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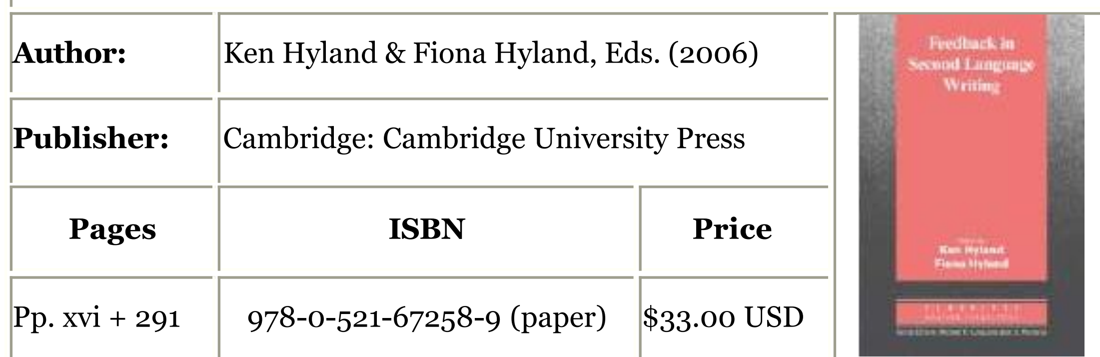
Feedback in Second Language Writing: Contexts and Issues



Author:	Ken Hyland & Fiona Hyland, Eds. (2006)		
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Pp. xvi + 291	978-0-521-67258-9 (paper)	$33.00 USD	

This volume contains fourteen chapters: an introduction and thirteen chapters grouped according to the broad lenses through which second language writing (SLW) is viewed: (1) Situating feedback: sociocultural dimensions; (2) Shaping feedback: delivery and focus dimension; and (3) Negotiating feedback: interpersonal and interactional dimensions. Its editors claim that it is an "attempt to bring together theoretical understandings and practical applications of feedback for teachers, researchers, and others working in the fields of second language teaching and literacy studies" (p. xv). It includes articles on the state-of-the art of the issue at hand (Hyland and Hyland's Introduction, Villamil and Guerrero, Nelson and Carson, Ware and Warschauer); empirical studies (Ferris; Hewings and Coffin; Leki); and case studies (Tardy, Milton, Hamp-Lyons, Johns, Goldstein, Hyland and Hyland, Weissberg).

Readers should start with reading the Introduction because it surveys four controversial key issues related to feedback, namely teacher feedback, teachers' conferences, peer feedback, and computer mediated feedback. The book covers most of these issues from at least three perspectives: raising the importance of socio-cultural contexts, clarifying concepts, and showcasing good practices.

The book should contribute to raising the importance of sociocultural contexts in SLW. Villamil and Guerrero suggest having learners fluctuate across different types of regulation, i.e., self-, other-, and object-regulation, as conducive to boosting individual regulation. Importantly, the writers assert that peer revision "cannot be fully understood or explained without observing the social contexts in which it takes place." (p. 37). Similarly, Nelson and Carson claim that even if peer review is well

structured and students are well trained, "a significant factor in the effectiveness of peer response is the contextual element of the *interaction* of the group itself and the quality of that interaction" (p. 43, italics in original). In this same vein, Tardy demonstrates how dialogic or cross-directional models of appropriation enable teachers to encourage students to take more ownership of their writing.

Other contributors cite the role the human factor or a humanistic approach can play in feedback in writing. Ware and Warschauer place a strong focus on the human factor in assessing the three strands of electronic feedback they surveyed. They also suggest introducing such human-focused practices in various combinations so as to maintain the social interactions inherent in face-to-face settings—increasingly at risk as English is dispersed around the globe through distance learning. And although Milton cites the strengths of his software programs and his regular updates to improve them, he acknowledges that they "c are not intended to take precedence over face-to-face interaction and make no attempt to replace the teacher or the student peers as sympathetic readers" (p. 136). These articles seem to reiterate Warschauer and Meskill's (2000) earlier conclusion that ". . . the key to successful use of technology in language teaching lies not in hardware or software but in 'humanware'. . . " (n.p.).

The humanistic approach is as important in other areas. Hyland and Hyland claim that feedback should be interpersonal: ". . . it [the information in feedback] is effective only if it engages with the writer and gives him or her a sense that it is a response to a *person* rather than to a script" (p. 206, italics in original). Goldstein, who reports previous research limitations related to teacher feedback and student revision, partly attributes such limitations to failure to take into account context factors. "We hope that the incorporation of humanistic handling of feedback opportunities will bring about better and closer relationships between the teacher and each learner, between learners—that the 'affect' in the classroom will be positively affected," claims Hamp-Lyons (p. 142).

Another asset of the book is its contribution to clarifying some SLW concepts. Nelson and Carson assert that 'culture' should be considered in motion and far from being a stable, coherent, and homogeneous construct. Hamp-Lyons, who admits that "[p]ortfolios are messy" (p. 158), shows how a student put great efforts in improving the drafts of a composition but the final results were disproportionate with the invested efforts. She stresses the complexity of portfolios for assessment and highly recommends student, teacher, and rater training in portfolio-based assessment. Weissberg draws attention to the misuse of scaffolding in an L2 writing context "c to the point that it seems in danger of losing its essential meaning" (p. 248). He clarifies that oral scaffolding refers to a conversation in which an expert attempts to assist a less expert in the hope that the latter will self-manage the task at hand. Leki reconsiders the concept of writing in disciplinary courses and suggests a broader meaning of this SLW subfield that will include specific features of a discipline's writing products being taught or learned.

The last major contribution of the book showcases good practices. Ferris reports encouraging results as to how some types of errors significantly decrease over time when feedback is given at the intermediate stages of drafting. Other authors call for providing balanced and appropriate interactional approaches to feedback. For example, the two teachers in Hyland and Hyland's case study balance the types of

feedback to include praise, criticism, and suggestion with the latter two understated; Johns insists on providing enough predetermined givens to help students write the I-Search paper; Goldstein illustrates how mismatch between teacher and student can be at the heart of malpractice in feedback and revision; Hewings and Coffin show how the visible presence of the teacher and the structure of the task can trigger longer interactions with in-depth analyses of the issues at hand. Other good practices include grouping students of the same culture, and preferably the same L1, so as to avoid students' losing face or mistakenly reinforcing social inequities (Nelson and Carson); or encouraging asymmetrical interactions by grouping self- and other-regulated profiles (Villamil and Guerrero).

The book also has successfully delineated some areas that need further investigation. Ware and Warschauer's three strands are reported to be inconclusive, despite promising signs of effectiveness, partly because they are judged to be new to the fields of writing instruction and assessment. Milton points out the limitations of his programs especially in coping with all types of potential errors or users' abilities in and attitudes towards using the package. Also the effectiveness of the package needs some empirical evidence. "The factor of student agency and decision making has not always been fully explored in the research on feedback," claim Hyland and Hyland (p. 220). Similarly, Hamp-Lyons admits that portfolio-based assessment "still has unresolved issues of fairness and validity. . ." (p. 157).

Other areas worth investigating are how to adapt the promising feedback practices to low levels and to EFL contexts. Most of the subjects from whom the data were collected are either advanced ESL students or (post)graduates. Therefore the good practices may need further refinements to yield the same positive results with less proficient learners. Similarly, many of the approaches to feedback were originally introduced in L1 contexts and were extrapolated to SL settings. This extrapolation already has general constraints but implementing these approaches to EFL settings without taking into account the specifications of such settings will definitely create further problems. Teachers' and students' relations in EFL contexts tend to be hierarchical and therefore the *authoritative* discourse features (Tardy, p. 70) prevail. On the whole, such settings need more research. As Scott (1996) acknowledged: "very little is known about the nature of foreign language writing" (p. x).

A close look into the content of the book elicited from me a double-edged remark. Apart from a few articles that happened to be ready for publication when the book appeared (Leki, Hewings and Coffin, etc.), the content is not new. Many contributors re-visit their previous research studies or re-focus on parts of the data they collected some time ago. Such reconsiderations should be taken as another strength of the book. The authors seem to react to what they have witnessed in the published literature in the hope of responding to concepts or practices that remain blurred (see the clarification of concepts section above).

Somewhat modifying the editors' claim about their potential audience (see above), I recommend their book to those doing research into L2 writing or those who teach (post)graduate students. Practitioners in EFL settings will benefit a little from a few articles (such as Ferris's). However, a wide range of readers can benefit a lot from the array of research methods described or referred to in these L2 writing studies — as well as from the wealth of references that appear at the end of each chapter.

References

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