Assessment feedback in examiner reports on master’s dissertations in translation studies

Deliang Man, Yi Qin Xu, Meng Huat Chau, John Mitchell O’Toole, Krishnavanie Shunmugam

*National Demonstration Center for Experimental Simultaneous Interpretation Education, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China
**Faculty of Education, University of Macau, Macau, China
***Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
****School of Education, University of Newcastle, Callaghan, NSW 2308, Australia

A R T I C L E   I N F O

Keywords:
Examiner reports
Assessment of master’s dissertations
Translation studies
Genre analysis
Assessment feedback
Academic writing

A B S T R A C T

Assessment is a crucial part of degree programmes in higher education. While previous research has been primarily concerned with PhD thesis assessment practice in western countries, this article considers the focus and assessment criteria of 40 examiner reports on master’s dissertations in translation studies at a Chinese university. The results indicate that these examiners structured their reports in four rhetorical moves: ‘preparing the candidate for a decision’, ‘expressing an evaluation’, ‘conveying the decision’, and ‘making recommendations’. These examiners appeared to place more emphasis on the expression of ideas, rather than on the accuracy and originality of those ideas. They apparently adopted flexible working criteria, assessing the dissertations based on institutional requirements and on their own experience. This article concludes with a discussion of implications for dissertation writing.

1. Introduction

Assessment is an indispensable part of degree programmes in higher education. Assessment of extended pieces of student work, such as undergraduate honours or master’s dissertations, helps to maintain the standard and reputation of a programme, as well as guiding and motivating student involvement in subsequent, deeper research work (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Kumar & Stracke, 2011; Sadler, 2010; Stracke & Kumar, 2010; Yu & Lee, 2013). Examiner reports can also help supervisors to understand common student difficulties and provide insights into the development of relevant academic writing courses and workshops. The existing studies have, however, primarily focused on PhD thesis examination (e.g., Kumar & Stracke, 2017; Prieto, Holbrook, & Bourke, 2016; Starfield et al., 2017). Very few studies have considered dissertation assessment at the master’s level. This is somehow surprising because master’s students often form a larger group of students at many universities than PhD candidates. Assessment practice in this regard warrants serious attention. Further, regardless of the education level, studies on dissertation assessment have been mainly conducted in the Western context (e.g., in Australia, New Zealand and the UK). Today, we know very little about thesis assessment in a higher education context such as that in China, where insights into the assessment practice would be both useful and informative, given the current vast number of students studying in the country.

The present study seeks to address these concerns by focusing on assessment of master’s dissertations at a Chinese university. Specifically, this study considers the focus and assessment criteria of examiner reports on dissertations in translation studies. The study shows that perhaps not unexpectedly, examiners regularly express evaluation and make recommendations for revision. They also place more emphasis on language use and how ideas are communicated, rather than on the accuracy and originality of those ideas, signifying the expectation at this level of postgraduate assessment and the context of assessment on a master’s programme in China using English as the language for dissertation writing. This article closes with a discussion of implications for dissertation writing.

2. Literature review

2.1. Previous studies on examiner reports

Research on examiner reports can be divided into several strands: report deconstruction, linguistic analysis and examiner practices. First, research on report deconstruction is concerned with the analysis of proportion of text as an indication of the emphasis given to the assessed areas. As noted in Hansford and Maxwell (1993), examiner reports are