Second language learners’ engagement with written feedback

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Studies on feedback given to second language (L2) learners have focused primarily on learners’ response to feedback on language. This study explores how L2 learners in one university EAP class respond to teacher written feedback on all aspects of writing and the factors that may affect their response. Using data from student initial and revised texts, the study first looks at nine learners’ uptake of feedback. Then, adopting a case study approach and using data from retrospective interviews, the study examines how three learners engage with feedback on different dimensions of their writing. Findings show that learners took up almost all feedback suggestions regardless of form or focus. Yet, learners’ engagement with the feedback differed. Using activity theory (AT), we explain the learners’ engagement with the feedback received by reference to the interaction of context and individual-related factors. Our findings highlight the complexity of learner behavior in response to feedback.

**Keywords:** second language writing, written feedback, engagement, activity theory

1. Introduction

Teacher feedback on second language (L2) learners’ writing has received much research interest. This trend may be attributable to the importance of teacher feedback in L2 learners’ writing development (Hyland, 2013). However, both the focus and the nature of this research have been questioned (e.g., Atkinson & Tardy, 2018; Storch, 2010, 2018).

One criticism levelled at research on teacher feedback is that it is too narrow in focus and does not resemble what happens in real language classes (Ferris, 2015; Lee, 2013; Storch, 2010). In language classes, teachers give feedback on various aspects of learners’ writing, such as content, structure, as well as language use (Lee, 2008; Zheng et al., 2020), with the goal of improving learners’ overall writ-
ing quality. However, research on feedback has focused predominantly on written corrective feedback (WCF), which refers to the feedback on language errors (e.g., Han & Xu, 2019; Zheng & Yu, 2018).

Furthermore, research on WCF still continues, for the most part, to focus predominantly on the uptake of the feedback as evident in revised drafts or new writing (see review in Bitchener, 2019) and to regard such texts as providing evidence of learning. This focus on the product may overlook the learning that could occur during learners’ processing of feedback. It is relatively more recently that researchers have also started to investigate learners’ engagement with WCF, that is, learners’ processing and reactions to WCF (e.g., Han & Hyland, 2015; Han & Xu, 2019; Mahfoodh, 2017; Zheng & Yu, 2018). However, although these studies have also considered factors that affect learners’ engagement with feedback, they tend to present these factors as a loose set of variables, rather than employing a theoretical framework to explain these variables in a systematic way (Bitchener & Storch, 2016). Moreover, although studies on learners’ engagement with feedback tend to be conducted in authentic L2 writing classes, learners’ engagement with feedback beyond language errors is still largely ignored.

Therefore, this study set out to investigate how L2 learners in a regular English for Academic Purposes (EAP) class respond to teacher written feedback given on different aspects of their writing. The study considered learners’ uptake of teacher feedback as well as how they processed the feedback, the actions they took in response to the feedback, and the factors that affected their thinking and behavior. Activity theory (AT) was used as a theoretical framework to analyze and interpret the findings.

2. Literature review

In this section, we briefly review studies that have investigated how learners respond to teachers’ feedback. We begin with studies on learners’ response to WCF before considering response to feedback on other aspects of writing. We then consider two frameworks and studies that have deployed these frameworks. The first is a three-dimensional engagement framework, initially proposed by Ellis (2010). The second is AT with its roots in Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory.

2.1 Learners’ responses to teacher written feedback

Many studies have investigated L2 learners’ responses to feedback, but they focused predominantly on WCF (see review in Bitchener & Storch, 2016).
Response in these studies is generally taken to mean incorporation or uptake of the given feedback as evident in learners’ subsequent writing (revised drafts or new writing). These studies seek to explore the most effective form of WCF; that is, feedback that will lead to improved accuracy in writing. For example, one strand in this body of research compares learners’ improved accuracy based on their incorporation of direct (errors corrected) versus indirect (errors signaled) WCF in their subsequent drafts. While some studies showed that learners successfully incorporated more direct than indirect WCF (e.g., Chandler, 2003), other studies found that indirect WCF was more beneficial in the long run (e.g., Ferris, 2006). Ferris (2010) suggested that learners may put more effort into understanding and processing indirect WCF, which ultimately develops their metacognitive skills and ability to self-correct, thus alluding to the importance of considering learners’ cognitive engagement with WCF.

Compared to the studies that investigated WCF, there have been fewer studies that consider teacher written feedback on aspects of writing other than linguistic errors. Such feedback is usually offered as comments, with different functions and rhetorical forms. With regards to functions, researchers have found that the degree of directness in teachers’ praise, criticism, and suggestions affects students’ interpretation and uptake of feedback (e.g., Ferris, 2007; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Indirect criticisms or suggestions, often expressed in the form of questions, may be misunderstood by the learners or create uncertainty about the expected response to the feedback (Ferris, 2007; Hyland & Hyland, 2001).

2.2 Engagement framework of feedback processing

As mentioned earlier, a number of recent studies (e.g., Han, 2017; Han & Hyland, 2015; Zhang & Hyland, 2018; Zheng & Yu, 2018; Zheng et al., 2020) have moved away from considering response to feedback as limited to uptake, and instead use the term engagement and a multi-dimensional model of engagement, first proposed by Ellis (2010), to analyze learners’ processing and reaction to corrective feedback. The model of engagement with corrective feedback proposed by Ellis (2010) has three interconnected dimensions: affective, cognitive, and behavioral engagement. Affective engagement involves learners’ attitudinal and emotional responses to feedback. Cognitive engagement refers to the way learners attend to feedback, including the use of cognitive/meta-cognitive strategies as well as revision strategies. Behavioral engagement is concerned with learners’ responses to feedback, encompassing revision actions (e.g., uptake, rejection) and time spent on revisions.

Investigations utilizing this framework have yielded some unexpected findings, illustrating the complexity of learner engagement within and across the
three dimensions. For example, Mahfoodh’s (2017) study found that learners’ positive or negative emotional reactions towards feedback on various aspects of their writing affect their interpretation of the feedback and success of revisions. The study, conducted with eight university EFL learners, found that too much feedback and negative evaluation could lead to disappointment, frustration, and dissatisfaction and affect understanding and utilization of feedback. However, Han and Hyland (2019a) argued that the connection between response to feedback and negative emotions should be drawn cautiously. They discovered that their EFL learners’ emotional reactions to WCF were rich and diverse and could not be simply distinguished as positive or negative. In their earlier study, Han and Hyland (2015) found that their EFL learners’ negative emotions towards the WCF they received in fact motivated them to revise. The complexity of engagement was also demonstrated in Zheng and Yu’s (2018) study, who found that while their learners’ affective engagement with WCF was relatively positive, their behavioral and cognitive engagement was not necessarily extensive. The researchers thus concluded that positive affective engagement does not necessarily contribute to learners’ improved accuracy.

Zhang and Hyland (2018) have also moved away from viewing the construct of engagement as one that can easily be segmented into individual components and instead propose a broader and more holistic definition of engagement. They refer to engagement as the degree to which learners invest in and commit to their learning. The underlying assumption in this definition is that learners’ engagement is linked to learning opportunities. In this study, we adopt this broader definition of engagement and focus on the quality of feedback processing and investment in the feedback activity. An engaged learner, therefore, indicates someone who is proactive, seeking to understand and learn from the feedback received, and acting on it appropriately.

Furthermore, learners’ engagement with and response to feedback is a situated activity; it does not take place in a vacuum (Atkinson & Tardy, 2018). The engagement framework does not consider contextual factors that may shape learners’ response to feedback. The advantage of using AT is that it provides researchers with a useful heuristic to capture individual and contextual factors in one unified model.

2.3 Activity theory (AT): Capturing factors that influence learners’ engagement with feedback

AT, with its roots in Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, attempts to explain purposeful human behavior (activity) by reference to a model that includes individual and contextual factors. Although the model has undergone a number of
iterations, the most frequently used version is that proposed by Engeström (2001). The model, adapted from Engeström (1987) and reproduced below, has six interacting elements. The subject refers to the participants in the activity whose actions are mediated by instruments, whether in the form of symbolic signs and cultural artefacts (e.g., language) or material tools (e.g., computer applications). These actions are driven by goals (objects) and are directed towards achieving an ultimate outcome. It is important to note that AT views subjects as agentive, whose goals are shaped by their beliefs, prior educational experiences, and sense of identity. However, since all purposeful activities, such as the provisions and response to feedback, take place within a context (community), enactment of agency is subject to the norms of behavior (rules) and power hierarchies (division of labor) within the community (for a more detailed discussion of AT see Storch, 2018). AT thus offers researchers the ability to shed light on why learners engage with feedback in a particular way, by taking into consideration individual factors (e.g., the learners’ goals), mediating tools (e.g., the nature of the feedback and how it is provided), and contextual variables, such as expectations, grading criteria, and the relationship with the feedback provider.

Figure 1. Activity model. Adapted from “Learning by expanding: An activity-theoretical approach to developmental research” by Y. Engeström, 1987. Copyright 1987 by Orienta-Konsultit. It was no longer possible to trace the original publisher
Although the framework has been used to investigate peer feedback (e.g., Storch & Aldossary, 2019), very few studies to date (e.g., Lee, 2008) have deployed this framework to explore learner engagement with and response to teacher feedback. Lee’s (2008) study, conducted in Hong Kong, examined secondary school learners’ reactions to teachers’ corrective feedback. The study found that the learners’ response to the feedback could be explained primarily in terms of the cultural and institutional environment, such as an exam-oriented culture and power hierarchies in the classroom. Lee found that although students, particularly those with lower proficiency, did not understand the feedback comments, they felt obliged to accept and incorporate the feedback. Zhao’s (2010) study reported similar findings with adult L2 learners.

No studies have deployed AT to investigate individual learner variables (included in the element subject) in explaining learner engagement with and response to feedback. However, a number of often-cited studies have shown that individual variables such as learners’ beliefs and goals, attitudes towards feedback forms and the teacher, as well as previous language learning experiences, can also shape learners’ response to WCF. For example, Hyland (2003) discovered that learners’ interpretation and uptake of WCF varied according to their beliefs and goals about grammar and English writing. Learners who prioritized content development tended to ignore teachers’ WCF. Lee and Schallert (2008) showed how learners’ language learning histories, goals, and perceptions of the teacher’s English language expertise all impacted on learners’ engagement with feedback, and whether the feedback was incorporated or ignored. More recently, Han and Hyland (2019b) adopted a sociocognitive theoretical framework to explain the interaction of individual and context-related variables that can explain learner response to WCF.

In conclusion, previous studies have highlighted that contextual and individual factors may affect learners’ engagement with feedback. Yet most of these studies centered on WCF without paying much attention to feedback comments on other aspects of writing. L2 learners’ writing development involves not only grammatical accuracy, but also improvements on other aspects such as content and structure.

Thus, the current study explores how L2 learners, in a regular English for Academic Purposes (EAP) class, engage with teacher written feedback given on all aspects of their writing and the factors that seem to influence their engagement. We adopted AT to guide our data analysis and to inform our interpretation of the findings. We considered learners’ goals and the mediating tools (the forms of the feedback) that could explain their actions as well as elements within the context of the activity, including their relationship with the feedback provider (teacher).
and their peers as a potential source of feedback. The two broad main research questions were:

1. How do L2 learners respond to teacher written feedback given on different aspects of their writing?
2. What individual and contextual factors influence L2 learners’ engagement with teacher written feedback?

3. Methodology

3.1 Study design

Ethics clearance was obtained before this study was implemented. The study was conducted in a large university in Australia offering a range of EAP credit-bearing subjects that students undertake concurrently with other subjects in their degree program. Both researchers, Liu and Storch, have an insider knowledge of the subject. Liu completed the subject in the year prior to conducting this study. Storch designed and had taught the subject for a number of years but did not teach the subject in the year the study took place.

The EAP class in which this study was conducted is designed to help graduate students from different disciplines to develop advanced academic writing skills. Students need to complete three assignments throughout the semester and receive feedback on early drafts of Assignment 2 and 3 (the major assignments). Only the final drafts are assessed for content, structure, language, and correct citations, with each criterion given equal weighting.

In the classes, the focus of instruction and discussion is on critical reading of research, strategies to incorporate source materials, correct acknowledgment of sources, and raising awareness of distinguishing linguistic and rhetorical traits of selected academic genres. Sample texts for class activities come from a range of disciplines and the students complete all assessment tasks on topics related to their own field of study. Feedback given on first drafts of major assignments aligns with the assessment criteria. When drafts are returned, the teachers tend to devote some class time to deal with common errors in language use.

The study examined students’ response to written feedback given on their first draft of Assignment 2. This assignment is a critical review (1000 words) of two studies that the students select from their field of study. After receiving feedback, students had about one week to revise and submit their final drafts for assessment. Assignment 2 accounted for 20% of the total grade.

Data were collected by one of the researchers (Liu) from two parallel classes, both taught by an experienced EAP instructor who had taught this subject for a
number of years. The data consisted of students’ writing (first draft with teacher feedback and a revised draft) and transcripts of audio recorded semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted with each participant outside class within five days after they submitted the revised draft. The interview had two sections (see Appendix A). In the first section, participants were asked about their background and views on English writing and written feedback. In the second section, each participant was asked to go through the feedback given on their first drafts and talk about their perceptions of the feedback comments as well as their revisions based on the comments. Their revised drafts were also used at the interviews to further probe learners about their responses to specific feedback.

3.2 Participants

Nine participants (eight females, one male), from two streams in the EAP subject, agreed to participate in this study. They were international students, in the age range of 21–27, who were predominantly pursuing a master’s degree. Seven participants came from China, and the other two came from Indonesia and Colombia. They had all been learning English in their home countries for over ten years and had been in Australia for less than a year. The participants were of upper-intermediate to advanced English proficiency, with IELTS scores ranging from 6.5 to 8.

3.3 Data analysis

We first analyzed all nine participants’ initial drafts with teacher feedback for the nature of feedback provided and then the revised texts for students’ uptake of the feedback. Interview data together with initial and revised drafts of three focal case studies were used to analyze engagement with feedback.

3.3.1 Nature of feedback

The feedback learners received was provided as in-text feedback targeting specific issues in the draft and end-comments offering a general evaluation of the draft. Following Hyland and Hyland (2001), in-text feedback that addressed one specific aspect of the text was counted as one feedback point. After perusing all the student texts, we decided to exclude end-comments and in-text compliments from the count because they were usually general statements that were not directed to specific areas for revision.

The counted feedback was then examined for focus. Based on iterative reading of the feedback and guided by relevant studies (e.g., Ferris & Roberts, 2001; Shahrani & Storch, 2014), four main focus dimensions were identified, which
aligned with the assessment criteria: Language (WCF), Ideas (development and clarity), Structure (coherence and cohesion), and Citation conventions. In instances where a feedback comment focused on two issues (e.g., clarity of ideas and language), the feedback point was counted twice, once for each category. Such feedback comments were very rare in the data.

Since previous feedback studies demonstrated that directness and the rhetorical form of feedback could affect learners’ response to feedback (e.g., Hyland & Hyland, 2001), feedback was analyzed carefully for form. A close scrutiny of all the feedback points led to the establishment of two broad categories – direct and indirect feedback. These categories were subsequently refined into four categories to account for the form of the feedback and whether it was accompanied by explanations. Thus, the four categories were: reformulation, reformulation with explanation, suggestion, and suggestion with explanation. Reformulation was considered as direct feedback while suggestion as indirect (see Appendix B for examples of feedback comments illustrating focus and form categories).

All feedback points were grouped into these four categories and in relation to their focus to show how feedback comments on different aspects of writing embody different forms. An inter-rater reliability check with a trained rater who had a background in TESOL showed very high reliability scores: 99% agreement on the identification of feedback points, 93% agreement on the form of direct and indirect feedback, and 85% agreement on feedback focus.

3.3.2 Uptake of feedback

Learners’ uptake of feedback points was examined by carefully tracing each feedback point in the students’ first drafts to their revisions in final drafts. Non-uptake of feedback was counted only if the target issue pointed out by the feedback on the first draft still existed in the revised draft. In some instances, learners reformulated their text and this made tracing responses to feedback on certain language errors no longer relevant.

To confirm the analysis of uptake, a member check procedure was used. During the interviews, participants were asked to go through each feedback comment, and show how it was addressed in their revised draft.

3.3.3 Engagement with feedback

To gain an in-depth understanding of learner engagement with feedback and factors that affect their engagement, a case study approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Stake, 2000) was adopted. Three cases were selected based on purposeful sampling and maximum variation sampling (Glaser et al., 1968; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) to represent the widest possible range of the participant group with consideration given to the number of feedback points they received and their responses
to the feedback. Two contrastive cases which received a large and small amount of feedback were first selected. Then one case which had the largest amount of non-uptake was selected.

Interview data of the three cases were transcribed. Case study participants’ responses to each feedback point were grouped for focus and form. Our analysis sought to identify how and why they responded in a particular way and to identify the impact of individual and contextual factors on their engagement with feedback and their investment in the activity.

4. Findings

4.1 Overall distribution and uptake of feedback

In general, a total of 401 feedback points were given on the nine participants’ initial drafts. Table 1 shows the number and type of feedback points provided on each aspect of writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback forms</th>
<th>Language (WCF)</th>
<th>Ideas</th>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Citation conventions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Direct feedback</td>
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<td>Reformulation</td>
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<td>Reformulation with explanation</td>
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<td>Indirect feedback</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suggestion with explanation</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average per participant</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>5</td>
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As Table 1 shows, WCF (246 points, i.e., 61%) predominated, followed by feedback on ideas (84 points, i.e., 21%). Structure received the least amount of feedback (26 points, i.e., 6%). Most WCF and feedback on citation conventions were given as direct reformulations, or indirectly as suggestions. Feedback on ideas and structure, in contrast, tended to be indirect (suggestions) but offered with explanations.

Table 2 illustrates the number of feedback points provided and taken up by each participant on the four dimensions of their writing (all names used are pseudonyms).
As Table 2 shows, feedback points given to each participant range from 20 to 66. Uptake rate was very high (390 of the 401, representing 97%). For example, all feedback on citation conventions was taken up. The difference in the uptake rate between the other three aspects of writing and between the participants was minuscule.

Based on these findings, three case study participants were selected. The two contrastive cases were Diane who received most feedback (66) and Sara who received a relatively small amount of feedback (29). Then Katherine was selected as she had the lowest uptake of feedback (53 out of 58) in this group.

In the following section we discuss how each case study participant engaged with feedback given on different dimensions of their writing as well as the factors that influenced their behavior. It is important to note at the outset that the three participants’ engagement with feedback on citations is not discussed because

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it became apparent in the interviews that all the participants understood and accepted this feedback without any questioning.

4.2 Case studies

4.2.1 Background information about the participants

Table 3 summarizes relevant background details about the three case study participants.

Table 3. Background information about three case-study participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>First language</th>
<th>Length of stay in Melbourne</th>
<th>Writing proficiency (IELTS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Master of Applied Linguistics</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Bachelor of Medical Science</td>
<td>Indonesian</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Master of Applied Linguistics</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.2 Diane: A highly motivated learner

Diane, a 23-year-old Chinese student, had been in Melbourne for about nine months. In her most recent IELTS exam, Diane achieved a score of 6.5 with 6 on writing. From the interview, it emerged that Diane was a highly motivated learner who wanted to improve her academic writing not only to pass exams but also to realize her ideal L2 self (Dörnyei, 2009):

(I could imagine) myself could help other people, that’s a very strong motivation in my academic writing, not only the exams that I need to pass...but the ideal of myself encourage me to do more.

Driven by such motivation, Diane engaged extensively with all the feedback regardless of its form. For instance, while 34 out of 66 WCF comments on Diane’s draft were offered as reformulations, she sought full understanding of the reasons behind these reformulations by checking dictionaries, consulting original articles, or asking peers and her teacher before accepting the feedback. She was eager to
improve her grammar so that the teacher could eventually understand, as she described, “what I think about this topic”.

However, Diane’s aim to communicate meaningfully with an expert reader explained her preference for the WCF to be given as questions or choices, which she could utilize to carefully rethink her intended meaning and “to choose [her] own style” in writing:

There’s ‘one advantage’ or ‘more advantages’ you want to say, and she didn’t just say you need to use ‘advantages’...she gave me a question for me to choose, that’s perfect.

Yet, Diane was equally aware of the power dynamics involved in her choice:

Option is perfect but I know that if I didn’t change as she corrects it, I will fail this assignment.

Therefore, when Diane disagreed with the reformulation provided, she was keen to obtain her teacher’s (i.e., marker’s) confirmation before using her own expression:

| Diane’s draft: | Ciszér and Tankó (2015) indicated that not only strategies’ use and... |
| Teacher’s comment: | Do you mean the use of strategies? |
| Diane’s revision: | the use of strategy |
| Diane’s explanation: | I talked with [the teacher] before, plural form is not so perfect...some learners in this article who have two or three strategies...some learners only use one strategy, so I can’t say ‘the use of strategies’, but ‘the use of strategy’ is okay. |

Diane also showed extensive engagement with feedback on ideas (13 out of 66 comments) and structure (3 comments) by actively seeking assistance from peers and the teacher to clarify her understanding. Although she acknowledged that many feedback comments on ideas and structure were given with explanations, she found some issues still difficult to solve and she needed to talk them through:

Some things can’t be explained only in words...I need to talk to my friends to seek the best way to change it. I need to talk to her how I could give some evaluations...because it is a big problem, I need to change the structure.

It can be seen that Diane’s engagement with feedback was situated in different social interactions with members of the community in this activity. Her participation in peer discussions reassured her about the legitimacy of her questions:
I’d like to speak to my friends before I talk to the professor. I don’t want her to think how many stupid questions you need to ask.

The one-on-one conferences with the teacher was a context in which she felt more comfortable to speak up, and where she had the opportunity to receive individualized attention:

I feel more relaxed than speaking up in the classroom. The teacher can focus only on my errors to talk about.

4.2.3 Sara: The budding scholar

Sara was a 21-year-old student from Indonesia. She had been in Melbourne for about three months, undertaking a Bachelor of Medical Science (see Table 3). Compared to the other case-study participants, Sara had a stronger English proficiency owing to her prior educational experiences in international schools. This high proficiency perhaps explains why she received a very small amount of feedback (29 comments), particularly WCF (19 comments). Sara’s goal was to improve her academic writing in order to be able to write papers for publication one day.

Regarding WCF, Sara understood all the comments regardless of their form and knew how to revise her draft. Although she found it hard to articulate the exact grammatical rules that drove her revision, Sara was confident that her revision would be correct since she had an intuition “from experience” and “reading books”. When Sara was asked whether direct or indirect WCF was more helpful for her, she responded that she found both useful but for different reasons:

Of course the one she provides the answer (would be more helpful)...because it saves my time...if she gives me the solution, I can reflect myself...(indirect WCF) was challenging, but it makes me think.

Given her writing goals and high English proficiency, Sara wanted to focus more on the feedback on ideas. On most occasions, Sara understood the feedback comments, which were given with explanations. In particular, she appreciated the teacher’s explanation of using hedges, which raised her awareness of the importance of word choice and of being less absolute in her future writing:

It makes me think about other words that I could use, instead of being too strong about it...I started to think what kind of hedges can I use...I go through everything from the Internet.

Sometimes Sara was confused about the given explanations. An email exchange with her teacher helped her gain a better understanding of what revisions needed to be made and why. In one instance, when she disagreed with the feedback
she received on the use of ‘yet’, rather than rejecting the feedback she chose to delete the relevant phrase, which she viewed as a compromise. She noted that this action, in fact, led to an improved version:

I don’t think ‘yet’ is appropriate...so I just delete ‘as of now’...I didn’t figure out why...but I can’t get ‘as of yet’, so I just find the common ground...and it’s a bit more academic in a way.

4.2.4 Katherine: A reluctant and confused writer

Katherine, a 25-year-old student from China, was also undertaking a Master of Applied Linguistics. She had been a high-school English teacher in China before coming to Melbourne and achieved an overall score of 7 on IELTS with 6 on writing.

Katherine was frustrated when she found many in-text feedback comments and she postponed dealing with them. The large amount of feedback seemed to threaten her identity as an English teacher:

Because I’m an English teacher in China, sometimes you find you have so many problems...it’s hard to admit that.

Unlike Diane and Sara, Katherine admitted that she did not like writing and her motivation for improvement was mainly grade driven. With the goal to “write like a native speaker and think like a native speaker”, Katherine believed that the best way to improve English was to imitate native speakers. Such motivation and belief explained her high appreciation of the WCF given as reformulations, which she felt had created a learning opportunity for her to figure out the “English logic”, or as she explained, “even if I can’t remember the rules correctly, I can remember the similar examples”. For instance, Katherine gladly took up the teacher’s reformulation from “another” to “the other” and believed that she had learned what she perceived to be a more academic expression:

That’s the feedback I want. It tells you what to do. Because “the other” is more academic than “another”, I can tell, I have a kind of feeling.

Sometimes Katherine could not understand the underlying reason for the teacher’s WCF reformulations, but she still accepted the feedback noting the authority invested in the teacher and because of her desire to get a good grade:

Why should I delete ‘completely’...I don’t understand...(yet) because teacher marks your work...I delete it.

When she received indirect WCF, Katherine was often very confused. She could not work out how to resolve the identified problems by herself. Katherine rarely
asked classmates for assistance because she thought that being of similar English proficiency, they too would not know the answer. Even when she sought assistance from peers or dictionaries, her confusion largely remained, particularly regarding the use of prepositions and articles, and eventually she made random choices in her revision:

(Check preposition) I don’t know how to correct it, I also ask my classmates, they don’t know, because according to my own language system, I think it’s correct... and I can’t find the example of the same structure...I just randomly change (preposition).

When processing feedback on ideas (15 out of 58) and structure (7 comments), despite her confusion about many comments, Katherine barely consulted anyone. She believed that organization of ideas and structure needed to show her own independent thinking and that meant that she should not be helped by others:

You can’t ask someone to develop idea for you...they didn’t read your article and it’s your assignment...and I don’t think feedback can help me to be concise, it’s based on my own language proficiency.

Katherine admitted that organizing ideas into a cohesive text was a weakness that shook her self-confidence and she found it “hard to face”. Nonetheless, driven by the desire for a good grade, Katherine tried to figure out “the teacher’s preference” and revise accordingly. For instance, when Katherine was advised to revise a linking phrase, which she herself thought was appropriate, she simply replaced it with a linking phrase that was not marked as incorrect by the teacher in another paragraph. Also, when Katherine did not understand the teacher’s explanations on the required revision for idea development, she just followed the teacher’s suggestion to “be specific” and added more details. Katherine acknowledged that there was little learning or understanding involved in these revision processes:

I just changed all the details according to the preference of the teacher...I have to admit it’s very detailed feedback, but I still feel struggling to figure out the way to make your writing more precise. It’s very difficult to master where is the fine line of how much detail you should offer, sometimes you think you are clear enough it’s not.

This confusion and lack of understanding also explained Katherine’s rejection of some feedback comments on ideas and structure:

Katherine’s draft: The conclusion of Mei-ching is unquestionably more convincing, owing to a precise way to select participants...
5. Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to investigate how L2 learners engaged with feedback given on different aspects of their writing. As mentioned earlier, engagement in this study attempted to capture learners’ processing of the feedback, whether they understood it or not, and how invested they were in the activity; that is, what actions they took in response to the feedback. It also sought to investigate the factors that might explain learner engagement, using AT as a theoretical framework. The elements of relevance were the subjects, with their goals and beliefs, the tools (the form of the feedback), and the community with expected norms of behavior (rules) and power relationships (division of labor).

In this study, conducted in an EAP class, feedback was given on a draft assignment. An examination of the nature of the feedback provided on the drafts produced by the whole cohort (9) showed that feedback was given mainly on language (WCF). It is interesting to note the prominence of feedback on language given that the assessment criteria for this assignment suggest that ideas, structure, language, and correct citations are equally important. However, the focus on language errors in the written feedback and in the oral feedback given in class may simply reflect the frequency of language errors in the writing of these EAP students. The lack of explanations accompanying most of the WCF (whether direct or indirect) may also be attributable to the oral feedback session, where the teacher discussed the most common errors. It can also explain why only feedback on ideas and structure tended to come with some explanations.

All nine participants took up almost all teacher feedback (97%), and the difference in the uptake rate for each writing dimension and between the students was minimal. It became very clear from the case studies that the main reason for this high uptake of feedback on language as well as ideas and structure, which may be at times more open to interpretation (compared to feedback on citation conventions), was most likely because these learners’ revised drafts were going to be marked by the teachers (i.e., the feedback providers). In other words, we can attribute this observed behavior to the power hierarchy in this activity system (division of labour) and a tacit expectation (rules in an activity system) in this draft-redraft system that learners would take up teachers’ feedback.
These contextual factors mean that feedback is taken up even when it is not totally understood. For example, Katherine, one of the case study informants, admitted that she did not always understand or agree with the feedback provided on language errors, ideas, or structure, but she incorporated a very high percentage of the feedback received (53 out of 58) in her revised draft. Similar findings were reported by other researchers (e.g., Lee, 2014; Zhao, 2010), suggesting that teachers’ dominant and powerful role as the ultimate judge of learners’ writing could lead learners to take up the feedback without questioning or understanding it.

However, we did note some signs of resistance and an emerging sense of agency, particularly when responding to feedback on ideas and structure compared to WCF. For instance, Katherine rejected teacher’s feedback when she believed her original draft was sufficiently clear. Sara did not fully take up her teacher’s reformulation of a linking phrase as she did not find the meaning fit in with her intended meaning. This more selective uptake of feedback on structure and ideas suggests perhaps that learners may feel a stronger sense of ownership over these aspects of their writing. Similar findings were reported in Zheng et al. (2020) who investigated graduate students’ response to their supervisors’ feedback on drafts of their thesis.

The form of the feedback (direct or indirect) is a cultural artefact that mediated learners’ engagement. For Katherine, direct feedback enabled her to simply imitate the correct forms. In contrast, Diane and Sara preferred more indirect forms of feedback. As reported in other studies (Ferris, 2006, 2010), in this study, too, indirect WCF seemed to encourage these two learners to invest in processing the feedback: to think and find resolutions to their errors on their own compared to direct feedback. However, greater engagement does not necessarily mean understanding nor lead to correct amendment of identified errors. Similarly, indirect feedback on ideas and structure, despite the provision of explanation, did not always lead to understanding. All case study participants demonstrated confusion about some feedback comments, but for Diane and Sara, it was through their follow-up interactions with peers and/or the teacher that they gained a better understanding of the feedback. Such discussion with members in the learning community, therefore, can be seen as opening up learning opportunities for learners.

While contextual factors such as the learning community and the instruments can affect learners’ engagement with feedback as demonstrated above, it is important to note that the context interacts with individual learner variables in the feedback activity. Our case study data highlighted a number of these individual factors.

Adult learners come into an activity with their own language learning history and beliefs about writing development and accuracy, all of which shape their ulti-
mate goals (or object, the term used in AT). These goals drive learners’ (subjects) behavior – how they engage with feedback – regardless of the form the feedback takes. In the case of WCF, for example, Diane engaged extensively with the feedback, whether direct or indirect. She was driven by a desire to understand the feedback because her object was not simply to get a good grade but also to become an expert L2 user, evident in her stated aim to reach her ideal L2 self. This goal drove her to make better use of the learning opportunities offered by the feedback. Hyland’s (2003) study also found that more highly motivated learners tended to develop better strategies for utilizing feedback. By comparison, for Katherine, the direct WCF enabled her to imitate correct forms that aligned with her views of language learning as a form of imitation. Her uptake of the reformulations was also driven by expediency and her goal to achieve high grades. As Kormos (2012) suggested, the strength of a goal orientation may determine the effort learners invest in learning from the feedback.

Other attitudes and beliefs also came to the fore in these case studies and seemed to explain engagement with feedback. For instance, despite confusion about some feedback comments on ideas, Katherine did not seek additional support because she believed that idea development could not be assisted by others, but rather depended on her own independent thinking. Such beliefs seemed to restrict Katherine’s learning opportunities during her engagement with teacher feedback and to discourage her from taking advantage of potential assistance from other members within the learning community.

Finally, we acknowledge that emotions can impact learners’ engagement with feedback, but they are highly complex and unpredictable. To date, very little attention has been paid to emotions in studies on feedback, even in studies informed by AT, despite the importance attributed by Vygotsky (1986) and key sociocultural theorists (e.g., Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Swain, 2013) and the inseparability of emotions and cognition. Learners’ emotional reaction to the feedback they receive is important because it could be closely linked to their identities. In Katherine’s case, at first glance we can explain her behavior by the quantity of feedback she received. Katherine felt overwhelmed by the large number of comments, so she postponed dealing with the feedback. Mahfoodh (2017) also found that too much feedback could frustrate learners and discourage engagement with the feedback. Yet, a detailed examination of Katherine’s case suggested that her frustration was not simply attributable to the quantity of feedback, but rather that it confronted her strong sense of identity as an English teacher and had shaken her self-confidence.

To conclude, the findings of this small-scale study highlight the complexity of engagement with feedback. The findings suggest that different contextual and individual factors can affect learners’ engagement with feedback and uptake of
feedback in revised drafts. Power hierarchies and expectations may determine learners’ ultimate uptake of feedback, yet learners’ agency can still be at play particularly during their engagement with feedback on ideas. Also, forms of feedback, attitudes towards members of the learning community (peers and the teacher), and whether they perceive seeking assistance as valid actions may affect their engagement with the feedback and the learning opportunities that could emerge. It is important to note that all these factors interact with each other in a feedback activity.

In general, our findings suggest that for learners to better engage with feedback, whether it is on language or on ideas and structure, it may be beneficial for teachers to provide opportunities for meaning negotiation in and out of class, not only with the teacher but also with their peers. Such opportunities may promote greater understanding of the feedback and greater learner autonomy in responding to feedback, rather than simply accepting the feedback provided.

Given the relatively small size of our exploratory study, our findings and conclusions should be interpreted cautiously. Furthermore, we acknowledge that a factor which was not explored in this study was differences in learners’ proficiency level, even within one class. These differences undoubtedly influenced the amount and focus of feedback the learners received, as well as their understanding and response to the feedback. Future studies need to examine learners’ feedback engagement across different proficiency levels. Finally, whether learners’ revisions were successful or not and whether the feedback influenced the development of their writing were not examined in this study. Future longitudinal studies need to examine learners’ writing development in relation to their engagement with feedback.

References


Appendix A. Interview questions

A. Questions for general background.
1. What’s your age? What languages do you speak?
2. How long have you been learning English?
3. What do you think is the role of writing in your English learning? What’s your goal of writing?
4. What do you think of teacher feedback on your writing?
5. Do you have any positive or negative experience of receiving feedback before?
6. How do you usually respond to written feedback? Why?
7. What kind of feedback do you think would be most effective for the development of your writing?
8. Any other suggestions and reflections on teacher feedback, revisions, or English writing?
9. Specifically on this critical review:
   a. Have you written a critical review before?
   b. What’s your goal of writing and revising this critical review? What would be your main focus? Why?
   c. Which kind of feedback do you think would be most beneficial for your critical review?

B. Questions when participants go through each feedback comment.
1. What did you do when you received the feedback? How did you feel?
2. What do you think about the end-comment? And the compliments?
3. Reflecting on each feedback comment you received on your draft:
   a. What did you think about this feedback? Did you like it? Did you feel it helpful? Why?
   b. What did you do when you received the feedback? (i.e., steps undertaken) Why?
   c. Where no response has been made: Why did you not follow this suggested revision?
   d. Did you make any revisions besides the revisions requested by the feedback? Why?
4. What do you think is the positive side of the feedback? What aspects of the feedback do you think can be improved so that it could be more beneficial for your writing development?

Appendix B. Examples of feedback comments illustrating focus and form

1. Language: WCF which deals with grammatical and lexical errors within sentence level.
   Student’s writing: considerations for achieving sustainability
   Teacher comment: Check preposition
   Form: Indirect feedback, suggestion
2. Ideas: Feedback on development and clarity of ideas, such as whether the idea is specific.
   Student’s writing: What is interesting is that perceptions with regard to the same topic emerged
   Teacher comment: Overly vague – be specific. provide a brief summary of the different Perspectives
   Form: Indirect feedback, suggestion with explanation

3. Structure: Feedback on coherence between sentences and paragraphs such as linking phrases.
   Student’s writing: Additionally, numbers of individuals...
   Teacher comment: If this continues on from your earlier ‘First of all’, you would then to use ‘Secondly’.
   Form: Direct feedback, reformulation with explanation

4. Citation conventions: Feedback on citation conventions.
   Student’s writing: Kim and Smith...
   Teacher comment: Kim and Smith (2017)
   Form: Direct feedback, reformulation

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