

# Peer feedback in virtual workshop of postgraduate thesis writing

## Retroalimentación entre pares en un taller virtual de escritura de tesis de posgrado

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### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords

*In-text feedback, global feedback, peer exchange, virtual workshop, postgraduate thesis*

The aim of this paper is to analyze the interventions that different students share in the peer thesis chapter and in their own chapter in the framework of experts and peer feedback activities proposed in a virtual thesis writing workshop. Different students were selected from working groups of two students and a teacher of a 90-hour virtual workshop aimed at teaching thesis writing. This workshop was held in 2017 at the National University of Cuyo. Within this workshop, each student with an expert had to analyze their own chapter and their peer's chapter taking into account three phases. Firstly, the communicative situation model and the event model; secondly, the textual model, particularly movements and steps; finally, also the textual model, but focused on the linguistic strategies. In these phases, two types of feedback are promoted: in-text and global feedback. Both are analyzed according to four categories: chaining, focus, function and type of analysis. The results show differences with statistical significance between the comments of the own chapter and the peer's chapter based on the feedback modalities (in-text and global), and between the feedback modalities themselves.

### RESUMEN

#### Palabras clave

*Retroalimentación en el texto, retroalimentación global, intercambio entre pares, taller virtual, tesis de posgrado*

*En este artículo analizamos las intervenciones de diferentes estudiantes en el capítulo de tesis de un par y en el propio capítulo en las actividades de retroalimentación de pares y expertos propuestas en un taller virtual de escritura de tesis. Se seleccionaron casos de alumnos que formaron parte de grupos de trabajo de dos estudiantes y un docente de un seminario virtual de 90 horas orientado a la enseñanza de la escritura de la tesis, que se realizó en 2017 en la Universidad Nacional de Cuyo. La propuesta ha sido que cada alumno, junto con el docente, analice el propio capítulo y el de un par teniendo en cuenta tres fases: primero, trabajar con el modelo de situación comunicativa y el modelo del evento; segundo, con el modelo textual, en particular con los movimientos y pasos; tercero, también con el modelo textual, pero las estrategias lingüísticas. En estas fases se promueven dos modalidades de retroalimentación: en texto y global. Ambas se analizan considerando: encadenamiento, foco, función y tipo de análisis. Los resultados muestran diferencias con significatividad estadística en los comentarios al capítulo del par y al propio según la modalidad de retroalimentación, así como de estas modalidades entre sí.*

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Postgraduate students show great difficulty in finishing their final academic work and, more specifically, their thesis (Carlino, 2005). Among the factors leading to the scarce completion of their work and, consequently to the programs in which they are enrolled, we encounter problems related to the development of written tasks (Aitchison, 2009; Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; D'Andrea, 2002), which in general, lack didactic support (Delamont, 2005).

In the light of this scenario, several studies have proposed that the interaction with peers, professors and advisors would contribute to address the different aspects that intervene in the production of a thesis (from experiential and epistemological aspects to those specifically textual). Based on the purpose of this research, our interest is set on highlighting some decisive findings of these studies, mainly of those analyzing face-to-face formative experiences (Basturkmen, East & Bitchener, 2014; Carlino, 2008; DeLyser, 2003; Maher *et al.*, 2008).

As a result of a writing skills seminar in social sciences directed to the postgraduate students of Geography and Anthropology (DeLyser, 2003), we realized that group work revolving around different thesis specimens and developed according to a bibliography and guidelines defined in advance, allowed the students to lose their fear of sharing their textual production, a task that contributes, on the other hand, to the development of a critical vision of their writings.

Carlino (2008), within the framework of writing skills workshops for students enrolled in the Master's degrees in Education and Psychology, suggests that the didactic situations proposed (including the revision among peers of the students' theses) must be scaffolded by teachers in a sustained manner in order to achieve an adequate development and for the students to recognize their usefulness.

Maher *et al.* (2008) suggest that students recognize two fundamental contributions of thesis writing groups. On the one hand, based on collaborative work, they feel like participating in the scientific and discursive community; i.e., they understand the textual production in the framework of conventional forms of academic writing, more specifically the thesis. On the other hand, and similarly to the findings of DeLyser (2003), writing is no longer understood as an activity carried out in a private environment but rather thought as a collective work.

Basturkmen *et al.* (2014), on the one hand, focus on the interaction of the students with their advisors; i.e., they analyze the comments of the latter on the thesis drafts of different disciplines. This analysis consists of two axes: the focus and the function. The first comprises the content, formal requirements, cohesion and coherence, as well as the exactness and linguistic adequacy. Three categories of comments are established in relation to the pragmatic function: referential, directive and expressive/appreciative. The first gives out information, correction or

reformulation; the directive comment indicates future actions or produces information or connections; the last gives an account of the assessments of the text. Hence, they conclude that the content and the linguistic exactness represent the focus that frequently appears in the comments of different disciplines. Moreover, the observations regarding the linguistic exactness or the formal requirements are expressed as information or correction. On the other hand, those regarding the content and the cohesion-coherence are presented as questions or suggestions.

Besides the studies cited that review experiences in face-to-face environments, virtual teaching of writing has also been studied in postgraduate studies (Difabio y Heredia, 2013; Álvarez and Difabio, 2017, 2018) and the importance of collaborative work has also been stressed.

Difabio and Heredia (2013) refer the results of a virtual intervention through the Moodle platform that seeks to accompany the production of a chapter of a doctoral thesis. According to the authors, one of the main achievements of the intervention was the possibility to overcome the academic and social isolation that students face during the research and thesis writing processes.

As for a virtual intervention directed to the writing of a thesis, Álvarez and Difabio (2017) show that group work mediated by technologies promotes awareness of different aspects of the production of the thesis as well as an explanation of these problems; hence, this makes possible a metalinguistic reflection which otherwise would not be possible in isolation. This metalinguistic reflection comprises not only global and macrotextual dimensions but also includes the recognition of strategies and linguistic resources.

Likewise, Álvarez and Difabio (2018), based on a chapter developed by students as closure of a virtual workshop revolving around thesis writing, have analyzed the teachers' feedback of this chapter and the changes applied by the participants based on said feedback; thus, recognizing the link established between the initial diagnosis of each student and the feedback during this process.

Ultimately, the studies in reference would show that the teaching proposals based on peers and experts (professors and advisors) contribute to the development of the thesis inasmuch they allow addressing the fundamental aspects of this production; however, we have not found in bibliographic bases (EBSCO, Academic Google, among others) any study on the dynamics established by a group of students in the review of their personal chapters or of that of their peers. In this paper, we analyze and compare the interventions that different students share in the chapter of their peer's thesis and their personal chapter in the feedback activities of peers and experts proposed in a virtual workshop on thesis writing.

## METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS

Our research is predominantly qualitative with a design of multiple case study (Stake, 1999, 2005), besides some quantitative instances. We intend to capture the complexity of the cases and, according to the analyses and the comparisons, establish a dialogue between the current theories on the exchange among peers and the writing of the postgraduate thesis.

We selected five cases from the participants' enrollment (N = 8) in a 90-hour virtual postgraduate seminar given in 2017, in which those responsible of this research performed as teachers. The selection was based on an intentional criterion that retains the cases that can provide richer information for this study. The seminar was conducted at the Postgraduate Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the Universidad Nacional de Cuyo [Cuyo National University] in Argentina, and was addressed to professionals in different fields of study of social and human sciences (four of the participants were formed in Education and the four others in Letters). Those enrolled in the seminar had to develop at least two chapters of the thesis. This would ensure that the participants were advanced students.

The seminar was conducted under a workshop type modality using the virtual platform of the faculty and Google Drive shared documents. The virtual environments were designed based on a series of concepts detailed in other publications of the authors (Álvarez y Difabio, 2016, 2017, 2018).

Based on these assumptions, the workshop was organized in three stages. In the first stage, the students introduced themselves and pondered on the writing process and the possibility to give and receive feedback. Every one of these activities has a forum. In the second stage, the participants were set up in groups of two according to their disciplinary affinities. For three weeks, every member of the group had to review his personal chapter as well as that of his peer. During the first week, they would consider the concepts of the situation and communicative interaction model and the event model (Cubo and Bosio, 2011). They would recognize successes and errors regarding the manifestation of the thesis partners, their intentions and expectations, as well as the research process and its characteristics. During the second week, they would focus on the textual model (Cubo and Bosio, 2011), more specifically on the movements and steps<sup>1</sup> of the chapters and the way in which they show up; in the third, they would also analyze the textual model, more specifically the resources and the language strategies.

To do so, we resorted to documents shared on Google Drive and on forums. We proposed at least two types of directives: on the one hand, the reading of the chapter and the indication of successes or inadequacies in regard to

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<sup>1</sup> El concepto de movimiento (*move*) "captura el propósito comunicativo de un segmento textual en un nivel más general; el paso (*step*) explica más expresamente el medio retórico de la realización de la movida. Una movida puede realizarse mediante un solo paso retórico o por la combinación de varios" (Jara, 2013, p. 77).

every model; and on the other, a general reflection on the successes or inadequacies of the chapter; thus aiming at generating in-text feedback (R) and global feedback R (Kumar & Stracke, 2007) regarding the peer's chapter and their own. The in-text R refers to the comments written in the margins of the document on Google Drive; i-e, the thoughts expressed by the dialogue established by the reader with the author. The global R, shared during the forum, is presented as a message that synthesizes the main appreciations of the text.

In the third and last stage, every student, for two weeks, reviews their personal chapter based on the comments received. During this period, they interact through e-mail with their thesis advisors and teaching experts.

For the purpose of this paper, in every comment –our analysis unit– analyzes both, in-text and global Rs, carried out by every student in regard to the peer's chapter and his own. The qualitative analysis of these interventions comprises different dimensions which are included in Table 1, as well as subcategories associated with them and an example of every one (some examples are purposely repeated to show how categories are assigned).

**Table 1.** Analysis dimension, subcategories of every dimension and examples

Dimension	Subcategories of every dimension	Example
Link	Linked [dialogue with previous contributions]	"I will take these citation suggestions into account since I usually follow the MLA format"
	Not linked [no dialogue with previous contributions]	"In general, there are short sentences that have a segmented style, easy to read"
Focus	Communicative situation model	"I have tried to be clear and use a variety of words consistent with the vocabulary of the specialized reader"
	Event model	"If it is a definition of the concept, I should maybe include the citation from where you took it or make a citation of the <i>community</i> concept"
	Textual model [comprises everything related to the movements and steps and linguistic resources]	"Check if I can replace it by the word "more" since further on, it is used in a similar case (unify)"
Function	Referential [information, correction or reformulation of the written text]	"In general, there are brief sentences that have a segmented style, easy to read"

	Directive [suggestion of future actions, obtaining information or connections between ideas]	“Check if I can replace it by the word “more” since further on, it is used in a similar case (unify)”
	Appreciative [positive or negative assessment]	“I agree with this rewording. I was going to point out that the style of this sentence was quite segmented”
	Commitment [commitment with future actions]	“I will take these citation suggestions into account since I usually follow the MLA format”
Type of analysis	Basic feedback of a decisive fragment of the thesis	“Without a comma”
	Founded feedback of a decisive fragment of the thesis	“I agree with this rewording. I was going to point out that the style of this sentence was quite segmented”
	Basic feedback on a general dimension of the thesis	“Regarding the length of the sentences, I believe it can be influenced by the English structure which is more correct and direct; however, some sentences are more extensive and can be repetitive”
	Founded feedback of a general dimension of the thesis	“As a suggestion on the content, there may be repeated ideas on diversity, heterogeneity, inclusive school, among other concepts. As a reader, it seemed that I have read the same thing several times and felt that the text did not go forward in proving your hypothesis. Likewise, it seemed that your text was quite argumentative regarding the teachers’ actions since proposals were made that were probably more convenient to make nearer the conclusion, and the research objectivity of the verification of the problem/hypothesis was lost (anyhow, I do not know where this chapter could be included in the thesis)”

Source: Self development.

It is important to consider that if the comment refers to a model or pragmatic function (which is the case for most comments), or to something else (in the 20 cases identified, there is only one option), we acknowledge one R or two, for example, if it refers only to the event model, there is only one R; on the hand, if it refers to a textual model, there are two Rs. To calculate the types of analysis, we simplified the categories in a dichotomous manner: basic R and well-founded R.

In order to comply with the coherence of the results, one of the authors conducted the entire analysis, while the other reviewed it as a type of inter-

rater validation. Lastly, both authors discussed the differences in the cases until reaching a consensus. On completion of this process, we quantified the in-text and global Rs in the text and those global in the peers' chapter and in the personal chapter, according to the linkage, focus, function and type of analysis. The corpus was formed as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Corpus formation

Comments	Peer chapter	Personal chapter	Total
Text	555	153	708
Global	29	20	49
Total	584	173	757

Source: Self development.

It is worth mentioning that the comments on the text show a great dispersion regarding the peer's chapter (ranges between 28 to 331;  $DS = 95,7$ ) as well as the personal chapter (ranges between 2 and 128;  $DS = 41,23$ ).

The presentation of the analysis of the data obtained continues with tables and graphs. Subsequently, we apply the difference of proportions by means of the STATS program (Hernández, Fernández and Baptista, 2014) to weigh if the statistically significant differences appear in the four categories in reference.

## RESULTS

The presentation of the results is structured into three sections: a) the comparison of in-text R between the comments of the peer's chapter and those corresponding to the personal chapter; b) the global R, under the same scheme; and c) the comparison between both R modalities. In the first two sections, we compared the percentages according to the predefined categories and the combination of said categories. In the third section, we focused our interest exclusively on the analysis per categories given the significant inequality in the number of comments. The findings on the in-text Rs are presented in Table 3 and Graph 1.

**Table 3.** Descriptive results per category of analysis of the text comments of the peer and own chapters

Categories		Peer's chapter (N = 555) (%)	Personal chapter (N = 153) (%)
Linkage	Linked	0.2	12
	Not linked	99.8	88
	<i>Total</i>	100	100
Model	Textual	84	91
	Event	14	8
	Communicative situation	2	1
	<i>Total</i>	100	100
Pragmatic function	Referential	7	18
	Directive	91	74
	Appreciative	2	3
	Commitment with future action	0	5
	<i>Total</i>	100	100
Type of analysis	Basic R	76	73
	Founded R	24	27
	<i>Total</i>	100	100

Note: The statistically significant differences are highlighted in color.  
Source: Self development, based on SPSS 22.0.

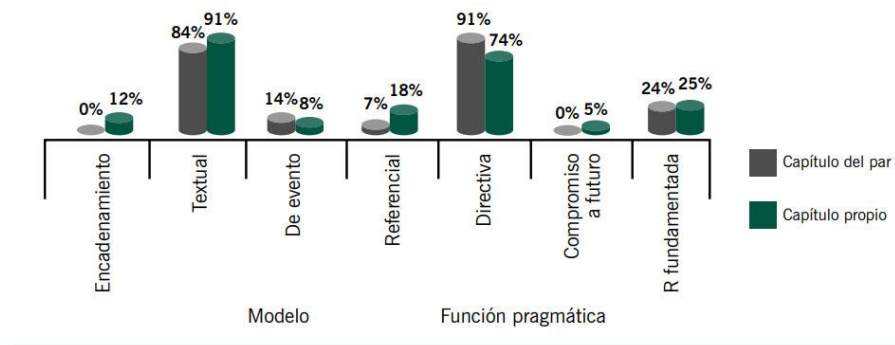
The “linked” category appear at a 12% percentage frequency in regard to the personal chapter; this difference is statistically significant ( $z = 12,919$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ).

Regarding the textual model, the percentage of responses is greater for the personal chapter (91% in comparison to 84%); however, without any statistical significance. The event model cast a low percentage in the peer's

chapter (14%), but significantly greater ( $z = 7.203, p = 0.01$ ) than the 8% of the personal chapter.

As for the pragmatic function, even though the percentages are low, the differences are in favor of the personal chapter in the referential function ( $z = 7.635, p = 0.01$ ) and the commitment with future action ( $z = 13.829, p = 0.05$ ).

In both chapters, the percentage corresponding to the communicative situation and the appreciative function is negligible. On the other hand, we do not notice any statistically significant difference in the types of analysis. The graphic representation of the differences of greater interest is shown in Graph 1.



**Graph 1.** Comparison per text category comments to peer and personal chapters.

This graph shows that in the text comments, the linkage only appears in the R of the personal chapter with a clear focus on the textual model and the directive function. In the peer’s chapter, we also notice the same focus and function.

The results of the combination of categories are shown in Table 4 and Graph 2.

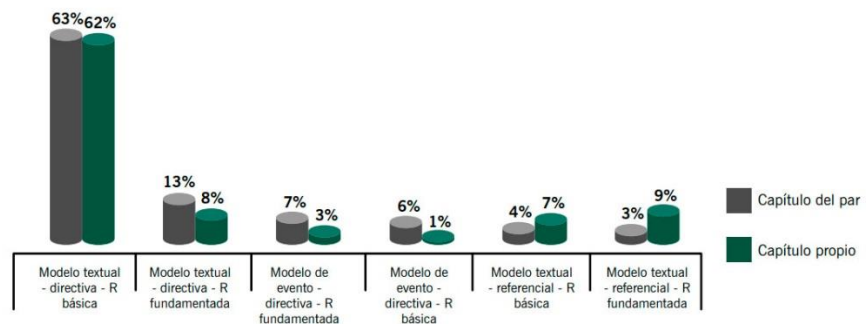
**Table 4.** Combination of categories in text feedback

Combinations	Peer’s chapter (%)	Personal chapter (%)
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Textual model – directive – basic R	63	62
Textual model – directive – founded R	13	8
Event model – directive – founded R	7	3
Event model – directive – basic R	5.5	1
Textual model – referential – basic R	4	6.5
Textual model – referential – founded R	3	9
Textual model – future commitment – basic or founded R		
Event model – future commitment – basic or founded R	0	5
Communicative situation model –future commitment– founded R		
Others	4.5	5.5
<i>Total</i>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Self development

Other combinations refer to the textual model –appreciative – basic or founded R; event model – referential – basic or founded R; event model – appreciative – basic or founded R; and communicative situation model – directive – basic or founded R (See Graph 2).



**Graph 2.** Comparison per combinations of categories in text comments to peer and personal chapters.

The comments referring to the textual model with directive function and at a basic R level prevail.

Table 5 and Graph 3 show the results of global Rs.

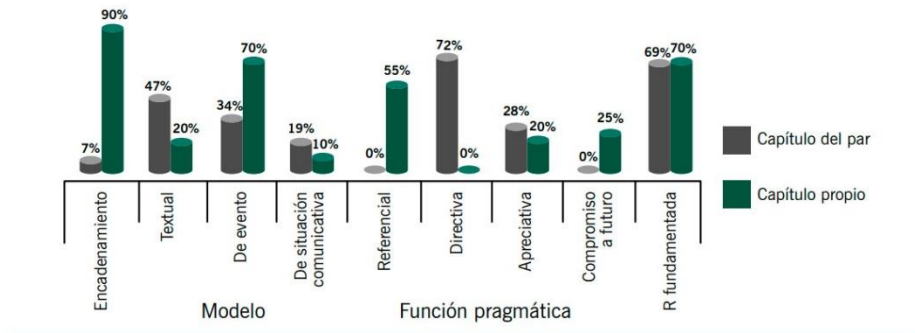
**Table 5.** Descriptive results per category of analysis of global comments to peer and personal chapters

Categories		Peer's Chapter (N= 29) (%)	Personal Chapter (N = 20) (%)
Linkage	Linked	7	90
	Not linked	93	10
	<i>Total</i>	100	100
Model	Textual	47	20
	Event	34	70
	Communicative situation	19	10
	<i>Total</i>	100	100
Pragmatic function	Referential	0	55
	Directive	72	0
	Appreciative	28	20
	Commitment with future action	0	25
	<i>Total</i>	100	100
Type of analysis	Basic R	31	30
	Founded R	69	70
	<i>Total</i>	100	100

Source: Self development.

The linked comments predominate in the global R of the personal chapter ( $z = 4.140, p = 0.01$ ) with statistical significance, from the event model ( $z = 2.151, p = 0.05$ ) and in the referential function ( $z = 4.513, p = 0.01$ ) or as commitment with future action ( $z = 4.564, p = 0.01$ ). Regarding the peer's chapter, conversely, the textual model ( $z = 2.792, p = 0.01$ ) and the directive function ( $z = 5.423, p = 0.01$ ) prevail.

Graph 3 shows the schematic representation of all the categories.



**Graph 3.** Comparison per category of global comments of peer and personal chapters.

In short, while the unlinked comment in the global R of the peer's chapter predominates from the textual model with directive function, in the case of the personal chapter, almost all of the comments are linked from the event model with referential function, to which a 25% of commitment with future action is added.

Hence, the combination of the categories shows a greater diversity than in the R in text (See Table 6 and Graph 4).

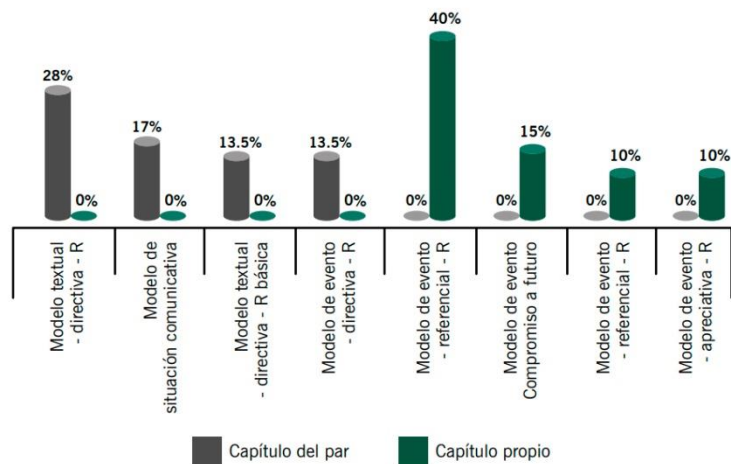
**Table 6.** Combination of feedback categories in global feedback

Combinations	Peer's chapter (%)	Personal Chapter (%)
Textual Model – directive – founded R	28	0
Communicative situation model – directive – founded R	17	0
Textual model – directive – basic R	13.5	0

Event model – directive – founded R	13.5	0
Textual model – appreciative – basic R	7	6
Event model – appreciative – basic R	7	0
Event model – appreciative – founded R	7	0
Event model – referential – founded R	0	40
Event model – Future commitment – founded R	0	15
Event model– referential – basic R	0	10
Event model – appreciative – founded R	0	10
Others	7	25
<i>Total</i>	100	10

Source: Self development.

Other combinations refer to the event model – directive – basic R; communicative situation model – appreciative – founded R; textual model – referential (appreciative or future commitment) – basic R; communicative situation model – appreciative or commitment with future action – basic or founded R.



**Graph 4.** Comparison per combinations of categories of global comments of peer and personal chapters.

Lastly, despite the marked difference in the number of comments between the Rs in text and the global Rs, it is of interest to compare them for the relevant variability the previous results allow to anticipate in the linkage, focus, function and type of analysis.

**Table 7.** Descriptive results per category of analysis according to the type of feedback

Categories		In text (N= 708)(%)	Global (N = 49)(%)
Linkage	Linked	2.8	41
	Not linked	97.2	59
	<i>Total</i>	100	100
Model	Textual	86	39
	Event	12	51
	Communicative situation	2	10
	<i>Total</i>	100	100
Pragmatic function	Referential	9	22.5
	Directive	87	43
	Appreciative	3	24.5
	Commitment with future action	1	10
	<i>Total</i>	100	100
Type of analysis	Basic R	75	31
	Founded R	25	69
	<i>Total</i>	100	100

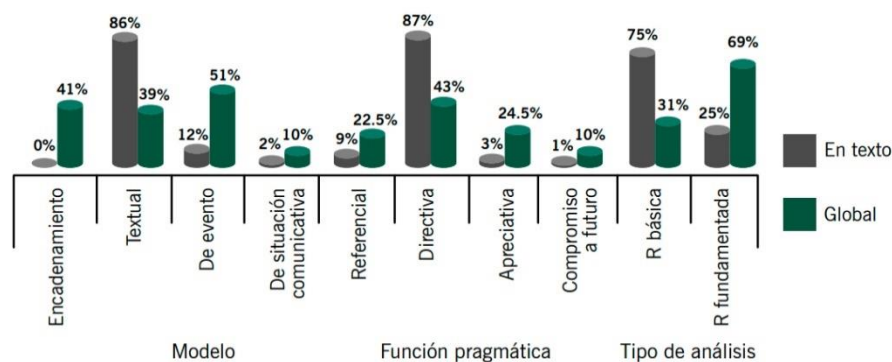
Source: Self development.

The global R underlines a considerable percentage, statistically significant of linked interaction ( $z = 6.568, p = 0.01$ ).

While the R in text addresses the textual model ( $z = 7.379, p = 0.01$ ), in the global R, the percentage of comments referring to the event model ( $z = 5.397, p = 0.01$ ) is more important; even if the percentage is low (10%), the difference regarding the communicative situation model ( $z = 5.898, p = 0.01$ ) is statistically significant.

On the other hand, in the textual model, we notice a significant discrepancy ( $z = 3.780, p = 0.01$ ) of relevance: in the R in text, only 6% of the responses (34 out of 605) refer to movements and rhetorical steps; this figure increases to 42% (8 out of 19) in the case of global R. In the first, the directive function prevails ( $z = 6.389, p = 0.01$ ); conversely, percentages of interest in the referential function ( $z = 4.211, p = 0.01$ ), appreciative ( $z = 6.254, p = 0.01$ ) and commitment with future action ( $z = 6.641, p = 0.01$ ) appear in the global R.

Lastly, the R in text operates with greater frequency at the basic level ( $z = 8.496, p = 0.01$ ) and at the global, at the founded level ( $z = 4.477, p = 0.01$ ).



**Graph 5.** Comparison per category of analysis between text feedback and global feedback.

In short, the in-text R is not linked and puts emphasis in the textual model with directive function and of basic level. The global R shows a considerable percentage in the linkage category; it is directed to the event and textual models (in that order) with varied functions and it operates at the founded level.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have analyzed the in-the text and global Rs performed by different students in the chapter of a peer and in their personal chapter as part of a virtual postgraduate thesis writing workshop. The analysis was carried out according to different categories: linkage, focus, function and type of analysis.

The analytical procedure allowed registering similarities and differences between the in-the text and global Rs in the personal chapter as well as in that of others. Hence, we noticed that the in-text Rs are characterized as being mainly unlinked comments; the linkage appears only in the comments made to the personal chapter and infrequently. On the other hand, the in-text Rs, in comparison with the peer's chapter and the personal chapter, the focus is represented by the textual model, the predominant function being the directive and the basic R level. Conversely, in the global Rs, although the unlinked comment predominates in the peer's chapter from the textual model with the directive function, in the personal chapter, a great part of the comments are linked from the event model with a referential function to which is added an important percentage of commitment with future action.

These results show, as DeLyser (2003) points out, that the group work on the textual production allows developing a critical view of the writings; this implies among other aspects, the recognition of the different dimensions involved in the development of the thesis (Maher *et al.*, 2008), whether it be the dimension of the research, of the communicative situation or the textual dimension. Furthermore, we also noticed that the critical view on the external productions seems to deepen the reflection on the personal thesis while it generates a relevant dialogue for a future text edition between the author and the proofreaders.

This view, on the other hand, does not come spontaneously for the simple fact that the students share documents, or, even, have virtual spaces to establish exchanges. On the contrary, we agree with Carlino (2008) that the scaffolding proposed by the teachers seems to be fundamental to the development of the feedback tasks. Along these lines and according to the findings of the study, we consider that, while the in-text R as well as the global R are indispensable to the dynamics of a seminar addressing the development of a thesis, in future editions it would be convenient to promote the global R more given the operations it activates. We highlighted more specifically the importance of generating not only isolated comments but chains of comments that foster the dialogue between the author of the thesis, the peers and the teaching experts. This way, the group work mediated by technologies renders a metalinguistic reflection about the thesis viable, which would not be possible in isolation.

As a summary, we believe that we have given evidence of some central aspects of the dynamics of the peers group in virtual feedback activities for the postgraduate thesis. We consider that, to follow up on this research, it is essential to study the changes made by the students based on their peers'



<http://www.udgvirtual.udg.mx/apertura/index.php/apertura/>

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