun phrase) + (really) + adverb	You V NP ADV	You organized the introduction really well.
6	I + (really) + like + noun phrase	I like NP	I really like the introduction.

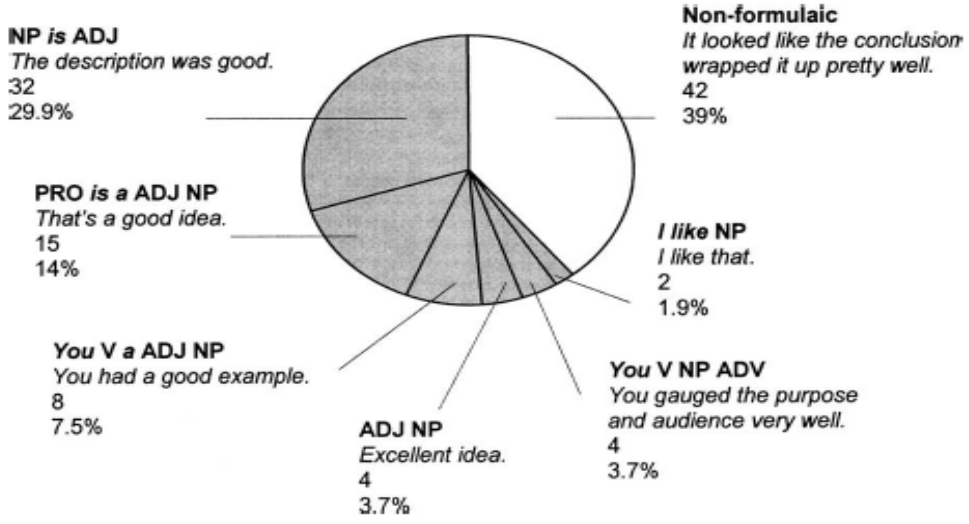


Fig 1. *Formulaic and non-formulaic compliments (Source: Mackiewicz, 2006, p. 18)*

In Table 1, Mackiewicz (2006) proposes six compliment formulae that L2 writing teachers can use when giving feedback to students' writing. Compliment formulae (1), (2) and (4) in Table 1 are good constructions for a compliment on the writing product. Teachers can use formulae (3) and (5) for a compliment on the writer and the writing process. Formulae (5) is a perfect construction for a compliment on the rhetorical effect on the reader. As shown in Table 1, formulae (1), (2) and (3) are dominant as L2 writing teachers tend to give compliments on the paper and on the writer. Using appropriate formulaic compliments, L2 writing teachers can respond to students' ideas with positive feedback, which aims to mitigate students' face threats possibly

posed from the teachers' suggestions and criticisms (Mackiewicz, 2006).

In some cases, Mackiewicz (2006) also suggests using non-formulaic and formulaic compliments (see Fig 1). Non-formulaic compliments differ from formulaic ones in syntactic complexity and semantic variation. As discussed in Mackiewicz (2006), the non-formulaic compliments are used to offer specific and individualized feedback, to focus on students as writers, and to focus on students' expertise in the subject matter (see Fig 1 for illustrative examples). Going beyond formulaicity, writing teachers can provide more specific feedback and put the focus more on the writer. These compliment strategies may help the students accept teacher feedback with ease and to some extent help students to further engage with the teacher feedback.

7. Conclusion

This paper has presented the act of giving compliments in asynchronous online feedback from writing tutors and then discusses its implications for teacher feedback in L2 writing. Throughout the paper, we have attempted to seek an answer to the three questions regarding the compliment strategies used in asynchronous online feedback, the major functions of compliments in asynchronous online feedback, and whether L2 writing teachers should give compliments on their feedback. The paper concludes with some techniques for giving compliments in teacher feedback in L2 writing.

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LỜI KHEN TRONG PHẢN HỒI TRỰC TUYẾN KHÔNG ĐỒNG BỘ: ỨNG DỤNG TRONG LỚP HỌC VIẾT NHƯ NGÔN NGỮ HAI

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Tóm tắt: Khen ngợi được biết đến như một hành động lời nói phức tạp, có thể đảm nhiệm nhiều chức năng khác nhau trong tương tác. Trong thể loại văn viết, lời khen thường mang tính đánh giá tích cực, cũng như phê bình hoặc gợi ý cải thiện. Để mang lại cảm xúc tích cực cho người viết, các gia sư tại các trung tâm dạy viết thường lồng ghép các hành động khen ngợi vào phản hồi trực tuyến không đồng bộ của họ. Người ta thường công nhận rằng mục tiêu chính của việc phản hồi trong lĩnh vực viết như ngôn ngữ hai là giúp học sinh viết tốt hơn và do đó nâng cao chất lượng bài viết của các em. Điều này đúng với cả gia sư viết tại các trung tâm viết và giáo viên dạy viết như ngôn ngữ hai trong các bối cảnh dạy và học viết khác nhau. Bài viết này nhằm mục đích thảo luận về vai trò của hành động khen ngợi trong phản hồi trực tuyến không đồng bộ từ các gia sư viết và tìm hiểu sâu hơn về ý nghĩa của hành động khen ngợi đối với phản hồi của giáo viên trong các lớp học viết như ngôn ngữ hai.

Từ khóa: khen ngợi; phản hồi trực tuyến không đồng bộ; phản hồi của giáo viên; dạy viết ngôn ngữ thứ hai.