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Reimagining feedback for improved academic writing in distance education: Lecturers and markers' perspectives in South Africa

ABSTRACT

Specific mechanisms relating feedback to learning are still not understood. One of the most neglected issues in education is the notion of providing constructive feedback to students, in particular, students who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL). EAL students may not cope with academic writing if explicit feedback is not provided. The objective of this paper is to explore markers and lecturers' perspectives of feedback in a first-year Academic Writing module at a Distance Education (DE) institution in South Africa. The study was conducted in a mega module but, due to the qualitative nature of this paper, the participants consisted of seven lecturers and four markers. Using a case study research design, in conjunction with Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory and Hattie and Timperley's (2007)

Model of Feedback, this paper argues that feedback needs to be reimagined in DE contexts. From the interviews and an observation schedule, the findings revealed that there is a marked difference between the ways in which markers and lecturers view feedback in students' assignments. The paper concludes by arguing that the growing diversity of the type of distance education students and the availability of technology call for the reimagining of feedback in DE. In addition, recommendations are provided to aid practitioners to foster quality feedback to improve academic writing proficiency in DE contexts

Keywords: Feedback, academic writing, first-year students, EAL, distance education, sociocultural theory

1. Introduction

Studies posit that specific mechanisms relating feedback to learning are still not well understood (Núñez-Peña, Bono, Suárez-Pellicioni, 2015; Cutumisu & Schwartz, 2018). “One of the most neglected issues in educational practices is giving constructive feedback to students. Markers and lecturers tend to score students’ work and give them grades but constructive feedback is rarely provided” (Al-Hattami, 2019:885). Students from working class and rural backgrounds, and who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL), are often associated with the notion of generic gaps in general skills that they bring into Higher Education (HE) (Department of Higher Education, 2017, cited in Madondo, 2020). These students are often the most marginalised and have attracted little attention in research participation to date (Mgqwashu, 2016). It is argued that one of the generic gaps of South African students who speak EAL in HE is that they experience challenges in expressing themselves through academic writing (Leibowitz, 2004).

Several reports and research studies indicate that many EAL students lack adequate writing skills, they struggle to write academically and are arguably linguistically underprepared (Jones, 2011; Van Dijk, Vivian & Malan, 2019). Other studies specified writing challenges such as ineffective writing strategies, problems with planning and organisation (Pineteh, 2014; Mohammed, 2019), difficulties with grammar, punctuation, word choice (Pineteh, 2014) and negative self-perceptions of their writing skills as a result of the negative feedback they may have received (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). There are more individual, instructional and institutional challenges faced by EAL students, particularly those who are in Distance Education (DE) (Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chiwanza & Zebron, 2015:65).

The researchers in the study conducted for this article teach academic writing to first-year students and hold the view that feedback has an impact on how students perform in academic writing. Their previous and current experiences as lecturers enabled them to understand that many students struggle to write academically, which may be associated with their ‘ways of being’ (Gee, 1990) or their cultural backgrounds, linguistic inadequacies and/or semantic barriers related to English as a language of instruction. For Gee (2012:152), all people have ‘ways of being’, a discourse, which is:

...composed of distinctive ways of speaking/listening and often, too, writing/reading coupled with distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing, with other people and with various objects, tools, and technologies, so as to enact specific socially recognizable identities engaged in specific socially recognized activities.

It is important, therefore, to reimage the feedback that students receive, which may be essential in enhancing and improving their academic writing. The role of feedback in academic writing has been explored in various contexts but adequate research has not been conducted to investigate markers and lecturers’ perspectives as far as feedback is concerned. For this reason, this paper intends to reimage the feedback that is provided in one Academic Writing module, ENG123, at a DE South African university (UX). The

research questions for this paper then are (a) How do markers and lecturers perceive the feedback they provide students with in the ENG123 module? (b) How does the feedback on moderators' reports prepare students to improve their academic writing? The findings generated from these research questions are used to suggest recommendations to practitioners to enhance students' academic writing skills in DE and other educational contexts.

2. Feedback in distance education: The Holy Grail to students' success?

Recent literature on markers' perspectives of feedback is limited, but studies on lecturers and students' perspectives and the nature of feedback at universities have been explored globally. Chalmers, Mowat, and Chapman (2018), in the United Kingdom, state that marking and providing feedback on students' assessments is one of the key roles of a lecturer. The study further focuses on how students interpret feedback. It highlights that as lecturers provide feedback, they should also reflect on and think about what they are giving to the students. This study argues that making feedback a two-way process may expose the essence of its power and greatness because if feedback makes sense to the sender, the receiver may also make sense of it.

Many studies that explore teacher-feedback commend it for its appropriateness in teaching writing to EAL students. According to Hyland (2019), written feedback is highly valued in second and additional language studies. These studies mostly seek to discover how teachers teach language and writing using written feedback and the emotions associated with it. Hyland (2019) indicates that feedback focuses on language accuracies and organisation, the structure of an introduction and the development of sentences. DE students require more feedback support and assistance from their lecturers and markers and detailed comments since there is a potential risk that these students might feel isolated or excluded in their online world.

Uiseb's (2017) study shares similar aims with the one conducted for the present article as it sought to understand perspectives around feedback and the improvement required thereof. The study found that written teacher-feedback is highly valued but that feedback alone may not be sufficient in enhancing students' writing or learning in general. The study further mentions that lecturers need to explicitly communicate marking criteria for each writing task (Uiseb, 2017) and further emphasises that there should be transparency and equity when assessing students writing in DE institutions. Lecturers who teach writing to students should be wary of how they practice assessment, more so in a DE environment where students are distant from their lecturers. Moreover, due to the realities of DE, feedback alone may not hypothetically produce the required performance. For Sopina and McNeill (2015), feedback in student assessment is not new to DE. However, its effectiveness at institutions of higher learning is questioned, as there is no clear evidence whether feedback improves students' performance or not. This suggests that feedback alone may not be the Holy Grail to students' success.

On the contrary, Gottipati, Shankaraman and Gan, (2017) conducted a qualitative study at the Singapore Management University, refuting Uiseb's (2017) and Sopina and McNeill's (2015) arguments by postulating that feedback alone is significant in improving student performance, teaching and learning. Hattie and Timperley (2007) further emphasise that feedback needs to provide information specifically relating to the task or process of learning that fills a gap between what is understood and what is aimed to be understood.

3. Feedback through the lens of sociocultural theory and the Model of Feedback to enhance learning

As will be explained later in this article, Hattie and Timperley's (2007) model, in conjunction with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, underpins the theoretical focus of this paper. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory sees learning as a sociable aspect which relies on interaction for learning to occur, while constructivist theories see learning as a matter of experimenting and experiencing things prior to entering school. Constructivists believe that learning takes place amongst learners themselves through interactions (Suhendi, 2018). The researchers argue that feedback becomes vital once students start the process of schooling and make valuable interactions within that context. The sociocultural theory is significant as it recognises that students are from different learning contexts as most students are fresh out of high school. Sociocultural theories attempt to emphasise the significance of having to go through several educational interactions before becoming independent in learning. Similarly, this paper argues that to enhance their academic writing skills, students should consistently receive support prior to completing the final piece of writing. This paper acknowledges that it may not be possible to teach important skills such as writing, if students' sociocultural backgrounds are not considered. Thus, the sociocultural theory of learning is arguably crucial in reimaging students' current feedback in academic writing. Vygotsky's concepts explain how the learning process is facilitated through socialisation. The main component of the sociocultural theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and it applies to a child who is developing cognitively in a second language context (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky (1978), to assist a student to move through the ZPD, it is crucial that lecturers take into consideration three components, which are important in the learning process. The first component is the 'More Knowledgeable Other' (MKO), which is the presence of someone with knowledge and skills beyond that of the learner. The second is 'mediation', which refers to social interactions with a skilful lecturer who allows the students to observe and practice their skills. The third is 'scaffolding', which refers to supportive activities provided by the lecturer, or marker, in the context of this study, to support the student as he or she is led through the ZPD.

Feedback is debatably a reliable tool, both in face-to-face institutions and in DE (Halawa, Sharma, Bridson, Prescott, Lyon & Guha, 2017). The Model of Feedback to enhance learning (Model of Feedback) introduced by Hattie and Timperley (2007) is apt for this study as it posits that feedback is certified as a successful teaching tool for

student learning that enhances performance in various educational contexts. Hattie and Timperley (2007) introduce a model that indicates how feedback operates at different levels:

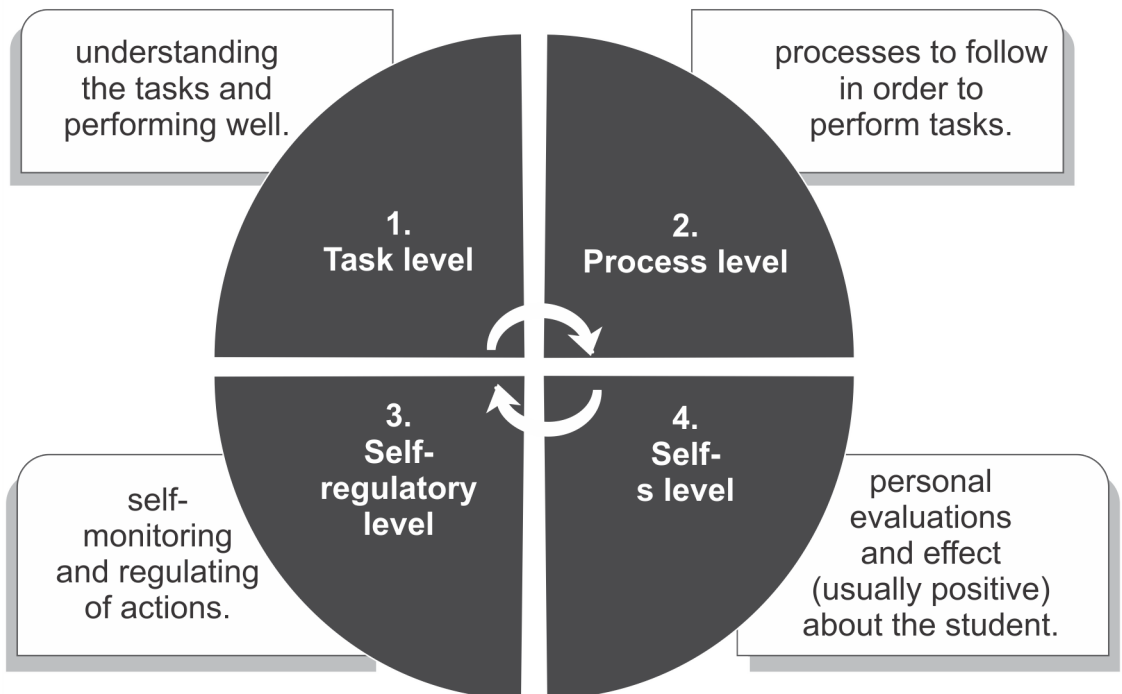


Figure 1: Four levels of the Model of Feedback (Hattie and Timperley, 2007:91)

For Hattie and Timperley (2007), each level of feedback as illustrated above, is vital in improving students' performance. At task level, feedback that aims to help students understand the requirements of the task is delivered and received by an individual or a group of students. At this level, it is not necessary to perceive that feedback is irrelevant to student's performance. Feedback at the process level is more detailed than feedback at the task level as feedback at the process level is generated to enhance performance. Thus, at the process level, students are encouraged to process feedback for deeper understanding of the task. The process level is followed by the self-regulation level which involves students' full involvement in the feedback process. Self-monitoring and directing take place in the self-regulatory level as students are expected to make necessary adjustment in relation to the required standards. This kind of feedback may play a major role in self-belief. The self-regulatory level helps students to grow academically and attain greater learning achievements before moving to the last level, which is the self-level. At the self-level, the requirement is for students to do self-introspection. Students evaluate and usually give themselves appraisals. According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), the self-level is generally not helpful for students' knowledge development.

The model depicts that generally, students are dissatisfied with the feedback they receive (Hattie and Timperley, 2007), particularly written feedback. Hattie and Timperley (2007) posit that lecturers can also assist by clarifying goals, enhancing commitment or increasing effort to reach students through feedback. The Model of Feedback combined with sociocultural theory in this paper may provide EAL students with an opportunity to receive learning assistance.

4. Methodology

Research approach

This study adopts a qualitative methodology as it is scientific and focused on the meaning of different aspects of peoples' lives, and how they understand their own and others' behaviour (Mohajan, 2018; Rahman, 2017). The study sought to explore in-depth perspectives of the participants concerning feedback provided in academic writing.

Research design

A case study design was utilised as it is naturally intensive; it could, in the case of this article, systematically help investigate markers and lecturers' experiences, practices and understandings about feedback provision (Creswell, 2003; Heale & Tycross, 2018; Khaldi, 2017). The design was used to gather in-depth understanding of how feedback was effective or ineffective concerning enhancing students' academic writing in ENG123. Tumele (2015) posits that a case study analysis involves interpreting and describing questionnaires, observations and documents to find substantively meaningful patterns and themes, which this study aimed to do. To reiterate, this paper responds to the following research questions:

- a) How do markers and lecturers perceive the feedback they provide students with in the ENG123 module?
- b) How does the feedback on moderators' reports prepare students to improve their academic writing?

Participants

The target population in this study is the ENG123 group of students. ENG123 is a semester module and comprises more than 28000 students per semester, seven lecturers and about forty markers. Simple random sampling, which falls under probability sampling, was used to set aside the participating markers from the rest of the marker

population. Purposive sampling, that is non-probability sampling, was additionally utilised in this study. Purposive sampling, according to Showkat and Parveen (2017) and Ames, Glenton and Lewin (2019), is a way of approaching a sample with a purpose in mind. This study purposefully chose to focus on the ENG123 lecturers. Seven ENG123 lecturers (the whole ENG123 teaching team) and four ENG123 markers (10 per cent of the marker population) were selected from the population size. The table below clarifies the marker participants:

Table 1: Sampled markers used in the study

Participants and type of sampling method	Pseudonyms	Gender	Experience and qualifications
Email interviews with markers (Random sampling)	Alma	Female	3 years of marking experience with an honours in Bachelor of Arts specialising in English Literature.
	Maggy	Male	5 years of marking experience and a Master’s degree in English studies.
	Charlie	Female	6 years marking experience, the qualification is unknown.
	Jeannie	Male	2 years marking experience and first-year doctoral degree student in Education studies.

Due to the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, the interviews were not held face-to-face with the participants. Hence, two female and two male markers were sent interview questions through email, which were accompanied by informed consent forms to be read and signed. The consent forms, amongst other things, indicated that markers were not forced to participate in the study. Male and female participants were selected to represent both genders’ understandings of feedback markers provided in students’ assignments. Most markers returned their responses within a day as the four questions on the interview schedule were concise and did not require much effort. Out of seven lecturers, only six were available to participate in the study. Table 2 below demonstrates the pseudonyms of lecturers who responded to the emailed semi-structured interview questions:

Table 2: *Sampled lecturers used in the study*

Participants and type of sampling method	Pseudonyms	Gender	Experience and qualifications
Email interviews with lecturers (Purposive sampling)	Bree	Male	More than 5 years lecturing experience and MA in English Studies.
	Kerl	Male	5 years lecturing experience and MA in English Studies.
	Sam	Male	More than 5 years lecturing experience and MA in English Studies.
	Danny	Female	More than 5 years lecturing experience and MA in English Studies.
	Fenn	Female	More than 5 years lecturing experience and MA in English Studies.
	Birdy	Female	Less than 5 years lecturing experience and Honours in English Studies.

The names that appear on Tables 1 and 2 are not the true names of participants. Pseudonyms have been used deliberately to ensure confidentiality and avoid violation of the participants' rights (Rahman, 2017). Lecturers and markers' expertise and lecturing experience are mentioned to indicate their level of expertise and to show that they may have a better understanding of the phenomenon, having worked in the education sector for a while. Thus, qualifications were considered to be essential and have influenced the way in which the participants viewed feedback.

Research instruments

The lecturers and markers were emailed a semi-structured interview schedule to complete. Both lecturer and marker schedules consisted of four similar questions. These questions were derived from the main research questions. Below are the email semi-structured interview questions that lecturers and markers responded to.

Table 3: *Email semi-structured interviews for lecturers*

Do you think the current feedback given by markers is helpful to improve students' writing? Discuss.

ENG123 is one of the biggest modules in the English studies department that caters for various degrees at UX. Do you think the large number of students compromise the quality of feedback given to students?

Most first year students seem to be struggling with academic writing. Do you think that providing students with detailed feedback, particularly in their writing activities may help in preparing them for their assignments? Support your answer:

What can be done to improve feedback given to DE students?

Table 4: *Email semi-structured interviews for markers*

Do you find the current feedback you are providing helpful to students? Support your argument:

ENG123 is one of the biggest modules in the English Studies Department that caters for various degrees at UX. Do you think the high number of students and tightened assignment deadlines compromise the quality of feedback you provide to students? Discuss.

What kind of feedback do you give students on their assignments?

What do you think can be done to improve feedback given to DE students?

The researchers requested moderator reports from the lecturers through individual emails. The aim of the report is for moderators to notify their markers about their marking strengths and weaknesses. These reports were observed and recorded in the schedule below:

Type of document: Observation schedule of moderators' reports

Year: 2020

1. Is the moderator satisfied with the provided feedback on the markers' scripts? Elaborate.
2. Does the moderator's report emphasise the importance of feedback? Explain.
3. Is there any acknowledgement of good or weak feedback/comments in the moderator's report? If yes, provide examples.

Figure 2: *Observation schedule used to analyse moderators' reports*

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was done by organising the themes according to the research questions. Sub-themes were identified by scrutinising data that arose from the emailed semi-structured interview questions and the moderators' reports. The researchers chose thematic analysis as it is a flexible approach to qualitative analysis, and enables researchers to generate new insights and concepts derived from data. However, the issue of flexibility may mean that there are many ways to interpret meaning from the data set (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019).

Limitations and ethical considerations

Initially, the researchers had planned to conduct face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the markers and lecturers. However, due to social distancing being one of the Covid-19 lockdown regulations, schedules had to be revised to ensure that there was no physical contact between the researchers and the participants. The researchers then administered emailed semi-structured interviews to the markers and lecturers.

Data collection in this study could not commence until permission from the Research Ethics Committee at UX was granted. The name of the university, the module, lecturers, and markers have all been given pseudonyms to protect the identities of all participants and the institution. Permission to collect data was granted from the University's office of ethics and the ethical clearance number is Ref: 2020_RPSC_033.

Discussion of findings

The section is organised according to the research questions and an analysis and discussion of the themes, which emerged from each research instrument. Data is

organised according to the following themes which answer each of the two research questions:

- a) Lecturers and markers' perspectives of feedback
- b) Feedback on moderators' reports: Adequate preparation for academic writing?

Lecturers and markers' perspectives of feedback

Lecturers' perspectives of feedback in the ENG123 module

Two sub-themes from the lecturers' interviews emerged under this section: academic writing challenges experienced by EAL students and factors affecting the success of feedback.

Academic writing challenges experienced by EAL students

In response to the question, "Do you think the current feedback given by markers is helpful to improve students' writing?" Most lecturers agreed that the feedback that was given is useful. However, most lecturers noted in their responses that EAL students generally struggle to read and write academically. It was noted that "students received meaningful feedback continuously in the module; even so, they still struggled to construct proper writing tasks because generally students struggle to express themselves in writing" (Bree, 2020 lecturer interview). In response to the question where lecturers were asked if the large number of students compromised the quality of feedback, another lecturer added,

We try our best to provide meaningful and quality feedback to each student, despite the high volume of marking we receive. But, it all boils down to the fact that students' major weaknesses are to master conventions of academic writing so as much as we try to help them, the onus is on them (Kerl, 2020 lecturer interview).

The academic writing challenges experienced by EAL students may occur as the literacy practices demanded in the academy "are tied to a notion of the student as separated from her history, culture, and language" (Boughey & McKenna, 2016:6). Bree and Kerl's (2020, lecturer interviews) responses are similar to the findings reported by Pineteh (2014:16) who argues that "applying the highly complex cognitive skills in academic writing is very challenging to students who are from rural and peri-urban backgrounds". In addition, the sociocultural theory argues that learning is socially situated and best achieved through collaboration with and dialogic feedback from peers and teachers (Vygotsky, 1978). Lecturers, as the MKO, should guide EAL students through planned feedback to assist them in broadening their ZPDs. Lecturers are mediators of learning in the DE context and they are pivotal in enhancing the students' social experience. As the

sociocultural theory emphasises, the role of social experience in the development of an individual's knowledge is vital (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978).

When lecturers were asked if providing students with detailed feedback improves their future academic writing tasks, all six lecturers agreed, "there is definitely an improvement in each follow up task after students receive feedback on Assignment 01. I do believe that feedback makes a difference in enhancing students' writing skills" (Danny, 2020 lecturer interview). Birdy (2020 lecturer interview), added that "through the feedback we provide, students are introduced to new ways of doing and it is understandably difficult, but surely feedback helps here and there". The understanding from Birdy's point is that learning academic writing is learning a new discourse which Gee (2001) labels, a 'secondary discourse'. For Gee (2001), secondary discourses such as academic writing need to be taken seriously, as they are "consistently related to [the] everyday lives of people [in] their communities" (Gee, 1999; Hall, 1998:11). It is therefore assumed that feedback can help in mastering the secondary discourses "through subsequent participation in various social groups, institutions and organisations" (Gee, 2001 cited in McKay, 2003:5).

Factors affecting the success of feedback

One lecturer noted that markers' feedback is helpful as "they prioritise feedback all the time. I know for sure because I moderate scripts" (Danny, 2020 lecturer interview), while another lecturer protested that "feedback is not a major problem in the module but when markers work under pressure, due to the high numbers of students in our module, providing feedback then becomes a challenge" (Fenn, 2020 lecturer interview). In addition, Carpenter, Beall and Hodges (2020) argue that high student enrolment is a global issue at universities; however, staff is held accountable if things go amiss due to this issue. Markers experience enormous levels of stress as the marking proceeds due to huge student numbers in the DE context (Uiseb, 2017).

In response to the first question on the semi structured email interview, Fenn noted, "there are markers who copy and paste feedback from one script to the other and you find that the feedback given doesn't address the exact challenges of the student" (Fenn, 2020 lecturer interview). Hattie and Timperley (2007:32) support Fenn's assertion by arguing that the feedback students receive cannot be the same as learners' challenges. For Horn (2016:8), "many curricula and assessments nowadays have the same expectations for students despite what type of cultural, economic, or social factors are involved in students' lives". When asked what can be done to improve feedback in the module, two lecturers noted that students need to be involved in the discussion of feedback. Again, Fenn noted that evaluation questions should be disseminated to students to find out what kinds of feedback they require. Additionally, "we need to have some form of framework to guide markers, especially in this module as marking academic writing is a very subjective exercise" (Fenn, 2020 lecturer interview). In the next section, markers' perspectives of feedback are discussed.

Markers' perspectives of feedback in the ENG123 module

Markers were asked similar questions as the lecturers (See Table 4). Three sub-themes from the markers' interviews emerged: Feedback is erratic, adequate feedback and feedback as a social event.

Feedback is erratic

All four sampled markers participated in the study and commented that there are intra-marker inconsistencies in the way feedback is provided in the essay writing assignment. In response to the first question in the semi-structured interview, one marker noted, "I try my best to provide consistent, clear and helpful feedback to the students, but I am also a tutor in this module and the students complain that other markers do not provide constructive feedback. In some instances, they complain that they just see a mark with no feedback" (Alma, 2020 marker interview). According to markers, there are many issues that contribute to the intra-marker inconsistencies in feedback within the module. Markers acknowledge that inconsistencies are bound to happen "feedback is the most demanding skill, especially with the hundreds of scripts we mark per assignment. It requires a complex process that involves generating critical ideas, planning, revising, researching and acknowledging voices" (Alma, 2020 marker interview). The complex process makes "assessing and providing feedback challenging because students have both language and academic writing weaknesses" (Alma, 2020 marker interview; Chalmers et al., 2018). Inconsistencies in feedback provision are guaranteed to happen, particularly in a module that enrolls a high number of students.

Adequate feedback

Some markers indicated that they provided satisfactory feedback in academic writing; feedback that can boost students' writing confidence. For example, one participant mentioned that "I give useful feedback that prepares students for the upcoming assessment" (Jeannie, 2020 marker interview). Interestingly, Maggy (2020, marker interview) argued that feedback is adequate when she alleged, "I work a full-time job and when I mark, I am usually tired. I mark fast and provide global comments at the end of each essay. I am sure this is sufficient" (Saeed, Ghazali, Sahuri & Abdulrab, 2018; Zhang & Zheng, 2018). A similar statement from one participant reads: "feedback is vital, and it is encouraged in our module. I provide adequate feedback all the time" (Julie, 2020, marker interview). Providing sufficient feedback, not only global comments at the end of the essay, is an important skill in higher education that individuals who assess students' work should master (Ahea, 2016; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Adequate feedback motivates students to learn and avoid repeating the same mistakes (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Feedback as a social event

In response to the question asking what can be done to improve the feedback given to DE students, Charlie argues that “learning academic writing should be viewed as a social event happening as a result of interaction between the learner and the context” (Charlie, 2020 marker interview). Similarly, Maggy adds, “we could sense that academic writing is a new culture to most students and our feedback should aim to socialise students into this culture” (Maggy, 2020 marker interview). These findings support an assertion by Street (1984) that reading and writing are socially embedded practices, which emerge out of a set of beliefs, and values that are found acceptable to a certain community of individuals. The argument in this discussion is that the individual’s social surroundings play an integral role in the way they master literacy skills.

Many markers showed that they understood the MKO and mediator position they hold in the module as one marker observed that “providing feedback to students is providing them with an opportunity to engage with their own learning” (Charlie, 2020 marker interview). This is in line with the Vygotskian ZPD that has been “constructed to account for the gap between the actual level and the potential level of development of the [students]” (Azi, 2020:105). This means that students may potentially master academic writing skills with scaffolding and assistance from markers and lecturers.

In summary, it was interesting to explore the perspectives of lecturers and markers as these stakeholders occupy a significant position of providing feedback to students in the ENG123 module. Some responses markers shared are related to the academic writing challenges students experience in DE and EAL contexts. For markers, academic writing skills acquisition (Lea and Street, 2006; Mgqwashu, 2016) does not seem to be an easy task for many students. This indicates that in addition to academic writing issues, students come into their first year of study with “language issues” (Boughey & McKenna, 2016:2). In the next section, the researchers analyse data that emanated from moderators’ reports to answer the second research question.

Feedback on moderators’ reports: Adequate preparation for academic writing?

This section responded to the following research question: How do moderators’ reports on marked assignments in ENG123 prepare students to improve their academic writing? The observation schedule in Figure 2 was used to analyse the moderators’ reports. The researchers received five moderators’ reports from lecturers who participated in the study. In analysing the reports, one major theme emerged from the data collection process: Feedback as a teaching tool.

Feedback as a teaching tool

In response to the first question on the observation schedule (See Figure 2), two moderators were satisfied with the markers' feedback as one of them noted "Thank you for providing both critical and positive feedback to the students. Students need to be praised for the work they do while being steered in the right direction" (Report 1). Moderators' comments such as "I also discovered that many students do not reiterate the topic at the beginning of their discussion and thank you for providing feedback on that" (Report 1) and "feedback is significant" (Report 5) are an indication that feedback is an essential teaching tool in the ENG123 module. It was revealed by moderators that markers provided quality feedback. As a result, students thanked the markers for highlighting challenges that they encounter, such as a failure to restate the topic in the introduction. Many reports consisted of positive feedback and this may be a good encouragement for markers. When moderators praise markers for doing a great job, markers improve their marking style. They provide adequate feedback and mark fairly (Chalmers et al., 2018; Zheng & Zhang, 2018).

Three moderators were, however, dissatisfied with the feedback markers had given to the students. One report, in particular, summed up reports 2, 3 and 4: "Provide more feedback on each student's script. The feedback you provide by saying things like 'vague', 'read your study guide' and 'incorrect referencing' will not help our students. Be more specific in your feedback" (Report 3). Most of the difficulties faced by the moderator were comments that addressed grammar, spelling and punctuation instead of addressing the topic, coherence, organisation and structure and citations. This was mentioned by other lecturers/moderators when responding to the interview questions. However, it is startling that a few moderators emphasised the significance of providing sufficient feedback in the moderation reports while the majority were concerned about calculations. This is in stark contrast to what many lecturers mentioned in the semi-structured interviews, "We try our best to motivate our markers to provide meaningful and quality feedback to each student; despite the high volume of marking we receive" (Kerl, 2020 lecturer interview). Clearly, there is a discrepancy between what was mentioned in the interviews and what was observed in the observation schedule. Overall, feedback provision is arguably a necessary skill to improve academic writing skills. It would be interesting to observe students' responses on this issue. However, this facet falls out of the scope of this paper.

In summary, the findings presented in this section regarding lecturers and markers' perspectives of feedback are in line with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and the Model of Feedback (Hattie and Timperley, 2007) in that these two theories argue that learning is a social event; it requires interaction between individuals for learning to manifest. As stipulated, one's culture influences how an individual behaves, processes and interprets any information they are exposed to. This generally resonates with the theoretical framework of this study, as it argues that culture determines the individual's learning and teaching procedures that consider individuals sociocultural practices (Badenhorst & Kapp, 2013; Boughey, 2016; Vygotsky, 1978).

Conclusion and recommendations

This study endeavoured to understand lecturers and markers' perspectives of feedback in the ENG123 module at a DE institution in South Africa. From the interview schedules, the results revealed that markers and lecturers were confident about the current feedback being administered to students, while results from the moderators' reports revealed contradictory views. Even so, the ultimate goal was to understand the different perspectives on feedback, which lead to best practices to benefit students in DE contexts. Developing different strategies on reimagining feedback would enhance the experience of learning through DE and could motivate more student retention and completion rates. There should be a focus on technological mastery for the post pandemic educational world. This may assist in reducing the lecturers' workloads but, more significantly, it may help close the transactional distance gap between lecturers and markers.

The challenges faced in different learning contexts concerning feedback and academic writing should be investigated further to improve the experiences of first-year students. The growing diversity of the types of distance learners and technology available calls for a reimagining of feedback in DE. The journey in DE can often be a very lonely and long one. Nonetheless, with sufficient support, both students and lecturers could embark on this journey together, transforming the teaching and learning experience into a positive and empowering endeavour. To reimage feedback, teaching and learning practitioners should rethink their "ways of being" (Gee, 1990). One lecturer commented on ways to improve feedback given to students:

As distance education students do not have the luxury of meeting with their lecturers face-to-face, quality feedback becomes even more essential and could bridge the gap between lecturer and student. It is necessary to consider issues such as changing to year module instead of semester modules. This would give the students more time to grapple with the content of the module and would offer the lecturers and markers ample time to provide quality and useful feedback. Adding more external and experienced markers could also assist in improving feedback. More intense and detailed moderation could be useful in improving feedback. I would also suggest that students be interviewed or consulted to find out what kinds of feedback they feel would assist them further. A questionnaire or survey to the students might help provide us with this information (Sam, 2020 lecturer interviews).

To improve the current feedback practice, as noted by Sam (2020 lecturer interviews) above, it is imperative to capitalise on enhancing feedback provision in technology-mediated and DE contexts. Following these recommendations would create the potential for early intervention and support for students who are likely to fall behind in their studies. While this study is a first step toward understanding lecturers and markers' perspectives and involvement with feedback, we hope that in the future, similar studies will offer new insights into the complexities of feedback provision in DE contexts. The current paper demonstrates that reimagining feedback is necessary

for enhancing EAL students' academic writing skills - which may aid researchers in understanding feedback recipience at a deeper level in DE and, in addition, narrowing the transactional distance gap.

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