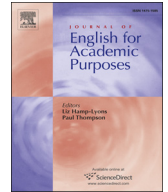


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## Exploring classroom feedback interactions around EAP writing: A data based model



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## ABSTRACT

This paper is based on case study research in the grounded theory tradition. In this paper we describe and theorise feedback interactions on EAP writing which were observed in classes in our institution. Working from detailed descriptions of feedback incidents and from interviews with teachers and students, we theorise a series of teacher and student actions. We argue that combinations of these actions are both reflective and constitutive of patterns of teacher–student relationships in the classes observed. Using interview data, we explore factors which may influence the nature of the actions and relationships which we have modelled. We also comment on the possible consequences for learners' ongoing understanding of academic writing.

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## 1. Introduction

Feedback on EAP writing is an important area of study; practitioners and researchers agree that feedback has the potential to contribute positively to learners' writing development and that it is worth investing time and effort in trying to understand the factors which might make it more or less successful (Carless, 2006; Ferguson, 2011; Hounsell, 2003; Price, Carroll, O'Donovan, & Rust, 2011; Rowe & Wood, 2008; Sprinkle, 2004).

While the majority of research in this area focuses on teacher written feedback, there are also studies which look at oral modes such as teacher taped commentary (Hedge, 2007), feedback conferences (Ewert, 2009; Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Strauss & Xiang, 2006; Trotman, 2011) or mixed modes of feedback (Bailey, 2009; Huxham, 2007). We are aware of relatively few studies on classroom interactions around student writing, and those which we have found (e.g., Waring, 2009) are not conducted in an EAP setting.

The broad purpose of our own study is to investigate feedback interactions around writing in EAP classroom settings within a particular institution. A more specific focus, which emerged from data as we will discuss below, is on the actions taken by teachers and students as they negotiate around feedback, and the implications of these for teacher–student relationship patterns. The underlying theory of our study is constructivist and grounded: we attempt to develop a model of feedback interactions, which emerges both from researchers' observations and interpretations of events and from participants' perceptions as explained through interviews.

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## 2. Overview of research into feedback on writing

Feedback on student writing has been much researched, and studies can be grouped into several lines of enquiry. One line is the chosen feedback target; the aspects of writing that teachers tend to highlight for feedback, for example surface language errors (Bitchener & Knoch, 2008; Chandler, 2009; Ferris, 1999; Truscott & Hsu, 2008). Cheung (2011) and Lee (2011) both develop this line of enquiry by researching the factors which may influence teachers as they select aspects of writing for feedback. In a similar vein, Lee (2008) and Li and Barnard (2011) both examined the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their feedback practices.

A second line of research examines the pragmatics of teacher feedback. Duncan (2007) and Hyland and Hyland (2001) both investigated the pragmatic strategies used by teachers (e.g., questioning, praising or giving advice). Poulus and Mahony (2008), and Mahfoodh and Pandian (2011) conducted similar investigations, with an emphasis on students' response to each strategy. Both studies suggest that praise helps students to write more confidently, whereas Weaver (2006) suggests that learners benefit most from a balance between positive and negative feedback.

A third line of enquiry is the language of feedback comments. Nurmukhamedov and Kim (2010), and Sugita (2006) both used functional grammar categories to classify teacher feedback comments and to investigate any relationship between comments in particular grammatical forms and students' eventual revisions. Unlu and Wharton (2015) also looks at the language of teacher feedback, seeking to elucidate the constructed tenor of the teacher–student relationship.

A fourth line of enquiry is concerned with student response to feedback and factors that influence this. Rae and Cochrane (2008), and Rowe and Wood (2008) both identify timeliness of feedback as a key factor; in a similar vein McGarrell and Verbeem (2007) argue that students revise most effectively when they see the formative potential of feedback. Knight and Yorke (2003), and Sheen (2007) contend that learners with greater intellectual maturity are more likely to respond to feedback, and Young (2000) shows that learners with low self-esteem may be paralysed by feedback which they perceive as critical. Burke and Pieterick (2010) similarly suggest that levels of self-esteem are a key factor influencing response. Burke (2009) highlights the strategies students have available for using feedback based on their previous educational experiences.

Despite the plethora of research on feedback, briefly summarised above, we have found little emphasis on teacher–student interactions around feedback. Some exceptions are Ewert (2009), a study of writing conferences which emphasises negotiation, and Hargreaves (2012), a study in a UK primary school context which illustrates the difficulties that students have in negotiating around feedback. Waring (2009) offers a case study of an ESL adult learner who managed to move out of teacher initiation - student response - teacher feedback sequence during a homework review activity, and to initiate negotiations in which classmates could participate. Our own research is, we believe, the first to concentrate specifically on interactive negotiation actions and their implications for teacher–student relationships in the context of classroom feedback in an EAP setting.

## 3. Context

Our research took place in 2012 within an Applied Linguistics/Language Teaching department at a UK university, of which we are members as an Associate Professor and a Research Student. Since we are not ourselves EAP teachers, gaining access to the classes involved careful and respectful negotiation over time. After general discussions with EAP colleagues about our research, we approached teachers and asked for permission to observe their classes. We gained access to four courses. This was a purposive sample – we had sought courses which would be focused on EAP writing. In total, approximately 43 h of sessions were observed.

Specifically, we collected data in four EAP writing courses. One was a pre-requisite EAP course, designed for students who did not yet have the required IELTS score to enrol on a degree course. The specific objective was to prepare students for the IELTS writing section. This course was observed over five weeks. The second class was an insessional (generic) course, designed to provide language support to students already enrolled on degree courses. This class (In-sessional EAP class) accepted students from any discipline to support them with general academic writing requirements. Its observation took place over seven weeks. The remaining two classes were specialised EAP classes, intended to address the discipline specific language needs of learners from particular departments (i.e., Statistics and English Language Teaching). These classes were observed over 4 and 7 weeks respectively. The length of observation per week changed depending on student attendance, the content of the specific class and so forth. Yet, the classes, which met every week for 2 h, were usually observed 1–2 h per week over the course of observation. (see Appendix A for further detail about the classes observed).

## 4. Data collection

We collected two sorts of data: classroom observation field notes, and interviews with teachers and students.

Field notes were taken during all classroom observations, and teacher–student interactions were audio recorded where possible. The field notes were relatively unstructured narrative, guided only by the general aim to capture anything to do with feedback. We used a basic two column format, with the left hand column intended to record the chain of events, what Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) refer to as 'field note tales' from a third person viewpoint. Then, in the right hand column we added our own reflections, comments and queries. Notes were revised and fleshed out as soon as possible after each observation.

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