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What students *don't* make of feedback in higher education: an illustrative study

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Abstract

This paper investigates the way a postgraduate student on an MA TESOL programme at a UK university constructed summative and formative messages from the written feedback she received on her first assignment, and the extent to which those messages corresponded with marker intentions. The study concludes that the participant was able to construct appropriate summative and formative messages with regard to aspects of her written expression such as lexical choice but showed limited ability to construct summative or formative messages from feedback concerned with argument, analysis or task achievement. The study highlights the importance of shared understandings; of making explicit the formative messages embedded within summative feedback; of the need to embrace a conception of feedback as dialogue rather than monologic telling; of issues of power, and of the need to empower students to seek out and negotiate rather than passively receive feedback; and of the need to understand the production and consumption of feedback within a wider context of affordances and constraints.

Keywords

Feedback; higher education**;** student interpretation; self-regulation

Highlights

- Formative messages must be dis-embedded from within summative messages.
- A dialogic assessment feedback practice is needed.
- Issues of power in assessment feedback must be made explicit and challenged
- Feedback practices must be understood within contexts of affordance and constraint.

Introduction

Over the last fifteen years written feedback in higher education has emerged as a major focus for critical attention (the collections edited by Boud & Molloy, 2013b; Burke & Pieterick, 2010; and Evans, 2013; and the systematic reviews by Li & De Luca, 2014; and Merry, Price, Carless, & Taras, 2013; see for example Wingate, 2010). This attention reflects the growing understanding that feedback on performance has a critical role to play in scaffolding the emergence of situated, disciplinary writing expertise (Jolly & Boud, 2013; Sadler, 2013). However, these publications, especially Li and De Luca (2014), and Evans (2013) do suggest a strong concentration of research in specific areas.

Chief amongst these is a diverse body of studies exploring the diversity of teachers' feedback practices and teachers' perceptions and understandings of them (Bailey & Garner, 2010; Carless, Salter, Yang, & Lam, 2011; Guillen Solano, 2016; Li & Barnard, 2011; Tuck, 2012); their impact on student learning (Court, 2014; Phillips & Wolcott, 2014; Wingate, 2010); the impact of institutional contexts on feedback practices (Bailey & Garner, 2010; Seror, 2009); and ways of enhancing the effectiveness of feedback through complementary measures of various kinds (or the mediation of written feedback through face-to-face tutorials, Cramp, 2011; the use of audio files alongside written feedback, Knauf, 2016; for example, the use of exemplars and detailed assessment criteria, Lipnevich, McCallen, Miles, & Smith, 2014).

Students feature extensively in the literature on feedback in higher education, offering their experiences (Hounsell, McCune, Hounsell, & Litjens, 2008); their assessments of the usefulness of feedback practices of various kinds (Chang, 2014; Knauf, 2016); and their preferences (Bols & Wicklow, 2013; Zacharias, 2007). There have also been studies which look at students as active, purposeful and motivated constructors of meaning and point to the dissonance between student interpretations of feedback and the messages their teachers intended: Guillen Solano (2016) points to the disprivileged position of international students in the UK, lacking the situated, cultural understandings necessary to interpret feedback; Torres and Anguiano (2016), point to different understandings of purpose and consider the impact of feedback on student identities; and Zhao (2010) highlights the fact that the uses students make of feedback rest on the constructions they make of its purpose and meaning.

Such studies however represent a fraction of the work in the field, a fact highlighted by Evans (2013) who identifies seven areas requiring further research. Five of these, in different ways, foreground the role of the student as a self-regulating subject, seeking, interpreting and appropriating feedback, and working within feedback networks, and through dynamic interactions with feedback-givers. Such research would serve to further underpin contemporary notions of feedback as dialogic process (Boud & Molloy, 2013a; Sadler, 2013). The present study addresses these concerns by reporting one element of a larger project looking at the construction of academic literacies by a group of international and home postgraduates on a MA TESOL course at a UK university. The paper focuses in detail on one of these participants and considers how she constructed summative and formative messages from the written feedback she received on her first (non-assessed) assignment on the programme, and how those messages might match those intended by the marker. The choice to concentrate on a single participant reflects the need to offer a granular picture in which comment and interpretation can be set side by side.

The study is illustrative of the need to see feedback as a dialogic process, to see feedback-recipients as active constructors of meaning both empowered and constrained by the understandings they bring to the process, and to understand the interaction of feedback-giver and recipient within a wider 'enabling context' (Freedman, 1987) of interweaving factors. The study lends support to feedback practices which offer students opportunities to negotiate feedback (Boud & Molloy, 2013a; Carless et al., 2011; Sadler, 2013), for example through text-based discussion (Lillis, 2006); which rebalance power relations by enabling students to seek rather than simply receive feedback; and which enable students to draw on a range of affordances within their learning context to make sense of and to appropriate feedback for their own purposes.

Methods

The study was guided by two questions:

1. What summative and formative messages did the participant construct from the written feedback she received?
2. How did those interpretations compare with marker intentions as understood by 'informed insiders'?

The participant, 'Lovely' (a pseudonym), an Indonesian woman in her 30s at the time of the research, was part of a group of eight home and international students on a MA TESOL programme, who had volunteered to participate in a longitudinal study investigating the construction of academic literacies, funded and ethically approved by a UK university. The participants were not purposefully selected in any way but, fortuitously, they were representative of the wider MA TESOL cohort in terms of nationality (Indonesian, Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, British, Chilean and Slovenian), linguistic abilities, professional experience and academic qualifications.

The data used for this paper relates to the early stages of this project and a collaborative academic literacy intervention which required the students to write a 1500-word practice assignment designed to afford them practice in engaging with sources and developing arguments. The assignment (see Appendix A) was set and marked, and the feedback written, by members of the MA TESOL team. However the writing of it was scaffolded by academic literacy tutors from the university's Language Centre who taught a 16-hour (eight-week) in-sessional course. This course supported the writing of the assignment by both enacting a writing process, beginning with unpacking the question, and by providing input on relevant topics such as argumentation, use of sources and register.

The data came from two sources. The first was marker feedback on Lovely's first (non-assessed) assignment. This feedback consisted of three elements: a grid showing the School's assessment criteria, with the comments applicable to the students' work highlighted; a set of summary comments drawn from the assessment criteria but with specific application to the student's text; and a set of marginal notes commenting on specific sections of text. This feedback is presented in Appendix B.

For coding purposes these comments were broken down into discrete feedback chunks, though care was taken to preserve their sequential, textual coherence. Each chunk was first assigned one of the categories used in the school's taught postgraduate assessment criteria. These were *relevance*, the

extent to which a question has been answered; *analysis,* the extent to which ideas have been understood and critiqued, and arguments constructed; *support,* the extent to which evidence from the literature or from personal enquiry has been used to support claims; *structure*, the extent to which the assignment text is organised cohesively to ensure coherence; and *presentation,* the extent to which the assignment meets word-limits, observes format conventions, follows citation and referencing conventions and is written in accurate, appropriate English. Each chunk was then categorised as either explicitly *summative* (affording an explicit comment on the assignment in question) or explicitly *formative* (affording an explicit suggestion/recommendation for improving subsequent written work). The great majority of comments were categorised as summative. The categorisation was then checked with two separate academics, both involved in teaching on the TESOL programme and in the marking of the practice assignment, who concurred fully with the categorisations.

I and the two other TESOL academics then, independently, provided our own interpretations of each of the chunks in the following manner: where the chunks were adjudged summative, we first offered our paraphrase of the comment, that is to say, we gave our own individual understanding of what the marker had meant to convey about the assignment. We then offered, again individually, our own inferences as to formative messages that might legitimately be drawn from the summative comments. That is to say, on the basis of what the marker had said about the assignment, we tried to infer an appropriate message for the student for their next assignment. Where the chunk was adjudged explicitly formative, we offered our paraphrases of the recommendations. This stage also produced a very high level of agreement. There were differences in the level of detail but the substance of both paraphrases and inferences was deemed by all three of the academics to be the same in all but one instance.

The second data-source was a semi-structured, text-based interview. In this interview, Lovely was first presented with both the highlighted assessment grid and the summary comments, as they appear in Appendix B, and asked to read them through until she was satisfied she understood them as well as she could. The interviewer then took the discrete, categorised comments, and asked Lovely to give her own understanding of each one with regard to (a) a summative message i.e. a message about the submitted text and (b) a formative message, i.e. a point of guidance for future writing. The interview was recorded with Lovely's permission, and transcribed. These interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy. This data is presented in Appendix C.

Findings

This section presents the interpretation data organised according to the criteria of the assessment grid.

1. Relevance

Marker comments under the heading of 'relevance' were:

You have addressed most of the required components of the assignment task.
You have thought about this in great depth and include the summary of positions in the papers to an extent, and plenty about your own context. You don't really set out Sowden and Liu's positions

against each other very clearly however: they have a contrasting stance, and this contrast is not obvious in your writing.

The former sets out a general assessment that the assignment has partially addressed the question. The second offers some detail of what has been done (some summary of the key positions advanced by the two writers, and an indication of the student's own context) and what has not: the two writers have not been presented as opposed participants in a debate. There is no indication of a formative point relating to this. Lovely's construction of the summative points was as follows:

> The first one in terms of relevance, yeah, like what I've said before, I think he thinks that I have addressed some of the require…some of the required aspects that I have to do to address the required aspects from the practice assignment

> What he said. I think I was not really addressing the task. The task was not entirely addressing all of these that he expect me to do so.

These two comments show an awareness of the partial nature of the task completion but little attention to the detail, that what was deficient in the assignment was a failure to set up a debate through the two protagonists. Pushed to infer a formative point from these comments, Lovely suggested the following:

> I think do more like present, no, I mean to criticise, maybe criticise more deeply about what the actually assignment asks to do, because somehow when I like first read the assignment, and then I understand, I understood that this…that they want us…what the assignment want us to do, but in the reality when I start to write, and I write everything, and sometimes it will just not in the right way.

This suggests awareness that what is amiss is 'criticality', but there is little indication of what that might mean in this case, nor how criticality might be instantiated in future writing. What it mainly suggests is a recognition that a task Lovely initially thought she had understood and could carry out turned out to be more complex and less manageable when she actually started writing. Overall, the data suggest a general summative understanding of the feedback, though little understanding of the detail, but very little in the way of formative inference. This is in very marked contrast to the 'insiders' who were able to offer, for example:

> Next assignment you must ensure you do all of the things the question asks you to do and fully (by adopting a range of writing strategies to make sure you understand the question, its demands and how to address each of them). […] You need to summarise arguments more fully. You need to show how different writers disagree about issues.

This indicates an understanding of not only what needs to be done ('all of the things the question asks you to do' and 'summarise arguments […] show how different writers disagree') but also some insight into how to do it ('adopting […]writing strategies to make sure you understand the question, its demands and how to address each of them').

2. Analysis

Marker comments under the heading of 'analysis' were as follows:

> There is some understanding of the main ideas with an attempt to relate ideas and experience (where relevant). There is criticality but limited synthesis in the discussion.

> Some criticality is evident though, and you have engaged with some central ideas on the topic.

These indicate that Lovely's assignment showed some understanding of and engagement with relevant concepts (in this case plagiarism and cultural constructions of it), some attempt to connect ideas and experience (through considering the student's own Indonesian context) and some indication of criticality and synthesis, though these are not explicitly exemplified. The comments were supported by six marginal notes, five pointing to analytical deficiencies ('I don't think there's anything particularly recent about plagiarism'; 'You are aligning with Sowden's position here without first critically examining it, which you need to do'; 'Too 'easy' a conclusion'; 'Sowden was not talking about Indonesia, as you are, so this is not 'according to Sowden'); one pointing out a coherence problem ('I don't understand this conclusion.'); and one commendation ('This is a higher quality of argumentation – well done').

Lovely interpreted the first sentence ('There is […] relevant).') as meaning:

> and then I actually attempt to elaborate some…fill some ideas but…and then try to develop my ideas with my experience, but it's not that much, it's just a few of them, yeah, and then…that's in terms of analysis.

She interpreted the second sentence ('there is criticality […] discussion') as:

> so it's just like, I don't really like criticise…I didn't realise…I really criticise the other authors […] I was aware also as well about criticising and…criticising the other authors, it's not…yeah, I found this difficult, and also maybe I…not maybe, but, there was limited synthesis in my… Synthesise is for putting all of the ideas of some experts, and then combine with mine, that's like that.

These suggest an awareness of deficiencies in understanding or at least of the articulation ('elaboration') of ideas and some understanding of criticality and synthesis. It is notable though that Lovely's construction of criticality equates it with 'criticism'. Asked to define 'criticality' Lovely replied:

Lovely	Criticality is it to do with criticise?
Interviewer	Well, it's certainly connected isn't it?
Lovely	Criticise an argument and then tell in some extent why? To some extent why. I disagree, for example, or why….
Interviewer	OK, does it have to be disagreeing with people, if you're being critical in the scientific sense?
Lovely	Yeah.

This strongly suggests that Lovely thought that what was wrong with her writing was that she had not disagreed more explicitly with her sources, an altogether partial view. The interviewer pursued this point in the following lines:

Interviewer	I tend to criticise my daughter's choice of clothing on occasion, or that she […] doesn't want to go to bed at the appropriate time, but in a scientific sense critiquing doesn't just mean saying things are not good or things are bad.
Lovely	Ok
Interviewer	What would you understand by critiquing rather than criticising in a scientific sense?
Lovely	What would I understand was critiquing – it's like I disagree, on an idea or some ideas of some authors, and then tell why I disagree, in the relevance, with the other relevant sources, or I can use with the other author resources, and then can also support on my own experiences, but it's
Interviewer	OK, OK, right can we just have a look in the assignment – if we say take what will be an important one? OK, well let's take this part about criticality – can you find anywhere in here where you think you are being critical?
Lovely	Critical. (Long pause as reads through paper). This one.
Interviewer	Ok
Lovely	Like the first thing I do, it's like I compare two arguments from this expert and then this one, and then after that I decide whether to follow the first author or the second and then explain why and add some explanations.
Interviewer	OK, so that's the…on page three then, this bit at the top here on page 3, and at the very bottom of page 2, OK. You would say the criticality there is taking different views, comparing them
Lovely	Yeah
Interviewer	and showing your own view?

In the end Lovely appeared to be reaching some understanding that criticality is about more than disagreement but it is notable that this understanding only emerged through a process of question and answer that was actually extraneous to the research interview and more akin to a tutorial.

Lovely's inference of a formative point is also notably vague:

> And then in terms of analysis, I think I will just like read more, read more, some of the sources, and then to understand better than before, and then it's also about my…

Her inference is that simply reading more will resolve the problem of criticality in her writing. Again this is in marked contrast to the 'insiders' who suggested:

> You need to show a clearer understanding of the ideas in your next assignment. [..] You need to critique more fully. You need to try to critique arguments i.e. to discuss and show the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments.

Overall this suggests a partial understanding of the problem as it relates to her assignment but very little detailed, practical understanding of key summative and formative messages.

3. Support

The marker comment concerning support was:

There is some use of relevant sources to support your discussion.

Lovely interpreted this as follows:

> and then from the support, yeah, I also put some support…relevant support it's like from the ideas from other expert to support my experience, and I put them together in my assignment, and again it's just a few of them, that's…he expect me maybe to give more than that.

She interpreted the term support exclusively in terms of other writers' work but for the purposes of this assignment that was a fair understanding. She also picked up that the 'some use' suggested that the writer would have liked to see more. She did not in fact offer an explicit formative inference but her recognition that the marker was expecting wider reference, a suggestion noted by the insiders, suggests she could correctly infer a formative message. She was also able to offer an accurate interpretation of the key term 'relevant sources':

> Interviewer   the relevant sources then, what does that mean?
> Lovely   Yeah its…what you call it, it's…the words…the right, no, yeah, the appropriate sources that I use to support my own views, its like use other ideas…other authors expert to support mine. It's like with they quotation, is it?

4. Structure

Under structure, the marker's comments were as follows;

> The text of your assignment has some structure and you have begun to develop the argument but gaps and inconsistencies make it difficult to follow your thinking.

This comment was supported by three marginal notes, all commenting on lapses in textual coherence and cohesion ('As an introductory paragraph this isn't bad, but could be more concise'; 'Cohesion between the two parts of this sentence is not strong – you need to start a proper new paragraph here'; 'Seems repetitive to me'). The insiders glossed this as:

> At an overall text level there is a discernible structure (of introduction, main body, conclusion). You offer elements of an argument. The argument has missing steps and contradictions which confuse the reader.

Their formative inference was as follows:

> Structure your text more clearly through developing a sustained step-by-step argument over the course of your assignment. You need to develop your arguments so there are no missing steps or contradictions.

Lovely's interpretation was as follows:

> And then the last one, it not hasn't the structure, in terms of structure, yeah. I mean he saw quite, he saw the structure, but it's not really well organised. And some…and then he found some of the inconsistencies of my argument maybe.

Although lacking in detail, this shows awareness of the issue of organisation and a sense of deficiency. Pressed on the term 'gaps and inconsistencies' she responded with a partial answer which led into the following exchange:

Interviewer	What's a gap in the argument, or inconsistency?
Lovely	Inconsistency – maybe because sometimes I support one idea, and then in the middle I support the other idea, maybe […]Yeah I think that's…maybe the inconsistency that he mean, it's about support one idea and then
Interviewer	It could be, I mean, it says 'gaps and inconsistencies', I mean gaps are usually things where there's an argument, but somehow there are steps that are missing in the argument.
Lovely	Ah yeah
Interviewer	And so you don't quite know how you get from here to here, because some of those steps are missing, but that's normally what it means anyway.
Lovely	Oh yeah, I remember when one of his comments is about I outlined one of author's argument but I didn't first critically…criticise his idea first, I don't know if this mean the gap?
interviewer	It could be, it certainly could be. It could be that you argue a point but you don't say why you argue a point, and that would be a gap because there's no support.

Again this showed Lovely negotiating an understanding through dialogue in a manner akin to a tutorial rather than a research interview.

5. Presentation

The marker's comments on presentation were as follows:

You have observed most of the presentation conventions, but language errors seriously affect comprehensibility.
Your writing is often inaccurate, and you must work to address this. I have made corrections to surface accuracy (articles; verb agreements etc) and have suggested re-phrasing where possible. I have also indicated where your written expression remains unclear to me. I suggest you work with the Language Centre colleagues to address these issues, and pay particular attention to these in your assessed work.

These general comments were supported by no less than 39 marginal notes, the majority of which indicate difficulties in understanding ('unclear'; 'vague'), some lapses in register ('Inappropriately informal'; 'Not precise or in appropriate style') and some lapses in word-choice ('wrong word: tendencies?').

Lovely showed a clear understanding of these comments:

And then when I saw the feedback, there are some words that he feels is unclear, like the use of reference in terms of accuracy, and then honestly I always do that, I mean, in practice, presentation, it's about…really about the languages and word-choice vocabulary […]I mean, for the language maybe I know that when I read again I know it's…that it was incorrect, but maybe because I didn't really check. So, and then the other difficulties is about the vocabulary, the languages. I sometimes integrate the words, the words that I can use for my, yeah, for my assignment. I think its…I think its good vocabulary, I mean the high, not

high, but academic words, academic vocabulary to use, but me, but I didn't really…it's inappropriate to use in that context, that's what it is, that's why its…I have really low score for that presentation.

She was also aware of the gravity of the errors and the way they obstructed comprehensibility:

I have so many unclear. I mean he mark unclear, unclear […] Vague, vague meaning […] especially it's about the reference, sometimes he found it's really unclear, like this - what mean by this – what do you mean by they, and I mean i…maybe because in perspective of the writer, I understand which one they, but as the reader he couldn't follow

In contrast to the other comments under the other criteria Lovely had much to say about the reasons for the lapses and what she could do in future to avoid making them.

The first one in terms of like presentation, the one about my language that I did my language errors, and it consider like simple thing, like verb, no, subject verb agreement, say that I really have to be really careful when I write that, so I like to check and recheck before. And then yeah, and it's about as well, it's in term of…still in presentation as well, it's about my diction, it's like to choose the appropriate words. I will not like try to find, I mean, what's it called, what they call the high level of vocabulary, but I will just use my, that I mean, I am sure that it's right in how it is used in the sentence, I mean I will not try to trap myself again.

This last comment refers back to something Lovely mentioned in an earlier interview in which she said that she consciously sought out 'academic vocabulary' in the texts she read and tried to deploy them. The experience of this assignment showed that that strategy was ill-advised unless she was absolutely sure of the meanings of the terms, hence her decision to stick with simpler words, but ones of which she was sure.

Discussion

The overall picture of comprehension of feedback illustrated in this study is far from reassuring. Although the participant demonstrated a general understanding of the summative comments on the focus of her essay (relevance), her understanding and engagement with ideas (analysis), her use of sources (support), her organisation of her text and argument (structure) and the quality of her expression and observance of academic convention (presentation), only in the last does she display a convincing and detailed understanding. In other areas, especially 'analysis', her understanding of what is deficient is partial at best, as shown clearly by the misapprehension she displays concerning the nature of criticality in writing. These limitations of understanding are accentuated sharply when we consider her inferences of formative messages. She appears to have a fairly clear understanding of the need for wider reading, and has some concrete strategies in mind for tackling the linguistic problems pointed out by the marker, but beyond that she appears to have only a vague sense of how to improve her writing.

This is worrying because the feedback Lovely received was not reflective of a careless, tokenistic practice. The marker made careful reference to standardised assessment criteria (Bloxham, 2013), fleshed these out with summative comments specific to the assignment and exemplified the points

through copious marginal notes all the way through the assignment (Burke & Pieterick, 2010), and did so in the context of an exercise that was purposely designed to foster understandings of the situated literacy practices of the school and discipline (Green, 2016). It exemplified many of the qualities students are said to value in feedback (Bols & Wicklow, 2013). The marker did so, we may assume, in the expectation that the feedback would afford Lovely insight into standards for quality writing in the discipline, and/or foster the ability to apply those standards to examples of written work, and/or help Lovely develop a strategic repertoire for writing, and so scaffold the emergence of expertise and self-regulation (Carless et al., 2011; Sadler, 2013). Regrettably, the data collected in this study provide little evidence that Lovely gained any specific insight into standards, or developed the ability to evaluate her own work, or learnt new strategies for improving her work. As a contribution to emergent writing expertise, the feedback appears to have been of quite limited value.

This feedback event, and its apparent relative failure, illustrate a number of critical issues to do with the conceptualisation and enactment of assessment feedback, and speak to many of the research concerns identified by Evans (2013).

The first issue, and one that is fundamental to all the others, is that, as with every other act of communication, feedback events depend on shared understandings. For feedback on an academic assignment to be interpreted by the recipient in at least roughly the way the assessor intended, both persons must share a set of cognitive-rhetorical schemata about quality academic writing, about the assignment task at hand, and about the purpose and scope of feedback (Boud & Molloy, 2013a; Jolly & Boud, 2013; Sadler, 2013). It is notable that the three 'insiders' who offered summative and formative interpretations of the feedback agreed with each other in every respect. They did so because they shared understandings accumulated over time and through shared professional experience, of the assessment criteria, the nature of the assignment, and of the intention of the feedback. Lovely, however, was not in their position: her construction of summative and formative messages from the feedback was mediated (Evans, 2013) by the assumptions and understandings she had brought with her from her university in Indonesia, what she had gleaned from induction briefings, and some ideas picked up on the academic literacy programme of which the practice assignment formed the culmination. What characterised Lovely's position as an interpreter and appropriator of feedback was an inversion of Sadler's (2013) notion of writing expertise: her *lack* of insight into standards, *inability* to judge her own work and *lack* of a strategic writing repertoire. That this will be the case for the great majority of students, as novice writers, is obvious: those most in need of feedback on their work will also be those least equipped to interpret and appropriate it.

A number of things follow from this. The first concerns the nature of the feedback. The overwhelming bulk of the comments on Lovely's essay were summative, rather than formative. They were designed to explain how the assignment had been assessed against a set of standardised criteria, and this meant Lovely had to infer how she was supposed to improve her writing in subsequent assignments. As the data show Lovely found this very difficult: while she was able to offer a vague interpretation of the summative messages she was largely unable to construct appropriate formative messages from the feedback. It is possible that if some of these comments had been systematically reformulated as formative messages, with appropriate procedural detail, Lovely might have had a better chance of understanding what she needed to do (Burke & Pieterick,

2010). Clearly, the tendency to embed formative messages in summative messages adds a wholly unnecessary layer of obscurity to feedback.

However, the study also suggests the limits of approaches to feedback based on monologic 'telling', however carefully comments are worded and exemplified. Lovely's case offers very clear support for the need to move away from thinking about feedback as product, towards thinking about feedback as a dialogic, communicative interaction (Boud & Molloy, 2013a; Sadler, 2013). Lovely received well-intentioned, conscientiously-written, detailed feedback made as transparent as the marker was able to achieve but was still unable from the comments alone to construct clear summative or formative messages. As is shown by the interview data quoted above in which Lovely and the interviewer negotiated the meaning of the term 'criticality', it was actually only through this oral interaction that Lovely was able to begin to construct more appropriate interpretations of some of the comments. This clearly shows a need to go beyond the notion of feedback as a one-way, one-off transmission: if feedback is to be constructed in appropriate summative and formative ways, students need to be able to negotiate the meaning of comments, ask questions and so to reconstruct the feedback in their own terms. One way of doing this is through face-to-face interaction in tutorials (Cramp, 2011), in which feedback can be interpreted and the implications adduced, or through the kinds of 'collaborative' and 'talkback' dialogues Lillis (2006) advocates, which move beyond 'tutor-directive' talk to afford students a space in which to critique the institutional conventions and practices underlying feedback.

The notion of dialogue, especially the move from 'tutor-directive' to 'talkback' dialogue foregrounds the issue of power (Gaventa, 2003), something that has hitherto remained implicit. What is notable about the study, when considered with regard to power, is how at each stage of the process Lovely was positioned as an object, someone to whom things were done, not as a subject. She had no choice over participation in the academic literacy programme leading up to the writing of the assignment, no choice of the focus or nature of the assignment, no say in the time-frames leading to submission, no say in the criteria against which her assignment would be marked, no say in the kind of feedback she would receive, and finally, having received her feedback, she was afforded no opportunity for negotiation or 'talkback' other than the entirely incidental research interviews conducted for this paper. The feedback was not something therefore that Lovely 'sought' and it was not something she expected to be able to negotiate. This all suggests a suppression of agency and considered from a socio-cultural perspective and with regard to the role of feedback in fostering emergent self-regulation (Paul, Gilbert, & Remedios, 2013), deeply problematic. It is difficult to see how self-regulation can really be fostered unless students are engaged much more fully as collaborators, as co-decision-makers, and so invested with greater power in the writing-assessment-feedback process. This speaks to the need to see and enact feedback as a process that is both dialogic and empowering: students need to see themselves as feedback-*seekers* and to see their need to negotiate meaning though dialogue as a legitimate and necessary educational practice, one that a university should strive to foster.

The notion of power as an overarching theme in the understanding of 'the feedback landscape' along with 'awareness', 'community', 'tools and 'process' (Evans, 2013: 97) points to the need to understand the experience of interpreting feedback in a wider context of affordances and constraints, a layered institutional context of actors (lecturers, administrators, students), academic and administrative structures and systems, technological resources and tools and organisations of

time and space. As Lovely's case shows, students' struggles to construct messages from their feedback can only be understood by an uncovering of, for example, the way assignment tasks relate to teaching programmes; the way preparation for assignments is interwoven in the teaching; the attention paid to explaining and demonstrating assessment criteria; the access students have to exemplars and the facilitation of their interactions with these; the opportunities students have to negotiate their understandings of the assignment as a set of cognitive-rhetorical problems (Green, 2013); guidance about writing standards provided by induction programmes, briefings, handbooks and so forth.

Conclusions

The study reported here is very small-scale but I believe it serves to illustrate the difficulties novice writers in higher education have with interpreting and appropriating even carefully constructed assessment feedback, and it points to a number of theoretical and practical issues within the field. Firstly it places the student as a subject at the heart of the feedback process: it is the student who makes sense of feedback and gives it value and purpose. This must be one direction for future research into assessment feedback: if we are to assess the utility of feedback practices we need to know how students interpret feedback and what they then do or do not do with it, and why. It also means that institutional feedback practices need to be enacted in such a way that assessors take into account not just what they wish to say about a submitted piece of work but also how the recipient of the feedback will interpret what they say and how the student might be supported in constructing appropriate summative and formative messages.

This refocusing of attention on the student as interpreter of feedback leads to the second concern arising from the study: the need for models of feedback, which are both *dialogic* and *situated*. Feedback should be understood as both a communicative process in which assessor and student writer negotiate meaning through multi-modal exchanges, and as a process embedded in specific teaching and learning contexts and so forming part of specific institutional configurations of affordances. It follows that institutional feedback practices should be constructed so as to facilitate dialogue and negotiation of meaning, through post-feedback tutorials for example, and that thought be given to the ways different affordances such as assignment briefings, discussions of assessment criteria, discussions of sample work, discussions of examples of feedback might all work together to prepare students to seek, interpret and negotiate feedback, construct appropriate summative and formative messages, and so learn about standards, acquire the capacity to judge their own work, and develop a repertoire of writing strategies.

Finally, the study foregrounds the issue of power and the effects of institutional power relations on student education. Feedback practices are one of many ways through which higher education institutions may empower or disempower their students, and they represent a site of potential contest. If the effects of power can be made explicit, and feedback practices understood as expressions of institutional power relations, it becomes possible for both institutions and their students to begin to consider ways in which empowerment and so self-regulation may be fostered.

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Appendix A: Practice assignment

Discuss a current controversy in the field of TESOL, the causes and prevention of plagiarism, taking into account the academic debate and your own experience as a teacher/learner, and giving your own views. In your discussion you should refer to the articles indicated below and two other sources you identify for yourself.

- Sowden, C. (2005a) Plagiarism and the culture of multilingual students in higher education abroad. ELT Journal, 59(3), 226-233.
- Liu, D. (2005) Plagiarism in ESOL students: is cultural conditioning truly the major culprit? ELT Journal, 59(3), 234-241.
- Sowden, C. (2005b) Reply to Dilin Liu. ELT Journal, 59(3), 242-3.

Word length: 1500 words +/- 10%, excluding appendices and references.

Appendix B: Marker feedback

B.1 Summary comments and marginal notes

You have thought about this in great depth and include the summary of positions in the papers to an extent, and plenty about your own context. You don't really set out Sowden and Liu's positions against each other very clearly however: they have a contrasting stance, and this contrast is not obvious in your writing. Some criticality is evident though, and you have engaged with some central ideas on the topic.

Your writing is often inaccurate, and you must work to address this. I have made corrections to surface accuracy (articles; verb agreements etc) and have suggested re-phrasing where possible. I have also indicated where your written expression remains unclear to me. I suggest you work with the Language Centre colleagues to address these issues, and pay particular attention to these in your assessed work.

This work would receive a mark of around 45 if presented for assessment (see attached assessment criteria)

Relevance	
Analysis	1. *I don't think there's anything particularly recent about plagiarism*
	2. *You are aligning with Sowden's position here without first critically examining it, which you need to do.*
	3. *Too 'easy' a conclusion.*
	4. *Sowden was not talking about Indonesia, as you are, so this is not 'according to Sowden'.*
	5. *I don't understand this conclusion.*
	6. *This is a higher quality of argumentation – well done.*
Support	
Structure	7. *As an introductory paragraph this isn't bad, but could be more concise.*
	8. *Cohesion between the two parts of this sentence is not strong – you need to start a proper new paragraph here.*
	9. *Seems repetitive to me*
Presentation	10. *What is 'this'? And the idea of something being 'completely true' is problematic. Avoid overstating your position using language like this.*
	11. *Wrong word*
	12. *This is rather vague.*
	13. *The sentiment is correct but the wording is rather vague*
	14. *This is unclear to me, and needs rephrasing precisely.*
	15. *OK – by whom? Liu? Be specific.*
	16. *Why 'therefore'?*
	17. *Unclear to me.*
	18. *Tend to plagiarize?*
	19. *Unclear*
	20. *What is the referent? Exam-based learning?*
	21. *Wrong word. Argues would be better.*
	22. *I understand this, but it needs rephrasing for precision and clarity*
	23. *Not the place for belief! Argues? Maintains? would be better*
	24. *Not precise or in appropriate style.*
	25. *Even more than what?*
	26. *Referent – cultural background?*
	27. *Who are 'they'?*
	28. *This type of emphasis is not necessary*
	29. *Unclear*
	30. *Wrong word. Tendencies?*
	31. *Wrong word*
	32. *Good to include this block quote. It is a direct quote so you need to include a page number with the citation*
	33. *This type of emphasis is not necessary – it's too strong .*
	34. *Unclear*
	35. *a very well-expressed sentence.*
	36. *Inappropriately informal*
	37. *Ditto: Inappropriately informal*
	38. *unclear. Who are 'they'?*
	39. *wrong word*
	40. *unclear*
	41. *unclear*
	42. *unclear*
	43. *Inappropriately informal and vague*
	44. *Unclear meaning*
	45. *Unclear*
	46. *Unclear what you mean here*
	47. *wrong phrase. Cultural difference?*
	48. *good accurate referencing here.*

B.2 Assessment grid

Level 5	20 - 39	40 – 49	50 -59
Relevance *Have you addressed the assignment task?*	You have not addressed the assignment task.	You have addressed some of the required components of the assignment task.	==You have addressed most of the required components of the assignment task.==
Analysis Have you shown that you can evaluate critique and synthesise ideas?	This is largely descriptive, with little evidence of understanding of the basic ideas, and without discussion or critical analysis.	==There is some understanding of the main ideas with an attempt to relate ideas and experience (where relevant).== The assignment is mainly descriptive with limited discussion.	There is a clear understanding of the main ideas linked with your own views and experience. ==There is criticality but limited synthesis in the discussion.==
Support *Have you shown you have used a range of appropriate sources (including experience where relevant)?*	There is little or no evidence of reading in the area to support your discussion.	There is limited reading in the area and the sources are too few or insufficiently relevant to support your discussion	==There is some use of relevant sources to support your discussion==.
Structure *Is your assignment and the development of your argument clearly structured?*	The text does not have a clear structure and it is hard to see how the argument develops.	==The text of your assignment has some structure and you have begun to develop the argument but gaps and inconsistencies make it difficult to follow your thinking==	Your assignment has a clear structure and the development of the argument is sufficiently sustained but there are still specific gaps and inconsistencies.
Presentation *Have you followed the conventions related to length, layout, language use and referencing?*	You have not observed the presentation conventions and ==language errors seriously affect comprehensibility.==	You have observed some of the presentation conventions, language errors occasionally affect comprehensibility.	==You have observed most of the presentation conventions==, there are some language errors but these do not affect comprehensibility.

Appendix C: Insider interpretations versus Lovely's interpretations

C.1 Assessment grid sample: Analysis criterion

Comment	Insider understanding		Lovely's understanding	
	Summative	Formative	Summative	Formative
There is some understanding of the main ideas with an attempt to relate ideas and experience (where relevant).	You have thought about ideas to do with plagiarism and you have tried to connect your understanding with your own experience.	You need to show a clearer understanding of the ideas in your next assignment.	and then I actually attempt to elaborate some…fill some ideas but…and then try to develop my ideas with my experience, but it's not that much, it's just a few of them, yeah, and then…that's in terms of analysis	And then in terms of analysis, I think I will just like read more, read more, some of the sources, and then to understand better than before, and then it's also about my…
There is criticality	You critique some ideas	You need to critique ideas more fully: to show the strengths and weaknesses of arguments	so it's just like, I don't really like criticise…I didn't realise…I really criticise the other authors […] I was aware also as well about criticising and…criticising the other authors, it's not…yeah, I found this difficult,	
but limited synthesis in the discussion.	but you do not integrate different points or different authors.	You need to bring together different viewpoints or different sources	and also maybe I…not maybe, but, there was limited synthesis in my… Synthesise is for putting all of the ideas of some experts, and then combine with mine, that's like that.	
Some criticality is evident though, and you have engaged with some central ideas on the topic.	You discuss ideas to some extent i.e. you consider the strengths and weaknesses of arguments to some degree. You have thought about the issue of plagiarism.	You need to critique more fully. You need to try to critique arguments i.e. to discuss and show the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments.	And…I think he say, he said, I actually arise a kind of ideas, but it's not…and based on my experience, it's not…it is just a few of ideas, a few of aspects that's maybe he expect me to write as many as possible.	

C.2 Summary comments sample: Presentation criterion

Comment	Insider		Lovely	
	Summative understanding	Formative understanding	Summative	Formative
Your writing is often inaccurate, and you must work to address this. I have made corrections to surface accuracy (articles; verb agreements etc) and have suggested re-phrasing where possible. I have also indicated where your written expression remains unclear to me. I suggest you work with the Language Centre colleagues to address these issues, and pay particular attention to these in your assessed work.	There are many language errors. Some of these affect comprehensibility.	You should look at the errors pointed out in the marginal notes and try to correct these. Seek help from the Language Centre.	and then for the surface structure, I guess I had mistakes and errors in the accuracy, so accuracy, and then the vocabulary, how I selected the appropriate words, so yeah, there is some reason that I actually…it's actually inappropriate, or in grammatical, sorry, incorrect in grammatical, yeah, I think that.	The first one in terms of like presentation, the one about my language that I did my language errors, and it consider like simple thing, like verb, no, subject verb agreement, say that I really have to be really careful when I write that, so I like to check and recheck before. And then yeah, and it's about as well, it's in term of…still in presentation as well, it's about my diction, it's like to choose the appropriate words. I will not like try to find, I mean, what's it called, what they call the high level of vocabulary, but I will just use my, that I mean, I am sure that it's right in how it is used in the sentence, I mean I will not try to trap myself again. […] then it's also about my…the unclear one, some unclear statement and unclear words, that I will try to look for, to look at it closely, about…oh yeah, especially it's about the reference, sometimes he found it's really unclear, like this - what mean by this – what do you mean by they, and I mean i…maybe because in perspective of the writer, I understand which one they, but as the reader he couldn't follow my…