WRITING FEEDBACK AS AN EXCLUSIONARY PRACTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Grace Chu-Lin Chang
Macquarie University
grace.chulin.chang@gmail.com

This ethnographic research probes into feedback on academic writing received by Taiwanese students in Australian higher education institutions, and examines whether the feedback received helped students to participate in the written discourse of academic communities. Academic writing dominates the academic life of students in Australia and is the key measure of their academic performance. This can be problematic for international students who speak English as an additional language and who are expected to acquire academic literacies in English ‘by doing’. As a social practice, academic writing depends on participation in dialogue for students to be included in the community of academia. However, the findings show that few participants received any useful feedback. Some assignments were never returned; in other cases, the hand-written feedback was illegible, and often included only overly general comments that puzzled the participants. As a result, the learning process came to an end once the students handed in their assignments; feedback failed to promote further learning related to content, and particularly to academic writing. The article highlights the few instances where participants received helpful feedback that was accessible and constructive, and which can be considered best practice for the promotion of academic literacy.

KEY WORDS: academic writing, writing feedback, overseas students, higher education

INTRODUCTION

International students are crossing countries in unprecedented numbers to advance their tertiary studies. In doing so, they face significant challenges with regard to language and academic development, as well as social adaptation to a new country. One major hurdle they face is academic writing, which not only presents a linguistic challenge but also requires them to adapt to a new discourse with its specific disciplines and genre, and its own academic literacy within a different cultural context. Performance and achievement in a new academic community, through the medium of a second language, becomes their primary concern. Therefore, any attempt to investigate the issue of social inclusion in higher education should not overlook the relationship between academic writing and feedback on that writing, since academic writing is a core assessment and practice in higher education and is crucial to students’ academic development and success; feedback on writing is meant to facilitate students’ participation in the written discourse of the discipline in the institution. Against this background, the present paper examines the intersection between feedback on international students’ academic writing and their inclusion in the community of academia.
The research question is whether feedback facilitates international students’ learning and their inclusion in the new academic community.

The literature on written feedback to second language (L2) students typically focuses on English language and error correction feedback, but pays little attention to feedback to L2 student writing relating to the disciplinary faculty (Leki, 2006; Roca de Larios & Murphy, 2010). The effectiveness of feedback is challenging to pinpoint, as Hyland and Hyland (2006) explain: ‘Like all acts of communication, it [feedback] 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’ (p. 10). As Kubota and Lehner (2004) have argued, academic writing is a social practice, which is politically and socially situated. Likewise, feedback acts as a form of communication and a social action (Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

In addition to the challenging nature of researching feedback, many research findings on feedback have been inconclusive because the research direction has moved too far away from empirical studies, shifting instead towards experimental studies (Storch, 2010). Ignoring the social nature of the practice, very few studies have looked at how students actually engage with feedback in natural settings while undertaking their university programs and how feedback influences their writing processes (see Hyland, 2010). A further problem is that only a minority of the research examined feedback from the perspective of postgraduate students, for whom academic development plays a significant role. After thematically analysing 460 studies on assessment feedback in higher education, Evans (2013) found that, from 2000 to 2012, there was a lack of studies on feedback in the context of postgraduate studies – only 19% compared to 69% on undergraduate students (p. 76). As a result of the factors mentioned above, the research field of written corrective feedback has not substantially advanced our knowledge of pedagogy – in spite of a growing body of research (Storch, 2010). This researcher called for more qualitative, ecologically valid and longitudinal approaches to research as well as acknowledging the fact that learners have their own agency and response to feedback in the real-life context of education. The present study responds to this call by adopting an ethnographic approach to investigate the feedback international students of higher education received on their written assignments, as well as how they made sense of that feedback.

This study not only examines feedback in relation to second language teaching pedagogy, but also explores how the feedback relates to the international students’ inclusion in tertiary education. This approach is based on the proposal by Piller and Takahashi (2011) that language mediates access to social inclusion sites, one of which is the educational site. The researchers have advanced the concept of social inclusion to cover ‘community participation’ and ‘a sense of empowerment’ (Piller & Takahashi, 2011, p. 372) and argue that ‘a sense of belonging is negotiated through language and often tied to specific competencies’ (p. 372).
Butorac (2011) also links social inclusion with community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) by stating that ‘the social inclusion of newcomers to a community of practice, such as learners of a language, occurs when they become more integrated in that community’ through a process of participation (p. 14). Participation in a university’s community of practice therefore becomes a consideration when evaluating the role of feedback.

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, employing an ethnographic approach, I analyse whether the academic feedback that international students received on their written work, as a social practice, serves as an inclusive practice that helps them in academic development during their time of study. Second, through its analysis and findings, this research addresses the implications for international student education and, specifically, the quality of feedback.

I begin by contextualising academic writing as a social practice leading to participation in an academic community. The research background and methodology of the study are then introduced, followed by an analysis of the actual feedback received by the research participants, and a discussion of their interpretation of the feedback. The paper concludes by highlighting the few instances where participants received constructive feedback that includes students in an academic conversation and promotes academic literacy.

WRITING AS PARTICIPATION

Australia is now one of the top three countries hosting foreign students, after the USA and the UK. There were 410,925 international students studying in Australia on a student visa in 2013; of these, 217,520 were in the higher education sector (Australian Government Department of Education, 2014). In view of the unprecedented numbers of students flooding into Australia, the issue of social inclusion in its educational aspect has become more significant than ever before (Leask & Carroll, 2011; Paltridge et al., 2012). Given that academic writing dominates the academic life of international students and largely determines the measurement of their academic performance, a great body of research has been carried out on international students’ writing experience. However, the research focus has often been on the influence of international students’ cultural backgrounds on their writing and on the difficulties they experience in adapting to the academic conventions expected by the host institutions. Tran (2009, p. 271) stated that insufficient weight has been given to ‘…students’ own reflection on their underlying reasons, potential choices and concerns embedded in their process of writing, and communicating in the institutional context’.

Academic writing is not merely an issue of language proficiency, but a socially and culturally situated practice (Kubota & Lehner, 2004). The conventions of what constitutes good writing vary among languages, education systems and particular disciplines. These differences can work to the disadvantage of learners when they are communicated implicitly to students who do not understand them or may not agree with them. International students studying in a
second language may feel frustrated and helpless about their writing competence and discipline-specific rhetoric in a new educational and academic context although they may have a good understanding of the subject they are studying (Leki, 2006). While L2 international students are in need of timely instruction and help, oftentimes only basic and general L2 writing skill courses are provided due to instructor availability, university funding and other feasibility issues (Hansen, 2000). As a result, the academic feedback received from course lecturers or supervisors has a significant role in helping students acquire discipline-specific genres and conventions, and further facilitates their membership of the academic communities in their particular fields.

THE STUDY

This research is part of a larger ethnographic investigation into the language learning experiences of Taiwanese higher education students in Australia, including their motivation to invest in studying in Australia, the challenges they face, their sense of identity and belonging, their social networks and their overall study experience. In-depth, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were first conducted with 30 participants, including seven PhD students, 19 master’s students, two undergraduate students, one TAFE student (Australian vocational education), and one language school student. The findings of the interviews showed that a key concern for them was their academic writing and the help they were (or were not) receiving to improve it.

METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPANTS

As the participants’ particular concern was how to deal with feedback they received on their academic writing, data collection and interviews were generated accordingly. Following this lead, I adopted a materialist and processual approach to probing into the ‘unproblematic side’, the feedback given by educators. It thus became necessary to collect participants’ academic writing. Participants were asked to collect all texts relating to a particular written assignment, including the original task as it was set, the assignment or essay they produced and any feedback they had received. These were discussed with participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted until the research data was saturated. Seventeen students participated, aged from 21 to 33. Sixteen of them were master’s students and one was an undergraduate student. The participants’ study areas included Humanities (Cultural Studies, Linguistics, Fine Arts); Social Sciences (Engineering Management, Integrated Marketing Communication, Marketing, Accounting, International Business, Project Management, Finance); and Sciences (Environmental Management, Health Promotion). They were located in different parts of Australia and had studied in Australia for periods of six months to three years. No academic writing data was collected from PhD students because of confidentiality concerns. However, their opinions are included as secondary participants. All the names used in this paper are pseudonyms.
The interview data confirmed that the research participants considered academic writing to play a central role in their overall academic performance. In the interviews, university life in Australia was described as consisting of attending classes, studying, and ‘writing essays, writing essays and writing essays’, as can be seen in the following examples:

在澳洲上課，就好像老師教東西可能只有一兩分，可是卻要求我們做到十分的報告

[I feel that learning in Australian higher education is like the teachers teach you 10–20% in class and expect you to write a 100% assignment.] (Kimberly, postgraduate student of Food Studies)

我們作業好多，一個接一個，下一週的東西一交完，馬上就回到家裡，又開始作下一個 [We have so many assignments, one after another. I handed in one assignment, went back home, and started writing another assignment right away.] (Tim, postgraduate student of Engineering Management)

The fact that assignments constituted a large part of participants’ academic assessment shocked and stressed many of them as well as dominating their study experience. On average, they took three to four subjects in one semester and were required to hand in eight to twelve assignments that varied in length, form and purpose, producing thousands and thousands of words. However, despite so much effort put into written tasks, be they assignments, reports, projects, essays, or theses, the students did not consider their English academic writing to have improved in a way commensurate with their practice. It is therefore important to examine the role of feedback in the academic literacy development of participants.

In the following sections, I present the participants’ learning process by probing into the feedback that they received. The observed problems with feedback were its limited nature, illegible handwriting and generic comments that puzzled the participants.

**FINDINGS**

**LITTLE OR NO FEEDBACK**

While I was collecting assignment feedback data from the participants, I found that many of them were generous in their willingness to share. Unfortunately, however, they found that they actually did not have much to show me. Nine out of 17 – more than half – received little or no feedback. Betty, the only undergraduate student in this research, said she had never received any feedback for her assignments, which were mostly essays, throughout her three years of a university Finance program. She considered this to be a huge drawback of the university because she could only tell whether she did well or not by a mark. Gigi, Abby, Cathy, Toby, Billy and Vincent, who are respectively Master’s students of Commerce, International Business, Marketing, Fine Arts, Biomedical Engineering and Integrated...
Marketing Communication, all indicated they seldom received feedback for their assignments in their programs, even though the universities they studied at were reputable and had a high standing in university rankings. Tiffany, a Master’s student of Human Resources, said she was not even told the mark for each assignment and received only a final—aggregated—mark. Some assignments were never returned because the semester had ended. In some cases, assignments and feedback were posted in a grading system online, which could not be accessed after a certain period of time.

Marking tells the student what degree of excellence they have achieved, and is certainly a kind of feedback; however, the use of marking alone does not promote academic literacy, because it conveys a minimal message and fails to offer students any other form of guidance. A mark only tells the students if they have passed or failed by the teacher’s standards; it tells them very little about how the mark was arrived at, since no explanation or suggestion is given for their improvement, whether in understanding the subject content or in academic writing.

**ILLEGIBLE HAND-WRITTEN FEEDBACK**

Among the eight participants who obtained some feedback, four of them indicated that they often found it difficult to understand the written annotations that lecturers made on their assignments because they could not read the handwriting (see Figures 1 and 2 below). Some of them blamed themselves for not being good at reading handwriting as a second language learner. Some participants went to the teachers for clarification, but they soon got tired of asking, especially when they were under time pressure to write the next assignment, or when the semester was about to end and the teacher was not easily accessible. If the mark was good, they did not even bother to decipher the comment(s), since a good mark already suggested they were doing well. Illegible hand-written feedback is largely a waste of time for both the teacher and the students; the students are using their time and energy in trying to make out the words rather than comprehending their meaning.

![Feedback sample from Lisa](image-url)
GENERAL COMMENTS THAT PUZZLED THE PARTICIPANTS

Apart from the illegibility of the comments, in many cases these were too general to be useful. All participants who had received feedback reported this as the foremost reason why they did not consider the feedback helpful. Examples include statements such as ‘What does this mean?’ ‘This example is not clear’, ‘Not sufficient’, ‘Not done properly’, ‘I’m not sure what you are trying to say here’, as shown in Figures 3 and 4, and ‘More academic tone’, ‘Not specific’, ‘This could be more critical’, ‘Need to be coherent’, ‘Not a Master/PhD level of analysis’. Participants receiving such general comments were often left in the dark, not knowing how the teacher had arrived at such judgment let alone knowing how to utilise the feedback to improve. As Tim, an Engineering Management student, said, ‘Comments such as “I don’t understand” or “This is not clear” are not helpful because I still don’t know why the teacher doesn’t understand.’
Looking through his assignments with me, David told me his reaction when he saw the comment shown in Figure 5: ‘他說他看不懂，這句話也非常 general!’ ['The comment saying this is too general is general to me too!']

You have worked hard at this and tried to give a thorough account of this complex article. Sometimes your summary of point is worded very generally, and it’s not clear what you mean or how well you have understood the point you are making. Your critique at the end is intelligent and good.

Similarly, Mark, a postgraduate student of Environmental Management, told me what he thought of the feedback he received and what he had hoped to gain from it:

I learned mostly from the process rather than the feedback, which is not very useful to me. Maybe it is because my work was not good enough, so the teacher mostly commented on the general things, such as references. My mark was on average around 70. The feedback was not detailed and specific enough for me to learn. It seems my ideas were not well understood so the feedback was not conversing with me. Of course,
I understand how limited time a teacher has, and there are so many students. Also, maybe our papers are not that easy to understand. Hahaha.

A dialogue to discuss his ideas and arguments was what Mark was hoping for from the feedback, as was the case for many other participants. The general comments did not serve the function of intellectually responding to and conversing with the participants. The learning process thus stalled, and so did the inclusion in an academic community of practice. In other words, their opportunities to move from peripheral to central participation in their overseas education experience were largely missed.

Some students like Mark were attributing such general feedback to their L2 learner identity. However, some time ago Lea and Street (1998) found that the feedback and guidelines provided to local students in the UK similarly were too generic and general for them to develop specific rhetoric for a particular field. Students felt they were trying to meet individual tutors’ standards rather than developing a set of coherent skills to write academically for a specific field. That study indicates that general academic feedback is also puzzling to local students, who are following a familiar educational system in their native language. It is therefore not surprising that international students, who have shifted to a different educational system using a language that may not be their strongest, struggle to comprehend such feedback.

HELPFUL FEEDBACK

However, the quality of the feedback received was not all viewed negatively. There were a few instances where participants received helpful feedback that made them feel included in a valuable learning experience. My findings suggest that high quality feedback is concrete and specific, forming a dialogue.

CONCRETE AND SPECIFIC COMMENTS

Good and useful feedback is clear, concrete, and specific. As Figure 6 shows, this type of feedback begins with a summary followed by specific comments. The teacher demonstrates what is more acceptable. When she does not understand, she asks the student ‘do you mean a, b, or c’, so the student knows the sentence is not clear due to multiple possible interpretations. The teacher also gives specific suggestions on how to improve grammatical accuracy.
Inevitably, such feedback is lengthier and requires teachers to expend more time and energy. However, good and efficient feedback does not have to be in written form only.

**VERBAL FEEDBACK AND MODEL EXAMPLES FROM STUDENTS**

Verbal feedback has the potential to work well as an efficient and genuine dialogue. Lisa, a postgraduate student of Finance, indicated that immediately after her first assignment the teacher chose two or three good assignments produced by students to demonstrate the standard expected and the principles to do well. In addition, the teacher would discuss general weaknesses of the assignments that did not meet the expected level. At the same time, students who had difficulties had the chance to express the difficulties they faced and ask questions to clarify their confusions.

> [Although those exemplary assignments were, obviously, written by local students, the level was too high for us to reach right away, but at least we realised what the teacher expected, and I knew better how to write future assignments.]

Verbal feedback in class combined with model examples serves at least four important functions: first, it is time and labour efficient; second, it starts a conversation between teachers and students and allows confusion to be clarified on the spot; third, model examples contextualise guidelines and implicit expectations in a course-specific text; and finally, social inclusion in a community of practice is embodied in the interaction of teachers and students in the learning process.
Learning is fundamentally a social activity, which is relational and dialogic in essence (Vygotsky, Hanffmann, Vakar, & Kozulin, 2012). The development of academic writing skills is a complex process. It cannot be mastered at the beginning of postgraduate education and be expected to take care of itself, developing autonomously (Wellington, 2010). Consideration of the type of feedback that does and does not promote learning seems to suggest that the key to useful feedback lies in whether the practice is inclusive, and whether there is an accessible, genuine, constructive dialogue between teachers and students as well as among students, irrespective of whether it is written or verbal.

Numerous studies over the past two decades have debated whether feedback, including corrective feedback, or error treatment, referring to the type given to international students, leads to tangible improvement. These studies often adopted experimental approaches in an attempt to look for types of correction which could make instant learning happen (see Evans, 2013). However, students’ academic writing takes time to evolve in an inclusive practice. Such learning processes are often unperceived and unmeasurable by experimental approaches. As one of the participants, a postgraduate student of International Business, states:

具體的還是較有用, 雖然不見得有馬上改進, 或能馬上用出來, 但還是會愈來
愈知道該怎麼寫, 雖然常感心有餘而力不足, 不見得語言能力上做的到。

[Concrete feedback is still more useful. Although I may not be able to improve right
away or apply the comments to the next assignment immediately due to my language
proficiency, I know better and better how to write (academic texts).]

As the quote shows, academic literacy and discipline rhetoric take time and participation in
the community of practice to develop for all students, whether local or international.

Writing feedback is considered to be an important component for a tertiary community of
practice by the research participants. This paper will close with participant Natasha’s
reflections on and emotions about her writing experiences in Australia. Her narrative
illustrates clearly that feedback acts as a form of a social inclusion/exclusion practice for
international students:

我來這邊有個很強烈的感覺是，我不知道我的讀者怎麼想。我不知道別人怎麼
讀,有一個可能是因為,我掌握的資源很少,大都各自在寫,很少有大家互相
看的機會。老師給我的幫助是學術寫作的態度,該如何去分析別人,該如何呈現
自己,當然這些也有幫助,但當我一直在寫的時候,我不知道到底有沒有進步，
還是一直在犯重覆的錯誤。可是我一下找這朋友或那個朋友幫我看,都是零碎
的意見,然後 supervisor 又不太管這些東西,所以寫作一直給我一個 insecure
感覺，你不知道自己有沒有 on track，不僅是語言上面，還有包含 idea 上
面，是不是這裡學術圈可以接受的。
After I came here to study, my deepest feeling is that I don’t know how my readers would think. I have little idea about how others would read [my work]. This could be due to the lack of resources I possess here. Everyone [classmates] is busy writing their own theses, and there are few chances for us to read each other’s work. My supervisor helps me with things like how to analyse others’ research and how to present mine. Of course, this is helpful; however, while I keep writing, I don’t know if I am improving or not. Maybe I’m making the same mistakes over and over again. Sometimes I asked my own friends to read my writing, but it is all little pieces of suggestions [various personal views on writing]. In addition, my supervisor does not care about this aspect [the student’s academic writing development] much. So writing gives me a constant sense of insecurity. I don’t know if I’m on track, not only when it comes to language use, but also in terms of ideas, whether they would be accepted in academic circles here.

Natasha was not a novice research student, but had obtained a Master’s degree in Cultural Studies in Taiwan that included both course and research components before undertaking a Master of Philosophy in Australia. She could produce writing in Mandarin that flowed freely and creatively for her first Master’s thesis and was confident that her readers would understand and accept her work based on shared common ground in language, academic culture and social culture. With the change of context, however, she lost full capacity in her language use. She was faced with difficulties not only caused by a change of language that implicitly forced her to adopt what she perceived to be ‘笨拙的方式’ [a clumsy way] to arrange her writing in English, but also by an identity change: she was not sure how she was positioned as a learner, as an academic, and as an ‘other’. The lack of useful and constructive feedback made her feel as though she were an outsider in the host education community. She was participating eagerly and earnestly, hoping to receive responses and be included in the academic conversation, but she was not given a bridge via which to connect. Her deep sense of insecurity corresponds to what Hymes (1996) observed in another educational context:

A latent function of the educational system is to instil linguistic insecurity, to discriminate linguistically, to channel children in ways that have an integral linguistic component, while appearing open and fair to all. (p. 84)

Hymes’ statement reflects the Australian higher education experience of the research participants. Their academic identity was not empowered through the academic writing and feedback practices. Instead, the current practice of feedback largely instils in the students a sense of insecurity and excludes them from the broad communities of academia and English language writers. As a result, the students remained in a peripheral position throughout their programs. Overseas students’ academic writing challenges far exceed the matter of language proficiency. These students confront a new discourse that is politically and socially situated. It takes participation and dialogue for L2 international students to enter this discourse, and useful feedback can be a powerful mediator in this process.
REFERENCES


