

**SOCIALIZATION IN THE MARGINS: SECOND LANGUAGE WRITERS AND
FEEDBACK PRACTICES IN UNIVERSITY CONTENT COURSES**

by

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Abstract

Recent years have seen a growing interest in the relationship between second language (L2) writing development and the ways we can help growing populations of L2 writers successfully integrate within academic communities. Much of this interest stems from increasingly diverse local populations and the continued internationalization of higher education. This dissertation explored the implications for curriculum resulting from this growing presence of L2 writers in academic content areas.

To achieve this goal, this research reports on an eight-month longitudinal ethnographic case study of five international Japanese undergraduate students at a large Canadian university. Focusing on the central role of writing in university courses as the dominant mode of knowledge construction and dissemination, as well as student assessment, the study documents focal students' and focal instructors' perspectives of the various factors affecting their writing in 'regular' content courses, with particular attention paid to the impact of feedback practices and their role in both the short-term and long-term development of students' skills and their investments in different types of writing. Drawing on a language socialization framework, data analysis focused on expectations and practices with respect to feedback, and explored the impact of these practices on conveying both explicit and implicit norms linked to students' access to, and successful participation in, their chosen content areas.

Drawing on both students' and instructors' perspectives of this literacy event and discourse analysis of relevant documents, findings offer unique insights into the role of feedback practices not only for students' writing development but also in indexing complex negotiations of positions, identities, and institutional forces. The dissertation concludes by highlighting the need to pay closer attention to the multidimensional functions of feedback practices in order to understand their power to shape the socialization trajectories of L2 writers and universities' responses to multilingual students who no longer fit traditional profiles.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

11 o'clock at night, and the stack of paper is still only half way done. Perhaps a break is in order. I pause and wonder if all of this is worth it. I know I should not, but I calculate in my mind how much work I still have to do. If I spend only about 15 minutes per paper providing my responses to the students' writing the rest of the batch, approximately 20 research papers, should take about five hours. I start again, hoping that students will read these comments. In fact, I am fairly confident that they will. What I am not so sure about is whether these comments will actually help them. Deep down inside, part of me has to believe that all this work is worth it, but still I am left wondering...

Like many other university instructors all over the world, I have spent much of my career engaging in a form of writing which still remains one of the most important, and at the same time private, idiosyncratic and misunderstood literacy events to be found in educational institutions. The act of responding to papers and exams written by students, offering advice, and indicating areas of weakness while hopefully also suggesting concrete solutions that will help students develop as writers is, according to Elbow (2002), “a *major* portion of the ‘academic writing’ of most academics” (p. 293, italics in original). Yet, it is also one of the least recognized and visible forms of writing found in universities. Professors rarely discuss or share the kinds of feedback they give students with other professors, and in most cases, they never do find out how students interpreted their comments or what effect they had on subsequent writing. In most cases, it remains a private, one-way conversation between students and instructors whose meaning and function seems more closely linked to hopes, expectations and best intentions than to any true knowledge of what is actually going on in the margins of the page.

And yet, it is this very nature, the fact that it represents a rare opportunity for a one-on-one dialogue with an instructor, that explains my interest in this event. I have been a teacher long enough to know that this individual attention, specialized according to the needs of the learner, is a rare but important pedagogic act, whose reach goes far beyond

the context of the classroom. I have also personally experienced as a student and teacher how important feedback (especially of an individual nature) can be for second language (L2) writers¹ and other non-traditional writers working in a language other than their mother tongue.

Feedback practices may be controversial, especially in the context of L2 writing (Casanave, 2003a; Goldstein, 2005), but they remain undeniably one of the most important ways instructors have of getting students to reflect on and better understand a system of conventions and grammatical features whose combinations will largely determine how successful they will be in conveying their ideas and arguments. In the words of Hodges (1997):

The margins of students' written work are the ideal site for teacher-student conversations about what and how students are thinking about their essay subjects, about how teachers respond to their thinking, and about the subjects themselves. Regardless of which discipline we teach in, we can do some of our most successful teaching in the margins and end spaces of students' written work, perhaps more than we can in any other site. (p. 78)

As a teacher and a researcher in L2 development, this dissertation is the result of intuitions that tell me Hodges may be right, particularly for L2 learners. This research is therefore the result of my attempts to verify this intuition and to shed light on what is actually going on in these negotiations, and what might be important to consider in order to move from hope to certainty, from simply guessing to consciously designing feedback with a better understanding of what can be done to make it successful.

1.2 Purpose of the study

This research is situated in the context of the ever-increasing awareness and interest in the issues of L2 writing and the ways we can help L2 writers successfully integrate within academic communities (Matsuda, 2003; Paltridge, 2004; Ravelli & Ellis, 2004; Silva & Brice, 2004). Whether it be interest in learning strategies for L2 writing

¹ My use of the terms *L2 writer* reflects the convenience of use and popularity of this label. However, I remain perfectly aware of its limitations as an oversimplification of writers working with texts composed in a language other than their mother tongue, particularly since some writers may actually be writing in their third or fourth language.

development, issues of placement, assessment, or teacher preparation and support, there is a growing body of research focusing exclusively on the development and dynamics of L2 writing (Hinkel, 2002; K. Hyland, 2003; Kroll, 2003).

This interest is motivated by the recognition of the place and importance of writing in educational contexts and society in general, in combination with important social changes linked to globalization and the diversification of society, which have increased the number of L2 writers in educational institutions throughout the world (Canagarajah, 2002b; Matsuda, 2003; Silva & Brice, 2004). Now, more than ever, suggest Block and Cameron (2002), societies and their educational institutions are faced with the need to not only welcome, but also learn to support and work with students entering systems traditionally designed for native speakers of the dominant languages used as the medium of instruction. Stated differently, whereas the presence of L2 learners in classrooms may once have been an exception to the rule, their existence is now the best reminder that we currently live in a day and age where intercultural and multilingual conversations are the norm rather than the exception.²

As a result of this growing presence of non-native English speakers attending institutions where English is the dominant language of instruction, we are seeing fundamental changes to educational institutions. Although these changes generate exciting possibilities for cross-cultural exchange and collaboration, they also create a pressing need to find ways to renegotiate and redefine literacy practices originally designed for student populations of native speakers (Matsuda, 2003; Ninnes & Hellstén, 2005; Singh & Doherty, 2004).

In reexamining university literacy practices, a lot of attention has been paid to the role of writing development. Much of this interest stems from the prevalence and importance of English academic texts as a dominant mode of communication for knowledge construction and dissemination (Swales, 2004) as well as its high-stakes nature as a dominant means of testing and evaluating students' knowledge in their fields (Cumming, 2002). Much of this interest also stems from researchers who have

² Universities in OECD countries are a good example of these changes with the reported growth of cross-border higher education more than doubling over the past 20 years (OECD, 2004).

highlighted the difficulties linked to learning to write academically in a second language. L2 writing development is not only difficult, but in the context of university education, it represents for many ‘nontraditional’ students a significant challenge to their integration and academic success (Ballard, 1996; Casanave, 2002, 2003a; Hinkel, 2002; Lea & Stierer, 2000; Lillis, 2001; Ridley, 2004; Shi & Beckett, 2002; Zamel & Spack, 2004). Worse, there is a strong sense that universities are still far from having found adequate solutions to help students (both L2 and mainstream) respond to these challenges. Many of these solutions remain controversial and disputed (Casanave, 2003a; Kubota & Abels, 2006; Matsuda, 2006; Spack, 2004), and authors such as Hamp-Lyons (2002) suggest that we “do not yet possess sufficient knowledge of culturally determined writing behaviors to be able to teach students what to change in their writing in order to conform to expectations, should they wish to do so” (p. 12).

I have personally witnessed L2 writers’ struggles through my own work in the above mentioned “contact zones” helping L2 students write in content courses. Their struggles echo mine, and those of all their instructors who have the responsibility to help L2 writers deal with the challenges of academic writing. Hinkel (2002) captures well the difficulty of the tasks when she suggests that:

When students who were non-native speakers of English (NSSs) entered the academic arena in English medium institutions of higher learning, the pedagogical tasks associated with improving students' writing skills became far more complicated than they had been in writing instruction to native speakers (NSs) of English. (p. 1)

My goals for this research are closely linked to this sense that educational contexts must look for new ways to respond to multilingual writers and understand what might be done to help successfully teach and support the acquisition of academic writing skills and practices for new generations of multilingual scholars.

To achieve this goal, this study explored the socially constructed nature of academic literacies and multilingual students' educational and social achievement in a longitudinal multiple case study. The case study tracked five Japanese international students over the course of eight months (see Chapter 3 for more details) and focused on

these students' and their instructors' perspectives on factors affecting writing in 'regular' content courses. Particular attention was placed on the role of a specific literacy form or act experienced by all L2 writers: feedback received on written assignments produced for classes.

Feedback practices are defined here as including any interaction, oral and written, about writing, with a 'guide' (usually, but not always, an instructor), while referring to a specific text in various states of completion. My interest in the socializing power of feedback is motivated by a sense in the literature that this is one event that we still know very little about, and yet whose potential for learning is felt intuitively by both teachers and students (Ferris, 2004; see Chapter 2 for more details). From a sociocultural point of view, its potential for dialogue, and negotiation, identify it as a learning event worth studying (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Lantolf, 2006; Villamil & Guerrero, 2006). To date, it also remains an event that has remained largely unexamined in terms of its interpersonal and contextual dimensions (Ferris, 2003b; K. Hyland & Hyland, 2006b; Reid, 1994). Moreover, although feedback has often been researched in the context of L2 writing classes, research looking at its impact and importance for development of discipline-specific writing skills by L2 writers is much rarer, particularly taking a longitudinal approach.

Drawing on ethnographic research techniques, the study was designed to provide a rich, socially situated, detailed description of feedback practices, focusing both on their discursive and interactional nature. The study aimed to explore the impact of feedback practices on students' socialization within discipline-specific communities, focusing on their impact for L2 students' writing development. The study also sought to explore the other functions this common pedagogic act may be serving as this language-mediated activity helps convey explicitly and/or implicitly important information about the linguistic, social and institutional norms, as well as specific social identities, stances and behaviors linked to universities.

The following research questions guided this investigation:

Q1: How are feedback practices described and perceived by L2 students in terms of their usefulness and impact for their writing development in the context of content courses?

Q2: What are the institutional forces that help shape and affect the feedback practices experienced by L2 learners in content courses?

Q3: How does students' engagement with feedback practices affect the long-term socialization of L2 students in content courses?

1.3 Significance of the study

This study contributes to a growing field of research focusing on L2 academic discourse socialization (Duff, 2007b; Morita & Kobayashi, 2008). It also takes advantage of discourse analysis techniques to better understand those practices that help shape the socialization of L2 learners in English-medium universities, and the ways in which we might most effectively try to design this socialization process so as to lead to successful outcomes for both learners and universities.

During this time of intense globalization and internationalization, this study is part of a wave of studies conducted in response to the urgent need to better understand how educational institutions might accommodate increasing numbers of students working and studying in a language other than their mother tongue. Moreover, by focusing on the socialization trajectory of international students in content courses, this study offers much-needed insights regarding feedback practices that might help welcome and support these students as they transition from language classrooms to enter content courses. Such insights play a role in helping L2 students achieve academic and social success, and help ensure that educational institutions successfully tap into the opportunities for learning, creativity, and knowledge exchange that are the promise of contemporary global/multicultural/multilingual educational institutions.

This dissertation also makes a unique contribution to the field of L2 writing development by combining an academic discourse socialization approach with a detailed examination of feedback practices and their impact on undergraduate L2 writers. To date,

the combination of these two areas of research remains one which has only been rarely employed either in the field of L2 writing development or in socialization research, especially in the form of a longitudinal study (see Zappa, 2007, for a notable exception to this rule). This dissertation thus offers a unique and novel approach to research on feedback practices for L2 writing development.

Finally, by taking advantage of a ‘situated’ research approach to L2 writing feedback that focuses on its socialization impact, this study provides an important opportunity to explore the impact of institutional pressures on L2 learning in universities beyond the context of the language classroom itself. Although institutional factors may correspond to only one aspect of a more complex system at work, they represent a lens on L2 academic socialization that has rarely been used in the literature on feedback and L2 writing development. It will be argued that this lens reveals important, but often unspoken, factors linked to power relations, material resources, and ideologies regarding the integration of L2 writers in universities.

1.4 Dissertation organization

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature and theoretical frameworks that have guided this research. Emphasis is placed on the theoretical contributions of L2 socialization theory and socially situated perspectives of L2 writing development as a result of the interaction of linguistic and contextual factors which include: relations of power (Benesch, 2001; Canagarajah, 2002b), identity (Ivanič, 1998; Lillis & Turner, 2001), participation and membership in communities of practice (Barton & Tusting, 2005; Haneda, 2006; Morita, 2004; Wenger, 1998), and the long term socialization trajectory of students (Wortham, 2005). The chapter also presents an overview of previous research on the impact of feedback practices for L2 writing development, and avenues of inquiry that have been identified in the literature as important to explore.

Chapter 3 provides details regarding the qualitative case study methodological design of this investigation. The chapter describes the context where the research was conducted, as well as the focal students and instructors who were the principal object of focus for the research. Descriptions are also given of the various data sources collected

and triangulated, as well as the analytical procedures followed to produce the findings explored in subsequent chapters.

Chapters 4 through 6 summarize the key findings stemming from the study, each chapter focusing on one of the three research questions and a different level of analysis.

Chapter 4 focuses on the first research question and offers a detailed description of the feedback practices experienced and described by students and instructors. These are contrasted with the ideal constructions of these practices offered by these same participants in the interviews. To provide readers with further details of the context and participants involved in this study, the chapter begins with a short vignette illustrative of a “moment” in the life of one of the focal participants involved in the study. Although the vignette takes the form of a narrative, the moment described is an actual composite of descriptions and details stemming from the data collected during the research and is hence representative of a real day and actual events, although not all of them occurred on the same day.

Chapter 5 addresses the second research question and explores the reasons for the contrast between ideal constructions of feedback practices and those practices actually experienced and described by students. Findings focus on the powerful but often unspoken impact that institutional factors have on L2 writers and their instructors’ ability to produce and/or engage in ideal feedback practices. The impact of these factors is shown to negatively affect students’ and instructors’ abilities to discuss and successfully negotiate discipline-specific writing.

Chapter 6, the final findings chapter, takes up the third research question and looks at the messages conveyed implicitly and explicitly by feedback practices in this study. In exploring the role of feedback practices as socialization processes, I show how even when these practices failed to provide students with “useful” information about what they needed to do to improve as writers, these literacy practices, nonetheless conveyed important messages to students regarding their identities and what it means to learn to write as a L2 writer in university.

Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation. It addresses this dissertation’s limitations, as well as its unique contributions to the field, and summarizes its key implications for the

conceptualization of the impact of feedback practices in content courses for L2 writers. Particular attention is paid to the significance of this study for the way the academic literacy development of L2 students might be researched, designed, and implemented. More generally, implications of this research are also discussed with regard to theoretical understandings of the impact of pedagogic events beyond the classroom for L2 academic discourse socialization. The chapter concludes with my personal reflections on what has been learned, and how this research has changed my own approach to L2 writing development and feedback as a teacher.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This study draws on important trends in applied linguistics research focusing on L2 literacy development as part of a dynamic socialization process. This approach to language development is applied to the exploration of how university practices might respond to increasing numbers of students pursuing higher education degrees in a language other than their mother tongue. This chapter seeks to better contextualize this research by reviewing the literature related to this topic. I first provide an overview of language socialization theory and its application to the study of L2 literacy development. I then look at the contributions this framework has to make to studies of the increasing linguistic diversification of higher education and the need to pay closer attention to processes of L2 writing development. Last, I note the importance that feedback practices have played as one of the various pedagogic activities helping L2 students learn to write, and illustrate how gaps in our understanding of these practices might be filled through research exploring the impact of feedback practices as a form of academic discourse socialization.

2.2 Second language literacy development as a socialization process

Recent years have seen an increasing interest in exploring literacy development as a dynamic socialization process. From this perspective, learning occurs as students gain membership and expertise through participation and negotiated interaction in the activities of various communities (Duff, 2003, 2007b, 2007c; Duff & Hornberger, 2008; Morita & Kobayashi, 2008; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Watson-Gegeo, 2004; Zuengler & Cole, 2005).

This approach emerges from the tradition of language socialization theory and research (Kulick & Schieffelin, 2004; Ochs, 1988; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2008; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). The language socialization paradigm has roots in linguistic anthropology, sociology, and cultural psychology, and has a strong ethnographic orientation. Broadly defined, language socialization theory seeks to understand the processes through which newcomers negotiate membership and competency in communication and other areas

through extended participation in the language-mediated activities of target communities. Language development is seen to be inextricably linked to social context and its constraints on the interaction of language learners with members of the target community, as well as learners' opportunities to participate in the practices of that community (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). This notion of participation is elaborated on in Lave and Wenger's model of learning from a *community-of-practice* perspective (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). They suggest that the socialization of newcomers requires *legitimate peripheral participation*: a gradual move by novice learners from a position of peripheral participation to fuller participation through genuine interactions with more competent members of the target community. A similar view of learning as participation is echoed in Prior's (1998) work on disciplinary enculturation in graduate education, linking successful enculturation with "trajectories of participation in disciplinary communities of practices" (p. 134). His results suggest that students who have the greatest access to legitimate roles, sites, practices and events within disciplinary communities have the greatest chance to develop mature levels of membership within their disciplines.

First-generation language socialization research concerned itself with the impact of parent-child interactions on the development of young children's specific subjectivities, stances and positions associated with the parents communities and cultures (e.g., Clancy, 1999; Schieffelin & Gilmore, 1986; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). More recently, language socialization research has also been applied to research looking at L2 development in multilingual settings and educational contexts (Atkinson, 2003; Duff, 1995; 2002; Kobayashi, 2003; Morita, 2004; Watson-Gegeo, 2004).

Part of the popularity of this approach of this approach stems from its ability to highlight, in addition to individual cognitive processes, the complex and important effect of contextual factors on L2 learning. Making use of qualitative research methods, language socialization research provide a broad and rich description of learners' experiences and learning contexts, and brings to light the nature of literacy events as situated social practices which entail not only the acquisition/use of linguistic competence, but also issues of identity, struggle, and transformation (Duff, 2003, 2007b).

In seeing literacy events as socially situated and co-constructed acts, with language serving as a key component (amongst others) driving learning and an individual's ability to function effectively and appropriately in a particular community, language socialization shares theoretical foundations with other theories of literacy development including, for example, sociocultural approaches to language learning (Duff, 2007b; Lantolf, 2005) and the 'academic literacies' model (Lea & Street, 2006). In all of these approaches, a great deal of attention is paid to the everyday linguistic and discursive practices of communities and their power to organize, shape and control socio-cultural development through language development (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Carrington & Luke, 1997; K. Hyland & F. Hyland, 2006a; Ivanič, 1998; Kubota, 1999; Kulick & Schieffelin, 2004; Lea & Street, 2006; Lillis, 2003; Norton, 2000).

As such, language socialization research has been used as an approach to look at language activities' potential for the reproduction, transformation and change of society (Garrett & Baquedano-Lopez, 2002), and to explore the bidirectional relationship which exists between macro-level contextual forces and micro-level discursive practices (Duff, 1995, 1996). Work in this line of inquiry has also served to account not only for the successful reproduction of expected and desirable outcomes in members who are socialized within communities, but also for the causes of unexpected or undesirable socialization outcomes from the point of view of the community, such as the example of Hasidic children who do not grow up to be modest and obedient (Kulick, 2005; Kulick & Schieffelin, 2004). Relevant questions stemming from this line of inquiry include for example: a) How we might explain why some novice members may not learn to be competent members of the community; and b) How might we address issues of resistance and transformation within socialization processes?

These questions have proven to be particularly important when looking at socialization processes in multilingual contexts. Keeping in mind that language and its use is socially contingent, and is therefore never neutral, mechanical or uninterested, L2 socialization research has helped expose the messiness and complexity that ensue when individuals work simultaneously with different and often competing discursive practices and the identities attached to them.

Researchers such as Duff (2002), Wortham (2005), and Morita (2004) have shown, for example, that as novice L2 learners enter a new discourse community they are not only socialized into its discursive practices, but are also being introduced to specific social constructions and identities. The “messiness” of the language learning process results from the fact that students will not always blindly assume the roles and identities assigned to them. Moreover, the target community will not always welcome them into their folds in the same way that a child might be welcomed into a family. What results is a conceptualization of language learning as a complex negotiation process with learners making decisions about how they will choose to adopt, adapt, or resist various discursive practices and the way these position them. Socialization trajectories are therefore far from straightforward or easily predictable, and may not even in the end match the explicitly stated goals of the educational institutions where the learning takes place (Atkinson, 2003; Duff, 2003).

By focusing on the role of language-mediated activities, language socialization studies of L2 learners have also contributed to our understanding of language learning processes by exposing the link between seemingly mundane interactions and language learners’ learning trajectories. For example, the work of Morita explored the role of silence in the classroom as a socially constructed and agency-rich symbol of struggles around participation and legitimacy in university classrooms for L2 learners. Toohey’s (1998) research demonstrated how seating arrangements in kindergarten classes not only helped to shape the dynamics of participation in the classroom, but also served to reinforce an implicit hierarchy which identified some L2 learners as deficient and worthy of being excluded from some classroom practices.

L2 socialization studies looking specifically at the context of higher education and academic literacy development have recently gained momentum (Beckett, Gonzalez, & Schwartz, 2004; Bronson, 2004; Duff, 2007a; Kobayashi, 2003; Morita, 2000, 2004; Zappa-Hollman, 2007). Central to this research is the belief that participation and engagement in university activities can be understood as a process of ‘discourse socialization,’ that is to say, that learning results from the process of gaining familiarity with and mastery over academic tasks and practices, including an understanding of those

processes as linked to both oral and written production of relevant university texts and genres (Morita & Kobayashi, 2008).

This view of learning as socialization complements an increasing amount of research in the field of L2 development which has significantly challenged and broken down the notion of academic discourses as predictable and fixed textual practices and conventions which can unproblematically be transmitted to students and lead to the production of successful academic prose (Canagarajah, 2002b; Casanave, 2002; Flowerdew, 2000; K. Hyland, 2000; Lillis & Turner, 2001; Matsuda, 2006; Tardy, 2005). This body of work has also demonstrated the importance of less traditional and unofficial interactions and linguistic activities as key elements determining the success or failure of interactions. Kobayashi (2003), for example, traced the importance of group work and private rehearsals, in conjunction with the mediating effect of both L1 and L2 conversations, as crucial elements in the out-of-class socialization of Japanese exchange students at a Canadian university. Swales (2004), similarly, stresses the need to understand how the genres that make up the academic discourse communities in higher education can be seen as parts of chains, sets, and networks, often in a hierarchical relationship to one another. As a result, understanding what is involved, for example in the creation of a successful dissertation, would also include studying 'occluded' genres, including oral interactions such as student-committee interactions which have traditionally received less attention in the literature, but which nonetheless are part of the dissertation writing process.

Similar arguments are found in the literature from researchers who note that successful academic writing has as much to do with the local forces that affect these interactions as with any well-established series of rules or writing conventions (Canagarajah, 2002b; Casanave, 2003b). Lea and Street (1998) echo this point when they warn that to ignore the unique variations and contestations of academic discourse in its different disciplinary and local contexts is to ignore a large part of the reality of what students do as they negotiate university literacy practices. Making a similar argument, Casanave (2003b) stressed that overlooking literacy events' socio-political dimensions involving both student identities and institutional forces fails to capture a large part of the work and effort students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds must exert to

develop an adequate sense of the competences and conventions necessary for success in higher education.

The present study aims to build on existing language socialization research. Taking advantage of the unique perspectives offered by this paradigm, I hope to be able to explore how universities might best understand and/or seek to transform actual discursive practices linked to feedback practices, and their impact on the learning experience and ultimate socialization trajectory of L2 students in regular content courses in universities.

2.3 Changing roles of university: Responding to non-traditional students

As suggested in the introduction, much of this research is motivated by a growing awareness and interest in the literature in the issues and problems related to L2 writers and the importance of L2 writing for educational achievement (Silva & Brice, 2004). Whether the interest is in learning strategies for L2 writing development, issues of placement, assessment, or teacher preparation and support, there is growing body of research focusing exclusively on the development and dynamics of L2 writing (Kroll, 2003; Matsuda, Canagarajah, Harklau, Hyland, & Warschauer, 2003), and particularly in the development of academic writing skills (Paltridge, 2004). This interest is motivated in part by the importance of written communication in our modern world and its privileged position in universities. It is also largely motivated by social changes, linked to globalization and the diversification of society, which now more than ever, have left societies in general and their educational institutions facing students who need to learn to work with, and in, many languages (Block & Cameron, 2002).

In North American universities, the challenges of developing academic literacy skills for a growing number of students who are crossing linguistic and cultural borders to pursue higher education degrees in English speaking universities are a major concern. A number of different reasons account for the growing size of the population of these students.

First, increases in learners in universities are the result of immigration policies have contributed to the tremendous transformation and diversification of local student populations in the last 20 years (Cummins, 2000; Early & Marshall, 2008; Gunderson, 2006; Séror, Chen, & Gunderson, 2005; Toohey, 2007), including the emergence of a

new generation of bilingual students typically having arrived at a young age in North America and often referred to as “Generation 1.5” students (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999).

Second, global pressures to internationalize higher education in both western and non-western countries such as China and Japan have also increased the number of L2 learners at universities (Altbach, 2004; Altbach & Knight, 2006; Hayle, 2008; Horie, 2002; Ninnes & Hellstén, 2005; OECD, 2004; Taylor, 2000; Vidovich & Slee, 2001). Vidovich and Slee (2001) point out, for example, that “accompanying the pressure towards the globalized knowledge-based economy, universities have moved to centre stage of public policy for the potential contributions they can make to the economic well-being of the country” (p. 435).

In Canada, internationalization strategies have become integral parts of various university and government mission statements which highlight the benefits of internationalized and global campuses (Hayle, 2008; Taylor, 2000). Note, for example, the following statement from the *Association of Colleges and Universities in Canada* on the importance of internationalization in Canadian post-secondary institutions.

Universities in Canada have a long tradition of international collaboration. Today, however, internationalization of the university means far more than inter-personal or even inter-institutional cooperation across borders. It is a necessary, vital, and deliberate transformation of how we teach and learn and it is essential to the future quality of higher education in Canada, indeed to the future of Canada. In a world characterized by challenges and opportunities of global proportions, universities are key agents of change. (Statement on internationalization, 2007, par. 2)

Such policy statements have been accompanied by changes in immigration policies and agreements with other countries which helped increase international student enrolment in Canada. A record 80,200 students from other countries enrolled in programs at Canadian universities in 2005/2006, an increase of 6.0% from the previous year. The majority of these students came from Asian countries, in particular China, but also included students from India, South Korea, Japan and Hong Kong. In total, these

students made up for 15% of the growth in total university enrolment in 2005/2006 and represented 7.7% of the total registrations, nearly double the proportion from 1995/1996 (Statistics Canada, 2008).

In the majority of Canadian and American settings, this growth of non-native speakers attending English-medium institutions is fundamentally transforming educational institutions into “contact zones” (Pratt, 1991): sites where people representing distinct communities and identities “meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (p. 4). Although these contact zones generate exciting possibilities for cross-cultural exchange and collaboration, they also create an ever pressing need to find ways to renegotiate and redefine literacy practices originally designed for populations of native English speakers (Kubota & Abels, 2006; Singh, 2005; Singh & Doherty, 2004). As a result, university students and instructors have had to find new ways to engage with each other and find strategies to negotiate the often implicit and contested conventions of university literacy practices.

The struggles entailed in these negotiations become particularly apparent when students face what is perhaps the most ‘mysterious’ and challenging of these practices: academic writing. Indeed, few course requirements, according to Ridley (2004), outdo written assignments in their ability to generate puzzlement, confusion and even fear amongst students. This malaise is even greater for students who do not share the cultural and linguistic backgrounds from which English-medium academic writing and its related discourses and practices have emerged. Indeed, the need to better understand how one might help L2 students face the challenges of writing in university settings is a dominant theme in the field of L2 development (Benesch, 2001; Canagarajah, 2002a; Hinkel, 2002; K. Hyland, 2003; Lea & Street, 2000; Matsuda, 2003; Paltridge, 2004; Ravelli & Ellis, 2004; Shi & Beckett, 2002; Swales, 2004).

Concerns about the development of L2 writing skills are rooted in an understanding of the important role writing plays in academic achievement in higher education. Students and instructors are keenly aware that writing development is linked to issues of equity and access since it plays a powerful role as a gate keeping mechanism determining

who enters, remains, and succeeds in their programs, and thus who will (and who will not) acquire credentials leading to positions of power, prestige and privilege in society. Writing and publication are also highly valued forms of communication for the transmission of ideas within academic disciplines, as well as, increasingly, on the world stage.

When asked to complete a written assignment, both L1 and L2 university students are faced with the problem of not only demonstrating knowledge, but also doing so in accordance with a “complex cultural ‘code’ of behaviour (not usually explicitly recognized or problematised)” (Read, Francis, & Robson, 2001, p. 387). For L2 learners this enterprise is made more complex, since their approach to the code starts from outside the code’s culture and language of origin. Every piece of writing is hence not only a test of L2 students’ knowledge of their fields of study, but is also a test of their capabilities with the second language in which this knowledge is to be demonstrated (and in the case of essay exams, of the speed at which they can draw on and apply these skills). Last, but perhaps most importantly, L2 writing development can be seen as a test of the students’ abilities to decipher the implicit nature of the rules of the ‘writing games’ they must play (Ballard & Clanchy, 1988; Casanave, 2002; Read, Francis, & Robson, 2001). For many these will be rules that will be completely different from any they will have previously experienced in their own native communities and educational contexts (Canagarajah, 2002b; Connor, 2002; Lillis, 2001; Shi, 2003; Shi & Beckett, 2002).

Adding to the complexity of the challenges faced by both L2 students and their host universities is the continued sense of scepticism regarding institutions’ overall response to the presence of L2 writers. Problems identified with the integration of L2 writers include the marginalization of L2 writers through narrow college access, lack of flexibility when dealing with hybridized and hence naturally different writing styles, essentializing discourse, and the marginalization of L2 writing classes and writing teachers within the larger education institutions which house them (see for e.g., Benesch, 1999, 2001; Devos, 2003; Harklau, 1994, 2000; Lillis, 2001; Matsuda, 1998; Silva, 1997; Smoke, 2001; Zamel & Spack, 2004) .

Part of the problem, it is suggested, is that the traditional responses to the presence of L2 learners in universities have relied on the tacit assumption that these students would conform to, and figure out on their own, the language and literacy practices of their host institutions, requiring and/or necessitating only minimal changes or responses from the host institution (Benesch, 2001; Brigugulio, 2000; Hills & Thom, 2005; Kubota & Abels, 2006; Lillis, 2001; Matsuda, 2006). Kubota and Abels (2006) point out, for example, that although across campuses people have debated what it might mean to offer services for writers in need of English language instruction and support, what is generally found is a lack of instructional resources and support leading to serious problems and “a great deal of frustration among instructors” (p. 79). In another example, Matsuda (2006) decries the tacit continuation of a “myth of linguistic homogeneity” in writing courses throughout American campuses, and the fact that institutions continue to ignore important underlying language differences in L2 students’ texts so that composition courses continue to be designed as if they served primarily native speakers.

Authors like Matsuda and Kubota and Abels are clear in suggesting that ignoring the linguistic challenges of L2 writers is simply an extremely unrealistic approach to the successful support and integration of L2 learners. Scholars highlight, for example, the fact that the acquisition of academic written discourse is particularly difficult for L2 writers who report that “they are often uncertain of what is required of them on the pieces of writing they need to undertake in their studies” (Paltridge, 2004, p. 87). Studies also stress the importance of acknowledging L2 students’ cultural backgrounds and previous educational experiences which can also add to the difficulties students face in acquiring written academic discourse. Students often have received little explicit training in writing and/or have received training that has focused on different writing traditions and purposes (Canagarajah, 1993; Connor, 2002; Mohan & Lo, 1985; Shi, 2003; Shi & Beckett, 2002). Many students, for instance, come from educational contexts where writing is primarily seen as language practice and/or a way to demonstrate comprehension. In such cases, these students arrive at a North American university with little experience of process approaches to composition, including the notions of revising a text over multiple drafts (Ferris, 2003a), or the conventions linked to the use of sources and citations to create one’s argument (Angélil-Carter, 2000; Shi, 2004).

2.4 The importance of feedback practices in contact zones

In seeking to understand how universities might better respond to L2 writers' needs and encourage and consolidate L2 writing development and hence students' academic success, this dissertation focused on one particular literacy aspect experienced by L2 writers: feedback received on written assignments produced for classes.

Feedback on writing, or response to writing, is defined here as including any interaction about writing, with a "guide" (usually, but not always, an instructor), while referring to a specific text in various states of completion.³ The value of these interactions is recognized as including both formative and summative types of commentary of a piece of writing. It is further acknowledged that feedback received by students is likely to take the shape of advice and comments in handwritten form as "the most widely practiced and most traditional form of response" (Straub & Lunsford, 1995, p. 1). However, it is also acknowledged that feedback can also take the form of audio feedback (Anson, 1997), electronic feedback (F. Hyland, 2001), feedback in numerical form, or the possibility of responses provided through a checklist or form prepared for this purpose (K. Hyland, 2003). For the purpose of this dissertation, the definition of feedback also includes the practice of teacher-student conferencing (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990), and the increasingly popular practice of peer feedback (Liu & Hansen, 2002).

Feedback has long been an area of interest in L2 writing literature (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Ferris, 2004; Ferris & Roberts, 2001; F. Hyland, 2001; K. Hyland & F. Hyland, 2006a). And yet, it also remains an area of controversy and debate (Casanave, 2003a; Ferris, 2003b; Goldstein, 2001, 2005). The importance and potential of feedback for L2 writing development has long been intuitively felt by both teachers and students, and it is seen to play a crucial role for L2 writing instruction in helping promote and consolidate learning about writing (K. Hyland & F. Hyland, 2006a). However, to date, despite feedback's perceived usefulness and its pervasiveness in L2 writing programs around the world, there is still little agreement as to its implementation, how it is taken up by students, or how it may influence L2 writing development in the long term (Ferris, 2004; Goldstein, 2005). Consequently, many L2 writing teachers are

³ In this dissertation the terms *teacher feedback* and *teacher response* are used synonymously to refer to feedback provided by instructors on their writing.

left uncertain about whether or not they are indeed making use of feedback's full potential, or worse, implementing it in ways that may be damaging to students and/or representing a waste of valuable resources on the part of all involved.

Indeed, some L2 writing researchers focusing on feedback have warned of its dangers for L2 learners, particularly when dealing with the debate regarding teachers' tendency to focus predominantly on form (F. Hyland, 2003) and the actual value of this form-focused feedback (Polio, Fleck, & Leder, 1998; Truscott, 1999). Truscott (1996), for example, has questioned teachers' ability to analyze and respond effectively to students' language issues and has argued that an examination of the impact of feedback on L2 students often reveals that it may be more trouble than it is worth. Zamel (1985), similarly, presented an austere depiction of feedback practices in L2 contexts, noting their tendency to be "confusing, arbitrary, and inaccessible" (p. 79) for students, and often accompanied by few expectations of revisions beyond the text's surface level.

Despite these criticisms, L2 acquisition research has increasingly recognized the importance for learners to focus on both meaning and form, hence strengthening the case for form-focused feedback (e.g., Lyster, Lightbown, & Spada, 1999). In the specific context of L2 writing feedback, Ferris (2002, 2004) notes that there is still a lack of conclusive data regarding the impact of feedback for writing development, and that contrary to criticism, well implemented error feedback can represent an effective and positive practice for L2 writers.

Further arguments in favor of taking teacher response seriously include empirical research which reports the beneficial impacts of teacher response for the quality of revised texts in terms of expressiveness and formal accuracy (Conrad & Goldstein, 1999; Ferris, 2003b; Hodges, 1997).⁴ Finally, investigations of students' feelings towards this common literacy practice also find that although students may have various reactions to the types of feedback they receive and prefer, they nevertheless appreciate it and take it seriously (Ferris, 1997, 2002, 2003a, 2003b; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994, 1996; Saito, 1994; Straub, 1997, 2000; Zhang, 1995).

⁴ There is, however, considerable debate over whether such improvements are linked to in the development of any true understanding of why revisions needed to be made and whether or not these revisions have any impact on students' future writing development (F. Hyland, 1998; K. Hyland, 2003).

This work continues to support the general sense that, if well done, feedback can result in significant learning, although from a research point of view, “we are virtually at square one” (Ferris, 2004, p. 56) and further examinations of feedback are necessary.

In reflecting on the possible shape these examinations might take, one issue identified by researchers is that the majority of research on feedback practices has tended to focus on the impact of different forms of feedback on students’ revisions and subsequent drafts of a text (i.e., direct versus indirect corrections of errors, electronic feedback versus traditional forms of feedback) (Ferris, 2003; Goldstein, 2004; F. Hyland & K. Hyland, 2001; K. Hyland & F. Hyland 2006b; Reid, 1994). Consequently, at the moment, there is still relatively little research in L2 writing which contextualizes teacher responses within the social context in which they occur (Ferris, 2002). Reid (1994), in discussing this gap in the literature, warned against research that does not take into consideration the classroom and academic social context in which writing and responses to it emerge. The results of this, she suggested, was potential for limited understandings about the decisions motivating the use of specific kinds of feedback in specific classroom contexts. She notes that an independent observer who simply collected her feedback on students’ texts would likely find much to criticize, but that these same feedback comments may in fact appear less idiosyncratic and problematic when seen in light of the larger classroom context and observations of concepts covered in classroom.

Hyland and Hyland (2001, 2006b), amongst others, further argue that despite their contributions, traditional studies of feedback in L2 writing classes have tended to reinforce a narrow view of teacher response. This view, they propose, emphasizes feedback’s informational function and its role as the channel for direct or indirect editing recommendations most often linked to grammatical corrections. What risks being lost as a result are the important interpersonal aspects at stake in feedback-related interactions. In other words, we are reminded that beyond grammar corrections, feedback also fulfills social purposes as they reflect and reinforce relationships stemming from the interaction of individual desires, as well as specific goals linked to institutional and cultural contexts. Understanding the success or failure of feedback would therefore require paying closer attention to the linkages of feedback to its social contexts and as well as how students and teachers interpret these.

This last point speaks to the advantage of looking at L2 language development from a language socialization perspective. From a sociocultural perspective, drawing on Vygotsky (1986), it can be argued that teacher feedback represents valuable opportunities for language learners to engage in a potential zone of proximal development (ZDP). This term is used by Vygotsky to symbolize an individual's range for future potential development as delimited by what the individual can do with others (usually someone with a higher level of expertise) today, leading to his or her ability to do it alone in the future. Seen as joint, collaborative acts in opposition to individual ones, teacher response activities in this light thus represent potential zones of proximal development since they allow novice writers to work on writing tasks with more knowledgeable experts (teachers), with the hope that, in time, these interactions will help develop abilities that allow students to complete similar writing tasks independently in the future (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; K. Hyland, 2003).

From a socialization perspective, feedback interactions are valued as language mediated-activities that create a potential for dialogue, negotiation, and thus learning. Feedback practices provide a unique opportunity for students and their instructors to interact, and as a result negotiate conventions, understandings, and identities linked to writing practices. Feedback events are therefore important discourses to be studied as crucial elements of the processes available to teachers and institutions to facilitate the socialization of L2 students in the context of their studies, and the 'discourses of learning' they are being asked to master.

In addition to the recognized "dearth of research on teacher commentary and student revision" (Goldstein, 2005, p. 119) in L2 writing research, this dissertation aligns itself with the rather limited number of studies which have looked at feedback practices in a socially contextualized way. Noteworthy examples of studies which have begun to look at this largely unexplored area of work include research by Ivanič, Clark and Rimmershaw (2000), who focused on the responses students received from their tutors in a British and an African university and identified and categorized these responses to look at what philosophies regarding academic writing and its functions in the university were being expressed through the different ways tutors/instructors worded their comments. Prior's (1995, 1998) ethnographic research investigated the links between non-textual

practices and teachers' written responses to graduate students and also argued for a view of writing development as a complex multilayered sociohistoric process involving not only textual practices, but also various forms of participation in a variety of literacy events occurring both in and out of the classroom. More recently, Hyland and Hyland (2006b) explored interpersonal aspects of teacher written feedback, highlighting how teacher decisions about the feedback they provide are linked to interactional forces and teachers assessment of the teacher-student relationship. Finally, Bronson's (2004) dissertation draws on L2 socialization theory to analyze the academic literacy trajectories of four international graduate students negotiating texts in an American university context. As with this dissertation, Bronson focused on the role of feedback and its impact on the socialization of university students, highlighting the importance of contextualizing these events within a larger holistic account of students' experiences.

My study seeks to add to the insights from the above studies. It also makes a unique contribution to the field of L2 writing research since, to this author's knowledge, no studies focusing specifically on L2 writing feedback and its role in the socialization processes of international undergraduate exchange students have ever been conducted. Moreover, this research fills a gap in the literature by looking at the impact of feedback interactions on L2 writers in the specific context of university content courses. Exploring the impact of L2 feedback practices occurring beyond the walls of writing classes or composition classes is an another area where to date there has been very little research (Leki, 2006).

This lack of research on the impact of feedback for L2 writers in discipline-based courses is particularly relevant in light of the above-mentioned reports of the challenges that learning to write represents for L2 learners, and the assumption that these challenges are unlikely to disappear once students are allowed to take regular courses. On the contrary, the importance of disciplinary variation in written genre, and the unique conventions of specific fields in universities, suggests that feedback practices should take on a special importance for L2 writers in content courses. By definition, the focus in content courses is on disciplinary knowledge, and writing feedback represents an important but all too rare opportunity for students to receive information from their content instructors on language-related and discipline-specific writing conventions.

2.5 Summary

In this chapter I have introduced the theoretical framework of language socialization and its applications in research looking at L2 language development. The rationale for my study was also provided by highlighting the current need to understand how universities might best welcome and support the integration of L2 students, with a particular focus on the need to help them develop academic writing skills. One particular literacy event, with great potential for the socialization of L2 learners in content courses, was identified in the form of feedback on written texts and relevant areas of inquiry were also identified as key themes guiding this dissertation research. In the next chapter, I develop these research themes further by providing a detailed overview of the research methodology employed to collect and analyze the data which was used to answer the research questions posed in this research.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Qualitative case study approach

In order to provide a richer, more socially contextualized understanding of the impact of teacher feedback on L2 writers' socialization trajectories this study made use of a qualitative multiple case study design (Duff, 2008; Merriam, 1998) drawing also on ethnographic methods to document and trace longitudinally socio-literate activity and its impact on "the construction, negotiation, and transformation of knowledge, identities and differences in and through educational discourse" (Duff, 2002, p. 291). The inquiry focused on five focal student participants, international students participating in an exchange program at Blue Mountain University⁵ (see below for more details).

In applied linguistics, case studies have long been recognized as an effective and productive methodological tradition. Case study research has gained popularity and recognition as a powerful way to provide a rich, 'thick' description (Geertz, 1973) of language learners and those factors (social and individual) linked to their language development and performance (Duff, 2008). In the specific field of L2 writing, case studies have been identified as an important response to the 'sociocultural turn' in L2 writing research and a gradual widening of the focus of analysis from textual and procedural practices to the inclusion of the complex interactions of local knowledge and socio-political forces as constitutive elements of the shape texts and language development take (Casanave, 2003b; Kubota, 2003). Case studies, and their ability to provide in-depth analysis of a few cases, allow the research to potentially include a longitudinal dimension to their research which is harder to obtain with other research designs due to logistics. This ability to capture time and maturation in L2 development research has been identified as one of the fundamental dimension of L2 research where we take into consideration the complexity and life-long transformative nature of language development (Ortega & Iberri-Shea, 2005).

This study also made use of ethnographic methods to combine the description and analysis of social contexts with the description and analysis of linguistic factors. In so

⁵ Pseudonyms are used to refer to all institutions and participants of this study in order to ensure their anonymity.

doing, the study draws on the tradition of ethnographies of communication and goals to describe the various knowledge participants need and display as well as the choices and options available to community members, as they make use of and interpret this knowledge to communicate with one another (Dagenais & Toohey, 2002; Duranti, 1988; Keating, 2001; Saville-Troike, 2003). Although more often focused on the “behaviors, values, and structures of collectivities or social groups with particular reference to the cultural basis for those behaviors and values” (Duff, 2008, p. 34), ethnographic research related to specific discursive activities and their sociocultural context have been identified in the field of applied linguistics as important avenues of research well suited to examine the effects of specific discursive practices for the language socialization of L2 learners (Duff, 2002; Watson-Gegeo, 1988, 1992), and for research in L2 writing development (Prior, 1998; Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999). Prior (1998), for example, suggests that ethnographic research is needed to investigate further the links to be made between non-textual practices and teacher response, such as classroom interactions, students’ and teachers’ histories, and other sources of verbal feedback on their writing students may draw on.

In using a qualitative ethnographic case study approach, I also sought to explore the notion that “a great deal of the response to dominant discourses occurs fleetingly *sub rosa* [italics in original] in what Scott (1990) calls the ‘hidden transcript’” (Rampton, Roberts, Leung, & Harris, 2002, p. 386), and that despite the advantages of quantitative approaches, “qualitative methods are best geared toward capturing backstage behaviors” (Myers, 2005, p. 27) which too often stay hidden despite their importance for meaning making in the social world that surrounds us.

This study attempts to get at this “hidden transcript” by seeking out a more personal and “emic” perspective on the role of feedback discourses motivated by my interest in capturing the subjective interpretations of these literacy events by participants. Case studies of individual learners have long been recognized as a powerful way to give voice to individuals whose perspectives might in more traditional research approaches remain silent or obscured by reports of central tendencies primarily (Duff, 2008; Harklau, 1994; Morita, 2004). I was very attracted to the emancipatory potential of giving voice to both dominant and marginalized members of society (in this particular case the

relationship between instructors and L2 writers in the university setting), and exposing how language and literacy practices help shape the positions and the power relations that govern them (Saville-Troike, 2003). These perspectives are particularly relevant in L2 education when working with language minority students who are traditionally "steeped in traditions of domination as well as resistance" (Canagarajah, 1993, p. 662) and in light of role languages play in reflecting and reproducing larger issues and values of privilege, power and social change (Corson, 2001).

3.2 Limitations of a case study approach: Addressing issues of generalizability

Despite their advantages, due to their limited and situated nature, case studies do not lend themselves to findings that can easily produce firm findings generalizable to a larger population. In this research, for example, it would be very difficult to draw conclusions that might be generally true of the impact of feedback for all Japanese international student participating in exchange programs in Canada. Each of the focal students in this study presented unique socialization trajectories and unique interpretations of what feedback practices meant to them. Extrapolating from these unique experiences should thus be done carefully as it is likely that different cases, in different settings, would exhibit different sets of practices and approaches to L2 writing development, leading to different potential results.

However, although a case study approach may limit the generalizability of the findings obtained in this research, it is hoped that this dissertation may lead to "analytic generalizations" (Firestone, 1993), whereby the findings in this study might be used to guide future academic literacy investigations and produce principles to help further theorize the role of feedback practices for the language socialization of L2 writers. This notion is similar to Lincoln's (1985) concept of "transferability", and the idea that readers of qualitative research can find links and similarities between the results of specific studies and other contexts where these ideas may be of use to them (in this case further studies or applications of feedback practices with, for example, different international students from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds). Although readers ultimately determine the applicability of research findings from one context to another (Duff, 2006, 2008), the potential transferability of the present study findings is enhanced through a)

the detailed account of the research design and data collection and analysis procedures used, b) “thick” descriptions provided of students’ and instructors’ backgrounds, activities, practices and perspectives and c) detailed descriptions of the feedback practices observed in this research.

As a final point, I would like to also suggest that the choice of a case study approach reflects the complexity, context dependence, and unpredictable nature of literacy development (Block, 2003; Lantolf, 2000). As is frequent with applications of case study research in applied linguistics, the belief that language-mediated activities are in fact inseparable from the sociocultural and institutional constraints that surround them justifies an approach that would shy away from trying to study these events in a way that would focus predominantly on their generic qualities. As suggested by Merriam (1998), in case study research “a single case or nonrandom sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many” (p. 208). My choice of qualitative approach can hence also be seen as a deliberate attempt to understand in greater detail the role of context as a fundamental and inseparable element of feedback practices and to focus on the significance of the local perspectives and interests which are often occluded in more generic descriptions of L2 academic literacy development and the role of feedback practices (see Chapter 2).

3.3 Summary: Methodological goal

In summary, through fieldwork involving the longitudinal collection of individual students and instructors’ interpretations of feedback in conjunction to the collection of relevant documents, this study aimed to provide a unique glimpse into the lives, emotions, successes, failures and struggles of L2 students writing in university content courses and their interactions with the powerful discourse of feedback practices. In what follows I describe in greater detail the context and design of the study.

3.4 General description of the context of this study and its participants

All participants in this study were Japanese undergraduate students from Nihon Daigaku University (NDU) and its sister campus Nihon University International (NUI)

participating in their second year of an exchange program with Blue Mountain University (BMU). This programme is the fruit of a longstanding international collaboration between NDU and BMU and has been running for over a decade. Every year at BMU, approximately 100 Japanese visiting students come and spend a maximum of two academic years in Canada. Similarly, a smaller number of BMU students also travel to Japan to take courses at NDU. In both cases, students receive credits at their home universities for courses taken during their exchange which can be used towards the completion of their programs of study.

BMU is one of Canada's tier 1 research universities, and like many other Canadian universities has included a strong internationalization agenda as part of its mission. Part of responding to this agenda has included the building of partnerships with over 130 universities worldwide with agreements facilitating the exchanges of students, such as the one described above.

NDU is one of Japan's top private universities, and also has gained a strong reputation for the quality of its international programs, including the opening of its bilingual English and Japanese campus, NUI. The university has also established links with a number of universities in different continents to provide its students with a variety of opportunities to travel abroad and experience a global education.

In the first year of the exchange program, every year from September to April, Japanese international students participating in the NDU-BMU exchange program take, depending on their TOEFL and GPA scores, both sheltered and non-sheltered content courses in areas that include, amongst others, geography, Canadian studies, social science research, sociolinguistics, cross-cultural communication and media studies. The sheltered courses consist of content courses taught by instructors with backgrounds and training in second language teaching and content-based language learning. These instructors include in their instructional design specific language learning goals and instructional approaches to facilitate students' access to the content and discipline specific discourse related to the content addressed in the course.

While the majority of the 100 students end their exchange after their first year in the program, a select number of students who meet the requirements may choose to stay

for a second year of study at BMU.⁶ During this second year, students are free to self-select courses based on their majors and interests. The data collected for this study stem from field work conducted on the BMU campus with focal students recruited from the population of NDU/NUI students participating in this second year option of the NDU-BMU exchange.

My decision to recruit from this pool of students originates in part from an opportunity that arose at BMU to work as one of the instructors working with NDU-BMU students in their first year of exchange at BMU. This opportunity to work with these students fueled my interest in researching the challenges and possible solutions experienced by these exchange students who are representative of the large populations of undergraduate East-Asian international students currently being recruited as part of the internationalization of higher education (Hayle, 2008; Kritz, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2008).⁷

I was also motivated by my desire to find out more about what happened to those students who opted to participate in the second year option, and how they managed their transition into elective classes. In this sense, this second year option population was perhaps even more closely representative of international students in higher education who for the most part are expected to enter and adapt almost immediately to regular courses at their host university.

My work with the NDU-BMU students was built on my own prior experiences working with Japanese students in Japan where I had worked as an English teacher for close to three years. Although far from an expert in my understandings of Japan's culture and language, my limited knowledge and long-standing personal relationships with Japanese speakers helped familiarize me with this population and its unique characteristics. This work also led to the building of personal relationships with these students. These relationships heightened my personal knowledge and interest in their academic progress at BMU and a sense of trust and intimacy that I felt might encourage

⁶ These students have generally demonstrated in their first year of exchange their ability to perform well in both sheltered and non-sheltered courses and are thus usually the most proficient English learners in the original group of 100 students.

⁷ Although only 25 percent of Canada's foreign students come from a single region (Europe), 22 percent come from East Asia (Kritz, 2006).

the students to talk in greater detail about their personal interpretations of what it was like to write and receive feedback on their writing as international students at BMU.

In the fall of 2005, an invitation letter describing the study and its goals was sent to all exchange students falling in this category of second year NDU-BMU students (see Appendix A: Letter of Invitation for Students). A total of three males and two females responded positively to this invitation (see Table 3.1 Description of Focal Participants). All five of the students were in their early 20's and were close friends with each other despite the fact that they were studying in a range of disciplines including: psychology, linguistics, Asian studies, and economics. All five students had also had the chance to meet me personally the year before as an instructor in the NDU-BMU program. Following an initial meeting with the students to discuss the study in detail, all expressed an interest in participating in this research, and all were therefore included as focal participants. From the start, four of the five students expressed that they felt this study would be useful to them as a chance to discuss with me their ideas about writing and to have help interpreting the advice and feedback they received on their writing. These students represented a population of undergraduate students who would have been in their third year in Japan, but who were taking second year courses at BMU due to the different semester start dates that exist between North American and Japanese universities.

As I would later find out, all five had also made important sacrifices linked to their decision to stay a second year at BMU. These sacrifices included, but were not limited to, the financial cost of continuing the exchange, the likelihood of increased workload as students studying in a second language, and the challenges of staying one more year out of the Japanese university system at a time of their lives when they should have been making connections and preparations for the job-hunting they would most likely engage in upon their graduation. Ultimately, trying to document the eventual experiences of these students in light of these sacrifices was another reason which motivated my desire to conduct this research.

During their second year of study at BMU, focal students registered for a wide range of courses in various disciplines at BMU (see Chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of

the courses taken by focal participants). In the majority of these courses, students wrote and received feedback on a variety of writing assignments including: final research papers, short essay papers, online bulletin board postings, essay exams, take-home exams, group presentations, group papers, and case study simulations.

Table 3.1 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

Another sub-group of participants included four university instructors who taught courses taken by the focal students. These instructors were part of a larger group of instructors whose courses included major writing components who were contacted in writing (see Appendix B: Letter of Invitation for Instructors) at the beginning of each semester. The written invitation asked instructors if they would be willing to participate in the study by accepting to be interviewed and possibly having their classes observed. A total of four instructors generously agreed to be interviewed at least once for this study about their feedback practices (see Table 3.2 Description of Focal Instructors).⁸ The instructors included two assistant professors in the fields of anthropology and political science, one sessional instructor who had been regularly teaching courses at BMU in

⁸ Sadly, the vast majority of instructors contacted for this study declined to participate. The most common reason for refusal, despite frequent expressions of interest in the study, was a lack of time due to heavy schedules and teaching loads. The heavy workload of instructors and its effect on feedback practices is explored in greater detail in Chapter 5.

linguistics, and a PhD student working as a TA for a number of courses in the department of psychology. Two of these instructors also consented to have me come and observe their classes at times they felt were relevant to the written assignments that were being completed by students in their classes.

Table 3.2 Description of Focal Instructors

Instructor	Gender	Rank	Course taught	Formal data collection
Instructor 1	Male	Associate professor	Anthropology	Interviewed twice Class observed (over one semester)
Instructor 2	Female	Associate professor	Political science	Interviewed once
Instructor 3	Female	Sessional lecturer	Linguistics	Interviewed twice Class observed (over one semester)
Instructor 4	Male	Graduate Teaching Assistant	Psychology	Interviewed once

3.5 Data collection: Triangulation

In line with most qualitative research approaches, this research made use of multiple methods and data sources in the process of tracking the process of the focal students in this study. The wide range of data making up the data set allowed for a triangulation of the information collected. The ability to use different viewpoints and perspectives to verify and develop understandings of the relevant themes and possible interpretations of the data collected is considered to be one of the major strengths of qualitative research, and was used to help enhance the validity and credibility of the results (Chapelle & Duff, 2003; Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Palys, 1997; van Lier, 1988).

In accordance with university ethical guidelines, all participants signed informed consent forms to participate in the study (see Appendix C, D and E for copies of these forms and the certificate of ethical approval). Data was collected from participants for a period of two academic semesters, starting in September 2005 and ending in May 2006. Data sources collected and analyzed during this time period are discussed below.

3.6 Data sources

3.6.1 Student interviews

The primary source of data collection for this study was bi-weekly semi-structured interviews with focal students that were held from September 2005 to May 2006. These interviews were conducted in English and lasted on average an hour in length. Each student was interviewed an average of six times per semester for a grand total of 74 interviews totalling in excess of 75 hours of audio-recorded conversations.

The interviews were designed to provide regular opportunities to track over time students' activities and their experiences with writing and any feedback they received. All interviews were audio recorded, summarized and transcribed by the researcher (see Appendix F: Transcription Conventions). With the exception of interviews conducted with Kaito, the great majority of interviews with students were conducted as per their request on campus at a local coffee shop which served as a regular meeting place and study area for the students in this study.

The interviews adopted a semi-structured format (Merriam, 1998) with prepared prompts designed to elicit reflections on L2 writing and feedback in content courses (see Appendix G: Sample Interview Questions for Students). I was particularly interested in exploring students' personal reactions and motivations linked to the way they interpreted and reacted to instructors' feedback. The longitudinal nature of the research allowed me to follow-up and expand on ideas and events discussed in previous interviews or other forms of communication. In this way, I was able to track how students were affected by and worked with feedback over time. I could also examine how feedback was used at different points in the semester, with different writing tasks and within different courses/contexts.

When the opportunity arose and students brought samples of their writing with them, these interviews also provided opportunities to conduct what Odell, Goswami, & Harrington (1983) have called “discourse based interviews”. In other words, these interviews, similar to simulated recall research techniques (Gass & Mackey, 2000), became opportunities to talk about and discuss in detail particular pieces of writing. During such moments in the interviews, I would review with students specific samples of writing assignments, any accompanying responses, and any revisions made in an attempt to capture their feelings and perspectives about the feedback they had received, as well as how they felt it might have affected their writing or larger sense of their identities as student writers at BMU.

3.6.2 Course documents and informal conversations with focal students

In addition to these interviews, relevant documents linked to students’ courses and writing were collected whenever possible from students. This included obtaining copies of their course syllabi, course materials, written assignment descriptions, all samples of students’ writing including pre-writing outlines and diagrams, copies of any responses provided by teachers to students, copies of any revised drafts submitted as a result of teachers’ responses, copies of any electronic communication between students and teachers, and copies of any textual resources referred to by focal participants in their interviews (writing textbooks, handouts, etc.).

In between bi-weekly interviews, students were also asked to contact me whenever they felt something important was happening in their classes regarding their writing or feedback they received on their writing. These communications most often took the form of email and electronic instant messaging chat conversations, but also included face-to-face conversations. These informal conversations provided additional opportunities to explore with students topics and experiences they felt were relevant to their writing.

These informal conversations came to replace a failed attempt to have focal students keep writing logs of their work on the various written assignments conducted in class. Although the writing log was discussed and handed out to students at the beginning of the first semester of the study, students did not complete these logs and it quickly became obvious that students were finding it an extra burden on top of heavy

work schedules. In light of students' commitment to the bi-weekly interviews, the decision was made with students to replace this element of the study with the more informal reports described above between the bi-weekly interviews.

3.6.3 Focal instructors' interviews and class observations

In the same manner as the interviews conducted with the students, interviews conducted with focal instructors were semi-structured in format, and were also audio-recorded and transcribed. These interviews focused on the perspectives and experiences of the role of writing in their classes and the strategies they adopted to help develop students' writing skills. Each interview was also conducted in a location chosen by the instructor (in most cases their office), and lasted approximately an hour to an hour and a half. Interview questions also enquired about the role and importance of feedback and how feedback was situated within the instructors' classrooms. These interviews hence became a valuable source of data in assessing the motivations and goals linked to specific patterns of responses found in the comments provided by instructors (see Appendix H: Sample Interview Questions for Instructors).

Two of the focal instructors also allowed me to come and observe their classes a number of times throughout the semester. These observations occurred in the first semester of the study in the courses taught by the anthropology and linguistics instructors. The observations of classroom events were timed to begin, based on discussions with teachers of their course schedule, at points in the semester when there were discussions of in-class writing assignments or the return of writing assignments. Unfortunately, I was not allowed to audio-record these classes, but extensive field notes were taken of these observations and these allowed me to gain some valuable insights regarding the specific details of the classroom context and interactions that influenced students' writing and their teachers' responses to it.

3.6.4 Field work and field notes

In addition to the data sources mentioned above, significant time was spent on campus at BMU interacting with its general student population and faculty. This included regular contact and interactions with staff and instructors directly linked to the

BMU-NDU exchange program, as well as informal conversations with various faculty members at BMU about the role of writing and feedback for the integration of international and other nontraditional L2 students in regular classes. As well, as mentioned above, considerable time was spent at a local coffee shop located a few minutes away from the students' dormitory. This coffee shop offered free access to the Internet and became a regular meeting place and study area for all the focal participants. Over time, the coffee shop became a valuable research site that provided numerous opportunities for observation and informal conversations with focal students and their friends that added further detail and depth to the field notes collected throughout the study.

Finally, during all stages of the research, field notes in the form of research diary entries and analytical memos were kept by me on a regular basis. These records were kept in both electronic and handwritten form, as well as with audio-recorded commentary made at the end of interviews with focal participants. These field notes were used to keep a record of the steps undertaken during the data collection stage of the study, as well as to serve as a record of impressions, thoughts, and emerging hypotheses and theories related to the findings of the research. These field notes played an important role in noting and justifying any changes or modifications to the emergent design of the study or its research questions, and served as a basis of the preliminary codes and themes to explore in the analysis of the data.

3.7 Data analysis

Data analysis for the study drew on principles of qualitative inquiry and made use of an iterative process to organize, sort, code and search the data while looking for emergent patterns and relationships between these (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Duff, 2008; Huberman & Miles, 2002; Merriam, 1998; Silverman, 2004). To help in the organization and management of the data, I made use of *NVIVO 7*, a computer software program specifically designed to assist in the analysis of qualitative data analysis. *NVIVO 7* takes advantage of computers' ability to store, code, and search the large amounts of relatively unorganized and heterogeneous data that are a defining characteristic of qualitative research (Sérór, 2005). Throughout the analysis, the software

helped me keep the data together, and facilitated my ability to move from raw data, to concept, to analytical memo. Closeness to the data was further enhanced by making use of *Transcriber*, another software tool used for the annotation of speech files. With *Transcriber*, I was able to link various transcript segments to their original audio recordings, allowing me listen again to the interview data every time I went back to a specific part of a transcript. This allowed me to retain dimensions of my interview data such as elements of emphasis and emotional response that are usually more difficult to preserve in more traditional processes of transcription.

Data analysis followed traditional steps, including the process of immersing oneself in the data, identifying salient and important moments in the trajectory of the students under study, and finally making decisions about what elements to focus on and which themes to report on in the interpretation stage of the analysis.

The analysis was also enriched through the use of discourse analysis techniques used to look for larger ideologies and discursive patterns in the data (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Richards, 2003; Silverman, 2006). In adopting this approach, I specifically focused on the social roles and ideologies constructed at a discursive level in the language of the feedback observed and described in the study as well as through the co-constructed nature of the interviews held with focal participants.

Preliminary stages of the analysis included sorting the data first on a case-specific basis, with all relevant data for an individual student being collated and then reviewed in order to form the basis of individual case files for each student. The process of analyzing the data also included a cross-case analysis of the data as intersections and differences between students' and instructors' motives and interpretations of feedback practices were compared and summarized. The analysis was guided by theoretical understandings of feedback practices and L2 writing development, understandings which were continually refined and elaborated through a constant process of reading, coding and memoing relevant elements of the literature which could in the process also be added to the conceptual map of key themes and ideas being developed through the analytical process. Examples of categories that were created and refined within the data analysis process included: roles and positions assigned to students and instructors by feedback practices;

the impact of departmental regulations on the type of feedback provided, examples of “good” versus “bad” feedback from students’ perspectives, the importance of alternative sources of feedback, and students’ evolving conceptualizations of writing, amongst others. In the final stages of the analysis, the ongoing and repetitive process of reviewing the data was refined to three major themes that were used in the final organization of the findings of this dissertation:

- a) The contrast between ideal and actual representations of what feedback practices meant to focal students and their instructors;
- b) The impact of institutional forces on the shape that feedback practices took;
- c) The impact of feedback practices as illustrated in “critical incidents” in the study where students reacted and interacted with comments in the texts they had written.

Throughout this process, my research journal and memos served as important analytical tools allowing me to use writing as a way to think through and test ideas about the data. The journal became an integral part of the analytical process and was deliberately kept as open and informal as possible to record the exploration and testing of different hypotheses, as well as to allow a reflexive record of my own subjectivities and emotions as I conducted the analysis.

Finally, writing up this final report was aided in part by the presentation of various aspects of this research at different research conferences which allowed me to present and test my analysis of the data with colleagues and researchers in the field, as well as by sharing these preliminary mini-reports of the data with focal students who were asked to comment and/or respond to any inaccuracies or misunderstandings that may have occurred (Séror, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Guardado, Kim, Séror, & Zappa-Hollman, 2007).

3.8 Focal students’ profiles

I end this chapter by providing some further details regarding the five focal students whose perspectives are at the heart of the findings that will be discussed in the following chapters. Although brief, these descriptions will begin to help readers understand who these students were, and what motivated their actions and interpretations of writing and feedback practices at BMU. As mentioned above, each of these

individuals brought a unique series of desires and histories to the educational experience they co-constructed with their host universities. It is worth noting, however, that these students remain an important part of a growing population of students in Canadian universities who are nontraditional specifically because they bring with them different sets of goals, expectations and backgrounds. The personal details listed below, and further developed in the findings chapters, offer insights which, although often missing in published versions of research focusing on the experiences of L2 students, can help bridge the distance which might exist between readers of this work and these students (Duff, 2008).

3.8.1 Kaori

Kaori was the only focal participant in the study who came from the international sister campus of NDU, Nihon University International (NUI). Consequently, she had had the most experience taking courses in English on her bilingual campus, and had had more opportunities than the other participants to interact and work with non-Japanese students in a university context. From the start, Kaori also had had the greatest amount of experience with writing in English as a regular part of some of the English courses she had taken, and as a result of a writing class she had taken which had helped her develop a strong interest and positive outlook towards writing. Although Kaori still found academic writing a major challenge, based on her experiences in a small writing class, where she had received “good feedback” in the form of face-to-face conferences, Kaori suggested at the beginning of the research that she actually enjoyed writing and particularly the exchange of ideas and different arguments that writing could represent.

Kaori was very much a perfectionist, and she therefore found the experience of being a minority language speaker very difficult. This desire for perfection accompanied a deep sense of personal courage and determination and had led to a number of achievements in Japan. Kaori had been a strong academic student in Japan and was an accomplished martial artist who had won tournaments both in Japan and Canada.⁹ In short, Kaori believed in the value of hard work and determination even when things were

⁹ Whereas all the other female students in this study received on Valentine’s Day a rose from the male participants in the study, Kaori was given a bamboo plant in recognition of her “samurai spirit.”

difficult. Her perseverance and focus could be seen in her decision to stay in Canada despite the considerable financial costs this entailed for her and her family (Kaori never replaced her damaged laptop computer during the eight months of the study as a result of the need to pay close attention to financial matters). Moreover, despite the fact that she had very much enjoyed life at her campus in Japan, and the fact that she felt frustrated at not being able to express herself in English, to the point of not saying much in the first few months of the exchange, Kaori decided to stay at BMU because doing so would allow her to pursue linguistic and anthropology courses which were not available at NUI. This decision was closely linked to her long-term goals of developing expertise in the field of deaf culture and language use and development in these communities. Kaori wanted to pursue a career working with members of the Japanese deaf community. This goal was inspired by her own experiences as the aunt of a niece who had been born deaf.

3.8.2 Kaito

According to Kaito, his participation in the BMU-NDU exchange program had completely changed his life and he often contrasted his identity in Japan, where he had been a student who lacked focus and drive, with the student he had become in Canada. According to Kaito, it was at BMU that he had discovered a strong interest in the specific field of cultural psychology leading to the goal of pursuing graduate research in the area. At the start of the research, Kaito had already started to make plans to build connections and expertise that would allow him to pursue graduate studies, possibly first in Japan, which would then lead him to study abroad again at a later date.

Kaito was very social and popular among his friends, but like Kaori also stood out for his determination when he had set a goal for himself. Japanese friends often noted, for instance, that they had never ever heard him speak Japanese to them, and that in the opinion of some he was “scary” because he studied so much and looked so intense when he worked. Although Kaito had not had many experiences writing in Japan, he had taken writing courses at BMU and was attending conversation classes held on campus on a weekly basis. Kaito struggled with writing, but was also one of the most active of the focal students in seeking out what I will refer to as additional sources of feedback to help him with his writing in the form of tutors, friends, and visits to the local writing center.

Kaito was also the most active in asking for extra help from his instructors and TAs. As will be discussed later, Kaito had a very specific understanding of how he needed to make sure he built and maintained a social network of connections to achieve both his short term and long-term goals. As a result, Kaito volunteered actively as a research participant and later as a research assistant within the Psychology department and actively sought out relations with university professors who he felt might be able to give him valuable advice and/or support as he prepared for his application to graduate schools.

3.8.3 Hiro

Hiro was the first student to contact me expressing an interest in participating in this study. In part, his interest in the study was motivated by his desire to practice speaking English and to look for ways to better understand how he might improve his writing skills. Hiro was a very thoughtful student and was quieter and often more reserved than the other students in the study. His friends, for example, commented on the fact that he would sometimes take trips alone, rather than traveling with friends. Despite his quieter nature, Hiro nonetheless seemed to connect well with people around him, and we were often interrupted during our interviews by Canadian friends who would come and say hello to him.

Very reflective, Hiro expressed an interest in theory, wrote a personal diary and also took extensive notes based on the various readings he did. Having originally studied policy science in Japan, Hiro's interests grew in work concerning policy and social movements linked to environmental issues. Like Kaito, Hiro also expressed an interest in pursuing graduate studies, with a long-term possible goal of pursuing work with government agencies working on environmental issues. Like Kaori and Kaito, Hiro expressed difficulties with the vast amounts of writing he had to do in his courses, which almost all had major essays, both in the exams and for final papers. Hiro also took a special course to help him with his writing, but he was less successful than others in managing his time with his writing, and often had difficulties making sure he could finish his drafts on time to get help with his writing.

3.8.4 Naoko

In many ways, Naoko was the most relaxed and easy-going of the focal students in this study. Although she was like the other students —bright and serious about her work— she was more explicit in her desires to make sure that her exchange at BMU should not only be about academic work. Naoko had an active social life, and also spent time each week volunteering downtown at a local agency for L2 learners. Her work with the agency was linked to her desire to experience life beyond the campus, and her long-term goal of working as a university agent responsible for exchange programs such as the one she was presently participating in.

Naoko was interesting in that she originally was perhaps the least concerned of all the students initially in writing. She knew that writing was difficult for her, but she did not feel that it would necessarily be of importance for her back in Japan. Her selection of courses in linguistics was motivated by her own interests in language, and language development (in line with her interest in finding out about how one might support international students), but was also due to her calculation that this was a field of research where less writing would be required of her in the form of essays. Like Kaito, Naoko was very social and seemed to be very successful at finding people who could help her as she navigated her way through her second year at BMU. She was not shy about asking for help, including from me, and unlike some of the other students, often displayed a great deal of flexibility and openness in her approaches to the different tasks she had to accomplish as a student.

3.8.5 Yoshimi

Yoshimi was the eldest of the five students, and was an economics major at the time of the study. He was typical of all of the rest of the students in the study in the dedication he brought to his academic work. Yoshimi shared with Kaori a sense of perfectionism and determination, which was impressive in such a young man. Most importantly, Yoshimi took a very organized and planned approach to the challenges he faced. For example, he kept schedules and records of how many hours a day he would spend in different activities, and included in his daily routine regular gym sessions and time to volunteer at a seniors' home in Vancouver. Yoshimi had also been a strong

student in Japan and, even at BMU, he became a resource for some of his friends who had difficulties with some of the mathematical formulas and notions use in some of his economics courses.

Yoshimi was very focused on his goal of finding work in a foreign securities company in Japan. As with others in the group, Yoshimi highlighted the financial sacrifices that had had to be made in order for him to take part in this exchange, and he often referred to the importance of the scholarships he had received without which he would not have been able to stay on for the second year option of the program. Although most of Yoshimi's courses included pure economics courses, with little writing, one of the reasons Yoshimi had stayed at BMU was to develop his communication skills in English, both in their oral and written forms. He was keenly aware though that English academic writing was different from the kind of writing he might do as an international securities broker. However, since he would be required to communicate regularly in writing in such a job, he felt that his experiences at BMU would give him a chance to develop his English writing skills in a way that would not have been possible in Japan. Yoshimi pursued this goal actively, and sought out advice and help from a number of sources in doing so. This included, for example, keeping an English diary, keeping an English blog, and visiting the campus writing center.

3.9 Summary

In this chapter, I have attempted to provide a detailed description of the methods of inquiry and rationale used to collect, analyze and organize the findings for this research project. I have also begun to provide further details regarding the lives and context of the focal participants in this study. In the next chapter, I begin to introduce the themes that emerged from this study and provide further details about the lived experiences of the focal students. The chapter begins with a brief vignette that summarizes actual data collected in the study to produce a detailed account of the lived experiences and context surrounding focal students in this research. The chapter next examines the feedback practices described and observed during the study, and students and professors interpretation of these and their role, both in their ideal form and their real everyday use.

Chapter 4: Exploring Feedback Practices at BMU

4.1 Vignette: It's hard...Another day at “The Steaming Cup”

Yoshimi pays for his tea. It is the cheapest item on the menu. This week he has had to pay his residence fees, and he already owes his parents more than he wants to think about. He picks up his cup and moves upstairs. The place is crowded and loud as always, but he feels a sense of comfort as he takes in the scene at the *The Steaming Cup*. This is the closest coffee shop to the residences where he and most of his friends from the exchange program live. It is a central part of life in the area, and since the majority of its clientele are students, it has developed its own special atmosphere, one that no chain coffee shop could recreate. Part library, part cafeteria, part social hub, it is the place to go when you want to get away—whether it is to get away from your roommates, or to avoid the solitude of an empty room. *The Steaming Cup* is much closer than the library and its sterile cubicles, where no food is allowed, and it is one of the rare spots in the area with guaranteed access to the university's wireless internet. For Yoshimi and many others like him, this has become a second home.

It is 2:30 p.m. and he is late. Students of all kinds have already arrived and staked out the best spots: the table in the corner next to the window, the larger table available near the back further from the noise. Some people work alone, studying or writing; others form small groups conversing on a wide range of topics before finally focusing on the work that has brought them together.

Yoshimi climbs the stairs to the second floor hoping that he can be lucky and find a spot to work there. He prefers it to the first floor, which is usually noisier with its hissing cappuccino machines and the children coming in for hot chocolates.

He spots one of the little tables to the left near the stairs. It is not ideal, but it will do. At least he has a plug next to the table and he will not have to worry about his battery running out like last time.

Yoshimi spots his friends who throughout the year have also made the café their workplace. They are three other students who, like him, are participating on the exchange program. Kaori and Naoko are sitting together already working. They are

chatting in English, sharing a table precariously filled with computers, books and handwritten notes. Yoshimi stops by their table to say hello and asks how things are going. They tell him that things are going okay, but they need his advice. Naoko tells him about the assignment they have to hand in next week for their anthropology class. It will be the second assignment they hand in, but they still have not received the first assignment back yet. Without any feedback on the first assignment, they are getting nervous. Naoko sighs and confirms that they have little idea of what the teacher really wants.

Yoshimi asks if they have received a description of what they need to do from the instructor. They have, they reply, but it is brief and of little help to them. Part of the problem is that this will be their first time writing what the teacher has identified as “a response paper.” “That’s the problem,” they state. “Every course means a different kind of writing assignment.” They are very far from the five paragraph essays they studied back in Japan for the TOEFL exam.

They ask him what he thinks they should do. Yoshimi suggests that they should try to talk to the instructor to find out directly from him what he really wants. They both agree that it is a good idea, but they wonder if they will have time, and also admit that they feel a bit shy about asking him. What if this is something we are supposed to know? E-mailing the professor is out. He made it quite clear in class that he hates e-mails. Making matters worse, Kaori has a class at the same time as the instructor’s official office hours. Therefore, the only time they can talk to him together is right before their next class.

“Good luck guys! Hang in there!” Yoshimi tells his friends as he leaves. Since the very beginning of the program, they have always tried to speak English together.

At another table, Yoshimi has spotted Kaito. He is alone. He is busy, as always, and looks tired. Like the others, Kaito is a regular at the café. He is always there, coming in after classes and working on a daily basis, usually until 7 p.m. before going for supper with some of the other male students at the nearest university food court. After supper, Kaito usually returns to the *Steaming Cup* and stays until 11 p.m. He certainly is dedicated.

Yoshimi decides not to interrupt him. He is reading and taking down notes. Yoshimi wonders what Kaito would have to say about the problem faced by Naoko and Kaori. Kaito is a successful student, but his research and fields are also so different from Naoko's and Kaori's. It is hard to go beyond the most general advice.

Yoshimi sits down, and turns on his computer. He needs to work hard tonight. He has calculated that he has one more chance to work on his philosophy paper before the midterms and the other class projects become too pressing. He has already spent more than 30 hours on the paper, reading materials related to the topic and copying out notes and quotations from the different texts that he thinks will help him for the paper. He was able to put together a rough introduction, but after showing his draft to his friends, there are many areas that have been edited and changed, and he knows it will take time to do the rewriting. He also wants to make sure he makes the changes before he forgets the reasons for the changes.

If only all the feedback he got on his writing were like this. Face-to-face feedback, with the person right in front of you, able to talk to you, asking you questions and explaining what they were thinking as they read your text. This was so much better than the quickly scrawled notes he usually received from his professors. At least with face-to-face feedback, you could ask questions, and occasionally, let them know when they had misunderstood you. Working with someone one-on-one also made it harder for them to ignore you.

Yoshimi takes out his paper from last semester written for the same female instructor. He has carefully saved it, like all of the other assignments he has written here at Blue Mountain University. He looks at the brief notes in the margin. A check mark at the top of the page. That is good he thinks, but does not know why. A few sentences on page 3 are underlined. That is probably bad, but again, he is unsure. At the bottom of page 6, there is a note he can barely decipher. Yoshimi remembers he had had to ask his roommates about it, and they have informed him that it probably said that he was not doing too badly for an L2 writer. Who cares, he thinks angrily, if he is not doing "so bad"! Why, he asks himself, does she always have to focus on the fact that he is an international student?

But what can he do? Perhaps it cannot be helped. His writing is not good. He knows this because the instructor has made it clear in her final comment: “Your presentation of the ideas is very difficult to follow, bordering on being incomprehensible in places.” He vows to be more careful this time. He decided last week that he is going to take his instructor’s advice and go to the writing clinic. He is going to make sure as well that he goes to see the instructor to talk about the writing, face to face. He has also talked to John, his friend and TA from another class, who has agreed to read the paper before he hands it in.

Time to work. He takes out the little note pad he has been using to keep track of how many hours he spends on different projects. The column for this particular course is full of ticks, marks, and numbers, silent witnesses to the hours spent dealing with the heavy load of reading and writing for this paper. Four more hours tonight. A few more tomorrow, and then hopefully, he can have the first draft done, or at least something close enough to a draft so that he can bring it to the local writing center. He has not been in a while, but this week he has finally been able to secure one of the coveted one-hour tutorial spots on the busy schedule. He will have to make sure he writes down his questions in advance though. Last time the 60 minutes went really fast, especially since they make sure that you actually are the one correcting things, as they ask questions and identify grammar issues you have problems with. Yoshimi knows they want him to learn how to do these things on his own, but it is so slow, and last time they had barely gone through his introduction before the session was over. As is often the case, time is his enemy.

Yoshimi opens the computer, takes a sip of the tea, and picks up one of the chocolate-coated almonds the coffee shop owner generously gives away with the drinks he serves. Perhaps the shop owner knows how tired and rundown we are, he thinks. Yoshimi carefully starts to make changes to what he has previously written, retracing the marks and scratches left by his roommate. He knows that in the end his roommate’s feedback is limited in that he knows nothing about economics, but Yoshimi wants to make sure that this time the teacher will focus on something other than grammar. Maybe this time, he can get her to focus and respond to his ideas. This will be his chance to show

who he really is, what he can really do. The chocolate candy is gone. So is the tea. This is not going to be easy. It never is.

4.2 Overview of chapter

This next section begins the formal process of synthesizing the findings stemming from my interactions and observations working with the focal students over the eight months of the study. In what follows, I describe some of the larger patterns that surrounded the feedback practices experienced by the focal students, and the ways these were interpreted and understood by students as well as by their instructors. In doing so, I hope to further situate for readers how the feedback practices that were the focus of this research were described and perceived by L2 students in terms of their usefulness and impact on their writing development in the context of “regular” content courses.

In what follows, I first look at the role that writing played in focal students’ courses at BMU. This overview of the role of writing is then followed by a summary of students’ perspectives of what writing meant to them and the way they constructed feedback as a result. Ideal constructions of feedback provided by students and instructors are then considered. These ideal constructions of feedback are next contrasted with the feedback that was actually discussed and observed. The chapter ends by looking at the importance of alternative sources of feedback as ways to compensate for perceived problems in the instructor-based feedback received by students.

4.3 Courses taken and the inescapable reality of writing

At the start of the data collection process for this research in September 2005, a friend and colleague asked me if I really thought that there would be much writing in the undergraduate courses offered at BMU. “You’ll find lots of exams,” he suggested, “but I do not think they will be writing much till later when they get closer to the end of their programs in fourth year.” I suspected at the time that he was wrong, or at the very least that things were not that simple. I knew, for example, that writing played a large role in the undergraduate classes I taught at BMU. I was also aware from informal conversations with previous BMU-NDU exchange program student participants that writing had indeed been an important part of their experience.

Nevertheless, as I started meeting with the focal students in September 2005, I was particularly interested in seeing what courses they would take, and the nature of the writing they would have to complete in these courses.

Ultimately, I cannot say that I was disappointed as I learned more about the course requirements the students were facing in all of their selected classes. During their second year of study at BMU, the focal students registered for a wide range of courses in various disciplines, including courses in anthropology, economics, philosophy, family studies, French, history, psychology, environmental science, political science, statistics and linguistics (see Table 4.3 Courses Taken by Students).

An analysis of the course requirements found in the course syllabi showed that the majority of these courses include as major components of their assessment a variety of writing tasks and assignments comprising of: final research papers, short essay papers, online bulletin board postings, take-home exams, group and individual assignments, presentations and papers, and research posters.

Of the 37 different courses for which the students registered, 25, or roughly two thirds, required students to complete some kind of major writing assignment, most often as a final term paper. Even in the 10 classes that did not include major writing assignments, students still had to produce brief texts in the form of short answers on exams, or assignments that required texts to accompany relevant formulae, calculations, or diagrams.

Finally, although I had not originally been interested in this form of writing, interview data with the students also quickly revealed that students also considered the course exams they were taking in their classes as a significant part of the writing they did in their courses. In the majority of cases these exams contained some form of in-class essay writing component which students clearly identified as a writing component which challenged them as L2 writers.

Table 4.3 Courses Taken by Students

Academic term	Courses	# of students	Kaito	Kaori	Hiro	Yoshimi	Naoko
Term 1 September - December 2005	History A	44		X			
	Psychology A	*	X				
	Psychology B	*	X				
	Sociology A	*	X				
	Anthropology E	42		X			
	Linguistics B	43		X			x
	History A	44		X			
	Linguistics C	59					x
	Economics D	*				x	
	Economics C	*				x	
	Philosophy A	41				x	
	Linguistics D	76					x
	Linguistics E	40					x
	Religion B	37			x		
	Asian studies A	50			x		
	Political science C	67			x		
	Writing A	25			x		
Term 2 January - April 2006	Religion A	134			x		
	Political Science A	57			x		
	Political Science B	67			x		
	History A	44		X			
	Anthropology A	41		X			
	Anthropology B	49		X			x
	Anthropology C	21		X			
	Anthropology D	209		X			
	Philosophy A	41				x	
	Psychology C	56	X				
	Psychology D	6	X				
	Family study A	98	X				
	Psychology C	194	X				
	Linguistics A	118					x
	French A	20					x
	Economics A	*				x	
	Economics B	*				x	
* : number not available							

In some cases, course syllabi and/or accompanying handouts given to students at the beginning of the semester also contained specific references to the importance of writing, and explicit instructions and recommendations about how to write. Kaori's course syllabus, for instance, suggests that:

The development of good writing skills is a major aim of university education and students acquire the skills through example, effort, practice, and rigorous thought. A good research paper involves the bringing together of facts and ideas using precise and meaningful language in a formalized structure.

Another example is found in a two-page handout entitled "*A Few Pointers on Writing Papers for Dr. Y*" handed out in Hiro's class. At the top of this handout was the reminder that:

While the main objective of this course is for you to learn something about xxxxx¹⁰ planning policy, it is also an opportunity for you to practice and improve your communication skills, which undoubtedly will be important in your future careers.

This handout contained a number of web links, key points, hints and advice related to writing. Significantly, should the students have had any doubts about the importance placed on their writing skills, this handout also served as a form of warning, stating that:

Now that I've forewarned you about these mistakes, I'll assume you won't make them in your term papers! And here's the kicker. If I consider that a paper does not meet standards for third year university-level work—and be forewarned that my standards are high—I will return it to the author to rewrite. Late penalties will accrue from the time it is returned until it is resubmitted.

The message in this handout echoes a central theme that emerged in students' understanding of writing at BMU: Writing was seen not only as a common and valued form of assessment, but as a skill that could be a) assumed to be a prerequisite for participation in the class, and b) whose inferior quality could justify someone's work being disregarded or rejected. Indeed, as will be detailed later in this chapter, students were very aware that writing difficulties could lead to poor marks and challenges to one's ability to communicate ideas.

¹⁰ Information was removed here to protect the identity of the course.

Instructors also confirmed in the interviews the “super important” role that writing played in their courses and in the larger context of a university education even if “too little attention” was paid to it by content instructors and departments in general (Linguistics instructor, November 2005). As suggested by the anthropology instructor (November, 2005), writing is key for “success for undergraduates” and was “the defining thing that differentiates B [grade] and A [grade] students” by showing who has “knowledge of literature and the ideas in the field.” Without good writing, “some people may have good ideas but...they won’t end up being recommended highly” for scholarships, awards, or access to competitive programs at the graduate school level.

This view of the importance of writing confirms research that has stressed this skill’s significant role in the assessment and educational experiences of undergraduate students across most disciplines in western higher education contexts (Casanave, 2002; Hinkel, 2002; Ivanič, 1998; Lea & Stierer, 2000; Ravelli & Ellis, 2004; Spack, 2004; Zappa, 2007). This also provided some confirmation that despite the diversity in forms of assessment available, the academic essay or paper was a common form of assessment that students had to face (Brown, Bull, & Pendlebury, 1997; Ravelli & Ellis, 2004)

To sum up, writing played an important role in much of the coursework students encountered during their 8-month stay at BMU. Texts produced by students were integral parts of the assessment schemes used to determine students’ marks and to help in their mastery of the course content. More generally, students and professors identified writing skills as a key component of the university experience. Writing, whether for the final term paper or for in-class exams, amongst other tasks, was central to focal students’ success and to the challenges they faced as newcomers to the complex fields of interests with equally sophisticated genres and discourses. In short, writing was, despite what students sometimes wished, necessary. It was frequent, high stakes and inescapable.

4.4 The role of feedback in courses: A normal activity linked to writing

With the prevalence of writing assignments came the prevalence of various forms of feedback provided by professors on students’ texts. Indeed, with few exceptions, all written assignments students completed and submitted to professors were returned to

students with a mark and some kind of written commentary.¹¹ This prevalence of written assignments and the general expectation that once submitted these would be evaluated, marked and returned with an indication of the score obtained, plus some form of commentary from the teacher was one of the common practices that applied across the disciplines and academic discourse communities these students participated in at BMU.¹² However, unlike writing, whose importance was readily commented on, feedback was never discussed explicitly in course outlines. Moreover, whereas students discussed in the interviews how writing and the breakdown of marks would come up as topics of conversations in class, if only briefly, conversations about feedback on writing were almost non-existent in the class context.

Two exceptions to this pattern can be noted. One occurred in the linguistics class that I observed, where the instructor explained to students why she could not return their assignments on time. She did briefly mention as one of the reasons for the delay that she was taking longer than expected because she was trying to give them the best feedback possible. The other exception occurred in the writing course taken by Hiro. In this writing class, emphasis was placed in class on the shape and use of the feedback to allow them to rewrite a second version of the text they were working on. Although some of the content classes taken by focal students also included a process approach with opportunities to submit a first draft and/or outline of a paper, none of these classes addressed directly with students the shape and role of the feedback students would receive on their drafts.

4.5 Feedback of all shapes and forms

Despite the assumption that feedback could be expected at BMU, it became clear that there were no clear patterns concerning the form that feedback would take. Indeed, students were often unsure of what kind of feedback they could expect from their instructors, and over the eight months, they experienced a variety of feedback practices.

¹¹The exceptions included final exams that were never returned, and short writing assignments in one of the psychology classes taken by Kaito where only a set number of randomly sampled pieces of assigned short assignments were marked and returned with minimal feedback. Rarely, some midterms essay questions were also returned to students with only a numerical mark and no feedback.

¹² On the rare occasions when students received no feedback, they complained and felt that this was not normal.

Feedback practices experienced at BMU by focal students varied greatly across courses, feedback providers and assignments. The kinds of feedback practices observed, collected, and/or discussed in interviews included the following:

- ◆ General feedback provided aloud in class by instructors about the general performance of the class or a group on an assignment;
- ◆ Face-to-face feedback from instructors on assignments provided before or after class, in the class itself, in hallways, or in instructors' offices;
- ◆ Face-to-face feedback from friends, tutors, or other sources of alternative feedback;
- ◆ Handwritten feedback, in various forms, including frequent notes and comments in the margins of papers, assignments, and exams, as well as the less frequent use of criterion-based feedback sheets. As will be discussed later, although varied in style and focus, handwritten feedback was the predominant mode of communication used by instructors to provide specific feedback on students' texts;
- ◆ Electronic forms of feedback, although rare from instructors, included e-mails with marks and generic feedback for a whole class, and the use of a course website to provide generic feedback and marks for a whole class. Electronic feedback in the form of electronic attachments with typed annotated comments added to a text, using Microsoft Word's reviewing function, was never provided by instructors, but was employed by focal-students' peers and friends (see section on alternative sources of feedback below).

Notably absent were forms of peer feedback activities, worked into the actual design, practices, and activities of courses, such as ones we find discussed in the recent literature on L2 writing (e.g., Guardado & Shi, 2007).

4.6 Writing and feedback: Different approaches in Japan

The central role of writing in undergraduate university courses and the prevalence of feedback was for focal students an experience that differed considerably from what

they had previously experienced in Japan. Students stressed in the interviews differences between the Japanese higher education system and the North American system with regard to the importance of writing and feedback in the early years of an undergraduate program.

With the exception of Kaori, who had attended a bilingual Japanese-English university and had completed some short written assignments in English with feedback in some of her courses, all the other focal students explained that prior to coming to Canada they had had to do very little writing in the first few years of their undergraduate programs. Unlike the Canadian system, the expectation was that writing would only come at a later stage of their undergraduate programs, most likely in the final year of their program, when they would be required to write some form of major paper. Otherwise, students like Yoshimi (Y) in a conversation with me (J), made it clear that the dominant assessment tool they had experienced in Japanese university courses was a single final exam held at the end of the course that would determine 100% of their course mark.

Y: In Japan, I didn't have to study like during the class time. Only one week before the final. I was working yeah for as a part-time

J: So with this kind class it would be very hard to work part time probably

Y: No you cannot I think, yeah. Even I am like a Canadian because like time schedule because of midterms and assignments so... In Japan they didn't like they didn't have midterms and assignments. We didn't have so...

J: Just an exam?

Y: Yes, one exam, only one exam 50 minutes-final that's it. That's it. The rest of the class is... So some people didn't come at all. Even though they didn't come they could get A or A+ (January, 2006, interview)

In summary, contrary to BMU courses, writing assignments in their home universities were rare, as was feedback. In fact, students reported that if ever they did have to hand in a text, they would never get it back and would get only a score.

In Japan, we did not really get feedback, because there was not so much writing to do compared to Canada. Japan and Canada are very different. Sometimes you give a paper in Japan and you never get it back. The paper or the writing is

done in the exams, and you cannot get the exam back. So teacher feedback is not as popular. (Naoko, September, 2005, interview)

In Japan even though we submitted, teacher does not give me any feedback, just a score, especially when I write essays on my final exams. (Yoshimi, January, 2006, interview)

In fact, for four of the five students, the only course in which they had ever received feedback on writing in their university careers prior to coming to BMU was within the context of a mandatory English writing class taken in preparation for their exchange. This lack of familiarity with writing as a central aspect of course work in content courses added significantly to the challenges the students faced. Not only did they have to write in their second language for the first time, but they were also, in most cases, completing written tasks with which they had no or very little experience. Students in fact regularly asked me for insights about the different types of written assignments they were given. Kaori and Naoko, for example, both came to me with questions regarding what exactly was meant by a “response essay,” a genre they had never encountered before. Kaito and Naoko also explicitly asked their instructors for models of the assignments from previous years to help them figure out what they needed to write. Finally, in the second semester of the research, Hiro was given a range of choices for the type of assignment he might write (including the ability to write a ministerial memo, or a newspaper article). Hiro without hesitation chose the more classic research paper because this was the only genre of which he had some knowledge and experience, whereas he simply “did not have the time” to figure out “how a journalist or a minister might write” (April 7, 2006, interview).

One other interesting consequence of this lack of experience with writing was that students’ conceptualizations of writing evolved tremendously as a result of their experiences at BMU.

4.7 Evolving views of writing

A good example of the transformation of conceptions of writing by focal students was seen by comparing how they discussed writing at the beginning and end of the interviews. At the beginning of the research project it was interesting to note that writing was not only a new challenge for them, but that it was also for some not yet a skill they

were particularly focused on developing. This attitude was almost certainly linked to the lack of emphasis put on written tasks in Japan. Kaito and Naoko specifically suggested at the beginning of the research, for instance, that their focus was on developing other skills such as speaking and listening, and that writing was not a major area of concern. Naoko, further suggested that: “At the moment, improving writing is not my main goal. I want to improve my speaking skills. Maybe later I can improve my writing. Next semester, I will improve my writing” (September, 2005, interview).

In fact, when discussing how important writing was for her, Naoko admitted that she had deliberately tried to choose courses such as pure linguistics at least in part because she knew they did not typically require long essay type written assignments. Naoko did realize writing was an important part of most university courses, but she still felt at the start of the research that this was not an important skill for her.

4.7.1 Writing is difficult but important

Whatever their initial degrees of experience with writing or their views regarding the importance of this skill, over time all the students came to share two common observations about writing. First, all came to see it as an important skill to focus on. This focus emerged in part due to the role of written assignments in their overall assessment (marks), but also, as will be argued in greater detail in other sections of this dissertation, because it ultimately was strongly linked to their own personal sense of self as successful students at BMU.

Second, linked to the importance of writing, all students also constructed writing as a source of frustration and serious difficulty for them. Illustrative of these constructions of writing as important but difficult is Hiro’s account at the beginning of the research project of how, despite the fact that he was beginning to feel a little bit more comfortable with writing after having spent one year at BMU, in the end, it still represented a “scary” practice.

- J: So how do you find the reading and writing you have to do in your classes? Just general impressions...
- H: I'm not nervous for writing anymore... Uh hum...(long pause)... Yeah, but actually I'm kind of scared. I have, I'm required to write down 11 pages essay for

this class, and maybe eight to 10 pages essay for the other class. I don't know well about religion studies, religious studies, but I guess I going to be required essays so. Maybe I will get kind of busy so I am kind of scared so...(laughs) yeah. I know it is hard for me because I don't have enough experience of writing.(October, 2005, interview)

Similarly, it was interesting to note how Kaito talked about an international student he had met and who had asked him for help on his writing after failing badly on his first written assignment. Kaito expressed, how in his mind, “international students have to be curious and careful” about writing, otherwise even if you are “very smart,” like this international student, you would be “screwed”. It was of course difficult because “you have to learn by yourself,” but writing was the key (October, 2005, interview).

Interviews also often repeated this theme of frustration as students struggled with the notion that writing mattered not only because of the marks attached to it, but also because without it you would not be able to truly display your content knowledge. Repeatedly, students expressed frustration and feelings of depression when their written assignments and midterms were returned to them, and they noted the discrepancy between what they felt they could do and the ideas they had in mind, and the embarrassment and disappointment involved in not being able to convey their ideas in their writing.

These feelings were particularly strong when students discussed the difficulties they had with writing in-class essays in the context of midterms and exams. Over and over, all focal students mentioned that no matter how well they knew their subject matter, no matter how much they studied, too often they were left feeling incapable of adequately displaying and communicating this knowledge due to their lack of command of the skills required to write with necessary speed and fluency.

J: How do you find writing in English at BMU in general?

H: Uh... I think it's kind of hard compared to native speakers. My speed of writing is so slow and I am required to write essay in almost all of my courses or in final exam or in midterm I have to write an essay. Right of course, my how do you say, speed of writing is very very slow compared to native speakers or...so, I feel like I kind of have a disadvantage for my final or midterm essay... When I have a question. When I

have an essay, I feel I have a disadvantage like almost native speakers generally write down two pages or three pages for one question, but for me. I write down just one page and a half at the most for one question. So yeah so bad. Even if I had a lot of knowledge about that question, I can't write it all down. (Hiro, September, 2005, interview)

This feeling is also illustrated well in the excerpt below, where Kaori expressed how she felt limited by her English writing skills on exams.

I realized after exam, it is not about the content of the class. It is my English skill because I knew all the answers. Not all, but most of the answers for the questions. So the problem was, apparently, um, time management and speed. (Kaori, November, 2005, interview)

Later Kaori sought to qualify her feelings regarding her frustration with exams, one that was amplified by the fact that the essays she had written for her history course had been returned with little feedback or information that might help her deal with the need to write essay questions in the future. In seeking to voice her feelings about this, the word “frustrating” simply did not quite capture her feelings. She therefore asked me if I knew how to translate a particular Japanese expression.

K: How do you interpret um "kuyashii" (laughs)?

J: Mmm, that's a hard one, um because that's one of the ones that I just use Japanese for. Uh...one translation that I have seen of it is vexing...but this is an old and formal word...to be vexed...more everyday language. Close but it is not exactly the same, you've got frustrating, you know it's frustrating.

K: YEAH, because when I finished that exam, I felt like “kuyashii”...but I did not know how to interpret it, so I used frustrating. (March, 2006, interview)

Although I could not provide her with the perfect translation on the spot, a better translation for the term Kaori wanted to use to express her feelings about these things would have been a combination of the following adjectives: regrettable, mortifying, and vexing.

We have seen that the importance students placed on writing was linked to its importance for assessment procedures, as well as their desire to have their knowledge recognized. As a final point, we note that these two reasons were closely related to a

third major theme that emerged linked to the importance students placed on writing. Put simply, more than merely being motivated by the desire to achieve high marks or the desire to feel like they could convey their ideas, there was a strong feeling that improving writing was linked to their sense of self: the identities they desired to project or were aiming for in terms of future goals.

Writing development was important, for example, for many of the students who knew that writing was going to be part of their future career trajectories. Yoshimi, for instance, explained that writing would be a part of his career choice working as a securities analyst for a large foreign company in Japan. Similarly, Kaito and Hiro, who were both hoping to attend graduate school by the end of the study, started to see writing as a skill they knew would matter in the future.

Writing was important as well because students recognized it as a chance to produce something more concrete and permanent that could serve as evidence of their work and participation as part of the academic world at BMU. A great example of this can be seen in contrasting how Naoko, who had started in September by displaying a lack of interest in writing, ultimately constructed in interviews the final paper she worked on at BMU as the most important work she would do there.

J: In the last interview you said, "One of my goals is I want to, I want to write a paper". And one question I wanted to ask you is why? What was the, what would you get from writing a paper.

N: Just satisfaction I think (laughs) and yeah I want to do something in the last semester, this is the last semester so I want to do something in academic thing and also want to do other stuff so yeah so the paper is going to be the academic goal.

J: So the academic paper, what does that represent for you and the academic world? Is that an important part of the academic world? Is that an important academic thing to do or um, or is that a normal part of the academic, in your sense of the academic world? Or does it feel kind of...although after 2 years maybe you have a good sense of what BMU is and what BMU students do...uh...is a BMU paper a normal or important part of BMU?

N: Yeah I think so yeah. I think paper is the most important I think.

J: Oh interesting

N: Yeah

J: Most important because? Because...

N: Uh it's not just memorization or... I think it's everything right. The study of everything. What I have learned what I feel and what I thought so yeah.

J: Good good good so for you it's not... It's not just I have to do for this class

N: Yeah, um...just a goal for me that I study at BMU for two years. It's the last thing I will do... For me it's going to a kind of thesis (February, interview)

In interviews, Naoko made it clear that this paper and the skill of writing suddenly mattered a great deal to her, because writing was more permanent than speech. She had already actually talked a bit about how writing was a chance for international students to participate in a different way than in classes. Writing could be “an advantage for international students. If you are a good writer, you can get a good mark. You can use it to make up for your other weaknesses” (such as speaking in front of a group) because with this form of communication “you have more time to work on your language” (Naoko, October, 2005, interview). Indeed, she and others invested a great deal of time in their papers, particularly in the second semester often sacrificing other course elements such as readings in order to do well with written assignments.

4.7.2 Writing as the result of hard work

As a result of the importance students placed on writing, they worked hard to improve their writing skills and employed a number of strategies to do so.¹³ Students read books and articles on writing, and sought out help and advice from instructors as well as from peers such as their friends, roommates, and fellow international students. They also contacted and interacted with former professors and academics with which they had developed relationships.

Focal students, for instance, all spent many hours with Dr. Yamakawa, the director of the BMU-NDU program, who served as a visiting professor from NDU and who

¹³ I frequently found in my field notes comments on how, although I had expected that these students would be working hard, I had not anticipated how much time and energy they would actually be investing in their courses.

provided advice and served as a kind of mentor for all the students. Kaori, in another example, arranged to meet with a fellow member of her local martial arts club who was a Japanese PhD student in order to specifically ask questions about writing, and also regularly read a blog kept by a Japanese international student in the United States who talked about her challenges writing in English. Finally, all students referred to me as well during the study to ask questions about the issues they were having with their writing.

One sign of the effort students expended as a result of their sense of the importance of writing development is that four of the five students paid extra student fees to attend writing classes offered at the *Composition Institute*, the local writing center. In some cases, this decision was made in response to feedback from their instructors, as in the case of Naoko, Kaori and Hiro. Most of the time, though, this was also an individual decision based on their evaluation of the importance of writing, which at a cost of approximately \$350 per writing class had serious financial consequences.

Finally, it became obvious that students were thinking strategically about how they would be able to deal with the challenges that writing represented for them. In the case of in-class exams for example, students often tried to guess beforehand what the essay questions might be to be able to prepare for these written components of the exam. This strategy was taken to the extreme by Yoshimi, who sought out ways to compensate for his lack of speed in displaying knowledge and making an argument in a second language by investing an enormous amount of time writing and then memorizing mini-essays in advance of the test. These mini-essays were based on his guesses at what kinds of questions might be asked. Once memorized, these prepared chunks of texts helped him write more quickly, thus allowing him to avoid running out of time on his exams (See Appendix I: Sample Mini Essay Written by Yoshimi).

In contrast to exams, take-home written assignments, as suggested above, took on a special significance because they allowed students to take the time they needed to more accurately and efficiently convey who they were and what they wanted to say. Making sure one had more time to write was a key strategy that was readily discussed and observed over the 8 months of the study. With the exception of Hiro, who on a few occasions found himself with only a few days to work on his written take-home

assignments, the focal students described, and were observed, spending numerous hours working on their written assignments, often starting months ahead of the due date for the final paper, or weeks before smaller assignments were due.

In addition to allowing students to take more time to write, take-home written assignments also allowed students to engage in the second key strategy they discussed as a way to improve their writing: getting feedback on drafts of their texts from various sources, including, but not exclusively, their instructors. The importance students placed on feedback as a strategy for improving their writing is discussed in the following section.

4.7.3 Writing is important, so feedback is important

Students' reflections on the importance of writing reflected directly on the degree of significance they placed on receiving feedback on the texts produced for their classes. Put simply, because writing was important for these students and they had difficulties mastering the writing skills, feedback as a way to get help with their writing also became important. In the words of Kaori, "feedback is important because it can help you find out what you got wrong" (December 2005, interview) as well as, ideally, what you got right. For Kaito, feedback was a valuable set of "hints and tips" which L2 students needed to seek out in order to be able to write well. Hiro echoed this sense of hidden knowledge accessed through feedback when he suggested that "Without feedback it is tough for me to know what is important as a non-native speaker" (Hiro, October 2005, interview).

At the heart of the matter was also the belief that the tips feedback might reveal could make a great deal of difference as a strategy to produce good writing. This applied particularly to feedback that could be received before handing in a final draft. This belief was grounded in their own conceptions of writing as well as their experiences comparing the scores they received on papers they had been able to get feedback on prior to handing them in, versus those papers which they had not been able to show anyone.

One can compare, for example, Naoko's results on her first paper produced for her anthropology class with those results obtained on her second paper for which she sought out extensive feedback. For the first paper, she received only her instructor's feedback on the final version and a mark of C+. On the second paper for the class, after seeking out and making extensive use of alternative sources of feedback and discussing her paper

with her instructor in two brief face-to-face meetings, she received a much more successful mark of A-. Although students were aware that feedback might not have been the only reason for the improved grades, such experiences reinforced for students the notion that feedback, especially prior to the completion of a final mark, could make a great deal of difference in the success of their texts.

In part, the importance of feedback as a strategy to improve one's writing was also strongly reinforced by instructors' advice to students about how to improve their writing. Students reported that, both prior to and during the study, a recurring message to them from instructors was: to "get more feedback," "you should have your work edited," and "consider having someone else read your paper." These comments clearly stressed for students that despite their best efforts, improving their writing required having their writing "fixed" by getting input from others.¹⁴ These comments seem to reinforce students' lack of confidence with writing assignments and their English skills

Because I took a writing class in Japan, I thought that I had learned all the stuff that I should know, but I still make a lot of mistakes and the professor keeps saying that I should improve my English skills so... (Kaori, April 2006, interview)

It is interesting to note that the importance of getting feedback from others as a strategy to improve one's writing was reflected at the campus-wide level. In addition to the *Composition Institute* available to students for writing classes and to have someone go over your writing with you, the BMU campus revealed large numbers of posters advertising private fee-based editing and tutoring services for students looking for feedback on their writing (see Appendix J: Sample Poster for Editing Services Available at BMU). These posters are still pervasive at the BMU campus.

The value of feedback also included the potential for comments received on a final draft to help students understand what they could do differently the next time around. Evidence of this approach to feedback as valued source of information for students was found in the fact that all students talked about keeping their final papers and the feedback they had received so that they could refer to these as they worked on new texts. In fact,

¹⁴ The long-term impact of these messages is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6, which focuses on the socialization impact of feedback practices.

in the case of four of the five students, specific references were made to reviewing prior papers and feedback received in the past to improve their work on a text.

In a striking example of this strategy, Naoko showed me how she had annotated a previous assignment, making a list of things she wanted to do differently next time based on the feedback she had received. She was explicitly making these comments to make sure that she would not make the same mistakes in the larger term paper for which she was getting ready to write.

What stands out in the interviews is that students valued feedback for formative processes. Feedback was a great strategy to find out what they were doing wrong, which was something they could not do alone, since, as suggested by Kaori, “if I knew that it was wrong, I would not do it” (February, 2006, interview). Feedback was also a key strategy in determining how clear one’s writing was, and to check if it was not what was causing the confusion. As such, it was an important way of learning why what students felt were successful texts were, in fact, not so successful at all.

In short, no matter what shape feedback took or how useful it ultimately was for them¹⁵ students had developed not only an expectation for feedback, but also a real desire for it. This desire was clearly linked to the fact that writing represented for them a difficult, time consuming, and often frustrating activity. In this context, feedback was seen as a key element that could make a difference as a source of the tips and hints that might make this difficult task a little bit more successful and rewarding.

The students’ descriptions of what writing and feedback meant to them echoed notions found in the literature, where we find an emphasis on the challenges of academic writing for L2 writers. The literature also suggests that the solution to these challenges is a combination of individual effort and social activities, including the importance of interaction with more advanced, stronger members (i.e., “experts”) who can guide newcomers unfamiliar with the literacy events of a new community (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; K. Hyland, 2000; Lillis, 2001; Prior, 1995). From a socialization perspective, I would suggest that the vision of feedback constructed by students matches this

¹⁵ As discussed below, challenges to the actual effectiveness of feedback were identified almost right from the beginning of the study.

description, especially in their representation of this activity as a way to acquire the skills they needed to participate more fully in the community.

However, as is discussed in the next section, students also echoed the literature in acknowledging that these ideal constructions of feedback practices, especially in the context of student-teacher interactions, may have been hard to achieve in reality.

4.8 Ideal constructions of feedback

4.8.1 Students' ideal constructions of feedback

As suggested in the previous section, findings from this research suggest that students valued receiving feedback on their writing, and that they had clear ideas of how this activity could play a role in helping them deal with the challenges of writing as L2 writers in university. These notions were sometimes based on their prior experiences of feedback received from both instructors and other individuals, and their interpretation of what had or had not been useful. For instance, in the case of Kaori, her notions of ideal feedback were strongly influenced by her experiences with teacher-student conferencing feedback received from her writing instructor in Japan. More often, however, these ideal notions of feedback emerged in interviews when students responded to the feedback that they had received on assignments. During these conversations, students would often comment on the kind of feedback they would have preferred.

For students, ideal feedback on writing was first of all detailed, timely, and readable. Typed feedback was considered great, as in the majority of cases, students found it extremely difficult to read handwritten feedback.¹⁶ In light of students' desire for formative feedback, drafts and opportunities to get feedback in advance of a final assignment version were also greatly appreciated, as were opportunities to consult the instructor in advance of handing in a final paper.

Although alternative sources of feedback (such as friends, roommates, and the *Composition Institute* tutors, among others) were important, in the end,¹⁷ students indicated clearly that feedback from their instructors would always be the best potential

¹⁶ See Section 4.9.1 for more details on this below.

¹⁷ See Section 4.10 for more details on this below.

feedback. In explaining this choice, students noted that instructors not only were the designers of the writing assignments they were working on and hence understood better than anyone what was expected to succeed, but also that they had the best disciplinary knowledge related to the type of writing being done. In contrast, despite their advantages, the problem with alternative sources of feedback like the *Composition Institute* or English native speaker friends was that regardless of their intuitive ability as native speakers of English to “hear” what might sound right, they often lacked the discipline specific knowledge regarding the specifics of the topic and type of assignment to be completed.¹⁸

Importantly, the best feedback would also go beyond simply identifying problems in their writing. Students suggested that the ideal feedback would provide specific solutions about what to do to solve these problems. These solutions would be clear and easy to follow, and where there had been problems, the link between these and the calculation of the final mark would also be clearly made.

This point was perhaps most amusingly demonstrated in an interview with Kaori when she discussed how she was not sure if the feedback she would get from a face-to-face meeting with her instructor to discuss ways to improve essay writing on exams would actually help her improve her exam taking skills.

Last time I went to talk to him he just said what was wrong with my exam. He just gave me an excuse that I have not written enough. That was why my marks was bad, but he did not give exact reason about what was wrong with my essay. So if I talk to him I don't know how he is going to give me advice. If he just says...bla bla bla...read the textbook carefully (laughs) take a look at the journals I don't think it is very useful to talk to him (Kaori, February, 2006, interview)

We note her clear dismissal of the feedback and advice she had previously received from her instructor; she did not agree that the problem was that she had simply not written enough. In fact, she plainly thought the problem was more complicated than

¹⁸ This would hence limit their ability to respond to the ideas and arguments in the paper even if they might be able to respond at a general level to the logic of the arguments, and the appropriateness of the grammar and sentence structures used.

that.¹⁹ It was also clear that what she was looking for were *specific* solutions to her problems, not *general* solutions.

Later in the same interview, Kaori gave an example of the detailed information about writing conventions she was looking for when she talked about how this same professor had explained how to insert and make use of historical dates when writing history texts.

I found it useful to talk about the fact that I have to put down the date in this sentence. That was good information, because I didn't know that. (Kaori, February, 2006, interview)

Linked to this preference for detailed feedback, students expressed a strong preference for criterion-based feedback which allowed people to clearly see how the mark had been arrived at and the relative importance of different problems in their text which they felt was “very clear” and “useful” (Kaori, March 2006, interview).

Although aware that occasions for this type of feedback from their instructors were rare, students also stressed that feedback opportunities that allowed for interaction and discussions²⁰ were really the best kind of feedback one could get. This kind of feedback (dialogic in nature) could allow for a conversation, where one might be able to talk back, exchange ideas, and benefit from all the advantages of having a reader and a writer meet to talk about what was working or not.

This included at times, for example, being able to disagree with a professor about feedback, or simply having the luxury of following up on a point that was not clear to the student. As suggested poignantly by Yoshimi, there was also a strong sense that face-to-face conversations also meant they might be less likely to be ignored.

J: So, most often teachers give feedback in written form. Mmm...would you change it if you could have, like, like in a perfect universe? Would you go would you get like face-to-face comments or computer comments, or does it matter for you?

Y: Um, I prefer face-to-face comments.

J: Yeah?

¹⁹ The advice provided in the past by this professor had many effects, including coloring how a student would approach and interpret any future advice provided by that same professor.

²⁰ Face-to-face conversations/feedback was the preferred mode for receiving feedback on their writing.

Y: More...Reliable!

J: More reliable?

Y: Yeah (laughs)

J: Because?

Y: Because...they can see my face. If it's not face-to-face, I don't think they, like... I don't think they pay attention to me (March, 2006, interview)

Later, when I asked Yoshimi what he would do if he were an instructor, he noted:

If I were a professor, I would try to talk to them more...try to interact a lot...because I would know that even if they wanted to talk to me, that it would be difficult for them. I would try to make more opportunities...have more office hours for them. (April, 2006, interview)

Most importantly perhaps, although all students expressed an interest in having their grammar corrected, all felt the best feedback should first attend to their ideas and arguments. From the start of the data collection to its end in May of 2006, students were clear that although language corrections were important, in the end, what was more important and most satisfying for them was feedback that would actually also engage with the concepts and ideas they had put forward. They understood that language was part of conveying one's ideas, but they also felt that it was "unfair," "useless," and "sad" in a content course, especially after spending weeks or months working on an assignment to receive feedback that responded almost exclusively to the language aspects of their writing.

J: There are many kinds of comments. Sometimes there are face-to-face comments or by e-mail, for example. In a perfect world, what kind of comments would you prefer?

H: I expect a comment on my idea, rather than grammar or structure, like uh yeah the comments on grammar and structure is very helpful for me, but I am more interested in how professors feel about my ideas.

J: I see and why?

H: Why? Why I'm interested in...

J: Why...I know it sounds like a stupid question, I can guess why, but I'd rather not guess. You said you're more interested in the content, the content is more important, because that's what is important for you or...

H: Maybe one of the reasons is I have I worked harder on the content rather than grammar or structure.
(November, 2005, interview)

4.8.2 Instructors' constructions of ideal feedback

Interviews with the focal instructors revealed very similar notions of what ideal feedback would represent, while at the same time demonstrating a genuine concern and interest in helping L2 students, and all students in general face the challenges of learning to write in university.

Like the students, when discussing their ideal feedback, instructors often referred to past experiences with feedback when they had felt its power to help writing development. Interestingly, rather than bringing in their experiences with undergraduate student writers, all instructors described the kind of feedback interactions that occurred with graduate students. This type of feedback was characterized by smaller classes, more face-to-face interaction time with instructors and TAs, and learning to write through multiple drafts of a text, with “lots of feedback on everything” and “lots of dialogue” (Linguistics professor, October 2005, interview). Although the details were different, all instructors also told a similar story of how good feedback had really helped their personal writing development. The TA instructor, for example, clearly recalled the importance played by a university professor who had worked with him on multiple drafts of the same assignment, discussing with him the weaknesses and possible ways of improving each draft, until he had finally produced a strong text. The political science instructor talked about what it meant to learn to write by having people edit your work, and later, by editing others'. The anthropology instructor talked with admiration of those English teachers who had returned his papers red with comments.

When reflecting on the specific case of English language learners in their classes and in particular international students, instructors also concurred that, ideally, detailed feedback opportunities should be part of a larger array of support services that should be guaranteed for all students, but especially those coming from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Such support services were conceived as something that should be a regular part of the education students were paying for. The types of services discussed

included social and academic support for their literacy development in the form of access to writing centers, writing tutors, greater numbers of TAs, and smaller classes.²¹

Frankly if we are going to charge international students the full cost of their education, with hopefully money available for scholarships for some students, then part of this whole cost should include language support. That would be different from what is actually available, rather than charging the full costs of the education and having this big gap
(Political Science Professor, March, 2006, interview)

4.9 Reality: Less than ideal feedback practices

It is important, although perhaps not surprising, to note that whereas students and instructors valued feedback on writing and had clear ideas of how powerful it might be, in reality students revealed, from the first interviews, how they had learned to not expect much from the feedback they would actually receive from their instructors at BMU.

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, interview)

While discussing and examining actual examples of feedback students received, the pattern that emerged was hence one where feedback was desired interaction, but it was also a complex and often problematic one.

To summarize, students felt that instructor-based feedback often fell short of the kind of feedback they desired. "Good" feedback did exist, but it seemed to be more of an exception than a rule. Interview after interview, students' interpretations of their feedback revealed a number of regular problems that made it less than ideal, and in the worst cases, useless or confusing. The following section provides a brief overview of these problems.

²¹ Interestingly, one instructor revealed that ideas had surfaced about having individual departments offer these types of services. It was clear that these ideas were controversial and would face some resistance in the department.

4.9.1 The problem with handwritten feedback

First, a large part of the problem students had with feedback received on their writing stemmed from the way in which it was communicated to them. As previously mentioned, students reported receiving feedback in a variety of formats at BMU. However, when it came to feedback from instructors, the principal channel through which feedback was communicated was through its classic form: handwritten comments provided in the margins of papers. The alternative to this dominant form of feedback from instructors was face-to-face interactions where students could seek and receive advice on their writing in person, but as discussed below, these interactions tended to be infrequent, and students found it difficult to find opportunities to engage their instructors in this way.

Interviews with the students revealed that handwritten comments created a difficult form of communication for students. These problems were due to its form, and the absence of important discursive qualities for the effective transmission of information between two people. First, handwritten comments tended to be, by nature, very different from the interactive, face-to-face feedback that students had identified as ideal. Instead, handwritten comments tended to be short, condensed and most often contained, symbols, checks, and underlined sections whose meanings students found difficult to decipher.²²

Handwritten feedback's abbreviated form also meant that the feedback received on writing focused heavily on identifying problems, whereas longer and more detailed feedback with specific solutions to address these problems was rarer. Kaori, for example, noted that just knowing you have a problem does not do anything to help you with the next essay:

- J: Interesting feedback but is it useful for you?
- K: It is really useful...because um now I know what is
 wrong for my essay, but I don't know how to make use
 of it for my next essay. (Kaori, February, 2006)

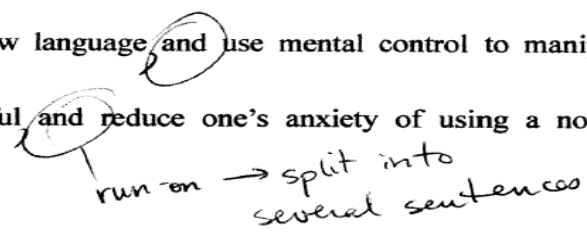
²² There is irony in finding this kind of imprecise, rough communication in a university, a context usually known for the pride its members take in the quality and precision of the written texts they produce. This raises an interesting question about the paradox of vague, unclear feedback being produced by the same people who have been trained to produce precise and detailed texts, custom-designed for their audiences.

An illustration of the type of feedback I am referring to here is seen below (see Figure 4.1). We find representative examples of circled and underlined sections, sometimes with the identification of a problem, but with little in terms of providing detailed solutions to the problem, or for that matter, anything going beyond the analysis of problems in the writing that might go beyond sentence level errors.

Figure 4.1 Example of Handwritten Feedback Received by Naoko

strategies are able to be applied to the social/affective strategies of O'Malley and Chamot (1990).

These data show that women are more likely to communicate with_z or cooperate with other people to learn a new language and use mental control to manipulate a learning activity to be successful and reduce one's anxiety of using a non-native language.



Discussion

As I mentioned in finding 2, women use particularly more social/affective strategies than men do. Why does this happen? I do not think this is a random or coincident ^{fact} thing, ~~but this fact~~ that women use more strategies of social/affective than

Although this concern with the mode of the feedback communications may represent at first glance a minor detail, interviews repeatedly revealed that this form of information could influence in fundamental ways the ease with which students could engage with the feedback they received. Reflecting on students' own linguistic background and their lack of familiarity with cursive writing systems, idiomatic expressions, and abbreviation conventions, as well as the fact that these comments were most likely produced quickly and under a time limit, even when instructors were not using symbols which were hard to interpret for students, students were often unable to decode the messages they had before them. This problem arose, for example, in one of the MSN chat sessions I held with Yoshimi.

Y says: I got [the paper] but I cannot read her comments.

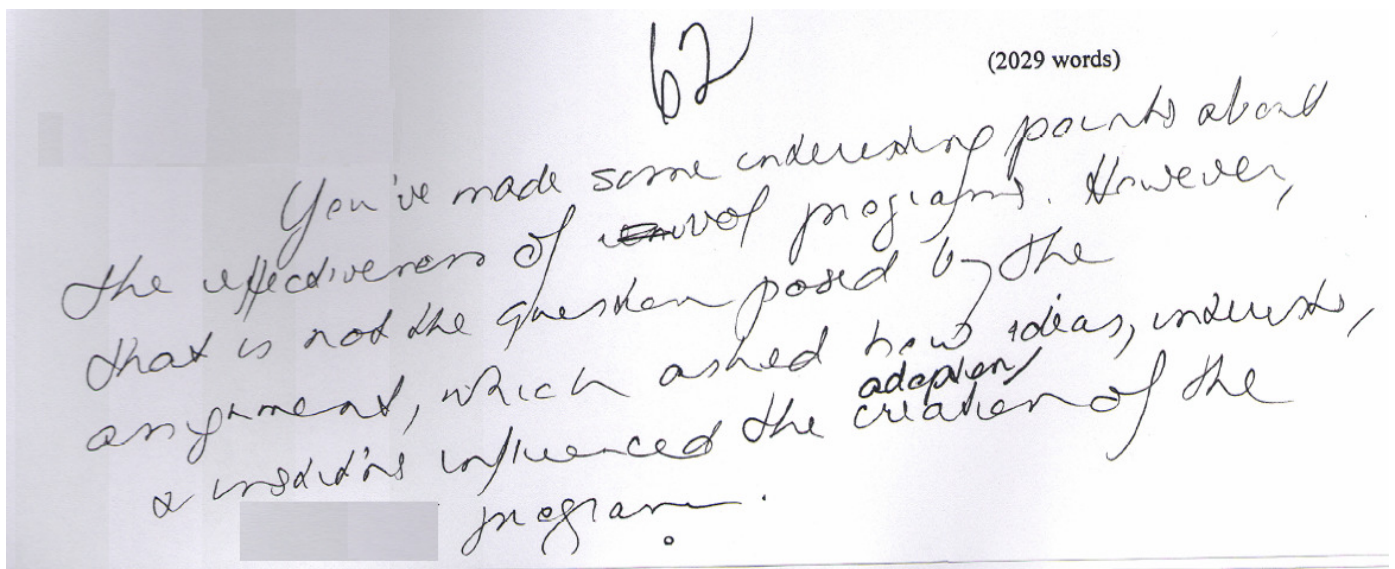
J says: Because of her handwriting?

Y says: Yeah. I asked my Japanese BMU friend, but he also could not... I am gonna ask my roommates!

(MSN electronic chat session, November, 2005)

Another illustrative example of a comment which was undecipherable for one student can be found below (see Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2 Example of Handwritten Feedback Received by Hiro



It was only in the actual interview itself with both of us working together that Hiro and I were able to decipher the message provided as:

“You have made some interesting points about the effectiveness of vol programs (voluntary programs). However, that is not the question posed by the assignment which asked how ideas, interests and institutions influenced the adoption/creation of the program”.

The use of the abbreviation *vol* was particularly troublesome as were the abbreviations used for the words *and* and *institutions*.

In a face-to-face interaction, or a meeting that combined both written feedback and a face-to-face interaction, students would have been able to ask for more information, or

to inform the instructors that they had not understood what was being said to them. However, since these were brief messages in the margin of the paper, most often read alone by students outside of the classroom context, students rarely asked teachers for clarification about feedback that they did not understand.²³ In fact, I noted in my field research journal that even in conversations with me, despite the feelings of trust that had developed, students were often extremely hesitant to admit that they were having problems deciphering the handwritten comments from their instructors. There was an unspoken sense of strong feelings of unease, and possibly shame, experienced by students in admitting that they were not able to understand what their teachers had written. It seemed that students felt that revealing these difficulties was admitting to the weaknesses they had with the English language. They had, erroneously I felt, learned to believe that their inability to read their instructors' handwritten comments was symbolic of their limitation as L2 learners. This was, of course, a belief I tried to strongly dispel in my conversations with the participants. Nonetheless, evidence of this resistance to openly admitting difficulties reading handwritten comments remained even up to the last interviews.

Ultimately, despite their recognized potential, instructors' dominant form of feedback lacked many of the discursive qualities required to make them effective modes of communication. In a sense, ironically, they apparently failed to follow the very same advice that they were trying to give to students by lacking clarity, readability, and specificity; qualities that are usually considered important for the effective/successful transmission of knowledge between a writer and the reader.

4.9.2 The problem with not responding to students' ideas

A woman once traveled far and long to seek out a wise man reported to hold the answers to many of life's most difficult questions. After traveling for years, and with much effort and sacrifice, the woman finally got the chance to meet with the wise man. Happy beyond belief, the woman posed her first of the many questions that had first gotten her started on her quest so many years ago. To her surprise,

²³ There were three occasions where students took steps to talk back, and discuss written feedback with their instructors. It is important to note however that these were rare occurrences and that these occasions generated stress for the students who engaged in this process.

having asked her question, the wise man did not provide an answer, but rather pointed out that she had made a grammatical mistake in expressing the question. Sad and disappointed, the young woman left, knowing that she had yet to find the wise man she had been looking for. (Field notes, March 2006)

I quickly wrote this little story in my field notes shortly after an interview near the end of this research. Although this was my own story, it illustrated, I felt, what was for students the most serious complaint they had about the feedback they received from their instructors. Possibly partly as a consequence of the nature of handwritten feedback with its highly abbreviated, and telegraphic modes of communication, students revealed that feedback from instructors was not only hard to read and interpret, but that also that it was particularly disappointing because it often focused primarily on grammatical mistakes or weaknesses with their writing, while only minimally addressing the ideas they had put together for these assignments.

Indeed, an analysis of the feedback comments received by students showed that these did focus heavily on corrections of language errors, often specifically referencing their non-native qualities (e.g., “not bad for a second language writer”), while addressing in only a minimal way the instructors’ advice or reactions to the ideas contained in the piece of writing.

Typical patterns of interactions in the interviews when discussing the feedback received included statements such as: “Actually I expected he would talk more about the ideas, but he just mentioned about ideas for 3 sentences. He mostly just talked about grammar...” (Naoko, November 2005, interview). Or, “They just look at grammar mistakes, not content” (Kaori, October 2005, interview). Students wanted more than just a general sense of their ideas. “Nice ideas,” etc... was not enough. This complaint was also one of the key reasons students sought greater levels of interaction and face-to-face feedback with instructors.

A final example of the desire for feedback on ideas, and the disappointment that resulted from a lack of response at that level emerged from the cases of Hiro, who received the handwritten comment discussed earlier (see Figure 4.2). More than the fact that he was not able to read the final end comment, what really frustrated Hiro was that

the crucial element missing was a more detailed response to the theoretical framework he had spent weeks crafting for this paper. Worse, he disagreed that he had missed the point of the paper and wanted a greater explanation of what his “interesting points” were and what despite these was actually missing in the paper to justify her evaluation of his paper as not having answered the question.

Throughout the interviews the students made it clear that they knew that despite considerable efforts, they would most likely have problems with their language, and that their writing could not be perfect because of “their language problems.” They appreciated help with these language problems, yet what they wanted was not only a reminder of the obvious, but also a recognition of the work they had done, and most importantly of the ideas that they had come up with. What students seemed to be asking for, in other words, was real communication, a real exchange of ideas with their professor, the expert on the topic matter they had chosen to write on, the person who had asked them to come up with this paper in the first place. In this sense, they were no more interested in focusing exclusively on language than were the content teachers. If they had chosen this course and this topic, it was because they had a genuine interest in the area, and they therefore strongly desired someone to talk back to their ideas, even if it were to disagree.

4.9.3 Problems with access to instructors

Finally, although it was the most desired form of feedback on their writing, opportunities for feedback in the form of direct dialogue and interactions proved to be difficult for both teachers and students, and they were extremely limited. Simply put, instructors and students were very busy, making it very hard to find the time that would allow both parties to engage in one-on-one conversations about writing.

A good example of the challenges students faced in getting a chance to meet their instructors is seen below in a chat conversation that occurred between Yoshimi and me, where he discussed how hard it would be for him to follow up on important but typically too-brief feedback from his instructor on an outline he had handed in.

J says: Did you get the feedback that she gave you on the outline. Did she give it back to you yet?

Y says: She did but, she just wrote "Resubmit"

Jer says: Ouch!!! Did she say why?

Y says: she did not! but she said topic is too broad!!!

Y says: but, I will do my best to find new journal!

J says: Did you get a chance to talk about these things with anyone else in class? Did other people get the same type of feedback?

Y says: Yeah.. 35% of the people have to resubmit their draft... But I did not talk anybody... I think I am gonna ask her directly on Thursday.

J says: That may be the best way. When will you ask her? Will it be during her office hours? Or will it be in class--- before after?

Y says: right after Thursday class!

Y says: because I have a class before the class!

J says: Would you consider going to talk to her during her office hours?

Y says: Yeah! I considered. but on Wednesday, I have to go volunteer! so, maybe in the class is best.

Y says: on the other office hours, I have classed. She often changes office hours!

J says: That makes it difficult. I guess a disadvantage with talking to her after class is that there may be many people... What do you think?

Y says: Yeah. But I guess I should not e-mail her, since she is busy. I guess I am also gonna talk about my topic to my classmates.

J says: I understand. It makes it difficult when they are busy.

(MSN electronic chat session, November, 2005)

Later, in the interviews, Yoshimi made an interesting comment where he explained how he had understood that despite his desire to engage with his instructor, he had had difficulties doing so. Like the other four students in the study, he had suggested that it was hard to interact with instructors about writing because of their heavy course schedules. His comments also echo those of other students who suggested that multiple clues, implicit and explicit, conveyed in class about family and work obligations were

quickly understood by students as clear indications that instructors (even if they wanted to) simply did not have the time to engage in these types of conversations about writing.

I sometimes feel frustrated, irritated... But I can understand. She [the prof] is doing their best, trying to teach me... She does not want to see me as special or disabled. She don't think she needs to spend time to teach me. She has her own life. She is busy raising her own son, and is busy with department job searches, as the head of the department...so she cannot help me a lot. (February 2005, interview)

Similarly, Kaori made it clear that she did not always feel comfortable asking help from her instructors because she had picked up on the idea that they were busy making it hard for them to spend the time needed to help her by “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)

Even, on the rare occasions that face-to-face feedback occurred, the actual sessions were most often described as being quite brief, and were often measured in minutes.²⁴ One face-to-face feedback session observed by myself between Kaori and her professor at the end of the class lasted approximately two minutes. In his second last interview (April, 2006), for instance, Yoshimi --who had written seven drafts of his final paper-- discussed how important he felt making the effort to talk to his instructor had been, while at the same time noting that in the end the actual amount of time spent talking with her was quite short.

J: In total, how much time did you spend with her
Y: Difficult, not so long actually...less than an hour
J: That is what I thought. I wanted to confirm that
Y: Yeah yeah like that. Less than 45 minutes I think. 5 meetings perhaps

²⁴ Exceptions to this occurred with Kaito who talked with one TA for about 30 minutes.

Adding to the problems of access students had was the nature of the additional opportunities for support and feedback of the type discussed by instructors as ideal available to students on campus. Indeed, writing clinics in the form of one-on-one tutorials were available on campus at *The Composition Institute*. As mentioned previously, focal students did in fact make use of these services. However, students were quick to point out that access to this resource and hence its benefits were severely limited by a policy that restricted students to only one hour per week of tutorial time. Moreover, the reservation schedule for the tutorial sessions was posted once weekly, and time slots were highly coveted. One had to be quick and lucky to be able to book the perfect time that fit one's schedule.

4.10 The importance of alternative sources of feedback

In reviewing how students felt about the actual feedback they received, a number of problems converged that hindered and limited opportunities for instructor feedback to lead to dialogue and detailed information about what students could do to improve their writing. It is important to note, however, that even if students were not able to receive "ideal feedback" from their instructors, students' desire for feedback did not diminish. Indeed, over the eight months of this study, despite frequent expressions of frustration, confusion and difficulties with the feedback received, students never gave up on the idea that good feedback could help them perform better as writers. Students, for instance, actively sought to make the best of the feedback they received and the limited opportunities they had to talk to teachers. They also made extensive use of alternative sources of feedback: the use of friends, and other individuals in both their immediate social networks, or available through institutional resources who were generally more accessible and could provide responses to their writing which they judged closer to the type of ideal feedback they desired, and hence more useful.

Naoko, for example, after deciding that her anthropology paper would matter to her as her "thesis" produced during her exchange at BMU explicitly made time in her schedule to ensure she would be able to visit the Composition Institute. Similarly, she also very strategically took advantage of the interviews with me²⁵ to verify and obtain

²⁵ I would certainly add myself to the list of alternative sources of feedback which the students relied on.

feedback from me as to the choice of her topic, as well as the organization of the ideas for her paper. She also took advantage of lab monitors in a computer lab who had advertised feedback services to go over her text with them, in addition to working with the Composition Institute tutors. At various stages in her writing of the research paper, Naoko also reported that she had received feedback from Kaori, who was taking the same class as her, and from other focal participants, and friends. Although other international students were not considered linguistic experts, over time, they became valued sources of feedback because they understood and cared providing a level of personal support and engagement with the person and his ideas, which was not found in instructor feedback.

All of these efforts did allow Naoko and other focal participants who made use of alternative sources of feedback to come closer to getting feedback, which they felt was useful because it was more likely to be face-to-face, detailed, and also responding to their ideas. However, this feedback was obtained at the expense of a lot of work and time on their part. Naoko, for example, noted in the interviews her sacrifices regarding coursework in other classes. In order to make sure she had enough time to get the feedback she desired, she suggested that she had done “nothing for the other classes,” and avoided “every single reading” (April 2006, interview).

Therefore, the question for students in making use of alternative sources of feedback to compensate for/add to instructor-based feedback was not simply one of deciding whether feedback could be important for them, but rather how good they were in accessing the resources necessary (time, money, social networks of friends) to obtain the kind of feedback they desired and could make a difference.

Kaito is an interesting example of a student who thought carefully about this question and strategically focused on making sure that he would have a feedback network he could draw on to help him with his writing. Like Naoko, he took full advantage of the writing center, friends, and also me as sources of feedback. Additionally, however, Kaito invested heavily in activities that allowed him to establish and build relationships that would provide him with access to feedback through a system of favors and services rendered.

Kaito did this by working as a volunteer research assistant for a large research project in his department that required Japanese participants. Although his activities were at first limited to helping recruit participants, over the course of the research, Kaito's participation in the research project increased to the point of helping collect, analyze and write up the findings of specific aspects of the research project dealing with surveys of Japanese speaking participants.

In accounting for his reasons for volunteering so much of his time as a research assistant, Kaito explained that his activities were motivated in part by his desire to pursue a graduate career and his need to develop what he felt would be influential relationships with the professor in charge of the project he was volunteering for. This professor had conducted research in Japan and had good connections in Japanese universities. Kaito felt that if this professor would agree to write him a strong letter of recommendation this would have a big impact for his application to universities in the future. Kaito also explained that investing some time in this research project would also work as a way to ask favors from this research team when he needed help with his writing, especially from the Japanese PhD student in charge of supervising his work on the project.

In fact, Kaito's strategy and investment in the research group did indeed seem to pay off for him. In the process of volunteering for the research project, Kaito was also able to take advantage of his frequent interactions with graduate students and instructors with whom he was working to receive feedback of a nature that was quite different from that received in other courses. Within this research team, Kaito was able to interact and receive feedback on his ideas on a regular basis. He received detailed descriptions of the rules and conventions of writing in his field with recommendations of how to improve and significantly, numerous samples of the writing he would have to produce.

He also received feedback on multiple versions of the texts he was working on. Finally, as predicted by Kaito, he received a lot of help from the Japanese PhD student in charge of the project, who provided detailed electronic feedback on multiple drafts of both presentation slides and scripts, and on a major research report he wrote based on the research project he was volunteering for (see Figure 4.3). In this feedback, it was interesting to see how Kaito and the PhD student engaged in dialogues, often using

different colored fonts to ask and answer questions. Moreover, the PhD student made use of Microsoft Words “track change” function to flag deletions and suggest changes to the text. In the excerpt below, 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.

Figure 4.3 Example of Feedback Received by Kaito from the Japanese PhD Student

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15

information and assumingly have no order effect by the randomization of the reviews. So_

(how does this follow the previous sentence?), it is possible to argue that on average the

promotion-oriented movie reviews in the present study were qualitatively easier to recall than

those of promotion-oriented. In detail, these differences might be rooted in the different

vividness of movie reviews such that some words contained in promotion-oriented movie

reviews in this study were fundamentally more outstanding than other movie reviews

regardless of the semantic difference between promotion-oriented and prevention-oriented

movie reviews. ¶

→is this explanation understandable?? Yes. I think this is good and very interesting possible

future direction. ¶

Except the above incompatible findings to the original prediction, overall, it is

plausible to say that the present study contributed the expansion of the past research about the

Dialogue, in orange color with feedback that is clear and easy to read

Specific suggestions for changes and responding to ideas

Deleted: Hence, it is necessary to replicate the present study in consideration for the validity of the material for the recall test. ¶

It is interesting to note that in the end, the feedback received from this PhD student represented some of the most “ideal” feedback offered to any of the students in the project, and that Kaito obtained a final mark of A+ for his research paper, the highest grade received by any of the focal students in this study. This was for Kaito one of the high points of his work at BMU, and all other focal students in the study admired and congratulated Kaito for his achievement. It also reinforced for Kaito and me the belief that feedback practices could make a difference, yet that the best sources of feedback might not have been easily available to students through typical avenues.

4.11 Summary

To sum up, over the eight months of the study, feedback from instructors on writing for L2 writers in content-specific courses was revealed to be a form of communication that was both extremely important for the students, as well as complex and difficult to achieve. Although students and instructors had a clear idea of what ideal feedback could be, achieving this ideal was much more difficult. Students did not, however, give up on the idea of feedback and used strategies to compensate for the lack of desired feedback they were receiving from their instructors. These compensation strategies were not always easy to accomplish and involved the use of social networks and resources,²⁶ including the exchange of services in payment for quality feedback. Nevertheless, interviews with students revealed that it was instructor feedback that students valued the most as the best source of information and advice on the writing they had to do for their courses.

The findings reinforce the idea that feedback could be of use to L2 students, but that in the context of instructor feedback, this potential was not being realized. This raises two interesting questions that are going to be discussed in the next two chapters.

First, what factors helped explain the clear divide between desired and actual feedback practices between students and instructors? Second, if the actual feedback practices between instructors and students were not helping students, what in effect were they actually doing? In other words, if instructor feedback did not effectively serve as a source of knowledge and information, how did this impact the larger socialization of these L2 writers within the academic community? These questions are explored in the next two chapters.

²⁶ These findings echo other research which has highlighted the importance of social networks for L2 literacy development (e.g., Ferenz, 2005; Séror, Chen & Gunderson, 2005; Zappa-Hollman, 2007).

Chapter 5: Exploring the Impact of Institutional Pressures on Feedback

5.1 Introduction

A single comment on a single essay is too local and contingent a phenomenon to yield general conclusions about the quality of the conversation of which it is a part.

Any remark on a student essay, whatever its form, finally owes its meaning and impact to the governing dialog that influences some student's reaction to it.

(Knoblauch & Brannon, 1981, p. 2)

The previous chapter examined feedback practices at BMU and students' and instructors' perceptions of their impact for writing development in 'regular' content courses. Following up on themes that emerged about these practices, this chapter addresses the second research question focusing on the role of institutional forces in shaping feedback and thus explaining the gap between ideal feedback and actual feedback practices.

In beginning to look for an explanation for the existence of a gap between ideal representations of feedback for L2 writing development in higher education versus their actual realization, I noted in my field notes that this was perhaps to be expected. Indeed, ethnographies of literacy practices have repeatedly shown that practices are rarely characterized by stable or well defined purposes, clear roles and expectations, or direct channels of communication for negotiating meaning (Canagarajah, 2004; Coughlan & Duff, 1994; Duff, 2002; Pon, Goldstein, & Schecter, 2003). Stated more simply, anyone who has ever worked in an educational institution knows that there are often gaps between what is desired and what actually occurs in the classroom. Nonetheless, this reality does not take away from the importance of placing such gaps at center stage with their complex positioning of students and instructors, as they try to and sometimes fail to reach an ideal goal. Looking carefully at what is happening and what creates the gap not only helps understand how it might be bridged, it also often offers a more realistic look at the complexity of literacy events such as feedback practices and their contingent nature as social activities dependent at least in part on contextual forces that affect and guide their implementation (K. Hyland & F. Hyland, 2006a; Lea & Street, 2006).

In order to explore some of the contextual forces which explained why feedback took the shape it did in this study, this chapter draws on both professors' and students' interpretations as revealed in interviews, as well as through observations and field notes taken while conducting research on the BMU campus. The chapter first focuses on the impact of institutional factors discussed by instructors. Next, the chapter looks at the impact of institutional forces on students. It will be argued that these institutional forces played an important, if at times unspoken and hence invisible role, limiting what feedback practices might become, while also explaining why it made sense for feedback to sometimes take a less than ideal form.

5.2 Instructors and institutional factors

5.2.1 The impact of limited resources

In seeking instructors' explanations of why ideal feedback was in fact hard to implement, the first, and perhaps least surprising, explanations that came up in interviews had to do with the crucial role of resources available to instructors. Despite an interest and belief in the power of feedback, instructors simply found it difficult to act on these intentions because of a lack of time, support and recognition for the work involved in providing ideal forms of feedback. Providing good feedback required resources and time which instructors simply did not have, or at least did not feel they could/should invest in this way.

Many of the issues falling into the category of "limited resources" were principally identified by instructors as functions of budgetary concerns. Instructors made it clear that feedback practices were affected by a number of departmental and institutional decisions regarding the distribution of resources such as the allocation of TAs, the type and number of instructors hired, class sizes, and financial decisions related to the existence of support services such as writing centers and writing classes on campus and their funding. Moreover, directly linked to the allocation of these resources was the issue of time. In short, the absence of these resources had an impact on how much time instructors could devote to students outside of actual class sessions.

A good illustration of this link between feedback, time, and resource decisions such as the type of instructor hired by a department surfaced in the following interview excerpt. In it, the linguistics instructor talked about her status as a part-time employee at the university.

Being a contract worker I feel overworked and underpaid. Much of the time, marking you just want to get that out of the way as fast as you can. It is much easier and faster to just underline the part that is missing something or just write just a sentence and then... And I hope that the students get it. (Linguistics sessional instructor, November 2005)

Another instructor also serves as an example of this pattern of reasoning, when she shared her strong feelings regarding her department's budget and the impact recent decisions to limit who would be assigned TAs in the department would have for her, and her motivation to "work with students."

This year the department decided that only untenured faculties [sic] would have TAs. [As a tenured instructor] why should I have so much more marking to do...extra work...sort of you know? I have 200 hundred hours more of marking to do than the person in the next office. That is five full weeks spent marking and nothing else...more than someone else does in the next office. So, I am not looking for ways to add to my marking load particularly this year. (Political science instructor, March 2006)

5.2.1.1 Increasing class sizes

Linked to the topic of limited resources, increasing class sizes were also frequently discussed by instructors. One might be able to provide rich, detailed feedback over multiple drafts with small classes, but the greater the number of students in a class, the harder it was for instructors to imagine they would have the time required to provide students with the kind of feedback most apt to foster literacy development.

The psychology TA who at times taught and provided feedback to a number of classes at the same time was particularly forthcoming about the realities of engaging in feedback practices for large classes, and how you would quickly move from providing useful information to simply marking and ranking.

When you are marking literally hundreds of papers all at the same time of the year, in those situations, the feedback you

produce will not be detailed...lots of [inaudible] and [inaudible], short sentences. But chances are that it will start to look the same. And chances are very big that in the end, you will be doing marking, and that is it, nothing related to improving writing or helping these people get into the discourse community... Nope just straight out marking and ranking. (TA, June 2006)

The TAs comments stood out in light of how he noted how this reality made it difficult to provide a “good university education” to L2 students in particular who should receive large amounts of good advice on their writing.

A nice, good university education would be one where everybody should get well trained TAs trained in providing feedback on how to improve writing, and I think those things. Those are things that every student should go through, especially for second language writing students. They need hmmm even more amount of good advice than native speakers, but you know, we have these 100-student courses 200-student courses, where it is just impossible to do that. (TA, June 2006)

The point made by the TA is both simple and realistic. Good feedback was simply most likely to occur in smaller classes, whereas it would be much less likely to occur in lower level undergraduate classes which in the case of the psychology department tended to be quite large with approximately 100 students in each introductory course.

I asked instructors in informal conversations whether, given the increasing presence of multilingual speakers, they believed that factors such as class sizes might be adjusted to create smaller classes and hence greater opportunities for more time to be spent on individual students. If anything, both focal instructors and interactions with other faculty members at BMU revealed that instructors felt that the institutional trend predicted for the future was actually a worsening of the situation as the institution increasingly moved away from smaller classes. In fact, faculty members explained, there was great interest in larger classes for their economical advantages as a simple way to fill the increasing demand for higher education while also keeping in mind the realities of shrinking budgets (smaller classes require the hiring of more instructors). This notion was repeated by the linguistics instructor (L) who talked about this problem.

L: The problem is you need small classes and need faculty that is around for the students

J: Any indications of changes coming up?

L: In our department, in fact, the trend is exactly the opposite, because for instance, the intro course, where we used to offer more sections with fewer students and more TAs. Now we have these mega courses, with 250 students, and then they have two tutorials, which have only 50 students with a TA, where you're supposed to get the personal one-on-one attention. So like 50 students in for one hour once a week. I guess everybody gets a minute -(laughs). (December 2005)

To summarize, interviews with instructors revealed that a complex interplay of resource allocation decisions affected feedback opportunities by hindering and/or discouraging instructors from investing in feedback. Class size, TA allocations, and time requirements were particularly important elements which affected how they could interact with students.

5.2.2 Impact of merit systems and grade distribution requirements

Other institutional factors were also identified as having a negative impact on the type and quality of feedback students received. Two forces in particular, a) the impact of the merit/reward system for instructors and b) departments' grade distribution requirements were found to play a major role on the feedback provided by instructors.

5.2.2.1 The impact of the merit/reward system for feedback

The role of the university merit/reward system for instructors was another major theme echoed in both formal and informal conversations with the focal instructors, as well as in informal conversations with other faculty members at BMU as a reason explaining the gap between ideal and actual feedback practices. Instructors noted that giving extended feedback could be seen as risky and/or a waste of time in an institution whose reward system did not give much weight to teaching activities. In their minds, this problem applied particularly well to the activity of providing detailed and extensive feedback on writing to students. Instructors stated clearly that research and publications were the valued activities for determining merit, and that being a 'world-class researcher' (the goal for many BMU faculty, especially if they were seeking to become tenured full professors), did not include spending time providing ideal feedback over multiple drafts. In the words of one instructor:

Research and teaching are not compatible... To a limited extent, people who are high-profile researchers can be good instructors, but the reality is that if you can do that much research, if you are going to be that "high profile", you probably aren't spending all your time teaching courses. So they're not exactly compatible. (Anthropology instructor, December 2005)

This same instructor noted that despite this lack of recognition for teaching, he still spent quite a bit of time providing feedback to students, often reading each paper three times, each reading focusing on a different dimension of the writing (once for the ideas, once for the mechanics, and last to check how things all came together). He did this to make sure that he could give feedback on different aspects of students' papers, but he also pointed out that this meant he invested a great deal of time in reading papers. Highlighting the little value placed on feedback practices amongst his department, the anthropology instructor also admitted that he was fairly certain that if he were to actually reveal to some of his peers in the department how much time he spent on feedback, they would laugh at him.

5.2.2.2 Grade distributions

Another major institutional factor that instructors cited in their discussions of why feedback practices were less than ideal was grade distribution requirements. Instructors asserted that these requirements had an impact not only on how they assigned marks, but ultimately as well, on how the support and advice they provided their students could be positioned.

All four focal instructors talked about the pressures they felt to conform to the departmental grade distributions: the requirement in some departments (more or less strictly enforced according to the department) for marks to be distributed along a normal curve with a fixed mean and distribution.²⁷ Whereas this idea of grade distributions was rarely raised by students themselves in the multiple conversations we had about writing and feedback,²⁸ all of the instructors stressed the importance of this institutional constraint.

²⁷ Although this was not a campus-wide practice, grade distribution practices were found in undergraduate courses in the Faculties of arts, science, psychology, computer science, math, and land and food.

²⁸ When it was raised, it was in the context of a midterm having been "scaled up".

In truth, interviews revealed that not all focal-instructors were under the same degree of pressure to conform to the distribution, depending on their status. For instance, whereas the linguistics sessional instructor and the TA described being strictly expected to follow the distribution requirements, the political science instructor who enjoyed greater seniority and tenure suggested she had some leeway linked to her status in the department. Nonetheless, as illustrated in the excerpt below, all instructors did talk about this institutional requirement and the fact that this did affect their feedback, at times encouraging them to lower marks, redesign their assessments, and ultimately look for ways to make sure that their grades did not stray too far from the expected distribution.

There is tremendous pressure. I mean for a while there, we had to submit the grades to the chair before we were allowed to enter them... I absolutely self-censor all the time... If there are too many A's then I write a killer exam. I make sure that a good number of students are going to do very poorly or preferably, everybody will do very poorly, and then I can hike up the whole class. (Sessional linguistics instructor, December 2005)

5.2.2.2.1 Defensive marking

With the pressure to make the grades fit a “normal” curve, a recurring pattern of what I will refer to as “defensive feedback” emerged in interviews and informal conversations with instructors at BMU, suggesting that feedback practices could have more to do with justifying the necessary low marks than actually helping students develop their writing skills. This notion is captured well in the following excerpt of a conversation with the linguistics instructor (L) about the impact of the grade distribution on her feedback practices.

- J: I was wondering if one of the other purposes of marking is not some sort of defensive--
- L: --Oh, absolutely, yes!!
- J: Because you have to justify the mark, and it doesn't become as much about--
- L: --about helping the student. I mean, if you just write “how?” somewhere. That's not going to necessarily help the student understand anything. The only reason it's there is that that “how” justifies that you took two marks off. So ultimately when you're marking for really large classes... It's all just justifying grades and very little of it has to do anything to do

with making the students better students or anything like that. Oh, now I'm all depressed!

(Linguistics instructor, December, 2005)

In his interview, the TA reinforced this idea as he revealed that the need to take off points in a way that would seem fair to students affected his emphasis on form, rather than content.

J: One institutional factor which has come up in some of the other interviews, which I had not expected but which was interesting because it... but I'm not sure if it has affected you. People talked about also being affected a little bit or a lot by grade distribution requirements and having to follow a certain certain number of A's, a certain number of B's, etc... It sort of depends on who was the professor and what department they were in and how strict that was, but that will seem to also affect some people. Did that--

TA: --Yeah yeah, I think that affects us. Probably everybody in the psychology department, because we have a required average of 68. For everybody!

J: For every course?

TA: Oh, first-year, second-year courses, I think it's 65. Fourth-year courses...it's somewhere between 60 and 70, which is very hard. Many students, I think are upset when they see 70 in their paper, and that had to be the average or that kind of thing. So, so I think our way of dealing with that is to put more weight on the mechanics of the paper. Major reductions for not citing things properly, because those are the...very easy to find out and easy to to convince them that they missed something. (June, 2006)

Expressing a similar notion of “defensive feedback,” the anthropology instructor and the TA both mentioned that although they had “systems” which were used to break down the different components of a papers’ final mark (e.g., 30% for organization, and 40% for critical thinking and 30% for language) when assigning marks to students. Interestingly, however, both also mentioned that they did not always share this system with students. The anthropology instructor explained that doing this prevented students from being too fussy about their marks, and coming back to an instructor with a request for a better mark, especially if a specific part of the paper had been identified as strong, even when other sections were problematic. A psychology instructor who was not a focal

instructor revealed a similar notion in an informal conversation during field work at BMU. He informed me that it was important in some universities to think of feedback as a “first gambit” which could lead to negotiations about the final mark, and that he therefore was very careful to construct his feedback in ways that left some room to defend his evaluation.²⁹

5.2.2.2 Ethics of the grade distribution system

When I inquired about ethical concerns regarding a system based on the assumptions of a normal population³⁰ and requiring comparisons and rankings of students by comparing them to each other, and its impact on non-native English students, instructors did not hide their knowledge that this set up a “harsh reality” for international students, one which was not easy to discuss openly with students.

P: You know, I think it's important for students to realize this is, you know, it's also how you do relative to what else is being turned in, in this class, and sometimes something is a B+ because you know it's just not as good as some of the others. And you can't quite, you can't say that, it would be kind of, I mean you can't say it because it would be really harsh. But you know, that's the message. You put the distribution up on...and they know that. Um, but yeah we never say...this is a B+ just because it's, you know, its just not, just not as good as the others.

J: In terms of the international students being put in a situation where they are compared to native speakers... Obviously coming with, I mean, I don't want to say a lot less, but something very different, and hence if you compare them to a native speaker, of course, they're going to end up more on one side than the other.

P: Yeah, and they tend to!

(Political science instructor, March 7, 2006)

This was not an idea they were particularly happy with. Some instructors showed in interviews some resistance to the idea that international students might be disadvantaged because of their difference, but, as illustrated in the excerpt below, professors often did

²⁹ This notion was repeated to me on two occasions by professors who attended presentations of this data at conferences and who noted how in some institutions it was sometimes better to be a bit vague with one's feedback to avoid long discussions with students complaining about their marks.

³⁰ Looking for a 'normal distribution of scores' hence also assumes that the assessment procedures are unbiased with regard to social factors such as race, gender, ethnic group or socioeconomic status.

ultimately agree that there was potential for this disadvantage to exist, especially when writing depended so much on clarity and good arguments.

Yeah, I don't like to think in terms of that, you know, in terms of international students penalized for because, because of their English, they're not expressing their ideas clearly, but yeah, but yeah, I think it's also the fact that they tend to express their ideas. They couldn't express ideas very clearly, if they don't have a strong command of English and clarity is a very important aspect of writing so I didn't think in terms of that. But that is maybe something that is happening. (Psychology TA, June 2006)

5.2.2.2.3 Resistance to providing feedback that might “build up” students

Most serious perhaps were reports that the grade distribution requirements were discouraging instructors from providing too much good feedback. The anthropology instructor captured this notion well in identifying the dangers of providing feedback that would “build up” the students.

...you know you're going to be in a situation where you're going to have to be giving and taking back - (laughs). You're going to build them up. And they're going to get better and better the more you help them with everything and even the way you write tests. You tell them, “Right you have to write two out of three, instead of having to write all three questions”. The grades are going to become A's at the end. You have to take back, because it will never get past the head of the department. (Anthropology Instructor, December 2005)

Another instructor identified the sad situation that emerges when only 25% of the classroom's population is allowed to “do well.”

The thing is that as long as you're expecting the average to be somewhere in the C's and you expect only 25% of the population to actually understand what is being taught, then well obviously you don't want to teach too well, because, if you teach well, then everybody understands and then they get good grades so if this is the system then, this is how were going to have to keep it. (Linguistics instructor, December 2005)

5.3 Institutional debates and international students

A final and perhaps more subtle institutional force raised in my conversations with instructors about feedback stemmed from references to debates regarding whether students with serious language difficulties should actually be in their classes, and if they

were, whose responsibility it was to support and help these learners deal with writing and other language skills in content courses. Hints of the tensions linked to these debates and departments' struggles with the need to respond to increasing populations of L2 writers came up in all conversations with instructors when talking about how to best support L2 writers face the challenges of writing not only in writing classes, but in content courses as well. These tensions, however, were most plainly illustrated in my interview with the political science instructor who explicitly called for a need to question what teaching L2 students meant for teachers like hers, and the need to distinguish between those students who should or should not be at BMU.

In the first of three excerpts, we note, for example, this instructor's feelings about the validity of TOEFL scores as a way to enroll students that she felt did not belong in her classes.

TOEFL test is just as bad... So at one point I think I did write some memo to the faculty of the graduate studies about this. We know that the TOEFL that, both TOEFL and GREs from certain countries are suspect...that you know...I just don't believe the numbers from certain countries. There are certain countries that you know, the marks are just higher, than they should be compared to a country next door, where there is a comparable focus on English like, you know there...it's not credible.

After relating how in fact she had at one point arranged to work with the *international student division* at BMU to get mature international students who were most likely going to fail or to “drop” her class, the same professor expressed her frustration at being the wrong person to deal with problems she felt the university was creating for itself by simply allowing students to “sink or swim.”

It drives me nuts, but but I think this university has remarkably few resources for helping students with basic writing, and I'm not the right person to do that. You know, we know that students are coming here who have gone to schools their whole lives in Vancouver with writing problems, and then we go and actively recruit international students, who we know are going to have a big challenge when they get here. We know (laughs) this is the first time studying in English, and, and I think we have to hold everybody to same standards, but it's like, “Come! Come to BMU! We'll offer this great education.” And then we drop them in the water knowing that they can't swim and this, this makes me furious.

But uh...the solution should not lie with individual instructors who have 65 students in their class, teaching English writing skills, um so, I hate that. I hate it!

It was obvious that this was a very emotional issue for this instructor especially, since one reason she “hated” the situation was that she not only did not feel this was the solution, but also that this was also far from her area of expertise.

I don't, you know, I don't see it as my job to teach that to students, whose first language is not English, and I realize it's a bigger challenge for students who are working in their second language, but my view is basically is that it's not my job and also that I'm not trained to do that. I know, I don't, I never learned how to teach writing.

The same instructor noted why she thought that despite the fact that she was not the only instructor with these feelings at BMU, these issues were often left unspoken at the departmental level. First, regardless of the trouble international students might cause, she referred again to the lack of time instructors had to raise these issues at an institutional level. Second, she also spoke of the potential conflict of interest that occurred because of financial incentives associated with the presence of international students that departments and instructors had to carefully consider before raising too much trouble about these issues.

I guess, what we could do as a department, we could raise concerns about this. But there is I think a kind of mixed incentive to do that. On one hand, if I've got 65 students in my classes with no TAs I don't have time to organize the department response in this. And the other thing is that um... I don't...think this is self-conscious, but our department has actually gotten at least one position from international student funding. I mean, we are in some ways financial beneficiaries of this. I mean, the faculties get money from the international student initiative. I think it's called, and that goes to various things. So that money is coming in through the campus and were probably, as, collectively, as the faculty, um...we're cutting off our nose to spite our faces. We sort of, we like to take the money too. But what we should be doing is siphoning some of that money and putting it into better language support, and writing support for students who come from--- for all students frankly...but we need, I think we need special types of this support for students who are international students. (Political science instructor, March 2006)

Although not all focal instructors spoke as directly as the political science instructor of these tensions, the themes raised by her were repeated in conversations with other focal instructors, and importantly, with other instructors at BMU in informal conversations held during my field work on campus. What seemed clear was that, as suggested by the literature (e.g., Benesch, 2001; Kubota & Abels, 2006; Matsuda, 2006), at least some people in various departments were having similar conversations about where exactly the responsibility lay for supporting and helping international students and whether they should be allowed to take “regular” classes.

Reactions and attitudes from other instructors echoed those voiced by the political science instructor and ranged from on a continuum to “It’s not my job to teach writing” to “let’s try to try to offer more services,” to “trying to get rid of weaker students” in certain classes either raising language requirements (i.e., TOEFL scores) to limit access to these classes, or through more indirect means such as instructors announcing in class at the beginning of a semester that students with a weak command of English should think twice about taking this class.³¹

It seems likely that one’s position regarding these debates would undoubtedly affect not only how an instructor saw international students in his or her class, but also the type of feedback provided. Indeed, a perfect example of this possible contrast in attitudes to international students and possibly responses to their challenges with writing in a second language came about unexpectedly in the second interview I held with the anthropology instructor.

During the interview, I had been interested to learn that there had been some recent conversations about creating some kind of department level support for L2 writers. However, the instructor informed me that he was still unsure whether this would actually come to fruition. Indeed, there was a note of pessimism related to the themes above regarding how some instructors in the department might not feel it was their job, nor their responsibility, for a content-related department to deal with students’ language issues.

³¹ Although this incident was not reported to me by a focal student, it was reported by a fellow international student to an instructor who worked at BMU. Focal students in the study did confirm that they felt some classes and instructors were more “international student friendly,” and that this information was often handed down from international student to international student so that despite BMU’s large diverse population of students, some classes were perceived by students as filled with only native speakers.

To illustrate this point, the anthropology instructor mentioned the recent case of a PhD student in the department who had not been doing well because of her writing abilities. Her case had caused some “talk” in the department because she had been failed by her instructor because of her writing difficulties, and everyone knew that this instructor had done so with the specific intent that this failing grade would lead to her expulsion from the program. However, the anthropology instructor noted with a smile that, due to unique regulations regarding doctoral students which this instructor had not known about, this student had not been expelled, and had rather been given a chance to improve her writing by taking courses at the *Composition Institute*.

This was for the instructor a reasonable solution, preferable to simply expelling the student. Moreover, he felt that after having taken courses at the *Composition Institute*, the student had indeed improved,³² and he was happy that she would be able to continue her research at BMU having received some necessary support from outside the department to improve her writing.

Shortly after this story had been told, the interview ended. The interview had been held at the instructor’s office. I was packing up my things and getting ready to leave when, coincidentally, someone knocked at the door. It was another instructor from the department who wanted to ask a question. After a brief exchange with the anthropology professor to address his question, the conversation drifted to reasons for my presence and the topic of the research I was conducting. Hearing of the topic, this visitor immediately expressed an interest in the importance of writing problems in universities, and then brought up the case of a “special” student he thought truly did not belong in the department and who had so many writing difficulties that he felt she really should have been forced to withdraw from the program.

As he added details to the story, it became clear that this was *the* instructor and *the* student that had just been mentioned. The contrast in tone and even in feeling towards the student was evident.

³² This confidence in the abilities of Composition Institute to help students was seen in the fact that this instructor often referred his own students through his feedback to take advantage of its services.

Interviews with the anthropology instructor highlighted his awareness that L2 students came to his classes with fewer resources making things more difficult for them. In his case, his own solution included giving the best feedback possible under the circumstances (even if others might think that was a waste of time), and looking for avenues such as the *Composition Institute* as resources students might use to get help and continue their studies, even if it meant both students and instructors would have to work a bit harder. This care and understanding for students and the difficulties represented by writing, while at the same time expressing an interest in students not giving up because of these difficulties, is I think well symbolized in an extended written comment this instructor provided to Kaori on her first semester paper, on the cover page of her paper. Kaori received a mark of 66% or C+ on the paper. Despite this final evaluation, the professor has made sure to encourage Kaori not “to get discouraged” and to show that despite the challenges she has with writing, he knows she is “doing good work”.

Kaori,

Your basic argument is that each group of immigrants adapts to Canada differently. The important variables include the age of the immigrants and whether they primarily identify with and live in a Chinese immigrant community or a Euro-Canadian community. You should make that variation the main theme of your paper. This is good work that is appropriate to your interests and writing. If the grading seems harsh don't get discouraged. I know you are doing good work.

In contrast, the visitor clearly felt that if L2 students could not perform as needed they simply should not be there. Saddest of all was the visitor's final comment regarding this student, and his assertion that despite her time at the *Composition Institute*, he still felt that this student had serious problems and that it was very unlikely that the student would ever be ready or deserving to belong in the department. Her writing problems were clearly not his problem, nor was the fact that these should in his mind lead to her exclusion from the department. She alone had to deal with the challenges of being an L2 writer. I had no doubt that his feedback on her writing would have reflected this.

5.4 Institutional forces affecting students

After discovering how important institutional factors had been for instructors in helping create and validate at times a less than ideal form of feedback, I became interested in looking at what students had had to say about institutional forces affecting their work at BMU. How aware were they of their existence, and the limitations that they were imposing on instructors, and hence the feedback they received? And how did they understand and react to these pressures? Indeed, it seemed unlikely that institutional pressures such as the ones identified by instructors would not also have had an effect on the students.

The data did in fact suggest that students in this study referred to institutional realities as factors affecting their stay at BMU as well as how they might look at feedback, although not all institutional forces were understood in the same way.

5.4.1 Institutional forces that were well understood

5.4.1.1 Limited resources

Issues linked to the limited resources available to instructors, particularly with regards to time and their lack of time, were as suggested in Chapter 5 one of the forces students were aware of as a factor with an important impact on their feedback. Students were aware of the importance of resources and their impact on instructors' abilities to help them, including offering them feedback. In particular, they quickly picked up on comments made by instructors in classes, such as "I will only reply to e-mails on Thursdays and Fridays", "Unfortunately, there is no TA for this class", or "I'm preparing for a conference next week," which sent out messages regarding their instructors' busy lives.

Kaito who had made extensive use of alternative resources developed this theme further by actually raising explicitly the limitations that existed in terms of "what BMU can offer international students," despite his awareness of the university's interest in internationalization. One of the limitations he mentioned specifically was time and the fact that without a lot of it, it was "difficult for universities to live up to their expectations." In a perfect example of the impact of institutional constraints on students,

Kaito specified that this reality was one of the main reasons he strategically looked for and made extensive use of alternative sources of feedback.

Interestingly, he felt that this approach was a worthwhile way to learn and that this was actually where he was learning to write, rather than in the classes he was taking. Ultimately he summarized things by regarding teachers as the people who might be able to point out the conventions that might be needed, but who could not be expected to give the kind of feedback that he would want because they were busy and they had to do many things.

Similarly, Naoko in the first semester could explain perfectly well why she never got feedback on her written assignment in one of her classes until the second-last class of the semester. Naoko did feel that getting this feedback as soon as possible would help with her writing for the next assignment, but she also knew that, despite the fact that she was a nice teacher who invited students to e-mail her and come to her office, “she is very busy”. Naoko pointed out that “she is always late and also [she cannot give back feedback quickly] because no TA- she mentioned about it” (November, 2005). Indeed, in the classes I observed which met on a weekly basis, the instructor did arrive between five to ten minutes late at times, explaining that she had to travel by bus. Naoko’s awareness of instructors’ limited time also became apparent at the beginning of the next semester, when I asked her why she thought handwritten comments were so common, even though they were sometimes harder to read for students. In answering my question, Naoko suggested that this was “perhaps because they have no time” and referring back to handwritten feedback she had received on a class presentation which had been hard to read and her belief that the teacher had been too busy to rewrite what she had marked down quickly while simultaneously watching her presentation. Later in the second semester, Naoko reiterated her feelings about the instructor’s busy schedule when she mentioned that although she felt that it would be great if teachers could hand out a sample of the different types of assignments they required, “it is too much work for a teacher to show a model” (March 10, 2006).

Students also revealed that they were aware of the pressures on professors to do research and the impact this had on teaching. Kaori, for instance, had an interesting way

of categorizing the different kinds of professors she found at the university, based on how focused they were on students, depending on their goals and whether they were more interested in research or their teaching. These understandings of the different types of professors were clearly linked to her expectations, based on prior experiences of the feedback she obtained from different instructors. In the first of the October interviews, for instance, Kaori talked about an instructor who fell into the first category, distinguished by the way he had showed in class that he cared for students and that he truly wanted to communicate with them. She expected good feedback from this type of professor but noted that, in her opinion, there were very few instructors like this.

- J: Do you expect good feedback from this professor?
- K: Yes... I think so, but I am not sure.
- J: Why do you think you will get good feedback?
- K: Because the professor is that type to give feedback. He wants to have communication with students. During class he came to communicate with students and the first day he took pictures of everyone. The next day he remembered people's faces. Some professors care only about their own research but some professors can keep balance their own research and class... Caring professors are less (5%) and 50% [of professors are] average and 45% [of professors] care only about their stuff. (Kaori, October 2005, interview)

Two weeks later, when we talked about another instructor, I asked her again what kind of feedback she would expect from this instructor. This time she thought this instructor belonged in another category, and her expectations of the feedback she would receive reflected this.

- J: You said you expected good feedback [from the other professor] because he is a kind professor that... How about this professor? Do you feel the same way about him? Is he interested in communicating with you?
- K: Not as much as the professor for anthropology.
- J: Because?
- K: Because last time I said there is two types of profs. One is like, he cares, they care about the class, and students, and one don't...um the history prof is standing kind of middle, yeah between research and class yeah... He does not care about students as much as anthropology teacher. I think the history professor

focuses on students' opinion not on communication
(Kaori, October 2005, interview)

5.4.2 Institutional forces which were less understood

Although students did at times demonstrate that they were well aware of some of the institutional pressures that affected the feedback they received, there was also evidence that there were some elements of the institutional pressures mentioned by instructors which were less visible to them.

In brief, it seemed instructors were correct in saying that some things were simply not discussed with students, and not brought out in the open, leaving it up to students to interpret their consequences for the feedback they received. As a result, in the interviews, students sometimes provided explanations for issues related to their feedback that were interesting, but that I also knew were inconsistent with what I had observed and knew to be in fact issues linked to institutional pressures.

5.4.2.1 Things left unsaid: Grade distribution and its impact on feedback

As suggested by instructors, because of its nature as something that had to be left unsaid, it seems that unlike limited time, or resources, the grade distribution requirements were a case of an institutional force that was more difficult for students to become aware of, understand, and potentially criticize.

This was a slightly contradictory comment because, in fact, the issue of grade requirements was actually described in writing in some of the students' course syllabi. In these cases, the syllabi had a section explaining the need for and procedure behind grade distribution requirements. Some of these explanations were short, as in the example of this paragraph is found in the syllabus from a Psychology class taken by Kaito which read:

Final grades for this course must conform to a standard distribution sent by the Faculty of Arts. As such, marks may be curved to meet these requirements.

Others were much more detailed as was the case in a linguistic course taken by Naoko:

Following Faculty of Arts policy, final grades will be scaled to fit a typical grade distribution for an upper-level undergraduate course in the Faculty of Arts: about 20-30% "A", about 75% "A" and "B" combined, about 25% "C" and below. The grade distribution does not need to include any grades below "C"; I hope that I will not need to use "D" or "F" grades, though most years very small number of students get a "D" or "F".

Despite these paragraphs, however, in interviews, students usually rarely brought up the question of the grade distribution. When I asked them about it, there was evidence that students were aware of this regulation, and in particular the impact it had in terms of a midterm being "scaled up".³³ However, students did not seem aware of how this institutional requirement might have been affecting their feedback in the ways indicated by their instructors.

We can, for instance, contrast Kaito's explanations of why he thought his psychology instructors provided so much feedback focusing on the mechanics of his writing. When, near the beginning of the study, I asked him what the most important aspect of writing in psychology was, his first answer was: "It's all about the font and the formatting," referring to "fundamental rules of writing" in psychology (October 14, 2005, interview). He may well have been right in that this is exactly what the feedback was conveying as a message.³⁴ However, it was also clear he did not realize that there was also a less visible reason for focusing on details such as margins in that, as suggested by the TA, formatting was something that was easier to take marks off for than other aspects of the writing.

In another case illustrating the hidden impact of institutional pressures, a professor used "yellow stickies" to indicate the final mark that the students had received on their writing assignments. All other feedback provided on the text was provided in the form of handwritten comments added directly in the margins of the paper provided. Interviews

³³ Four of the five students discussed this process whereby the instructor had informed the class that students had done so poorly on an exam that the marks had been raised ("scaled up") to match an expected grade distribution. No incidents of "scaling down" marks (an announcement which would have likely been much less well received) were reported by students.

³⁴ See chapter 7 for more on what was being conveyed to students by the feedback they received.

with the instructor revealed what I had suspected. The “yellow stickies” were a strategy which allowed him to make sure that he would be able to go back and order papers and change things to make them fit the grade distribution as he did a final evaluation of the scores for his papers. Interestingly, when asked about the yellow post-it notes on their papers, students were completely unaware of the reasons why the professor had used this system.

A final example, illustrating students’ lack of knowledge regarding the impact of grade distributions on feedback and assessment practices came up in a conversation with Kaori, where we discussed a poor mark she had just received on her midterm exam. This exam had been based on a series of essays, but Kaori had only received minimal comments/explanations in the margins of her exam. Wanting to better understand why she had received such a low mark, and most importantly what she could do to improve her writing for the next exam, Kaori had actually gone to see her instructor at his office to ask about the exam and her writing. In reporting what her instructor had said about the way he had evaluated her writing/content, she expressed her surprise as she came to realize the subjectivity involved in receiving feedback on her writing, not on an individual basis, but on a comparative basis.

K: The instructor said that he looked at the content, and because I didn’t write enough I got that grade [on my exam.] My ideas were not sufficient when compared to other students. My reasons are not good enough compared to other students.

J: What do you think of this way of evaluating?

K: I think it's okay. It’s okay because I knew that I had not written enough, and my writing is lower than other students.

J: But if you were in a classroom with different students, it would mean that your marks would be higher or lower. If you're in a classroom with weaker students, does this mean that your mark would be higher?

K: (Laughs) It's weird, before I talked to you I didn’t notice that. I didn’t notice that it's unfair, but now, I think it's unfair. Comparing is very subjective. (December, 2005, interview)

5.5 Institutional pressures affecting the students themselves

Before ending this chapter, I would like to note that in addition to the pressures identified by professors there was evidence that students had their own sets of institutional pressures to deal with, which also affected how they interpreted and used the feedback they received.

5.5.1 Limited resources

As with the instructors, students were also participating in these feedback interactions with limited resources. Here I am referring to the limited amounts of time available to them as a result of heavy course schedules, as well as the importance that financial resources could have for how one worked through the challenges of writing and engaged with feedback on writing.

Scheduling and the lack of time to tackle all that they needed to do were, like the instructors in this study, a major theme that emerged when students talked about the challenges they faced with writing and dealing with their course work in general. Student interviews stressed the incredible number of hours they had to invest to keep up, not only with their writing, but also with the reading and research that was entailed in their courses.

The limitations imposed on students by their time constraints had a lot to do with the number of classes they were taking and the number of writing assignments they had to complete. Taking three classes with only one major writing assignment allowed Naoko, for instance, to invest almost all of her time in the second semester working more closely with her instructor, adjusting to his schedule to meet him. Additionally, time also meant that she was able to take her draft assignment to the Composition Institute and also consult other alternative sources of feedback such as friends (see Chapter 5).

For students like Kaori, who took five classes in the second semester, each with its own major writing assignment, or Hiro, whose course work involved great amounts of writing, engaging in feedback became a luxury that could not always be indulged, especially when they had to write four or five papers in close succession. When Hiro did

not do as well as he had hoped on one of his second semester papers, despite having started to work on it in early in January, his first reason given for not doing well was:

That was my fault. I was not able to get feedback from the Composition Institute. I also was not able to ask my roommates because they were too busy. (Hiro, April 2006, interview)

This sense of running out of time and the sacrifices this entailed were poignantly captured in an electronic chat conversation with Kaori who spoke of how her history course (only one of the five courses she was taking in the second semester) had in the end “stolen everything” from her by not only ruining two vacations (she had had to work on a paper and a take home exam) but also her birthday, the day of the final exam for the course.

K says: haha.. im also gonna enjoy the last few days of freedom, although I have to study chinese history

K says: but unless I become free from chinese history, i will never feel free, i think

J says: because of the prof? or the paper?

K says: the paper and exams. Did i tell you that i have the final of chinese history on my birthday??

J says: Oh no!!!!!!!!!!!! That is terrible, although I guess, after it is done, you will be able to celebrate for two reasons...(WHEN is your birthday?^)

K says: February 27th.. I have one more exam on the next day.

J says: Hmm.I guess the party will have to wait...

K says: I hope the prof will give me 'pass' as my B-day present but, I also think the prof might give me 'Fail' for my birthday present

K says: if the prof gave me 'F', i would curse him forever, coz he already stole two vacations from me, and stealing my birthday!!

(MSN electronic chat session, February, 2006)

As a general rule, the busier students were, the harder it became for them to write and take the time to engage in feedback practices, whether this meant going to see their instructor or asking a friend to provide quality feedback, this despite the importance they attributed to feedback.

5.5.1.1 Financial resources

Institutional forces affecting students also included those linked to financial resources in the form of scholarships and agreements regarding how much tuition would have to be paid by students. In the case of the focal participants, all had received a scholarship in recognition of their academic work at BMU from their home university. In the case of Yoshimi, this had been a determining factor in his staying at BMU for a second year. Financial resources not only made it possible to take “extra courses” to improve one’s writing, but also made it possible to hire tutors and editors, if needed, who could provide feedback on their writing and hence could replace the instructors as sources of valued and efficient feedback. None of the focal students took advantage of such services; however, informal conversations with other international students as well as regular students at BMU confirmed that the editors and tutors for hire, as mentioned in Chapter 4, could indeed be used. For approximately \$100 for a term paper of about 15 pages, one could receive editing and valuable feedback which would allow one to seriously improve the quality of the paper (the student I talked to received an A mark for his paper). An international graduate student from BMU informed me in an informal conversation about this research project that he was certain that his own paper which had been as one of the best of the year in his field would never have won the competition had he not made use of the editor he had been using for many years.³⁵

5.5.3 Institutional factors in the student exchange program

Last, the data revealed that students were made aware of some of the institutional debates linked to the very nature of the BMU-NDU exchange program in which the students were participating, debates that echoed those raised by instructors regarding the legitimacy of international students in regular classes. These debates also had an impact on students and how they interpreted feedback, and contributed to what I felt was their acknowledgement that feedback at BMU might not be what they really needed, and that they would have to support themselves on their own.

³⁵ In both of these cases, the students assured me that they definitely felt that they had written the papers in terms of coming up with the ideas and their organization. But the editors had fixed their language problems.

Although I had had a great deal of experience working in the first year option of the program, a well organized and well administered unit, I quickly came to realize through my conversations with the focal students, that there was a great deal of uncertainty and at times confusion about what the second year option of the program would actually represent and how it should be run.³⁶

Issues in need of clarification, raised by students throughout the eight months of the study, included various aspects of the exchange program such as: a) which credits would be transferred back to Japan,³⁷ b) what courses students could or actually should take, c) the impact and options this exchange would have for their degree on their return to Japan, and d) the long term consequences of this exchange for the strict regulations regarding “job-hunting” in Japan.

As a result of this uncertainty, students spent a lot of time talking with the Japanese administrators of the program, representatives from NDU living on campus at BMU, who served both as advisors and links to the administrative offices of their respective departments within their home university. One of these individuals included a Japanese professor, Dr. Marunouchi (Dr. M), who was particularly influential for the students throughout these conversations.

Dr. M was an energetic NDU professor who took a very active role in finding ways to improve the quality of the program the students were participating in. This commitment meant that he was eager to make sure that members of the exchange program were able integrate at all levels of participation at BMU, including attempts to make sure that more students from the program might be able to take “regular classes.”

Interviews with students revealed that Dr. M shared with them the arguments he had had with BMU concerning the presence of international students on campus and controversies linked to their status, access to classes, and debates about their skills. Students such as Yoshimi, for example, reported that Dr. M. had discussed with him the pressures the exchange program was under to negotiate greater access to regular class for

³⁶ I later found out that one of the Japanese representatives from NDU did not feel that the second-year option was beneficial for students. It is perhaps, therefore, not surprising to see that the following year, only seven students stayed on for a second year.

³⁷ I was surprised to learn that students were unclear about what credits would be transferred and how many would actually apply to their programs of study back home.

its students as well as greater recognition of their work at BMU through some kind of certificate.³⁸ I became convinced over the eight months of the research that these interactions contributed to students' sensitivity to instructor feedback, which indexed their identities as international students or non-native speakers, and seemed to have been part of a larger socialization process whereby students internalized the argument that their legitimacy as full time students was open to questioning, and that it was up to them to prove that they belonged (see Chapter 6 for more on the socialization of students into specific identities as international students).

Additionally, institutional rules linked to the running of the exchange program were also seen to impact the number of classes the students took, and, as suggested earlier, the amount of writing they had to deal with and the resources they had available to deal with it in terms of time.

A significant event occurred at the midpoint of the research project in November, when students were offered by Dr. M the possibility of returning to Japan and entering a graduate program at their home universities directly from their third year if they met certain criteria. These criteria were linked to their GPA averages in Japan and also the number of credits they had in specific areas on their return to Japan.

For many students this possibility was particularly enticing, and this option was a topic of numerous conversations throughout most of the Christmas break for all of the students. Ultimately, two of the students made significant changes to their programs of study to meet the criteria that had been outlined by Dr. M.

However, early in the beginning of the second semester, students were informed that NDU was no longer certain they would be able to deliver the graduate program as promised. Sadly, students received this information after the deadline had passed for making changes to their second semester schedules. As a result, many students were stuck in the second semester with courses that they had not originally intended to take.

This was particularly important in the case of Kaori, who ended up taking five courses (the maximum allowed) and who had dropped some of her intended courses in

³⁸ Focal students received credits in their home universities for their work at BMU, but received no formal transcripts or documents acknowledging their BMU coursework .

order to try to match the requirements described by Dr. M. By the time she received confirmation that a guaranteed entry for graduate school was no longer possible for her, it was too late to withdraw from classes and she was therefore left with an increased amount of work and writing. Unwilling to simply drop classes now that she had registered for them, Kaori persevered in her courses, but it made it very difficult for her to get feedback and engage in conversations, which I think would have actually served her better in achieving her goals to improve her writing.

Similarly, Naoko had registered at the last minute in a French course to fulfill the requirements for direct entry into graduate school. However, she was also informed after the deadline for course withdrawals that this French course could not count for her entry into graduate school because it involved one less contact hour than required by the criteria set up by NDU. Frustrated, Naoko did not drop her French class, but she did lose all motivation to study for this class, and invested her time (and interest in writing and feedback) in the one course she had left which she truly wanted to take.

5.6 Summary

Casanave (2003b) has emphasized the need to pay attention to the sociopolitical forces that affect how students and instructors construct their experiences of writing. This chapter has tried to do this by giving a sense of the larger conversations and pressures that surrounded the feedback students experienced in their content courses.

The insights from students and instructors allow us to retrace how institutional decisions such as grade distribution requirements or the number of hours required for the transfer of a credit can have in shaping, at least in part, the circumstances under which L2 students' get to write and how feedback practices will be exercised, interpreted and potentially used. These findings highlight the embedded nature of these literacy events as inseparable from the larger context from which they emerge (K. Hyland, 2005; K. Hyland & F. Hyland, 2006b).³⁹ Most importantly, as we start to understand better the tensions and conflicts that existed in this context, we also understand better why so many of the students' experiences with feedback were also in themselves full of contradictions,

³⁹ A more theoretical analysis of this link between feedback practices and a system of economic exchange is provided in Chapter 7.

uncertainties, and tensions. As controversial visitors, working in a system with limited resources, where individual achievement—with little need for linguistic support— was valued, we begin to understand how less-than-ideal feedback practices were often treated as normal.

Students may not have been fully aware of all the forces affecting them and their instructors, but students were aware that certain pressures perpetuated an image of themselves as imperfect students, potentially less deserving in content courses due to their language difficulties. This realization is important because it may well explain why students were willing to accept feedback that seemed to have many functions except perhaps the most important function of all: to help them become better writers.

Ultimately, I think they understood more quickly than I did what I had possibly been afraid to admit to myself as an instructor: that the less-than-ideal feedback practices they experienced might have been the best they could get, based on the institutional forces surrounding them. In other words, if feedback was not ideal, it may well have been because there was little support at the institutional level that could have made it so.

The final findings chapter that follows explores this theme further by looking in detail at how students interacted with the feedback they received, and exploring how these messages conveyed to students information about their roles and positions at BMU, and what this meant for their image of writing in a North American university.

Chapter 6: Feedback as a Socialization Process

6.1 Introduction

Having thus far established the larger patterns of feedback experienced by students and how institutional forces influenced these feedback practices this final findings chapter addresses my third research question and explores the role played by feedback practices in focal students' academic literacy socialization at BMU.

Drawing on language socialization's emphasis on the centrality of language in mediating newcomers entry and participation in a social group and the internalization of its rules (Duff, 2003; Duff & Hornberger, 2008; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2008; Watson-Gegeo, 2004; Zuengler & Cole, 2005), I focus in this chapter on how discursive features found in the feedback received by students helped index for students, both explicitly and implicitly, specific norms, preferences, and expectations linked to academic writing and development. Inspired by Kulick (2005, 2004), I also look at both what is present in the feedback and what is 'left out' and the implications these criteria also have for students' identities as L2 writers as well as their sense of what is valued in academic texts.

Through these analyses, I argue that feedback practices serve to reflect and reinforce information about "social identities, actions and stances" (Ochs, 1996), which mirror at the micro level, larger macro level discourses, including institutional conversations described in the previous chapter. Connections that tie feedback practices to their larger context and visions of writing and L2 writers are seen to explain how less-than-ideal forms of feedback described in Chapters 4 and 5 could become normalized practices whose greatest impact likely lies less in their pedagogic function than in their ability to reinforce specific stances and orientations at BMU.

6.2 Feedback mattered, but what was it actually doing?

As seen in previous chapters, through the eight months of this study, even when it was perceived as "less than ideal," feedback received from instructors on their writing mattered greatly to students. They paid attention to instructor feedback and did their best to understand what was being communicated. In fact, it also became obvious that even when it was deemed "not useful" that the feedback still had a great impact on students.

Therefore, one of the important questions which emerged early in study from these findings focused on what this might entail for the actual functions of instructor-based feedback. In other words, if in the majority of the cases instructor-based feedback was not providing students directly with “useful” information required to improve their writing, what was it actually doing?

Drawing on language socialization theory and its claim that “all interactions are potentially socializing contexts” (Schieffelin, 1990, p. 19), it seemed highly unlikely that these interactions were serving no purpose at all. On the contrary, although the students’ frequent characterizations of their feedback as not useful were a cause of concern, the analysis of the interviews revealed that even with problematic feedback, students were taking away important messages from comments received from instructors and coming to conclusions that were affecting their behavior and their approach to writing. Importantly, these messages did not always have specific relevance to the text in front of them, or even to discipline-specific writing conventions, but they did have tremendous impact on who they thought they were and what they felt they would have to do or be able to write for courses at BMU.

To help illustrate this pattern in the data, this chapter focuses on illustrative phenomena classified in the qualitative analysis of the data as falling under the key theme of socialization processes addressed in this chapter. While drawn from the larger data set collected during this study, the selection of a necessarily limited number of representative examples is in the interest of space only. Each example is provided with a combination of related interview excerpts and feedback samples to attempt to reconstruct accounts of feedback’s interaction with students’ goals, contexts and interpretations. These accounts demonstrate the power that feedback had to reflect and reinforce habitual ways of talking about and representing academic writing and L2 writers. They also illustrate how feedback also had definitive, if at times unexpected, consequences for students’ language socialization trajectories (Wortham, 2005).

6.3 Yoshimi’s case: Feedback constructing writing as an individual act

Perhaps one of the best examples of the powerful impact feedback could have on students’ lives was found in the case of Yoshimi during interviews held at the beginning

of the second semester after the winter break. These interviews allowed Yoshimi and me to discuss the mark and feedback he had received for the first of two major research papers to be written in his two-semester third-year history of philosophy course.

Each semester, Yoshimi's philosophy course required students to write a 2500-word paper on a major philosophical debate linked to influential thinkers discussed in the course. These papers were, according to Yoshimi, the longest texts he had ever had to write. They also represented a major challenge since he had had little writing experience in Japan, and because most of his courses in economics, both in Japan and at BMU, relied more often on mathematical skills than on essay writing skills. These papers were thus difficult to write for Yoshimi, and became a central focus of his studies at BMU. Despite the hard work entailed by these papers, Yoshimi revealed that he had taken this course specifically because he had hoped to improve his writing skills.

6.3.1 "I am not going back to Japan"

One of the reasons these conversations with Yoshimi stood out for me in the data collection process was because he revealed in these interviews that the feedback on this paper had "shocked" him and that as a direct result of this feedback he had decided to cancel an important trip to Japan originally scheduled during BMU's reading week in February.

This trip to Japan was a topic Yoshimi and I had discussed in the past. The trip would allow him to take an important securities test that could only be written in Japan at a specific time of the year. This test would be invaluable for the job hunting he was planning to do upon his return from Canada. Yoshimi had stressed the importance of this test by explaining that he had "spent about 50 to 60 hours studying" over the holidays for this securities test, "studying, all the time," so that he "didn't have an actual winter break" (January, 2006, interview).

When Yoshimi originally booked his trip to Japan to take this exam, he already knew that he had not done well on his first philosophy paper. At the time, although Yoshimi's paper had not yet been returned, he had been able to check his class average

on the university computer system, and had been able to deduce that he had not done well on the paper based on the low grade indicated for the course.

6.3.2 Explaining the weaknesses in one's writing

In the first interview of the second semester, I asked Yoshimi, whose paper at the time had not yet been returned, why he thought he had not done well on this first essay. Yoshimi listed his grammar and language difficulties as one possible reason. Significantly, however, this was not the only reason listed. He also mentioned that he knew that despite having had the paper read by three roommates, including one English major student, since they did not have any knowledge of the specific thinkers he had focused on that there might still have been problems with his ideas and paper. He also stressed that he had spent many hours working on the paper, but that he felt he had not had enough opportunities to meet with the instructor to discuss the paper and its topic.

One of the reasons Yoshimi deeply regretted not having been able to talk more with his instructor was that on the only occasion he had spoken with his instructor, one week prior to the paper's due date, he had had to change his topic based on the face-to-face feedback his professor had given him. At the time, Yoshimi had brought with him an outline of his paper. The professor had informed him that she felt his topic was too broad and had strongly recommended a different topic, with specific readings and information sources he should look at.

Although unhappy with the advice that he should completely change his topic, Yoshimi complied with his instructor and collected the references she had recommended. For Yoshimi, this had meant restarting his draft from the very beginning with only one week left before the paper was due. In light of the difficulties he had finding readings and writing quickly, he felt these events had also played a part in the low mark he knew he had obtained.

Last, importantly, despite these perceived reasons for his expected low mark on the paper, Yoshimi indicated that he felt he had worked hard and that he had put his best effort into writing this paper.

The interview excerpt that follows illustrates how some of these ideas were conveyed in the interview as we discussed how he might try to change things for this upcoming semester when he would once again have to write a paper in a similar style for the same instructor.

J: And uh you you mentioned, so now you know, right, so what are some of the things that now you know that you will do differently this semester to be able to get a better grade.

Y: I am going to better grade? Ah yeah...like I am going to talk to my prof more often, yeah, like, before I made a draft yeah... I should have talked to her more, like otherwise, like last semester, like one week before due date I had to change my subject completely, yeah, yeah...that's why I got a lower grade I think yeah. So I try to talk and go to office hour, yeah

J: Did you do as well as you had expected?

Y: Uh, like, you mean, grade or effort? Depends, I did really like try to, like how to say, like study hard, yeah because like I spent so much time for only this course. Maybe, I took 3 [courses] right and maybe I spent 60% of the studying hours for this course
(January, 2006, interview)

In summary, Yoshimi's account of the problems he had had with his writing included references to the notions of effort, the actual series of events that surrounded the writing of the text, and the nature of the interactions that he had and others he had not had with the professor. In essence, what is interesting in this account is that his predicted poor performance for this paper was linked not only to Yoshimi himself, or to his language difficulties, but also to a complicated account of effort, making the right decisions about his topic and the presence or absence and impact of dialogue with the professor and alternative sources of feedback (friends who could correct his grammar, and language, but who did not have the disciplinary background to provide input on ideas). In the next section, I describe the actual feedback and grade he received.

This construction of writing by students as something complicated, which they worked hard at, but which under the best conditions required interaction with instructors and others, and which was linked to contextual factors was a recurrent theme in all focal-students' interviews. What I would discover in the case of Yoshimi however, is that the

feedback received on papers could have an impact on students' accounts of what made their writing complicated.

6.3.3 Getting feedback: The instructors' account of what went wrong

In our second interview of the second semester, Yoshimi announced to me that his paper had finally been returned. I immediately looked forward to finally being able to discuss the feedback it would contain. I came to the interview knowing that the feedback would most likely focus on negative points since we already knew the mark had been low. Nonetheless, I was taken aback when Yoshimi began the interview by first informing me that as a result of this feedback he had changed his mind about the important trip to Japan to take the securities test. When I asked him why he had cancelled the trip, Yoshimi simply replied that he wanted to spend all his time working on the next essay for his history of philosophy class. In seeking to understand how receiving feedback on his paper could have had such an impact, we went over the feedback he had received.

Yoshimi had received a final mark of 52% for the paper, and a series of comments which included, after the first page: thirteen separate marks (underlined words, inserted articles, etc., and no major feedback comment) on the first page of his paper, followed on page 2 with the first substantive comment which read: *"I'll stop correcting your grammar & your prose style, but it needs serious work."* Page two contained one inserted article, and three underlined sections identified with question marks. Page three had one comment about the use of a long quote *"No need for this long quote"* and a marginal *"AWK"* written next to a paragraph. Three series of words/sentence structures had been struck out, and one misspelled word (*low* instead of *law*) was circled on page four. Page five had no comments; page six contained a single question mark next to one of Yoshimi's paragraphs, accompanied by the following statement in the margin: *"Not what is meant by these terms."* Finally, page seven had one final end comment which read:

You have chosen good sources and show some understanding of the debates at issue, but your presentation of the ideas is very difficult to follow, bordering on being incomprehensible in places. I suggest you go to writing clinics and consider extra tutoring.

The final references page contained three check marks and a final comment at the end of the page which read “GOOD.”⁴⁰

In analyzing the discursive features of the teacher’s feedback we can observe how the orientation of the feedback is highly focused on an evaluation of Yoshimi’s language skills, echoing the larger pattern described and observed by students in the study who complained that feedback focused too often on language while ignoring their ideas (see Chapter 4). We also have an extreme categorization of his writing as “almost incomprehensible,” and the implied reference to the fact that it was so bad that she would simply stop commenting on the prose after the first page.

In talking with Yoshimi about this response, a number of the typical problems focal students had with instructor feedback emerged in the interview (see Chapter 5). First, as illustrated in the short excerpt below, it became clear that Yoshimi was having trouble reading and understanding the meaning of the more telegraphic notes found in the margins of the pages. Yoshimi was unsure why certain sections had been underlined or circled or identified with question marks,⁴¹ and he had difficulties reading what was said.

- Y: She says... “I’ll stop correcting your grammar, and...
“punct--???” (struggles with the word)...I don’t...
J: Maybe prose? Prose style.
Y: But it needs...“Something?...Work?”
J: Can you read it?
Y: Yeah, almost.

⁴⁰ Yoshimi did not fail to note that this positive response was to be expected in light of the fact that these were the very sources this instructor had assigned to Yoshimi when he had been asked to change his topic for his final paper.

⁴¹ In Japan, teachers do not use check marks to indicate a correct answer, but rather use circles. This was another example of a cultural difference that caused confusion for students in the study.

The one thing that he was sure of, however, was that for him the final comment was important and that it had played a defining role in his decision to cancel his trip. The transcript of our conversation as we addressed this final comment follows below.

- J: One question is how important do you think that final sen-paragraph is for you?
- Y: uh most important
- J: the most [important
- Y: [yeah more than like grade
- J: oh [interesting, good...that was my second question
- Y: [yeah yeah yeah yeah
- J: What do you look at first?
- Y: (Points to the comment)
- J: uh...because..
- Y: Because I am not sure... because I can get feedback right, even though I know the grade. I cannot tell like how much I did. Like yeah, if yeah like professor like says some comment. Yeah. It's more helpful to improve my skill right. Yeah... But this is not not not helpful
- J: This is not help--(laughter from both of us)
- Y: Yeah no...
- J: Because?
- Y: Because like she's saying totally, like because of my grammar and skill, English skill. Yeah the reason. Yeah... Like, I can understand right yeah so it's not helpful because...because, not like, she's not evaluating my paper, yeah, OR just it's my fault right, because I couldn't meet her expectation yeah that's why... She like couldn't evaluate my content yeah, yeah so...I think my fault yeah. So yeah I should improve my more writing skills. (January, 2006, interview)

In this excerpt, we find two general themes raised by all focal students regarding their perceptions of feedback. First, students valued but struggled to make sense of feedback. Marks mattered, sometimes a lot, but so did the comments they received, even if they could be hard to decipher. Second, students valued a response to their ideas and content over comments on their language.⁴²

As a result, in this specific case, this was clearly not the kind of feedback Yoshimi was looking for. Ideal feedback he suggests would have had the instructor orienting herself to something other than his “grammar and skills” and his “incomprehensible” writing. We see this in how he comments explicitly on what the instructor has failed to address in her comment: the paper itself and its content, its ideas. She is not, in his opinion, “evaluating my paper.” It is all “totally” his grammar and skill. He can “understand,” he suggests, but there is a strong sense that this is not what he would have desired.

From a socialization perspective, this first example represents a socialization pattern for feedback where professors invoke L2 students’ deficient linguistic skills as a feature of their writing that takes precedence over the validity of the ideas contained in their writing and the need to respond to these (see further examples and greater development of this idea in Section 7.4.1).

We also find in this excerpt a second pattern of socialization seen in the feedback received by students in the study. Repeatedly, the discourse of the feedback seemed to depict writing development as something that was linked to the writers’ individual skills, and which was to be improved alone, or at least separated from the content courses. This message often worked in direct opposition to students’ constructions of learning to write that highlighted its more social, collaborative, situated and disciplinary dimensions.

The power of feedback to impose this individual view of writing is seen in how Yoshimi rewords the professor’s account of his writing as problematic in the above excerpt, and that this problematic nature is his fault. This new explanation of the problems with his writing, a direct reaction to the feedback he has received, is much

⁴² I would like to stress here that this does not mean that students were not aware that language affected their ability to convey their ideas; on the contrary, they were very aware of this, but it still did not take away from their fundamental desire to receive a response to these.

simpler than the account he had previously given before getting this feedback. This time, he has not done well because he is a student that needs to “improve his writing skills,” skills that are lower than those expected by the instructor.

What is interesting is what has remained unsaid in this second evaluation by Yoshimi of what has gone wrong. Missing are any considerations of the unique series of events surrounding the creation of this paper, the effort and time invested in the paper, the fact that he was not able to talk to his professor as much as he would have liked, or that his topic was changed at her request at the last minute, and so forth. Rather, it is the teacher’s construction of writing as something that is linked exclusively to the writer’s individual skills that is picked up. It is up to him and him alone to “improve his writing skills.” It is all just his responsibility.

This power of feedback to work as a force socializing students to see writing development as an individual act separated from what is happening in the content classroom is further noted in the discursive choices found in the advice given by the instructor to Yoshimi regarding what can be done to deal with the problems found in this writing. The use of the second person singular *you* in the instructor’s solution to Yoshimi’s problem reinforces a view that bases the evaluation of writing on those actions that he alone, has taken or that he alone must take in the future. *You* need to go to the writing clinics. *You* need to get the extra tutoring. Significantly as well, none of these recommended actions include the instructor or even aspects of the course itself as a potential source of support (or as components in the larger process of helping him to learn to write at BMU).

These discursive choices on the part of the instructor do convey implicit messages regarding how writing is to be learned at BMU. Writing is something you might learn with others, through writing clinics and extra tutoring, but not necessarily, it seems, with the content instructors of the courses you are writing for.⁴³

Finally, we see as well how the very format of the feedback (handwritten notes that are hard to decipher for students) might also have helped reinforce students’ limited

⁴³ Interestingly, this is exactly the view of writing that Kaito had developed of writing development at BMU (see Chapter 6).

expectations of mediation or support on the part of instructors. Although most likely unintended, over time the complicated, non dialogic, and often cryptic nature of handwritten feedback created an association for students between writing feedback from content instructors and confusion, lack of comprehension, and frustration. The challenges students had reading handwritten comments may seem minor when compared to the importance of what feedback actually focused on. However, I would argue that the cumulative effect of this association over time, in conjunction with other explicit and implicit messages about how busy instructors were, and whose responsibility it was to work on writing (*go to the writing center*, versus *come and see me*), cannot be dismissed.

In summary, the distance that existed between content instructors and students was at least partly exacerbated through discursive choices in the feedback that encourage students to look for help elsewhere while at the same time discouraging students from seeing their content instructors as valid and legitimate participants in the processes of writing development at BMU. These message clearly indexed the larger institutional debates found in interviews with instructors regarding the degree of support, skills or rewards available to content instructors to help make helping students with writing part of their job (see Chapter 6).

Yoshimi, in the end, did not benefit from the dialogue, conversation, and interaction that students like him had identified as the most useful kind of feedback, and as the key to success with writing. On the contrary, the enduring message from this feedback was that if he were going to improve, it would be something that he would have to do alone.

6.4 Feedback and the consequences of focusing on language errors

6.4.1 Feedback focusing on students' non-native identity

One of the other important themes hinted at in Yoshimi's case was the way students perceived teacher feedback that focused predominantly on the "non-native" quality of their writing. We have seen that feedback that regularly focused on students' language difficulties frustrated students' desire for a fuller response from professors to their ideas and the content of their papers. It also reinforced for students a view of their writing that was often resisted by them in interviews: the notion that all non-standard and problematic

aspects in their texts could be attributed to some kind of L2 writing effect or their non-native status. In other words, feedback that focused predominantly on students' non-native language problems not only failed to engage the students at the level of ideas, but also sent important messages to students about how L2 writing and writers were being positioned by their instructors.

An example of the way students reacted to feedback that focused explicitly on their non-native status includes Kaori's reaction to feedback received on her final anthropology paper written in the second semester. Kaori's paper contained the following advice provided in the form of an end comment: *"Many ESL mistakes! You need to proofread carefully and possibly work with a native speaker of English."*

In interviews, Kaori characterized this feedback in the following way: *"I feel so disappointed, because I could fix my mistakes, if I had time. But in this semester I got 4 papers, and I didn't have time to correct my mistakes"* (Kaori, April 2006, interview).

What is interesting in this response is Kaori's subtle restatement of the problem identified by her instructor with her writing. In fact, for her, it is not simply a question of "ESL mistakes" or the absence of native speaker feedback. It is also a matter time and the realities of a heavy schedule that prevented her from fixing mistakes she felt she could have fixed on her own without a native speaker.

Similarly, Hiro received the following feedback on the second page of his final paper for a political science course. *"Lots of little writing errors. I won't continue to edit particularly as I suspect that English is not your first language. You've done a good job this far."* In a more detailed interview excerpt below, it is interesting to note Hiro's interpretation of this comment.

J: Uh...what do you think of that comment?

H: So... it isn't my first language so... In that sense I was doing good, but that's...um that seems to be what she is saying.

J: Yeah, why do you think she said that?

H: I don't know... She is just trying to... I mean she is just trying to not to discourage me or some kind of stuff.

J: Is it working?

H: Uh...sure I don't know but...

J: Let's put it this way if...do you think...uh...I think you are right she is trying to encourage you.

H: Yeah maybe (laughs)

J: Do you think it is a good comment to write?

H: I don't think so, like, yeah. It doesn't matter it is my first language or my second language, you know. I am taking the same course as the other students right. Yes. So yeah, I don't know.

J: Does it mean that she is not marking the same way?

H: I don't think so, she was marking the same way...or I hope so but I don't know (April, 2005, interview)

If indeed the purpose of the feedback was to encourage Hiro, it seems uncertain whether this goal has been achieved. More importantly, this feedback has brought out Hiro's resistance to an implied message he has picked up from this comment regarding his difference from other students in the class. What he has understood is that she has not only focused her feedback on his language, but also on the fact that he is a second language writer, and that this has led to him being potentially treated differently. This is not, he notes, a good comment to write. He may have some L2 writing problems, but he does not like the difference being implied between him and other students.

References to students' non-native status were prevalent in the feedback received by students as were students' display of resistance, in co-construction with me in the interviews, to messages which they felt, in combination with a heavy focus on language aspects of their writing, overemphasized a limited view of L2 writers as the producers of problematic writing worthy of high degrees of correction and different sets of expectations in terms of what should be focused on in the writing and how it might be evaluated.

This perspective students had of how their writing was being responded to in light of their identities as L2 writers is perhaps best illustrated in Yoshimi's account of an

incident that occurred in one of the rare moments he was able to talk face-to-face with his instructor to discuss a draft of his philosophy paper in the second term. In the interview, Yoshimi discussed how even after having had his draft proofread by native speakers he had been confused by the instructor's tendency to identify errors in his language and to change his words and replace them with her own words.

- Y: She helps me based on her way of writing so like sometimes it's like I think I should talk to her more yes.
- J: Because?
- Y: Because I don't know even though maybe I tried my best to write in my own words and phrase, since she thinks I am an exchange student right so she thinks I'm not good at writing yet because like...
- J: So so so you mean th- that if you weren't an exchange student you don't think that she would change so much?
- Y: No I don't think so because when I asked her to, I asked her to look at this part and then she said, "we don't say this, 'the imaginary economy'". 'The imaginary economy' is like the only Keynes says. Actually then I said that this is from the article. And so she said, "Oh really"!
- J: Because at first... You're saying she said you should change this and write this phrase because nobody says this, but when you said that this comes from the article she said it was okay.
- Y: (Laughs) So I thought that since I am an exchange student she is thinking that I'm having trouble writing because...like...right after I left her office she was saying yeah... I told her that the writing center doesn't change so many phrases, just looks at the grammatical things and she said, then you should look, talk to your classmates or someone who is really good at writing
- J: What do you think of that comment?
- Y: Hmmm like, I don't know kinda like complicated. (April, 2006, interview)

In this case, although Yoshimi believed that his instructor was trying to help him, he notes how this is "based on her way of writing" as well as her perception of himself as an exchange student. Of note here, again, is the resistance demonstrated to feedback that seems to be reinforcing a judgment of their writing and/or identity they disagreed with. This time, Yoshimi took advantage of the dialogic nature of face-to-face feedback to do

something that would have been impossible with handwritten feedback as he explained to his instructor that he felt he had in fact chosen the right expression. In doing so, we might suggest that Yoshimi's feedback to the feedback can be seen as a subtle attempt to socialize his instructor and resist her socialization and positioning. Yoshimi's argument that he has chosen correct terms, found in the literature, not only justifies his choice of words, but attempts to demonstrate to his teacher that what has been identified as a "language problem" can be something else, something actually more complex, involving choices and factors which go beyond a lack of native fluency in English, and yet which are misunderstood in the feedback he is receiving.

The limits of this resistance however, and the power of the instructors' feedback in socializing students into a different vision of themselves and their writing, is seen in Yoshimi's description of himself in the eyes of his instructor as "an exchange student" who is "not good at writing yet." This socializing effect is further felt when we see that Yoshimi has clearly kept in mind his instructor's advice to look for someone who is "really good at writing" with its implied message that he himself does not fall in this category.

The type of feedback discussed here is indeed, as suggested by Yoshimi, "complicated." Yoshimi stated in this interview that he was certain that if he had not been there, in front of his instructor, during this reading of his draft, that the teacher would have been left with the impression that he had not used the right term. He understood that this would have happened not only because the term was unconventional, but also because the use of an unconventional term combined with his identity as a second language writer meant that there would be a lack of trust in his writing. This, I would argue, was a key message conveyed to focal students in this study by this kind of feedback, and one of the factors that contributed to students' resistance to feedback that focused predominantly on their language errors and/or their non-native status. Further evidence of the long-term effect of this type of message is discussed in the next section.

6.4.2 Long term impact of being reminded that they were “non-native” writers with writing problems

In the previous section, specific cases of feedback and comments on students’ assignments and related interview comments could be seen to reinforce a perception of themselves as non-native writers closely associated with language errors and assumed weaknesses in their texts. Although more difficult to prove, there were also signs of longer-term effects of these types of messages for students’ general view of themselves and their hopes for writing development in the future.

Indeed, despite evidence in interviews of students often responding to feedback by providing alternative accounts of why they had made mistakes, or how they had been misunderstood by their instructors, interview data revealed that students often reported an image of themselves as L2 writers with language problems who were different from regular students, and hence would never be able to write well.

This theme emerged most strongly in my final interviews with students when I asked them how, based on their experiences writing at BMU, they would characterize what being an international student represented for them. In answering this question, all talked about the difference in status that separated international and exchange students from regular students. Significantly, this difference included a close association of international students with language and writing problems. I felt great sadness, for instance, when I heard the very first point raised by Yoshimi in his answer to this question after close to two years as an international student at BMU.

J: How would you describe or define what an international student is?

Y: International student? Uh, international student is like...language problem. Yeah if we don’t act positively...we can never be successful. (April 2006, interview).

Further qualifying this definition and demonstrating that this definition was partly rooted in his writing experiences (and, I would argue, feedback he had received), Yoshimi added: “Writing like an international student is not appropriate, but it is difficult because it is impossible to be perfect”. He also added, in an almost perfect reiteration, the feedback he had received

that international students “need to get help to get the native style [that] is important” but that they do “not know” (April, 2006, interview).

Also indexing a strong association between international students and language problems, Naoko firmly believed near the end of the study that international students received special treatment from teachers because of their language problems. For Naoko this was a “hidden rule” that meant that international students would not be marked the same way as regular students (April 2006). This sense of being treated differently because of lower expectations due to assumed language problems was also seen in Hiro’s assessment of the way papers might be marked differently by his instructor.

J: In terms of how these [papers] will be marked, do you have any sense that the fact that you are an international student may make a difference in how these will be marked.

H: Maybe yes. I think so. His expectation might be lower than for domestic students. (March 2006, interview)

Worse, perhaps, was the sense in this data that “good writing” for these students had become constructed as an impossible task because of their non-native status. Repeatedly, this became one of the central themes of students’ beliefs about writing at BMU. Reflecting the multiple times they had been referred to as non-native speakers and identified as weak writers because of their language problems, writing well was seen as an achievement that did not apply to them, and rather was the purview of native speakers alone. Kaito captured this feeling perfectly near the end of the study as he noted how he and other focal students had come to the following conclusion.

There are some things that I cannot actually learn. Because I am using a second language. It is impossible to have perfect writing. The best, most important thing I have to do is talk to them [native speakers] to correct my language. Others, like Kaori and Yoshimi agree...even if you are a good writer we always make mistakes all the time. We need to get native speakers to correct our grammar and organization. (Kaito, March 2006)

In summary, I believe we see here the long-term risks incurred when those providing feedback forget that L2 students’ texts, including their non-standard language, are the results of deliberate meaning making and informed decisions, based on

knowledge and non-linguistic factors that can for students make sense and that go beyond their identities as non-native speakers. Whereas this does not take away from the importance of informing students when their writing does not make sense, it suggests instructors must be careful not to assume they can easily identify the reasons why problems may be occurring.

Significantly, students rarely found feedback that reminded them of their non-native status ideal in helping them learn to write. Moreover, it reinforced feelings that instructors saw them primarily as students with language problems to be treated differently from native speakers. Conversely, this type of feedback seemed to contribute to closing down the possibility that there might have been other reasons for the students' choice of language, including the possibility for these students to manipulate linguistic resources in sophisticated and innovative ways, even if these may have remained nonetheless marked and non-native. As such, we have here our first indication that feedback had the power to question the legitimacy of L2 students at BMU, and more importantly, to discourage them from seeing writing as something they as non-native speakers could achieve.

6.5 The impact of feedback on students' socialization as writers

In addition to evidence that showed feedback influenced students' general views of writing and of themselves as L2 writers, interviews revealed how these perspectives could affect and radically transform the decisions students took about how they approached their writing. Examples of this effect are discussed in the following sections and demonstrate once more the complex consequences of instructors' regular focus on surface-level grammatical and stylistic errors.

6.5.1 The importance of making sure everything is correct

Feedback that predominantly identified sentence-level grammar mistakes, no matter how small, sent powerful message to students about the importance of making sure that they had grammatically correct sentences. As noted earlier, at its most basic level, this reinforced for students the idea that form and conventions were important and mattered

as key elements of their writing success and their potential positioning in the eyes of instructors.

Evidence of this message being conveyed to students is seen in the explicit advice Kaito received from the Japanese PhD student from whom he received feedback on some of these writing assignments. An e-mail sent to Kaito accompanying electronic feedback of a draft of a text Kaito was working on informed him that although his content was adequate, he should now focus on editing his language, an important step in writing a paper especially for “people like us.”

I think your paper has enough contents (ideas, discussions, etc), so at this point you should spend more time on editing things rather than including new material. Editing is really important for people like us (non-native speakers) because we can confuse readers very easily with tiny grammatical errors. (PhD student e-mail, second last e-mail received by Kaito, no date provided)

Although it is arguably true that correct form and accuracy are an important part of academic writing, it is interesting to note how this rule is applied in its elaboration for Kaito to include the power of even “tiny grammatical errors” to potentially “confuse readers.” More important perhaps is also the way message is prefaced by the assertion that this rule applies in particular to non-native speakers, with its suggestion that they might be most affected by this phenomenon. The implication seems to be that careful editing and the dangers of tiny grammatical mistakes are not something native speakers on the other hand have to worry about as much.

As a PhD student and fellow international student, this individual represented a role model to Kaito, and this message seemed to confirm what he and other focal students often suspected: not only did attention to form matter in academic writing, it may well have been more important than content.

6.5.2 Naoko’s case: Choosing to sacrifice content for form

Messages such as the one discussed above had a powerful impact on students and the decisions they made regarding what they were willing to sacrifice to produce “clean” texts. An interesting example of this power emerged in the case of Naoko’s work for her final anthropology paper in the second semester.

The interview excerpt that follows occurred when we discussed the feedback Naoko received on her final anthropology paper in the second semester. Early in the second semester, Naoko had completed a shorter written assignment for this class. Typical of the feedback received by all focal students, the feedback Naoko had received on this smaller paper largely attended to small grammatical corrections, including word choices, errors identified through circled or underlined sections, and alternate wording and structures provided by the instructor.

In interviews, Naoko made it clear that she would pay careful attention to this feedback in deciding what would be important to focus on for her next paper. Moreover, as suggested in Chapter 5, Naoko was determined to produce a good paper, and invested heavily in preparing for her second and final written assignment. To achieve her goals, Naoko visited her professor, sought feedback on her paper from both the Composition Institute and language monitors at a local computer lab, and regularly asked me for advice on the topic and the organization of her ideas.

Despite her best efforts, a crucial moment for Naoko emerged in the interviews a week before the final paper had to be handed in. In our interview, Naoko revealed that she felt she was making good progress with the paper, but that she had to make an important decision regarding what to include in the final version of the paper. Naoko had just run across readings that contained new data related to the argument she had planned to make for her paper. Importantly, these more recent articles presented important criticisms of her main thesis based on older research. The dilemma for Naoko was to decide what to do with this new information.

This was not an easy decision for her. On the one hand, Naoko wanted to represent the best ideas possible in her paper. On the other hand, Naoko was convinced that integrating the new information at such a late time would “mess up” the organization and the language of her argument that she had already spent a great deal of time constructing and getting proofread. She feared that this in turn she feared would negatively affect the quality of her paper in her instructor’s eyes.

After much hesitation, Naoko later informed me that she had decided to withhold from her final paper the most recent data she had discovered. Naoko knew in making this

decision that she was taking a risk. She had chosen to omit from the paper literature that was more recent and whose arguments made a crucial difference for her central thesis. In fact, she was quite nervous that her professor would notice the missing information.

In reflecting on this decision from a language socialization perspective, Naoko's decision demonstrates how she had learned that the value of producing texts which avoided any grammar mistakes, and which were clear and easy to read as the most important part of academic writing in her classes. In other words, Naoko's socialization into the ways and conventions of academic discourse had convinced her that it was less risky to have a well-organized and structured paper than it was to have a paper with accurate ideas but with the potential for more language problems. I have no doubt that this was a lesson she had learned in part from the fact that language and grammar had been the central focus of much the feedback she had received in content courses at BMU across various disciplines.

Ultimately, both Naoko and I were very curious to see what kind of feedback she would get on her paper. In the end, Naoko received a very good mark on her paper: A-. This mark was accompanied with 86 feedback items, including seven substantive comments, 54 comments focused on editing her writing, 20 check marks and a rather positive final end comment which read:

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!

In our interview, I inquired about how she interpreted this feedback and the consequences of her decisions. Naoko noted that, ultimately, although there was indeed a comment focusing on the need for her to be more specific about her sources (she had in fact been deliberately vague to avoid discussing the contradictory evidence), the feedback did not address the missing information at all. She interpreted this to mean that the instructor had valued her clear and well-organized writing while not noticing the missing content in her paper. She therefore felt she had made the right decision.

As illustrated in the interview excerpt below, we see that it was both what was present in the feedback as well as what was absent which worked to reinforce for Naoko a particular view of writing.

- J: What were the negative things you had expected?
- N: I wrote down some uh example, and it's too much information for me so I just kind of erased, erased, erased, and I just wrote so, broad thing. But, he mentioned about that.
- J: uh huh
- N: You should be more specific, and yeah, give more examples. Yeah, before that he also told me like that, so this time too (laughs).
- J: So you knew about it but you took them out because?
- N: Because it takes so long time and I was kind of... (laughs) I don't know...ignore the information (laughs)
- J: Interesting
- N: But he doesn't mention that I used the old resources so... I was expected maybe he's going to mention about that. But he didn't say.
- J: Why do you think he didn't mention it?
- N: I don't know, but I guess, if I put that data it's going to be mess this paper. and it's not going to be organized, so I think that point, maybe. (laughs)
- J: So are you saying that maybe organization is more important than the...
- N: Organization is more important than yeah, than the fact. (we both laugh)
- J: That's interesting isn't it? Do you think that's true? That way you write and how you organize is more important?
- N: Yeah, yeah, I think so.
- J: Good fresh ideas but...
- N: Before, the fact. (April, 2007, interview)

This excerpt brings out the power of what is left unsaid in feedback in socializing students. I strongly suspect that Naoko's instructor would never have guessed that his feedback, in conjunction with the combined effect of feedback received in the past, might contribute indirectly to Naoko's understanding academic writing as an activity that places organization and structure over the values of ideas, or even the value of using recent and

more interesting literature. In fact, I strongly suspect that this is not at all what the professor would have wanted her to learn from his feedback. Yet this is the message she has internalized. Therefore, this example highlights the unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of language socialization processes, as well as feedback's long-term and cumulative impact beyond the draft of a specific text.

More important perhaps is that Naoko's example demonstrates how feedback practices have socialized her into what is arguably an unrealistic or incorrect construction of what academic writing represented at BMU. There is indeed value in pointing out errors and mistakes made to grammar punctuation and usage at the sentence level. However, when this is the predominant focus of the feedback, what is left unsaid and unexplored is the understanding that good academic writing is much more than simply good grammar and spelling. Research on academic genres has in fact clearly shown that good academic writing involves a complex configuration of textual and grammatical features, much of which works at the larger text level beyond the sentence to create a text's academic nature (K. Hyland, 2000; Martin, 1993; Ravelli & Ellis, 2004; Swales, 2004). This, of course, is in addition to the fact that in the end, we would all hope that the quality of a text should depend at least as much on the strength of its ideas as on its form. In other words, form may be necessary, but is not sufficient, just as ideas are necessary but not sufficient to create good writing.

6.6 Feedback constructing writing as a transparent practice to be learned implicitly in content courses

In a final example of how feedback practices served to socialize students into particular understandings of what academic writing represented and how it might be approached, I look at the implicit messages conveyed to students by feedback that tended to identify problems but did not offer concrete solutions.

As suggested in Chapter 4, students often complained about feedback received from instructors where errors were identified, but no solutions were offered to help them deal with the error. Kaori showed me, for example, a small writing assignment that had been returned in her history class. Next to one of the answers she had written to a list of questions was written a single comment: *"use your own words!"*

A review of the paragraph made it clear that this comment was motivated by the fact that Kaori had essentially constructed her answer by placing together a collection of sentences and terms found in her textbook for the course. When discussing this, although Kaori acknowledged the advantages of using her own words, she pointed out that this kind of feedback was far from useful to her since it provided no specific details regarding how she might actually do what she was being asked to do. In other words she knew she had to paraphrase, but was not sure how to face this task which represented for her and other students a considerable challenge.⁴⁴

The data revealed that when it came to the assumption that students would be able to use minimal comments identifying problems to figure out what they needed to do on their own, nothing could have been further from the truth. On the contrary, students repeatedly stated in interviews that they were not sure what they were doing or needed to do. As suggested in Chapter 4, on many occasions, students were writing different types of texts for the first time and there was a lot of guessing as to what needed to be done for the various assignments they were completing. In the majority of cases, simply identifying a problem thus did nothing to help them move away from this guesswork approach to improving as L2 writers.

Nonetheless, from a language socialization perspective, this type of feedback did succeed in doing three things. First, it further normalized the idea that writing development was something done without assistance from content instructors (adding force to explicit messages related to this such as those found in Yoshimi's case). Second, this type of feedback strengthened for students the idea that writing development was something that occurred in content courses *with little or no explicit discussions* of the specific language rules and skills required to put together successful texts. Last, unless students were given a chance to inform their instructors otherwise, this type of feedback also carried with it the assumption that it was enough for students to be told there was a problem because a) students should either already know the solution, and/or b) the solution was obvious and/or could be intuited by writers over time.

⁴⁴ All students in the study stressed the difficulties of rewriting in their own words ideas presented in complicated English that they also knew were already perfectly well written.

Thus, not only did this pattern of feedback reduce students' chances of understanding what they needed to do or their ability to perceive such feedback as "useful," it also marginalized students by highlighting their lack of knowledge and thus non-membership in a community where it was suggested the knowledge they desired would have been obvious for its legitimate members.

6.6.1 Kaori's case: "Fortunately, this only requires practice"

A good illustration of feedback working to socialize students in the ways described above was found in the feedback Kaori received on her final history paper. Like Naoko's anthropology paper, this history paper written in the second semester at BMU became an important piece of writing for Kaori. Kaori's history class had stretched over two semesters, and throughout its various assignments and exams Kaori had experienced frustration with her professor, who she felt was particularly insensitive to the challenges faced by L2 students. Kaori had complained, for example, that his lectures contained absolutely no visual supports, and that he had refused to provide any notes from his lectures, even after she and others in the class had asked him for some. His feedback on assignments had also often discouraged Kaori because of its minimal nature, which she felt often made it hard to understand why how he had assessed her writing, especially on the written sections of midterm exams.⁴⁵

Although Kaori considered dropping this class on a number of occasions, she remained in the course. Despite her reservations about her instructor, Kaori had discovered a strong interest in the course content focusing on the history of South America. Consequently, despite her heavy schedule with five courses, each requiring a final paper, Kaori concentrated greatly on this paper whose topic, although complicated, held a lot of appeal for her. Although she never had time to bring it to the composition center or show it to friends to obtain feedback on her first drafts, she did report working on it extensively and discussing her arguments with friends, and classmates.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ This professor in particular had from the beginning been a source of stress for Kaori (he was the one that did not provide any feedback at all on his midterm and who had "stolen" her vacations and birthday).

⁴⁶ Although this was not stated explicitly in the interviews, I also strongly suspected that Kaori's investment in this paper was linked to her desire to prove herself to her instructor, who had regularly given her poor marks on her midterms and her writing prior to this final assignment.

Kaori looked forward to seeing what feedback she would receive on this paper. She received a mark of C for this paper. The paper contained 40 incidences of feedback. The large majority of these (23) fell into the category of minimal feedback marks in the shape of checks, underlined sections, circles, and question marks with no accompanying comment to clarify these. Fifteen feedback items focused explicitly on elements related to Kaori's language/writing (e.g., editing or rewriting a word or expression). A single substantive response asking Kaori whether "the notion of 'race'" was "indigenous or borrowed from the west" was found in the body of the paper. Most importantly, a final end comment on the page of the paper read as follows:

Kaori,

What is impressive about this essay is your willingness to grapple with complex and difficult ideas, such as "race", "trans-nationalism" & "Pan-Americanism". You are closely attuned to the importance of argumentation in intellectual discourse, and your approach is admirably analytical. What is holding you back & preventing you from achieving higher marks is your inability to express yourself well in written English. On many occasions, it is difficult to understand what you're trying to say. Fortunately, this is a problem that can only requires (sic) practice in order to resolve. If you can improve your written English, you will be able [sic] of achieving very good grades.

A number of interesting things came up in the interview as we discussed this final feedback. Unlike Naoko, Kaori had stood out as a student who refused to sacrifice her desire to focus on her ideas and content in order to produce clean and better organized texts. Throughout our interviews, it was clear that Kaori was above all interested in writing as a chance to express and debate arguments, and she obviously hoped that despite any eventual language problems her professor would respond to her ideas. In a sense, we can see in commenting on her complex arguments and analysis that Kaori's instructor has to a certain degree picked up on this fact. However, this also meant that this feedback was a great source of disappointment for Kaori. Kaori bemoaned the degree of attention that had been explicitly placed on language and form, whereas so little could be found that actually responded to her ideas. Moreover, Kaori commented on the

paradoxical nature of the end comment from her professor. “How could” the instructor decide that she was “closely attuned to the importance of argumentation in intellectual discourse” while at the same time suggest that her “writing can’t be understood because of her English”?

It was also interesting to note how this comment not only raised the issue of writing well as an obstacle to better marks, and to having one’s ideas and analysis valued. It also contained advice about what it would take for Kaori to improve. The advice is simple enough: “fortunately” her problem would only “require practice” (and, it is implied, time) to resolve and once enough of practice had been done, Kaori would finally be able to achieve the grades that were seen as potentially there to be had.

In responding to this, Kaori first suggested that this suggestion gave her some hope since it offered the possibility that it acknowledged she could be a good student if she became a good writer. This hope, however, relied heavily on accepting that the advice was valid, and hence Kaori’s hope was limited. Although the instructor’s advice might have been true to some extent, Kaori expressed doubts about whether this solution could actually work for her. Good writing was not something that she would simply pick up over time. Importantly, she suggested, this might work for native speakers, but for her “it would be really slow.”

I would tend to agree with Kaori. We both knew that she had indeed practiced and written a lot in the last two years, and that despite this, she was still having trouble with writing. In fact, all focal students were very aware that in addition to practice, learning to write required access to resources and explicit information that might help one figure out what was needed. It is for this reason that Kaori not only practiced but also actively sought out and read books on writing. She spent time reading the blog of a Japanese graduate student in the United States who gave advice on writing, and like Naoko often asked others for help in finding solutions with specific problems she had which had been identified in her writing.

Therefore, we see how Kaori’s history instructor’s feedback stood in opposition to what students’ lived experiences with L2 writing told them. Rather, what we have here is the construction of a rather ideal image of writing development, akin to what Lillis and

Turner (2001) refer to as a “discourse of transparency,” whereby in academic discourse “language is treated as ideally transparent and autonomous” (p. 58) so that writing guidelines and conventions fall in the domain of common sense and can hence be left unexplained and unspecified.

Whereas this pattern of feedback is more likely to have been motivated by a number of complex reasons including institutional factors such as lack of time and expertise in writing instruction, amongst others (see Chapter 5), it is nonetheless important to consider the effect of raising nonnative qualities, linking them to the failings of a text, and then simply saying that these will be fixed with time and practice. For second language learners, this type of feedback and the discourse of transparency and inevitability it promotes not only prevents L2 writers from accessing the conventions and specific rules they require to understand how texts work, this also teases students by highlighting the way their potential will be limited due to a lack of writing skills which are kept from within their grasp. Ironically, the discourse of transparency is therefore closer to a discourse of obscurity for these students. Worse, the naturalizing discourse of the idea that learning to write happens naturally over time through practice, indirectly condemns those who do not have the ability to intuitively figure out how to write (the position of most non-native writers) as something unnatural, and problematic, no matter the strengths, or background of the students.

In summary, feedback that identified language problems but no solutions played into the construction of students as marginal and potentially illegitimate learners not only because they did not have the expected writing skills but also because no matter how hard they worked this type of feedback, regularly reminded students that they could not learn these skills in the way that everyone else could. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that students, despite their drive and determination, mostly felt near the end of the study that they had little hope of ever being able to write well.

6.7 Summary: Feedback matters

In conclusion, this chapter attests to the complexity and richness and sometimes contradictory nature of academic socialization through feedback events. Indeed, we have seen that even when teacher feedback does not provide students with desired levels of

formative assessment, or the possibility to update and improve their assignments through interaction with instructors, that these literacy events play a complex role in helping shape the learning of students in content courses. Whether it is a question mark on the page, the direct correction of a grammar point or a long message encouraging students to simply practice more, feedback is never without meaning. Quite the opposite, we see that feedback goes beyond providing brief and expedient advice for a next draft or on a specific text. It is also even more than just the justification of a mark. Feedback interactions from teachers to students ultimately communicate larger messages and ideologies, including (folk) theories of literacy development that are often as complex and unpredictable as the social beings whose attitudes, values and positions become inextricably involved in feedback's construction and interpretation. These messages had both short-term and long-term implications for students (and their instructors). They echoed the difficulties and controversies of their roles and positions in the university context, and the risks and decisions that had to be weighed in dealing with these. They both provided support but also isolated and played a key role in the shaping how students and instructors constructed what writing was and how it could be approached and developed. Writing was sometimes seen as a social act, the product of complex, if novice, individuals. More often though, we saw how feedback constructed writing as individual performances focused on the need to match an ideal, native like, and potentially unrealistic standard where form often trumped content. As newcomers to the academic ways of BMU, the students were affected by these constructions of writing as they tried to make the best decisions regarding their writing development. Feedback may not have been ideal, but it certainly mattered.

Based on the findings of this and the previous analysis chapters, the next and final chapter of this dissertation presents the implications of these findings for our understanding of L2 writing feedback and the academic literacy socialization of L2 students in content courses.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Implications

7.1 Recapitulation of findings

Situated within a language socialization framework looking at issues of L2 writing development, this research drew on ethnographic multiple-case study methods to address three main questions:

Q1: How are feedback practices described and perceived by L2 students in terms of their usefulness and impact for their writing development in the context of content courses?

Q2: What are the institutional forces that help shape and affect the feedback practices experienced by L2 learners in content courses?

Q3: How does students' engagement with feedback practices affect the long-term socialization of L2 students in content courses?

In answering these questions, this research has shown how focal students and instructors perceived a gap between ideal and actual feedback practices engaged in at BMU. This gap was examined and shown to be linked to wider institutional pressures affecting students' and instructors' abilities to engage in preferred forms of feedback. Additionally, a discourse analysis of feedback samples collected and the way these were interpreted by students revealed how, even when feedback failed to provide adequate responses to their ideas, or useful information about how to improve their writing, according to students, it still conveyed powerful messages reinforcing specific identities for students and instructors, as well as specific constructions of writing and writing development. Feedback was thus seen to be complex, multifunctional, and embedded in intricate socio-academic interactions. These interactions, in turn, often indexed, at a micro-level, macro-level debates and institutional forces affecting higher education's adaptation to students who no longer fit traditional profiles or students' and instructors' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities at a Canadian university.

In this final chapter, I attempt to explore the implications that can be drawn from these findings and the way these might help reconceptualize the act of providing responses to L2 writers in higher education.⁴⁷ Particular attention is placed on the value of modeling feedback as a literacy practice that is best understood and/or designed when taking into consideration its multiple dimensions, in particular those aspects that go beyond its traditionally associated pedagogic functions to also include socialization, institutional and economic functions. I conclude by discussing the implications of this multidimensional understanding of feedback as a literacy practice, which, although minor in appearance, can play a powerful role in the academic discourse socialization of L2 writers.

7.2 The multiple dimensions and functions of feedback

In trying to tie together the various findings of this dissertation, one of the principal lessons to be drawn stems from the wide number of factors that helped determine the impact of instructor written responses for L2 writers. We have seen that feedback's 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 various institutional forces and wider conversations about writing and the presence of L2 writers.

These findings support a theoretical conceptualization of writing feedback as a complex literacy event with different and at times conflicting functions associated with various levels of analysis or dimensions of feedback (see Figure 7.1). These include feedback's more traditional pedagogic function, less visible institutional and economic functions, and a powerful socialization function. Feedback was found to simultaneously play these roles at different levels of the analysis (focusing on the classroom versus focusing on institutional context, for instance), with some of these functions at times coming in conflict with each other, thus creating tensions that affected its realization. This multilevel, multifunctional and conflicted nature of feedback may well explain a great deal of the mystery and controversy associated in the literature to this literacy event

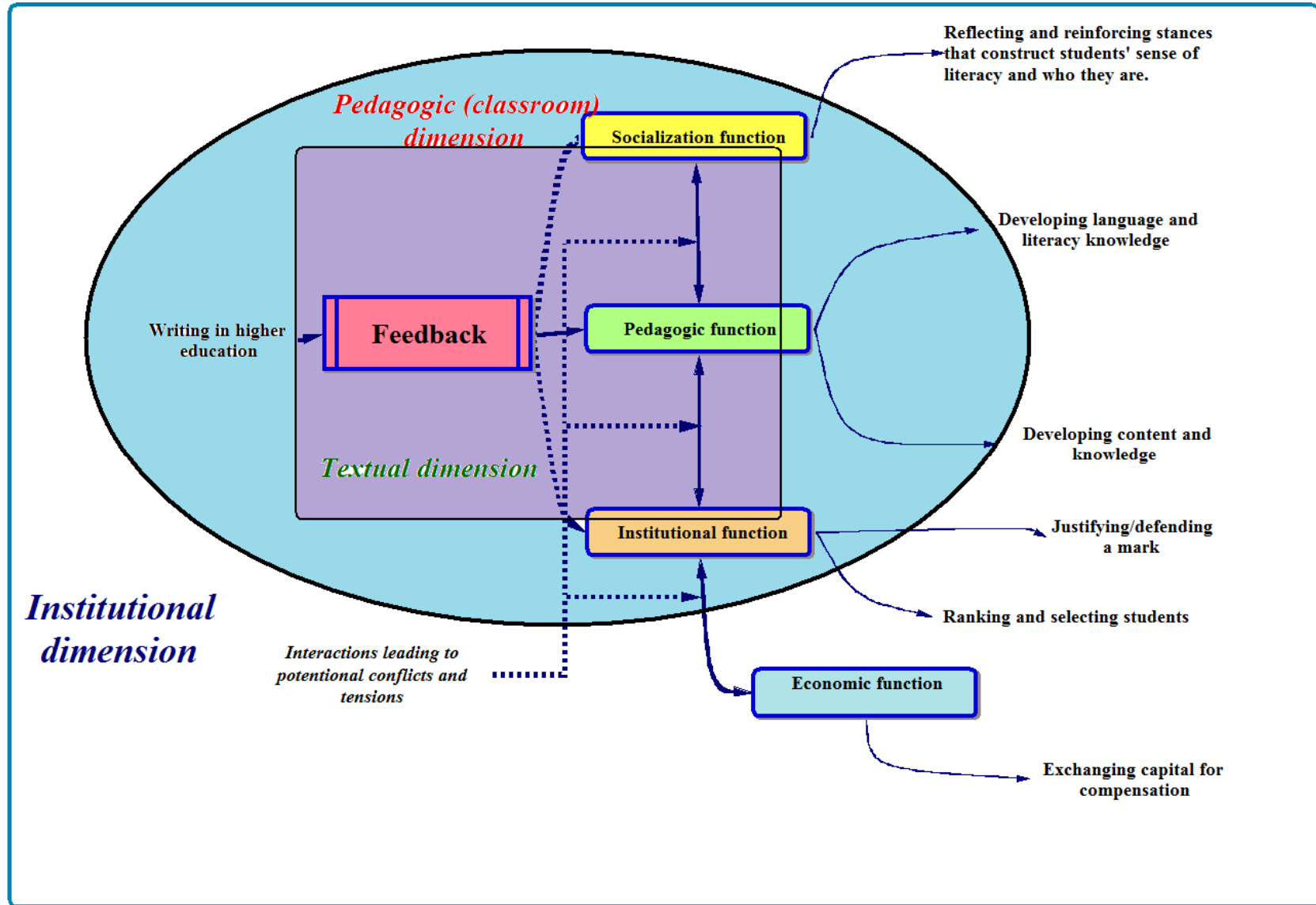
⁴⁷ It is hoped that some of these implications may also apply well to conceptualizations of feedback provided to L1 writers.

(Casanave, 2003a). It also helps clarify the at times unpredictable impact this pedagogic act can have as instructors and students have the potential to engage with writing feedback at various levels, focusing on some functions while ignoring others or leaving them unaddressed or unacknowledged. In arguing for the importance of this conceptualization of feedback, a more detailed review and analysis of each of these functions and their associated levels is provided below.

7.2.1 At the classroom level: Feedback's pedagogic function

In the conceptualization of feedback suggested above, one finds feedback's most publicly acknowledged role: its pedagogic function. This function can be defined as the focus on feedback's ability to serve as a source of advice and knowledge. It can guide students over time and across multiple drafts to a better understanding of both the conventions required in the texts students must produce in classes as well as the ideas and concepts at the heart of their discipline. This function therefore has two sub-functions: a) one focusing on facilitating students' language and literacy development, and b) the other focusing on the development of content-level knowledge for specific disciplines. This pedagogic function is closely associated with the classroom context of feedback, and was predominantly identified by students and instructors when discussing feedback. This pedagogic function was important in that it was the role most closely linked to what students and instructors explicitly wanted feedback to accomplish, even if, as seen in this research, at times other functions of feedback had a greater, if less explicitly discussed, influence.

Figure 7.1: Feedback's Multiple Dimensions and Functions



At a larger level, the explicit focus placed by students and instructors on the pedagogic function of feedback resonates well with work done in both L1 and L2 writing research that has paid a great deal of attention to feedback's potential to help students develop as writers (Carless, 2006; DeLuca, 2002; Elbow, 2002; Ferris, 2003; Goldstein, 2005; Hodges, 1997; K. Hyland & F. Hyland, 2006a). In L2 writing research specifically, much has been written on feedback's potential as a site of learning for students lacking familiarity not only with specific academic genres and tasks but also with the linguistic norms linked to these. Indeed, much of the research on L2 writing feedback might be characterized as attempting to better understand how this specific pedagogic function might be facilitated, particularly with regards to feedback as a source of corrective input leading to L2 students' ability to produce better (i.e., more grammatically correct) texts (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Ferris, 2003, 2004; Truscott, 2007).

Where we do note an interesting divergence from the focus found in the majority of research in L2 writing feedback is how, contextualized within the dynamics of specific courses, assignments and instructors, focal students in this study stressed the second of feedback's pedagogic functions: its potential to allow students to engage in a dialogue with instructors about their ideas and arguments based on course content. Indeed, as seen in the findings, students seemed to value this aspect of feedback's pedagogic function as much, if not more, than its ability to provide information about the language conventions that controlled the writing they were being asked to produce.

Although the importance of attending to L2 writers' ideas and their role in motivating feedback remains largely undisputed in L2 writing research (Ashwell, 2000), this second pedagogic function has been less frequently addressed in the literature in comparison with the focus on feedback's role as a tool for language development. This is no doubt due to the fact that much of the research on L2 writing feedback is done in the context of L2 writing classrooms where language development is indeed the chief focus and goal of the class (Leki, 2006). By focusing heavily on feedback's relationship to form, however, it seems that research may be losing sight of how in the context of content courses, students rightfully look to feedback as potential conversations about *both* language and content.

One implication of this research is thus that more might be done to take into consideration both facets of feedback's pedagogic functions. One might, for instance, look at how well balanced these two functions are and how the need for language and literacy development is balanced with students' (and instructors') desire to engage in content-related conversations. A further area worth concentrating on would be an examination of the impact of the complex interaction of content-related feedback with language-focused feedback. At issue would be the goal of guiding students in making their texts (and ideas) more accessible, while keeping in mind L2 students' perceptions of themselves as newcomers and their aspiration to feel accepted as legitimate sources of knowledge by their instructors, and more largely by the university community.

7.2.2 Institutional dimensions of feedback

In addition to its more commonly discussed pedagogic functions, feedback practices in this study were also found to fulfill a very different set of functions when analyzed at the institutional level. In addition to addressing issues of language or content matter development, feedback practices were also conceptualized by participants in more pragmatic terms as a response to everyday pressures and demands faced by instructors and students. For instructors in particular, feedback practices were shown to be constructed as onerous and undervalued tasks. Although this facet of feedback practices was less often voiced and publicly addressed, this did not diminish the fact that conflicts existed between the desire to design feedback that might enhance students' learning experiences and the need to design feedback that addressed institutional pressures to produce comments quickly, with a limited amount of resource expenditures, thereby indirectly functioning to maximize investments in more valued areas of activity at BMU (i.e., research). Additionally, findings suggest that feedback also functioned at an institutional level when it was designed to help enforce and/or justify strict grade distributions related to the competitive and selective functions of universities.

In this study, what was interesting was instructors' suggestions that these less visible dimension of feedback and its links to the material reality of limiting expenditures of time and resources in higher education's increasingly market-driven environment (Chevaillier, 2002; Fisher & Rubenson, 1998; Yang, 2003) may have surpassed the more

publicly discussed pedagogical dimension in ultimately determining the shape feedback took in their classes. An example of this was seen in how the “defensive feedback” referred to by instructors shifted the focus of feedback away from facilitating students’ writing development, or even an exchange of ideas, to the function of justifying the marks and the institutionally required ranking of students.

In making these adjustments to their feedback to fulfill institutional functions, we see a clear example of how the functions of feedback at different levels can conflict with each other so that instructors must choose which function will be most relevant and hence most influential in the design of the feedback.

The existence of these tensions is far from surprising. In fact, ethnographies of literacy practices have showed how rarely literacy events might be defined as stable or having well-defined shared purposes (Canagarajah, 1993; Casanave, 2002; Collins & Blot, 2003; Duff, 2002; Morita, 2004; Schecter & Bayley, 2004; Zappa-Hollman, 2007). Nonetheless, it is relevant and important to ask why these tensions exist and what is actually occurring as a result and a great deal of interesting work could be done, for example, exploring in greater detail how feedback relates to the institutional pressures that surround it.

Acknowledging more directly, and publicly, this institutional dimension to feedback would allow researchers to make visible the largely hidden forces that help produce, at least in part, the prevalence of feedback that, according to students, seemed to so often fail them at a pedagogic level. A great deal might also be learned about why institutional pressures in some circumstances might make it more reasonable for a professor to offer feedback designed to justify a grade than to make a student into a better writer and scholar. All of this raises a number of important questions about what we actually want feedback to accomplish in universities and the level of organizational support and guidelines required to achieve publicly stated goals of establishing global (and thus linguistically diverse) campuses. How these issues might lead to important institutional-level discussions about optimal feedback is considered below.

7.2.3 Feedback's economic function

As suggested above, tensions found between feedback's pedagogical and institutional functions may well explain why instructor feedback that successfully contributed to students' writing development and their sense of themselves as legitimate producers of ideas was so rare, according to students.

Further supporting this assumption is the fact students looked to feedback originating from sources other than instructors, and the institutional pressures that affected them, as the feedback more likely to match their ideal constructions of feedback. In other words, alternative sources of feedback (friends, paid editors, writing center, amongst others) were perceived as better capable of fulfilling feedback's pedagogic functions and were valued in consequence (this, despite the fact that students clearly felt instructors, as disciplinary experts and the originators of their writing assignments, were the best potential source of pedagogic feedback).

One of the interesting implications of these findings is that students appeared to have been socialized to associate different sources of feedback with different functions and purposes. Whereas content instructors' written feedback was linked predominantly with what I would categorize as institutional functions (grading, selection, summative responses shaped by the need to save time), alternative sources of feedback were the ones associated more closely with feedback's pedagogic functions (specific and detailed recommendations on changes which would help improve the text, and explanations of the principles guiding these changes).

This association and its consequent emphasis on alternative sources of feedback as key resources for student writers reveals another hidden but important dimension of feedback practices in higher education: its economic function. I am referring here to the fact that access to these alternative sources of pedagogic feedback was seen as a function of students' social networks and their ability to draw on a range of resources which were negotiated and exchanged as they sought to develop their writing.

Of interest is how pedagogic feedback in such a system became associated with something not normally found in the classroom, and that this feedback had to be paid for as part of system of exchange of capital that also went beyond the classroom. This

payment could take the form of an exchange of services (e.g., Kaito's volunteer work in exchange for feedback), or of monetary compensation (either directly, through the hiring of a tutor, or indirectly, by going to the Composition Institute with tutors paid by the university to help students with their writing). Moreover, the lack of supply of good pedagogically oriented feedback increased its rarity and hence its value, just as it reinforced the idea that it did not come for free.

In exploring the nature of these exchanges, we can draw links to Bourdieu's (1977) notion of the "economics of linguistic exchanges" to explain how language users invest in specific repertoires and languages as forms of investments associated with the complex relationship that links their identities to perceptions of the potential gains associated with the costs of learning a target language (Norton, 2000). Language resources are thus seen as being part of a linguistic marketplace, where various forms of capital including symbolic and material resources are traded in exchange of opportunities to develop expertise in the use of linguistic forms linked to social forms of knowledge and thought that have prestige and value in society (Bourdieu, 1994, 1997).

In the specific case of this study, in the regular absence of instructor feedback that fulfilled the pedagogic function desired by students, students came to see instructor feedback as something that could not realistically be expected from instructors who they understood lacked the resources required to provide it. This, in turn, resulted in their desire to invest in other sources of feedback as alternative investments.

The advantage of considering feedback's nature as economic exchanges lies in how this frame transforms feedback practices from purely pedagogical acts into interested acts potentially benefiting not only the receiver of the feedback, but also the feedback provider who receives something in exchange for his or her services (i.e., the TA, friend, or tutor giving feedback for a salary, a free dinner, friendship, amongst others). This commercial / economic function of feedback, and its construction as something that must benefit not only the receiver of the feedback, but also the giver, is another dimension of feedback's complexity highlighted in this study that has remained unexamined in great detail in the literature. And yet, looking at the commercial functions associated with feedback has the advantage of highlighting the importance of the bidirectional nature of

feedback practices and the need to ask what precisely is being offered and received in the exchange, both with respect to students and to the different types of feedback providers involved, including content instructors. Answering this question provides, for instance, insights about students' behavior and outlook with respect to feedback based on the resources (time, money, social networks, amongst others) available to them. We can understand why some students might give up on receiving quality feedback if they feel they simply do not have the resources required to obtain "good" feedback.

This economic function also brings us back to the importance of looking at how these events could be designed better at an institutional level. Seen as interested, commercial enterprises, institutions might consider for example the advantages of paying closer attention to and attempting to better regulate the way feedback is priced and rewarded, determining clearly what kind of feedback is available, from whom, and at what price. What would be made clear through this process is what is actually required for students to access "good feedback." At the very least, this knowledge could be used by institutions to make better informed decisions about what they might need to do to foster systems that reward and pay enough for the best feedback practices to be enjoyed by as many students as possible.⁴⁸ This would also greatly enhance the transparency of what is otherwise a mostly private and obscure dimension of feedback, so that too often the economics of feedback are left to instructors and students to negotiate, leading to economies of literacy that may in fact not be in their best interests.

Institutions, for instance, may want to consider the risks of a system where the best feedback is only available to the highest bidders, those students who have the resources (time, money, social networks, amongst other) needed to pay into the system. Such a system has the undesirable consequence of greatly advantaging some students over others in their quest to develop their writing skills, i.e., those who do not need the feedback because they come with the knowledge of writing that they need (a situation which would certainly advantage many native speakers), or those who can afford and/or are willing and able to make the sacrifices needed to get good feedback.

⁴⁸ It may also provide a more honest understanding of what may not be possible in the present situation, hence starting a conversation about what might need to be changed to remedy the situation.

7.2.4 Feedback's socialization function

On a final and more general level, the findings of this dissertation highlight the role played by feedback as part of the larger processes through which L2 students are socialized into various beliefs and norms as they attempt to work within academic communities. The longitudinal scope of this study allowed us to see how feedback conveyed both explicit and implicit messages that often went beyond the scope of a specific writing assignment or text. At this level of analysis, feedback practices served as social indexes for students, shaping their understanding of their social positions and degrees of legitimacy within the academic community. These social positions or identities were derived from students' interpretation of what feedback comments contained, as well as what was absent. These understandings were also shown to affect students in the short and long term by determining in part how students engaged with and interpreted instructors' intentions, subsequent feedback, future writing assignments, and their sense of what was possible (and impossible) as L2 writers at BMU.

This socialization function adds one last complicating dimension to a model of feedback that looks beyond its classically assigned pedagogic role in L2 writing research. Paying attention to feedback as a socialization process links it to the construction of students' identities and writing and, in turn, to the larger discourses found in universities surrounding the presence of non-traditional students, and particularly non-native English speakers. Feedback in this sense thus not only affects how L2 students see themselves and their writing, but also contributes to a system that mirrors and reproduces a host institution's norms and expectations towards L2 students, offering answers to questions such as a) Who truly belongs at the university? b) What are the roles and responsibilities of university professors? and c) What is the relationship and potential division of labor between language support and development versus disciplinary content teaching in universities?

Seen in this way, feedback becomes a classic example of macro-level forces affecting micro-level interactions and vice versa. The norms and expectations found in the discourse of feedback practices affected the decisions students made about their writing, their courses, and their future plans in powerful ways. Conversely, students'

decisions and actions helped to shape the discourse of feedback practices. These findings lend support to the idea that, for better or worse, feedback had a definitive impact on the larger potential socialization trajectory of students and helped reflect, reinforce, and/or resist specific ideologies, conflicts, and power relations related to writing in higher education.

7.2.5 Summary

In this section I have described and discussed the value of a model of feedback as a literacy practice that simultaneously works to accomplish various pedagogic, institutional, economic, and socialization functions. Each dimension of the model was described and an attempt was made to briefly introduce the implications such a model of feedback might have for how feedback might be conceptualized and improved in educational settings.

The final sections of this chapter explore further some of larger implications stemming from this model as well as more generally from the findings of this study. It should be noted that these implications mirror the complexity of this literacy practice as they are seen to relate simultaneously to theory, research, and pedagogy. Implications are therefore deliberately not associated exclusively with any specific group: i.e., researchers, teachers, students, or administrators, but rather are seen as valuable for all of these stakeholders. A research implication may thus also represent a pedagogical implication that might also encompass a theoretical understanding of feedback.

7.3 Wider implications of this research for our understanding of L2 writing feedback practices

7.3.1 The value of a longitudinal study of feedback practices as socially embedded acts

One larger implication of this research on feedback practices, despite their often brief and abbreviated nature, is that particularly in content courses, feedback comments did represent socially embedded and motivated texts with implications for literacy construction, identity, legitimacy, and the long-term socialization trajectory of students.

In stressing the fundamentally social nature of feedback, these findings echo researchers who argue that socially situated descriptions of literacy events can significantly contribute to our understanding of the sociocultural forces underlying classic academic events such as essays, exams, and presentations, amongst others (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; Duff, 2007b; Kobayashi, 2003; Morita, 2000; Street, 2004; Zappa-Hollman, 2007). On the whole, however, minor literacy events that form part of the chain of genres which surround and often support the creation of these key texts (i.e., the text of an assignment description, practice runs of a presentation, and feedback comments on a first draft) have received far less attention (Swales, 2004), or have been studied with more traditional and narrowly constructed approaches focusing on these events as purely linguistic, decontextualized and apolitical events (Casanave, 2003b; Ortega, 1999). It is hoped this dissertation illustrates how all those interested in L2 writing research might benefit from applying larger social theories of academic literacy and knowledge construction to *all* literacy events, even, and perhaps especially, to those minor ones that have traditionally remained unexamined with this theoretical lens.

This view also lends support to arguments in favor of ethnographic and case study designs to capture those factors occurring beyond the page without which it seems we may be missing a large part of what is going on in L2 writing development (Casanave, 2003b; Lam, 2000; Prior, 1998; Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999). This approach includes, as suggested by this dissertation, the value of paying close attention to contextual factors such as the larger institutional discourses (both public and private) which surround and affect the way that a specific literacy practice is conceptualized, justified, valued, and ultimately executed. From an applied linguistic perspective, this dissertation suggests that there are strong benefits to a longitudinal approach that combines an analysis of texts such as feedback comments with an analysis of students' and instructors' perspectives of these texts and the varying meanings these can have for them, both in the short and long term. This approach allows one to trace the impact of discursive micro-interactions over time and their effect on the socialization of individuals, helping to understand not only how these events occur but also how these processes unfold in both predictable and unpredictable fashions.

Last, this research has offered a glimpse at how feedback practices are linked to participants that goes beyond the core relationships that connect student writers to their instructors. Although instructors do play a primary role in the development of students' writing skills, this research has also brought out the important feedback work performed by "others" who serve as alternative sources of feedback and also facilitate the learning of second language students. Although only briefly explored in this dissertation in the interest of space, feedback provided by these sources would certainly be worth exploring in future research with the same longitudinal language socialization lens applied to the instructor-based feedback that has been the specific focus of this dissertation.

7.3.2 Feedback as a socially embedded multifunctional literacy event and thus a highly unpredictable dialogue

7.3.2.1 Principles yes, but no predictable trajectories of learning

Paying attention to the multidimensional elements of feedback discussed in this chapter has important implications for conceptualizations of feedback as a pedagogic activity whose impact can be controlled. Findings suggest that any notions of predictable results for feedback practices must be qualified by an understanding that feedback practices remain above all a form of human interaction. These are therefore fluid, dynamic, simultaneously linked to multiple and at times conflicting functions, and highly dependent on the context and individuals who participate in the interaction, thus resulting in no specific and predictable trajectories of learning.

This is not to say that one should abandon looking for guiding principles in seeking to identify how to best approach the role one might design for feedback in classrooms. However, the strong implication is that we must keep in mind that we are dealing with more than textual processes or the application of a single clear formula or procedure that might serve as the best solution to providing feedback to L2 writers. As suggested above, understanding the full equation represented by feedback includes going beyond the draft and adding the voice of the students and their instructors, as well as institutional forces, all variables which mean that whatever approach to feedback is adopted, it will never be separable from the unique configuration of individuals, functions and educational context at play in a single event.

7.3.2.2 One possible guiding principle: Viewing feedback as a dialogue

In looking for a guiding principle to be drawn from the findings in this study for the design of feedback, perhaps one important suggestion that emerges is that since feedback is by its very nature a complicated communicative event, that feedback should be designed while keeping in mind the same rules that govern the creation of successful conversations or dialogues. Although this idea is not new in writing research (Baumlin & Baumlin, 1989; Danis, 1987; Fuller, 1987; Hodges, 1997; Knoblauch & Brannon, 2002; Murphy, 2000; Straub, 2000), it remains a powerful one I feel deserves more attention in the field of L2 writing development and which is particularly relevant in light of the findings of this research.

Findings in this research helped highlight that some of the biggest problems identified by students with feedback events had to do with their discursive interactional features (mode of message, topic, dialogic or non-dialogic format, amongst others) whose impact reduced students' chances of communicating effectively with instructors about writing. Instructor feedback's dominant format, for instance, took the form of roughly handwritten notes, composed with a limited number of words under limited time constraints that created one-way, asynchronous conversations for students. This type of feedback fostered misunderstandings and disagreements about what was being said, focused on, and ultimately intended. Similarly, the interactional potential of feedback was hindered by a lack of input from students in deciding what the topic of the interaction should be. Far from helping to create useful conversations about writing with students, these features served to isolate students in their attempts to develop as L2 writers from their instructors. Unsurprisingly, under these conditions, students were left frustrated and guessing as to the actual meaning behind the feedback they received, while teachers were also left wondering how useful and desired their feedback had been for students.

A strong implication emerging from these findings is that, despite their complexity and unpredictable nature, the details of the interaction and the relationship established between instructors and students through feedback may well hold the key to design aspects which might be used to, if not guarantee, at least help enhance some degree of control over the impact these events can have on students. For all interested in taking advantage of feedback's potential, this would entail the following suggestions.

First, feedback would be most likely to succeed when it was constructed with care as to its legibility and intelligibility. As suggested by this research, greater attention, for instance, may be needed on the impact that handwritten feedback can have for L2 students, and the way it may hinder in a silent way the whole process of engaging in a dialogue. Teachers should also be aware of pressures acting on L2 students trying to establish their legitimacy in classes who might therefore choose to hide any signs of weaknesses with their second language, even if it means never telling teachers that they cannot read or understand their comments.

On a related matter, although the use of handwritten feedback is unlikely to decrease in the near future, the use of a variety of technological advances in computer technology to provide an alternative to handwritten feedback (e.g., the use of typed electronic feedback and screen capture devices in conjunction with electronic pens, or the use of audio recorded feedback) is one area of development in the field of L2 writing whose impact in these matters may well be worth exploring (Anson, 1997; Popyack & Herrmann, 2003; Séror, 2007; Still, 2006; Vastani, Edwards, & Pérez-Quñones, 2006).

Second, viewing ideal feedback as two-way communication is a reminder that ideal feedback must remain attentive to “the other” in the conversation. As such, we would be moving away from a view of feedback as an act focused on responding to “a text”, a process that occludes its human author as the participant in this conversation and which makes it easier to forget that behind the text (and any errors it might contain) lies an individual trying to communicate with us. Rather, the focus would be on promoting feedback as a response to an author/student. Linked to this focus on “the other”, would be a move away from a monologic mode of communication to one that would be more likely to promote a dialogic interaction with students. This would entail paying closer attention to what students might want to “hear” (more focus on their ideas), as well as looking for ways of finding out what they might want to “say” as a response to the feedback. The work of Goldstein (2005), and her suggestion to ask students to include with their writing assignments a letter identifying any issues they would like their instructors to focus on in particular with their feedback in addition to the criteria for the assignment, is a good example of the type of practice referred to here.

Third, from a critical perspective we may also want to ask ourselves what is achieved when basic interaction rules are broken in feedback communications with students, and what forces might be motivating this. As suggested by the findings of this dissertation and the model discussed earlier in this chapter, the moment feedback becomes something other than a dialogue about writing is likely to be the moment where feedback's other functions are coming into play. This includes, for instance, the case of using feedback to justify and defend marks where there are some real benefits to be gained when students are *not* given a chance to talk back to the feedback they receive.

Of course, it is important to acknowledge the fact that, as suggested by the findings in this study, it may not be realistic to expect instructors to be able to fully engage in feedback practices as a dialogue. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that despite the forces that worked against them, both students and instructors had clear ideas of what good feedback could be, and that this focused specifically on its qualities as a dialogue and interaction. Consequently, without forgetting that other aspects of feedback must also be taken into account, it does seem worthwhile to suggest that understanding what prevents feedback from truly taking the shape of a conversation about the ideas and texts which form part of the larger intellectual activity of the academic community is another area of research worthy of further inquiry.

7.3.3 Feedback and language socialization: Wider implications

7.3.3.1 Rethinking feedback as an ideological tool

Another important aspect of rethinking feedback that emerges from the findings of this study is the notion that feedback cannot be separated from the broader institutional context that surrounds it, nor for that matter the ideologies found within this context. Drawing on Benesch (1993), in the context of L2 writing, ideologies here are defined as unavoidable conscious and/or unconscious assumptions and value judgments that underlie instructional choices and influence their socio-political implications. These assumptions and judgments were echoed in the way feedback helped socialize students into understandings of themselves and what writing may represent.

This reconceptualization of feedback opens up interesting, if as suggested by some instructors, complicated and controversial questions about L2 writing, and the

presence of L2 writers in content courses. It strongly suggests a need to address more closely how ideological questions are linked to feedback practices. This type of work would align itself with the work of a number of L2 researchers who have attempted to situate writing as a social event which is inextricably connected to issues of power and access, especially for L2 students attempting to make use of literacy in their L2 to do things which ultimately necessarily go beyond the need to produce language that is accurate and mechanically correct (Benesch, 1993, 2001; Canagarajah, 1993, 2002; Leki, 2000; Pennycook, 1996; Ramanathan, 2002; Zamel & Spack, 2004).

Feedback practices would therefore be added to the list of ways in which these issues of power and access are negotiated in the context of L2 writing development through its power to help shape conversations and concepts related to what being a second language writer means and what supporting that writer might entail. This ideological dimension expands yet again the focus of traditional research on feedback by asking what kind of ideologies we might find and/or would be interested in creating through various kinds of feedback practices aimed at supporting L2 students' writing development.

Answering this question will require taking a closer look at the ideological stances found within the larger community that surrounds these practices. It is likely that like most literacy events, the ideologies linked to certain feedback practices will be inseparable from those that dominate in the community (thus, again, the importance of ethnographic approaches in examining these issues). It is also likely that the forces reinforcing these ideologies will be implicit (Lillis, 2001), and perhaps even denied (see for example Santos' (1992) description of the L2 English writing profession as resolutely non-ideological). Making them invisible, however, only further increases their power to naturalize and legitimize certain ways of seeing the world, while making it harder to question their arbitrariness and interested/political nature (Bourdieu, 1977).

These ideologies will differ from setting to setting, but the findings of this study do suggest that they are never completely invisible since they end up tainting the feedback practices that are found in the classroom and become relevant for students' interpretation of their feedback and the decisions taken based on this feedback. This

raises important questions about how we feel about the ideas students may be walking away with based on the feedback they receive.

We might, for instance, like to critically address feedback practices that seem to encourage a focus on the mechanics of writing, with often negative and oversimplified depictions of L2 students as writers who have problems with these conventions. Not only are these discursive constructions of students as deficient language learners who therefore fall in the category of unprepared and hence problematic students (Harklau, 2000; Norton, 1997; Norton & Toohey, 2001), but this product oriented approach to writing helps reinforces what Severino (1993) has referred to as an “assimilationist stance”: a response to L2 writing that pressures learners to “smoothly blend or melt into the desired discourse communities and avoid social stigma by controlling any features that in the eyes of audiences with power and influence might mark a writer as inadequately educated or lower class” (p. 338). This ideology oversimplifies the differences and unique needs that characterize L2 students, while reaffirming the use of educational standards historically established for traditional and often monolingual learners whose applications for multilingual learners are in fact far from ideal (Cummins, 2000; Ortega, 1999).⁴⁹

In this sense, drawing on the work of Myers (2005), and her examination of racist discourse in ordinary conversations, one might look at the ideological work accomplished by feedback in the way it plays the role of “boundary policing” whereby in structures of dominance, the categories that help separate insiders from outsiders are directly linked to processes designed to reaffirm and legitimize in language the dominance of one group over the other, hence reproducing relations of dominance, both in the imagined and structural realizations of institutions. For international students, who are by definition perfect examples of individuals crossing boundaries, both physical and symbolic, feedback in this study did play such a role by not only policing students’ texts, and reinforcing certain types of structures and knowledge, but also more implicitly in suggesting who might be expected to be able to master these ways with words and thus be allowed into specific academic communities.

⁴⁹ My point here is not to deny the fact that there do need to be some common criteria regarding effective written communication, but rather to point out the need to critically address the native-speaker standards that are so often used to measure L2 writers learners’ texts.

We might also want to question an ideology that justifies a system where students are left on their own to find the support and help they need in the proverbial sink or swim situation described by the political science instructor in Chapter 6. This is the same type of ideology denounced by authors such as Leathwood (2001, 2003, 2006) as a view of learning that is deeply rooted in white Western free-market neo-liberal constructions of the learner as an independent, autonomous individual who, to the great convenience of educational institutions, is solely responsible for his or her strengths as well as weaknesses and failures. This is the same ideology characterized by Kubota (2002) as a “color-blind liberal discourse of individualism, equality, and meritocracy,” where one is invited to believe that “everyone is equal regardless of race and other attributes and that socioeconomic success is the result of individual effort” (p. 87). What is occluded in this metaphor, however, is that if this is a competition where some drop out and only the best make it to finish line (where the best marks and social positions await), not everyone starts the race from the same starting line, or with the same kinds of advantages and resources at their disposal.

Last, from an ideological perspective, one might want to critically address how feedback practices such as the ones observed in this study seemed to reinforce traditional and controversial divisions between ESL or language support classes and mainstream content classes. Authors like Matsuda (1999, 2003, 2006) have strongly criticized this “division of labour” as a key obstacle hindering higher education institutions from moving away from a system that in many institutions still prefers to ignore, or deal with the presence of L2 writers as abnormal deviations from a mythical homogeneous whole. In this fashion, L2 writing problems remain something to be fixed on the side, in (unavailable) language/writing courses rather than through the much more serious and needed rethinking of the curriculum this diversity actually demands. Similarly, this is the same division of language and content questioned by researchers arguing for language’s central position in *all* learning and in particular in content area teaching so that language and content knowledge learning should be integrated not only in the language classroom, but across the curriculum to facilitate the integration of L2 into local academic and social cultures (Beckett & Slater, 2005; Leung, 2005; Mohan, 1986; Schlepppegrell, 2003).

In summary, it has been suggested that much might be gained by exploring the socialization power of feedback and its role as an ideological tool. To sum up, feedback can and should indeed focus on language and the way content is constructed, organized and presented, but, importantly, it is *also* about promoting the ideologies that make these genres and literacy practices possible. Understanding these ideologies, their roots and their impact on students would in and of itself contribute significantly to our understanding of this literacy event and its impact.

7.3.3.2 Raising instructors' awareness of the discursive dimension of optimal feedback design

A related implication of looking at feedback as a tool of ideological socialization is that much might be gained from helping content instructors better understand how feedback's discursive features shape, even if seemingly only in minor ways, underlying messages conveyed to language learners. This approach would raise content instructors' awareness of specific discursive choices available to them in designing feedback, the implicit messages tied to these choices, and the possible consequences of these choices for students' socialization and learning. This approach would rely on getting instructors to understand that behind every discursive act, lie decisions, beliefs and attitudes that are taken for granted. Therefore, work with content instructors in this area might for example take advantage of the discourse analysis skills developed by applied linguists to help content instructors reflect on their feedback and question the "apparently neutral and commonsensical premises these discourses presuppose" (K. Hyland, 2000, p. 178).

The goals of such an approach would encourage instructors to consciously reflect on why their feedback takes the discursive shape it does, the type of interactions created by this shape (e.g., monologic or dialogic), and what forces determine what gets included (and attended to) versus what gets excluded. One might consider, for instance, an exercise which would have instructors compare the subtle but powerful difference between the extreme categorization and individualized exclusion found in "your writing is incomprehensible" versus the more socially co-constructed evaluation of writing implied in an alternative such as "I find your writing hard to understand". Such exercises would help instructors reflect on the qualities needed to (re)shape feedback so that it successfully identifies areas of weakness in L2 students' writing without negatively

affecting students' sense of themselves as valued and legitimate writers in their academic communities.

7.3.3.3 The need for institutional level discussions

The final implications discussed in this chapter address in further detail how feedback might be more consciously (and publicly) designed at an institutional level as a powerful tool available to universities looking for ways to help support the integration of growing populations of L2 learners.

Recognizing that in truth a great deal of time and energy is invested in feedback at a personal level by students and instructors and that it has a powerful impact on the socialization of language learners, it seems logical to suggest that feedback must be given greater attention by institutions. Viewed as a multidimensional event that carries within it traces of the complicated and often conflicted interests surrounding its production and consumption, feedback's success, and its potential impact on L2 writers becomes an exercise in successfully coordinating both micro-level and macro-level interactions. Part of the problem is that this coordination is hindered by the fact that feedback practices, particularly in content courses, are usually a private matter, hardly ever discussed in public, or even amongst instructors, so that it is not only students who do not always know why a certain type of feedback has been given, or what the exact intention or meaning of a comment might be.

There would be serious benefits to moving feedback practices out of this private realm of private conversations, to include public discussions of the multiple functions that feedback plays in socializing students into their disciplines. These public, institutional level conversations might, for instance, address basic issues in teaching and learning relationships (e.g., that the student body has changed while resources to support L2 learners have not grown in tandem; that learning takes time and that teaching is a vital aspect of a university's function as institutions of higher learning). Conversations between instructors and university administrators might also address how feedback can be seen as part of the larger conversation concerning not only how L2 students learn to write, but also how they are welcomed and socialized within disciplines, and how these

tasks are distributed in higher education.⁵⁰ Further questions to address would include: a) how feedback practices fit into this socialization process; and, b) how in turn this socialization process fits within university systems related to academic standards, power relations, gate keeping, academic support, and issues of equity.

Topics of interest would also include tackling the paradox of departments that benefit from the funding resulting from the increased presence of international students, while at the same time find themselves under pressure to minimize expenditures of resources used to support these very same students. Relevant areas of discussion might also take account of the different ways in which research and teaching are valued, and the need to reward more explicitly the time and effort expended by instructors who work with L2 students and fully engage in the processes of dialogue and negotiation (and multiple readings of various drafts) necessary for L2 students to learn to write in their disciplines. On the agenda, one might also discuss more explicitly the different alternative sources of feedback available to students and campus and how these might be best supported. Finally, conversations held at an institutional level should attend to the implications of grade distributions that emphasize the need to rank, select, and eliminate students, pitting instructors against, rather than with students, and pitting students against other students-from whom they might otherwise receive valuable feedback, and the consequences this has for students' literacy development, particularly language minority students.

For institutions, making feedback a more public topic of conversation would not only increase the chance that better feedback might result, more importantly, it would also acknowledge that even if an institution ignores the need for these conversations, they will occur anyway, if perhaps only in a less public and controlled way. Ignoring these conversations would hence only contribute to a process that increases the tensions and complexity linked to feedback practices by encouraging them to remain idiosyncratic, private affairs created by individuals forced to work alone with forms that are likely far from the ideals they truly desire.

⁵⁰ One might ask, for example, if in light of their heavy schedules, it is institutionally wise to relegate to instructors so much of the responsibility to help students obtain feedback.

7.4 Final words: On putting doubts to rest and making feedback matter

Close to six years have passed since I started this research. As I reflect back on what I have learned since then, I am reminded that at its very core a great deal of this work was motivated by a personal sense of doubt as an instructor working with feedback. To what extent did my feedback practices matter? How effective could these mysterious and often time-consuming literacy acts be for my students? Deep down, I sensed that feedback did have an impact for my students, but wondered how important this effect might be.

Over these six years, I have had a great deal of time to reflect on what feedback might represent, not only to L2 students, or even myself, as an instructor and graduate student, but for the wider university context. As I write these final paragraphs, I note that what I have learned is that when it comes to asking if feedback matters, there is little doubt that it does.

Feedback may not be a mechanical process which will always effectively achieve my goals, or my students' for that matter, but I have learned that feedback practices, including those brief comments written late at night do in fact have very real consequences in how they reflect and reinforce identities, attitudes, practices and actions that affect not only students but also instructors and institutions themselves. More importantly, these effects travel across time and go beyond the scope of the page, or even the classroom context in which they occur. In these small, daily actions and gestures, in these brief and at times mundane texts, we find the full power of language to construct our sense of community, literacy and who we are.

Therefore, the next time an instructor tells me they are not sure if the feedback they are giving makes a difference, I will tell them they should not worry. It does, always, whether we want it to or not. It is just that it may not be making a difference in the way we had originally imagined it might.

I will tell them that feedback, like other literacy events linked to academic discourse socialization, is highly complex, and entails various levels and functions of interactions. Inside this complexity lie some of the different keys to L2 writing success: the ideologies on which to build this success, the institutional culture and resources required to support

it, and access to the conversations and information that increasing numbers of L2 writers need to integrate and participate in universities.

Finding ways to enhance the positive aspects of feedback will not be easy. It will take hard work and collaborations that go beyond students and their instructors. It is hoped, however, that this dissertation has offered some good reasons to take up this challenge. Taking up this challenge may not only help us better shape important disciplinary practices linked to the changing nature and increasing complexity of language learning in universities, it will help ensure that students' and teachers' best intentions are not co-opted by goals and pressures which have little to do with L2 writing development, leading to a mismatch between the feedback interactions and thus the learning that students and teachers desire, and what can actually occur.

Such a mismatch would be sad news for anyone who views learning as something that occurs best in situations where learners and guides can work together, particularly in an L2 learning context where interaction and negotiation are considered key for successful socialization into new discourse communities. This is even more unfortunate when we consider what is potentially lost every time an L2 student cannot get the feedback that could help them improve their writing, when L2 writers and their texts remain stuck at the level of incorrect grammar and forms and/or when their ideas are dismissed. When students cannot engage in feedback of a more substantive nature and are left to figure out alone how to best communicate their ideas in a process that is far from guaranteed to be successful.

When this happens it is not only students who suffer, but universities and societies as well, who as a result, have minimized their chances to benefit from the creative and cross-cultural texts that with a bit of help are waiting to be produced and shared, and that are one of the great advantages of the increasing transformation of universities as sites of international and multicultural contact.

Indeed, this echoes the point boldly made by Kaori, who suggested that "international students are the best students" because of their willingness to sacrifice so much and work so hard, and their ability to provide new ideas and perspectives. This was certainly true in Kaori's case. This is why I hope this dissertation and further explorations

of feedback practices situated within their larger institutional context and taking into consideration their multiple functions might help L2 students like her and their instructors take full advantage of feedback's power.

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Appendix A: Letter of Invitation for Students

Opportunity to discuss the role of teacher response for L2 writing development in content courses at BMU

Dear NDU-BMU Students,

I hope you have had a great summer. This is Jérémie Séror, and as some of you may already know, this year I will be conducting a research project about the literacy development of international exchange students at Blue Mountain University (BMU). This research will be conducted as part of the requirements for my doctoral program in the Department of Language and Literacy Education (LLED), and will be conducted in collaboration with Dr. Patricia Duff, an associate professor in LLED, at UBC.

Presently, I am in the process of recruiting international exchange students who might be interested in participating in this study. The study specifically focuses on students' and teachers' experiences and reflections on the use of different types of teacher responses (oral or written feedback, teacher student conferences, etc...) provided on written assignments given in regular content classes. My purpose is to know more about how different types of responses actually get used by students as they develop their L2 writing skills over time and to try to identify which responses are perceived to be the most/least useful in helping students develop their writing skills.

Participating in this project is voluntary. The research project would involve being interviewed by me several times during your second year stay at BMU, as well as maintaining electronic communication with me about your experiences with teacher response in your classrooms. It is estimated that participating in the project would involve approximately 18 hours of your time per semester. If they agree, I will also interview some of your instructors, and possibly observe (if permission is granted) some of your classes. It is anticipated that your participation in the study would lead to important insights that would be useful for future international students and their instructors at BMU.

If you think you might be interested in participating in this project and would like to find out more details about it, please contact me by e-mail at: jeremies@interchange.ubc.ca. I would be very happy to provide you with a more detailed explanation of the purposes and procedures of this investigation and answer any questions you may have.

Please know that your participation in this project would be very much appreciated. Student participants will receive a \$30 gift certificate from the BMU Bookstore after the first interview is completed in appreciation for their time.

I thank you in advance for your consideration of this request and wish you all the best for this second year at BMU!

Jérémie Séror

Appendix B: Letter of Invitation for Instructors

Opportunity to discuss the role of teacher response for L2 writing development in content courses at BMU!

Dear [Instructor's full name]

My name is Jérémie Séror and I am a graduate student in the Department of Language and Literacy Education (LLED) at UBC. This year I will be conducting a research project about the literacy development of international exchange students at Blue Mountain University (BMU). This research will be conducted as part of the requirements for my doctoral program in the Department of Language and Literacy Education, and will be conducted in collaboration with Dr. Patricia Duff, an associate professor in LLED, at UBC.

Presently, I am in the process of recruiting international exchange students who are interested in participating in this project. The project specifically focuses on students' and teachers' experiences and reflections on the use of different types of teacher responses (oral or written feedback, teacher student conferences, etc...) provided on written assignments given in regular content classes. My purpose is to know more about how different types of responses actually get used by students as they develop their L2 writing skills over time and to try to identify which responses are perceived to be the most/least useful in helping students develop their writing skills. Some of the students who have expressed an interest in participating in this project are taking your class this semester, and I would therefore like to ask if you may also be interested in participating in this project.

Participating in this project is completely voluntary. The research project would involve being interviewed by me twice at the beginning and end of the semester about your experiences responding to students written assignments. It is estimated that participating in the project would take approximately 3 hours of your time. If you and focal students also agree, I would also like to observe some of your classes at key times during the semester when written assignments are discussed and/or returned. Please know that this project is in no way intended to be an evaluation of students' or their instructors' performance, or their programs of study at BMU. Rather, it is hoped that your participation in the project will lead to important insights that would be useful for future international students and their instructors at BMU.

If you think you might be interested in participating in this project and would like to find out more details about it, please contact me by e-mail at: jeremies@interchange.ubc.ca. I would be very happy to provide you with a more detailed explanation of the purposes and procedures of this investigation and answer any questions you may have.

Please know that your participation in this project would be very much appreciated and you would receive a \$20 BMU bookstore gift certificate after the first interview is completed in appreciation for your time.

I thank you in advance for your consideration of this request and wish you all the best for this semester at BMU!

Jérémie Séror

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form for Students

Consent Form

Background Information for Students

Title of Study: Conversations about Writing: The Discursive Practice of Teacher Response in L2 Writing

Principal Investigator:

Dr. Patricia Duff
Associate Professor
Department of Language and Literacy Education (LLED), UBC, Faculty of Education
Phone: 604-822-9693

Co-Investigator:

Jérémie Séror
PhD. Candidate
Department of Language and Literacy Education, UBC, Faculty of Education
Phone: 604-822-1248 / e-mail: jeremies@interchange.ubc.ca

Purpose:

The purpose of this project is to provide a contextualized longitudinal account of the role of teacher response practices (oral or written responses, student-teacher conferences) on written assignments for second language (L2) writing development. There is a strong sense that teacher response can play a crucial role in helping L2 students negotiate the conventions they must learn to write in a new language and socio-cultural context. Yet, although various forms of teacher response accompany written assignments returned by teachers to their students, their actual effectiveness and long-term impact for L2 writing development remain controversial. This project focuses specifically on both students' and teachers' interpretations and uses of teacher response practices. It also looks at the nature of teacher response practices in mainstream classes and its impact on helping position L2 students and teachers in relation to writing and its conventions within the academic community. It is hoped this project can lead to principles that can be used in planning responses that are adequate and effective when helping L2 students learn to write in English academic contexts.

Study Procedures:

Participation in this project is voluntary, and if you decide to withdraw from this investigation you can do so at any time without suffering any negative consequences. This study requires you to participate for approximately 18 hours per semester, for a maximum of two semesters. Your participation will involve being interviewed several times by Jérémie Séror, a doctoral student in the Department of LLED at UBC. These face-to-face interviews (which will be audio taped with your permission) are expected to take up to one hour each time, and they will be conducted at your convenience approximately every two weeks during each semester. In addition, e-mail/electronic communication between you and Jérémie Séror will be maintained on a weekly basis during the research process in order to make arrangements for interviews or for any other project-related issues you may wish to share/discuss with him. Also, you will be invited to share with Jérémie Séror writing samples, course outlines, and copies/audio tapes of any feedback received from instructors on your writing both in and out of the classrooms. Some of your instructors will also be contacted and invited to participate in interviews with Jérémie Séror, where they will be asked to share their perceptions on the practice of responding to the written assignments. These instructors will however not know which specific students in their class are participating in the study until final marks for the course have been handed in, nor will your comments be shared with them. Finally, if permission is granted by yourself and your instructor, your classes may be observed and audio taped at different times in the semester to find out more about how written assignments and teacher feedback are discussed in the classroom context.

Publication

This research project will be conducted as part of a doctoral degree, and will thus be accessible to the general public in the form of a doctoral dissertation. In addition, conference presentations as well as journal articles will be published based on the findings of this investigation. Please be assured that pseudonyms will be employed for all participants to ensure their confidentiality. No results of the study will be made public until all final marks in classes you take are handed in for the semesters during which you will be participating in the study.

Confidentiality:

Your identity will be confidential at all times. All documents (e.g., writing samples, course outlines, feedback from instructors, etc.) will be identified only by a code and kept in a locked filing cabinet in Jérémie Séror's office. You will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. Also, all the computer files generated for this study will be password

protected and kept in Jérémie Séror's personal computer hard disk. The only people that will have access to your own raw personal data will be the investigators of this study: Dr. Patricia Duff and Jérémie Séror, and yourself if you so wish.

Compensation and benefits for participants:

You will not receive any payment as a result of your participation in this project. However, we believe you might find it beneficial to have an opportunity to discuss and reflect on issues related to your L2 writing development during your academic experience at BMU. It is hoped this reflection can lead to a more conscious awareness of your writing development and the role that teacher response can play in it. Additionally, as a gesture of appreciation for your time and effort devoted for this study, you will be offered a \$30 gift certificate from the BMU bookstore after the first interview, regardless of how long you decide to continue participating in this study.

Contact for information about the study:

If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Dr. Patricia Duff by phone (604-822-9693) or Jérémie Séror, by phone (604-822-6821) or e-mail: jeremies@interchange.ubc.ca.

Contact for concerns about the rights of research subjects:

If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598.

Consent Form (Student Copy)

Your participation in the study “Conversations about Writing: The Discursive Practice of Teacher Response in L2 Writing” is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences to you.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

Subject Signature

Date

Printed Name of the Subject

*Please **keep this copy** for your own records.*

Thank you very much for your cooperation!

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form for Instructors

Consent Form

Background Information for instructors

Title of Study: Conversations about Writing: The Discursive Practice of Teacher Response in L2 Writing

Principal Investigator:

Dr. Patricia Duff

Professor

Department of Language and Literacy Education (LLED), UBC, Faculty of Education

Phone: 604-822-9693

Co-Investigator:

Jérémie Séror

PhD. Candidate

Department of Language and Literacy Education, UBC, Faculty of Education

Phone: 604-822-1248 / e-mail: jeremies@interchange.ubc.ca

Purpose:

The purpose of this project is to provide a contextualized longitudinal account of the role of teacher response practices (oral or written responses, student-teacher- conferences) on written assignments for second language (L2) writing development. There is a strong sense that teacher response can play a crucial role in helping L2 students negotiate the conventions they must learn to write in a new language and socio-cultural context. Yet, although various forms of teacher response accompany written assignments returned by teachers to their students, their actual effectiveness and long-term impact for L2 writing development remain controversial. This project focuses specifically on both students' and teachers' interpretations and uses of teacher response practices. It also looks at the nature of teacher response practices in mainstream classes and its impact on helping position L2 students and teachers in relation to writing and its conventions within the academic community. It is hoped this project can lead to principles that can be used in planning responses that are adequate and effective when helping L2 students learn to write in English academic contexts.

This study is in no way intended to be an evaluation of the students' or their instructors' performance, their programs of study, or BMU.

Study Procedures:

As an instructor your participation will involve being interviewed twice by Jérémie Séror, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at UBC, who is pursuing this study as a part of his doctoral dissertation research. These interviews will be one hour in length and will occur at the beginning and end of the semester at a time of your choice. These interviews will focus on your experiences and thoughts about the different ways of responding to written assignments. You will also be asked to share course outlines and examples of specific types of responses provided to your students about their writing. This may include (upon approval), audio-taping any out of class communications with students about writing assignments, or providing copies of electronic communications with students about written assignments. Finally, upon approval, and as much as scheduling allows, your classes will also be observed and audio taped a number of times throughout the semester to get at the classroom context which surrounds teacher response. The observations of classroom events will be timed, based your recommendations and the course schedule, to coincide with moments in the semester's duration when there are discussions of in class of writing assignments or the return of writing assignments. Participation in this project is voluntary, and if you decide to withdraw from this investigation you can do so at any time without suffering any negative consequences.

Publication

This research project will be conducted as part of a doctoral degree, and will thus be accessible to the general public in the form of a doctoral dissertation. In addition, conference presentations as well as journal articles will be published based on the findings of this investigation. Please be assured that pseudonyms will be employed for all participants to ensure their confidentiality.

Confidentiality:

Your identity will be confidential at all times. All documents (e.g., course outlines, interview transcripts, etc.) will be identified only by code number and kept in a locked filing cabinet in Jérémie Séror's office. You will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. Also, all the computer files generated for this study will be password protected and kept in Jérémie Séror's personal computer hard disk. The only people that will have access to your own raw data, will be the investigators of this study: Dr. Patricia Duff and Jérémie Séror, and yourself if you so wish.

Compensation and benefits for participants:

It is hoped that participating in this study should provide a stimulating opportunity to discuss and reflect on issues related to the integration of L2

students and the fostering of their L2 writing development in content courses at BMU. As a gesture of appreciation for your time and effort devoted for this study, you will be offered a \$20 gift certificate from the BMU bookstore after your first interview for this project.

Contact for information about the study:

If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Dr. Patricia Duff by phone (604-822-9693) or Jérémie Séror, by phone (604-822-6821) or e-mail: jeremies@interchange.ubc.ca.

Contact for concerns about the rights of research subjects:

If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research subject, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598.

Consent Form (Instructor's Copy)

Your participation in the study "Conversations about Writing: The Discursive Practice of Teacher Response in L2 Writing" is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences to you.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

Subject Signature

Date

Printed Name of the Subject

*Please **keep this copy** for your own records.*

Thank you very much for your cooperation!

Appendix E: UBC Research Ethics Board Certificate of Approval



The University of British Columbia
Office of Research Services and Administration
Behavioural Research Ethics Board

Certificate of Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR Duff, P.	DEPARTMENT Language and Literacy Educ	NUMBER B05-0570
INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT UBC Campus ,		
CO-INVESTIGATORS Seror, Jeremie, Language and Literacy Educ		
SPONSORING AGENCIES		
TITLE: "Conversations about Writing: The Discursive Practice of Teacher Response in L2 Writing"		
APPROVAL DATE	TERM (YEARS) 1	DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL: Aug. 11, 2005, Consent forms / June 24, 2005, Contact letter / Questionnaires
<p>CERTIFICATION:</p> <p>The protocol describing the above-named project has been reviewed by the Committee and the experimental procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.</p> <p><i>Approval of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board by one of the following:</i> Dr. James Franks, Chair, Dr. Susan Rowley, Associate Chair</p> <p>This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the experimental procedures</p>		

Appendix F: Transcription Conventions

.	<i>A period indicates terminal falling intonation</i>
–	<i>A dash indicates a brief pause or cut-off utterance</i>
!	<i>An exclamation mark indicates an enthusiastic tone</i>
,	<i>A comma indicates nonfinal intonation, usually a slight rise</i>
...	<i>Ellipsis indicates a pause in the conversation</i>
YES	<i>Capital letters indicate increased volume</i>
?	<i>A question mark indicates a rising intonation</i>
(Laughs)	<i>Parentheses include information about physical behavior accompanying the utterance.</i>
[clarification]	<i>Brackets include information to clarify meaning</i>
“reported speech”	<i>Words between double quotation marks are attempt made by the speaker to report speech</i>
bold	<i>Bold typeface is used to highlight part of an utterance for analytical purposes</i>
<u>Underlining</u>	<i>Underlined words indicates utterances spoken with emphasis</i>
[<i>A single left bracket, indicates the starting point of overlap</i>

Appendix G: Sample Interview Questions for Students

1. Please tell me about your experiences with teacher response in the past. How often did you receive responses from your teachers on your written assignments? What kinds of responses would you receive? What role do you feel teacher response played in the classes you took? What role do you feel teacher response played in your writing development until now?
2. What do you think of the different types of responses you received from teachers on your writing? How do they make you feel in general? How do they make you feel about your writing? Is one kind of response (face-to-face, written feedback, etc.) better than others?
3. What kinds of responses do you usually expect/get from your professors?
4. What role do you feel teacher response plays in the classes you are taking now? How important/useful do you feel they are? Why?
5. What did you like about the way that the teacher responded to you? What worked well for you? What did not work well for you? Why? Can you give me a specific example of something that they helped you improve? What do you think makes the difference between useful and less useful responses?
6. What effect do you feel the writing feedback received in your classes have had on your writing in the short-term? How do feel they will influence your writing in the long-term? Have the responses you received from the teacher this class changed in any way your view of writing in this specific area of study? If yes, how?
7. What do you usually do with the responses you receive from your teachers? Do you use the responses in any subsequent writing/rewriting you do? How?
8. Do you feel your relationship with the teacher is influenced by the responses he or she gives on your writing? How?
9. What did you expect in terms of teacher response when you came into this class? Were there any surprises? Do you ever ask for a specific kind of response? What kinds of responses would you like to have in a perfect world?
10. Do you ever communicate with your teacher to discuss the response they provided you on your writing? Please tell me more about how you do this.
11. What do you think the teachers trying to do when he or she gives you these responses on your writing assignments? What do you think affects the specific kinds of responses your teacher gives?

Appendix H: Sample Interview Questions for Instructors

1. Could you tell me a little bit about yourself and your experiences here at BMU?
Could you tell me a bit about your work here at BMU?
2. Today is a chance to ask you questions about your experiences providing feedback to students on their writing in the classes you teach. Could you begin by telling me a bit about what comes to mind when you think of correcting and providing feedback to students?
3. Could you tell me what comes to mind when you think of providing feedback to students for whom English is not a native language?
4. What are your goals when you provide feedback to students? Why? Would you say that writing development is one of your goals?
5. How important would you say your role as a teacher is when it comes to providing feedback to students on their writing? How important do you feel feedback is for students in content courses?
6. What other purposes, if any, do you feel feedback on writing may actually have?
7. Could you tell me a bit more in detail about the type of feedback that you give?
 - a. What do you usually comment on? What do you usually write on students papers? And why?
 - b. How do you respond? In writing? Orally? Both? Typed? Etc.
 - c. Do you have any specific strategies in terms of what you attend to in responding to writing?
 - d. Are there any specific strategies you use to make the act of responding to students easier, more effective?
8. What effect do you feel or hope that the feedback you provide has on students in general? How confident are you that it helps them develop their writing skills? Why or why not?
9. In a perfect world, what kinds of responses do you feel would be the best/most effective? Why?

Appendix I: Sample Mini Essay Written by Yoshimi

Keynes $IE \uparrow / IE \downarrow$

Keynes shaped and gave direction to economic science in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He saved capitalism from itself because he transformed the liberal capitalism of the modern age and gave it a new life. Moreover, he represented a shift from price stabilization as the goal of public policy to the stabilization of income and employment at high levels. He favored an international financial organization with a substantial potential for monetary expansion. He addressed 'salvage capitalism' and proposed the need to the government fiscal policy to stimulate investment and decrease in unemployment. Contrary to the classical economists, he believed that there would be no scarce of capital in the end.

Jevons

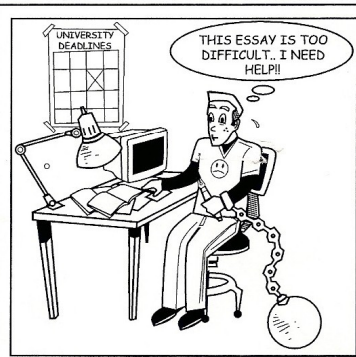
Jevons philosophical significance was that he mentioned that the labour theory of value was wrong and we had to see not the supply side, but the demand side. Moreover, he offended J.S. Mill saying that we should treat human not as we ought to be, but as we are. His historical significance was that he added a mathematical treatment to the classical theory. His theory, utility, was the element of value and dealt with quantities. Furthermore, he defined that the mechanics of utility were 'pleasure' and 'pain', and he interpreted utility in subjective and relative terms as compared with the fact that the value theory of the classics was objective.

Marx

Marx's prophetic vision of the collapse of capitalism and of salvation through revolution was grounded in strict science, and his thoughts were mainly based on scientific socialism. His philosophical significance was that he mentioned that commodities were mysterious things because they represented the social character of labour, and this idea affected strongly to the latter economists. Moreover he and pointed out that machinery displaced labour, and hence, it caused to grow 'industrial reserve army' of workers. Therefore, there an increasing misery of the proletariat in the future. Thus, he sought to destroy the capitalist system.
would be analysed the whole process of capital accumulation by system.
producing surplus value

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