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# The Experiences of Feedback Practices on Academic Writing Undergone by Students with English as an Additional Language in a Master's Programme: A Multiple Case Study

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## Abstract

This article reflects upon the experiences and perceptions of feedback practices that five students who spoke English as an additional language (EAL) engaged with as part of their one-year taught master's course at a major UK University. During writing processes and after the submission of assignments, participants received support in a wide range of modes: tutors' oral, written, and electronic feedback and peer feedback. The paper outlines the key difficulties students encountered when engaging with and responding to feedback. Findings suggested that although students expressed satisfaction with feedback practices provided over the course of their master's degree, instances in which these events constrained their understanding of writing conventions have been documented. Such factors as appropriate timing, the nature of feedback, the type of language tutors employed when providing feedback, variation in tutors' preferences for marking, as well as students' individual and cultural differences, sometimes limited students' understanding and use of feedback.

## Introduction

This paper draws on the findings of a longitudinal case study which investigated the writing experiences of five students who spoke English as an additional language (EAL). The major interest was in examining what it was like to be an EAL writer engaging in disciplinary writing and what changes occurred in students' perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers, during a one-year taught master's course at a major UK University in the academic year 2007/08. The case study participants were following different master's courses in an Education department, where the principal means of assessment was written assignments (typically of 5,000 words) and a final dissertation of 20,000 words. The major sources of data were collected from self-completion questionnaires, semi-structured interviews with students and tutors, tutors' feedback sheets, and students' assignments and drafts. This article examines how these students engaged with various feedback practices to make sense of the writing conventions specific to their discipline. In this paper, the term *feedback practices* is used to denote the activities built into master's modules that were designed to introduce students to writing conventions and to support their writing. These practices encompassed tutors' written, oral, and electronic feedback, and peer feedback.

This paper is grounded in a number of empirical studies that have examined the perceptions of feedback held by students for whom English is not their native language and the effects of feedback on student learning and revision. The primary aim is therefore to learn about the potential of feedback for student writing; in this sense, these studies reveal inconsistent results. On the one hand, EAL students have reported that feedback has facilitated the acquisition of writing norms and has contributed to the improvement of written texts (Casanave 1995, Ferris 1995 and 1997, Hyland 1998 and Leki 2006, Prior 1991 and Riazi 1997). On the other hand, there have been documented instances in which feedback has not led to noticeable improvements to students' work (Conrad and Goldstein 1999, Hyland 1998 and Patthey-Chavez and Ferris 1997).

## Literature review

### ***The role of feedback practices***

Literature has suggested that feedback is a crucial means of encouraging and consolidating student learning and writing (Black and Wiliam 1998, Hyland and Hyland 2006b and Leki 2006). Typically, feedback is designed to offer students responses to their writing that show where their textual goals have been achieved and where they may have fallen short, as well as how their written texts can be improved. Over the past three decades, tutor feedback has been largely extended to include peer feedback, writing conferences, and computer-delivered feedback (Hyland and Hyland 2006a). These developments are supported by a rich theoretical framework, which draws extensively on the Vygotskyian concept of scaffolding, community of practice theory (Lave and Wenger 1991), knowledge-making, and cognitive apprenticeship models (Vygotsky 1978 and Brown, Collins and Duguid 1989). These theoretical tenets advocate that novice writers acquire deeper understandings of writing conventions and gain a growing participation in disciplinary knowledge through dialogic interactions and feedback practices with more knowledgeable tutors or peers (Vygotsky 1978).

Despite the extensive theoretical support for the use of feedback in teaching, the accumulated empirical data suggest conflicting outcomes in terms of its effectiveness. As far as tutor feedback is concerned, empirical studies have revealed that EAL students greatly value tutors' written and oral feedback on all aspects of their texts (Brice 1995, Casanave 1995, Chapin and Terdal 1990, Conrad and Goldstein 1999, Enginarlar 1993, Hyland 1998, Leki 2006, Prior 1991 and Riazi 1997). However, findings have suggested that there is a variation among EAL students in terms of how they use tutors' commentaries and how successful their subsequent changes are (Chapin and Terdal 1990, Conrad and Goldstein 1999, Ferris 1995, 1997, Hyland 1998 and Patthey-Chavez and Ferris 1997). Furthermore, studies have shown a variation in how much students feel they understand tutors' commentaries and the reasons behind the requests for change (Brice 1995, Ferris 1995, Hyland 1998 and Tardy 2006). Indeed, even when students understand a comment, they encounter difficulty in deciding upon the correct revision strategy (Chapin and Terdal 1990 and Conrad and Goldstein 1999). Other studies have reported that sometimes students think they understand a comment when they do not; consequently, they are more likely to revise unsuccessfully (Hyland 1998).

Research into tutors' oral feedback has also revealed ambivalent results regarding its effects on student writing. Findings show that the writing conferences or tutorials where tutors provide commentary on student writing do not always result in revision, and when revision occurs it is not always successful (Goldstein and Conrad 1990, Hyland and Hyland 2006a and Hyland and Lo 2006). Moreover, EAL students do not always participate in conferences and do not make substantial contributions to the topic nominations, questions and conversation (Goldstein and Conrad 1990 and Patthey-Chavez and Ferris 1997).

In terms of peer feedback, a range of studies (Leki 1990, Connor and Asenavage 1994, Zhang 1995, Zhu 2001 and Nelson and Carson 2006) have suggested strong reservations about the effectiveness of these practices. EAL students often believe that their peers offer unconstructive and unhelpful advice, addressing surface problems and mechanical errors at the expense of more meaningful issues such as the development of ideas, organisation or the overall focus of what they were trying to write. Finally, literature into feedback has suggested that there are a limited number of studies that have addressed the effects of tutors' feedback provided through electronic means such as e-mail or the 'Comment' function in Microsoft Word on the success of EAL students' revisions (Goldstein 2006). Goldstein and Kohls (2002 cited in Goldstein 2006) reported on three undergraduate students who had to revise in response to tutors' electronic feedback. The data showed that electronic feedback applied directly to students' drafts played a relatively minor role in how these students subsequently revised their work.

### ***Sources of difficulties in feedback practices***

Although feedback is designed to enhance students' understanding of writing conventions, ironically, the above-mentioned studies have suggested that certain feedback practices may generate confusion and uncertainty within students. In a paper on teacher written feedback and student revision, Goldstein (2004: 71) delineates possible reasons why multilingual students misconstrue feedback and employ it unsuccessfully when revising.

These include:

- a lack of willingness to critically examine one's point of view,
- a feeling that the teacher's feedback is incorrect,
- a lack of time to do the revisions,
- a lack of content knowledge to do the revision,
- a feeling that the feedback is not reasonable,
- a lack of motivation,
- being resistant to revision,
- feeling distrustful of the teacher's content knowledge and
- mismatches between the teachers' responding behaviours and the students' needs and desires (Goldstein 2004: 71).

Other potential reasons why EAL students misunderstand feedback are students' individual and cultural differences. Accordingly, such factors as students' prior learning experiences, their interactive and aural comprehension abilities, and the strongly-held beliefs about feedback that they bring to the learning processes may constrain how students engage with and respond to these practices (Goldstein and Conrad 1990, Hyland and Hyland 2006b and Hyland and Lo 2006).

Another reason why EAL students misconstrue feedback is the type of language tutors employ when providing commentary. Hyland and Hyland (2001) acknowledge that teachers are conscious of the potentially damaging effect of too many critical comments on students' motivation and self-confidence, which often leads them to address textual problems using indirect language. As a result, teachers often seek to mitigate subtly the full force of their criticisms and requests, toning them down by using hedges, question forms and personal attribution (Hyland and Hyland 2001 and 2006b). However, research has suggested that EAL learners appear to misinterpret the intent of tutors' implied comments that do not directly state that a revision is needed (Ferris 1997 and Patthey-Chavez and Ferris 1997). Consequently, they either do not attempt any revision or revise unsuccessfully.

Based on the inconsistent results emerging from studies that examined the effects of a single type of feedback on student writing, this paper aims to capture the complexity of feedback practices that EAL students engage with and the potential difficulties they encounter while reading and responding to feedback. This article also explores lessons that can be learned to improve the effectiveness of feedback.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

This article draws mainly on data emerging from semi-structured interviews, which explored the perceptions of feedback practices held by EAL students and the difficulties they encountered when engaging with these. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with case study participants throughout the academic year 2007/08. The students were volunteers selected from the pool of respondents who had completed the self-completion questionnaire in October 2007. I carried out between six and nine semi-structured interviews with each participant, each of which lasted from 35 minutes to 1 hour and 27 minutes. A total number of 35 interviews were collected. The number of interviews depended largely on how many assignments students wrote and unexpected events that occurred during the course of the year 2007/08 (e.g. the failure of assignments). The case study participants' demographic and educational information are included in Table 1.

Table 1: Background Information on the Interview Participants

Name	Age range	Sex	Regions and countries of residence	Subject of 1 <sup>st</sup> degree	Other higher education degrees	Taught master's course at WIE
Mary	20–29	Female	Eastern Europe*	Psychology	Completed 1 year of 2-year master's Course in Psychology	MA Educational Studies
Oliver	30–39	Male	Nigeria Africa	Animal Sciences	Master's in Educational Studies PGDE	MA Educational Studies
Hannah	20–29	Female	China East Asia	Chinese Language and Literature	None	MA Educational Studies
Rita	30–39	Female	China East Asia	Law	None	MA Educational Studies
Molly	20–29	Female	Hong Kong East Asia	English Language and Literature	None	MA Drama and Theatre Education

\*To guarantee participants' anonymity, I have not included Mary's home country as it may disclose her identity.

In addition, this paper uses the data from the analysis of tutors' written feedback submitted to students' writing assignments. At the beginning of the academic year, I asked for students' consent to allow me to make photocopies of the feedback sheets. Out of 24 possible feedback sheets, I managed to gather 12, which were analysed in terms of the length and focus of feedback provided.

Content analysis was employed to analyse the semi-structured interviews and tutors' written feedback. Categories were developed and applied to the interview texts using NVivo software. *A priori* categories, such as comments on 'content' and 'form', were applied to analyse tutors' feedback sheets. According to Hyland and Hyland (2001), the 'content' category included comments referring to subject knowledge, analysis of materials, and constructing the arguments and organisation of written text. The 'form' category referred to language, grammar, typographical errors, punctuation and referencing conventions. To enhance the reliability of codes, I ran inter-reliability checks on coding data and coding processes. The inter-coder agreement index for interview transcripts was 82%, denoting that the categories were discreet enough to cover all the narratives and express the same meaning (Miles and Huberman 1994). The inter-coder agreement for the feedback sheets was 92.3%. Although this was a small-scale case study and the results may not be generalised to other populations of EAL students across other master's programmes, the research findings were reflected in a number of empirical studies that examined the effects of feedback on student writing.

## Findings

### ***EAL students' perceptions of feedback practices***

The analysis of the research interviews indicated that participants received feedback in a wide range of modes: tutors' oral, written, and electronic feedback, and peer feedback. These feedback practices occurred during writing processes and after the submission of assignments. The analysis of interview transcripts and feedback sheets suggested that the purposes of feedback were to discuss students' assignment preparation, to monitor their progress with written work, to provide commentary on the

aspects where they fell short and to offer further recommendations for their writing development. All five students expressed satisfaction with tutor feedback provided.

This kind of supervision – you receive feedback before submitting each assignment, and this kind of personal tutor staff and academic tutor you have. So this is great. [...] They were very helpful and supportive every time you ask something, you will get an answer (Mary).

Participants indicated that to some extent they acquired the writing conventions common for their discipline and developed their writing skills. They also suggested that they gained disciplinary knowledge and improved their L2 while reading and responding to feedback.

I think it [written feedback] is useful, because the tutor told me lots of the weaknesses of the assignment 1, and lots of comments on structure and ideas of the assignment. [...] Then in my assignment he gave me grammar corrections, and you can see he marked the problem which I should notice (Hannah).

I think it [oral feedback] is very instructive and inspiring for me, because to discuss how to write I think it is a key problem for us. So because we have the opportunity to discuss it, it makes us feel [...] keep paces with time or [...] keep keen on the progress of our writing (Rita).

These excerpts show that students learned to extend their current competence through the guidance of a more knowledgeable expert, emphasising the importance of creating numerous spaces to make writing conventions and values visible to novice writers (Lave and Wenger 1991). Furthermore, four out of five students acknowledged that they used their written feedback for feed-forward purposes in subsequent work. They devised further plans for writing development, set objectives for their next assignments and regulated their writing behaviours in the light of previous feedback. However, one student stated that she hardly employed written feedback to inform her following assignments as she could not recognise the connections between writing assignments.

I don't think it [prior writing experiences and strategies] is useful for my dissertation because it is different topics. [...] If I think about my dissertation, I don't think about anything or other assignments (Hannah).

Findings suggested that Hannah possessed poor self-regulative skills in monitoring her participation in feedback practices and in devising plans for her writing development, which ultimately hindered her from availing herself of the learning benefits of these events. This echoes the research into feedback (Hyland and Hyland 2006b and Price, O'Donovan and Rust 2007) that indicates that many students may not know how to read and work with feedback. Consequently, students either dismiss the feedback provided or do not truly understand and make use of it.

### ***The sources of difficulties in feedback practices***

Findings revealed a number of issues that constrained the success of feedback practices, impacting on the ways in which participants understood and employed it.

#### *The nature of feedback*

The analysis of interview data and feedback sheets revealed that six out of twenty-four feedback sheets were short and vague, offering only general commentaries, few recommendations and few or no grammar and/or typographical corrections. On these occasions, students longed for lengthier feedback that could have offered them a clear sense of tutors' expectations, writing standards, and information about where they were falling short and where they were performing adequately. They believed that vague feedback did not contribute to their writing development and did not prevent them from making the same mistakes again.

We want to have more practical comments because last time we had a whole page of comments, even if I got a low grade but when I read the comments 'Yes, you are right. I am wrong, I made some mistakes'. So I was convinced that I deserved that mark. This one is kind of more general and that was 'soundly argued' but never tell me what part was argued, which was well-argued and which part was not. [...] I couldn't learn from the comments (Molly).

Furthermore, interview transcripts suggested that vague feedback generated confusion over the appropriateness of the grade when contrasted with the tutors' comments. Having read the provided feedback, two students concluded that they had been awarded higher grades than they deserved. Accordingly, vague feedback challenged students' self-efficacy beliefs as academic writers, instilling doubts about their abilities to produce high quality work.

Another reason that sometimes undermined the potential of feedback practices was the type of language used to provide it. For instance, on a couple of occasions Rita misinterpreted the intent of tutor feedback, which led to no revision changes and low academic performance.

I quickly sent my outline to him and he agreed with me with my negotiated topic. [...] He said I am so [...] *I am too ambitious*. I made the assignment to look like a dissertation! So he thinks *we don't need* to regard the assignment as a dissertation. And I have to say it is very interesting another tutor, she also thinks I don't need to regard the assignment as a dissertation.

It appeared that the way the tutor formulated the comments turned out to be misleading for Rita. In his comments, the tutor pointed that she was too ambitious and did not need to treat the assignment as a dissertation, but Rita regarded this comment as 'flattery' and the use of 'don't need' sounded like an optional food for thought rather than a strong recommendation. Even after receiving the same comments on another assignment, Rita decided not to implement these suggestions.

### *Timing*

The timing of interactions emerged as critical to the efficacy of oral feedback provided during tutorials. Two students perceived that on several occasions tutorials came at a late stage in their writing process, leaving too little time for further revisions in the light of tutors' advice.

I think we had two tutorials – one or two – which was a bit late. So that one is to discuss too, because we had tutorials when we just have one week to submit the assignments. What is that? That's not really fair on people. [...] That should be done earlier on (Oliver).

As a result, they did not manage to implement all recommendations and/or to proofread their texts, which eventually did not lead to substantial improvement. In contrast, another student found that tutorials had occurred too early in her writing preparation. Hannah acknowledged that she tended not to participate in tutorials because either she had not decided on the topic or had not done enough reading around the chosen topic.

We had one class only about the assignment [...] after the class the teacher said we can stay in the classroom and ask him some questions [...] if you have an idea of your topic – you can stay in the class and discuss with him. But at that time, I don't have any ideas of my assignment, so I didn't stay in the classroom.

This suggests how important is to provide well-timed feedback to ensure that all students take advantage of these learning opportunities.

### *Variation in tutors' preferences for marking*

Findings indicated that most students believed that there was a variation in tutors' preferences for what counted as good writing. Students felt that tutors offered contradictory feedback on the use of particular vocabulary and on the organisation of assignments, generating frustration and confusion over how to act upon it.

I am very confused because I heard a lot of versions, like someone told me that I have to make long paragraphs, and academic ones. Now [...] another told me that paragraph should be short, clear and very explicit and you know I don't really know how to write anymore (Mary).

Participants also reported a variance in tutors' weightings of such assessment criteria as organisation, grammatical accuracy, mechanical errors and incorrect referencing. They revealed that some tutors

did not penalise for grammatical errors or incorrect referencing, while others harshly criticised these types of errors. These findings are consistent with other research (Lea and Street 1998 and Ivanič, Clark and Rimmershaw 2000) which supports the view that there is considerable variation in tutors' preferences and weightings of assessment criteria. Accordingly, these students have to learn how to write for each tutor and module. This situation may generate confusion amongst students who are not yet familiar with disciplinary writing conventions and who have to acquire them as they learn the subject.

### *Individual differences*

It has been suggested that the success of feedback practices depends not only on the ways in which they were provided but also on students' individual differences (e.g. linguistic, interactive, and comprehension and aural capabilities), their beliefs and prior learning experiences. All participants reported having no or limited previous experience of engaging with peer feedback. Additionally, they were negative about the role of peer feedback, considering it less competent than tutor feedback and focussing mainly on surface issues and mechanical errors.

[...] sometimes I find it that it [peer feedback] is not in-depth enough. [...] It tends to be shallow. It is like 'okay, good language skills', the comment will be supportive, something like that. I really do not find very helpful comparing to the tutors' comments (Molly).

The students' lack of training and experience in giving and receiving peer feedback constituted a potential impediment for EAL students to engage with tutorials where students shared their written work and had access to multiple sources of feedback (e.g. peer and tutor feedback). However, as was suggested, the majority of feedback was provided by tutors and much less by peers.

### *Cultural differences*

Another issue that compromised the success of feedback practices was participants' cultural differences. Hannah reported benefitting less from any types of tutor feedback as she regarded tutors as authoritative figures whom she could not approach easily. She also held distinct beliefs about the status and the role of teachers and students in classroom, which did not help her to establish an efficient communication with her tutors.

Teachers [from her previous educational study] are all serious [...] and one teacher had to care about a lot of students in whole class, so they don't have any more time to take one by one. And you don't need to communicate with teachers – just teachers say something and you do something.

This excerpt suggests that Hannah attributed her reluctance to interact with tutors to her cultural differences. However, this belief was not consistent with the two other East Asian students' behaviours, who regularly approached tutors for support and advice. While not always coming to the fore, there is a need for tutors to be aware of such cultural dynamics.

## **Conclusions**

To sum up, it has been suggested that the department the research participants were studying at, provided a number of feedback practices designed to introduce students to academic writing conventions and to support their writing processes. All respondents expressed satisfaction with this support and reported extending their current competence in academic writing. These results accentuated the importance of creating various opportunities to make writing conventions and values visible to novice writers. Literature suggests that 'self, peer, tutor, and teacher feedback are not mutually exclusive categories and multiple types of feedback including peer feedback are useful for students' (Nelson and Carson 2006: 43).

Importantly, this article highlighted the complexity of factors and variables that may come into play and limit the success of feedback. Such factors as appropriate timing, the nature of feedback, the type of language tutors employed when providing feedback, variation in tutors' preferences for marking, and students' individual and cultural differences may sometimes hamper students' understanding and use of the feedback provided. Hence, there is a myriad of crucial factors that tutors need to be aware

of and to consider when providing such support. It is essential that tutors offer advice at every stage of feedback so that students truly engage with and make use of it; otherwise, these practices can have little effect on student learning and writing. Furthermore, students' misinterpretation of feedback can challenge their self-efficacy beliefs as academic writers, instilling doubts about their abilities to produce high quality work. This invites further research into the provision of constructive and effective feedback practices at university level.



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