

# What Postgraduates Appreciate in Online Tutor Feedback on Academic Writing

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## Abstract

Improving postgraduate student writing in English is an ongoing concern in the increasingly internationalised UK Higher Education context. Although the importance of feedback for developing academic writing skills is well-established (Hyland and Hyland 2006), there is still much debate about the components of effective feedback. In response to the call for research investigating teachers' real-world practices in giving feedback in specific contexts (Lee 2014 and 2012), this article presents an initiative to develop students' abilities to tackle written postgraduate writing (essays and dissertations) through collaborative on-line academic writing courses.

The Grounded Theory-inspired study explores student perceptions of the effectiveness of online formative feedback on postgraduate academic writing in order to identify best practices which can contribute to developing skills in providing feedback. The study analyses tutor feedback on student texts and student responses to feedback. We applied categories which emerged from this data and concluded that the students we investigated had responded most positively when a combination of confidence-developing feedback practices were employed. These included both principled corrective language feedback and positive, personalised feedback on academic conventions and practices.

This collaboration between academic writing and content specialists continues to provide further opportunities for embedding practices that encourage the development of academic writing skills on one year postgraduate programmes at the University of Edinburgh.

## Introduction

With the continuing increase in the numbers of both distance and face to face international Masters students in UK universities, developing second language (L2) English academic writing skills has become a crucial concern. Respondents in a recent survey conducted among academic staff at Edinburgh University indicated that students' difficulties with academic writing in English was the biggest challenge they faced in working with international students who have English as a second language (Benson et al. 2016). Furthermore, providing useful and appropriate feedback is a major concern. The importance of teacher feedback for developing L2 writing skills is widely recognised (e.g. Hyland and Hyland 2006). Building on a long history which views feedback as essential for learning (Anderson 1982, Vygotsky 1978), the provision of teacher feedback is a central element in writing programmes throughout the world. However, most feedback research has been conducted in 'learning to

write' (writing classrooms) rather than 'writing to learn' contexts (Hyland 2013a: 241). Mainstream writing programmes are rare in UK universities with academic writing issues treated either as remedial concerns for study skills units or English language proficiency problems to be dealt with by the university language centres or equivalent units (Wingate 2006). Writing within the discipline is usually seen as a matter for the specific subject area (Arkoudis and Tran 2010) where it is inextricably linked to assessment. Feedback in this context is most frequently encountered by students in the form of comments justifying grades awarded to written assignments. Student satisfaction with assessment and feedback, however, is an ongoing source of concern for UK universities as attested by the results of the 2014 National Student Survey (HEFCE 2014).

Identifying the characteristics of effective feedback is an important first step in spreading good practice more widely. Whilst there is a general consensus that effective feedback is personalised, specific and timely (Busse 2013, Hyland 2013b), studies into student and teacher perceptions of feedback effectiveness have sometimes produced conflicting results (Busse 2013, Truscott 2007) which suggest that not all feedback necessarily results in writing improvement. Many of the studies use an experimental approach in the expectation of obtaining reliable results. However, conducting experiments into student writing can remove feedback 'from the contexts in which it has meaning for students' (Hyland 2013b: 182). Specific teaching and learning environments, on the other hand, can provide a very meaningful context for research in this area, addressing some of these concerns.

This paper reports on the initial phase of a study funded by Edinburgh University Principal's Teaching Award Scheme (PTAS), which supports small-scale learning and teaching projects. Our primary aim was to explore student satisfaction with the online formative feedback provided by English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC) tutors in the context of short online academic writing courses run in collaboration with particular postgraduate programmes. We hoped to identify effective techniques for providing written feedback. The courses, which are not credit-bearing, have been developed in response to approaches from programme organisers concerned about the difficulties their international students experience writing academic assignments in their disciplines. We focused on two academic writing courses run in collaboration with the College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine (CMVM) and the School of Social and Political Science (SPS). Our expectations were that the research would contribute to developing our own understanding and skills in providing feedback in the postgraduate context. As qualified and experienced teachers of English as a second language with Applied Linguistics qualifications, we are very accustomed to oral and written error correction but have less experience giving feedback on student writing in specific disciplinary contexts. Intended outcomes included the development of research-based guidelines for giving feedback for ELTC tutors and professional development sessions for our own and other university academic staff.

The research presented here builds on a preliminary study, undertaken in 2013, examining student evaluation of ELTC tutor feedback on earlier instances of the two online courses which indicated student satisfaction with detailed, personalised feedback. These results echo the findings of Higgins et al. (2002: 56). Undergraduate students in their study were found to 'perceive feedback negatively if it does not provide enough information to be helpful, if it is too impersonal, and if it is too general and vague to be of any formative use'.

## **Feedback Research**

In giving this account of some of the relevant research in the area it may be useful for the readers of this article to keep in mind the order in which we approached the usual elements of research. In accordance with Grounded Theory principles, we wanted to maintain hypothesis-free data collection. For the most part this research was not familiar to us before we began to examine our own feedback practices as described in the next section.

It appears that feedback-related research has undergone something of a revival recently because of the very practical teaching and learning concerns of English for Academic

Purposes (EAP) and other writing teachers. There is particular interest for EAP practitioners in the considerable body of research into written corrective feedback (WCF) in 'learning to write' contexts. Some is clearly of more relevance to the postgraduate 'writing to learn' context than others but this focus on error correction resonates with the norms of academic writing in UK higher education where there is little tolerance for typical ESL errors (Hyland and Hyland 2006: 4). The controversy begun and continued by Truscott (1996, 2007, 2010), who maintained that written corrective feedback (WCF) was, at best, ineffective in improving writing, and opposed by Ferris (2006, 2007), has been joined by Bruton (2009), Lee (2008), McMartin-Miller (2014), Hyland and Hyland (2006) and Hyland (2013a and b), among others. More recent research has shifted from experimental studies to a focus on teachers' real-world practice in specific classroom contexts, exploring teaching and learning-related needs (Lee 2014: 1). Although WCF plays a substantial role in teacher feedback on writing, the contribution of different strategies to improvement is still unclear (Lee 2013). For example, whilst some research indicates that a selective approach to giving feedback, with a focus on a few errors, is more effective than comprehensive, unfocussed correction (e.g. Bitchener 2008), other research (Bitchener and Ferris 2012), suggests that comprehensive, unfocussed correction may be of benefit to advanced learners. Parr and Timperley (2010: 70) attribute the lack of impact of some writing feedback to "(t)he non-developmental and non-dialogic nature of much of the reported practice".

The online nature of our courses would appear to limit the possibilities for dialogue and development. However, some early research on online feedback (Tuzi 2004) indicated that e-feedback had a greater impact on revision of writing than oral feedback. Online feedback, perhaps, emphasises the one-to-one relationship between teacher and student, which is not always so evident in a face-to-face classroom setting. The movement towards establishing Writing Centres in the UK is slow and the one to one encounters possible in such a setting are not viewed as a practicable solution to meet the large scale demands for academic writing support from international students.

As much of the WCF research is conducted in secondary school and early undergraduate years' settings and focusses on grammatical and lexical correction, we took the decision during the course of the research process to expand the definition of WCF for the postgraduate context to indicate correction of use of academic conventions, sentence structure and argumentation as well as grammar and lexis.

Error correction is, of course, not the sole focus of academic writing feedback. While the assumption often made is that postgraduate students will have been socialised into the academic community through undergraduate study, this is of course not necessarily true of those who have come from other educational systems. For this reason, much of the undergraduate research undertaken is equally relevant to one year postgraduate courses. The role of feedback in 'assisting students in negotiating access to new knowledges and practices' (Hyland and Hyland 2006: 2) is key for international postgraduate students becoming familiar with the academic expectations of UK universities as well as the expectations of their disciplines.

Whilst we make no claims for generalizability within the WCF debate, we hope our approach to developing academic writing skills will be of relevance for practitioners in similar contexts to ours.

## **Context**

We are based in the English Language Teaching Centre in a research-intensive Russell Group university which hosts the third largest international student population in the UK (UKCIAS 2014) with the majority of students studying at postgraduate level. The university has, in recent years, invested in providing more support for teaching and learning generally, with the establishment of an Institute for Academic Development, and, for international students specifically, through ELTC. ELTC has 20 full-time academic staff engaged primarily in supporting the academic English needs of the university's international students.

Improving academic writing is such a central concern for postgraduate students in UK universities because assessment is often based solely on student writing. This comes as a surprise to many non-UK students. One year taught postgraduate degrees at Edinburgh typically comprise two semesters of taught courses assessed through written assignments followed by a dissertation of 12 -15,000 words. Formally assessed written assignments are often not due until the end of semester with feedback provided by the beginning of the second semester. If the feedback indicates problems with academic essay writing, it is often too late for students to make the necessary improvement in subsequent assignments to substantially alter the overall assessment of their performance. As a result, students may not achieve the grades to which they aspire. Only recently has university policy changed to ensure that all courses include at least two written assignments to ensure that formative feedback can be provided on the first assignment, which can then potentially enhance performance on the second assignment. Student satisfaction with feedback generally has been an issue of concern for the university, impacting on results obtained from student satisfaction surveys. It is important to note that, in these surveys, feedback and assessment are considered together. This is possibly because students' concerns about provision of feedback are seen as intrinsically linked to the impact lack of feedback has on the grades they receive for their assignments.

Although ELTC provides general academic writing courses to students in need of improvement, those with the lowest scores on the Test of English at Matriculation (TEAM)<sup>1</sup> have priority for places. There is also resistance amongst some students towards attending a special centre or to have attention drawn to possible difficulties. In our experience, those who struggle the most with academic writing requirements can feel so overwhelmed with the academic demands of their programmes that an additional course is simply too much for them to cope with.

For these reasons, collaborative English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) courses, initiated and run within academic subject areas, present an interesting way forward. From a practical point of view, the online nature of the courses means that students can fit them into their busy schedules more easily. In response to requests from academic programme organisers for postgraduate academic writing support, online academic writing courses were developed. Both the subject matter and academic genre for the practice assignment are selected by academic staff in the students' academic subject area, which provides students with the opportunity to develop their academic writing skills and understanding of academic conventions within their own discipline. Moreover, as any reading required is directly relevant to their subject of study, it was envisaged that this would lead to greater motivation to complete the course.

Ideally, the courses run as early in the academic year as feasible in order to provide students with structured support in producing an academic essay before formally assessed assignments are due. ELTC staff take responsibility for the course design and development, with subject specialist input from the academic course organisers. Participation in the courses is voluntary as the courses are non-credit bearing, although CMVM strongly encourage student attendance. For SPS, first priority on places is given to L2 speakers but the courses have also proved useful for students from Anglophone academic contexts with differing academic writing expectations, such as the USA. UK students, although in smaller numbers, also participate regularly. These include those returning to study after a long gap, such as doctors, vets and dentists in the case of the CMVM course, as well as highly motivated potential PhD students in SPS, who value the extra opportunities for feedback on their writing. There are new developments each year in response to feedback from students and deepening cooperation between subject specialists and EAP practitioners. For example, the SPS course now includes three joint ELTC/subject specialism face-to-face sessions, providing further opportunities for feedback and an open forum for questions about academic writing conventions, style and content expectations.

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<sup>1</sup> TEAM is taken routinely by all students who have an IELTS or equivalent score lower than 7.0 to access in-session academic English support.

Each course comprises five weekly units with tasks and answer keys focussing on the different aspects of writing academic assignments:

1. Structuring an essay
2. Reading and Writing Critically
3. Citation and referencing
4. Concluding
5. Revising and editing

Students work through the self-study materials on the University's VLE and submit a weekly written assignment to their ELTC tutor for written feedback. This is provided either online, using Grademark (part of Turnitin) or by tracking changes and commenting on an emailed word attachment, depending on the preferences of the academic department requesting the course. The weekly assignments are effectively first drafts of the different sections of the essay assignment the students are gradually building. Assignment titles with prescribed reading from a limited number of sources are provided by the academic department.

This is the SPS assignment brief:

The essay topics are below. These are designed to be multidisciplinary, generic topics, which any SPS student can attempt (although some are obviously closer to some academic disciplines than others). For each essay there are three readings. You may choose ANY ONE essay topic to work on. You should **use all three readings** in your essay, but (unlike for many of your future essays), **please refer to a maximum of three readings additional to the recommended ones** – the aim of the exercise is not primarily for you to produce the most perfect answer possible, but to focus on how best to use a limited number of sources to answer a specific question.

The CMVM students are beginning one year MSc by research programmes which will require the production of a 30,000 word thesis. The academic writing course is intended to act as a way in to developing writing skills through short essay writing for students whose prior studies have not had a strong focus on academic writing and the short essay format was the expressed preference of the CMVM course organiser. These are the current CMVM essay titles provided for students to choose from, depending on their specialism:

1. Discuss the issues surrounding the ethics of human and animal research.
2. Briefly outline the inequalities in health that exist within and between countries and describe how these are socially determined.
3. 'Oral inflammation is a causative factor in cardiovascular disease'. Discuss this statement.

In both cases subject specialists give feedback on the content of the final 1,500-word essay which is submitted in the format and according to the procedures specified by the postgraduate course organiser, giving students the opportunity to accustom themselves to university and departmental requirements.

Table 1 gives an example of SPS academic tutor feedback. The criteria for assessment have been adapted from the University's Common Marking Scheme. Students need at least a C to achieve a pass in their postgraduate degree.



**Table 1. SPS Academic Tutor Feedback Sample**

<b>Marking criterion</b>	<b>Comment</b>	<b>Grade A-H (if appropriate)</b>
Critical/conceptual analysis	The concepts of relative and universal HRs are identified; discussed and evaluated in an appropriate way. The conceptual debate could have been more extensive, in particular identifying and critically analyzing the grounds for claiming universal HRs	C
Strength/cohesion of argument	Argument is clear and sustained, but based on relatively narrow grounds (the argument about relativism) because of the short length. 950 words is really very short for a 1500 word limit. The extra 550 words could have been used to fill in the gaps indicated.	C
Use of sources/evidence	Generally good, though several instances (indicated) of repeating claims without explaining them or their relevance to the argument.	B
Structure and organisation	Logically organised. Answer coherently structured and flows well.	B
Breadth and relevance of reading	Relevance and amount of reading is good given the advice given.	B
Clarity of expression, presentation and referencing	Essay is clear and well-presented. Referencing is in a consistent and appropriate format.	B

Feedback from both ELTC and subject tutors is formative and intended to feed into practice when writing essays for assessment. ELTC tutors, however, offer immediate detailed feedback on a weekly basis over four weeks with a relatively generous time allowance for each assignment, whereas the subject tutors only see the completed essay resulting in the need for providing summative feedback and a grade on this task at the same time as providing advice for future essays. The tutor roles are complementary. The assumption was that ELTC tutors would give written corrective feedback on language as well as feedback on specific aspects of academic essay writing and subject tutors would focus on content feedback, grading according to the criteria used for credit-bearing assignments. The focus for ELTC feedback for each weekly assignment is guided by the content of that weeks' unit of work, further contributing to the clarity of purpose essential because "(u)nless it is clear what feedback is trying to achieve, its success cannot be judged" (Price, Handley, Millar and O'Donovan 2010: 278). Appendix 1 gives an example of feedback provided on the Unit One assignment in which students draft the introduction to their essay, having selected their topic and read the source material recommended.

Several strong challenges presented themselves for our tutors. Changes in the role of ELTC meant that teachers were spending a much greater proportion of time developing students' academic writing skills than previously. In addition, much of the work now involved online courses rather than face-to-face classroom interaction. It seemed to many of us that our only interaction with these students was through the written feedback we provided on their texts. The discipline-specific nature of some of the courses created uneasiness among tutors about their ability to give useful feedback on unfamiliar subject-specific writing at postgraduate level. Although we knew that subject specialists would be involved in giving feedback on the content of the final essay, language and content are not easily separable and "the way a student

expresses his or her ideas is inseparable from the ideas themselves” (Hyland 2013a: 245). Secondly, some of the course participants were first language speakers of English with, in some cases, years of experience in their professional fields. Whilst we were confident about developing a strong professional relationship with students we could engage with in the classroom, the fact that these students were invisible was daunting. We found giving feedback on discipline-specific writing demanding and, subsequently, decided to apply for funding to research our practice.

## **Research Design and Data**

Our data consist of the four short written texts submitted by each student from two separate online academic writing courses run in 2014. These are Scientific Academic Writing for Masters by Research in Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Medicine (SAW) and Academic Writing for Social and Political Sciences (AWSPS). The texts include written feedback (comments, changes and corrections) from the ELTC tutor. SAW uses an online system (Grademark) whereas AWSPS assignments are sent to tutors as emailed Word attachments and returned with comments and changes tracked. Each tutor manages a group of 10 students. 145 students enrolled on AWSPS; 94 completed the first assignment and tutors provided feedback on a total of 224 texts. 137 enrolled on SAW; 81 completed the first assignment and tutors provided feedback on 234 texts. 53 students completed the whole course. All the students were in the first month of their one year postgraduate programmes.

In addition to the writing samples, short Feedback on Feedback questionnaires (Appendix 1) were sent to students on three separate occasions during the course to elicit comments on the feedback they were receiving. A final course evaluation questionnaire was sent to all students participating in the course. We also looked at comments students made in emails. We aimed, as far as possible, to approach our data without preconceptions, simply to see what kind of feedback strategies appeared to be successful. In order to examine in more detail the nature of the written feedback provided by our academic tutors and gain some objectivity and distance from the courses with which we were heavily involved, as course directors and tutors ourselves on both courses, we adopted a modified Grounded Theory approach (see Author 2001 and 2006). We wanted to research our own practice and avoid judging our colleagues. It was a deliberate attempt to provide a descriptive account. Using the grounded theory approach described rather than beginning by engaging with the literature we first engaged with our data and read relevant literature only as we progressed with the research and themes emerged. Only then was it possible to ascertain whether or not our feedback practice reflected research findings in the literature.

We independently conducted an initial trawl of the data, beginning from the returned Feedback on Feedback questionnaires, to identify any emerging themes and generate categories through open coding. These initial categories were then jointly refined and developed and applied to sets of data, checking for both positive and negative instances. Multiple coding of samples of each individual researcher's data was undertaken and we reached broad agreement on coding. Research memos were written throughout the process and the three researchers met regularly to discuss the findings and hypotheses/theories generated, creating the 'genuine interweaving of data collection and theorizing of the kind advocated by Glaser and Strauss' (Bryman and Burgess 1994: 6).

Questionnaires were then matched to students and tutor groups to examine written work and tutors' feedback. At this stage it is important to emphasise that most of the feedback we received from students (on both the course itself and the feedback their teachers had provided) was generally positive. We therefore narrowed our focus to those students who completed the whole course and had expressed a strong sense that their written work had actually improved as a result of the course (rather than simply expressing satisfaction) and took the further step of examining their written texts for uptake of feedback. This emphasis on students' perceptions of effectiveness is tied to the link with motivation. Research has shown that feedback which is perceived as demotivating can negatively affect students' learning behaviour (Busse 2013). Whilst there is general agreement that effectiveness of feedback is

very hard to pin down, we hoped to discover whether there was any evidence that the students' expressed perceptions of improvement reflected their actual written performance. Although students were not required to produce second versions of the individual assignments for us to comment on, they were encouraged to incorporate suggestions for changes and corrections into the developing essay. Uptake of feedback can be seen by examining the set of assignments produced by individual students for modifications to earlier parts of the essay at later stages. The course is organised in such a way that each assignment contributes to the whole essay but needs to be modified (i.e. redrafted) to fit as the essay is developed. Limiting our sample to those students who completed the whole course allowed us to examine the chain of assignments and to see where students had modified the different parts of the essay in response to the feedback provided.

Examination of written feedback began with the students' texts and tutor comments to identify patterns. These were matched afterwards with student comments on the effectiveness of the feedback and the course. As the work progressed we read the relevant literature, particularly in relation to the written corrective feedback (WCF) debate, and compared our emergent findings with those of other studies. The initial categories developed were refined and grouped to produce the scheme in Table 2. The codes are designed to apply either to student (S) or teacher (T) comments. Some categories apply to both (ST).

**Table 2. Categories and codes**

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Codes</b>
Positive comments from tutor leading to increased motivation and improvement. S	POS
Corrective feedback leads to improvement and elimination of mistakes. S	CF
Students have refreshed their knowledge of academic conventions and style (possibly after a break from study). S	REFRESH
Students have developed their awareness of academic expectations, S	EXPECT
Critical awareness developed. S	CRITAWARE
Confidence developed. S	CONFID
Improved but lack of detail. S	NONSPECIFIC
Extended academic vocabulary. S	VOCABEXTEND
Address. T	NAMED
Suggestions for improvement. S	IMPSUGG
Any comments related to feedback on this. S.T.	CONTENT
Tutor comments/instruction/correction to improve academic style. T	ACADEMIC

### **Examples from Our Data**

Having identified a limited number (53) of particular cases on which to focus (as described above), we looked initially at types of WCF, coding tutor comments on student texts for different types of WCF. Ferris (2006: 98) maintains that there is 'a strong case for the superiority of indirect feedback over direct feedback'. Other research reported (Ferris 2006)



suggests that WCF should be indirect when dealing with so-called treatable errors. Untreatable errors, such as word choice and word order, it is claimed, can only be addressed by direct correction as there are no rules which students can apply. Indirect feedback, on the other hand, allows learners to engage with the rules and apply them to their own correction of errors, resulting in deeper learning (Ferris 2001). However, as both types of feedback were appreciated, it appears that, in this postgraduate context (with advanced learners on non-compulsory courses), any kind of correction involving drawing students' attention to errors may result in perceived improvement and student satisfaction with feedback. This would appear to confirm Bitchener and Ferris's (2012) finding that comprehensive, unfocused correction can benefit advanced learners.

It became increasingly clear as we coded our data that other factors also played a role. Establishing a relationship, developing confidence and individualising feedback to take account of the student's L1 and cultural background as well as their professional and academic background appeared also to be key.

These are some student comments from the Feedback on Feedback questionnaires. Most students indicated that the feedback had helped them to improve their writing. Not all made additional comments to tell us exactly how the feedback helped, but these are some examples where this was done:

The positive feedback gave me confidence in other assignments

Corrections, proposals and questions made by (Tutor) helped me to improve my essay.

It made me more aware of my strengths and weaknesses regarding my writing skills, as the feedback underscored both positive and negative aspects of my work. I think positive criticisms are rather crucial too!

Both the feedback and course units are giving me a better understanding of the requirements of European essay writing.

Helped me get back into the correct frame of mind and also to make the transition to masters level

I learned to pay attention to my own idea not just list the other person's ideas

By looking at student texts, teacher comments and students responses, we could see student engagement with feedback emerging, as this fairly typical detailed case illustrates.

The following excerpts from tutor feedback were coded as shown below:

POS - S is named / first name basis / CF related to referencing and citation/ CONFID 'impressively accurate' / 'rights' comment – REFORMULATION and DIRECT FEEDBACK /INDIRECT + CORRECTION / x 2 / POS

T1.Hi (student's first name) Well done. Overall, this is well-written. (tutor's first name) If you use a direct quotation from an author, you should ...

Your English is impressively accurate. Your citation skills, however, need some polishing. There are examples of incorrect citation throughout your writing. You need to revise the Harvard referencing system. A useful website is: [www.epax.co.uk](http://www.epax.co.uk)

'Rights' can't go into further detail. You need to reorder as well as restructure this part of the sentence. My suggestion is: These rights are basic, fundamental ...

Noun/verb agreement – legitimacy derives (not derive)

Verb structure: Aid + in + noun, e.g. Vitamin C aids in the absorption of iron.  
You could begin your sentence with: This aids in the elimination of ...

As you can see, the types of errors I have highlighted this week are to do with the following: structure, text organisation, citation and appropriate academic vocabulary and phrasing. I hope you find my comments helpful.

This is a good Conclusion, (student's first name). It is well-organised according to ...  
Well done for completing the ELTC contribution to the course.

It is clear from the teacher feedback that both direct and indirect feedback has been provided to help the student correct misunderstandings about academic citation practices as well as help with grammatical and lexical errors and sentence restructuring. Rather than an unfocussed comprehensive approach to error correction, the teacher also clearly indicates the areas on which she has commented. This is done in response to the student's work rather than reflecting a pre-existing agenda for correction, however. It is interesting also that examples of correct usage provided are tailored to the student's needs for, in this case, scientific writing. This principled approach to providing feedback is personalised and there is a conscious focus on developing confidence through praise. The teacher begins with a greeting and a personal acknowledgement, addressing the student by first name.

The student's responses below are taken from Feedback on Feedback questionnaires and email communication<sup>2</sup>:

How did you use the feedback?

I implemented recommended changes and corrections / techniques explained will be most useful / ... rewrote based on suggestions and recommendations about what to think about, sentence structure, vocabulary, paragraph structure etc.

Is the feedback helping you to improve your academic writing?

... also motivational, encouragement and compliments make me believe that I can do it! / ... very helpful to have the common sense explained in rules and recommendations, tick lists and examples about right and wrong / ... no longer organised chaos based on intuition, but clear and concise guidance.

Feedback in an email

(Tutor's first name) 's feedback is doing wonders for my technique, understanding and self-confidence.

Again, there is acknowledgement of the helpfulness of the correction provided and its future application. There is also, however, a very strong appreciation of the motivational aspects of the teacher's approach to providing feedback.

After becoming aware of very similar patterns in other samples it appeared that tutors' positive, personalised comments increased motivation and led to perceived improvement. However, this needed to be combined with the provision of corrective feedback tailored to the individual student's writing concerns, as shown by engagement with the structure, organisation and content of the essay. It appeared to be the combination of principled corrective feedback with a focus on developing confidence by providing positive, personalised feedback on academic conventions and practices as well as language which obtained the most positive response from the students we investigated.

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<sup>2</sup> All student examples are used with permission.

In line with grounded theory recommendations, we carried out constant comparative analysis, looking for negative as well as positive instances. We found one example, where, although satisfaction with improvement was claimed, it was clear, through examination of the different essay drafts built up as the course progressed, that the student had not acted on the feedback to make changes and corrections to their writing. In light of this we add 'providing there is evidence the student has acted on the feedback' to the theory generated. We found, however, little evidence of what Truscott (1996: 355) refers to as 'the inherent unpleasantness of correction'. On the whole, our postgraduate students appreciated the correction provided and perceived that they had improved their academic writing. We found only this one case where there was clear evidence that a student had *not* acted on the feedback provided. This is exemplified below:

Feedback on ELTC tutor feedback from SAW student

How did you use the feedback?

I checked my mistakes and I noticed my deficiencies in order to improve my writing for the next time.

Is the feedback helping you to improve your academic writing?

Yes, because next time I will write an essay I will have in mind not to do the same mistakes

Tutor 2 remains positive and encouraging in spite of the fact that the student has not taken any steps to implement the feedback:

T2. Thank you for submitting your 4th task. To make a few general comments I think you could maybe go back and look at previous corrections on tasks -particularly task 2. I think much of the advice I gave you for that doesn't seem to have been applied- I especially recognise a few sections in paragraph 1 of task 4 which I have already commented on. I know it is time consuming but you will find the suggestions helpful. Have a look again at task 2 at my suggestions and the same for 1 and 3 and see if you can make changes to incorporate in your task 4 so that over the course the improvement builds up from task to task.

Appropriate indirect and direct WCF is provided by the teacher engaging with the way in which the content of the student's argument is expressed:

T2. I think you would benefit from having another look at the material for task 4- especially the hedging as you do need to be a bit more cautious in your writing ... for example in paragraph 2 genetically modified organisms which seem to experience pain would be more appropriate than the sweeping statement you have made.

However, in spite of the teacher's best efforts, there is no evidence of uptake of feedback in the case of Student 2. The final essay submitted showed that the student had not implemented any changes or corrections and the essay was, in fact, identical to the work submitted for the first assignment. It is not possible to do more than speculate on the reasons for the student's attitude. It may be symptomatic of the fear of exposure alluded to at the beginning of this article. Students generally are unwilling to admit to problems with academic work, including any that relate to inadequate levels of English. It may, however, simply be due to a lack of time and the need to focus on more urgent work deadlines. Students who dropped out of the course usually cite time pressure as the reason – and the courses are not credit-bearing.

## **Discussion and Lessons Learnt**

For those students who complete the course, working through the units of work and drafting sections of an essay within the disciplinary parameters set by specific postgraduate programmes, with the opportunity to use feedback on one assignment to improve the next, results in student satisfaction and perception of improvement with academic writing. Improvement was further evidenced by changes made as the essay was gradually built up through adding the different sections. Given that attendance on the course and completion of the assignments is voluntary and we are working with students who are actively seeking feedback, we would not suggest this as a recipe for success in other contexts, necessarily.

Becoming more aware of our own written feedback practices and comparing them with research in the field gave us greater confidence that our instinctive, experienced-based practices had a sound research base. The process also encouraged us to view the possibilities for engagement with students in the online context more positively. We were interested to discover that social interaction takes place with students online as well as in the face-to-face classroom. Students were responding to our presence online and saw our written feedback as a response to the person writing the text, not simply a response to a writing task, and we discovered that it is possible to establish a dialogue with students through commenting on a text. Establishing a persona online to project a friendly and involved yet critical friend appeared to be an important element of good feedback practice in our postgraduate context. Although research is needed to confirm this, we hypothesise that the dialogue established may create a virtuous circle.

Student feedback to tutor, in our experience, also encourages the tutor to continue providing principled feedback if we have evidence that the student both values and acts on the feedback. This opportunity to provide feedback to the academic writing tutor potentially also allows the postgraduate student to have more control over the process and become a more equal partner, rather than the passive recipient of teacher correction. To further facilitate this dialogue we now begin some units of work with a request to the student to tell us how they have applied the feedback they have received, and, if they have been unable to apply the feedback, to tell us why and indicate areas where they would appreciate further feedback. This provides the tutor with useful feedback on feedback and allows for an adjustment of feedback practice which is better suited to the individual, further reinforcing the virtuous cycle.

Whilst the primary benefit of the research has been to allow us to investigate and improve our own practice, these collaborative academic writing courses continue to provide rich opportunities for subject and EAP specialist cooperation, leading to more embedding of practices which encourage academic writing development. Increasing numbers of SPS postgraduate courses include an early, shorter assessed assignment and we are considering possibilities of offering the current support for these credited assignments. Future planned developments include a session with SPS academic staff (who have been relatively invisible in this paper) in response to SPS tutor requests for more guidance on feedback. We also intend to further investigate some of the other categories in our data and intend to apply our findings to new sets of data. In addition, we plan to investigate whether the progress made transfers to other written assignments by tracking the progress of some of the students through their postgraduate year.

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## Appendix 1: SPS Academic Writing Tutor Feedback Sample

### P B, CECILIA Unit 1 (RW)

#### In-Text Comments

Name?

DELETION      INSERT These

DELETION              INSERT of

Are these countries developing countries?

This is a language not a country

DELETION

DELETION

DELETION

DELETION      INSERT (countries)

DELETION              INSERT N

DELETION

Of + v-ing

INSERT which is

This should be an adjective, not a noun

INSERT the

DELETION              INSERT s

'Have' doesn't collocate with 'effort', use 'make an effort'

This is a parallel structure so it should be the past participle

Why did you choose this quote? Although you reference it as 2005, it was meant for the 1990s (finished time). Is this relevant? Could you paraphrase it instead to support your statement better?

DELETION      INSERT the political

DELETION

Factors?

INSERT s

DELETION ii

What are these world necessities? This needs to be explained more clearly.

‘with extreme poverty’. Poverty is a concept so it is uncountable.

Use the adjective form as we are describing the states

DELETION                      INSERT making it

New paragraph

INSERT the

DELETION

INSERT

INSERT the

I don’t understand this

DELETION                      INSERT life

## **END COMMENT**

This paragraph does contain some of the elements of a good introduction- you begin with a general statement and give some background to the situation as well as briefly explaining your approach. If I understand correctly, you are saying that wealthy countries such as the US are not interested in the MDGs but are interested in industries affecting their economy. The US is interested in security and financial stability whilst poor countries are interested in ‘disease’. Are you going to argue that it is NGOs and not the MDGs that affect poverty? Make sure that your line of argument answers the essay question- your message seems to move away from the essay title. Looking at the language, some of the mistakes in this could be avoided with careful proofreading- be aware of your use of articles and word forms. Overall, this is a good start- look at my comments and consider them when making corrections. Well done! R.

## Appendix 1: SPS Academic Writing Tutor Feedback Sample

Evaluation of Tutor Feedback

Unit -

Please tick (✓) the relevant box and provide further information where asked.

1. Is the feedback you have received useful?

Very Useful	Useful	Not very useful	Not at all useful
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2. Is the feedback clear?

Very clear	Clear	Not very clear	Not at all clear
------------	-------	----------------	------------------

3. Have you been able to act on the feedback?

Yes	No
How did you use the feedback?	If not, please briefly tell us why:

4. Is the feedback helping you improve your academic writing?

Yes	No
Please tell us why	Please tell us why not:

5. Is there any way you think the feedback can be improved?