A sociosemantic examination of secondary English teacher written feedback

Ryan Angus
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Luciana C. de Oliveira

Approved by Major Professor(s):

Phillip VanFossen 09/24/2014

Approved by: Head of the Department Graduate Program Date
A SOCIOSEMANTIC EXAMINATION OF SECONDARY ENGLISH TEACHER WRITTEN FEEDBACK

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty
of
Purdue University
by
Ryan L. Angus

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy

December 2014
Purdue University
West Lafayette, Indiana
For Kara, Grant, Gracyn, and Jude
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Overview and Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Organization of the Dissertation</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 The English Language Arts Classroom</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 English Language Arts Teacher Preparation</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Writing Instruction in the secondary English Language Arts Classroom</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Commenting in the English Language Arts Classroom</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4.1 Types of Written Feedback—Form and Function</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Insights from previous research</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3. METHODS</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Qualitative Case Study</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Research Context</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Participants</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 Role of the Researcher</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 Data</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.1 Comment Data</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5.2 Interviews</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 Data Analysis</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7 Halliday</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7.1 The Ideational Metafunction</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7.2 Ideational Coding</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7.3 The Interpersonal Metafunction</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8 Maton</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8.1</td>
<td>Specialization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8.2</td>
<td>Semantic Gravity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4</td>
<td>RESULTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>SFL Analyses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1</td>
<td>Ideational Coding Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.2</td>
<td>Interpersonal Analyses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>LCT Analyses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5</td>
<td>DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>SFL Discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.1</td>
<td>Ideational Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.2</td>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>LCT Discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1</td>
<td>Specialization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2</td>
<td>Semantic gravity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Implications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF REFERENCES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Enrollment at Calvin high school by year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Enrollment at Knox high school by year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Ms. Edwards’ writing assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Ms. Frame’s writing assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Process types in SFL’s transitivity system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Process type and corresponding participant options in transitivity system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>Circumstance type in transitivity system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>Summary of ideational codes used in data analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>Basic speech functions in Mood system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>Types of modality and modulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>Summary of interpersonal resources used in data analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>Research questions with corresponding data, analysis, and outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Ideational codes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Ms. Frame’s typical ideational code patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Ms. Edwards’ typical ideational code patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Overview of comment type choice by teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Overview of comment pair realizations by teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>SES at Calvin high school according to type of lunch</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Ethnicity at Calvin high school</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>SES at Knox high school according to type of lunch</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Ethnicity at Knox high school</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>SFL metafunctions</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>Specialization codes</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>Semantic gravity at the lexicogrammatical level</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Congruent forms of Ms. Frame’s grammatical metaphors</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Congruent forms of Ms. Edwards’ grammatical metaphors</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

Angus, Ryan L. Ph.D., Purdue University, December 2014. A Sociosemantic Examination of Secondary English Teacher Written Feedback. Major Professor: Luciana de Oliveira.

The purpose of this study was to provide a functional linguistic based description of teacher writing comments in secondary ELA classrooms. Based within a case study methodology, this study used analytical tools from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) in order to discover the various meanings that teachers make through their commenting practices. The findings of the study show that teacher comments focus on the content of the student writing, but also, significantly, help teachers to discursively realize various teacher identities. It was also found that teacher comments tended to either be concrete in their reference to a particular error in the text, or abstract in mentioning a particular theoretical understanding about writing, and comments rarely linked the concrete to the abstract. The implication of these findings suggest that teachers and students may benefit from a shared metalanguage that would allow them to explicitly link abstract notions of correctness in writing to particular, concrete places in the student text.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Writing instruction is not just the teaching of a mechanistic skill. It also has an impact on the way that students think, and the way that they view themselves in relation to their world. In his important work on the major pedagogical theories of the composition field, Berlin (1982) says that to “teach writing is to argue for a version of reality, and the best way of knowing and communicating it,” or, in other words, “what can be known, how it can be known, and how it can be communicated” (p. 766). These arguments for a particular reality are not typically offered explicitly in the writing classroom. Instead, they should be viewed as something implicit in the teacher’s use of language, and this certainly includes feedback in the form of written comments. For example, if a teacher’s comments focus solely on mechanical errors such as punctuation, then a student’s concept of writing, and what makes writing ‘good’, may be that good writing is that which is free of punctuation errors. This can become problematic because good writing is more than just being grammatically correct.

Although the written comment may seem like a relatively small, insignificant bit of language, research suggests that it is often the primary way that students receive individualized feedback on their writing, and that most students prefer it
over other types of feedback (Ferris, 1997; Clare, 2000). Writing comments are, however, problematic. Research on written feedback has shown that teachers struggle to align their goals for commenting with the actual results of their commenting practices. This research has focused on issues such as specificity of comments, whether comments are negative or positive, and student understanding of comments (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982; Peterson & McClay, 2010; Sommers, 1982). Although these studies sometimes look at the effects of comments, they do not systematically consider the language used in the comments themselves. This is problematic since teachers who are unable to make informed, purposeful lexico-grammatical choices when commenting are also unable to control the meanings that they make when commenting.

This problem is especially salient in educational contexts, where, perhaps most evidently, language and content cannot be separated (Derewianka, 1990; Fang, 2009; Schleppegrell, 2004). In other words, when we speak about, for example, science language we are also talking about science meaning. More broadly speaking, language allows us to structure and give order to all of the varied sensory data we experience. We rely on language to reflect on and understand our experiences, and, thereby, to create knowledge. In this sense, written feedback has the potential to construct a conception of writing for students. Additionally, if a student is unable to properly decode and comprehend the explicit and implicit meanings encoded in writing comments, they are effectively blocked from accessing information about writing that leads to knowledge about writing. If we take seriously the notion that
students have ownership over their texts (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982)—that they are in control of what and how their text means—then it is even more important that we understand the meanings that written comments make for teachers and students.

Another problematic aspect of writing comments are the effects they have on teachers. Comment writing is time intensive and may even be emotionally exhausting (Carless, 2006). Teachers must write comments that evaluate student work, but because they spend most days with their students, and, therefore, have a personal relationship with them, they typically do not want their evaluations to be so harsh that they crush a student’s spirit. The teacher, then, is in a position where a precarious balance must be struck between honest criticism and encouragement, and evaluator and friend. This speaks to the significant relationship between teacher identity and comments. In this study teacher identity will be conceptualized as something constantly in flux and negotiated discursively through teacher commenting practices. Beijaard et al. (2004), borrowing from Gee (2001), write:

identity is not a fixed attribute of a person, but a relational phenomenon. Identity development occurs in an intersubjective field and can be best characterized as an ongoing process, a process of interpreting oneself as a certain kind of person and being recognized as such in a given context. (p. 108)

Further, Beijaard et al. (2004) point out that “concepts or images of self strongly determine the way teachers teach” (p. 108). Teachers cannot separate who they are
from their teaching practice. Teaching, like ones identity, is relational, and the relational nature of the job has an impact on teacher comments.

Since writing comments are one of the primary ways that students get feedback about their writing, it is essential that teachers are aware of the meanings that they make through their commenting language (Parr, 2010). This is particularly important for students who are struggling with writing, and, therefore, need comprehensible and actionable feedback from knowledgeable others on how to ‘do’ writing. In order to build awareness of how comments mean, the particular language features typical of written feedback must be discovered and systematically described. Also, building awareness of how comments mean involves discovering how those language features particular to written feedback function.

These problems with writing feedback practices have become evident to me over my many years as a writing instructor and researcher. As a writing instructor, I felt frustration at not seeing improvements in student outcomes despite the time and care taken to leave what I considered thoughtful, helpful comments on student work. At times, students would respond in puzzling, unexpected ways to a comment, and at other times, they would simply not respond at all. This experience encouraged me to start thinking about commenting language and how students respond to it. My interest in writing research is tied to my interest in functional linguistics, specifically Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). One of the great benefits of SFL is that it provides a metalanguage (see Moore and Schleppegrell, 2014; Schleppegrell, 2013; Unsworth, 2006)—a language for talking about
language—that allows one to speak systematically about the lexico-grammatical features of language; in other words, what and how language functions and means. In the interest of coming to a deeper, more explicit understanding of the ways in which teachers mean in their comments, this study will present a systematic, functional description of the language of written feedback using an SFL framework. Such understandings have clear benefits for writing instruction, but they can benefit students and teachers in all areas of education. As teachers and students increase their understanding about how language works, they will become more knowledgeable and critical language users.

1.1 Overview and Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to address the problems mentioned above through research focusing on teacher writing comments in two secondary high school ELA classrooms: one at Calvin high school in Indiana and one at Knox high school in West Virginia. I chose the secondary school level for this research because it is a time when student writing gets increasingly complex in type and purpose, and, therefore, the role of the teacher as one who can guide students through the process of learning these new uses of language becomes especially significant. I have chosen to analyze teacher comments using conceptual tools from Systemic Functional Linguistics and Legitimation Code Theory as both offer great explanatory power when looking at language and social practices in specific contexts.

A case study has been conducted examining the commenting practices of secondary school English teachers in order to answer the following research
questions: 1) What meanings do secondary ELA teachers construct in their paper comments? 2) What teacher identities are realized through the form and content of comments?

1.2 Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 2 of the dissertation presents a literature review of the various ways in which written feedback has been viewed since the middle of the 20th century. First, the chapter begins with an overview of the ELA classroom and ELA teacher preparation. Then, the chapter looks at writing instruction and feedback in the ELA classroom before closing with a look at several key studies that informed this study. Chapter 3 begins by outlining the case study framework employed in the study. Next, the chapter describes the research context, participants, and data collection procedures used. The final part of the chapter goes into detail regarding the Systemic Functional Linguistic and Legitimation Code Theory tools used to analyze the teachers’ comment data. In Chapter 4, the results of the analysis techniques described in Chapter 3 are presented and organized by analytical tool. In the presentation of the results of each analysis the corresponding data from each teacher participant is compared. Finally, Chapter 5 begins with a discussion of the data analysis results and concludes by suggesting some implications of the study and suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides an overview of the literature on writing instruction and feedback in secondary ELA classrooms. The first section (2.1) will describe the general English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. The next section (2.2) looks at the ways in which ELA teachers are prepared for the classroom in their pre-service teacher programs. Next, section 2.3 focuses on writing instruction in the secondary ELA classroom. The next section (2.4) gives an overview of the literature on feedback in the ELA classroom. Finally, section 2.5 looks at several previous studies that provide some insights for this research project.

2.1 The English Language Arts Classroom

The ELA classroom is a vital part of primary and secondary school curriculums. All content areas are important in different ways, however, it has been argued (Burke, 2010) that ELA is especially fundamental in that it provides a literacy base that enables students to succeed in both secondary school and college. It is in the ELA classroom that students learn the pillars of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and practice reflective, critical thinking (Jago, 2009). As Brandt (2001) and Darling-Hammond (2010) suggest, these literacy skills that are practiced in the ELA classroom are a resource of great value for students in their everyday life. They additionally enrich the lives of students by equipping them to navigate and
interact with an increasingly information saturated world (Gleick, 2011; Rose, 2005). Recent research efforts have examined the negative effect of information saturation on one’s ability to think clearly and make decisions (Schwartz, 2004; Gigerenzer, 2000; Gigerenzer, 2007; Winkielman, P. & Cacioppo, J., 2001). The thinking skills that students learn in the ELA classroom may help them to more successfully deal with the constant onslaught of messages they experience and to make more informed decisions about these messages.

2.2 English Language Arts Teacher Preparation

Darling-Hammond (2006) points to the connection between how we prepare teachers and their effectiveness in their future classrooms. More recently, Zancanella & Alsup (2010) have written about the renewed focus on teacher education in the United States:

Teacher education in the United States continues to be under fire. In the last two decades in particular, policymakers have increasingly critiqued the methods of preparing teachers for effective classroom practice, claiming that the so-called failures of American students can be linked to the lack of knowledge and preparation of their teachers. In more recent years, former Teachers College president Arthur Levine and current U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan have both criticized teacher education programs and called for their reform—or even elimination. (p. 70)
Laying aside the issue of who is to blame for the "so-called failures of American students," it is clear, at least, that teacher preparation is an important issue and one that is still an important area of research in the field of education.

As the world inhabited by students has become increasingly complex and diverse, so have ideas about how to best prepare pre-service ELA teachers. In the distant past, the scope of literacy was relatively narrow—referring mostly to the reading and writing of print. Over time, as media have become more varied and multimodal and, correspondingly, the ways that students interact with the world outside and inside the school have become more varied and multimodal (Unsworth, 2001; 2006), the conception of literacy has expanded into one of multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). This has prompted teacher researchers to investigate issues such as how teachers conceive of multiliteracies and what impact their pre-service preparation had on those conceptions (Shoffner, de Oliveira, & Angus, 2010). Another significant and growing body of research looks at how to prepare pre-service ELA teachers to address diversity in their classrooms (e.g. Valdes, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Zeichner & Flessner, 2009; Angus & de Oliveira, 2012).

Another important area of research that gained momentum in the 1990s (Beijaard et al., 2004) looks at teacher identities. One of the main challenges in this research area has been to simply define what concepts like identity and self are. Although there are multiple ideas about identity and its significance in teacher preparation, there are a lot of areas of agreement. It is generally accepted that a distinction should be made between a teacher’s personal and professional identities,
and that these somewhat distinct identities can influence one another (Goodson & Cole, 1994). Also, these identities, whether personal or professional, are not stable—they are constantly revised and negotiated as one goes through life (Coldron & Smith, 1999). Most significantly for this study, it is also recognized that identities can be realized discursively, and that the narratives and discourses that teachers create and interact with can have a significant impact on their identity formation (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Alsup, 2006).

These newer areas of ELA teacher preparation are important and deserve continued research, but they are not the whole picture. ELA teacher preparation programs must still spend a significant amount of time preparing pre-service teachers to teach the basic literacy skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Pre-service teachers are typically prepared to teach these skills through preparation in the key areas of literature, grammar, and composition. Those pre-service teachers who want to teach in secondary schools may also receive additional preparation for teaching the more grammatically and rhetorically advanced texts that students are likely to encounter in secondary school and college.

Despite the recognition of the importance of multiliteracies and the growing presence of new technologies in the classroom, traditional print literature still remains the backbone of the ELA classroom (Beck, 2005). Additionally, this literature serves, at least, several purposes: it helps students develop new conceptions and understandings of diversity (Henderson & May, 2006; Alsup, 2010); it stimulates intellectual development by engaging students with the big
questions and ideas found in great literature (Bloom, 1995; Gallagher, 2009); and it often serves as a model for students as they learn about various types of writing and writing techniques (Applebee, 1993).

2.3 Writing Instruction in the secondary English Language Arts Classroom

Writing, in particular, is a key activity in the secondary ELA classroom, however, in general, there hasn’t been a large research focus on writing at this level (Christie & Derewianka, 2008). This is unfortunate, especially in light of the growing body of research that points out the growing grammatical complexity of texts coupled with the general lack of explicit teaching about language in secondary settings (Schleppegrell, 2004; Fang & Schleppegrell, 2008; Rose & Martin, 2012; Moore & Schleppegrell, 2014). Although there are studies emerging in the literature that examine other methods of writing instruction in the United States context (Gebhard & Harman, 2011) the ways that pre-service teachers are prepared to teach writing (if they receive training at all) are typically focused on one of two theoretical approaches: process or post-process.

The process approach began as a reaction to what has been called the current traditional paradigm (Tobin, 1994). Those who worked in this paradigm tended to view the classroom as a product-focused, teacher-centered space. Instruction in these classrooms would emphasize grammatical correctness of student writing above other language features, and, so they presented a fairly one-dimensional view of what writing is and what it means to be a writer. In response, process approaches emphasized that writing itself is a messy, non-linear, recursive process, and that
texts are not static, finished products, but can instead be viewed as drafts always open to revision and improvement. This new theory was freeing for many teachers and students because it downplayed the role of correctness in favor of emphasizing the lived experience and creativity of the writer. For example, one of the most famous process theorists, Peter Elbow, is well known for his views of writing as primarily focused on the expression of the writer (Elbow, 1981). It is out of this movement that popular writing exercises such as the ‘free-write’ emerged and they are still practiced in many classrooms today.

Eventually, writing scholars began to question some aspects of process theory. The main critique leveled against it is that it overemphasizes the role of the individual in writing—ignoring the social context that writers live and make meanings within (Kent, 1999). There is a significant level of reciprocity between culture and language, and research such as Halliday & Martin (1993) and Halliday & Matthiessen (2006) show that this relationship is one of construal. The social contexts that we live within both enable and limit the ways in which we can make meaning, and the kinds of meaning that we make help to shape and define how we perceive the realities or contexts around us. Post-process theory, then, seeks to understand the impact that this relationship has on writers and writing.

The literature on writing suggests that in classroom contexts there is a need for a balance between these two perspectives. Writing certainly is a process—one that is somewhat unique for each writer—and what and how we write is limited by our own socially-situated lives. There must also be balance between the overly
teacher-focused current traditional paradigm classroom and the overly student-focused process classroom. Research across various areas in education show the value of classrooms where teachers act as knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978; Gibbons, 2002) instead of stepping back and out of instruction—adopting a stance of what Halliday calls “benevolent inertia” toward students (Cope & Kalantzis, 2014). This study focuses on teacher commenting in the ELA classroom and the next section will focus more in depth on the role and history of this type of feedback.

2.4 Commenting in the English Language Arts Classroom

Since its beginnings in the latter half of the 20th century, composition studies has been concerned with increasing knowledge about writing and the teaching and learning of writing. One important consideration within this area of interest is the practice of commenting. Among the many techniques and practices that comprise teaching, commenting is ubiquitous and seemingly unremarkable. In their education programs, pre-service teachers are rarely, if ever, given instruction about how to provide writing feedback (Sommers, 1982; Sluijsmans et. al., 2002). Instead, like much of teaching, it is part of the craft they learn on the job. Decisions about how and what to say in commenting are likely, at least in part, to be based on intuition. This intuition is not, however, formed in a vacuum. Without clear instruction on how to carry out the procedure of commenting on student work, one obvious source of guidance would be the way that their teachers commented on their work throughout their student careers. Lortie (1975) asserts that teachers tend to teach the way they were taught, and it follows that, given a lack of formal instruction,
teachers might rely on the way that they were commented upon to inform their own commenting practices. This is one possibility, but we do not really know much about what informs teacher commenting. In fact, recent research shows that we know very little about in-service teachers’ commenting perspectives and practices (Evans et al., 2010).

Before analyzing comments, it is important to understand what they are and what they are an attempt to do. To this end, one may start by considering the school practice of writing papers. When the student writes a paper she is attempting to craft an ideal text. This ideal text is not one that exists in any real, physical sense, but, instead, exists in the mind of the teacher. Part of the ‘game’ of paper writing for students in school is trying to guess what form and content the teacher will approve of and score highly. So when the student writes her text it is a proposition oriented toward her understanding of what that ideal text is for herself and for the teacher. The grade given to the student can be viewed as a reflection of how close the student came to that teacher’s ideal text. The situation is complicated by the fact that teachers cannot typically articulate the ideal text, but they know it when they see it.

The practice of commenting exists because when teachers grade papers, it is typically on their own time outside of school, and, therefore, the students are not present to receive feedback orally (Sommers, 1982). Since comments are meant to be both instructive and evaluative, for the sake of clarity teachers must take advantage of all the semiotic meaning potential afforded to them by the semiotic
plane of the paper space. Of course, the paper is physically a plane by nature of its flatness. It is also a semiotic plane in the sense that it becomes a space on which teachers make meanings. Viewing the paper as a semiotic plane isn’t new—see, for example, Sinclair (1981) and Hunston (2000) in which both discuss planes of discourses. In the view of these researchers there are two planes: the autonomous and the interactive. On the autonomous plane the “writer’s concern is with developing his argument, the text, or, in Hallidayan terminology, the ideational component” (Rahman, 2004, p. 29). On the interactive plane the “writer’s concern is with the appropriateness of presentation, the presentation of the argument with respect to his audience. At this plane, the writer negotiates his rhetorical affairs with his intended audience” (Rahman, 2004, p. 29-30). Both of these categories co-occur in the text, and, so, a given text can be analyzed for meanings realized on both planes.

Feedback is an essential part of the learning process. It tells students where, in a learning process, they have been, where they are, and where they are going. Without adequate feedback, it is difficult for learners to have any sense of their trajectory when learning new information and skills. In the writing classroom, this feedback is important for writers who must hone skills such as appraising their own work and making decisions about how to proceed in revising it.

Due to its importance in composition studies and classroom settings, written feedback has been researched for many years, with researchers focusing on issues such as what types of feedback do teachers leave on student writing and what types
of feedback seem to be the most effective for student writers. The next section of the literature review will be organized around a framework suggested by the general content of much of this literature on written feedback: form and function.

2.4.1 Types of Written Feedback—Form and Function

A review of the writing evaluation research that began in the early 1960s reveals two general, but distinct, types of commenting being practiced in educational settings. Schleppegrell (2007) points out that for many teachers grammar is conceived of as simply “a set of rules for accuracy in language use” (p. 121). It is this conception of grammar that informs the first type of comments—those that focus on clause level grammatical and mechanical errors, or, the form of a student’s writing. This is, historically speaking, the most typical type of written comment (Connors, 1993).

It was common practice for many years in writing classrooms for teachers to edit student theme papers in this way in hopes that with enough practice and correction, students would become better writers. Although this approach has fallen out of favor in many settings, it is still common practice in classrooms where teachers lack theoretical knowledge, such as that provided by process theorists, about other features that one could comment on in a text (Connors, 1993). In modern contexts this approach to feedback is also common in English as a foreign language classrooms or other settings where students are learning to write in a second language through the practice of direct written corrective feedback or WCF (Storch, 2010; Ferris, 2003).
Although this type of commenting is the most typical, it should be noted that it is not free of problems or limitations. The literature on form focused feedback reveals several ways in which it is problematic. One is that there is a general lack of student understanding of the conventions of written English (Chanock, 2000). For teachers firmly established in what Haswell (1983) calls the “tradition of full correction,” (p. 604) years of marking errors on student papers seems to make little difference in the general student population’s ability to minimize or eliminate surface errors when writing. The benefit of full error correction for students is that they receive a record of the types of errors they make in their writing. These comments and corrections may then be reviewed by the student for the purpose of learning which conventions they need to learn more about and practice using correctly. The problem is that many students find it difficult to study these comments and learn from their previous mistakes.

In addition to confusion about the conventions of grammar and punctuation, students may be confused about the meaning of the comments as they are coded in language and editing symbols. For example, a teacher may write “splice” in the margin of a student paper. The student who receives the comment must know that “splice” is a shortened form of “comma splice,” and then they must actually understand what is meant by comma splice. If a student does not understand the meaning of that comment they will be effectively blocked from locating the error in the text and acting on it. Problems may also arise for students when teachers use different sets of symbols to comment on or correct student errors. Since there is no
universally agreed upon set of symbols for editing papers, it is possible that
students will encounter multiple ways of indicating errors in their writing. This can
create additional stress for students who are already overwhelmed with the process
of learning how to write. Also, the amount of comments left on papers when
teachers practice full correction can overwhelm students. They see a sea of red
marks on their paper and have no idea where to start.

As Comenius (1907) famously suggests in *The Great Didactic*, ideally,
teachers should teach less and students learn more. With full correction, the teacher
does all of the work and the student is required to do nothing but passively receive
the corrections. Student writers often learn more by doing (Kolb, 1984), and papers
with all errors marked ask students to do very little. For these reasons, some
researchers have suggested that teachers practice minimal marking of papers
(Haswell, 1983)—although it must be noted that the efficacy of such error
correction practices has been a topic of great debate, especially in ELL classrooms
(e.g. Truscott, 1996; Ferris, 2004; Ferris, 2006). Teachers may minimally mark
papers by placing a mark (a checkmark, for example) in the margin of a paper
beside the line where an error is located. If there is more than one error on a given
line, the teacher can make more than one mark in the margin. Pedagogically, such an
approach has many advantages. Students are asked to become more active
participants in their learning about writing. Because of the speed with which
teachers can mark errors, minimal marking can be used as a formative assessment
tool by marking student writing in class and asking them to look for, indicate, and correct the errors in class (Haswell, 1983).

The second type of comment is more concerned with function and content instead of form. In these functional comments, teachers write in the margins as a reader and a teacher. Their goal is to make students aware of issues they need to work on in their writing, as well as to engage their students in thinking about the content in their work. This functional commenting is significant because it opens the door for negotiation about the nature of writing, and issues like power and authority, by allowing teachers to become more conversational in their evaluation of student work (Sommers, 1982). Teachers could comment on things that need revision in a student paper, but they could also write their reactions to things that a student had written—thereby approximating a conversation within the discursive space of the paper. In this sense, the writing comments that a student receives on their paper can be viewed as a very significant source of information about writing itself—e.g. what makes it good, or what good writers do.

Such comments are also significant in the sense that, suddenly, the margins of a student’s paper become a space where negotiations between teacher and student about the nature of writing become possible. Sommers (1982) writes that many beginning writers have trouble imagining how their future readers may respond to their writing. For this reason, teacher commenting on papers aids students by helping to “dramatize the presence of a reader, to help our students to become that questioning reader themselves, because, ultimately, we believe that
becoming such a reader will help them to evaluate what they have written and
develop control over their writing” (p. 148). It is within this space, where the
‘reader’ is created, that negotiation about writing and meaning take place. For the
teacher, even though they may imagine their role in commenting as a dramatized
reader, they are, in reality, still also playing the role of the teacher who appraises
and evaluates student work. From the perspective of the student, comments may be
interpreted as if they were written by a dramatized reader, but, due to the context of
the classroom and the fact that students are doing these assignments for grades, the
role of the teacher is still always at play.

In addition to their conversational nature, functional comments differ from
the form-focused comments by concentrating on different, more semantic-based,
issues in the writing (Hyland, 1998). One issue that researchers have focused on is
the degree of explicitness of comments. Like the minimal marking practice of
placing a check next to a line containing errors, other researchers have found that it
is most helpful to write comments directly beside the part of the text in question
(Bruno & Santos, 2010). In opposition to minimal marking practices, however, other
research has shown that students perform better if those comments offer explicit
instructions on how to address problems in the text (Brookhart, 2009). Many of the
academic words used in commenting can be vague or confusing to students, and, so,
explicit commenting is also significant in the way that it attempts to overcome the
hidden curriculum (Christie, 1985; Schleppegrell, 2004) realized through much
commenting language.
These explicit, content-focused comments, it is thought, should be understandable for students and manageable for them given their ability and the scope of the assignment. Such comments encourage revision and honor the ideas that students bring to their work. Often, prescriptive commenting that focuses on mechanics and other surface errors attempts to control student work—making it into a type of ideal text that the teacher has in mind (Zamel, 1985; Friedmann, 1983). Such comments demotivate students by robbing them of ownership of their texts (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982). It should be clear that function-oriented commenting is the most useful type of commenting in writing classrooms (Hillocks, 2005). However, both types of comments have value, and have a place in the evaluation process. It is when teachers exclusively use one type of commenting over the other that many problems arise.

2.5 Insights from previous research

One important study, Smith (1997), looks at end comments from a Bakhtinian genre perspective. Bakhtin conceives of primary genres as stable units of language that, when realized, have consistent forms and meanings, and secondary genres as complex units of language that are formed by combining various primary genres. Smith conducts a Bakhtinian analysis of a large sample of papers with end comments in order to conceptualize end comment primary genres. She writes that the “study identified sixteen primary genres, falling into three groups: judging genres, reader response genres, and coaching genres….A primary genre may consist of several sentences, a single sentence, or simply a phrase or fragment” (p. 252). So,
for example, her results revealed that the most common type of genres were judging and within that genre ‘evaluation of development’ was by far the most common.

Although this research does discuss both the form and function of a particular type of writing feedback, there is at least one weakness in this approach. Since a primary genre may be a sentence, phrase, or fragment, there is no consistent, systematic unit of analysis (e.g. the clause). In other words, although the study looks at language, it is more of a semantic analysis, rather than a grammatical one. Such an analysis only tells us about the effects of language—or, what the language does—rather than how the language creates meaning. The usefulness of this study is that teachers can use its findings to analyze written comments in order to discover what genres are being employed in their feedback, and whether or not they are using the most appropriate genres or simply following a generic convention. In my proposed study, I do want to look at the genre/register level of language, but I will also do an analysis at the lexico-grammatical level. Analyses done at both levels will hopefully provide more thorough and useful results.

Best (2011) also looked at the language of commenting, as well as potential benefits for teachers to reflect on and research their own commenting practices. In the author’s self study, she examined a sample corpus of her own written comments, and grouped them according to function and form. A comment was first identified as either praising or critiquing, and then she took note of the syntactical form (declarative, interrogative, or imperative). She also gave special attention to comments where she appeared to mitigate what she perceived would be a harsh
message with hedging or modality. Best admits that her hedging language was a potential source of confusion for her students since it can make commands and suggestions seem optional. As with Smith’s study, I want to look at text features similar to those examined by Best. However, I will be using a more systematic approach based in SFL to analyze the function and form of comments and both whether or not and how they employ features such as hedging or modality.

Although there are a number of studies that examine feedback in college composition classrooms, there are very few studies that look at feedback practices with younger student populations. Like the small number of studies that look at writing feedback in secondary classrooms, there are equally few studies that examine the language of writing comments themselves. What I mean by ‘examine’ in this case is a functional analysis of the commenting language. One notable, recent study that does take a functional approach to teacher feedback in L2 classrooms is Devrim (2014). This study considers the way in which comments can mediate and scaffold student learning. He divides comments into four types: carrying, hand holding, free climbing, and bridging. Carrying and hand holding comments are those that provide more explicit guidance from the teacher, and free climbing and bridging comments are those that are more implicit and just ask students to make changes to their text. The study found that the more explicit commenting types worked well with less proficient students and the implicit type worked well with more proficient students. There have also been studies that consider the language of comments in the sense that researchers consider differences in using syntactic
forms such as declaratives and imperatives. Such studies comment on the form of the language, but they do not consider other grammatical features, nor do they fully consider the function of such language. Again, what I have in mind instead are the ways that the language of written comments construct meanings about the nature of writing and the teacher-student relationship.

The literature on written comments makes it clear that writing teachers must be aware of and purposeful with their own commenting practices. To be successful, it is essential that teachers develop a deep understanding of how language and texts work (Parr, 2010). I believe that a systematic, functional analysis that considers the lexico-grammatical features of written comments will provide many insights into what makes this language more or less effective for teachers and students. Because such research has not yet been conducted, this study will fill an important gap in the research of writing assessment and evaluation.
CHAPTER 3. METHODS

For the research design in this study, I have chosen the qualitative case study (Merriam, 1988) — with the objects of analysis being the classroom teacher’s writing comments and interview texts. The data collection for this study took place during the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school years in two different states: Indiana and West Virginia. The collected data were analyzed using both qualitative and linguistic techniques. This chapter will describe the research context, research sites, participants, and provide a rationale for the methodology used in this study as well as provide a description of the analysis techniques used with the data.

3.1 Qualitative Case Study

When planning a research project to examine teacher writing comments in secondary ELA classrooms, the case study methodology (Merriam, 1988) immediately stood out as the best choice for this study for several reasons. First, case study methodologies are ideal for research in real world contexts where the context is essential for understanding the data being collected and analyzed and researchers are seeking to explain phenomena in terms of how and why they are what they are (Gillham, 2000). As mentioned in Chapter 2, because comments and commenting practices are particular to school settings, it is important to have a
research methodology that allows the researcher to consider that context during analysis.

Second, I tried to focus my research as narrowly as possible on teacher comments—ignoring issues such as student grades and student lived experience in the classroom—and, so, the case study seemed better than other qualitative methods such as the ethnographic study. Because of my focus on comments themselves, I wouldn’t need to observe students or teachers in the classroom as an ethnographic study would dictate. Instead, teacher comments could be collected on student papers (with student information marked out). This fits with the case study preference that units or cases of analysis are tightly bounded (Merriam, 1988). In the case of this study, the ‘cases’ being analyzed are student papers with comments and teacher interviews—it is believed that this will be less unwieldy than looking at all acts of semiosis in the classroom. It is the intention of the researcher in this study to produce new knowledge and understanding of teacher commenting practices, and, it is believed that narrowing the focus of the research to comments and interviews will allow for these new understandings to emerge.

3.2 Research Context

The research sites and participants for this study are located in secondary schools in different regions of the United States. One school located in Indiana and the other school is located in West Virginia. Calvin High School is a small school located in Indiana. It is part of a public school system but is considered an alternative school in its district. The students that comprise Calvin are mostly from
lower SES backgrounds: 62% of students receive free lunches and 17% receive reduced price lunches:

\textit{Fig. 3.1} SES at Calvin high school according to type of lunch

The school is also somewhat mixed in the ethnicity of its students: 67% of students are White, 17% are Black, 7% are Hispanic, 2% are American Indian, and the remaining 7% are classified as Multiracial (IDOE: Compass, 2014):

\textit{Fig 3.2} Ethnicity at Calvin high school
Calvin High School is unique in several ways. First, unlike many alternative schools where students are coerced to attend because of behavior or academic issues, students at Calvin must apply to the school voluntarily. One of the goals of the school is to create and foster small learning communities, and this is accomplished by keeping the enrollment numbers relatively low—the school had 75 students enrolled in the 2011-2012 school year and 58 enrolled in the 2012-2013 school year (IDOE: Compass, 2014):

Table 3.1 Enrollment at Calvin high school by year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year:</th>
<th>2011-2012</th>
<th>2012-2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number enrolled:</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Second, unlike traditional school models where students either pass or fail a course, students at Calvin are required to make a 70% on all their work in every class before they receive a credit for that course. That means that students are permitted to redo work as many times as necessary before moving on to more advanced assignments. A student’s status (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior) is determined by the number of credits they have earned. This model creates a very different learning environment for the students at Calvin. Relationships between teachers and students are more fluid and dynamic—allowing teachers more freedom to act as mentors than they would find in more traditional models of schooling.

Knox High School is a large school located in the western area of West Virginia where its borders meet with Ohio and Kentucky. It is one of two large consolidated
public high schools in its district—a district which is one of the largest in the state. Although there are quite a few wealthy families in the area—especially relative to other parts of the state—there are also a number of poorer families, and this socioeconomic mixture is reflected in the student population at Knox. Although the majority of students at Knox come from middle and upper class SES backgrounds there are still a good number of students from lower SES families—from a total of 1882 students 36% receive free or reduced lunch (School data, 2014):

![Fig. 3.3 SES at Knox high school according to type of lunch](image)

The ethnic composition of the school is also largely homogenous: 96% of students are White, 1% are Black, and 3% are classified as Other (School data, 2014):
Unlike Calvin, Knox follows a school model and curriculum more typical of traditional schools of a large size. Enrollment for the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years was large and fairly similar (School data, 2014):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year:</th>
<th>2011-2012</th>
<th>2012-2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number enrolled:</td>
<td>1,857</td>
<td>1882</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3 Participants

At Calvin high school I had an initial meeting with the principal to describe my student and to find out what she felt would be the best way to contact her teachers. She thought that the best way for me to contact them would be in person, and so she invited me to a staff meeting where I could introduce myself to the teachers, describe my project, and invite them to participate. At the meeting I described the project and two teachers showed an initial interest. Of these two teachers, only one ultimately participated in the study: Rose Edwards. Ms. Edwards attended college at a large research university in the Midwest and, although in her
fourth year of full-time teaching, was working on a Master’s thesis in Education during the data collection period of this study. She is licensed as a social studies teacher, however she is also licensed in secondary English and, consequently, places a great emphasis on writing in her classroom.

At Knox high school, initial contact was made with the assistant principal. He forwarded my information to the chair of his school’s English department, Suzy Frame, and let her know that I would be contacting her in the near future. I emailed Ms. Frame and she volunteered to participate in the study. I requested that Ms. Frame also distribute my recruitment letter to her department, but after several requests she refused to distribute it saying that her teachers were too busy to participate. Ms. Frame has several decades of teaching experience, is licensed as a secondary English teacher, and is the chair of her school’s English department where she is working actively with the state on a literacy initiative.

3.4 Role of the Researcher

My interest in this topic comes from my years as a writing teacher and a student of functional linguistics. Before entering the Ph.D. program I was a full time university composition instructor for two years—I also taught these courses as a graduate assistant for two years before being full-time. During this time I thought often about my comments and would wonder if they were effective, and if my students were understanding them in the way I had intended. Although I was curious if there was a best way to comment to students, at this time I did not formally research these questions. I think this was in part because I was not trained
to conduct that kind of classroom research—my background at that point was in literature. In fact, I would guess that the thought of doing research on my own commenting practices never occurred to me.

As I went through my graduate program, learning about education and growing in my understanding of linguistics, I started to think about writing feedback again. Much of the functional educational linguistics research centers around the insight that the language of schooling must be made explicit to both students and teachers (Schleppegrell, 2004) in order to improve learning across the content areas. I noticed in my reading that, although many content areas have been researched using functional linguistics, secondary writing classrooms were still largely unexplored. My personal interest coupled with the discipline’s need for this research has led to this project.

3.5 Data

The following sections will describe the collection procedures for and nature of the two data types that I collected for this study: teacher comments and interviews.

3.5.1 Comment Data

Although I would have accepted comment data from previous semesters (from, for example, old student work that the teacher had in storage), at each research site data came from classes that the teacher was currently teaching at the time of collection. The comments have been gathered together into a corpus, which has been analyzed functionally in order to more deeply understand the meanings that
teachers create about writing through their commenting practices. In this section I will describe how I gathered comments from each research site, and provide detailed information about the comment data. Although the analysis presented in Chapter 4 focuses on the comments, understanding the context within which the comments were found can lead to a clearer understanding of what each teacher does in her commenting practice.

When I made contact with my teacher participants and they agreed to participate in the study, I let them decide what method of giving me comment data would work best for them—I informed them that I could come to the school and pick up data, they could email it to me, or I could meet them somewhere else convenient for them. The only requirement for the data was that the student papers had to have all student identifiers removed. Although there might be some advantages to having a consistent data collection procedure across participants, I felt that letting the teachers choose how to give me data would make it easier on them—especially since their schedules are already busy.

Ms. Edwards and I spoke in person at the teacher meeting I set up for recruitment about the best way for her to send me comments. She informed me that the copier at their school had the capability to scan and email documents and we agreed that this would be a good method for data collection. Over the 2012-2013 school year Ms. Edwards emailed me data twice. From her classes I have four unique paper assignments and six drafts. As mentioned above in section 3.2.2., although Ms. Edwards was a social studies teacher, she has training in secondary English, and her
writing assignments reflect this background. The following table summarizes these papers:

Table 3.3 *Ms. Edwards’ writing assignments*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment type:</th>
<th>Paper topic:</th>
<th>Number of drafts:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research paper</td>
<td>Andy Warhol</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research paper</td>
<td>Civil rights movement/Plessy v. Ferguson case</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research paper</td>
<td>Racism</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informative essay</td>
<td>History of The Boston Church</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ms. Frame and I made initial contact through email, and we negotiated how to collect and send me comment data through email as well. Ms. Frame decided that the best way for her to send me data would be to collect hard copies of student work, remove identifiers, and then leave the copies of the work in the school office for me to pick up. After collecting assignments through the Fall 2013 semester, Ms. Frame emailed me in late November to let me know that there was a folder of data for me in the school office. This was the only time I collected data from Ms. Frame. Although I had initially planned on collecting more data in Spring 2014, an increase in the busyness of Ms. Frame’s schedule prevented additional collection. Even though Ms. Frame sent me data only once, I was able to collect a greater number of papers—16 total—from her than Ms. Edwards. The following table summarizes these papers:
Table 3.4 Ms. Frame’s writing assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment type:</th>
<th>Paper topic:</th>
<th>Number of drafts:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Essay</td>
<td>Themes in <em>Wuthering Heights</em></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research paper</td>
<td>Themes in <em>Of Mice and Men</em></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.5.2 Interview

The teacher interview focuses on teacher perceptions about commenting. It must be mentioned that one participant, Ms. Frame, has refused to be interviewed—citing her busy schedule as an excuse. Every attempt to meet Ms. Frame at a time and place convenient for her was made and she was still unable to participate in the interview. Any interview data referenced in the study, therefore, will be from Ms. Edwards.

I met Ms. Edwards after school in her classroom in early June 2013, and conducted an interview at a table in her room. I audio recorded the interview using my laptop computer and later transcribed the interview to facilitate future analysis. The length of the interview was approximately 12 minutes and the following questions were asked:

1. What constitutes good writing?
2. Were you actually taught how to comment in your teacher education program?
3. What types of comments do you make?
4. What informs your decision making about commenting?
5. How would you describe yourself as a teacher?
6. If you have native English speakers and ELLs, do you comment differently?
The purpose of these questions is to discover why, for example, teachers comment the way that they do; what do teachers think is effective about their commenting; or, alternatively, if a teacher feels like comments are not very effective, why they still write them. This interview data is used to provide a context for the comment data, and may be referred to in Chapter 4 during discussion of the analysis results. As an outsider to the school and classroom, I lack an important perspective on the commenting data. It is possible that the meanings I find through an analysis of the comments will be unknown or unintended from the perspective of the teacher. For this reason, the emic perspective provided by the teacher interviews is invaluable. They allow for a discussion of the ways in which teachers make unintended meanings. This knowledge could benefit teachers in that it could help them to become more aware of their language use and more purposeful with their commenting.

3.6 Data Analysis

The following sections will describe the methods—based in work by linguist M.A.K Halliday and sociologist Karl Maton—that I have used to analyze the teacher comment data.

3.7 Halliday

The first set of conceptual tools that I will use for data analysis is based in M.A.K. Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics (hereafter SFL). SFL theory is vast in scope and application, and I will use several tools from the theory to analyze comment data. I will also use a concept from SFL as a general background and
justification for the study. Halliday & Matthiessen (2006) and van Leeuwen (2008) have both explicitly pointed out the important connection between what could be broadly called theory and praxis.

Halliday & Matthiessen (2006) write: “we are concerned with the construal of human experience as a semantic system; and since language plays the central role not only in storing and exchanging experience but also in construing it, we are taking language as our interpretative base,” (p. 1) and “grammar is a theory of human experience; it is our interpretation of all that goes on around us, and also inside ourselves” (p. 511). Similarly, van Leeuwen (2008) views discourse as “recontextualized social practice” (p. 3). In each of these conceptions is the emphasis that language is constitutive (it construes experience), and that the experiences or practices that we realize in language are in turn influenced by what we experience outside of ourselves. It should follow, then, that even a language practice as small and seemingly innocuous as written comments could contain important information about how teachers view themselves, their students, and writing. The remainder of this section will look in further depth at Hallidayan theory and the SFL-based tools used to analyze comment data in this study.

SFL is a functional branch of linguistics created by M.A.K. Halliday in the 1960s. Halliday & Matthiessen (2004) states that the purpose of SFL is to “describe and explain the meaning-making resources of modern English” (p. 4). According to SFL theory, the ‘meaning making resource’ available to English speakers is grammar. In other words, grammar is a meaning making resource. Rather than
conceiving of grammar as a set of rules that one must follow to be correct, SFL views grammar as a resource, or set of choices, that one has at one’s disposal to make meaning in a particular context. In this sense, language is functional; it helps us get on with life (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Initially, research in SFL stayed within the confines of the linguistics field. However, as the theory became more developed and powerful (i.e. explanatory), it began to stretch beyond these borders.

As Halliday, Hasan, and other scholars continued to develop SFL theory in Australia, other researchers began to imagine ways that the theory could be usefully applied within educational settings. University researchers such as J.R. Martin, David Rose, and Frances Christie created SFL based literacy curricula with the dual purpose of improving the literacy achievement of underrepresented, low performing students as well as increasing their social mobility. They partnered with schools, teachers, and governmental agencies in various places and settings in Australia in order to implement these curricula (see Culican, 2006). Research in and with SFL is still growing in the United States. Of the handful of researchers using SFL in U.S. universities, nearly all of them are in Colleges of Education. The main thrust of their research has been to examine and explicate the language of the content areas (see, for example, de Oliveira, 2011; Fang, 2005). Schleppegrell (2004)—a landmark study in this area—uses an SFL framework to look at the challenges of using language in a way that schools value as well as the particular lexico-grammatical features of text in several content areas. Fang & Schleppegrell (2008) takes a similar look at the language of the content areas, and provides teachers with
many SFL based examples and tools that they can use to improve their instruction. Another important application of SFL in education has been in researching and teaching English Language Learners (see, for example, Byrnes, 2006; de Oliveira, 2011a).

Although SFL theory has been widely applied in the analysis of content area language, including the ways in which it can enhance writing instruction (Brisk, Hodgson-Drysdale, & O’Connor, 2011; Martin & Rose, 2007; Martin & Rose, 2008; Gebhard, Harman, & Seger, 2007), it has not been used to analyze written feedback—particularly at the secondary level. This study will employ several areas of this theory to illuminate the way that conceptions of writing are constructed and negotiated through teacher writing comments. One part of this analysis will involve the three SFL metafunctions. Metafunctions are the general functions that language has come to serve as it has evolved over time, and they are realized by different structures and ways of organizing language. They are ‘meta’ functions because they impact every aspect of the language (such as how it is structured) rather than just how the language is used. Halliday & Matthiessen (2004) identifies three metafunctions: the ideational, interpersonal, and textual (p. 29):
In Fig. 3.5 above it can be seen that the metafunctions work at the lexicogrammatical level of language. The metafunctions are said to co-occur which simply means that each metafunction is present and making meaning in any instance of language use. In a given text, one of the metafunctions may be more prominent in making meaning, but the other two are still there.

3.7.1 The Ideational Metafunction

The ideational metafunction is concerned with how we use language to construe human experience—how we talk about doings and happenings in the world. The interpersonal metafunction is concerned with how we use language to create and maintain relationships with others. When we use language with others we are asserting meanings about our relationship with that person; i.e. who has more authority or power. The textual metafunction is concerned with how ideas—the meanings made through the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions—are organized and sustained through a text.
Since one purpose of this study is to discover the types of meanings that teachers make through their commenting as well as how they construct their teacher identity through their language, it will focus on the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions. Conducting ideational and interpersonal analyses of the data will reveal the ways that writing is conceived of by the teacher and also show the way that this meaning is negotiated through the student-teacher relationship.

As mentioned above, the ideational metafunction is concerned with how language is used to construe reality or represent experience in discourse. In order to discover how these meanings are realized in text, SFL analysts conduct a transitivity analysis. A basic transitivity analysis begins by examining the configuration of three components: the process, participants, and circumstances. In a broad sense, all of experience can be realized in discourse through these three components. The process is typically realized by a verb, the participants by nouns and noun phrases, and the circumstances by prepositional and adverbial phrases. The process type is especially significant because the possible options for participants and circumstances change when the process type changes. There are six general process types in SFL:

Table 3.5 *Process types in SFL’s transitivity system.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process type</th>
<th>Example clause (process in bold)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>material</td>
<td>She <em>stirred</em> the coffee.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
mental

She *likes* coffee.

relational

She *is* a barista.

behavioural

She *laughed*

verbal

She *said*

existential

there *was* a beautiful barista

With each process type comes different options for participants:

Table 3.6 *Process type and corresponding participant options in transitivity system.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process type</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>material</td>
<td>Actor, Goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mental</td>
<td>Senser, Phenomenon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relational</td>
<td>Carrier, Attribute; Token, Value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>behavioural</td>
<td>Behaver (Target)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verbal</td>
<td>Sayer (Target)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>existential</td>
<td>Existent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Circumstances act as a resource for representing elements that are less central to the clause—and, therefore, not in the process or participant role. They are the same regardless of the process type and help provide a context for the more central information realized by the process and participant:
Table 3.7 *Circumstance type in transitivity system (adapted from Halliday & Matthiessen (2004)).*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Circumstance type</th>
<th>Meaning / example (in bold italics)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extent</td>
<td>for how long?; how many times?; how far? &lt;br&gt;-She stirred the coffee <em>for five minutes.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>when?; where? &lt;br&gt;-She stirred the coffee <em>in the kitchen.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manner</td>
<td>by what means?; how?; what like?; how much? &lt;br&gt;-She stirred the coffee <em>vigorously.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause</td>
<td>why?; for what purpose; on whose behalf? &lt;br&gt;-She stirred the coffee <em>in order to mix in the cream.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contingency</td>
<td>under what conditions?; despite what?; lacking what? &lt;br&gt;-She stirred the coffee <em>with her finger because she couldn’t find a spoon.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accompaniment</td>
<td>who/what with?; and who/what else? &lt;br&gt;-She stirred the coffee <em>with her brother.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role</td>
<td>what as?; what into?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It needs to be pointed out here that because of the nature of the comment data a full transitivity analysis was not possible. While planning this study it was assumed that the comment data would mostly be full clauses. It turns out that the majority of the comments are not full clauses, and, so, a transitivity analysis is not really possible. Instead, I created an ideational coding framework that enabled me to analyze the general semantic focus of the teacher’s comments. In the remainder of this section I will provide an explanation and rationale for these ideational codes and then give a description of each one.

3.7.2 Ideational Coding

There is a tension that exists for the teacher as she is commenting on student papers. In one sense she is a dramatized reader who is responding as she imagines a given paper’s imagined audience might respond. But she is also, in a very real sense, responding as a teacher who has the authority, ability, and prerogative to evaluate a student’s piece of writing. Significantly, this tension has a basis in cultural history. In traditional approaches to teaching writing such as the current traditional paradigm
(Tobin, 1994), the teacher’s role was to help students move toward increasingly greater levels of accuracy, and this has been the case from the early grammar schools that taught Latin through more modern English oriented schools. The topics that one read and wrote about were not so important as the rote memorization and production of concepts that the texts exemplified. It is easy to imagine that in classrooms where students read stories as humorously bad as the ‘Dick and Jane’ basal books, the content that one wrote about was of relatively less importance than grammatical accuracy. Even though many teacher preparation programs and schools present teachers with other ways of viewing text—such as process approaches—this idea of the teacher as the guardian of grammatical accuracy still looms largely in our cultural memory.

The teacher—in this conception—does not care about the content. The content is for the reader—the one coming to the text for information, or entertainment, etc. As writing assignments began to change from seemingly random themes to more real-world-oriented, rhetorically motivated topics, teachers began to see the need to comment differently—as readers. This need to comment differently makes sense when one considers the tension that the writing assignment places on the student. A student might be asked to write a paper that has some real word purpose, such as a letter to the editor. So this student must pick a topic and then imagine the audience he is writing for—presumably an editor and the readership of the paper he is writing to. He must then make rhetorical choices that reflect his knowledge of this audience and the best way to either align himself or not
align himself with them. Because this writing exists in the educational context of the classroom, however, the student also knows that the real audience for his writing will be his teacher, and his teacher will evaluate the writing as such. Since the paper will not typically venture outside of the classroom, and therefore be circulated among real readers, the need is created for the teacher to fill this role. So in any act of writing evaluation the teacher has to balance between these two focuses of correctness and content. Relatedly, the teacher must also strike a balance between viewing the text as a product that is to be corrected and a product that belongs to a writer/student who may be responded to and given advice.

In this ideational framework the comments are analyzed as either being “text” or “student” focused and “content” or “correctness” focused. Borrowing from the SFL tradition, these labels are meant to be descriptive/functional (and, so, somewhat self explanatory), however, I will briefly explain and provide an example of each. A comment that is “text” focused is one that is oriented in some way to the content or grammatical features of the student’s work. They may point out things like the correctness, appropriateness or validity of a student comment. In contrast, a “student” focused comment is one that is focused on what the student has done or should do. Comments that are “content,” focused are those that are concerned with the semantic content of the paper—its ideas and truth claims.

Finally, the “correctness,” type of comment is one that is concerned with traditional, prescriptive conceptions of grammar and punctuation. After labeling each of the comments with one of these labels the pairing of each type was also
noted. The possible types of pairings are: “text-content,” “text-correctness,” “student-content,” and “student-correctness.” The following table provides a summary of these ideational codes and what they could reveal in the data:

Table 3.8 *Summary of ideational codes used in data analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideational code</th>
<th>What it reveals in the data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Text</strong></td>
<td>-The comment is focused on some aspect or quality of the text itself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student</strong></td>
<td>-The comment is focused more on the previous or future performance and action of the student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td>-The comment is focused on the content—ideas, theories, arguments, etc.—of the student’s text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Correctness</strong></td>
<td>-The comment is focused on grammatical accuracy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.7.3 The Interpersonal Metafunction

The interpersonal metafunction is concerned with how language is used to establish, maintain, and negotiate relationships in discourse. An interpersonal analysis can reveal the role a speaker plays in a text or the social context within which the text occurs. It can also show how committed a speaker is to the validity of his or her message. These meanings are revealed in an interpersonal analysis through the SFL systems of Mood and Modality.

In writing, a Mood analysis can reveal how language establishes relationship(s)—e.g. roles, power relations, etc.—between speaker and listener (or writer and reader). One aspect of a Mood analysis is looking at the syntactic form of a clause and the speech function that syntactic form plays in the text. SFL points out
that through language we can give or demand goods & services and information through what are called the basic speech functions:

Table 3.9 *Basic speech functions in Mood system (from Martin & Rose (2007)).*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>initiating</th>
<th>responding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>giving information</td>
<td>statement</td>
<td>acknowledgement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>demanding information</td>
<td>question</td>
<td>answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>giving goods-and-services</td>
<td>offer</td>
<td>acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>demanding goods-and-services</td>
<td>command</td>
<td>compliance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in this table, we can use language to do four basic things: giving or demanding information, and giving or demanding goods-and-services. Each of these options has an unmarked mood form—statement, question, offer, or command—and a compliant response: acknowledgement to a statement, answer to a question, acceptance to an offer, and compliance to a command (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 108). There is, of course, always the option of responding non-compliantly: not acknowledging a statement, not answering a question, not accepting an offer, and not complying with a command. So, for example, when we want to give information, we typically use the declarative structure. Alternatively, if we want information from someone we typically employ the interrogative form. However, this is not the only option as it is possible to give the meaning of a command through the marked form of a declarative or interrogative—for example, an angry parent
saying to their child, “I think that you should clean your room,” or “shouldn’t you clean your room now?” In SFL, when a clause makes a meaning that is not typical for its grammatical form, it is called a grammatical metaphor (see Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, pp. 592-593).

Grammatical metaphors are powerful in application because they allow speakers to make certain meanings while appearing that they are doing something else. For example, a boss might use questions with modality to convey the meaning of an imperative—“can you make 10 copies of this report for me?”—in order to appear friendly while still managing to carry out the duties of a boss that must run an office and ensure that work gets done. In writing comments, this language resource may be used by teachers to suggest corrections to students while not appearing authoritarian. A possible problem with this is that students may misinterpret a command in the form of statement as friendly advice that they are free to follow or not—while in reality, not taking the advice can adversely affect their grade.

The teacher’s mood/speech function choice places a restriction on the student: a statement gives information, which is neutral in terms of how the student is set up to respond, except in cases where grammatical metaphor is employed and the statement carries the meaning of an imperative; a question might demand information—which may require the student to think more deeply about something, or could be a grammatical metaphor that is seeking action from the student (they need to change what they have written); the command extremely narrows the
options in the exchange for the student by explicitly marking the requested type of response.

Comments, then, can be viewed as propositions in a negotiation because they typically ask something of the student—attempting to elicit a change in the paper. Comments are rarely, if ever, just observational. Even comments that seem to be devoid of content, ‘good’ for example, can be seen as meaning something like, “this content is like my ideal text.” They may even be seen as containing propositional meaning in the sense that they encourage a student to write similar points in similar ways. Viewing the writing and commenting process as a negotiation is a first step toward making deeper sense of commenting language. Significantly, if the commenting practice is part of a negotiation, the student has the option to respond compliantly or non-compliantly. So, comments are not just a proposition about the nature of the ideal text, they are also an attempt by the teacher to get a student to respond in a way that is most likely to result in the ideal text. So an important consideration for the teacher becomes, “what sorts of comments are most likely to result in desired actions by the student?” What semiotic options exist for the teacher in the attempt to ensure compliance?

Another interpersonal resource that is used to negotiate relationship among language users is modality and modulation. Modality and modulation are grammatical resources that, in general, allow language users to express meanings in-between yes and no as well as the speaker’s assessment of the validity of their message. They are an interpersonal resource because they provide a more nuanced
way to express meanings such as inclination—it is clear from experience that our inclinations are often not just ‘yes’ or ‘no’ but something in-between. SFL recognizes four types of meaning that can be expressed through modality and modulation:

Table 3.10 Types of modality and modulation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modality:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Probablity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Usality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modulation:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Obligation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-Inclination</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Writers use modality to express probability and usuality, and modulation to express obligation and inclination. Both of these types of language use allow writers to make meanings somewhere in-between yes and no. A teacher may use modulation in commenting in order to soften her message—for example, “you should change this sentence,” rather than the more forceful “change this sentence.” As with grammatical metaphor, use of modality may cause confusion for students because they may interpret a word like ‘should’ as expressing the meaning of obligation and choice, when, in the context there is not really choice for the student. In general, one can consider a language user who employs low levels of modality,
higher levels of modulation, commands, and requests for information as one who is attempting to realize higher levels of interpersonal power and status.

Another important function of modality and modulation—typical in contexts such as academic writing—is that it allows the writer to express her own orientation regarding the veracity of a truth claim. In other words, this resource allows writers to more subtly align or dis-align themselves with the arguments and ideas of others. It can also be used to lessen the force or range of a truth claim put forward by the writer. Writers who use little modality or modulation—particularly with their own truth claims—can come across as authoritative, but also, possibly, close-minded. Conversely, writers who employ modality and modulation effectively can be seen as advancing an argument while appearing more balanced or even-handed. Of course, overuse of this resource can also lead to trouble as it can make a writer appear to not be taking a stance at all.

In the classroom context, all of these effects apply to teacher commenting practices. A teacher who uses little to no modality or modulation in her commenting can come across as an authoritarian judge. It asserts that her opinion of classroom work is the only valid one. Perhaps, in order to come across as nice or to soften the blow of a critique, a teacher will use modality or modulation. A potential problem with this is that it runs the risk of the teacher coming across as lacking knowledge or being ambivalent about students taking her advice. This is especially problematic in light of the fact that many times not taking the advice of the teacher will adversely effect the student’s grade.
In the analysis of comment data, I have examined my teacher participant’s comments across the interpersonal categories discussed above in order to see how their commenting practices might be used to discursively realize a particular type of teacher identity. The following table provides a summary of the types of interpersonal analysis conducted on the comment data and a description of what each type of analysis could reveal:

Table 3.11 Summary of interpersonal resources used in data analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpersonal resource</th>
<th>What it reveals in the data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modality / modulation</td>
<td>-The authority and veracity that each teacher places behind their comments. -The degree to which each teacher is attempting to realize the voice of an expert and authority through their comments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood choice</td>
<td>-The degree to which each teacher is attempting to realize the voice of an expert and authority through their comments—those in power in a given language context have more freedom to use commands and ask questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical metaphor</td>
<td>-The degree to which a teacher participant wants to accomplish a particular speech function while appearing to do something else—for example, the teacher might want to control student behavior through commands, but they also do not want to come across as bossy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech function</td>
<td>-This will reveal if teachers have tendencies in what speech functions they employ—it can show, for example, if a teacher is primarily invested in giving information or requesting information through their commenting practices.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.8 Maton

In this section I will attempt to provide a clear, but succinct introduction to a relatively new area of sociological research called Legitimation Code Theory (hereafter called LCT), which, according to Maton (2014), “enables knowledge practices to be seen, their organizing principles to be conceptualized, and their effects to be explored” (pp. 2-3). In other words, LCT allows one to see how specific disciplines construct legitimate knowledge and legitimate knowers. In this section, after outlining LCT theory, I will describe the conceptual tools I have used from LCT to analyze teacher comment data.

LCT initially emerged out of the research of sociologist Karl Maton (see, for example, Maton (2014)), but has since grown to include scholars from sociology and SFL, among other areas. The research efforts by LCT and SFL scholars has been especially fruitful and popular in recent years (see the Martin & Maton (2013) *Linguistics and Education, 24*(1), issue for examples of these collaborations). In order to define LCT in more depth, one should start with the theory’s name and seek to understand what is meant by “legitimation” and “code”. To accomplish this I want to present Maton’s (2014) own description of the theory and how we should understand ‘legitimation’ and ‘code’:

For LCT, society comprises an array of relatively autonomous social universes that are neither wholly separate from nor reducible to others. Each field has its own distinctive ways of working, resources and forms of status that are specific in terms of their realizations yet similar in terms of their underlying generative principles. Within each field, actors cooperate and
struggle to maximize their relational positions in its hierarchies by striving both to attain more of that which defines achievement and to shape what is defined as achievement to match their own practices. LCT highlights that actors’ practices thereby represent competing claims to legitimacy, whether explicit or tacit (such as routinized ways of working) – they are *languages of legitimation* (Chapter 2). These strategies to shape the ‘rules of the game’ are themselves shaped by relations between actors’ dispositions (which are in turn shaped by previous and ongoing experiences in fields) and the current structure of the field. The organizing principles of dispositions, practices and fields are conceptualized by LCT in terms of *legitimation codes*, each ‘code’ representing in effect a currency proposed by actors as the ruler of the field. Underlying the structuring of fields, and acting as a kind of exchange rate mechanism among currencies, is the *Legitimation Device* (Chapter 3). Whoever controls this ‘device’ establishes specific legitimation codes as dominant and so defines what is legitimate, shaping the social field of practice as a dynamic field of possibilities. To analyse legitimation codes is thus to explore what is possible for whom, when, where and how, and who is able to define these possibilities, when, where and how. pp. 17-18

The last sentence of this is passage is, I think, a key point for understanding what this approach is about. In classroom contexts, we can ask what is possible for students and what is possible for teachers in terms of knowledge creation. We can also ask, in turn, who in the school setting defines these possibilities for actors in the classroom. For this study on teacher commenting practices I am particularly
interested in how teachers and students together, through their writing practices, create and negotiate ideas about legitimate writing knowledge.

I am taking the view that in the secondary ELA classroom, commenting is one of the many possible practices that act as a legitimation device. It is primarily through a teacher’s commenting that legitimate knowledge about writing is constructed for the student. In order to analyze my comment data in this way I have used two conceptual tools from LCT: Specialization and Semantics. Specialization is concerned with relations between knowledge and knowers in a given context. Semantics is concerned with the amount, concrete or abstractness, and density of information in a text. In the next two sections of this chapter I will provide more details about each conceptual tool as well as what they will help uncover in the comment data.

3.8.1 Specialization

Maton (2014) introduces Specialization “via the simple premise that practices and beliefs are about or oriented towards something and by someone. They thus involve relations to objects and to subjects” (p. 29). The relations to objects or practices are called epistemic relations, and the relations to subjects or knowers are called social relations. One can distinguish between strong epistemic relations (ER+) where “possession of specialized knowledge of specific objects of study is emphasized as the basis of achievement,” and weak epistemic relations (ER-) where “specialized knowledge and objects are less significant” (p. 30). One can also distinguish between strong social relations (SR+) where “the attributes of actors are emphasized as measures of achievement, whether these are viewed as born (e.g.
‘natural talent’), cultivated (e.g. artistic gaze or ‘taste’) or socially based (e.g. the notion of gendered gaze in feminist standpoint theory),” and weak social relations (SR-) where “the attributes of actors are downplayed” (p. 30).

When there is a strong epistemic relation (ER+) and a weak social relation (SR-), the result is a Specialization code called a “knowledge code” (p. 73). When there is a weak epistemic relation (ER-) and a strong social relation (SR+), the result is a Specialization code called a “knower code” (p. 73). These codes are the most typical as the knower code is often linked to knowledge in the humanities and the knowledge code to the sciences. However, there are two other possible code combinations: (ER+, SR+) and (ER-, SR-). In the case of (ER+, SR+), where both epistemic and social relations are strong, the code is called “elite” (p. 30). In the case of (ER-, SR-), where both epistemic and social relations are weak, the code is called “relativist” (p. 30). Each of these four codes represent a different orientation towards knowledge and knowers, and the orientation that is privileged in a given context will have a drastic effect on what ends up being considered as legitimate knowledge. The following figure summarizes the four Specialization codes:
Figure 3.6 Specialization codes, (adapted from Maton (2014)).

Each teacher participant’s comment data has been analyzed using these Specialization codes in order to discover if they privilege a particular type over the others. The discovery of a dominant preference pattern in the comment data can reveal much about how each teacher constructs knowledge about writing and writers in her classroom.

3.8.2 Semantic Gravity

Semantic gravity considers “the degree to which meaning relates to its context,” and, so, when “semantic gravity is stronger, meaning is more closely related to its social or symbolic context of acquisition or use; when it is weaker, meaning is less dependent on its context” (Maton, 2014, p. 110). A strong semantic gravity (SG+) can be linked to what Maton (2014) calls horizontal discourses—which are those concrete, embodied ways of knowing about the world (p. 110). A
weak semantic gravity (SG-) can be linked to what Maton (2014) calls vertical discourses—which are the more academic, abstract, and hierarchical ways of knowing about the world (p. 110). A lexicogrammatical example of this distinction can be found in nominalization; where nominalized forms would possess a weaker semantic gravity than their more ideationally congruent expression:

Figure 3.7 Semantic gravity at the lexicogrammatical level

In the above example, the nominalized form “the experimentation” possesses a weaker semantic gravity (SG-) because it takes the figure of Participant-“I”; Process: “conducted”; and Participant: “the experiment,” and compresses/abstracts them into a noun group. In the analysis of comment data, the Semantic gravity of the teacher comments has been analyzed in order to discover the degree to which teacher comments refer to the concrete, student text (SG+) or to writing in general (SG-).

The following table provides a summary of the research questions for this study, with the corresponding data analysis and outcomes for each question:
Table 3.12 Research questions with corresponding data, analysis, and outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Corresponding data</th>
<th>Corresponding analysis</th>
<th>Corresponding outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. What meanings do secondary ELA teachers construct in their paper comments? | Student papers with teacher comments—marginal or as end notes. | 1. **Hallidayan:**  
   - Ideational coding:  
     - Text  
     - Student  
     - Content  
     - Correctness  
   - Interpersonal analysis:  
     - Modality/modulation  
     - Mood choice  
     - Grammatical metaphor  
     - Speech function | -Functional, linguistic description of the language of writing comments.  
2. **Maton:**  
   - Specialization:  
     - ER+/-, SR+/-  
   - Semantic gravity:  
     - SG+/- | -Description of the context within which the comments were created, and the context and meanings that the comments build through their grammatical choices. |
| 2. What teacher identities are realized through the form and content of comments? | -Teacher interviews | 1. **Hallidayan:** -Ideational coding: -Text | -A description of the types of discursive identities teachers construct in their commenting practices. |
| | -Student papers with teacher comments—marginal or as end notes. | -Student | |
| | | -Content | |
| | | -Correctness | |
| | | -**Interpersonal analysis:** -Modality/modulation | |
| | | -Mood choice | |
| | | -Grammatical metaphor | |
| | | -Speech function | |
| | | 2. **Maton:** -Specialization: -ER+/-, SR+/- | |
| | | -**Semantic gravity:** -SG+/- | |
CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will present an analysis of my teacher participants’ comments using the analytical tools from Halliday’s SFL and Maton’s LCT discussed in Chapter 3. Section 4.2 presents the SFL analyses conducted on each teacher’s data, and is organized by SFL analytical tool. Comparisons of each teacher’s data set will be made as each analysis type is discussed. Section 4.3 presents the LCT analyses conducted on each teacher’s data, and is also organized by analytical tool. Like the SFL section, this section will also make comparisons between each teacher’s data set as each analysis type is discussed.

4.2 SFL Analyses

As discussed in Chapter 3, this study has employed SFL theory in order to uncover the meanings that teachers make through their commenting language. This relates directly to research question 1: What meanings do secondary ELA teachers construct in their paper comments? SFL, as a body of theory, is quite large, and the analytical tools that it provides are powerful enough to uncover a lot of meaning in text. For this reason, I have narrowed down my choice of analytical tools to two parts of the theory that I felt would be the most revealing for analyzing comment data: the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions. In the following section 4.2.1 I
will present the ideational coding analysis conducted on the data, and in section 4.2.2 I will present the interpersonal analyses conducted on the comment data.

4.2.1 Ideational Coding Analysis

The ideational coding analysis is meant to provide a general sense of the semantic, ideational focus of each teacher participant’s comment data. The codes, along with a definition and examples, are outlined in the table below:

Table 4.1 Ideational codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Text</td>
<td>-comment is focused on some quality or aspect of the text.</td>
<td>-Ms. Frame:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-“good intro”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Ms. Edwards:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-“no semi colon here...just a comma”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>-comment is focused on some quality, ability, or performance (i.e. what student has done or should do) of the student.</td>
<td>-Ms. Frame:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-“Just look at your spelling next time”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-Ms. Edwards:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-“you missed a couple but it appears your format is correct”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>-comment is focused on the quality, type, or</td>
<td>-Ms. Frame:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-“used good support!”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this ideational coding framework the comments are analyzed as either being "text" or "student" focused and "content" or "correctness" focused. Borrowing from the SFL tradition, these labels are meant to be descriptive/functional (and, so, somewhat self explanatory). Because the two groupings of 'text-student’ and ‘content-correctness’ are exclusive, it is possible to have four different paired combinations. The possible types of pairings are: “text-content,” “text-correctness,” “student-content,” and “student-correctness.” In the remainder of this section, I will look at each teacher’s comment choice patterns within this framework.

Ms. Frame’s comments tended to be “text” and “correctness” focused, and the most typical comment pairing was the “text-correctness” type. These patterns in Ms. Frame’s commenting data suggest that she views writing and writing instruction in
a more traditional, product-focused way. The following table provides examples of
Ms. Frame’s “text” and “correctness” comments along with the corresponding
section of student text:

Table 4.2 *Ms. Frame's typical ideational code patterns*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>comment type</th>
<th>comment</th>
<th>student text &lt;contextual information&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Text</strong></td>
<td>Nurture</td>
<td>Nature vs. Nuture &lt;paper title&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>run-on</td>
<td>Lennie never meant to put them in bad situations, he just couldn't control himself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Correctness</strong></td>
<td>fragment</td>
<td>The many times Lennie trusts the word and instructions of George.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>use past tense here</td>
<td>He would get mad &lt;text is circled&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ms. Edwards’ commenting choices were slightly different than those of Ms. Frame.
She, like Ms. Frame, tended to have a “text” focus, but also focused on “content”
more than “correctness”. The most typical comment pairing for Ms. Edwards was
also “text-correctness”. The following table provides examples of Ms. Edwards’
“text” and “content” comments along with the corresponding section of student text:

Table 4.3 *Ms. Edwards’ typical ideational code patterns*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>comment type</th>
<th>comment</th>
<th>student text &lt;contextual information&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Text</td>
<td>no contractions in a formal paper please</td>
<td>He wasn’t medically diagnosed with the disorder &lt;text is circled&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>this comma goes here because we use commas to separate two independent clauses connected with a conjunction</td>
<td>His work began to gain recognition, and in 1952, Andy received (sic) an opportunity to have his very first solo exhibition. &lt;comma after ‘recognition’ added by teacher&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>this is a good quote but be sure to set your reader up for it</td>
<td>&quot;Warhol’s work was part of a larger movement known as Pop Art, which rebelled against the Abstract Expressionist style of painting that&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tables 4.2 and 4.3 above present the most typical comment types realized by each teacher, but each of them did, to a lesser degree, make the other types of comments too:

**Table 4.4 Overview of comment type choice by teacher**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>teacher</th>
<th>text / student focused comments</th>
<th>content / correctness focused comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Ms. Edwards | -text: 72%  
-Student: 28% | -content: 54%  
-correctness: 46% |
| Ms. Frame  | -text: 76%  
-Student: 24% | -content: 43%  
-correctness: 57% |

Although each teacher had a similar ideational focus on text, the data reveal that, overall, Ms. Edwards was more balanced in the types of comment she chose. This becomes more apparent when one looks at the types of comment pairs realized by each teacher:
Table 4.5 *Overview of comment pair realizations by teacher*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>teacher</th>
<th>comment pairs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Edwards</td>
<td>-text-content: 34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-text-correctness: 38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-student-content: 21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-student-correctness: 07%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Frame</td>
<td>-text-content: 30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-text-correctness: 47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-student-content: 13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-student-correctness: 10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table shows that each teacher realized the 'text-correctness' comment pair more than the others, however in the case of Ms. Edwards the gaps between categories are smaller than those of Ms. Frame. Ms. Frame wrote ‘text-correctness’ comments 47% of the time and ‘text-content’ comments 30% of the time—a 17% difference. On the other hand, Ms. Edwards wrote ‘text-correctness’ comments 38% of the time and ‘text-content’ comments 34% of the time—only a 4% difference. Also, Ms. Edwards was slightly more student focused in her commenting than Ms. Frame—at 28% versus 23%. These patterns in the data suggest that Ms. Edwards was better able to balance between focusing on the content and grammaticality of student work as well as shifting her comments between the nature of the text and
what the student should do to improve it. The significance of these different approaches to commenting will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

4.2.2 Interpersonal Analyses

A general, broad interpersonal analysis of the data was conducted and looked for the following features: modality/modulation; Mood choice (imperative, interrogative, or declarative); grammatical metaphor; and speech function. The remainder of this section will report the findings of each interpersonal analysis in turn.

**Modality and Modulation.** Ms. Frame and Ms. Edwards are very different in the way that they employ modality and modulation. Out of all of her comments, Ms. Frame uses modulation expressing obligation once (or .01%) in response to the conclusion of a student’s paper examining theme in the novel *Of mice and men:*

**Table 4.6 Modulation in Ms. Frame’s commenting**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>student passage</th>
<th>Ms. Frame’s comment (with modulation in bold)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-“In conclusion, the overall them (sic) in Of Mice &amp; (sic) Men is friendship and loyalty. There were times in the book where both themes were shown at once, then when it showed none at all. George was close and loyal to Lennie, then eventually he turned on him.”</td>
<td>-<strong>could</strong> have restated thesis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In contrast, Ms. Edwards uses modality and modulation much more often—in around one-fifth of her total comments. She uses modulation expressing obligation and inclination (16% and <1% respectively) and modality expressing probability and usuality (4% and <1% respectively). The following table provides some examples of Ms. Edwards’ use of modality and modulation:

Table 4.7 Examples of Ms. Edwards’ use of modality and modulation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>comment type</th>
<th>comment (with modality or modulation in bold)</th>
<th>student passage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-modality: probability</td>
<td>maybe a good place to talk about Jim Crow laws</td>
<td>-The 13th Amendment however was regarded to (sic) as insufficient to protect former slaves from certain laws which had been enacted in the south...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Also, the flow <strong>seems</strong> confusing even as you preview your points in the introduction</td>
<td>-There were many events that helped change the world in the fight for the civil rights (sic) one of the major events was the Homer Plessy case. The Homer Plessy case was a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
big court case that eventually led up (sic) to the Brown vs. (sic) Board of Education case. A little African girl named Ruby Bridges also intertwined with the Homer Plessy case in a way. Homer Plessy first took his ordeal to court because he felt like he was treated unfairly, then his case went to the supreme courts (sic) then came trial number 3, then last was the aftermath of the whole all the trails and the whole case. (sic)

- modality:-usuality
  logical flow...**sometimes** you could make your paper transitions between topics and subtopics smooth for your reader  
  <-from rubric category:  
  "Main bodies: paragraphs organized, appropriate transitions, topic"
-modulation: obligation  
the first paragraph **should** be this one because it gives context  
- The Boston church is a theistic group. This church is perceived as a Christian church because it follows the bible (sic) but it strays because it has a disciple ship (sic) within (sic) the church.

**definitely** see me about when to use semicolons  
- Not only did he use the blotted line ink technique in his art, Andy Warhol also did silk screening; (sic)

-modulation: inclination  
**I would like** to see approximately two more sentences here  
- The life, art work, and mimics of Andy Warhol are forever apart (sic) of Pop Art and art history because of how he changed art throughout his lifetime. Warhol
changed art as much as the transition between cave paintings and hieroglyphics. His influence restructured the way people perceive art forever.

Although Suzy only uses it once, her and Rose both employ obligation more than any other type of modality or modulation. This makes sense given the classroom context where it is generally expected that the teacher in some way tells students what they should or should not do.

**Table 4.8 Overview of use of modality and modulation by teacher**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>teacher</th>
<th>modality (as found in percentage of total comments)</th>
<th>modulation (as found in percentage of total comments)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Frame</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>obligation: &lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Edwards</td>
<td>probability: 4%</td>
<td>obligation: 16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>usuality: &lt;1%</td>
<td>inclination: &lt;1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Mood choice.** Each comment was analyzed for mood using the categories of imperative, interrogative, and declarative. The only comments not analyzed for
mood were those that involved a correction for a spelling error or word choice as these comments were typically just single words, and thus had no mood. Since these categories are well known from traditional grammar, examples illustrating them will not be given. The following table, however, will provide a break down of each teacher's mood choice by percentage of total comments:

Table 4.9 Teacher participant mood choices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>teacher</th>
<th>imperative</th>
<th>interrogative</th>
<th>declarative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Frame</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Edwards</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Grammatical metaphor and speech function.** As discussed in Chapter 3, grammatical metaphor occurs when a particular grammatical resource is used to make a meaning that it typically does not make. In this study, it was found that both Ms. Frame and Ms. Edwards used grammatical metaphors in their comments—typically to mask or soften a command. This section will present the findings about each teacher's use of grammatical metaphor and speech function.

Ms. Frame used grammatical metaphor less often than Ms. Edwards, but its use was still evident in her data.
Table 4.10 Ms. Frame’s use of grammatical metaphor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>grammatical metaphor type</th>
<th>percentage of total grammatical metaphor use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Declarative used to make imperative meaning (DEC-&gt;IMP)</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interrogative used to make imperative meaning (INT-&gt;IMP)</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in the table above, Ms. Frame showed a preference for using declaratives to make imperative meanings. This pattern makes sense given the dual need for teachers to give instruction to students through commands, but not wanting to come across as overbearing. The following table provides some examples of her use of grammatical metaphor in comments:

Table 4.11 Examples of Ms. Frame’s use of grammatical metaphor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>grammatical metaphor type</th>
<th>example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Declarative used to make imperative meaning (DEC-&gt;IMP)</td>
<td>-On right track <strong>but</strong> you don’t really <strong>tell</strong> me anything about their relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- very weak here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- could have restated thesis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In each of the DEC->IMP and INT->IMP type comments it can be seen that, although realized as a declarative or interrogative, each comment means as an imperative. To show this one can rewrite the comments in a more congruent way:

\[
\begin{array}{|c|c|}
\hline
\text{Interrogative used to make imperative meaning (INT->IMP)} & - \text{Title?} \\
- \text{Should be a 3 x 5} & - \text{What is this?} \\
- 3 \text{ items?} & \\
\hline
\end{array}
\]

Fig 4.1 Congruent forms of Ms. Frame’s grammatical metaphors

The analysis of speech functions conducted on the data support these grammatical metaphor patterns:
Table 4.12 *Speech function in Ms. Frame’s comments*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>speech function</th>
<th>percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>statement</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>question</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>offer</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>command</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since the number of clauses given the speech function of command are quite high at 69%, it makes sense that Ms. Frame would employ the grammatical metaphor resource in order to make a command meaning in ways other than just an imperative mood choice.

Ms. Edwards patterns of grammatical metaphor use were similar to those of Ms. Frame. Ms. Edwards, however, employed the resource a little more often and also used it more varied ways by also using declarative forms to make interrogative meaning:

Table 4.13 *Ms. Edwards’ use of grammatical metaphor*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>grammatical metaphor type</th>
<th>percentage of total grammatical metaphor use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Declarative used to make imperative meaning. (DEC-&gt;IMP)</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grammatical metaphor type</td>
<td>example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interrogative used to make imperative meaning (INT- &gt;IMP)</td>
<td>- source?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- why is this important?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declarative used to make interrogative meaning (DEC- &gt;INT)</td>
<td>- I’m not sure if your last paragraph is supposed to be the conclusion or another body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- you don’t need to double space this in the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- great graphic, but you need to set it up for the reader and cite it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As with Ms. Frame’s comments, it can be helpful to see the grammatical metaphor at work when the comments are translated into a more congruent form:

```
I’m concerned about how you’re going to do this
```

Figure 4.2 Congruent forms of Ms. Edwards’ grammatical metaphors

Similarly to Ms. Frame, Ms. Edward’s speech function choices support the patterns found in her usage of grammatical metaphor—with the most typical speech function realized being the command:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>speech function</th>
<th>percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>statement</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>question</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>offer</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As shown in this table, Ms. Edwards uses commands as well as questions more frequently than Ms. Frame. In Chapter 5 the implications of these patterns will be discussed in more detail.

4.3 LCT Analyses

**Specialization.** The comments of each teacher were analyzed as Specialization codes that help to construct and legitimate particular views of writers and writing. The comments were labeled as either a “knowledge code”—where possession of specific knowledge about writing is emphasized—or a “knower code”—where the ability of the student to either correctly or incorrectly achieve something as a writer is in focus. As with the other types of analyses, the results from each teacher were different; suggesting that they view writing and writing instruction in fundamentally different ways. Ms. Edwards was more “knower” focused in her commenting:

Table 4.16 *Specialization codes in Ms. Edwards’ comments by percentage*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specialization code</th>
<th>percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>knowledge codes (ER+, SR-)</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knower codes (ER-, SR+)</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall, the knowledge codes in Ms. Edwards comments focused on what students should know about writing:

- no semi colon here...just a comma
- no italics
- parenthetical citation after quote
- too much extra space between these paragraphs

Conversely, the knower codes in Ms. Edwards comments focused on behaviors and abilities that students need to be writers:

- try to follow this format for your paper
- the first paragraph should be this one because it gives the context
- Dude! we have to work on using commas and semicolons correctly. see me about this so we can practice.

Ms. Frame was more balanced in her use of Specialization codes, but differed from Ms. Edwards in that her comment data showed a slight preference for knowledge codes:

Table 4.17 Specialization codes in Ms. Frame’s comments by percentage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specialization code</th>
<th>percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>knowledge codes (ER+, SR-)</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knower codes (ER-, SR+)</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Ms. Frame’s commenting, knowledge codes focused on error correction:

- Nurture <SP>
- allowed <SP>
- then <WC>
- use good here <WC>
- run-on
- split infinitive

Like Ms. Edwards, Ms. Frame’s knower codes focused on student behavior and ability:

- Introduce novel
- used good support
- Just look at your spelling next time
- Good support of theme
- give a final statement

**Semantic gravity.** The comments of each teacher participant were analyzed for Semantic gravity—labeled either as possessing strong semantic gravity (SG+) or weak semantic gravity (SG-). A comment with SG+ would be one that is more concrete and explicitly connected to the text. A comment with SG- would be one that is more abstract and less explicitly connected to the text. As with the Specialization codes, Ms. Edwards and Ms. Frame were quite different in terms of Semantic gravity. Ms. Edwards’ comments realized a stronger semantic gravity than Ms. Frame’s:
Table 4.18 Semantic gravity types in Ms. Edwards’ comments by percentage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantic gravity code</th>
<th>percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SG+</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SG-</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ms. Frame’s comments revealed a very strong preference for weak semantic gravity:

Table 4.19 Semantic gravity types in Ms. Frame’s comments by percentage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantic gravity code</th>
<th>percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SG+</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SG-</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following table provides some examples of each comment/code type for each teacher participant:

Table 4.20 SG+/SG- comments by teacher participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>SG+</th>
<th>SG-</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Edwards</td>
<td>- correct use of semi colon here</td>
<td>- use transitions to help with flow… this one is weak but hopefully you get the idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- I’m guessing this is your punctuation</td>
<td>- This is a really great reflection on your experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The implications of these differing views on writing and writers shown through Specialization and Semantic gravity will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the results from several types of SFL and LCT based analyses. Teachers employ various language resources in their commenting practices in order to provide students with feedback about writing and to realize and assert their teacher identities within the space of their classroom. Although seemingly simple, and possibly even insignificant, the grammar of comment language allows teachers to create a variety of meanings—meanings that may sometimes even confuse students. Writing comments are evaluative, but they can also tell students important things about what their teachers view as legitimate writing and what qualities make someone a legitimate writer. The next chapter will discuss the key findings suggested by the analysis and will provide implications for teachers and teacher educators.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ms. Frame</th>
<th>- was &lt;WC&gt;</th>
<th>- No clear support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- talked &lt;SP&gt;</td>
<td>- great intro!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 SFL Discussion

The SFL-based analyses and data presented in Chapter 4 centered on the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions. When teachers comment on student work they are making ideational meanings by addressing particular qualities and features of the text, and they are also making interpersonal meanings by choosing particular grammar features that help to create and (re)negotiate their particular teacher identity in their specific classroom context. In this section of Chapter 5, the results of the SFL analyses will be discussed.

5.1.1 Ideational Analysis

The ideational patterns in the data suggest some fundamental differences in the ways that these teachers conceive of student writing and their role as teachers. Ms. Frame focuses on the correctness of the student text (with the other categories not even coming close)—treating commenting as primarily an act of evaluating the student paper as a finished product. In this way of thinking, the meanings made by a student are either correct or incorrect, and the paper stands as a record of that student performance. Ms. Frame’s strong preference for text-correctness focused comments realizes a teacher-as-evaluator identity. Ms. Edwards, on the other hand,
along with a focus on text correctness, also places a great deal of emphasis on
student-content meanings. Her comments realize a teacher-as-evaluator identity,
but they also realize a teacher-as-reader identity in the way they focus on the
student as a writer and the nature of the content. It should be mentioned that the
writing assignments given by Ms. Frame and Ms. Edwards belong to different
genres, and, therefore, have different goals. Ms. Frame’s assignments were a literary
interpretation and Ms. Edwards’ assignments were typically historical and
biographical recounts. These differing genres mean that each teacher would have
different expectations for what makes each text successful—and, these genre
expectations could have an impact on teacher comments by influencing what
aspects of the text the teacher deems as significant. Future studies on teacher
feedback should take the genre of the student’s writing into consideration as well as
the teacher’s understanding of genre and genre expectations in order to assess what
impact they have on commenting practice.

Overall, the data suggests that teachers feel the need to be evaluators in their
commenting, even if they want to be viewed as less of an authoritarian in
their classroom. This pressure to evaluate at even the level of commenting makes
sense given the increasingly strict requirements put onto teachers and students by
the higher, administrative levels of the school. Of course, one of the main, overt
purposes of schooling is for students to learn and improve, and it is very difficult, if
not impossible, to learn without some type of feedback or evaluation. In this sense,
the amount of emphasis that each teacher placed on the text and its correctness was expected.

This data also shows, however, that although the teacher-as-evaluator identity may be an intrinsic part of the profession, there is also room for the teacher to adopt other stances toward the act of writing evaluation. Focusing more on students, and their actions and abilities, allows the teacher to soften her evaluative stance. These comments—“nice work,” or “used good support,” for example—can seem more like reader reactions than evaluative judgments. They do, however, still contain evaluation, but it is evaluation hidden behind a more interpersonally motivated comment. A comment such as “nice work,” expresses the opinion of the teacher and also praises the effort of the student, but it also implies that ‘the text is correct’ without explicitly referencing the text itself. The ideational analysis of each teacher's comment data suggests that there is an interpersonal motivation behind the pattern of ideational focus realized by each teacher that relates to the type of teacher identity—evaluator or reader—that they want to enact in their classroom.

5.1.2 Interpersonal

**Modality and Modulation.** Ms. Edwards is, like Ms. Frame, invested in instructing her students and giving them guidance on their work, but the data suggests that Ms. Edwards feels the need to make this instruction more nuanced through the use of various modality and modulation resources. This difference between each teacher participant could be for various reasons. Ms. Edwards is a less experienced teacher than Ms. Frame, and, so, perhaps her more frequent use of
these constructions is due in part to a lack of confidence about just telling the students what to do. Based on the school context that Ms. Edwards works in, however, I think a more likely explanation is that modality and modulation are employed as a way to lessen the potentially harsh impact that comments can have on students. The students in Ms. Edwards’ classroom are students that for various reasons did not thrive in a traditional school structure, and therefore may also be struggling to learn the conventions of school writing. In this sense, modulation and modality can be employed to give students instruction while still helping to build their self-efficacy towards writing.

This pattern in each teacher’s use of modality and modulation may also be explained by the different views they have on writing as suggested by the ideational analysis. In general, Ms. Frame was more focused on the text and its correctness in her commenting, as opposed to Ms. Edwards greater focus on students and on the text and its content. From a product-focused perspective there is really less need for using modality and modulation because the student paper either realizes the ideal product or it does not. A product focus in commenting also creates less of a need to focus on the individual student as a learner-in-progress, and, so, there would be less of an apparent need to use modality and modulation for the purpose of sparing a student’s feelings. Also, in a product-focused writing classroom where the teacher is the final judge of a text’s value, the teacher must necessarily appear to students as a legitimate authority on writing knowledge. In this type of classroom it would be
expected that the teacher would employ less modality to show that they have no doubts about the veracity of what they claim in their comments.

**Mood Choice, Grammatical Metaphor and Speech Function.** Each teacher's mood choice and speech function was noted along with uses of grammatical metaphor. These grammatical features are all significant in creating interpersonal meanings in the comment data. The choice of mood allows the teacher to assert authority as one who can command or question. Because of the unique context of the classroom, however, there is an interesting caveat to using imperatives. In general, one who uses a lot of imperatives and constantly questions others could be viewed negatively as overly aggressive or mean. This could be interpersonally problematic in the classroom where teachers have a very practical reason for desiring to maintain peace between themselves and their students. So while the teacher, in reality, has real authority and power over students—a very basic function of the teacher’s job is to evaluate students—asserting that power too overtly might lead to classroom management issues like unruly students. So, teachers must typically learn to strike a balance between strict authoritarian and push-over. The grammatical resources discussed in this section provide teachers with ways of striking that balance. The grammatical metaphor in particular affords teachers with a subtle way of asserting authority while appearing not to.

Both teachers were similar in their choice of mood. Rose and Suzy each preferred using declaratives by quite a large margin—67% and 43% respectively. The next largest category for each teacher was the imperative. Rose used
imperatives 18% of the time and Suzy 22% of the time. The lowest category for each was the interrogative mood at 13% for Rose and 12% for Suzy. These findings are not really all that surprising. One might expect that teacher comments would be comprised of a lot of statements and commands.

The patterns of mood choice in the data become more interesting when one also considers the use of grammatical metaphor and speech function. Although the mood choice of each teacher was primarily the declarative, the dominant meaning realized by each teacher’s use of grammatical metaphor and speech function was an imperative meaning. As might be expected based on the previous modality data, Rose uses grammatical metaphor much more frequently than Suzy. Rose uses grammatical metaphor in 57% of her comments and Suzy in only 29%. The most interesting finding in this part of the data is, perhaps, the difference in how both teachers used declarative forms as imperatives. Suzy used declarative forms to make imperative meanings 45% of the time. Rose, on the other hand, used declaratives to make imperative meaning 68% of the time.

Each teacher participants differing tendencies in the use of grammatical metaphor to make declaratives mean like imperatives points to a general tension that exists for all teachers when commenting on papers. When a teacher is grading and commenting on a paper they are presented with two basic options. The first option is that they can comment as an evaluator. Under this option the teacher may mark out words and replace them, correct or point out grammar errors, or give students instruction about changes to make in the paper. The second option for the
teacher is to comment as a reader—a practice emphasized and encouraged in the literature on writing since the early 1980s (see Chapter 2, section 2.4.1). When the teacher comments as a reader they are focused more on their own reaction to and appraisal of the student's writing—comments such as “good job,” or “I really liked this part”. The important distinction between these two options is grammatical. When commenting as an evaluator, you are much more likely to use imperatives. The imperative form really serves no purpose for commenting as a reader. When commenting as a reader you are more likely to use declaratives to simply state your feeling about or reaction to the text. So this tension between being a reader and evaluator is present because the teacher is literally reading the student’s paper, but they must also evaluate that paper and assign it a grade. Since the over use of imperatives (which provide instruction for students about what to do to make their paper better) make the teacher seem like less of a reader, they employ grammatical metaphor in an attempt to provide instruction while appearing to just be making observations. For example, here are two comments from Ms. Edwards that employ grammatical metaphor:

- you don’t need to double space this in the future
- I don’t see this source on your works cited page

Both of these comments are declaratives that have the meaning of an imperative. In the first comment the meaning is really something like ‘don’t double space this’. In the second comment the meaning is really ‘put this source on your works cited page’. In each case the preferred, expected student response is hidden behind the
grammar. For those students unfamiliar with this way of using grammar, it may be unclear that they need to actually do something in response to the comment. They may simply view it as a comment by the teacher about their paper. The need for teachers to create and maintain particular interpersonal relationships with students can get in the way of other, more ideational, meanings conveyed through the comments. It could be important for teachers who comment in this way to pay attention to how students respond to such comments. If using grammatical metaphor in this way does not lead students to make appropriate changes to their papers in revision, other, more explicit forms of commenting should be considered.

5.2 LCT Discussion

Two conceptual tools were borrowed from LCT to analyze the teacher comment data: Specialization and Semantic gravity. The following two sections will discuss the results of those analyses.

5.2.1 Specialization

In the Specialization analysis results presented in Chapter 4, teacher comments were labeled as realizing either a “knowledge” code or a “knower” code. The purpose of this analysis was to see which code type teachers were privileging in their comments. Knowledge codes emphasize what a person knows as being the most significant indicator of success. Knower codes, on the other hand, emphasize the person and their attributes and abilities as indicators of success. Significantly, an emphasis on one code over another also emphasizes a different “gaze” (Maton, 2014, p. 94). According to Maton (2014), who is taking the concept from Bernstein,
gaze refers to one's ability to see what counts as an authentic and legitimate knowledge or reality in a particular context (p. 94). Knowledge codes emphasize the “trained” (p. 95) gaze, which views knowers as those who lack and, therefore, just simply need specialized information to become legitimate knowers. Knower codes emphasize “born,” “cultivated,” or “social” gazes—where a ‘born’ gaze is something like natural talent; a ‘cultivated’ gaze where “where legitimacy arises from dispositions of the knower that can be inculcated,” (p. 95); and ‘social’ gazes which are determined by a knower’s “social category” (p. 95).

The data suggest that Ms. Frame was knowledge focused in her commenting, and seemed to view students as knowers possessing a trained gaze. Her comments suggest that in order for student writers to become legitimate writers, the most important thing for them is to have knowledge of correctness in writing—particularly grammar, punctuation, and spelling conventions. Conversely, Ms. Edwards was knower focused in her commenting. This suggests that she views students as possessing more of a cultivated gaze—in order for her students to become legitimate writers they must be taught about things such as what writers do, what writers are like, and how writers think about text.

5.2.2 Semantic gravity

As discussed in Chapter 3, Semantic gravity can be thought of as the degree of concreteness (SG+) or abstractness (SG-) of language or knowledge. The data reported in Chapter 4 showed that Ms. Edwards preferred SG+ comments and Ms. Frame preferred SG- comments (by a large margin at 71% versus 29%). Ms. Frame’s
focus on the more abstract SG- comments makes sense in light of the Specialization analysis where she was more knowledge focused. Since SG- comments would be oriented towards abstract knowledge about writing, this pattern of SG- comments and knowledge focus suggests that Ms. Frame lacks explicitness in her commenting practice. In other words, Ms. Frame does not link knowledge about writing to what her students do in their writing. Ms. Edwards preferred the SG+ (concrete) focused comments and was less extreme in her variance between the two types of semantic gravity (with SG+ comments at 59% versus 41%). This SG+ focus might seem curious since the Specialization analysis revealed that she was more knower focused. This seems to suggest that Ms. Edwards is more balanced in commenting practices in how she links concrete things in the text to what the student knows about writing. The Semantic gravity patterns of teacher comments seem significant for teachers and are discussed in more detail in the implications section below.

5.3 Implications

In general, a goal of the ELA classroom throughout primary and secondary school should be to move students as writers from a trained gaze to a more cultivated gaze. In other words, once students have the basic knowledge about writing and writing conventions, they must move on to more advanced considerations about their writing. By privileging knowledge codes—and, thus, viewing students as possessing a trained gaze—teachers may prevent students from developing a cultivated gaze unless explicit links are made between specialized knowledge and being a knower. A look at Semantic gravity can be useful when
considering how teachers might make more explicit links between knowledge and knowers. In recent LCT research (see, for example, Maton, 2013), the concept of semantic waves has been introduced. A semantic wave refers to, essentially, when a text alternates between abstraction and concreteness, or, in other words, weak and strong semantic gravity. In the literature review, a distinction made in the feedback literature between form and focus was emphasized. The concept of semantic gravity, when applied to comments, can show the form and function distinction to be a false dichotomy. Rather than commenting in one way or the other, teachers should do both—but in a way that explicitly links notions of form and function to the student’s actual text.

For many genres of writing in academia, a text pattern that creates semantic waves is preferred because it is this pattern that helps readers to build knowledge by learning a concept and then placing the concept in a concrete context. Although the research on semantic waves has focused on the semantic patterns of actual texts, the concept can be usefully applied to writing comments. Students could benefit from comments that alternate between strong and weak semantic gravity. Students must be taught about conventions and expectations for their writing (SG-), but they must also be shown explicitly how their texts do or do not meet expectations for them as student writers (SG+). An over reliance on SG- comments could be problematic because their abstractness removes them from clear referents in the paper, leading to a segmented learning about writing instead of the more ideal cumulative learning. For example, a teacher may realize a SG- comment by writing
“doesn’t flow” on a paper. The student in this case is left with no explicit guidance about what parts of his text are failing to achieve what the teacher considers ‘flow’.

On the other hand, an over reliance on SG+ comments can lead to segmented learning. For example, a teacher might mark out an incorrect semicolon usage with a comma on a student paper, but that student has not been given any explicit information about comma usage—the comment only applies to that particular case, and, so that knowledge is less likely to be transferred to future cases of comma use (or misuse).

This raises a question of how can teachers effectively use their commenting to explicitly link instances in the text to more abstract knowledge about writing in order to increase cumulative learning and decrease segmented learning. A promising answer lies in the concept of metalanguage. Metalanguage can be simply defined as language about language. In other words, it is a language that allows us to talk about language itself. A familiar example would be words from traditional grammar such as ‘verb’ and ‘noun’ that allow one to identify and talk about particular words as different from others. It would be very difficult to talk about and understand language without some type of metalanguage. SFL, and the terms and concepts that go along with it, provide a functional metalanguage for talking and thinking about language and how it means. Recent research on metalanguage, Moore and Schleppegrell (2014), for example, has shown the usefulness of metalanguage in helping students link content to contextual learning in the classroom. Another recent study—Devrim (2014)—examines feedback as a
mediation tool that, through scaffolding learning, can help L2 students to improve as writers. The current study also views feedback as a useful mediation tool, but has focused more on mainstream ELA classrooms. It is likely that such views of feedback, and the practices that result from them would be helpful for all types of student populations. In thinking about feedback as a mediation tool, a functional metalanguage based feedback could help students to make connections between their own texts and their knowledge about writing.

For example, a common, and typically baffling, comment that students receive on their papers is that their text does not flow. It is difficult for students to connect the perception that their text does not flow to the actual parts of their text that are failing to create flow. In a case such as this SFL metalanguage can be extremely useful. In SFL there is the concept of Theme and Rheme, where Theme is the first participant, process, or circumstance in the clause. The Theme is, essentially, what the clause is about. So, those things that are chosen for Theme across the text are seen as what the text is about. When a text seems to lack flow it is often because the Theme choices are not ideal. A common cause is when writers choose circumstances as Thematic for too many clauses in a paragraph, which creates the effect that each clause is about something different and makes linking the clauses together cohesively difficult. If a teacher, then, explained the concept of Theme to her students—thereby creating a shared metalanguage—she could mention in a comment that the text does not flow because of the Theme choice in a
particular paragraph. This would link the student’s text explicitly to knowledge about writing in a useful way.

The two teachers in this study were quite different and worked in settings that were also very different. In the case of Ms. Edwards, the unique curricular structure of her school gave her more time and opportunity to comment on student work across multiple drafts. The situation was almost the opposite for Ms. Frame, who, in a more traditional school setting, had more students and more pressure for student achievement exerted on her from above. An insight from this comparison of two very different teachers, then, is that perhaps all teachers could benefit from increasing their awareness about the meanings they make through commenting. It may be a surprise for teachers to learn that a lot of the meanings conveyed through their comments are interpersonal and not really about the text. Teachers are, of course, free to value what they want in writing, and to enact whatever teacher style or identity they choose. However, knowledge about commenting practices could help teachers to at least be more purposeful about how they comment and the potential effects of their comments on students. ELA teacher education programs, and their pre-service teachers, could benefit from a focus on language that looks at how language makes meaning. A deeper, more explicit understanding of how the language of instruction makes meaning could allow teachers to be more purposeful and effective in their instruction.

Although it has been largely ignored for many years, it is hoped that the language of commenting and classroom evaluation will continue to be examined in
the future. For future research, it would be ideal to collect larger data samples across more schools. Also, the application of LCT theory to the ELA classroom—in order to examine how teachers construct knowledge about writing as well as ideas about what it means to be a writer—seems particularly promising for future research. Written feedback is a significant source of knowledge about writing for students, and it could benefit both students and teachers to put more consideration into how they understand it. It is hoped that this study will contribute in some part to helping both teachers and students of writing.
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APPENDIX
APPENDIX

Comment Corpus data:

1. Ms. Frame:

Corpus Data—Ms. Frame:

Wuthering Heights

1. keep same tense
2. Nurture <SP>
3. keep same tense
4. Title ?
5. good intro
6. allowed <SP>

'Loyalty in Of Mice and Men'

7. Nice work! <TOP OF FIRST PAGE>
8. good organization
9. run-on
10. used good support!
11. Just look at your spelling next time
12. then <WC>
13. use past tense here
14. awkward
15. rabbits <SP>
16. then <WC>
17. use good here <WC>
18. throughout <SP>
19. use past tense
20. did <WC>
21. took <WC>
22. were <WC>
23. too <WC>
24. than <WC>
25. Good support of theme! <ENDNOTE>
26. Good Job! <TOP OF FIRST PAGE>
27. What is this?
28. Introduce novel
29. good thesis
30. reward <WC>
31. awkward
32. oh—good point!
33. awkward
34. why?
35. give a final statement <ENDNOTE>
36. One <WC>
37. use past tense here
38. was <WC>
39. On right track but you don’t really tell me anything about their relationship <ENDNOTE>
40. did he?
41. very weak here
42. could have restated thesis <ENDNOTE>
43. discuss their relationship <ENDNOTE>
44. Redo—not a 3 x 5 <TOP OF FIRST PAGE>
45. 3 items?
46. weak thesis
47. how?
48. Moral responsibility is about George/Lennie—not Crooks or Candy <ENDNOTE>
49. No clear support
50. great intro!
51. fix tenses to match
52. Again—watch changing verb tenses— <ENDNOTE>
53. Should be a 3 x 5 <TOP OF FIRST PAGE>

54. (run-on)
55. How?
56. good
57. future? or past tense
58. split infinitive
59. verbs again

60. Nice! <ENDNOTE>

61. fragment
62. watch for commas needed
63. not 3rd person
64. great thesis!
65. talked <SP>
66. were <WC>

67. just—edit verbs <ENDNOTE>
68. Nice essay <ENDNOTE>
2. Ms. Edwards:

- Corpus Data—Ms. Edwards:

PAPER 1A

1. you don't need to double space this in the future

2. don't forget to set up the quote for your reader

3. no contractions in a formal paper please

4. no semi colon here...just a comma

5. no italics

6. this comma goes here because we use commas to separate two independent clauses connected with a conjunction

7. check with me on when to use semi-colons

8. no comma here because the second part of this sentence is not an independent clause

9. this is a good quote but be sure to set your reader up for it

10. parenthetical citation after quote

11. one example might be: in a brochure about art, scholastic ART writer

12. definitely see me about when to use semicolons

13. long sentences with improper comma and semicolon use... lets fix this together to make it more clear for your reader

14. I'm guessing this is your punctuation

15. I'm guessing this is your punctuation

16. which is

17. this is a correct use of a semicolon
18. informal language for a formal paper

19. parenthetical citation needed after every quote

20. comma not semicolon here

PAPER 1B

21. This diagram is awesome, but you need to do more to set the reader up to see it. It sort of appears for the reader without much context

22. too much extra space between these paragraphs

23. correct use of semi colon here

24. a little redundant at the end here

25. I’m guessing this semicolon was not in the original quote

26. when you have a quote within a quote, the inner-most quotes are only singles not double quotes

27. Conclusion is a bit abrupt. I would like to see approximately two more sentences here

PAPER 1B RUBRIC

28. ancient man cave paintings were a little disconnected from Andy Warhol at points

29. logical flow...sometimes you could make your paper transitions between topics and subtopics smooth for your reader

30. I wanted a little more

31. you missed a couple but it appears your format is correct

32. extra space between each citation. where is your primary source

33. great graphic, but you need to set it up for the reader and cite it

34. you did this but I found myself wanting one to two more sentences here
35. Dude! we have to work on using commas and semicolons correctly. see me about this so we can practice.

INFORMATIVE ESSAY 1

36. the first paragraph should be this one because it gives context

37. what does this mean? how is this different from other Christian churches

38. capitalize all proper nouns! –names –cities / states / countries

39. try to follow this format for your paper:

40. Paragraph one: what is the Boston Church? what do they believe? what is it all about? what do follows look like? do?

41. Paragraph two: important people to the Boston Church, why they are important and what they do / did

42. Paragraph three: info about Boston Church today: how many followers

REFLECTION

43. no conjunctions in a formal paper

44. need agreement with singular and plural words

45. comma to separate two independent clauses

46. use transitions to help with flow... this one is weak but hopefully you get the idea

47. I like this statement because it shows the depth and breadth of your research

48. great use of semicolon

REFLECTION (ENDNOTES)

49. This is the most professional writing you’ve done this year! Fantastic

50. This is a really great reflection on your experience

RESEARCH PAPER 2

51. you don’t need to double space this part in the future
52. we italicize the names of court cases
53. semicolon here or period then start new sentence
54. Plessy v. Ferguson happens in 1896. Ruby Bridges isn’t even born until 58 years after the Plessy case.
55. I’m concerned about how you’re going to do this
56. you begin your first paragraph with Ruby. I though your paper was about Plessy?
57. your numbers don’t quite add up
58. extra space here
59. why did you choose to talk about these out of order (chronological order I mean)? let’s talk about your reasoning so that I can help you with your transitions and flow
60. I don’t see this source on your works cited page
61. what do these amendments state
62. maybe a good place to talk about Jim Crow laws
63. Not your words... you need to put this in quotes
64. I don’t see this source on your works cited page
65. parenthetical citation here
66. these don’t sound like your words... even if you paraphrased you need to cite your source
67. where does this quote start
68. no URLs in parenthetical citations
69. OK, we need transitions here... remember you have to help your reader along
70. conclusion?
71. center the title
RESEARCH PAPER 2 RUBRIC

72. your font is not Times New Roman

73. extra spaces between some paragraphs

74. you need an attention getter

75. Also, the flow seems confusing even as you preview your points in the introduction

76. needs some work on organization and transitions. The theme is there, but we need to work on flow

77. I'm not sure if your last paragraph is supposed to be the conclusion or another body paragraph

78. you don't need URLs for your in-text citations. It should be the first few words of the citation on your works cited page.

79. Don't forget to check the box in essay bibliography that will allow you to see the URL in the citation. hanging indent? non-internet source? primary source?

80. didn't see one

81. didn't see any

82. pretty good but we need to work on this during the revision process

RESEARCH PAPER 2 ENDNOTE

83. lets talk about the organization of this paper to see if we can make it more thematic to fit all of the topics you want to include

RESEARCH PAPER 3A RUBRIC

84. should all be Times New Roman, size 12 font. spacing is still messed up in places

85. you have too much of your own opinion in this paper so far. Research papers should just have facts and not a lot of opinion. Also, you don't really preview your paper.

86. Choppy. Each paragraph is like its own thing without good connections to what comes before / after it.
87. you need to review your main points and tie everything together

88. capitalize names in in-text citations; include all authors when there is more than one

89. title page needs to be at the top of the page. missing two websites

90. I didn't see these. timeline is not in graph or table format

91. I didn't see these

92. lots of incomplete sentences and grammatical errors

93. please make corrections based on my comments here and on your paper

RESEARCH PAPER 3B

94. Incomplete sentence

95. new paragraph

96. minor?? He killed thousands of people! I think that is pretty major

97. incomplete sentence

98. court case names are italicized

99. plagiarized

100. where is the rest of this quote?

101. no contractions in a formal paper

102. what is the rest of this sentence?

RESEARCH PAPER 3C

103. Title and paper should be in Times New Roman size 12

104. use last name

105. font should be left aligned

106. preview paper
107. font
108. source?
109. this is not a persuasive paper
110. why is this important
111. split into paragraphs
112. is this a direct quote
113. review your essay!

RESEARCH PAPER 3D

114. who are you going to talk about?
115. what event are you going to talk about?
116. sentence fragment
117. repeat this on next page
118. same as on previous page
119. good explanation of Ruby’s story
120. repeats last sentence
121. source?
122. new paragraph
123. re-state who / what you talked about – Little Rock, Ruby, Marshall, King
VITA
VITA

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- ENG 478.578, Sociolinguistics
- ENG 618, English Language Assessment
- ENG 408.508, Advanced Expository Writing
- ENG 101P, Composition
- ENG 354, Scientific and Technical Writing

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- EDCI 311, Media for Children
  Instructor

Graduate Teaching Assistant. Purdue University. (Fall 2011-Spring 2012)
- EDCI 370, Teaching English as a New Language
  Instructor

Graduate Teaching Assistant. Purdue University. (Fall 2011-Spring 2012)
- EDCI 326, Literacy in the Intermediate Classroom
  Instructor

Graduate Teaching Assistant. Purdue University. (Fall 2010-Spring 2011)
- EDCI 362, Literacy in the Elementary School
  Instructor

Graduate Teaching Assistant. Purdue University. (Fall 2009-Spring 2010)
- EDCI 311, Media For Children
  - EDCI 362, Literacy in the Elementary School
  Instructor for one section of each course.

Adjunct Instructor (fulltime). Marshall University. (Fall 2007-Spring 2008; Fall 2008- Spring 2009)
Taught four sections of English 101 in fall '07; one section of English 101 and three sections of English 102 in spring '08. Taught three sections of English 101 and one section of English 102 in fall '08; will teach four sections of English 102 in spring '09.
Guest Lecturer. Visual Rhetoric course. Marshall University. (Fall 2008)
L ectured on social semiotics and multimodal discourse analysis.

(Fall 2005; Spring 2006; Fall 2006)
Instructor (T.A.) for first-year composition course. Self-designed syllabi.

English 102: English Composition II. Marshall University. (Spring 2007)
Instructor (T.A.) for second-year, research based, composition course. Self-designed syllabi.

Taught at all grade levels in any subject area.

Designed and led workshops on poetry and short story writing.

Awards and Grants

Teaching Assistantship, Purdue University College of Education, Department of Curriculum and Instruction (2009-2013)
-EDCI 311, Media For Children (2009-2010; 2012-2013)
-EDCI 362, Literacy in the Elementary School (2009-2011)
-EDCI 326, Literacy in the Intermediate Classroom (2011-2012)
-EDCI 370, Teaching English as a New Language (2011-2012)

Teaching Assistantship, Marshall University English Department (2005-2007)

Appalachian Youth Writing Project/Workshop (2005-2006)

Maier Award Nominee, Marshall University (2002)

Service

Committee Chair, MA TESOL student, Marshall University, Spring 2014

Committee Member, 3 MA TESOL students, Marshall University, Spring 2014

Related Experience


Literacy research project in Lafayette, IN area schools. (2009-2010)
Conducted field observations of classrooms; transcribed interviews; analyzed observation and transcribed data.

President of Marshall University English Grad Student Association (2006-2007)


Led high school writing workshops. (Fall 2005)

Freelance writer and editor.

Conferences

INTESOL. (Fall 2011). Indianapolis, IN. Presenter. Panel presentation, "Lessons from the classroom: Working with English language learners across the grade levels"

Literary Research Association (Fall 2010). “It's All About Image: An Examination of the Visual in Elementary Science Textbooks”

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) (Fall 2010). Orlando, FL. Presenter. “Instructing students: Approaches to support literate lives”

37th Annual International Systemic Functional Congress. (Summer 2010). Vancouver, BC. “Nobody to Blame: School Administrators’ Talk about English Language Learners”

Purdue University Graduate Student Education Council Research Symposium. (Spring 2010). “Let’s get visual: the need for visual literacy in the primary science classroom”

WV TESOL Conference (Spring 2006). Charlestown, WV. Presenter. “Solving ESL Difficulties with Regards to Textual Flow in Writing”

INTESOL Conference (Fall 2006; Fall 2008). Indianapolis, IN. Attended.

Professional Affiliations

WVTESOL member. (2006-2007)