Alternative Sources of Feedback and Second Language Writing Development in University Content Courses

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Abstract

Despite a strong intuitive sense held by instructors that feedback practices can help scaffold L2 writers' composition processes, a number of questions remain concerning the manner best suited to deliver this feedback and its ultimate impact on literacy development. This paper presents findings from an eight-month longitudinal ethnographic case study of five international Japanese undergraduate students and their efforts to navigate the writing requirements of their content courses at a large Canadian university. While confirming the importance of instructor-based feedback practices and their potential as valuable language learning experiences, findings from this study also highlight language learners' perceived importance of "alternative sources of feedback" for their L2 writing development. Friends, roommates, and writing centre tutors amongst others, were seen as valuable sources of advice on writing that could compensate for perceived problems with content instructors' feedback, while offering feedback opportunities which were more closely associated to students' ideal representation of this pedagogic tool. Implications focus on the advantages of widening our focus when understanding feedback practices to also include paying closer attention to the impact of the "invisible partners," which also help shape students' literacy development and the bridges that might be built between these and more formal modes of instruction.

Résume

Si les instructeurs sont intuitivement persuadés que le feedback peut aider au développement d'habiletés d'écriture en L2, un certain nombre de questions demeure quant à la meilleure façon de fournir ce feedback, et à son ultime effet sur le développement de la littératie. Le présent article présente les résultats d'une étude de cas longitudinale et ethnographique de huit mois auprès de cinq étudiants internationaux japonais inscrits dans des programmes de premier cycle d'une grande université canadienne s'efforçant de satisfaire aux exigences de leurs cours de contenu. Tout en confirmant l'importance du feedback de l'instructeur et son potentiel en tant qu'expérience utile d'apprentissage langagier, les résultats de cette étude mettent également en évidence l'importance perçue par les apprenants d' « autres sources possibles de feedback » pour le développement de leurs aptitudes d'écriture en L2. Les amis, les colocataires et les tuteurs du centre d'aide à la rédaction, entre autres, se sont posés comme des sources précieuses de conseils sur l'écriture susceptibles de compenser les problèmes perçus de feedback fourni par les instructeurs de contenu, tout en offrant des possibilités de feedback plus étroitement associées à la représentation idéale que se font les étudiants de cet instrument pédagogique.

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L'étude souligne l'importance d'élargir notre champ de compréhension vis-à-vis des formes de feedback, et de prêter particulièrement attention à l'impact des « partenaires invisibles », ce qui permet également de façonner le développement de la littératie des étudiants et la construction de ponts entre ces modes d'instruction et d'autres plus formels

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Introduction

There has been a long-standing interest in the impact of feedback on second language (L2) writing development (Ferris, 2003; Goldstein, 2005; Hyland & Hyland, 2006a). Indeed, the practice of providing students with commentary and advice on written assignments is widely used in a range of educational settings to scaffold composition processes and students' understanding of the linguistic and rhetorical conventions of written genres. However, despite a strong intuitive sense held by teachers that these interactions can help students, a number of questions remain concerning the manner best suited to deliver this feedback and its ultimate impact on literacy development (Carless, 2006; Casanave, 2003; Crisp, 2007; Ferris, 2004; Nicol 2010).

The continued search for evidence of the value of feedback and the best way to provide it to students is largely motivated by writing's position as a core component of learning in educational settings worldwide, such that writing development has long been a key objective for educators and a rich area of study and research (Berlin, 1987; Hedgcock, 2005). More recently, however, writing research has focused on the needs and struggles of increasing populations of students pursuing studies in a language other than their mother tongue (Early, 2008; Matsuda, 2003; Ricento & Cervatiuc, 2009). In particular, scholars have noted the barrier L2 writing too often represents for L2 students in university contexts where writing truly becomes the dominant mode of knowledge construction, dissemination, and student assessment (Benesch, 2001; Canagarajah, 2002; Hinkel, 2002; Ridley, 2004; Shi & Beckett, 2002). Success for L2 students is thus inextricably linked to their ability to identify and demystify those conventions and practices associated with academic writing skills (Casanave, 2002).

In seeking to understand how to best respond and support L2 writers, universities have increasingly been challenged to rethink traditional models of writing instruction to address L2 writers' unique linguistic, social, and cognitive needs (Hinkel, 2002; Matsuda, 2006; Silva, 1997). Part of this rethinking has involved explorations of pedagogic interventions such as writing centres (Thonus, 2002; Williams, 2004), genre and discipline specific writing development (Hyland, 2007; Swales, 2004), and computer-based writing support systems (Sullivan & Lindgren, 2002; Warschauer, 2002). This work has also included a greater focus on how feedback practices in higher education may best be designed to maximize their benefit for L2 writing development (Hyland & Hyland 2006a; Lee, 2004; Leki, 2006; Séror, 2009) .

Until recently, research on L2 writing feedback practices had focused predominantly on teacher-authored written feedback in recognition of instructors' central role, either as language experts and/or disciplinary experts, for students' academic writing development. This line of research sought to identify those techniques and strategies used

by teachers (for example, explicit or implicit correction of grammar mistakes) most likely to promote L2 writing development (Bitchener, 2008; Ferris, 2003; Stern & Solomon, 2006).

Although this body of research has led to important insights about how teachers can choose to respond to students, some have noted how this focus has reinforced what authors such as Lee (2008) refer to as a vision of students as "mere recipients" (p. 144) of feedback rather than as active agents as important in determining the impact of the feedback they receive as the teachers providing the feedback, or the format in which they choose to deliver it. This interest on the agency of students has led to a growing interest in studies of students' perspectives of feedback practices (Cohen, 1987; Diab, 2005; Ivanič, Clark, & Rimmershaw, 2000; Leki, 1991, 2006; Saito, 1994; Séror, 2008) and the emergence of a more dialogic conceptualization of feedback as a literacy event whose impact must be understood as a co-constructed event, shaped by both teachers and students. Such research has also highlighted the impact of contextual and interpersonal factors that surround teachers and writers and how these shape desires, motivations, and relationships that ultimately contribute to the attitudes and interpretations with which feedback is approached by both students and instructors (Goldstein, 2006; Hyland & Hyland, 2006b; Kim, 2005; Lee & Schallert, 2008).

In their study, Lee and Schallert (2008) note, for instance, how students' sense of trust in their teacher affected students' uptake and use of feedback. Similarly, Hyland and Hyland (2006b) observed that students are more likely to value feedback and find it useful in classroom contexts where they feel the teacher has taken into account their individual needs. More recently, Séror (2009) noted the power exerted by institutional forces on teachers' and students' engagement in feedback practices. For researchers and teachers, this work suggests new insights on the complexity and intricacy of feedback practices that must be taken into consideration by educators and institutions alike to take full advantage of what many see, when well done, as a powerful resource for writing development.

Of the research that has examined writing feedback from sources other than instructors themselves, an important proportion of work has investigated the impact of peer-authored writing feedback (peer feedback) where students receive comments and advice from fellow students, most often as part of a class activity (Hyland, 2003; Liu & Hansen, 2002). Research in this area has positioned this type of feedback as a potentially powerful "alternative to the [more] traditional sources of feedback on student writing, namely teacher response" (Hu & Lam, 2009, p. 372) that can, under certain conditions, lead to significant improvements in the quality of revised drafts (Liu & Hansen, 2002).

Advantages associated with peer feedback include its ability to expose L2 writers to a greater range of comments and reactions to their texts. Moreover, when set up and used effectively, their nature as what is typically a face-to-face socially constructed activity has also been associated with a greater potential for "negotiated interaction" (Long, 1996), "joint" language learning (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Villamil & Guerrero, 2006) and a more interactive and collaborative learning experience (Liu & Carless, 2006). Of interest are the opportunities for explicit talk and debate about writing among students that peer feedback interactions generate while enhancing students' sense of an audience that

typically feels more authentic than when students write and receive feedback exclusively from teachers (Mangelsdorf, 1992; Rollinson, 2005).

Despite these identified benefits, there is evidence that not all students or teachers are comfortable or even see as legitimate an approach that does not have the teacher as the central source of writing feedback (Rollinson, 2005; Zhang, 1995). Zhang (1995) notes for instance, that 94% of students in her study preferred teacher feedback to peer feedback and stresses the need to explore how students can be trained to engage in peer feedback class activities, especially when these students do not initially see these activities as a worthwhile investment of their time. Similarly, Nelson and Carson (2006) note the need for a clearer understanding of the impact of students' cultural backgrounds on their engagement with peer feedback while researchers such as Hu and Lam (2009) emphasize the need to gather data from a wider range of educational contexts and L2 students.

In an attempt to contribute to the above body of work, this paper reports on feedback practices which do not have as their authors language or content instructors and which occurred in two contexts that have remained largely unaddressed in the L2 writing feedback literature. First, whereas a large body of work has explored feedback practices within the context of writing classrooms, this study adds to a limited body of work that explores feedback practices for L2 writing development in the context of university content courses (for notable exceptions to this trend, see Dong, 1998; Leki, 2006, 2007; Nelson & Schunn, 2009; Prior, 1998). Second, this paper investigates the impact of L2 writers' feedback interactions with sources of feedback (including peers) outside of the context of the classroom itself.

Situated within these contexts, this paper explores L2 writers' perspectives of feedback practices and their implications for our understanding of the various dimensions of feedback and its role as a source of pedagogic support for L2 writing development. Below, I first discuss the methods and data sources gathered for this study. Findings and the concept of "alternative sources of feedback" in higher education are then introduced, defined, and exemplied with two illustrative cases. The paper follows with a discussion of the implications of paying closer attention to the interactions, negotiations, and exchanges in which L2 writers partake outside their classrooms and in particular to the role played by alternative sources of feedback and their interpersonal and transactional dimensions.

Methodology

Data for this study stems from an eight-month longitudinal ethnographic case study of five international Japanese undergraduate students pursuing studies in content courses at a large Canadian university. The study tracked students' perspectives of the various factors affecting their writing in “regular” content courses while focusing on the impact of feedback practices for the short-term and long-term development of students' skills and investments in different types of writing.

Students for this study were volunteers recruited out of a larger cohort of Japanese international exchange students participating in their second year of study at Blue

Mountain University (BMU).[1] Whereas, in their first year of exchange these students had taken sheltered language courses to facilitate their participation within an all-English university, the second-year option of the exchange program was reserved exclusively for those students having demonstrated a strong performance in their first year of exchange and having thus proven their ability to pursue self-selected “regular” content courses within their areas of study with no official linguistic support.

Three males and two females from the second-year cohort of this program volunteered to participate in this study (see Table 1). Despite their status as "strong," students, all reported facing challenges with English academic discourse and, in particular, with writing. It is precisely because these students were at a stage in their studies where they were negotiating academic discourse as independent language learners in content courses, that I became interested in their progress and their perspective of the role of feedback interactions in the context of regular content courses.

Table 1
Description of Focal Participants

Student	Gender	Home University	Major
Kaito	Male	Nihon Daigaku University	Psychology
Naoko	Female	Nihon Daigaku University	Linguistics
Kaori	Female	Nihon University International	Asian studies
Yoshimi	Male	Nihon Daigaku University	Economics
Hiro	Male	Nihon Daigaku University	Policy Science

Methods employed to track students' perceptions of writing and feedback practices in content courses drew on a multiple case study design (Duff, 2007a) and triangulated multiple sources of data to situate students' accounts of the texts they were working on and the feedback they received. Data collected included biweekly semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 1998) with each of the five focal students during the eight months of the study (approximately seven interviews with each student per semester, for a total of close to 75 hours of recorded interactions). These interviews were conducted in English, recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Interviews lasted on average one hour in length and were designed to build on each other, each interview following up on ideas and events previously reported by students about their experiences writing for their courses. For these

1 Pseudonyms are used to refer to all institutions and participants of this study in order to ensure their anonymity.

interviews, students were asked to bring any drafts or assignments on which they had received feedback to share their reaction to this feedback and their understanding of its impact on their writing. These interactions also gave students a chance to discuss both the strengths and weaknesses of the feedback they received and how close this was to what they would have ideally desired to receive.

Further data sources collected and triangulated to verify students' insights included informal communications with students between interviews (e.g., email, electronic chat sessions, informal conversations), the collection and analysis of relevant documents (e.g., copies of final papers, drafts and accompanying feedback, course syllabi, and assignment descriptions), field notes recorded while visiting the campus, and observing classes attended by the focal students, informal conversations with faculty at the university, and semi-structured interviews conducted with four of the students' classroom instructors in order to explore their perspectives of feedback practices in their classrooms.

Throughout the study, data analysis drew on qualitative analysis tradition (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Silverman, 2000) and consisted of an iterative process of organizing, sorting, and coding the data to highlight emergent patterns and relationships between students' perspectives of their writing development and the feedback they had received from various sources.[2] Case-specific narratives were created that collated all relevant data available for each student and established a chronological description of events that made up their unique trajectories as L2 writers. This included instances when students identified a particular set of feedback comments as key to their writing development, as well as those moments when a specific feedback source was identified as helpful for their writing development. A cross-case analysis of the data was also conducted to discern key intersections and differences in students' interpretations of feedback practices. The emerging analysis was verified and refined through a constant return to the theoretical understandings of feedback practices and L2 writing development in the literature and by sharing early versions of these findings with both fellow researchers in the field and the focal students of this study to ask for comments and/or identify any inaccuracies or misunderstandings found.

Findings

Findings for this study revealed the feedback practices experienced by the focal students to be a complex literacy event with different and, at times, conflicting functions. As a result, its delivery, interpretation, and impact depended as much on students' and instructors' individual characteristics and backgrounds, as on its discursive features, all set against a complicated background of institutional forces and wider conversations about writing and L2 writers (for a complete report of the findings resulting from this study, see Séror, 2008).

In the interest of space, this article will focus on only one specific major theme which emerged from the data: the importance of what I will refer to as "alternative sources

2 Although the majority of feedback received by students originated from their instructors, as discussed below, other sources of feedback were also identified by students.

of feedback" for students' writing development. Alternative sources of feedback are defined here as those occasions when students sought out and received writing advice and feedback on their writing from individuals (including, but not exclusively limited to, peers) with no direct connections to the courses for which these assignments were being written.

As will be argued below, these alternative sources of feedback proved to be crucial resources for students who used them to compensate for what was often perceived as less than ideal feedback from content instructors. These alternative sources of feedback were also seen to be the object of complex strategic actions on students' part, often involving investments of social capital, time, and material resources.

Turning to Alternative Sources of Feedback to Compensate for Problems with Instructor Feedback

To better explain the compensatory role played by alternative sources of feedback, it is first important to note how instructor feedback was characterized by students in this study. When discussing instructor feedback, students in this study echoed others in the literature (Leki, 1991; Saito, 1994) by describing their professors' feedback in its ideal form as desired, important, and very much capable of contributing significantly to their writing development. Although the students had successfully completed their first year of study at BMU, all reported that many aspects of writing remained a challenge for them, stressing that learning to write in a second language was difficult, frustrating, and not something that could easily be done on their own. Learning to write meant being "curious and careful" about writing, and frequently "guessing" at what was expected from them as writers, especially when dealing with the written genres of content courses (i.e., a psychology lab report, a history paper, or reading response paper)—typically not genres that had been covered in the general academic writing courses these students had previously taken. Feedback from content instructors was hence seen as a crucial component of the process of figuring out if one had gotten it right and if not, what one might do differently next time.

Students particularly valued timely feedback provided as part of multi-draft process which would address *both* language issues in their assignments (i.e., grammar, spelling, mechanics) and the content (i.e., the ideas) they were communicating. The best feedback would also be clear and easy-to-read and would offer specific direct advice rather than simply identifying a problem (particularly, when dealing with complex problems such as organization or sentence structure).[3] In as such, good feedback was able to provide the "hints and tips" needed to "write well" (Kaito) and understand what differentiated "good writing from bad writing" (Yoshimi). As a result, good feedback was closely linked to learning how to write and was always credited by students as a key reason for writing success. Whenever students, for instance, obtained strong marks on written assignments, frequently, it was feedback's ability to demystify writing conventions and language issues

3 See Séror (2008; 2009) for more detailed descriptions of how students' described the shape ideal feedback should take.

that was credited as the determining factor having made it possible to successfully meet instructor expectations.

However, despite this shared sense of the value of instructor feedback, interviews with students also revealed a dissonance between students' construction of feedback as a key to successful writing development and the feedback they actually described and received from content instructors. Again, echoing problems attributed to L2 writing feedback in the literature by other L2 writers (Goldstein, 2005; Lee, 2008; Zamel, 1985) in interviews, students often expressed disappointment with the feedback that accompanied their returned assignments, complaining that the advice provided by instructors was often too short, unrelated to what they truly wanted to know, and difficult to understand.

In particular handwritten feedback comments made in the margins of assignments, the dominant form of feedback from content instructors, frequently stood out as a severe obstacle limiting students' ability to understand what their instructors were trying to tell them. Students also strongly disliked the tendency for instructor feedback to identify problems with their writing without, in their opinion, also providing the guidance or models to actually correct these errors (students stressed the usefulness of clear examples and models of good writing as a way to help them get a better grasp of writing assignments, especially when these differed from generic essays). Additionally, students decried how frustrating it was in a content course, where they felt the ideas expressed in a writing assignment should matter, to receive feedback which they noted largely attended to language errors while much less attention was paid responding to the value of their arguments. When asked about the kind of feedback he preferred, Hiro suggested for example: "I expect a comment on my idea, rather than grammar or structure… comments on grammar and structure are very helpful for me, but I am more interested in how professors feel about my ideas." Similarly, Kaito noted that "instructors that correct a lot of the grammar mistakes are helpful, but they also need to talk about my content," because "my main purpose is about expressing my ideas." Finally, students complained about professors' heavy schedules and how difficult it was as a result to communicate with professors in face-to-face interactions, a mode of feedback they felt was clearly superior to handwritten comments.

In summary, students presented a paradoxical image of feedback as something they believed in and desired, while simultaneously also being understood by students as something they did not in fact expect to receive in its ideal form from content instructors. As suggested by Naoko, "good" feedback did exist, but it seemed to be more of an exception than a rule.

> Usually I got feedback from my teacher, but it was short. And it was not useful for me. The class was useful, but the feedback was not so useful. I did not expect so much feedback because it was too short. *I expected feedback, but I did not expect good feedback*. That's the pattern I have always experienced. (Naoko, October 2005)

Refusing to Give Up on Feedback

Despite the sad state of affairs described above, students' interest in feedback and their desire to use it as a learning tool never diminished. In fact, showing determination and great sense of autonomy, students remained at all times determined to improve as writers and actively searched for "alternative sources of feedback" to supplement instructor-based feedback and find ways to work through the challenges they were facing in their classes as L2 writers. At the heart of what was coded in the data as "alternative sources of feedback" were the numerous occasions where students reported having identified and contacted individuals unrelated to their specific courses in order to ask them for advice on writing in general or on a text they had written.

These alternative sources of feedback frequently included peers drawn from their immediate social network (friends, significant others, and roommates) chosen because they were often deemed to be more available in terms of time and accessibility when compared to instructors. Alternative sources of feedback, however, also included making use of writing centre tutors on campus, and seeking out more socially distanced expert writers to learn more about what they had to suggest about improving as writers (falling in this category were times when students turned to Japanese professors, graduate students, and other more advanced L2 writers in both face-to-face or text-based interactions to discuss writing (for example Kaori reported reading regularly a blog written by a Japanese exchange student in the United States on solutions to writing problems faced by L2 writers, whereas Yoshimi frequently consulted one of the Japanese professors in charge of the exchange program).

The fact that students turned to individuals outside of the classroom context for additional sources of feedback was upon reflection in and of itself unsurprising. It is likely that this is a process that occurs readily on campuses worldwide. However, again, one might note that these interactions remain an aspect of feedback practices which has remained largely hidden and unaddressed in the literature. Moreover, what was in fact unanticipated in the findings was the quality of the feedback these interactions produced and the dynamism and complexity of the forces involved as students arranged access to these alternative source of feedback.

Alternative Sources of Feedback: Getting Closer to Ideal Forms of Feedback

In contrast to the typical instructor feedback they received, alternative sources of feedback were characterized by qualities that were often closer to what students had identified as ideal feedback for L2 writing development. These included, in particular, the ability to engage in more frequent face-to-face feedback interactions with longer and more detailed explanations of the evaluators' judgments (especially with friends). These longer interactions were often also linked to more explicit corrections and suggestions for alternative wordings, phrases, and vocabulary. Friends often had the time to make these suggestions and seemed unafraid to help too much (unlike some instructors, see Séror, 2009). Indeed, in some cases, it was not uncommon to hear students report they had spent

over an hour receiving feedback from a friend. Students greatly valued these opportunities to have extended periods of time to talk about their writing, particularly since they were very much aware that teachers and TAs simply could not be expected to engage with them in the same type of one-on-one sessions (face-to-face interactions with instructors did occur, but were generally short, ranging in the 5 to 15 minutes range).

Students' descriptions of alternative sources of feedback also suggested that the very format of these interactions made it easier to question and respond to the feedback offered on one's writing, something students felt was extremely difficult to do with instructors. Whereas instructor feedback was embedded in a clearly established institutional power relationship which often made it difficult for students to ask or complain about the feedback they received, alternative source of feedback frequently occurred within relationships where students felt on a more equal footing with the person providing the feedback. Indeed, on multiple occasions, it became evident that students did not feel comfortable going back to their instructors to discuss their feedback, even when they knew a teacher had actually misunderstood something or perhaps made a mistake in their feedback (e.g., Yoshimi talked of the fact that his teacher had marked as incorrect the use a specific terminological expression even though he knew for a fact that it was actually in use in some of the literature). Alternative sources of feedback thus made it easier for students to engage in debates and dialogues about writing versus the predominantly one-way, monologic nature of the feedback they were receiving from instructors.

Moreover, while with instructor feedback, the choice of what to focus on was determined by the instructor with little chance for students to suggest specific areas of the writing on which they wanted feedback (for example the ideas of the paper rather than purely its language), consulting alternative sources of feedback, on the other hand, made it easier to determine what the feedback would be about and even broach topics which were deemed risky when interacting with professors. Such topics as identified by students included, for instance, addressing concerns about plagiarism, or questioning the value of a particular topic or research question which had been assigned to students by the instructor, but which did not resonate with them.

Illustrating these qualities, Kaori's comments reveal the general sense of comfort associated with alternative sources of feedback (in particular, friends) in contrast to instructors who she felt were simply too busy, and often had difficulties "coming down to her level."

> I don't know how much the prof can spend time for me. I don't know how prof can level down to me. If I bring question to help and I don't understand but he is really busy and he might not have time... So it is very difficult. Friends on the other hand are easier to ask questions... They understand me more... They understand English as well. If I don't understand what they say...I can tell them that I don't understand. They are more patient. (Kaori, November 2005, interview)

Interestingly, it was also when focal students received feedback from fellow students and writing tutors from the writing centre, as well as more experienced writers

that they were offered the models they so often desired (frequently copies of previously written essays). These were given to students as concrete examples of how they could organize their ideas and of the norms and rhetorical structures associated with specific types of assignments. For example, when Naoko was asked to produce a research poster for a class, it was alternative sources of feedback that allowed her to collect information about the nature and type of writing associated with this specific academic genre. She also collected from these alternative sources of feedback several samples of such posters and technical advice on how to produce these with PowerPoint. In contrast, no such models or explicit technical advice on how to produce them was provided by the content instructor.

Also interesting were those occasions when feedback was offered through the use of computers in digital form. These forms of electronic feedback were identified by students as significantly more legible and easier to understand and were thus greatly appreciated. Interestingly, they also led to a different dynamic of feedback exchanges since these were most frequently embedded in back-and-forth email conversations (see Kaito's case below for more on this).

In summary, the alternative sources of feedback not only provided useful and valued information to students; they did so while offering unique advantages related to the unique relationships (less power-governed) and modes of communication (more frequent, longer face-to-face interactions) associated with these sources of feedback.

In order to better illustrate the role and nature of alternate sources of feedback, I present below two specific cases of students' use of these types of feedback and details of the interactions and actions that led to their accessing this feedback. These cases illustrate further both the advantages gained by students by making use of the sources of feedback, as well as the complex investments involved in getting access to these types of feedback.

Naoko's Case

Naoko was one of the most well-rounded and grounded of the focal students in the study. Although she was, like the other focal students in the study, bright and serious about her academic work, she was also determined to maintain an active social life in Canada and take full advantage of friends and social activities she felt would simply be no longer available upon her return to Japan.

Naoko also stood out from other focal students as the only one not to express a strong desire to improve her writing skills right from the onset of the study. Whereas all other focal students explicitly identified in their first interviews writing development as a goal they were striving to achieve at their host university, Naoko explained in her first interview: "At the moment, improving writing is not my main goal. I want to improve my speaking skills. Maybe later I can improve my writing" (September, 2005, interview).

In fact, in her initial interviews Naoko revealed that in attempts to avoid having to deal with writing during her first year at BMU, she had deliberately looked for courses she believed required little formal writing. She explained her decision by noting that in addition to knowing that improving as a writer would likely be difficult and time-

consuming, she felt English writing skills would not be required in her workplace in Japan unlike conversational English abilities or reading skills[4].

Of interest, however, during the following eight months of the study was how this opinion evolved and gradually changed. In fact, four months after dismissing writing as an explicit goal worth pursuing, Naoko expressed at the start of her final semester in Canada a very different view of what writing represented for her. In these interviews, writing was still recognized as a difficult skill to develop for L2 learners, but it was also increasingly associated with a growing sense of what writing could allow her to do as a second language learner. Naoko stressed how writing enabled one to display to an instructor ideas and an engagement with the content in a way that was simply not possible solely through oral communication skills. Writing also was unique in that it allowed international students to make use of a mode of communication that did not rely on what Natsu (and other focal students in the study) identified as the high degree of skills and confidence required for an L2 learner to raise one's hand and speak up in a class dominated by native speakers. In contrast, writing afforded one the time and opportunity to craft and review one's message carefully and slowly, rather than having to string it all together "live" in public.[5] Naoko also made it clear that she was attracted to the notion of permanence that came with written texts. Unlike the ephemeral nature of spoken interactions, written texts were concrete objects that could serve as evidence of one's abilities in a second language, and might even be taken home to Japan and shown to parents, friends, and future employees as tangible proof of what has been accomplished as an exchange student.

With these reasons in mind, Naoko thus made writing an explicit goal at the start of her second and final semester stating that she wished to write something for her courses in these final months in Canada that she could be proud of. Moreover, in contrast with previous semesters, she did not shy away from classes with writing and appeared eager to engage with her writing assignments.

Ultimately one particular assignment became closely associated with Naoko's goal to write something she could be proud of, namely, the final research paper for her communications course due at the end of the semester in April. Naoko enjoyed this course and its professor, and because she could choose the topic for the paper, she saw in it a chance to produce a research paper which would be a culmination of all she had learned during her two-year exchange program, giving her a chance to turn this assignment into her own mini "thesis," and it soon became clear she was determined to do her best to produce a top quality paper including turning to alternative sources of feedback.

Naoko, like the other students, had expressed disappointment with written instructor feedback and commented on how difficult it was to find time to talk to her

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4 In many ways, she turned out to be right. With the exception of reading occasional documents in English, at the company Naoko ultimately ended up working for, she reported in later conversations that she did not have to speak or write in English, with the majority all of her business interactions being conducted in Japanese.

5 Indeed, Naoko reported that she remained shy in her classes throughout the study, and during the times I was able to come and observe her classes she never spoke out in class and was visibly uncomfortable during the class presentation she had to make.

instructor who was always in high demand by all students in the class. Naoko therefore strategically went out of the way to find alternative sources of feedback to receive advice on her writing from the very start of her work on the communications paper in the month of February. In this process, Naoko drew on a variety of individuals. For instance, Naoko asked and received feedback from her local Canadian roommates and friends. She also discussed her research interests and possible topics for her paper with fellow exchange students to get their opinions and suggestions. Additionally, she took advantage of a lab monitor on more than one occasion at a local computer lab that had advertised feedback services for students and made weekly one-hour appointments at the local writing centre to work on her text with writing tutors. Having decided to focus on second language learning strategies as her topic, she also took advantage of our regular interviews to ask for advice in the initial planning stages of her paper and inquire about resources I felt might be relevant to her research question.

Through these alternative sources of feedback, Naoko succeeded in receiving a great deal of advice and feedback on her initial topic, her research questions, potential sources of information, the arguments and organization for her paper, and the language and structure found in the final versions of her assignment. As suggested above, this feedback from alternative sources aligned itself with those qualities identified by students as ideal. She received feedback on multiple drafts of her text in what were predominantly face-to-face interactions that lasted much longer than the two short talks she had with her professor to discuss her assignment (these lasted no longer than fifteen minutes each). Thus, these alternative sources of feedback enabled her to access more frequent and detailed information on a wider range of issues, information which Naoko conscientiously incorporated in numerous drafts of her paper before finally handing in her paper at the end of the semester.

When Naoko's professor returned her paper, she happily announced that she had received positive feedback from her professor with regards to the quality of her paper. He had given her an A- noting in his end comment to her:

> Naoko,
>
> You have written a very well organized paper. You relate the difference in learning strategies nicely to differences in social structure, and use a theoretical framework well.
>
> Try giving more background on data sources.
>
> Good work!

Happily Naoko commented:

> ….it's better than I had expected. I'm so happy, and the professor said to me, "You did a very good job on this paper, and I guess that you worked so hard." I'm so happy about that. I'm satisfied with this work and I really I think I worked so hard. (April, 2006, interview)

When asked how important she felt the feedback she had received had been for this success, she felt that the lab monitor and her roommate had both "made a big difference." Even if it "took a long time,"she "could ask more questions, and it was more casual" and could "talk more comfortably" than in the more formal settings of the writing centre.

Naoko's case illustrates well the previously mentioned potential attributed to alternative sources of feedback by students as a way to make a positive impact on students' abilities to improve as writers and enhance their ability to meet instructors' expectations. It is noteworthy, however, that this feedback was obtained at a considerable expense in terms of the work and time required on Naoko's part, as well as the part of the various individuals she consulted. She noted quite honestly in interviews that it had not always been easy to schedule moments to sit down with drafts for the face-to-face conferences she had had and that she had had to sacrifice coursework in other classes to free up time to get feedback at moments that worked with her alternative sources of feedback. She added that in the final weeks before handing in her paper, she had done close to "nothing for the other classes," and had practically avoided "every single reading" due for the end of the semester.

Naoko's case illustrates how, when an assignment really mattered, students in this study turned to alternative sources of feedback to access extra help and information that was not readily available from instructors. In Naoko's case the desire to make use of these alternative sources of feedback stemmed directly from her motivation to write well and her belief that these sources of feedback could make a difference and were, therefore, in this case (her final chance to write an essay she could be proud of) a worthwhile investment of the resources required to obtain this feedback such as time and energy stolen from other classes, and favors from friends and roommates. Significantly, alternative sources of feedback did prove to be useful and to have a positive impact on the results obtained, although, notably, they also did not come for free.

Kaito's Case

Kaito's case offered another fascinating example of the agency and costs involved for focal students as they drew on alternative forms of feedback to improve their writing. Unlike Naoko, Kaito greatly valued writing from the very start of the study. Like other students, however, he was skeptical about the idea that he could receive the type of detailed feedback he needed exclusively from his instructors. As a result, he was actually one of the first of the focal students to show an interest in how he could use interactions and connections with various individuals beyond the classroom to provide him with "valuable clues" about writing that professors did not have the time to provide.

This approach to his writing development reflected his personality and social skills. Like Naoko, Kaito was very social. He was, in fact, charming and he easily made friends. For instance, he once recounted the time when he had been approached by a female student in the library who had seen him working and asked what he was working on. After chatting for a while, she offered to help him with his writing (an offer he gladly accepted for the rest of the semester). Kaito, therefore, had a wide network of friends he could draw

on when looking for alternative sources of feedback. Like Naoko, Kaito also made regular use of writing centre tutors, and friends, and he even turned to me for writing advice on occasion, doing everything he could to maximize his chances of meeting people that could help them improve as a writer.

Perhaps the most interesting and complex action undertaken by Kaito in this line of reasoning occurred when he made the strategic decision to volunteer as a research assistant for a large research project conducted within the psychology department at BMU. Originally, Kaito had been asked whether, as a native speaker of Japanese, he might help recruit Japanese participants for the research project. Over the course of his final year at BMU, however, Kaito's participation in the project gradually grew to the point of helping to collect, analyze, and ultimately write up sections of the findings emerging from the surveys conducted with the Japanese participants he had recruited

I originally asked Kaito why he had made what first appeared to be a risky decision to commit the little free time he had outside of his full-time studies to work as what increasingly resembled the position of an unpaid research assistant, warning him that I felt he should be careful not to overextend himself. Kaito explained that although he did indeed feel he was busier than he had ever been, there were two main reasons motivating his actions.

First, volunteering for this project was part of a long-term plan related to his desire to pursue graduate studies in psychology. Participating in this project would enable him to gain valuable research experience and allow him to get to know personally the professor in charge of the study. This professor was known by Kaito to be a leading researcher in his field who had previously conducted research in Japan and had good connections with Japanese universities. Kaito hoped that by volunteering for this professor's project, he would later be able to ask for a letter of reference from this professor when he applied for graduate studies in Japan. Kaito also made it clear that he fully expected that investing time in this research project would allow him to ask for "favors" in return, including getting feedback on his writing from members of the research team with whom he would be collaborating, especially from the Japanese PhD student who had initially recruited Kaito to help with this project and who had been placed in charge of supervising his work.

Over the span of the two semesters of the study, it became evident that Kaito's involvement in the research project did take up vast amounts of his time. He reported spending sleepless nights working on the final report and invested numerous hours collecting and analyzing data. However, it also was clear that Kaito's strategy did pay off for him. In the process of volunteering for the research project, Kaito did exactly as he said he would and took advantage of his interactions with graduate students and the professor in charge of the project to ask for and receive advice and feedback on his writing. Of note were the significant differences in the nature of the feedback he received when compared to the typical feedback received in content courses. For instance, as part of a "research team," Kaito was able to interact and ask for feedback on his ideas on a regular basis on multiple versions of drafts, again in direct contrast to the more typical experience of receiving feedback on only the final version of an assignment in his classes. Moreover, the research team provided him with detailed descriptions of the rules and conventions of

writing with recommendations of how to improve including, significantly, copies of scholarly articles and chapters on how to write for his field, and samples of the type of assignments he would have to produce.

Finally, as predicted, Kaito was able to receive one-on-one feedback from the Japanese PhD student in charge of the project who provided detailed electronic feedback on multiple drafts of both presentation slides and essays he was working on for his classes (see Figure 1 below for an example of this feedback). In these feedback interactions, it was interesting to see how Kaito and the PhD student engaged in dialogues, often using different colored fonts to ask and answer questions in a series of back and forth e-mails (this type of feedback interaction was never seen in the feedback interactions focal students had with instructors). Moreover, the PhD student made use of Microsoft Word's "track change" function to flag deletions and suggest specific changes to the text all while adding comments about the strength of the ideas being proposed.

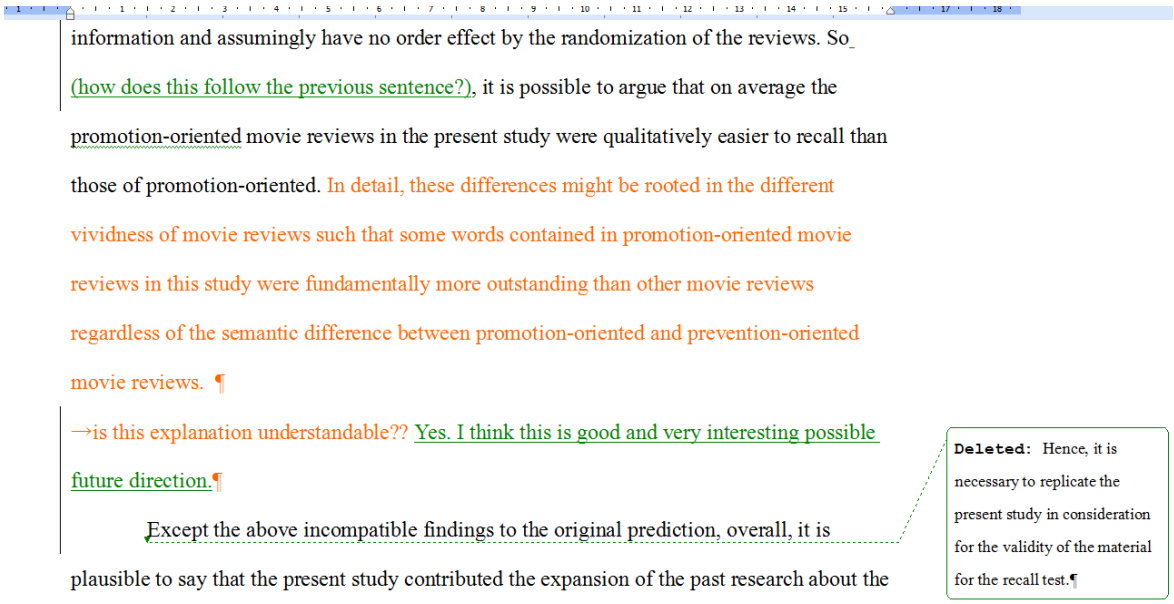

Figure 1. Example of feedback offered to Kaito

In the excerpt shown of these feedback interactions, for instance, we find that Kaito has asked if his explanation of a key concept "is understandable." The PhD student has replied in a different color that "yes it is" and adds a compliment suggesting that his ideas have interesting future directions for the research. He has, however, also suggested that Kaito delete the introductory sentence of the next paragraph that follows this explanation.

Of note again is how much more this type of feedback came close to the "ideal" feedback students had described in their interviews. Regarding the effectiveness of this feedback and its perceived importance, Kaito greatly appreciated the feedback he had

received from these more expert writers, noting the details and also the quality of the advice he received. It is also worth noting that Kaito obtained a final mark of A+ for the research paper he had worked on with the PhD student. This was the highest grade received by any of the focal students in the study, an achievement which was admired and celebrated by his peers in the second-year exchange program cohort. Like Naoko, nevertheless, for Kaito the greatest success was not the mark in itself but rather the quality of the work that was implied by the mark. The paper became a high point of his work at BMU, and it would influence the direction of the research he would indeed later pursue as a graduate student in the same field back in Japan. These results would once again reinforce for Kaito and me the belief that feedback practices could make an important difference for L2 writers' initiation into academic discourses, even if the best sources of feedback might not necessarily be the ones I had originally anticipated, namely, content instructors, and the fact that it truly took a lot of work to access them.

Implications

Although the qualitative research design for this study makes it impossible to offer generalizations beyond the individuals who participated in the study, implications stemming from these cases are expanded on in this section in order to propose future research avenues, principles, and theoretical insights drawn from these cases' unique perspectives on the impact that feedback practices can have for L2 writing development in similar contexts.

University Feedback Practices: Importance of Looking Beyond the Classroom

Findings in this paper suggest that alternative sources of feedback were perceived by students in this study as a valid and important means of receiving writing feedback, contributing in important ways to their L2 writing development even if students felt instructors, as disciplinary experts and the originators of their writing assignments, remained crucial if not the best potential source of feedback. However, these findings also reveal how students appeared to have learned to associate different sources of feedback with different functions and purposes. Whereas content instructors' written feedback was linked predominantly with what could be categorized as institutional qualities (monologic interaction, a focus on problems rather than solutions, short summative responses shaped by the need to save time and keep things simple), alternative sources of feedback were associated more closely with pedagogic qualities involving dialogic interaction, specific and detailed recommendations on solutions which would help improve the text, with more time and opportunities to discuss the reasoning and principles guiding these changes.

At a general level, these findings reinforce the notion that research on the impact of feedback practices can benefit from investigations of feedback interactions that occur in more informal settings outside the classroom. Indeed, this study suggests that conversations with friends in coffee shops and libraries, chat sessions on MSN, and interactions at writing centres, among others, can play a crucial role for L2 writers as was

the case with these students, especially when they have reached a stage in their studies where they find themselves in programs composed solely of "content courses" and must hence work independently to locate and access the information needed to write in a language other than their mother tongue. Studies of L2 writers as independent language learners and how they turn to alternative sources of friends, writing centres, and fellow L2 writers remain rare in the literature, but they represent an opportunity to uncover important information regarding the larger set of social interactions and networks mobilized in the processes of L2 literacy development (Duff, 2007b; Ferenz, 2005; Kobayashi, 2003; Séror, Chen, & Gunderson, 2005; Zappa, 2007).

The challenge for researchers and instructors is that many of these interactions occur outside the classroom and therefore remain largely hidden from view. Swales' (1996) definition of "occluded genres," discourse practices which occur outside of public view but which nevertheless remain key components of the larger chain of genres that together shape academic discourse communities seems particularly relevant here. Future researchers may well want to trace and make more explicit the position and role alternative sources of feedback have in the larger chain of literacy events that leads to success or failure for L2 writers in content courses (see Figure 2). For example, questions of interest might include: To what extent are successful alternative source users those who experience the greatest academic success; and what is the impact of alternative sources of feedback on students' approach and understanding of discipline-specific writing?

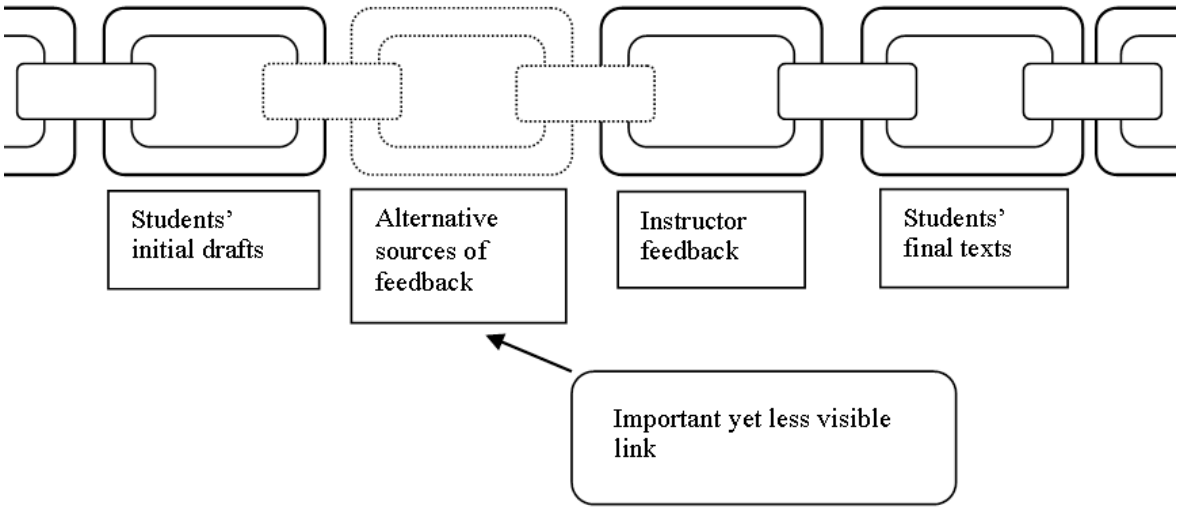

Figure 2. Larger chains of literacy events connected to writing success

Exploring in greater detail these occluded processes and their impact on L2 writing development in universities, could also help address increasing concerns on the part of instructors that feedback by peers, friends, and more specifically, paid online and offline tutors can easily slip into a form of ghostwriting (i.e., situations where students'

assignments are simply written/ rewritten by an unacknowledged author rather than actually commented on with further revisions to be made by the actual student consulting these services).

Sadly, there is indeed evidence that online essay editing services do exist which offer, for a price, completed essays that students can then submit in their own names (Flowerdew & Li, 2007; Hayes & Introna, 2005). Although in such cases, we clearly move away from legitimate feedback practices and cross into the domain of academic plagiarism, a closer look at how students find and use alternative sources of feedback would shed much needed insights on this controversy while also potentially leading to the development of guiding policies that could clarify for students where and how the line can be drawn between valid, desirable feedback resources such as seen in Kaito's case above and instances of non-instructor editing which in fact constitute instances of plagiarism. Similarly, potential tutors and editors, in particular those who lack training in offering feedback, would be better informed by such policies and thus better prepared to supply assistance to L2 writers without falling in the trap of helping too much.

Tracking the Price of Feedback

The study also has implications for the need to consider more carefully feedback as something that is often the result of a complex series of exchanges of services set against the background of specific relationships (tutor/customer, friends, fellow L2 writers, novice/ expert, for example). This idea reinforces the importance of taking into account the interpersonal dimensions of feedback practices (Hyland & Hyland, 2006b) and taking seriously the notion that, unlike feedback received from instructors which can be expected, even if only in a minimal way, for free, access to other sources of feedback is neither guaranteed nor free.

This conceptualization of feedback adds an extra dimension to what has more often been an almost exclusive focus on the pedagogic function fulfilled by feedback as an activity that provides L2 writers with the knowledge and skills required to improve as writers with little attention paid to the other functions it also realizes: interpersonal, institutional, and, as suggested by this paper, transactional, all integral components of the dynamics of feedback. In particular, adding a transactional dimension to our understanding of feedback practices reinforces their bidirectional/dialogic nature as an activity that involves individuals in what is not only a pedagogic act but also "an interested one" which to truly work must be seen to benefit both the receiver of the feedback and the feedback provider to ensure the time and effort required on the part of all is worth the trouble. It is hence important to explore what form of compensation is being offered in exchange for the services rendered and its consequence for the success of the activity. A lack of sufficient compensation, incidentally, may well explain why many instructors in fact do not feel "motivated" to offer the best feedback possible once they calculate the investment of time required versus the return in terms of recognition and reward at an institutional level (see Bronson, 2004; Séror, 2009).

From a theoretical perspective, this study's findings favor a conceptualization of feedback interactions as acts of negotiation that students must strategically engage in and draw on as they learn to deliberately identify, choose, and make use of different types of sources of information about writing while identifying those resources they may be able to exchange for this feedback (e.g.,volunteer work, friendship, language exchange, monetary compensation). Useful links can be drawn here to Bourdieu's (1977) notion of the "economics of linguistic exchanges" and his conceptualization of language users' investments in specific repertoires and literacy practices. Seen as the complex calculations that involve balancing the potential gains associated with particular language practices with the costs associated with their acquisition, alternative sources of feedback can be situated as components of a larger linguistic marketplace (Bourdieu, 1997), whereby various forms of capital including symbolic and material resources are exchanged for opportunities to access expertise in the use of those linguistic forms deemed to have prestige and value in society.

At a policy level, this conceptualization of feedback raises interesting questions for institutions in terms of what sources of information on their writing and feedback practices are made available to support increasing populations of L2 writers and what can be done to ensure that as many students as possible have access to these. This would entail asking questions such as:

- What spaces (both private and public, formal and informal) are available for students to receive feedback on their writing?
- Who presently gets to participate in these, how, and in exchange of what?
- How is writing addressed and talked about in these spaces, and how is it adding to and/or compensating for the learning students are doing in their courses?

Such institutional oversight could foster greater transparency and equity regarding practices that otherwise remain too frequently private with instructors and students left to negotiate on their own, in the margins, the "best deals," leading to "economies of literacy" which may not in fact be in the best interest of everyone. In particular, institutions, may want to consider the risks of a system where the best feedback is only available to the highest bidders or only to those students with the resources (time, money, social networks, among others) needed to pay into the system.

Finally, acknowledging the important role played by alternative sources of feedback for students' trajectory and academic success, even if it is often in a way that is not directly visible, suggests that advantages may be gained by exploring what bridges that might be built between these and more formal sources of feedback, most notably instructor-based feedback provided in classes.

In this study, with the exception of professors encouraging students to visit the writing centre, few explicit links were ever established by instructors between what was occurring in the course and the alternative sources of feedback students were working with. In other words, teachers did not ask or encourage students to talk about or explicitly discuss with their instructors the alternative sources of feedback they were consulting for their writing. Based on the importance given to alternative sources of feedback by the

students in this study, it seems that rather than leaving out these activities from the official instructional discourse, efforts should be made to refine the strategic use of alternative sources of feedback as resources for literacy development to be explored by both L2 writers and writing and content instructors. One might for instance encourage instructors to make room in their classrooms for conversations about the use and importance of alternative sources of feedback including recommendations about: which alternative sources of feedback might be best suited for the type of writing they are working on; what to ask for when getting this feedback; and how alternative sources of feedback and the knowledge about writing they are providing might be used and referenced appropriately in an assignment. A teacher might, for instance, ask students to submit copies of the drafts of assignments students have worked on with alternative sources of feedback as well as a brief reflection on what was learned as a result of working with these individuals.

In conclusion, this study has reaffirmed the notion that feedback practices are multiple, complex, and interrelated affairs that function not only at a pedagogic level but also at an interpersonal, institutional and transactional one, all embedded within a complex series of exchanges, services and fulfillments of obligations. As such, determining and understanding what shapes the value attached to feedback by L2 writers and its ultimate impact will require paying attention to these multiple factors including those forces that go beyond the individual and purely pedagogic dimensions of feedback itself and spill over into the wider social contexts and interactions that surround the classroom and the content instructor as officially recognized sources of feedback. Engaging with alternative sources of feedback explicitly in this way should help instructors and universities establish stronger connections between the learning that occurs in class and the learning that occurs outside of it, bringing together rather than keeping separate the various contexts and partners involved, both visible and invisible, and ultimately contributing to a more coherent and effective vision of feedback for L2 writing development.

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