Student engagement with teacher and automated feedback on L2 writing

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ABSTRACT

Research on feedback in second language writing has grown enormously in the past 20 years and has expanded to include studies comparing human raters and automated writing evaluation (AWE) programmes. However, we know little about the ways students engage with these different sources of feedback or their relative impact on writing over time. This naturalistic case study addresses this gap, looking at how two Chinese students of English engage with both teacher and AWE feedback on their writing over a 16-week semester. Drawing on student texts, teacher feedback, AWE feedback, and student interviews, we identify the strengths and weaknesses of both types of feedback and show how engagement is a crucial mediating variable in the use students make of feedback and the impact it has on their writing development. We argue that engagement is a key factor in the success of formative assessment in teaching contexts where multiple drafting is employed. Our results show that different sources of formative assessment have great potential in facilitating student involvement in writing tasks and we highlight some of these pedagogical implications for promoting student engagement with teacher and AWE feedback.

1. Introduction

Feedback on second language writing is widely acknowledged to offer considerable learning benefits, providing writers with a sense of audience and an understanding what readers' value in a text (Goldstein, 2005; Hyland, 2016). Equally however, research reminds us that it does not always fulfill this potential (e.g. Ferris, 2006; Truscott & Hsu, 2008) and surveys reveal significant student dissatisfaction (Carless, 2006). A great deal of this research has focused on error correction and limited itself to particular modes of delivery, examining the effectiveness of teacher written feedback (Ferris, 1997), oral conferencing (Weissberg, 2006), peer feedback (Mendonca & Johnson, 1994) or machine marking (Warschauer & Ware, 2006). The assumption underlying much of this research is that feedback can improve L2 students' writing abilities and consolidate language learning if *delivered* effectively rather than if it is *received* attentively. But the mere provision of feedback does not automatically lead to writing improvement. Rather, it is the effective student engagement with this response to their work that is likely to unlock the benefits of feedback.

Student engagement with feedback, however, has been an under-researched area in L2 writing, although it has been shown to play a pivotal role in learning in studies of evaluation in higher education (Handley, Price, & Millar, 2011; Price, Handley, & Millar, 2011). Against such a background, this study aims to explore the construct of student engagement with feedback in L2 writing looking at two key delivery methods: teacher written feedback and computer-generated feedback or automated writing evaluation

(AWE). We look at how two Chinese students of English engage with both teacher feedback and AWE feedback on their writing over a 16-week semester in a Chinese university. We suggest that student engagement is a key factor in the success of writing development and how these different sources of feedback have great potential in facilitating L2 students' involvement in their writing.

2. The construct of student engagement

Broadly, engagement refers to the extent students are invested or committed to their learning, embracing a complex of factors which can be seen in students' responses to texts and their attitudes to writing and responding. It is an umbrella term which brings together students' degree of attention, curiosity, interest and willingness to employ their language proficiency and a repertoire of learning skills to make progress. These are realised through affective, behavioral and cognitive elements which can help facilitate effective responses to feedback. Engagement has traditionally been discussed in relation to students' positive behaviors and their sense of belonging in the classroom, but there is some evidence linking student engagement with positive academic outcomes (Fredricks, 2013; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). It is equally possible, however, that students who have good academic results may be disengaged from learning tasks and school activities (Willms, 2003). The lack of consensus over the definition of student engagement lies behind these inconsistent findings.

Finn (1989) proposed a model of student engagement which includes *participation*, or the behavioral component that contains students' compliance with school rules, response to teacher directions, and completion of assigned work, and *identification*, an affective component which concerns a sense of belonging and feelings toward school and learning. However, Student engagement may be more complicated than observable behaviors and emotions because students may be observed being on task without deeply processing the learning content (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006).

More helpful is Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) conceptualization of student engagement as encompassing three inter-related dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. **Behavioural engagement** refers to positive conduct in class and at school, involvement in academic tasks, and participation in school activities. **Emotional engagement** includes students' affective reactions in the classroom and at school such as happiness, sadness, boredom, anxiety, and interest. **Cognitive engagement** is concerned with psychological investment in learning and strategic learning. The three dimensions of engagement are dynamically interconnected, bound together as both cognition and emotions influence human behaviors (Pessoa, 2008). These concepts also overlap with constructs investigated by other researchers. For example, student interest, attitudes, values are examined in the research of emotional engagement (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012), and studies on cognitive engagement are associated with the exploration of constructs such as motivation and self-regulated learning (Boekaerts, Pintrich, & Zeider, 1999; Perry, Turner, & Meyer, 2006).

In addition to the difficulties of conceptualizing student engagement is how to measure it. Behavioral engagement is normally subdivided into positive behaviors, effort, attention and other participatory behaviors at school, and has been measured through teacher report and observation (Stipek, 2002). Emotional engagement is often operationalized as identification with school (Voelkl, 1997) and various emotions related to school work, teachers, and peers (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Measurement of emotional engagement has been conducted via student self-report and observation (Finn, 1989). Things become more complicated when measuring cognitive engagement as it is not readily observable so most research has relied on survey items and self-report questionnaires to measure strategy use, volitional control, and psychological investment (Gamoran & Nystrand, 1992)

In summary, while open to multiple interpretations and beset by difficulties of measurement, student engagement is generally believed to correlate positively with academic achievement and has great potential to improve students' school outcomes. Encouraging is the fact that student engagement is malleable and can be affected by teachers and parents, and shaped by wider teaching practices and school policies (Fredricks et al., 2004; Willms, 2003).

3. Student engagement with feedback in L2 writing

A number of studies have suggested that student engagement with written corrective feedback facilitates language acquisition and writing development. In their study of two L2 writers' engagement with teacher feedback given as reformulations, for example, Qi and Lapkin (2001) argue that the quality of noticing, related to the depth of processing feedback, is a key factor in improvement in students' revisions. Engagement also seems to involve students in devoting cognitive resources to understanding or memorizing the feedback they are given (Sachs & Polio, 2007).

Most importantly, several studies have sought to pin down what encourages L2 learners to process, take-up and retain teacher written corrective feedback on writing, pointing to the impact of affective factors. Hyland (2003), for example, found that the extent her two case study students engaged with form-focused feedback varied greatly, so that one lower-intermediate student's response to teacher feedback was strongly influenced by her emotional reactions to the teachers' comments on her work. Storch and Wigglesworth (2010) similarly noted the importance of affective factors, with engagement among their case study students influenced by their attitudes, beliefs, and goals. They suggest that not only do affective factors affect the actions adopted by learners in responding to the feedback, they also have an impact on their willingness to accept and retain the feedback. The centrality of affect in student engagement is also highlighted by Lee and Schalert (2008) who argue that we need to rethink the cognitive process model of revision to give greater weight to the importance of establishing a trusting relationship between teacher and students.

Fredricks et al. (2004) tripartite conceptualisation of engagement has been picked up by Ellis' (2010) who suggests it can be applied to students' approaches to corrective feedback (CF). The extent learners attend to CF falls within the cognitive dimension; whether and how learners uptake the CF or revise their texts is seen as behavioral response, and learners' attitudinal response to the CF is their affective reaction. These three perspectives were also adopted by Han and Hyland (2015) in their study of four