

Hindrances to L2 Graduate Students' Incorporation of Written Feedback into their Academic Texts

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Abstract

The present study employed a qualitative approach to investigate L2 graduate students' reasons for not incorporating supervisor feedback into their theses/dissertations. Think-aloud protocols were employed to examine 54 L2 master's degree and doctoral students' reasons for ignoring their supervisors' comments on their theses/dissertations. Employing an inductive categorization approach, we categorized students' reasons thematically into four main classes of specificity of comments, clarity of comments, the compatibility of comments with students' perceived abilities, and students' retention of their autonomy.

A significant issue in the feedback literature is students' engagement with comments. Engagement is reported to determine the success of a feedback practice and explain the differential success of students receiving comments in second language writing programs (Ferris, Liu, Sinha, & Senna, 2013; Han, 2017; Han & Hyland, 2015). Han and Hyland (2015), highlighting the significance of students' engagement with feedback, assert that "learner engagement is a critical link that connects the provision of WCF with learning outcomes" (p. 31). One of the consequences of students' poor engagement with supervisor feedback is their failure to apply comments (Sinclair & Cleland, 2007). Boud (2015), too, argues that the "feedback loop" is completed when a student has enacted the information and has incorporated the comment into the subsequent versions and tasks. Nonetheless, as Storch & Wigglesworth (2010) state, the investigation of students' engagement with comments has been an overlooked research area. Bounds, et al. (2013) have found

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that studies on students' engagement with feedback has been an underexplored area of research, which requires more studies to cover a blind spot in the field (Burke, 2009). Winstone, Nash, Rowntree, and Parker (2017) assert that the findings of studies on factors affecting students' engagement can help us improve the quality of supervisor feedback and students' learning opportunities.

Despite the significance of the issue of students' incorporating supervisor feedback into their revisions as an indicator of students' engagement with feedback, to the best of our knowledge, it has remained an unexplored area of research. Some researchers have investigated this issue, but all of them have focused merely on students' perceptions. For instance, some studies (e.g., Caffarella & Barnett, 2000; Can & Walker, 2011) found a significant relationship between students' perceptions of feedback and their revision process. Carless (2006), in his survey study, found that one of the major reasons that hindered students' incorporation of comments was their inability to comprehend the comments. Sadler (2010) stated that to apply comments, students need to understand them; he also posited that students' lack of suitable knowledge to decode the provided comments leads to their inability to benefit from the provided comments. Kumar and Stracke (2007) found that students' attitude toward critical comments, and supervisors' respect for students' voice can affect their revision decisions; they also found that those who had more positive attitudes toward academic writing made more revisions. The present study put a step forward and investigated L2 graduate students' reasons for ignoring comments by the use of stimulated recall interviews.

Storch and Wigglesworth (2010) have argued that the methodological complexity of think-aloud protocols can be regarded as a major hindrance to investigate the details of students' engagement with feedback. However, the present study benefited from a retrospective data collection procedure in the form of stimulated recall interviews to have a better understanding of the reasons why L2 graduate students do not incorporate some supervisor comments. To be more specific, this research contributes to the body of first and second language writing literature by responding to the following research questions:

Research question one: What are L2 advanced students' main hindrances to incorporation of written feedback into their academic texts?

Research question two: Is there any significant difference between L2 master's degree and doctoral students' reasons for ignoring their supervisors' feedback?

The present study employed a qualitative approach to investigating L2 graduate students' reasons for not incorporating supervisor feedback into their theses/dissertations. The participants included 39 master's degree and 15 doctoral TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) student in four different Iranian universities. The researchers selected TEFL theses/dissertations because of their availability to these texts and their writers.

The corpus of the present study included the two versions of 54 theses and dissertations: a version with supervisor feedback and the subsequent (revised) version. These texts were collected; the provided comments and the incorporated and ignored comments were identified for further analysis. In the present study, we defined supervisor feedback as any sort of written alphanumeric information provided by a supervisor that a post-graduate student should engage with to improve the quality of his/her performance and/or add, modify, or omit an item from his/her cognitive set to move toward the designated reference point determined by the

community of practice. The comments ranged from a sign (a question mark, highlight, etc.) to comments as long as a page.

In order to examine master's degree and doctoral students' reasons for ignoring comments into the subsequent version of their texts, stimulated recall interviews were employed. The participants were invited to participate in the interviews to examine the provided prompts (the two versions of their theses/dissertations), and disclose their reasons for not employing the provided comments. These reasons were, subsequently, categorized into different classes thematically. An inductive category formation procedure (Mayring, 2004) was employed to induce the themes from the responses. The interviews were conducted in students' native language, Persian. Students' first language was employed to avoid missing or misunderstanding interviewees' information (Pavlenko, 2007). Each interview took about 20 minutes and, on average, we had 3 double-spaced pages of transcription (Persian) for each interviewee.

The findings indicated that students did not apply some comments because of four main reasons: being too general, being unclear, sensing the incompatibility of feedback requirements with their abilities, and defending their autonomy. The results showed that masters' and doctoral students ignored unclear and general comments with no significant difference in quantity. However, significantly more master's students ignored the comments they found beyond their abilities, and significantly more doctoral students ignored the comments that did not respect their autonomy. The findings are discussed in the light of various linguistic, psychological, and sociological theories. Several pedagogical implications are also provided based on the findings of this study.

Keywords: Second language writing, Feedback, Incorporation, Academic writing, Supervisor feedback