1 Contexts and Issues in Feedback on L2 Writing

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1 Introduction

L2 writing research, and especially work on feedback, has changed significantly since the first edition of this book was published back in 2006. The intervening 13 years have seen the field grow in a variety of directions: most obviously in the plethora of experimental studies into the effectiveness of written corrective feedback (WCF); a greater interest in how individual learners engage with and participate in feedback; the emergence of automated delivery systems and online sources of feedback; and the role of feedback outside language classrooms. How students learn from feedback, the role of digital media, and the links between Second-Language Acquisition and feedback have become more prominent, while topics in the first edition of the book, such as portfolio feedback and computer-aided feedback, now seem somewhat dated. These changes have motivated a second edition of the book, and while retaining much of the original content, structure, and range of the first edition, only four of the original chapters remain.

What has not changed is that the feedback on second-language writers' texts remains an issue of central interest to practicing educators, graduate students, and researchers, and continues to be seen as crucial for both encouraging and consolidating learning (Goldstein, 2005; Hyland, 2016). 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, a growing synthesis between these approaches has transformed feedback practices, with teacher-written comments focusing on genre-specific features being supplemented with peer feedback, writing workshops, conferences, and computer-delivered feedback. But, however it is delivered, feedback is a constructive judgement of a text: an evaluation that points forward to the student's future writing and the development of his or her writing processes.

1

But while feedback is now a key aspect of L2 writing courses across the world and is central to language-teacher education programs, teachers often still have a sense that they are not making use of its full potential. Equally, research reminds us that it does not always fulfill its possibilities (e.g., Ferris, 2006; Truscott & Hsu, 2008) and surveys reveal significant student dissatisfaction (Carless, 2006). This book sets out to address this quandary, and in this introductory chapter we sketch some of the background to what follows, offering an overview of some key issues and previewing the book's organization.

2 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 also extended beyond the teacher's margin notes to include oral interaction involving the teacher or the students themselves. The focus moved from a concern 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 was therefore viewed as having a powerful potential with the possibility for "a revision of cognition itself that stems from response" (Freedman, 1985: xi).

Feedback practices and research were also increasingly influenced by interactionist theories that 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: 69). This perspective places a high value on reader response and encourages the use of peer feedback and multiple feedback sources providing a real, rather than 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 of consequence. 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 also means confronting issues of teacher control and social and political dominance. Bartholomae (1986: 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 our 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 over 45 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. What are the most effective feedback practices in different contexts? Does feedback improve student writing and language accuracy in the longer term? What is the impact of peer feedback on L2 writing? Does the use of social media enhance the feedback process? Does automated feedback encourage revision and learning? What factors affect student engagement with feedback? L2 writers are not all the same, and learn in very different contexts where language proficiency, cultural expectations, access to social media, learning experiences, teacher variables, and teaching practices can interact in significant ways with the cognitive demands of interpreting feedback and negotiating revisions. As a result, research has sought to explore key issues of teaching practices and learner experiences, which we briefly consider here.

3 Some Key Issues

Error Correction

Surveys indicate that ESL students greatly value teacher-written feedback and consistently rate it more highly than alternative forms, such as peer feedback (Hyland, 1998; Zhang, 1995). But while 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 has remained unclear. A great deal of research has focused on WCF and been highly skeptical of its advantages. Early L2 writing researchers, for example, argued that feedback on error was both discouraging and unhelpful (e.g., Kepner, 1991; Sheppard, 1992; Zamel, 1985). In a well-known summary of this literature, Truscott (1996) saw very little benefit in this kind of

feedback and argued strongly that teachers should adopt a "correction-free approach" in their classrooms (Truscott, 1999). Much of this work, however, followed a process view which emphasizes the need for writing uninhibited by language correction, and adopted experimental methodologies that removed feedback from the realities of classroom practice.

Clearly, grammatical 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 comment on their errors and may feel resentful if their teachers do not provide this. It has also been suggested that L2 students have less of their self-worth invested in their writing than L1 writers have in their native language and are therefore not discouraged by language corrections (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 not only consider the errors they find in a piece of writing, but also the student who wrote it, 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 both produce texts that are regarded as successful by their intended audiences.

More recent research has largely confirmed the effectiveness of WCF, and controlled studies show that feedback on specific linguistic features gives L2 writers an advantage over those receiving no feedback (e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Ellis et al., 2008). Longitudinal studies also suggest that error feedback over time can improve language accuracy (Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2002). While it is unlikely that feedback alone is responsible for long-term language improvement, it is almost certainly a significant factor and one that varies with context. One context is whether teachers use direct feedback, providing the correct form to the student, or give feedback indirectly through the use of a code or highlighting to draw the writer's attention to an error (Ellis et al., 2008; Ferris, 2010). Another is the nature and backgrounds of the students themselves (Bitchener & Storch, 2016). How teachers might adjust to these contexts to offer the most effective feedback remains an open question.

Teacher Stance and Interaction

Clearly, feedback involves more than correcting student errors, and another key area of investigation has been the stance teachers take when giving feedback. Leki (1990), for instance, 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 teacher feedback show that learners remember and value encouraging remarks, but expect to receive constructive criticism rather than simple platitudes (Hyland, 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 in various ways, taking the sting out of them by the use of hedges, question forms, and personal attribution, but this kind of indirection also carries the very real danger that students may miss the point of the comment and so misinterpret the feedback.

Stance forms part of what Ferris in this volume refers to as the "missing teacher variable" (Ferris & Kurzer, 2018). Teachers give feedback in many different ways and vary in their stances and the ways they interact with students (Ferris, 2006; Hyland, 2003; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010). The messages that students take from feedback impact on their uptake of feedback and may also affect their attitudes to writing and feedback in the longer term, making stance an important area for further research.

Writing Conferences

Responding to student writing during writing conferences is a powerful means of providing feedback, and the benefits have been widely discussed in the literature. One benefit is the negotiation that takes place, allowing both the teacher and the student to constantly negotiate meaning and understandings. Writing conferences with teachers have therefore been seen as "conversational dialogues" (Freedman & Sperling, 1985), with the emphasis on two-way communication. Students have the chance to ask for clarification and explore issues they don't understand (Martin & Mottet, 2011) and to exercise their agency by negotiating teacher feedback and standing up for their ideas (Gilliland, 2014). For teachers, the interactive nature of the conference

offers 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. At the heart of the writing conference is the Vygotskian concept of *scaffolding*, where the support of a more knowledgeable person can enable a student writer to develop both his/her text and writing abilities (Williams, 2002).

Both teachers and students therefore tend to be positive about the opportunities for detailed discussion that conferences offer. But conferences vary 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 have more lasting effects on improving writing in later assignments (Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997). They also provide opportunities for individualized instruction, may help students to set goals, and help teachers build rapport with students (Eckstein, 2013).

Conferences, however, consume considerable amounts of time and require interaction skills from teachers that have not been fully defined. Nor are L2 students always in a good position to make the most of the opportunities these negotiations offer. Conferences differ considerably from the typical classroom situation, and some students may lack the experience, interactive abilities, or aural comprehension skills to benefit. Some learners have cultural or social inhibitions about engaging informally with authority figures, let alone questioning them (Han & Hyland, 2016), and this can result in students passively and unreflectively incorporating the teacher's suggestions into their work. Conferences, moreover, are "emotionally charged interactions" (Trees et al., 2009: 397–398) due to their evaluative nature, and this may create tensions for both teachers and students (Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2012). Criticism in such face-to-face settings may undermine students' self-esteem and motivation (Värlander, 2008) and have the potential to negatively impact perceptions of the teacher (Lee & Schallert, 2008), thus creating barriers to future learning.

Clearly, such relational and affective aspects are central to the management of conferences and can impact the productivity of conferences and the learning that might occur (Consalvo, 2011). Many students, in fact, see conferences as opportunities to strengthen a close relationship with their teacher (Liu, 2009), but this involves careful management of the interaction to minimize threats to the students' face and their self-esteem (Shvidko, 2018). This strong connection involved in teacher–student relationships and students' uptake of teacher feedback underline the importance of creating a

positive atmosphere (Lee & Schallert, 2008). There is, therefore, a need for further investigation of the best ways of offering feedback in conferences and the nature of the interactive skills needed to achieve this.

Peer Feedback

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

Considerable research has explored the potential benefits of peer feedback on L2 writing development. This work has shown how peer feedback can assist writers' growing understanding of writing (Villamil & Guerrero, 2006), of themselves as writers (Yu & Hu, 2017), and of the needs of their audience (Paulus, 1999; Rollinson, 2005). It enables writing teachers to help their students receive more feedback on their papers as well as facilitate students' meaningful interaction with peers and a greater exposure to ideas. Peer reviewing may also help students learn critical evaluation skills that are necessary to effectively review texts (Berg, 1999), and help them to see logical gaps, problems with organization, and other weaknesses, making them better writers and better able to review their own papers as they write (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1992; Yu & Hu, 2017). It has also been suggested that when two novice learners are paired they are able to support each other's writing and learn from each other (e.g., Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Teo, 2006).

But research has not always confirmed this optimism. Nelson and Carson (1998) and Tsui and Ng (2000), for example, found that students trusted peer comments less than teacher feedback, while Zhang (1985) found that teacher feedback was more effective for improving grammatical errors than peer or self-feedback. Several studies also show low rates of uptake of peer feedback into revisions (Mendonça & Johnson, 1994; Nelson & Murphy, 1993b). Nor have long-term benefits been categorically observed because of the difficulty in conducting longitudinal experimental research and eliminating the effects of extraneous variables. On the other hand, some studies have identified peer feedback as being complementary to teacher feedback and/or self-feedback (Lam, 2013; Suzuki, 2008), that L2 students incorporated large proportions of peer comment into their revisions (Hu & Lam, 2010; Rollinson, 2005) and that peer feedback brought significant improvements to revised texts L2 (Diab, 2011; Hu & Lam, 2010; Paulus, 1999).

These inconsistent findings sometimes give pause to teachers plan-ning to implement peer feedback in their classes, but an important factor in the success of peer response seems to be student training. Without appropriate training, students may not be able to offer useful feedback or to identify and benefit from it in their revision (Liu & Sadler, 2003; Ren & Hu, 2012). Instruction in peer response does seem to have a big impact on the quality of advice. Studies show that it fosters positive attitudes toward peer feedback (Hu, 2005; Liou & Peng, 2009), increases the amount and type of feedback provided (Berg, 1999; Min, 2005), improves the ability to engage in productive response and revision (Min, 2006; Rahimi, 2013; Rollinson, 2005; Yang & Meng, 2013), and develops appropriate communicative strat-egies (Berg, 1999; Hu, 2005; Stanley, 1992). In fact, training appears to benefit both the writer and the reader in peer dyads with Lundstrom and Baker (2009), finding that, following reviewer training, the bene-fits of peer review mainly accrue to the provider of feedback rather than the recipient.

Peer-response studies have also focused on interactions that go on in peer-feedback sessions. Villamil and Guerrero (1996), for instance, found a complex and productive scaffolded peer-help process, conducted largely in the students' Spanish 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: 65). A similar emphasis on informal peer-support mechanisms was also apparent in Hyland's (2000) examination of writing–workshop interactions. Effective inter-actions may, however, be a potential stumbling block as a result of students' prior learning and cultural backgrounds (e.g., Carson & Nelson, 1996; Nelson & Carson, 2006). Recent research, however, has stressed the multifaceted and accommodative nature of cultural traditions and shown that students' backgrounds do not necessarily impede discussions or prevent them working collaboratively to improve each other's L2 writing (e.g., Yu & Hu, 2017; Yu, Lee, & Mak, 2016).

As we can see, while the research is increasingly positive, especially where peer training is involved, it has not really been conclusive on the central issue of whether peer response is an effective means of improv-ing L2 written products 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' evalu-ative skills. So, while it remains an important source of feedback in many writing courses, there is clearly a need for further investigation of this area.

Computer-Mediated Feedback

Technology has had an enormous impact on the delivery and mediation of feedback in recent years, but the rapid pace of its development means any overview of its role in feedback is likely to date rapidly.

Many teachers today use the Track Changes feature in word-processing programs to give feedback or deliver it via course-management systems such as Blackboard or Moodle after students have posted online. Other asynchronous (delayed) tools such as email or bulletin boards are now popular, and more teachers are recognizing the value of supporting students to develop and publish their own websites so they can practice new online literacy skills. Class blogs have also been used by teachers to foster the expression of students' opinions in writing, creating a sense of both authorship and community (Bloch, 2008), while wikis are seen by some as encouraging research and collaborative posts (Beach et al., 2014). Teachers have also turned to mobile technologies to exploit text messaging and micro-blogging, and to social media, as ways to engage students in authentic writing activities and alternative sources of feedback. All of these, of course, present their own opportunities and challenges for how feedback is negotiated, engaged with, and understood. The range of technologies available has become so diverse and so much part of everyday practice that the use of the widely used term (Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), which we used in the previous edition of this book, may becoming obsolete (Dudeney & Hockly, 2012).

The role of technology in peer feedback has received particular attention, with some researchers claiming that technological developments empower students, allowing them to be more active and autonomous when seeking feedback. Since synchronous platforms allow students to raise questions and take the initiative in discussions (e.g., Warschauer, 2002), this can lead to better writing products and more focused and better peer feedback (Sullivan & Pratt, 1996; Ware & Warschauer, 2006). In a review of twenty studies of computer-mediated peer feedback, Chen (2016) discovered generally positive results with technology, allowing students to respond spontaneously, to reflect on their ideas, to rehearse their responses, and to express themselves freely at their own pace.

However, there are also some concerns about CMC as a substitute for more traditional forms of feedback, since research is still catching up with the ways new technology is being used. Clearly, while many students respond well to CMC, the lack of face-to-face communication, time pressures in synchronous encounters, and public postings

may negatively affect the quality of peer interaction. The future role of electronic peer review may be as part of a two-step process combined with traditional face-to-face activities, rather than as a replacement for them.

Another area with a growing impact on feedback is electronic software, which is either programmable or capable of scanning student text and offering feedback on a variety of areas including grammar. Going beyond the often misleading and prescriptive information provided by early grammar checkers, there are now many automated writing evaluation (AWE) systems that combine numeric scores and written comments, offering students feedback on a wide variety of areas. Programs such as *Criterion* and *Writing Assistant* are widely available, while *Pigai* is used by tens of thousands of students in 5,000 Chinese universities (Yubing, 2016; Zhang & Hyland, 2018). A growing number of systems are designed for L2 learners, so that *CorrectEnglish*, for example, provides feedback on English grammar in seven languages (Wang et al., 2013). These programs typically offer feedback on organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics with generic suggestions on language use (Deane, 2013). While many remain skeptical of the accuracy of these programs (Ericsson & Haswell, 2006) and criticize their stress on accuracy and formal correctness (Stevenson, 2016), they help relieve teachers of time spent on the mechanical marking of errors and may encourage students to develop self-assessment skills.

Finally, technology is also encouraging self-feedback through the use of electronic corpora. Concordancers allow students to access numerous examples of particular features in large collections of texts so they can see typical patterns in writing. If students submit their writing electronically, then teachers can hyperlink errors in an essay directly to a concordance file where students can examine the contexts and collocations of the words they have misused (e.g., Milton, 2006). 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. All these topics offer interesting areas for further investigation.

Student Use and Engagement with Feedback

Students' engagement with feedback, and how they use the comments they receive, has until recently been an under-researched area in L2 writing, although it plays a pivotal role in learning (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012). Broadly, engagement refers to the extent