

# 1 *Contexts and issues in feedback on L2 writing: An introduction*

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Feedback is widely seen in education as crucial for both encouraging and consolidating learning (Anderson, 1982; Brophy, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978), and this significance has also been recognized by those working in the field of second language writing. Its importance is acknowledged in process-based classrooms, where it forms a key element of the students' growing control over composing skills, and by genre-oriented teachers employing scaffolded learning techniques. In fact, over the past 20 years, changes in writing pedagogy and research have transformed feedback practices, with teacher comments often supplemented with peer feedback, writing workshops, conferences, and computer-delivered feedback. Summative feedback, designed to evaluate writing as a product, has generally been replaced by formative feedback that points forward to the student's future writing and the development of his or her writing processes. More widely, there is a growing awareness of the social and political implications of teacher and peer response.

Although feedback is a central aspect of ESL writing programs across the world, the research literature has not been unequivocally positive about its role in instruction, and teachers often have a sense that they are not making use of its full potential. This book addresses this incongruity, and in this introductory chapter we offer an overview of some key issues and preview the book's organization.

## Some historical context

The importance of feedback emerged with the development of learner-centered approaches to writing instruction in North American L1 composition classes during the 1970s. The "process approach" gave greater attention to teacher-student encounters around texts and encouraged teachers to support writers through multiple drafts by providing feedback and suggesting revisions during the process of writing itself, rather than at the end of it. The form feedback took was extended beyond the teacher's marginal notes to include oral interaction involving the teacher or the students themselves. The focus moved from a concern

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 *Ken Hyland and Fiona Hyland*

with mechanical accuracy and control of language to a greater emphasis on the development and discovery of meaning through the experience of writing and rewriting. Feedback came to be viewed as having a powerful potential, with the possibility for “a revision of cognition itself that stems from response” (Freedman, 1985, p. xi).

Feedback practices and issues were also increasingly influenced by interactionist theories, which emphasized the significance of the individual reader and the dialogic nature of writing. Rather than asking students to write for an idealized general audience, the interpretation and response of a specific reader was seen as important in giving meaning to a text and assisting writers to shape their texts for real people. Without a reader, there is only “potential for meaning” but no meaning itself (Probst, 1989, p. 69). This perspective places a high value on reader response and encourages the use of peer feedback and multiple feedback sources to provide a real rather than a visualized audience.

More recently, feedback has been seen as a key element of students’ growing control over writing skills in genre-oriented approaches, where sociocultural theories of scaffolded instruction and learning as a social practice are important. Here feedback is important in providing students with the rhetorical choices central to new academic or professional literacy skills and as a way of assisting students in negotiating access to new knowledge and practices. This view of feedback also means confronting issues of teacher control and social and political dominance. Bartholomae (1986, p. 12) has discussed “the difficult and often violent accommodations that occur when students locate themselves in a discourse that is not ‘naturally’ or immediately theirs.” In such contexts feedback may be seen as either denying students their own voice and imposing teachers’ own requirements on them, or as empowering them to produce texts that appropriately address the expectations needed to succeed in a particular discourse community.

But while response to student writing has been a subject of considerable interest to teachers and researchers for more than 30 years, research into response in L2 writing, as opposed to error correction, did not really begin until the early 1990s, and many questions remain only partially answered. Several key questions continue to be hotly debated. What kinds of feedback are most appropriate in different contexts? What are the most effective teacher practices? How do students perceive and respond to feedback? How do cultural factors influence response? And does feedback improve student writing in the long term? L2 writers obviously work within a complex context, where language proficiency, diverse cultural expectations, new teacher-learner experiences, and different writing processes can interact in significant ways with the cognitive demands of interpreting feedback and negotiating revisions. As a result, research has tended to explore some key issues of difference between L1 and L2

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Contexts and issues in feedback on L2 writing* 3

writing contexts, such as peer response, teacher-student conferencing, and the effects of teachers' written feedback.

## An overview of key issues

### *Teacher feedback to L2 writers*

Surveys of students' feedback preferences indicate that ESL students greatly value teacher written feedback and consistently rate it more highly than alternative forms, such as peer feedback and oral feedback in writing conferences (Leki, 1991; Saito, 1994; Zhang, 1995). Even though students themselves are positive about written feedback and appear to value comments and corrections on all aspects of their texts, its contribution to students' writing development is still unclear. Ferris (1997), for instance, found that although three quarters of substantive teachers' comments on drafts were used by students, only half of their revisions in response to these could be considered as improvements and a third actually made matters worse. A similarly mixed success rate emerged from Conrad and Goldstein's (1999) study of the revisions of three case study subjects.

In the L2 context, the effectiveness of feedback that focuses on error correction is seen as particularly important, and the question of whether such feedback is beneficial to students' development, in both the short and long term, has become a major issue of contention. Early L2 writing researchers, influenced by process theories, argued that feedback on error was both discouraging and unhelpful. Zamel (1985, p. 96), for instance, advised teachers to rein in their "reflex-like reactions to surface level concerns and give priority to meaning." Others suggested that error correction had few positive effects on student writing (Kepner, 1991; Polio, Fleck, and Leder, 1998; Robb et al., 1986; Semke, 1984; Sheppard, 1992). In a well-known summary of this literature, Truscott (1996) saw very little benefit in this kind of feedback and argued strongly that it is the responsibility of teachers to change student attitudes regarding the benefits of error correction by adopting a "correction-free approach" in their classrooms (Truscott, 1999).

But while process approaches emphasize the need for writing uninhibited by language correction, grammar errors can be an obvious problem for L2 writers, and it is not surprising that teachers often feel the need to respond to them. ESL students themselves, particularly those from cultures where teachers are highly directive, generally welcome and expect teachers to notice and comment on their errors and may feel resentful if their teachers do not do so. This is a particularly pressing issue where students are learning to write for business or academic audiences for whom

4 *Ken Hyland and Fiona Hyland*

accuracy is important (Hyland, 2003). A number of survey studies, for instance, suggest that university subject teachers have little tolerance of typical ESL errors and that these can influence their overall grading of papers (e.g., Janopoulos, 1992).

It has also been suggested that ESL students have less of their self worth invested in their L2 writing than L1 writers have in their native language, and that language corrections therefore are not as discouraging to them as they would be to native speakers (Leki, 1991; Schachter, 1991). The idea that “error” has different connotations for L2 learners is one that needs further investigation, but it is clear that the practice of response is not so clear-cut as was first thought. The picture is further complicated by the fact that teachers respond to students in their comments and not just to texts. Hyland (1998), for example, found that teachers consider not only the errors they find in a piece of writing but also the student responsible for them, basing their comments and what they choose to address on their relationship with the student and what they know of his or her background, needs, and preferences.

In other words, we cannot ignore either our students or their immediate needs to produce texts that are regarded as competent and successful by their intended audiences and to become self-sufficient in constructing acceptably accurate prose. Admonishments to teachers to focus exclusively on meaning therefore seem misplaced, the result of a view of writing that sees ideas and language as distinct. In fact, the separation of form and content is largely an artificial one, of dubious theoretical value, and impossible to maintain when responding to writing.

We should not be surprised, therefore, that other researchers disagree with Truscott’s views on error correction, arguing instead that form-focused feedback can be effective, especially when accompanied by classroom instruction (Master, 1995; White, Spada, Lightbown, & Ranta, 1991). Studies measuring student improvement longitudinally suggest that students who receive error feedback over a period of time can improve their language accuracy (Fatham & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 2002; Ferris & Helt, 2000; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). In one study, for example, Chandler (2003) tracked students’ writing over one semester and found that both underlining and direct correction reduced grammatical and lexical errors in subsequent writing. Although it is unlikely that feedback alone is responsible for long-term language improvement, it is almost certainly a highly significant factor.

Another key area of investigation has been the stance teachers take when giving feedback. Leki (1990) suggests that L2 teachers may be fulfilling several different and possibly conflicting roles as they respond to student writing. When giving feedback, then, we have to choose the appropriate language and style to accomplish a range of informational, pedagogic, and interpersonal goals. Studies of L2 students’ reactions to

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[More information](#)*Contexts and issues in feedback on L2 writing* 5

teacher feedback show that learners remember and value encouraging remarks but expect to receive constructive criticism rather than simple platitudes (Ferris, 1995; Hyland, F., 1998). However, many teachers are very conscious of the potentially damaging effect of critical comments, and this awareness can translate into a reluctance to address issues directly. Hyland and Hyland (2001) suggest that teachers often seek to mitigate the full force of their criticisms and suggestions, taking the sting out of them with hedges, question forms, and personal attribution. However, this kind of indirection also carries the very real danger that students may miss the point of the comment and so misinterpret the feedback.

*Writing conferences*

Research indicates that, to be effective, feedback should be conveyed in a number of modes and should allow for response and interaction (e.g., Brinko, 1993). Among the most extensively employed of these modes is the writing conference, an approach lauded by L1 researchers as a dialogue in which meaning and interpretation are constantly being negotiated by participants and as a method that provides both teaching and learning benefits. Writing conferences with teachers have been visualized as “conversational dialogues” (Freedman & Sperling, 1985), with the emphasis on two-way communication. At the heart of the writing conference is the Vygotskian concept of *scaffolding*, the ways that the feedback delivered through the dialogue between teacher and student can be used by the student writer to develop both a text and his or her writing abilities (Williams, 2002). The interactive nature of the conference also gives teachers a chance to respond to the diverse cultural, educational, and writing needs of their students, clarifying meaning and resolving ambiguities, while saving them the time spent in detailed marking of papers. Writing conferences can give students a clearer idea of their strengths and weaknesses, develop their autonomy, allow them to raise questions on their written feedback, and help them construct a revision plan (Hyland, F., 2000).

Both teachers and students tend to be positive about the opportunities for detailed discussion that conferences offer, and research suggests that students typically receive more focused and usable comments than through written feedback (Zamel, 1985). But conferences vary considerably in the extent to which they improve student writing, and the literature stresses the need for careful planning to ensure that students participate actively. Where they are successful, however, oral conferences can not only lead to revisions in subsequent drafts but also have lasting effects on improving writing in later assignments (e.g., Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 *Ken Hyland and Fiona Hyland*

Some teachers have expressed reservations about oral conferences, however, because L2 students are not always in a good position to make the most of these opportunities to get individual attention and discuss their writing face-to-face with their teachers. Conferences differ considerably from the typical classroom situation, and some students may lack the experience, interactive abilities, or aural comprehension skills to benefit. There is also the issue of power relations in the conference and the ways that this may affect student participation and negotiation of meaning (Powers, 1993). Some learners have cultural or social inhibitions about engaging informally with authority figures, let alone questioning them (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990), and this can result in students passively and unreflectively incorporating the teacher's suggestions into their work. For teachers there are the disadvantages that conferences consume considerable amounts of time and require specialized interaction skills that have not been fully defined. There is, therefore, a need for further investigation of the effectiveness of the feedback offered in conferences and the nature of the oral interaction between teachers and students.

### *Peer feedback and L2 writers*

Another important issue in L2 feedback is the role of peer response. From a socio-cognitive perspective, peer review can be seen as a formative developmental process that gives writers the opportunities to discuss their texts and discover others' interpretations of them.

Although peer response was introduced into L2 settings from L1 contexts on the assumption that what was good for one would be good for the other, subsequent research has not confirmed this optimism. Chaudron (1984), for instance, found the influence of teacher and peer feedback on writing improvement to be about the same, while Zhang (1985) found that teacher feedback was more effective for improving grammatical errors than peer or self-feedback, and Connor and Asenavage (1994) discovered that peer feedback made only a marginal difference to student writing. Other studies, however, have been more positive. Paulus (1999), for instance, established that peer feedback influenced student revision significantly and led to improved texts, and Mendonca and Johnson (1994) found that students used their peers' comments in more than half their revisions. Affective factors are also important in the success of peer feedback, and studies have suggested that whereas students might value peer feedback, they prefer teacher feedback to all other types (Saito, 1994; Sengupta, 1998; Zhang, 1995).

These studies have taught us to avoid idealizing L2 peer group interactions as sites of constructive interaction, since the reality can be quite different. An important factor in the success of peer response seems to be student training, with instruction encouraging a greater level of

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[More information](#)*Contexts and issues in feedback on L2 writing* 7

engagement with the task and more helpful and concrete advice (e.g., Keh, 1990; Stanley, 1992). In fact, training appears to benefit both the writer and the reader in peer dyads, with students who receive training to give peer feedback also making higher quality revisions to their own writing (Berg, 1999).

Some problems with peer response are specific to the L2 situation. It is suggested that student editors, for example, are more likely to address surface errors than problems of meaning (Keh, 1990) and that inexperienced L2 students may find it hard to judge the validity of their peers' comments (Leki, 1990). Students might also have difficulties identifying problem areas in other students' writing and offer them inaccurate or misleading advice (Horowitz, 1986), while writers may react negatively and defensively to critical comments from their peers (Amores, 1997). But studies looking specifically at the kinds of advice given by L2 editors have found relatively small amounts of miscorrection (Jacobs, 1989). Caulk (1994), for example, concluded that L2 peer commentary appeared to offer valuable and complementary suggestions when compared with teachers' comments, with only 6 percent of peer suggestions offering bad advice. The comments made covered different concerns from the teacher comments and gave less general and more specific advice.

Peer response studies have focused on the nature of peer interactions in writing workshops (Guerrero & Villamil, 1994; Lim & Jacobs, 2001; Ohta, 1995). In their study of peer interactions by Spanish speakers in an EFL writing workshop, for instance, Villamil and Guerrero (1996) found a complex and productive scaffolded peer help process, conducted largely in the students' L1. The authors argue that a crucial aspect of peer interactions is "affectivity," which includes "camaraderie, empathy and concern for not hurting each other's feelings" (1996, p. 65). Hyland's (2000) examination of writing workshop interactions found that the aspects of peer feedback mentioned most positively by the students in interviews were related to informal peer support mechanisms. Rather than focusing on a finished product, these interactions functioned mainly at the affective level, with students informally providing each other with support and advice during the writing process.

An important but contentious issue in examinations of peer-group interactions is a focus on the problems that can arise from the variety of cultural and educational backgrounds that L2 peer groups may contain. According to Allaei and Connor (1990, p. 24), "conflict, or at the very least, high levels of discomfort may occur in multi-cultural collaborative peer response groups." Students from different cultures may have different expectations about fundamental aspects of the group situation, such as the roles of the members, the mechanics of the group, and interpersonal interaction strategies (Carson & Nelson, 1994, 1996; Nelson & Carson, 1995, 1998; Nelson & Murphy, 1992). These differences can

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Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *Ken Hyland and Fiona Hyland*

make it difficult for multicultural groups to reach a consensus about what to focus on and how to convey information and may affect the extent to which students incorporate their peers' suggestions. If the members of the group cooperate, the writers are more likely to make changes, but if the interaction is poor or the writers become defensive, they are less likely to do so (Nelson & Murphy, 1993).

As we can see, the research so far has not been conclusive on the central issue of whether peer response is an effective means of improving L2 writing or revision strategies. However, many writing teachers of L2 students feel instinctively that it has benefits, since it provides an audience for writers and seems to develop students' evaluative skills. Although it remains an important source of feedback in many writing courses, there is clearly a need for further investigation.

*Computer-mediated feedback*

As technology develops and computer facilities become more widely available, the role of the computer in delivering and mediating feedback has become a focus for research. In addition, changes in university sources of funding and student demographic distributions have meant a marked increase in the provision of distance courses and online research supervision. In more local contexts of instruction, writing workshops have also been extended through the use of computer networks that allow students to exchange writing with each other and with the teacher and receive comments without the need for face-to-face interaction.

Some researchers claim that these technological developments can empower students and make writing classes more collaborative. According to Warschauer et al. (1996), computer-mediated communication (CMC) allows students to take a more active and autonomous role when seeking feedback, since they can raise questions when they want to and take the initiative in discussions. Student conferencing is also said to make discussion more "student centered," foster a sense of community, encourage a sense of group knowledge, and increase student participation, since there are more opportunities for student-student interaction with the teacher as facilitator (Warschauer, 2002). CMC may also have particular advantages for empowering disadvantaged and less able students (Belcher, 1990; Hartman et al., 1991) and may be particularly motivating for L2 students (Warschauer, 2002; Greenfield, 2003). Some researchers also claim that it can lead to better writing products and more focused and better-quality peer feedback (Braine, 1997; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996).

However, there are also some concerns about CMC as a substitute for more traditional forms of feedback, since its benefits have not yet been clearly established by research. Belcher (1999) has cautioned that



*Contexts and issues in feedback on L2 writing* 9

although many students respond well to CMC, it can disadvantage the technologically challenged and those lacking access to good computer facilities at home. The lack of face-to-face communication and the time pressure may also have a negative effect on the quality of peer interaction in the CMC mode. Liu and Sadler (2003) looked at comments made by peer reviewers in technology-enhanced and traditional face-to-face contexts and found that students using CMC, especially those using real-time communication in online chat rooms, made a greater number of comments, but that these were more superficial, perhaps due to the pressure to respond immediately. Face-to-face interaction resulted in a more positive response with more focused feedback and more questions and interaction among peers. The future role of electronic peer review may be as part of a two-step peer review process, combined with traditional face-to-face activities rather than as a replacement for them.

Another area with a growing impact on approaches to feedback is the development of software that is either programmable or capable of scanning student text. Going beyond the often misleading and prescriptive information provided by early grammar checkers, several programs now offer students feedback in a wide variety of areas, including grammar. Programs such as the Criterion Online Writing Service (Burston et al., 2004), for instance, automatically evaluate essay responses, and e-rater (Burston, 2003) provides a holistic score for an essay with real-time feedback about grammar, usage, style, organization, and development. Such programs offer the potential for integrated and systematic feedback on language problems, although their value has not yet been fully demonstrated. The goal of producing automated feedback on L2 writing is still the holy grail of software developers, and the problem of parsing natural language in completely reliable ways remains an area of ongoing activity and research (Hearst, 2000).

Another kind of automated feedback program is the type offered in the Respond module of the widely used Daedalus Integrated Writing Environment (Daedalus, 2005). The program steers students through an evaluative process using a series of modifiable prompts. Learners revise their drafts, with questions appearing in the upper half of a window; students respond in the lower half while consulting their text in another window. Once again, research is sparse regarding the effectiveness of the program, but the fact that students as well as teachers are able to construct questions that focus on fine-tuning writing or highlighting common problems can be a productive way of using the medium.

Computers are also influencing feedback on writing through the use of electronic corpora, which are becoming increasingly important as teaching becomes less a practice of imparting knowledge and more one of providing opportunities for learning. Concordancers offer interesting possibilities for innovative uses of feedback, allowing students to access

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Edited by Ken Hyland and Fiona Hyland

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Ken Hyland and Fiona Hyland*

numerous examples of particular features in large collections of texts so they can focus on typical patterns in writing. If students submit their writing electronically, teachers can hyperlink errors directly to a concordance file where students can examine the contexts and collocations of the words they have misused (Milton, 1999). This kind of reflective, active response to a teacher's feedback can be extremely useful for raising students' awareness of genre-specific conventions, developing independent learning skills, and improving writing products (Hyland, K., 2003; Milton, 2004) and is an area for further investigation.

## Contexts and issues of feedback

It is clear that many areas of feedback remain unresolved. The main reason for this is that feedback on students' writing, whether by teachers or peers, is a form of social action designed to accomplish educational and social goals. Like all acts of communication, it occurs in particular cultural, institutional, and interpersonal contexts, between people enacting and negotiating particular social identities and relationships, and is mediated by various types of delivery. The fact that participants respond differently to these factors means that the effectiveness of feedback is difficult to pin down, and it is these factors that are explored in this book.

We need, then, to go beyond the individual act of feedback itself to consider the factors that influence feedback options and student responses. Although the choices are affected by what responders see on the page or screen, they are also socially shaped and constrained by the possibilities made available by their previous experiences, by their preferences for certain cultural and institutional practices, by the type of feedback mode they employ, and by their assumptions and beliefs about writing, learning, and individual writers.

The difficulties of specifying relevant aspects of context are considerable and have been discussed at length in the literature (e.g., Goodwin & Duranti, 1992; Levinson, 1983). Although such aspects of teaching writing and learning to write are not fully understood, it is clear that we can only appreciate them by considering both the immediate interaction in which they take place and the larger world that has an impact on participants' behaviors. Context is therefore a frame that surrounds feedback and provides resources for its appropriate interpretation. This volume seeks to further our understanding of what we do when we respond to second language students' writing, how we do it, what perceptions come into play, and the effects feedback has on teachers, learners, and writing. To do this involves examining how feedback is situated, shaped, and negotiated, and for us this means looking at three key dimensions of