

Investigating 'Criticality' in Written Assignments of Postgraduate Students in TESOL and Applied Linguistics

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Abstract : Too often, one hears teachers complaining about how uncritical students can be, yet the notion of 'criticality' may be subject to variable understandings or interpretations. One challenge facing postgraduate students is the writing of essays responding to a specific reading assignment. Such an essay requires students not only to summarise, but to engage in a discussion of the significant points of the article, pointing out its strengths as well as its weaknesses. This paper presents the results of an investigation on criticality in written assignments of postgraduate students in applied linguistics and TESOL. The guiding questions for this investigation were: -How 'critical' are postgraduate students when writing their assignments? -What kind of 'critical' comments are they able to offer? A total of 70 essays were analysed, using two sets of corpora in the initial and follow-through phases of the research from three different universities in Asia. The essays were written by MA applied linguistics and TESOL students. Students were told that the response essay should definitely not just summarise, but should offer a reflection or critique on the ideas presented in the subject article. The initial findings from the investigation include: the identification of at least 10 general 'moves' each of which has a number of possible specific categories; presence of critique 'nodes' as distinguished from 'support' comments; and the identification of at least 4 moves as the most recurrent and possibly obligatory categories. This investigation has unearthed a few more questions or issues that are definitely worth investigating as extensions of this research, and will be of interest (most especially) to genre analysts and teachers of writing.

Keywords : criticality, discourse and genre analysis, postgraduate students, applied linguistics

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