

Article

Understanding Learners' Needs: Classroom Feedback Interactions in EAP

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ABSTRACT

This article foregrounds findings from a larger doctoral research on the theorization of teacher-student classroom feedback interactions on academic writing across EAP classes at one UK HE institution. Data was collected through classroom observations and interviews with both EAP tutors and students. The findings are meaningful for meeting the demands of both international and home students while also underscoring the urgent need to establish stronger collaborations between EAP and learners' departments.

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Introduction: The Significance of EAP Classroom Spoken Feedback

This study presents findings on understanding learners' needs, which are taken from my doctoral research on the theorisation of teacher-student classroom spoken feedback interactions on academic writing in EAP classes. Although learners' needs in EAP classrooms were not a major focus in my thesis, I identified several issues around classroom feedback interactions as also meaningful to understand learners' needs. These were:

- Role of EAP classroom feedback interactions on writing: My data has shown that classroom feedback interactions were the most immediate form of interactions students could have on the drafts of their writing. Likewise, EAP tutors also utilised this form of feedback most due to various reasons (e.g. high number of students, time constraints and so forth).
- “An imbalance in the literature with more attention paid to what of EAP” (Watson-Todd, 2003), and “a reluctance in EAP to go into the living-and-breathing classroom” (Cadman, 2005): This study presents the EAP classroom as an underexplored, yet significant setting to understand learners' needs.
- The two items above also indicate that classroom spoken feedback interactions in EAP classes can facilitate the design of EAP through a bottom-up view on learner needs. While doing so, the paper draws on the previous work that encourages the collaboration between EAP units and learners' departments (Sloan and Porter, 2010).

Literature Review

Although written forms of feedback on second language students' writing have been widely examined and have established the significance of written feedback for L2 writers, the research on the role of oral interaction on L2 speakers' writing has stayed thin (Hyland and Hyland, 2006, p. 83). In my doctoral research, within the field of forms of feedback on writing, I have identified five separate but interrelated strands of research: 1) Interactional patterns and possible influencing factors on them; 2) Content of feedback and possible

influencing factors on it; 3) Student perceptions and possible influencing factors on them; 4) Teacher perceptions and possible influencing factors on them; 5) Revision behaviours and possible influencing factors on them. Although these lines of research provide insight into other forms of spoken feedback on writing, I have revealed that one-to-one teacher-student classroom spoken feedback interactions on academic writing was an underexplored area particularly within EAP settings.

The present study, with a focus on this scarcely examined form of feedback in EAP classes, locates itself at the nexus of more than one of the above listed strands of inquiry. In this way, it acknowledges the underlying dynamic and multi-dimensional nature of classroom spoken feedback practices in EAP and moves away from one-sided accounts. However, at a more specific level, this paper draws on the studies on students' and teachers' perceptions of feedback on writing. The studies on students' perceptions of feedback on L2 writing provide insight into spoken forms of feedback in comparison to other forms of feedback and highlight learners' perceptions of personalisation (e.g. Olesova et al., 2011; Oomen-Early et al., 2008), quality and quantity of feedback, learning intentions and perceived relationship with tutors (e.g. Liu, 2009; Thompson and Lee, 2012). In terms of teachers' perspectives of feedback, the findings on teachers' perceptions of phatic potential of different modes of aural feedback (Harper et al., 2012) as well as how institutional factors shape these perceptions stand out (Goldstein, 2006). Even though these studies have illustrative findings on learners' needs in relation to feedback, they fail to acknowledge that learners' needs are emergent and multi-constructed. By foregrounding this gap, the current paper contributes to the filling of a significant gap in the literature.

Data Collection

Two methods of data collection were used. These were classroom observation field notes, and interviews with EAP teachers and students. Field notes were taken during all classroom observations, and teacher-student interactions were audio-recorded where possible. Data presented here was taken from classroom observations across Generic-Insessional, and Specialised EAP classes. The details of these classroom observation field notes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Details of classroom observation field notes

Classroom Observations		Disciplinary Background
Type of EAP class	Generic In-Sessional EAP	Mixed: Business, Education, Sociology
	Specialised EAP	Law, Statistics, PhD in Science, BA in Education in TESL
	Pre-requisite EAP	Mixed: Business, Dentistry, Law, Economics, Manufacturing

Simultaneously with the classroom observations, interviews with both EAP tutors and students were conducted. All interviews were individual, except for those who wanted to be interviewed together. Questions focused on how learners and teachers perceived feedback, and felt about feedback practices.

Methods of Data Analysis

Case study (Yin, 2003) and Grounded Theory (GT) (Glaser, 1978) informed the data collection and data analysis procedures. Case study facilitated the understanding of a contextually bounded phenomenon through multiple perspectives (Dörnyei, 2007). These multiple perspectives were provided by the two methods.

GT tradition has also informed the study. The study began with a general idea of exploring feedback interactions while gradually becoming more selective. Charmaz (2006) indicates that concurrent data collection and analysis, deriving analytic codes and categories from data, use of constant comparison method, use of memos (i.e. reflective notes taken during analysis), and the gradual development of theory through steps of data collection and analysis are key principles of a GT research. This study also followed these principles as can be seen in Figure 1 below.

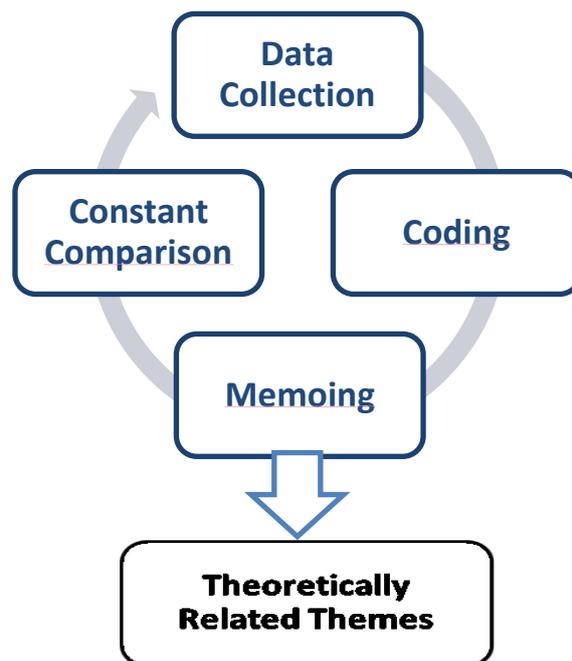


Figure 1: Concurrent procedure of data collection and analysis

Classroom field notes were utilized as a central data set whereas interviews were the supporting data set. This meant that the analysis of the interviews were informed by the findings from the classroom observation field notes.

Results: Learner needs as emergent and co-constructed in feedback interactions

Although the broader study did not focus on learners' needs, the findings included meaningful samples in terms of understanding learners' needs across EAP settings in the study. The findings indicated that classroom feedback interactions across EAP settings were a multi-dimensional and multi-directional construct. These dimensions were behavioural dimension, intra-personal, inter-personal and extra-personal dimensions. This nature of feedback interactions also indicated that learners' needs were emergent and co-constructed:

- a. *Behavioural dimension*: Three relationship patterns as normative, collaborative, and subordinated relationships emerged in classroom feedback interactions on EAP writing between students and teachers. These relationship patterns were not linear, but displaying an irregular pattern.

In the normative relationship, teachers were more powerful and arbiters while learners were seeking conforming to the conventions.

Table 2: Normative relationship pattern in classroom feedback interactions

(The teacher asked students to write a short summary of an article they had been reading in their departmental courses. While the teacher was visiting students to check how they were doing, the following dialogue took place)

Jens: Is it very usual to use *of which/of whom* or too complicated? Maybe not but too long when you use that?

Michael: You want to understand if you write *of which*,

Jens (student): Is it possible to put *of which Jack is a member*?

Michael (the teacher): Fine. Good English. *(he gives an example)*: Manchester United, of which....

Jens: And is it too long to put it in an essay? Because I want to write long sentences, but I also read it's complicated.

Michael: You've got too many advises. Of course long sentences are used a bit in academic essays. It doesn't have to be like that but it's a norm to use two/three clauses. If you write too short sentences, it feels like childish, journalist writing. But short sentences can be effective and powerful. *(He showed the sample essay.)* You don't have to be overambitious and build long sentences, said the teacher then.

(Specialised EAP-Law, Field notes, Focused data collection phase)

In the collaborative relationship, both teachers and students tried to explore the requirements together while neither side claimed control over the text.

Table 3: Collaborative relationship pattern in classroom feedback interactions

(The teacher and the student are talking on assignment draft of Cheryl, a student from Education master's department.)

Heled (the teacher): Why we use it is not necessarily advantages, be careful. You need to be careful with your headings. (Warning)

Cheryl (the student): But there will be a part about disadvantages part. (Challenge)

Heled: I think you need to be careful with your title. (Warning)

Heled: How....? [Indicating a portion of text] (Diagnosis)

Cheryl: I mean with the strategy. (Clarification)

Heled: Initially if you go..For me personally, this is kind of what and how and this is why. For me, I would want to know what and how before why. (Suggestion)

Cheryl: But the logic is first why and then what and how. (Challenge)

(EAP-Generic Writing Class Field notes, Initial data collection phase)

As for subordinated relationship, students gained higher control over the text while EAP tutors remained cautious and deferred to learners' departments.

Table 4: Subordinated relationship pattern in classroom feedback interactions

(The teacher and the student are talking about an assignment draft the student brought to the class. The teacher is reading and asking questions or making various comments on the writing. In the below section, the teacher has difficulty in understanding the meaning of an abbreviation the student used. Thus, the below dialogue emerges):

Steen: [...] So what's RBV?

Student: We mention before research, resource view

Steen: Is it like a framework or is it like?

Student: it's like a theory and framework.

(Steen: the teacher, Generic Insessional EAP, field note, Focused data collection)

Teachers and students utilized certain actions in each relationship, and certain combinations of these actions constructed the relationship patterns. (Please see Unlu and Wharton, 2015 for further details of these relationship patterns).

- b. *Intra-personal dimension:* At this dimension, individual perceptions, goals and attitudes emerged as potential influencing factors on the feedback interactions. The interviews of students indicated that learners expected flexible and 'eager to help' EAP tutor attitude in general. They also stated that learners usually joined the feedback interactions with a self-reinforcement mechanism. As for EAP tutors, their

accounts showed that EAP tutors did not regard correction as their only job even though various students joined EAP with that expectation. Tutors also reported constructing themselves as ‘an educated reader in many fields’. Finally, EAP teachers underlined that they focused on facilitating learners’ criticality, independence and professional attitude.

Table 5: Learners’ and teachers’ accounts at intra-personal dimension

Students	Teachers
<p>“He maybe not know about my work about what, it’s my responsibility to write and, to let him know that this is the things I was told, want to write, then maybe he will give suggestions, but I have to let him know about it” (Surinder, Specialised EAP-PhD Science class student; interview; November 29, 2012 Thursday)</p>	<p>“actually we don't know the answer sometimes,...’how long should a research proposal be’, there isn't a fixed answer, and you throw this question back at the students, some of them are horrified to see that you don't know the answer and you are actually going to ask the students what the answer is” (Heled: Generic In-sessional EAP teacher, Interview, March 20, 2012 Tuesday)</p>

- c. *Inter-personal dimension:* Inter-personal dimension refers to how learners’ and teachers’ interaction in one-to-one feedback dialogues influenced the emergence of feedback interactions. For learners, EAP tutors’ openness to listen, language barriers during feedback interactions and features of feedback interactions (i.e. clear, honest, and critical) emerged as significant issues. For EAP tutors, several issues were significant. Establishing rapport with learners during feedback interactions was one determining factor. They also frequently indicated the variety of students with differing levels of content and language knowledge. Related with that, levels of expected student knowledge and the real knowledge did not always match during feedback interactions. The variety of the students in EAP classes also necessitated EAP tutors to employ prioritisation mechanisms during feedback interactions. However, it was often underlined that the priority of learners and tutors did not always match, this led to the need to negotiate priorities. required negotiation of priorities. Most importantly, EAP tutors indicated the role of learners’ departments on the interactions. EAP tutors aimed at conforming to the departmental requirements. Finally, learners’ departments, particularly in ESAP classes, were able to shape EAP classes profile as well as varying in the support they offered to the learners with their academic writing tasks.

Table 6: Learners’ and teachers’ accounts at inter-personal dimension

Students	Teachers
<p>I think Michael doesn’t make you feel uncomfortable with your language. [...]He just try to understand and he understand generally, and that’s why you don’t feel a problem, you don’t feel, there is no reason to be ashamed because of Michael’s attitude I think,</p> <p>(Cengiz, Specialised EAP)</p>	<p>I get surprised that students don’t understand the basic legal principle. We have something like misrepresentation, which is standard for undergraduates, they know what it means, but a much older more mature post graduate student I had to explain the concept.</p> <p>(Michael; Specialised EAP –Law; teacher; interview; November 30, 2012 Friday)</p>

- d. *Extra-personal Dimension:* Extra-personal dimension referred to how learners’ and teachers’ interaction with the larger setting shaped their one-to-one classroom feedback interactions. Learners’ extra-personal dimension were constructed by the elements of institutional attitude towards EAP (e.g. departments’ presenting EAP as a setting to learn/fix academic writing), awareness on EAP tutors’ struggles with disciplinary writing, issues of authority in academic writing (e.g. aiming at conforming to the departmental/disciplinary tutors’ requirements rather than simply following all the comments by EAP tutors), and ambiguity in academic writing conventions (e.g. departments being strictly demanding on academic writing while being vague with requirements). As for EAP tutors, they supported learners’ accounts on the departments’ role: Departmental tutors’ provision of varying feedback and the departmental demands (e.g. sending learners who take different courses within the same programme), created challenges for EAP tutors during feedback interactions. Furthermore, a lack of healthy communication between EAP units and departments was frequently reported. EAP tutors highlighted the need for closer collaboration. A sample for both students and teachers is presented below:

Table 7: Learners’ and teachers’ accounts at the extra-personal dimension

Students	Teachers
<p>“There was a situation when he said something and I, I’ve been told completely different from the lectures at the university, so I said what I’ve been told and I waited for him to reply to it”</p> <p>(Danuta-student, Specialised EAP class student; interview; 5 December, 2012 Wednesday)</p>	<p>“...occasionally, I mean you get students sort of says, well sort of I say well have you thought about doing this, what about doing this, and they sort of say well actually in maths in statistics, we don’t really do that, or the tutors really ask them, they are asked to use particular referencing system rather than that referencing system”</p> <p>(Steen; Generic Insessional EAP; teacher; interview; February 25, 2013 Monday)</p>

Discussion

This paper contributes to the understanding of learners' needs within EAP classrooms, in particular during one-to-one teacher-student classroom feedback interactions on academic writing. Unravelling how learners' needs emerge at different dimensions dynamically, the paper indicates that an effective feedback interaction would require a systematic management of these dimensions.

At the intra-personal dimension, the findings on learners' expectations of clear and explicit feedback show that learners actively engage with agenda-setting and maintenance in feedback interactions, which could explain why the issue of personalised feedback emerged as a significant finding in literature (Olesova et al., 2011). In that sense, explicit, specific and not over-complimentary feedback might be what shows learners that EAP tutors acknowledge their agendas. Likewise, these could be interpreted as learners' criteria for "tailor-made" (Oomen-Early et al., 2008, p.272) and individualised feedback.

At the inter-personal dimension, tutors' moment-by-moment attitudes as possible influencing factors on learners' participation in feedback interactions were reported as significant by learners. Whether the EAP tutor was open to listening, encouraging, open to learners' agenda, flexible, not harsh when learners made mistakes and not self-justifying through feedback determined learners' participation in feedback interactions. In that sense, learners' feedback perceptions from a phatic perspective were examined by a variety of scholars (Liu, 2009; Thompson and Lee, 2012). Those studies indicated that the medium of feedback had an impact on learners' perceptions of the phatic aspect within feedback. The findings in this paper highlight these studies in an EAP classroom feedback interaction setting. It also adds to the current understanding by unravelling the possible relationship between phatic issues residing in feedback interactions and the relatively more frequent emergence of certain relationship patterns by learners. For example, it might be interpreted that learners would display a more collaborative relationship pattern with an EAP tutor with the described attitude. Even though this paper indicates tutor accounts on rapport in feedback interactions, further research is still required to explore how both tutors and students actively construct classroom feedback interactions.

In terms of the issues encountered at the extra-personal dimension, this paper repeats the existing calls in literature for collaboration between EAP and subject tutors "to promote learning opportunities for students" (Sloan and Porter, 2010, p.209).

Conclusion and Implications

This paper deepens our understanding of learners' needs as they emerge in moment-by-moment interactions during feedback interactions inside EAP classrooms while simultaneously indicating the co-constructed nature of these needs. Although encountering these issues in the classroom settings might be challenging for teachers due to the unpredictable nature of the dimensions, developing more systematic collaboration between EAP units and departments can open up further teaching and learning opportunities. Yet, how 'more systematic collaboration' could be developed would require further research and more sharing of good practices from different HE institutions.

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