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## “She kinda kookie but she is a sweet lady”: How student evaluations on a professor-rating website reveal the students’ concerns about English language education

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### Abstract

This study used a corpus-informed approach to identify students’ key concerns regarding their English language education. To address the complexity of key elements in student evaluations, the data collection involved students’ comments from 2012 to 2022, regarding their English language professors across different English-related departments at several institutions on Ratemyprofessors.com. These comments were treated as a corpus which covered more than 1,200 comments with over 70,000 words. The data analyses involved two stages. First, using the KeyBNC software, keyword analysis was performed to identify keywords which suggests the students’ areas of concern regarding their English language education. Second, through the USAS tagging system, Wmatrix was implemented to indicate the areas of concern through semantic domains. The findings in both analyses clearly indicated that the students’ concerns involved a wide range of areas, with an emphasis placed on grading and course evaluation issues. Overall, this study argued that, despite some comments that appeared superficial, it is important for professors to critically and judiciously consider all aspects of the evaluations as they can be valuable for improving teaching practices.

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### Keywords

Professor rating, students’ concerns, English language education, keyword analysis

## Practitioner Notes

1. The analysis of the keywords broadly indicated that the two widely discussed topics included "class" and "professor", with other lexical items such as 'helpful' and 'interesting' used to describe their experiences with the ratees.
2. Overall, it appeared that the students generally held a positive attitude towards their English language education.
3. The thematic categories from the key semantic domains yielded three salient themes, including grading and ease of the subjects, professors' personal traits, and gaining support for learning.
4. There was an explicit association between the support provided by English professors and students' satisfactory learning experience.
5. In both analyses, it appears that grading and assessment were the primary concern among the students.

## Introduction

Within the context of higher education, it is generally taken as a given that student evaluation of teaching (SET) is a prominent aspect of academic instruction at most universities (Rosen, 2018). These evaluations are commonly distributed to students at the end of a semester, often through an anonymous web-based survey (Ballantyne, 2003). As an essential component of instructional evaluation, SET involves students assessing professors based on their learning experiences, often using rating scales (Lakeman et al., 2023). Although it is widely assumed that the purpose of the evaluation is to provide insightful feedback on teaching quality (Hammonds et al., 2017; Rosen, 2018), the goal of SET has deviated from its original intention, partly due to the complexities of the educational contexts and the diverse expectations of stakeholders (Stroebe, 2020). Since SET now serves administrative and regulatory purposes, the evaluation has far-reaching implications for teachers' promotions and tenures at universities (Lloyd & Wright-Brough, 2023).

While understanding the far-reaching implications of SET in higher education has become a critical focus in recent research, the key challenge is the difficulty of obtaining adequately large and suitable samples because of the confidentiality and anonymity constraints of institutional SET (Clayson, 2014). As an alternative, many online professor-rating platforms have emerged and, as such, increasingly have become popular among students and researchers in the practice of SET (Boswell & Sohr-Preston, 2020). Generally, on an online professor-ratings website, students can rate professors on specific criteria, and they can also provide comments on each professor's evaluation page, broadly focusing on the aspects they want the potential students of the professors to know. The issues that distinguish this new type of evaluation from traditional SET then involve the intended audience and are used to inform decisions of course selection among fellow students rather than for instructors or administrators (Lewandowski et al., 2012).

As with the issue with institutional SET research, much of the existing research into student evaluations of teachers on online student evaluation websites ignores the complexity and dynamic nature of the evaluation. That is, the research into student evaluations on an online platform has been exclusively conceptualised by a single focus and on a narrow aspect. These include, for example, the singular focus on the impacts of gender bias (e.g. Esarey & Valdes, 2020) and race bias (e.g. Reid, 2010) on the results of the evaluation, validity of the ratings on Ratemyprofessors.com (e.g. Otto et al., 2008), as well as how students' use these review websites (e.g. Boswell & Sohr-Preston, 2020; Villalta-Cerdas et al., 2015). However, SET has shifted toward a multifaceted system with the interplay between teaching methodologies,

student satisfaction, and other salient elements of the educational contexts (Lloyd & Wright-Brough, 2023). This shift has led to the possibility that the relevance of earlier research, which focused on a single aspect of SET, could become unclear due to the complexity of the current SET context. As such, given the need for a holistic view of elements in SET (Lloyd & Wright-Brough, 2023), and that contributions to online faculty ratings often reflect broader and more representative opinions than those of traditional SET (Hartman & Hunt, 2013), this research aims to investigate the students' comments on Ratemyprofessors.com (RMP) to identify the students' key concerns regarding their English language learning.

## Literature

### Online evaluations of faculty teaching

Student evaluation of teaching has been a key element of most mainstream higher education institutions. Administered by the institution, faculty teaching evaluations are distributed to, and completed anonymously by, students at colleges or universities. Generally, the purpose of the evaluation is to gather students' feedback on the effectiveness of instructional methods, course content, and the overall learning experience for a wide range of purposes. While the alternate uses of the evaluations often involve decisions regarding professors' promotion and tenure, student evaluations as a summative evaluation are initially aimed to provide teachers feedback for improvement in teaching and course quality after the course is finished (Villalta-Cerdas et al., 2015). In most online professor-ratings websites, students, or the users who submitted the reviews, provide anonymous feedback and give ratings on their professors for specific courses at institutions of higher education. In contrast to institutional evaluations, online evaluations of teachers aim to convey the information to students rather than teachers, and appear to receive longer and more in-depth information in the students' comments compared to in-class evaluations (Legg & Wilson, 2012). As such, with the extensive information, combined with the growing popularity of online faculty rating platforms (Otto et al., 2018), it is widely believed that the data elicited from the websites can provide a sheer breadth and depth of information from a large pool of useful feedback "to satisfy college students longing for more data" (Boswell & Sohr-Preston, 2020, p. 945).

In general, online websites for faculty evaluations allow students to rate their professors from a scale of one (lowest rating) to five (highest rating) on certain key criteria (Subtirelu, 2015), including, for example, easiness, teacher helpfulness, and hotness. In addition to the rating, students can provide written feedback on each professor they took a class with. While how students write comments on online platforms for the evaluations of professors may vary, it is found that the comments are often expressed in a moderate tone (Bleske-Rechek & Michels, 2019) and rarely address academic issues such as learning outcomes, course goals, or course grade point averages (Felton et al., 2004). Rather, as discussed in previous studies (see, for example, Freng & Webber, 2009; Silva et al., 2008), students' comments on professor evaluation websites, such as RMP, largely centered around professors' characteristics and easiness. This clearly suggests that contributions to online faculty ratings explicitly value the superficial attributes of the professors rather than legitimate teaching and course qualities (Lewandowski et al., 2012).

Regardless, the websites that allow students to evaluate their professors have increasingly attracted scholars with interest in the impacts of such evaluations on college students. Lewandowski et al. (2012), for example, concluded that engaging in the evaluations on Ratemyprofessors.com shaped students' expectations about their instructors, which in turn influenced their choices of professors and courses. Moreover, Brown and Kosovich (2015) found that students were more likely to enrol in courses taught by professors with higher overall teaching quality ratings and easiness scores.

## Concerns over online faculty ratings

Given its importance to the academic community, much empirical evidence has been collected in a growing body of literature to assess the validity of ratings on online faculty evaluations. The fairness and objectivity of the user reviews on online professor ratings have become the focal concerns in many studies. The concerns involve both validity issues from the anonymity such as ratings from hostile colleagues and helpful friends, as well as bias in the evaluations regarding personal characteristics (Boswell & Sohr-Preston, 2020). As such, with the overall course quality score often associated with the easiness ratings and hotness scores, it should be cautioned that intangible factors such as these could dominate the results of the evaluations (Boswell, 2016; Felton et al., 2004). Gender bias is another concern in the evaluations. Studies indicate that male professors receive more favourable ratings than their female counterparts (Boehmer & Wood, 2017; Sohr-Preston et al., 2016). Race and ethnicity also impact ratings: regardless of the subject, Asian professors are often rated lower in terms of teaching quality compared to their white European counterparts (Reid, 2010; Subtirelu, 2005).

To date, research has focused on quantitative data, or numerical ratings, which clearly justifies the need for a more nuanced approach to assessing online professor evaluations, one that concerns qualitative insights. While little research has examined comments on RMP and other online professor rating platforms (Hartman & Hunt, 2013), recent studies on the influence of RMP on students have empirically suggested that students using the website tend to rely more on comments, rather than statistical data, when making decisions (Kindred & Mohammed, 2005; Lewandowski et al., 2012). Given that students would provide their peers with dependable information (Otto et al., 2008), and the fact that RMP comments, as a form of communication among fellow students, often entail more honest evaluations than traditional SET (Brown et al., 2009), this study aims to investigate how these RMP comments reveal students' concerns regarding their English language learning.

## Method

Qualitative data, or comments, on online professor rating websites can provide an in-depth understanding of students' opinions toward their professors (Scherr et al., 2013). This study aims to examine the qualitative evaluations on Ratemyprofessors.com, one of the largest online student evaluation websites, to identify the students' areas of concern related to their English language learning. To this end, the students' comments provided on the website were employed to provide qualitative results relevant to the salient patterns, themes, and meanings. In order to gain an insight into the issues, the study formulated the following research questions:

1. How does keyword analysis provide lexical information that indicates the overview of the students' key concerns about their English language learning?
2. What are the students' specific concerns regarding their English language learning according to the identified key semantic fields?

## Data collection

The data gathered in this study consists of the comments the students made about their English language professors and courses on Ratemyprofessors.com, an online professor ratings platform. According to its 'About' page, the website describes itself as an online platform that fosters a community to help college students choose the best courses and professors using the feedback from their peers. Moreover, the website received over 17 million ratings for more than 1.6 million professors at approximately 7,000 universities. Therefore, this website has the potential to provide rich and extensive data for in-depth analyses of the issues focused on in this study, while ensuring the representation and comprehensive coverage of the key concern areas among the students regarding their English language education.

It should be noted that there were particularly limited options for rating universities and faculties outside of the United States and the United Kingdom. For this reason, the collected data in this study primarily concerns professors in English language-related departments (e.g. the departments of English, English Language and Literature, and English as a Second Language) from evaluations dated from 2012 to 2022 from 20 colleges and universities in the United States and the United Kingdom. Unnecessary information such as user names and dates of contributions were not collected as they did not provide meaningful patterns for data analysis. This means that only texts relevant to the evaluations of the professors were collected, copied and pasted in a .txt file for the preparation of the data analyses, and were then treated as a corpus, hereafter named the 'Comments' corpus. Altogether, this corpus of the students' comments covered more than 1,200 comments consisting of roughly 70,000 words. Employing a corpus-based approach ensures that the concordances are not cherry-picked and are not influenced by preconceived notions and decisions (Baker & Levon, 2015). This methodological approach minimises subjectivity in data analysis (Brookes & Baker, 2021; Brookes & Chaupnik, 2022).

### **Data analysis**

The data analyses of this study involved two stages. First, a keyword analysis was conducted to analyse the students' qualitative comments to identify salient words in the corpus that highlight the key concerns. Through KeyBNC software, the keyword analysis was performed to compare the target 'Comments' corpus against the benchmark corpus to generate words identified as key in the target corpus that appeared statistically more frequently than the words in the benchmark corpus. The generated keywords, as such, are indicative of key issues, or major concerns, which emerged from the 'Comments' corpus since they inform what the corpus is generally about (Scott & Tribble, 2006).

This study employed the BNC corpus as the benchmark corpus to compare against the target corpus, due to its representation of overall English usage, covering both spoken and written language without limitations to any specific subject area. A comparison of the relative frequencies of each lexical item between two corpora is technically termed keyness, suggesting the aboutness of the text and so "they reflect what the text is really about" (Scott & Tribble, 2006, pp. 55-56). This approach, in fact, has been used in studies in which identifying key concepts is the major concern. For example, to identify salient words which suggest the teachers' perceptions of key concerns about the shift to online teaching, Watson Todd (2020) conducted a keyword analysis to analyze the survey data to provide themes that indicate the teachers' areas of concern.

Keyword analysis does not require preliminary data processing, such as the removal of function words (e.g. pronouns) which provide essential context and are thus important for interpreting the aboutness, or the main concerns, of the corpus (Pojanapunya, 2016). The 'Comments' corpus with all collected texts stored in a .txt file was uploaded into the KeyBNC software. Then, the keyword list, generated by the software, was observed and examined to determine the words identified as keywords in this study.

To indicate the aboutness of the target corpus, the Log-Likelihood value (LL) was used as a probability statistic in this study. LL is a statistical measure that compares occurrences of each word, or the relative frequencies of words, in two corpora to produce a single number. The calculation of LL involves comparing the observed frequency of a word in the target corpus with the expected frequency based on the word's frequency in the benchmark corpus. A higher Log-Likelihood (LL) value means a word is more salient to the target corpus, suggesting that the word is overrepresented in the target corpus compared to the benchmark corpus. To determine as many relevant topics as possible, the top 20 keywords ranked by LL value were considered as key in this study. The preliminary analysis of the keyword list found that words that appeared in the corpus fewer than five times did not yield meaningful patterns. So, the minimum frequency threshold was set at five, which means that only words appearing more than four times would be included for the examination and would be considered key. Moreover,

as Pojanapunya (2016) pointed out, concordances are used to identify the associations between the keywords and the general aboutness of the corpus. The Antconc program (Anthony, 2019) was also employed to generate concordances to support each identified theme relevant to students' key concerns in this study.

Secondly, to identify the students' concerns based on the key semantic tags, Wmatrix software (Rayson, 2018) was employed to provide empirical evidence relevant to the key semantic categories. The software can produce three types of quantifiable data, including lexical, grammatical, and semantic. At the lexical level, it can generate frequency lists of a text. For grammatical analysis, Wmatrix relies on a corpus annotation tool called CLAWS (the Constituent Likelihood Automatic Word-tagging System) to assign a part of speech to each word in a corpus. For semantic analysis, the software applies the USAS (UCREL Semantic Analysis System) system to automatically perform multi-tiered semantic grouping of given texts in a corpus. With 21 semantic fields divided by the English alphabet, the USAS tagging system has the potential to highlight areas of concern according to the key semantic domains generated by the system.

In particular, this study involved the use of USAS tagging on Wmatrix to underlie the students' key concerns about their English language learning. To perform the analysis, a text (.txt) file with all students' comments treated as a corpus was uploaded to the program. The lexical tokens in the comments corpus, successfully assigned semantic tags, were automatically classified into each key semantic domain. By comparing the 'Comments' corpus against the BNC corpus, a default reference corpus built into Wmatrix, the software created a list of key semantic domains, with each identified domain ranked by LL value.

The generated semantic fields and the statistical measures were then observed to determine the key semantic categories that highlight the students' areas of concern. Eventually, given that a greater LL value is likely to indicate a more salient semantic theme (Rangsarittikun, 2023), and that there is no maximum allowable value for LL, the cut-off value of 100.00 was set in this study to ensure the relevance of the semantic fields (Balossi, 2014). The key semantic themes and the lexical items belonging to each theme together with the concordance lines were analysed and interpreted to classify each category based on the students' areas of concern focusing on their English language learning.

## Results

Given the two research questions which involve the differences in the analyses of the data, the results in this section will be divided into two parts. The first part will explicate the results of the keyword analysis. The second part will provide the key issues and concerns emerging in the qualitative evaluations through the semantic categorisations provided by the Wmatrix software. In both parts, the concordances will be presented to elucidate each identified theme.

### Keyword analysis

Keyword analysis, through the statistical measure technically referred to as keyness, highlights salient words, or the words which reflect the gist of the textual content (Scott & Tribble, 2006). The highly ranked keywords, therefore, are likely to suggest the key aspect of the target corpus and, especially in the existing study, underlie the main concerns of the students from the evaluations.

Of the words identified as key with an LL value of greater than 500, the majority concern students' judgements on teachers and their English language classes (e.g. *nice* (LL = 743), *boring* (LL = 615), *best* (LL = 548), *good* (LL = 522), while many concern grading and assessment (e.g. *grader* (LL = 1153), *homework* (LL = 589), *grading* (LL = 560.06), *papers* (LL = 537). However, to ensure a narrow focus on the words identified as key with stronger

statistical significance (Balossi, 2014), the top 20 keywords ranked by the LL statistical measure are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

*Top 20 keywords from the Comments corpus*

Ranking	Keyword	Log-likelihood value
1	class	8806.45
2	professor	3415.96
3	she	2475.72
4	very	1777.63
5	teacher	1594.77
6	you	1449.24
7	students	1306.42
8	prof	1289.24
9	helpful	1237.85
10	grader	1153.43
11	great	948.65
12	interesting	911.44
13	her	898.57
14	assignments	898.33
15	grade	860.24
16	really	855.77
17	easy	843.38
18	take	835.04
19	classes	823.49
20	nice	743.20

Table 1 presents an overview of the key issues in the student evaluations. The two highest-ranked keywords are ‘*class*’ and ‘*professor*’. While these keywords do not appear to explicitly represent the students’ concerns, it is important to note that, with their highest LL value, they are the two topics that were the major issues of focus in the comments. Another remarkable pattern is that most of the words identified as key denote the qualities or characteristics students referred to in order to evaluate their experiences with professors or courses (*helpful*, *interesting*, and *nice*), ratees (e.g. *professor*, *she*, *teacher*), and course evaluations (*grader*, *assignments*, *grade*, *easy*). Although the function words, including the grammatical tokens, may not immediately suggest patterns relevant to the students’ major concerns, they are clearly associated with the key issues of the corpus, or especially the two highest-ranked keywords and the repeated keywords (*class*, *classes*, *professor*, *prof*). For example, the use of the pronoun ‘you’ indicated the commenters’ intention to refer directly to the readers, or perhaps to imply a fairly close relationship with their fellow students, in order to provide suggestions concerning the *class* and *professor* (e.g. “Unless *you* REALLY like writing, avoid taking any classes with this woman”). Moreover, in contrast to generic inclusive pronouns such as ‘we’, the third-person and reflexive pronouns, including ‘she’ and ‘her’, were predominantly used to describe the professional attributes of the evaluated professors (i.e. the keywords *class*, *classes*, *professor*, *prof*), who were considered outsiders in this context (e.g. “*She* does a great job of connecting with *her* students and lecturing in a way that makes it easy to comprehend the material”).

As shown in Table 1, given that several words identified as key clearly denote the students’ positive judgement of either their class or professor (e.g. *great*, *interesting*, and *nice*), many keywords indicated that the students generally held a healthy attitude toward their English language professors and classes. On the whole, for example, they felt that their English language professors were “so *helpful* and always able to give you a hand if you’re struggling”,

and that they were “*nice* and did not make anyone feel stupid for being there”. More importantly, those words were likewise used to illustrate their satisfaction with the English classes they had taken (e.g. “Class discussions were fun and *interesting*, and we often did group work”, and “Course content was kept relevant and *interesting*”. With these keywords suggesting the students’ positive attitude, it appears that having a positive, or perhaps satisfactory, experience accounted for one of the main themes among the students as evaluators.

The findings from the keyword analysis also highlight the issues of course assessments and grading. The keywords include *grader*, *assignments*, *grade*, and *easy*. Many quotations suggest that the comments prioritised the topics relevant to grading and assessments in the English language courses. In particular, in many comments, the students complained about the grade they received, for example, “...felt my final *grade* didn’t reflect my grades...” and “She grades WAY too tough, so don’t expect a good *grade*, even if you’re fluent”. Some comments, in addition, focused on giving practical advice about getting a decent grade to their peers. For instance:

but her assignments are graded very harshly, if you talk in class that will definitely help your *grade*. also, have a good accent and you will be well-liked...

He doesn’t give real assignments. As long as you turn some stuff in at the end of the semester u will get a good *grade*.

she is nice but very in teaching. you won’t get a good *grade* except going class on time, be quiet, turn off your phone, turning HW due to time. then you will be fine.

The concordances surrounding the keyword “*grader*” offered a broader perspective of the students’ concern over grading. Overall, they demonstrated that many comments were primarily focused on the toughness and fairness of the grading in the English courses. For example:

C1: She is a fair	<i>grader</i>	and if you go to her for extra
C2: Good sense of humor and a fair	<i>grader</i>	
C3: She's awesome! tough	<i>grader</i>	but it's worth it if you want to
C4: She loves what she does, tough	<i>grader</i>	, didn't like absences.
C5: So great teacher, but a tough	<i>grader</i>	.
C6: about your grammar and is an easy	<i>grader</i>	. Although he does talk about

Given that students choose a course that promises a satisfactory grade (Stroebe, 2020), it is not surprising that the issues related to dissatisfaction or offering advice on achieving better grades were extensively focused on in the student evaluations. Another keyword, *assignments*, reinforced the dominance of the students’ concerns over grading and assessment (e.g. “Great Professor, very helpful, very clear, easy *assignments* and easy class”.)

## Thematic categories

### Overview

Table 2 highlights the key issues from the top semantic fields ranked by the LL value from USAS Tagging function in the Wmatrix software. For a more robust analysis of the data (Balossi, 2014), the cut-off value was set at 100.00, so that the semantic themes considered to be highly salient could be identified. Eventually, the identified key semantic fields according to the LL value, combined with the concordances, provided the basis for the discussions of the students’ key areas of concern as explicated in the following section.



**Table 2***Key semantic areas of the students' comments about their English professors*

Key issues	Log-likelihood value
<b>Education in general</b> (e.g. <i>student, classes, professor</i> )	12878.55
<b>Degree: Boosters</b> (e.g. <i>very, really, incredibly</i> )	2115.86
<b>Interested/excited/energetic</b> (e.g. <i>interesting, enthusiastic, exciting</i> )	1281.21
<b>Happy</b> (e.g. <i>fun, humor, laughs</i> )	995.45
<b>Language, speech and grammar</b> (e.g. <i>grammar, language, vocabulary</i> )	892.57
<b>Time: General</b> (e.g. <i>ever, appointments, anytime</i> )	732.07
<b>Evaluation: Good</b> (e.g. <i>best, excellent, greatest</i> )	726.64
<b>Evaluation: Good/bad</b> (e.g. <i>grade, grades, grading</i> )	635.80
<b>Easy</b> (e.g. <i>easy, easily, simple</i> )	614.44
<b>Learning</b> (e.g. <i>learn, learned, learning</i> )	596.59
<b>Helping</b> (e.g. <i>supportive, help, helpful</i> )	539.52
<b>The Media: Newspapers etc.</b> (e.g. <i>paper, papers, articles</i> )	356.05
<b>Judgement of appearance: Positive</b> (e.g. <i>charm, charming, cute</i> )	333.66
<b>Informal/Friendly</b> (e.g. <i>approachable, friendly, outgoing</i> )	325.85
<b>The Media: Books</b> (e.g. <i>books, textbook, novel</i> )	307.13
<b>Uninterested/bored/unenergetic</b> (e.g. <i>boring, dull, uninteresting</i> )	302.67
<b>Like</b> (e.g. <i>favorite, favorites</i> )	246.72
<b>Understanding</b> (e.g. <i>insights, understand, understanding</i> )	233.04
<b>Substances and materials generally</b> (e.g. <i>material, materials, stuff</i> )	224.72
<b>Tough/strong</b> (e.g. <i>strict, tough, strengthen</i> )	209.52
<b>Geographical names</b> (e.g. <i>American, British, English</i> )	170.65
<b>Mental object: Conceptual object</b> (e.g. <i>ideas, subject, theory</i> )	163.85
<b>Personal traits</b> (e.g. <i>personality, charismatic, childish</i> )	154.66
<b>Participating</b> (e.g. <i>attendance, participate, participation</i> )	147.81
<b>Able/intelligent</b> (e.g. <i>clever, intelligent, genius</i> )	144.27
<b>Ethical</b> (e.g. <i>fair, fairness</i> )	140.70
<b>Evaluation: Bad</b> (e.g. <i>worst</i> )	128.26
<b>Texture</b> (e.g. <i>hard, hardest, flexible</i> )	120.00
<b>Sensory: Taste</b> (e.g. <i>sweet, sweetest, salty</i> )	105.88

Overall, a number of key semantic fields together with the lexical tokens in each theme provided a broad overview of students' experiences regarding their English language professors. These include, for example, the semantic categorisations of "Evaluation: Good", "Evaluation: Bad", "Interested/excited/energetic", "Uninterested/bored/unenergetic", and "Like" which generally reflected the students' judgements on the classes and professors. Besides the categorisations of "Education in general" and "Language, speech, and grammar" which accounted for the gist of the textual content, the presence of geographical terms in Table 2 indicates the specificity of these comments to the English subject and the teachers of English (e.g. "Greatest *English* teacher I've had!" and "This is truly a great *english* professor, he knows his literature and teaches it with a passion and no im not a friend or family member"). To highlight the themes representing the key concerns, the key semantic domains were categorised and sequenced by their prominence, determined by the number of semantic fields and the statistical evidence (LL) within each category.

### **Grading and ease of the subjects**

While the key semantic categories only provide a broad idea of students' comments on the student evaluations website, many categories highlighted the main concerns students had regarding their English language education. According to Table 2, the first predominant issue concerns the ease of the English courses students took, which involves evaluation and assessment. A closer inspection of the lexical tokens that belong to the "Evaluation: Good/bad" revealed that most of the words in the concordances, as many as 244 from 262 occurrences, included "*grade*", "*grades*", "*grading*", and "*graded*". The concordances below exemplify the dominance of the students' common concern regarding grading and assessments:

C1: hours definitely help boost your	<i>grade</i>	. Good teacher overall
C2: not that challenging to get a good	<i>grade</i>	if you put the effort in
C3: cult, unfriendly. and does not	<i>grade</i>	fairly. GREAT teacher She
C4: IF YOU NEED GOOD	<i>GRADES</i>	AVOID HIS CLASS
C5: and understanding, and his	<i>grades</i>	do not heavily involve grammar.
C6: I never got bored. I think she	<i>grades</i>	fairly , but she sometimes
C7: flexible, and understanding. The	<i>grading</i>	is fair . The work is challenging
C8: If he is in a bad mood wile	<i>grading</i>	your paper, you will make a D-
C9: and she is really generous around	<i>grading</i>	, definitely one of the best
C10: ind of hard but the stuff we were	<i>graded</i>	on was ridiculously easy
C11: when you ask her about why she	<i>graded</i>	so harshly , she really has no
C12: essays the semester which were	<i>graded</i>	harshly. In her feedback

While it appears that their concerns over grading involved far-reaching implications for their academic and learning experiences, there is a tendency of grading fairness to be perceived as the most worrying issue (e.g. C3, C6, and C7). It is, therefore, equally important to further examine the tokens in the "ethical" category to provide a clearer understanding of the teachers' ethical assessments. The examinations of the concordances which belong to the "ethical" category justified that fair grading was focused on in the evaluations, given that the majority of the tokens in this semantic field often co-occurred with either *grading* or *grader*. (e.g. "I think his grading is *fair* (though he expects a lot)" and "She is a *fair* grader").

Another dominant issue which is associated with grading is the ease of the subjects. In fact, the fact that the category "easy" immediately follows the "Evaluation: Good/bad" category in Table 2 implies not only a potential connection between these two issues but also the ease or difficulty of courses in relation to their evaluations of the professors. Furthermore, a more thorough inspection of the concordances in the two semantic categories indicated an association between grading and the perceptions of the ease of the courses:

C1: is papers are easy and he's an	<i>easy</i>	grader. Easy A prof!
C2: get a higher grade, so it 's	<i>easy</i>	to get an A. This teacher was
C3: as my minor. She grades WAY too	<i>tough</i>	, so don't expect a good grade,
C4: enjoys what she does. She grades	<i>tougher</i>	than many professors, but

Altogether, with several identified thematic categories, including "Evaluation: Good/bad", "Ethical", "Easy", and "Tough/strong", it is important to point out that the concerns over the ease of the English subjects and grading were remarkably prominent in the students' evaluations. These imply that students' comments often discussed the ease or difficulty of courses in relation to the assessments and grading of the courses.

### **Professors' personal traits**

Concerns over the professors' personal traits were discussed extensively. This area of concern particularly involved the "Happy", "Informal/Friendly", "Personal traits", and "Sensory: Taste" categories. The concordances below, obtained from "Personal traits", the semantic

category with LL value as high as nearly 155, exemplified how the lexical token “*personality*” was widely used to describe the students’ attitudes about their professors’ traits:

C1: She's got a very colourful	<i>personality</i>	which makes going to class
C2: you revise a paper. Easy going	<i>personality</i>	and I loved the class.
C3: and gives helpful comments. Her	<i>personality</i>	is catty, but in a good way.

A more detailed examination of the occurrences suggested that the favoured traits specifically included being kind and charismatic. For example:

C1: What a great man with enough	<i>kindness</i>	and energy to deal with such
C2: Prof. Brian ( <i>pseudonym</i> ) is so	<i>kind</i>	and supportive. Always
C3: students a big smile and she is so	<i>kind</i>	! She is the best Professor
C4: caring. not very interesting or	<i>charismatic</i>	. He was an excellent in
C5: this course just for him. Super	<i>charismatic</i>	and upbeat. Class is a lot of
C6: is very endearing and	<i>charismatic</i>	; only for the first few classes

The “Personal traits” category which encapsulated the lexical items entailing students’ preference for likable personalities was reinforced by the fourth-highest value, “Happy”. This foregrounds the importance of a positive and cheerful personality in the evaluation of English language professors. Of the 438 occurrences, many quotations indicated that professors’ sense of humour and the ability to make the classes enjoyable are extensively focused on in the comments. For instance:

Trust me, if you take his class, you are bound to have some *laughs* and learn a lot at the same time. Grade is pretty objective; you get what you earn.

Combining brilliant thought-provoking discussion with corny *jokes*, he has a real flair for teaching that makes for an interesting experience. Best. Prof. Ever. one of my best professors ever!

Class is very *enjoyable*, and she's understanding when an assignment can't be turned in on time. Highlyyyy reccomend this class!

Many of the example excerpts clearly underscored the high value students placed on professors who created enjoyable learning experiences and, perhaps, added some humor to their classes. In addition to being a “happy” professor, for college and university students, it appears that another pleasant personality trait involved being friendly and approachable. From the categorisation “Informal/Friendly”, it can be seen that words that denote the welcoming nature of professors were widely used, while their amiable characters were extensively focused on in the comments (e.g. “He's very *down to earth*. i recommend him.”, “He is a very *friendly* guy and I definitely recommend”, “her classes feel so *welcoming* and fun.”, and “Soooo kind, *friendly* and *approachable*, obsessed with her”).

Another intriguing aspect relevant to the issue of professors’ personal traits is the characters of the professors, especially the expressions of how *sweet* the professors were. While tokens in this category (e.g. “sweet”) may initially appear to be associated with “Sensory: Taste” according to the software, an analysis of the contexts in which they are used reveals that these words are more accurately related to personal traits of professors. The example concordances are shown below:

C1: supplemental readings. He's a	<i>sweet</i>	guy but just an okay professor
C2: to succeed! She's a really	<i>sweet</i>	and kind professor who clearly
C3: teacher I 've had. she's super	<i>sweet</i>	, and genuinely wants you to do
C4: stumbling old lady, but	<i>sweet</i>	and often funny. Not exactly help

C5: with the kookieness. But she is a	<i>sweet</i> lady and was extremely helpful
C6: She's kinda kookie but she is	<i>sweet</i> and one of my better professors
C7: obsessed with her. She is the	<i>sweetest</i> professor at BU! The lessons are
C8: Great class! My god,	<i>sweetest</i> person I have ever met. I don't

Given the influence of people's physical appearance on character judgements (Petrican et al., 2014), the overall positive perceptions of professors' traits and characteristics may be dictated by and related to the categorisation "Judgement of appearance: Positive". As such, with the words that carry positive emotional connotations that describe an individual's physical attractiveness (e.g. *charming*, *beautiful*, *lovely*, and *attractive*), the investigations into the lexical items and the concordances which belong to the "Judgement of appearance: Positive" category were carried out for a robust analysis of the qualitative data. Generally, while some words such as '*nice*,' '*awesome*,' and '*amazing*' do not reference appearance, many lexical tokens were pertinent to discussing the professors' physical attractiveness. The excerpts below illustrate the extent to which the issue of the professors' appearance was discussed in the comments.

Absolutely wonderful, *cute*, and entertaining.

She's *cute*, enthusiastic, and seems to genuinely want her students to learn. She generally explained grammar quite clearly. She's a very nice woman but i can't seem to do well in her class.

Awesome professor. Explains everything very well. Always available. Though quite *attractive*, lectures and handouts are confusing and unfocused.

*Attractive*, yes, and helpful. Easiest to have him explain 1 on 1, not in class.

Overall, although the interplay between perceptions based on physical appearance and their potential impact on the evaluation of the professors' characters was fairly unclear, these semantic categories clearly stressed that personal traits accounted for another main concern the students had regarding their English language professors.

### ***Gaining support for learning***

The issue of students' learning from experienced and knowledgeable professors appeared to be another major concern among the students. The key semantic domains, including "Learning" and "Helping", provided the basis for this area of concern. Generally, from the categorisation of "Learning", the semantic field ranked in the top 10, most comments focused on sharing with their peers the successful path of their learning (e.g. "...but I *learned* a lot and my writing improved dramatically" and "The things I have *learned* in his class have helped me earn A's on papers for other classes") and giving recommendations about how the success in the learning was achievable (e.g. "If you all today listen to what he has to say and keep up with your reading, you'll *learn* lots", and "However, you will *learn* his ideas about the material and undoubtedly get an A if you memorise his theories and spit them back to him on the exams"). From these comments, it is evident that in the discussions surrounding the lexical token "learning", only a few students shared their learning experience related to their improvement. Approximately half, however, were more concerned about the grades they received than the actual learning process.

Following the "Learning" category is the categorisation of "Helping". This close proximity of semantic categories according to the LL values warranted the attention of English language professors, emphasising the significance of academic support and encouragement from professors in students' learning. An inspection of the concordances indicated that getting help

from professors was deemed important as it facilitated students to learn better in the courses. The concordances below illustrate the dominance of this issue:

C1: are also excellent, she'll	<i>guide</i>	your thoughts in a way that
C2: while providing fair and	<i>constructive</i>	feedback on essays.
C3: as well. He was always so	<i>encouraging</i>	and responded well when
C4: every step of the way to	<i>help</i>	you to succeed.
C5: is so kind and	<i>supportive</i>	. Always available for office
C6: She was also great at	<i>facilitating</i>	a friendly and open class

A further examination of the key semantic themes suggested that the semantic domain "The Media: Books", the semantic category with more concrete and tangible discussions as to learning support, primarily discussed the issues associated with instructional materials in the classes. While some quotations criticise the professors' clarity of delivering the lessons through textbooks (e.g. "but I felt at times that she could be unclear explaining the material and deviated from the *textbook*"), a few mentioned that outside reading resources are particularly beneficial, noting that, "A lot of reading but she picks great *books*".

## Discussion

The main goal of the study was to focus on a wide-ranging analysis of students' key concerns about their English language learning and instruction. The findings, underpinned by the empirical and statistical evidence from the keyword analyses and the key semantic domains, highlighted several themes that encapsulated both interpersonal issues and academic challenges. The lexical frequency indicated that the salient issues in the comments involved the students' attitudes toward the professors and courses, words that denoted rates, and course assessments.

Both analyses yielded overlapping results regarding the concerns over course grading, clearly emphasising the seriousness of the issue among the students. This is consistent with Johnson's (2003) findings, which demonstrated that students relied on information about average course grades when selecting future courses, so their evaluations of faculty were heavily influenced by the professors' grading practices. Similarly, given that students generally evaluated their professors based on their satisfaction (Huybers, 2014), rather than their own learning (Feeley, 2002), grading could be a significant factor which subtly accounted for the interplay between the students' satisfaction and the perceived teaching effectiveness of the professors. This dynamic, in turn, may have contributed to an overall positive feeling toward the professors, as students' satisfaction with their grades often shaped their perception of the instructors' effectiveness and contributed to their overall satisfaction with the courses.

Another interesting finding is the students' concerns over their professors' personalities and traits. On the whole, it seems that all of the mentioned attributes associated with the professors' likeability centred around being friendly, kind, and approachable. This finding not only substantiated that of Best and Addison (2000), who found that student evaluations tended to favour the warmth-inducing behaviour of professors, but is also justified by the evidence discussed in Delucchi and Pelowski's (2000) study on the determining factors of professors' likeability. These characteristics include, for example, the ability to build rapport with students and to be approachable (Delucchi & Pelowski, 2000). As with the previous literature, this study involved the "Informal/Friendly" semantic (e.g. "She is so *kind!*") and the "Sensory: Taste" category (e.g. "She's kinda kookie but she is *sweet* and one of my better professors"), as referenced in the title of this paper, which clearly reflect two of the students' chief concerns about their English language learning. Furthermore, the word choices within the "Judgement of appearance: Positive" category (such as *charming*, *cute*, and *attractive*) suggest that the physical appearance of the English professors was also a matter of concern for the students in their evaluations. It is, moreover, interesting to note that these words usually collocated with

the words associated with commonly preferred or desirable qualities in the context of the evaluation (e.g. “Absolutely wonderful, *cute*, and entertaining” and “She’s *cute*, enthusiastic...”). This can be explained by the evidence discussed in Stroebe’s (2020) study, which indicated that students usually assume that physically attractive professors are associated with the positive qualities or traits of the professors.

As with the findings from the thematic analyses, the keyword analysis focused on in many comments also largely involved grades or grading of the courses. Scholars noted that students’ comments on RMP usually lack legitimate information, but rather focus on elements such as professors’ easiness and personal attributes (e.g. Felton et al., 2008). Thus, while it is still unclear whether students who read the comments formed their judgements about a professor based on such superficial comments (Davison & Prince, 2009), this finding showed that there appeared to be a strong, and perhaps worrying, tendency that students’ comments on RMP revolved around superficial and irrelevant information, or “aspects of teaching that are less central to quality education” (Lewandowski et al., 2012, p. 989).

Lastly, another key concern is the support provided by their English language professors. From the comments, the students were generally concerned about gaining the support that would encourage them to learn better in the courses. For them, it appears that the professors of English should be encouraging and supportive people who could help students succeed in their learning. The fact that the category “Learning” immediately precedes the “Helping” category might seem to point to the implicit associations between these issues, suggesting that students perceive a direct link between the support provided by English professors and their overall learning experience. All of these indicated that the students’ emphasis on the need for supportive English professors highlights the crucial role of mentorship and guidance in fostering an effective learning environment.

Given the absence of the course details on the website, a potential limitation lies in the lack of clear contexts and details of the English courses in question. Since different courses can have different teaching styles and expectations, those details may offer a more holistic view of the students’ perceptions of the courses and professors teaching effectiveness. However, those contextual factors were less relevant in the data collection, selecting professor evaluations from a wide range of English-related departments ensured a comprehensive and representative data collection. This minimises the risk of potential bias or skewness that may result from focusing on a narrow subset of courses and limited choice of professors.

## Conclusion

Overall, the implications of the findings of this study are far-reaching. For example, on the one hand, understanding the specific concerns of students regarding their English language education could help educators identify potential areas for improvement. On the other hand, given the multifaceted aspects and processes of teaching that includes not only content knowledge but professors’ interpersonal behaviors (Boswell, 2016), this study emphasised that students’ evaluations encapsulated both relevant and irrelevant issues related to learning and teaching. For instance, it was found that likeable personalities of the professors, which involved their personal traits and physical appearance, were somewhat affiliated with the students’ perception of teaching effectiveness (e.g. “... very easy great *personality!* He is a good teacher” and “... you are bound to have some *laughs* and learn a lot at the same time”). So, despite these emerging issues in the evaluations, evidence suggested that RMP evaluations with students’ narrative comments may consist of information germane to professors’ teaching (Otto et al., 2008). These findings suggest that educators should not overlook the potential concerns reflected in the students’ comments as they can provide valuable insights into teaching practices. However, professors wishing to make use of

students' comments to improve their teaching skills should approach the comments critically, by perhaps being selective about discussions helpful for developing relevant skills.

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