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Abstract

In the context of cross-cultural classrooms, the exchange of feedback between teachers and students holds significant importance as a channel for dialogic communication. This study examined how international students interpreted and responded to formative feedback during their revision processes. It had two objectives: evaluating the efficacy of hedged comments in facilitating successful revisions by L2 writers and exploring students' interpretation and comprehension of hedges delivered within formative feedback. Data was collected through students' draft and revision writing, along with retrospective interviews. The findings indicated that implicit feedback lacking clarity posed challenges, resulting in low rates of successful revisions. Students initially reacted critically to the feedback, leading to diminished confidence, motivation, and self-esteem. They also reported differences in feedback delivery compared to their previous experiences. These results emphasize the importance of writing teachers recognizing the fundamental differences in students' academic cultures and reconstructing feedback practices for more effective communication. By adopting culturally sensitive and contextually appropriate feedback approaches, teachers can better support students in their writing endeavors and create a more conducive learning environment.

Introduction

The issue of how writing teachers respond to student writing has garnered substantial attention and generated controversy for teachers, students, and researchers alike. Within the context of composition research and writing classrooms that espouse the process approach to teaching composition, the value of teacher feedback has gained increasing recognition. Both teachers and students concur that teacher-written feedback constitutes a crucial element of the writing process, especially in the context second language (L2) writing, which often entails instruction on both the conventions of writing in a specific cultural context and the linguistic structure of the target language (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Montgomery & Baker, 2007; Paulus, 1999). To this end, writing teachers seek to enhance the writing proficiency of L2 learners by providing written feedback on their papers.

Writing has been defined as a nonlinear, recursive, and mutually engaging activity of meaning-making between teachers and students (Matsuda, 2003). As such, teachers must consider students' needs and how they incorporate teacher feedback into their revisions (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Leki & Carson,

1994, 1997). Process-oriented writing instruction advocates for the teacher to act as a “collaborator than an evaluator” (Casanave, 2004, p. 69), and to work with students during the revision process. However, the modes of providing feedback vary considerably, some directly rectifying errors, others underlining or marking problematic areas with or without explanations, while still others providing implicit and indirect questions or statements. Recent research indicates that written feedback often employs vague and implicit language (Ginsburg et al., 2011), which can lead to confusion and misunderstandings, particularly in intercultural contexts where students may be unfamiliar with certain rhetorical styles and academic cultures. Therefore, it is crucial to consider how feedback language is constructed to facilitate effective intercultural communication between teacher and student.

Hedges as a Politeness Strategy in Academic Writing

A growing body of literature suggests that the feedback provided by writing teachers is multifaceted and extends beyond the correction of grammar or content (Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Ferris et al., 1997; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Teachers have a variety of different aims for their commentary, manifested in a range of linguistic forms such as hedges, questions, and suggestions. However, many writing teachers are often concerned about how to appropriately provide feedback without appropriating the student’s text or being too directive or prescriptive, which may negatively impact the student’s motivation and self-confidence as a writer (Connors & Lunsford, 1993). To mitigate these concerns, teachers often employ hedged comments that soften the force of their feedback (e.g., “*Some of the material seemed a little long-winded and I wonder if it could have been compressed a little.*”) (Hyland & Hyland, 2001).

Hedging is a very common strategy that enables speakers or writers to signal a lack of full commitment to what is being said, which can avoid loss of face and convey politeness. Brown and Levinson define a hedge as a “word or phrase that modifies the degree of membership...in a set”; it says that the membership is “partial, or true only in certain respects” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.145). In spoken English, hedging is a strategy employed to avoid coming straight to the point or speaking directly (Carter & McCarthy, 2007). Other scholars have conceptualized hedging as a rhetorical strategy that enables speakers or writers to save face by indicating a lack of commitment to what is said (Fraser, 2010). In the writing classroom, hedges are often used in formative feedback to suggest areas for improvement, indicating that an argument “*could go into a bit more detail.*” Hedges can also be employed by not fully committing to the force of the speech being expressed, such as using phrases like “*I think,*” “*perhaps,*” or “*I suppose.*” The use of hedges has become a strategic convention in academic writing, where they are employed to soften categorical statements and preempt possible counter-arguments (Hyland, 1998). This enables writers to refute potential objections and strengthen their arguments.

Numerous studies have asserted that the use of nondirective approaches, primarily through hedging in written feedback, has had little impact on the extent of substantial changes students make in their revision process and fails to meet the expectations of L2 writing students from backgrounds where explicit advice and correction were preferred (Hyland, 1998; Hyland & Hyland, 2001, 2019; Sugita, 2006). Although it is important for teachers to avoid excessively directive comments, there may be instances where it is necessary to address issues and solutions

candidly and clearly. Therefore, to determine from these studies whether or not mitigation strategies lead to improved revisions, it would be useful to also consider the English proficiency levels of L2 students in terms of their familiarity with indirectness and comprehension of implicit messages. This is particularly significant with L2 learners of low English proficiency since they may fail to grasp implied messages due to lack of familiarity with indirectness. As Hyland (2000b) explains, hedges are often imperceptible even to more advanced L2 learners. In other words, indirectness as a mitigation strategy has two sides: preserving a student's face on the one hand, and the possibility of misinterpretation by a student, on the other. Therefore, more research that employs retrospective interview techniques is called for to examine how students comprehend indirect feedback.

Hedges and Cultural Differences

Scholars have acknowledged the importance of hedges in academic writing (Myers, 1989; Hinkel, 2004, 2005; Hyland, 1998), as they enable writers to "present unproven claims with caution and to enter a dialogue with their audience" (Hyland, 1998, p. 6). However, the use of hedges varies across cultures and mastering their effective use by L2 writers require the development of linguistic and pragmatic competence in L1 (Bell & Youmans, 2006; Dressen-Hammouda, 2013; Nurmukhamedov & KIm, 2009), and acquiring these skills and being able to use them efficiently takes time (McCann, 1989; Ventola, 1992). In the L2 writing classroom, L1 teachers provide written feedback to L2 students to help improve their writing, expecting L2 students to decode the messages conveyed through this feedback. In the process of giving and receiving feedback, the teacher, as an expert of L1, uses hedges to soften potential face-threatening moves and mitigate criticism, which is considered a speech act of politeness.

The use of polite markers, also known as downgraders, in giving feedback is common in many cultures including Western societies such as the UK and the US (Meyers, 2014; Samovar et al., 2017). However, research has shown that the interpretation of these markers can vary across cultures, leading to potential misunderstandings. For instance, the use of downgraders in British English, such as *kind of, a little, a bit, or maybe*, may not be readily understood by individuals from cultures that use strong language, or upgraders such as *absolutely, totally, or strongly* to convey critical messages, including the Dutch (Meyer, 2014). However, the use of downgraders, such as to mitigate criticism, is unique to certain cultures and can create intercultural misunderstandings. As an example, Meyer (2014) provides the case of a Dutch employee who interpreted the British manager's saying "*I suggest that you think about doing something differently*" as a mere suggestion to be considered, rather than an instruction to change behavior immediately (p. 68). This highlights the importance of considering cultural differences and the potential for misinterpretation when using polite markers in feedback, particularly in intercultural communication contexts.

Hedging propositions and claims is a rhetorical strategy used in various cultural and linguistic contexts to decrease one's responsibility for the truth value of claims and to convey politeness and uncertainty. Non-Anglo-American rhetorical traditions, such as Japanese and Korean, make extensive use of hedges in order to minimize potential divergences of opinions while making propositions or claims polite, vague, or indeterminate (Maynard, 1997; Park, 1990). However, the meanings of hedges are diverse and ambiguous, and are strategically employed in different ways depending on contextual factors such as social distance, relative difference in power, and the rank

of the imposition (Myers, 1989). Similarly, Vietnamese and Chinese written prose display comparable characteristics, as their rhetorical tradition adheres firmly to classical Confucian rhetoric (Ngyuen, 1987; Taylor, 1995). In these traditions, those who hold higher authority and power tend to use more direct and assertive persuasion in their negative oral or written feedback, as compared to those with less authority (Meyer, 2014; Samovar et al., 2017).

In non-Anglo-American cultures, the use of hedges and indefinite reference may not be considered a valid or effective means of persuasion in classical Arabic prose, while exaggeration and overassertiveness are viewed as more appropriate (Nydell, 2002; Sa'adeddin, 1989). Hinkel's (2005) research also indicates that speakers of languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese tend to employ a limited range of hedging devices in their academic writing. These findings suggest that the use and interpretation of hedges vary significantly across cultures, influenced by sociocultural factors, and reflecting distinct styles of politeness and persuasion, as observed in Dutch rhetoric.

According to Bardove-Harlig (1999), having linguistic competence may be a necessary requirement for mastering pragmatic competence, although it does not guarantee an equivalent level of pragmatic competence. Overall, L2 writers generally possess the linguistic abilities to comprehend the purpose of hedging devices as presented to them in written feedback and to incorporate them in their writing to a greater extent than before (Wishnoff, 2000). The acquisition of pragmatic skills in a second language is strengthened by instructing L2 writers on the importance of hedging in academic writing, which prompts them to notice and concentrate on certain aspects or features of the target language.

Method

This present study investigated the relationship between the types of hedging comments and success in revision and L2 writers' understanding and use of the comments in their revising process. Depending on whether the comment was given out with concrete suggestions or actual ways to revise, hedging comments were divided into two distinct categories: one category included hedges with revision strategies while the other category comprised hedges with no revision strategies provided. As the aims of this study were twofold, the research questions were formulated as follows:

- (1) To what extent do students achieve successful revision of their drafts in response to hedged comments?
- (2) How do students interpret and react to hedges in their revision process?

Participants

This investigation was conducted at a university in the Northeastern United States that offered academic composition courses tailored specially for L2 students enrolled in the First-Year Writing program. This study utilized a non-experimental design where there were no treatments administered. Given the contextual nature of teacher feedback on student writing in a college classroom, a case study approach was deemed appropriate for this investigation. Convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling technique that relies on easily available or

accessible units from a population, was employed to select the subjects for the study (Creswell, 2003).

The subjects, who enrolled in ENG 711, the first year English composition course, volunteered to participate in this study when asked. In order to minimize the variables of feedback types, all the subjects were recruited from the sections taught by the same instructor. The sample consisted of 30 international students, who were involved with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, coming from China, Vietnam, India, Korea, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the Philippines. While 21 students completed secondary education in their home countries, the rest attended high schools in the U.S. Throughout the semester-long course, which focused on the theme of “language,” students were encouraged to read critically and discuss various topics such as gender and language, language and power, and bilingualism. The course emphasized multiple drafts over the semester as it focused on improvement by going through a process of writing, and improvement through the writing process, rather than just producing a grammatically perfect product. This course was selected as the research site for its emphasis on academic writing skills, the diverse proficiency levels of its students, and the freedom afforded to instructors in constructing feedback methods that meet the needs and wants of their respective classes.

Data

Corpus Data

This study attempted to illuminate the communicative processes of teacher commenting and student revising through the interweaving of performance data and retrospective interviews. To achieve this goal, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from multiple sources. Initially, the corpus of 30 drafts with the teacher’s written comments was amassed. Students received feedback in the form of marginal and end comments, and no grade on their draft writing, as they were given the opportunity to revise their work in response to the comments. Out of 1,074 written comments for 30 drafts, a total of 307 hedges were acquired and further categorized as either hedges without revision strategies or hedges with revision strategies, depending on whether each comment type included a specific suggestion for revision.

While the terms, hedges and hedging, have been defined in various ways to address the different rhetorical purposes in spoken, written, and academic discourse (Carter & McCarthy, 2007; Ferris, 1995a; Hinkel, 2004, 2005; Hyland, 1998), I adopted Hinkel’s (2005) definition of hedging, referring to “a large class of lexical and syntactic features of text that have the goal of modifying and mitigating a proposition” (p. 29) and identified hedging comments into two further categories as follows:

- Hedged comments without revision strategies included comments in which the intended function was implicitly stated with no specific strategy for revision given out. For example, these comments were indirect in nature as they included modals of politeness (e.g., *I would suggest that you elaborate this*) and lexical items expressing uncertainty (e.g., *probably, maybe*).
- Hedged comments with revision strategies referred to the comments that provided explicit ways to effective revisions along with hedged language (e.g., *I might switch these opening two sentences to make the meaning clear*).

During the coding phase, the 307 hedged comments were classified as either hedges with revision strategies or

hedges without revision strategies, and the inter-coder reliability was established (.93**, $p < .01$), using Cohen's kappa coefficient. The coefficient values of 0.97 indicated high reliability of inter-coder agreement. Any discrepancies encountered were discussed and resolved through discussion.

The second corpus of data comprised the 30 revisions made by students after incorporating the comments on their drafts into their revision processes. To investigate the extent to which students successfully revised their drafts in response to heeded comments, 30 revision papers were collected, matching the same number of earlier drafts. To minimize the bias, the parts that students revised in response to the 315 hedged comments were independently evaluated by three instructors specialized in L2 writing. Employing Conrad and Goldstein's (1999) definitions of the three categories of revision success, they coded the revisions as 'successful,' 'unsuccessful,' or 'no revision' as they cataloged and reviewed all the changes to the drafts made.

- Successful revisions indicate those improving upon or solving a problem area raised in the feedback.
- Unsuccessful revisions refer to those that failed to improve the problem identified in the draft or even further weakened the text
- No revision is defined as no attempts made to revise (p. 154)

In this phase of the coding the three categories of revision success, the inter-coder reliability was established (.87**, $p < .01$), using Cohen's kappa coefficient. The coefficient values of 0.87 indicated a high reliability of inter-coder agreement.

Retrospective Interviews

Subsequently, the final source of data was collected through the retrospective interviews with the participating students that were conducted at the end of the semester after they submitted their final revisions. To analyze this data, content analysis procedures were employed (Shi & Cummings, 1995), focusing on how students interpreted and utilized hedges in their revisions, which was one of the aims of the study. In an initial procedure, the interviews were coded for descriptive and perspective utterances, enabling recurring themes to be identified and the students' experiences and preferences for the teacher's commenting practices to be examined. As previous literature has suggested that students' reactions to the comments be important factors affecting revisions (Evans & Waring, 2011; Ferris, 2004; Goldstein, 2004; Leki & Carson, 1997), it was of great importance to examine how students comprehend written comments and change their drafts accordingly.

The interview prompts comprised two parts. The first part asked the students how they interpreted the hedges in the comments on their drafts, and the second part inquired about their specific reactions to the comments, aiming to uncover how they went about using the feedback in revising their papers and how they handled the comments they did not understand. The interview prompts were based on a semi-structured approach in which follow-up questions were formulated as students were encouraged to reconstruct their experiences with the revision processes and the strategies they had used and to express their thoughts and opinions freely. The results obtained from the retrospective interviews conducted with the students were further complemented by an analysis of their draft and revision corpus data. This triangulation of data sources provided a comprehensive framework for qualitatively elucidating the students' interpretation of the hedges and their subsequent writing modifications.

Results

Hedges and Revision Success

A total of 315 hedged comments were identified in 30 drafts; however, 8 comments were excluded from the analysis of revision success because some students removed the commented sections entirely. Consequently, 307 comments were analyzed to address the first question of the study: *To what extent do students achieve successful revision of their drafts in response to hedged comments?* I initially investigated the overall success rates of the students' revisions. The analysis revealed that students successfully revised in response to 128 (41.69%) of the hedged comments. In contrast, 113 (36.81%) of the comments did not lead to successful revisions, while students made no attempt to revise 66 (21.5%) of the comments. Table 1 summarizes these findings.

Table 1. Overall Success in Revisions for 30 Drafts

Hedges	Successful Revisions	Unsuccessful Revisions	No Revisions
307	128 ^a (41.69%)	113 (36.81%)	66 (21.50%)

Note. ^aThe number in the parentheses refers to the number of each category in revision success per commenting type.

The data in Table 2 illustrates the results of the revision success based on the two types of hedging comments. A total of 307 hedged comments were analyzed, out of which 187 (60.91%) were given without revision strategies while 120 (39.09%) included specific revision strategies. The findings revealed that hedged comments with revision strategies resulted in a higher rate of successful revision (61.7%) compared to hedged comments with no revision strategies (29.4%). In contrast, students were less successful in revising their drafts in response to hedged comments without revision strategies (44.9%) than those with revision strategies (24.2%). In addition, hedged comments without revision strategies were more frequently associated with no revision (26.2%) than those with revision strategies (14.2%).

The overall findings gained from the analysis indicate that hedged comments including concrete suggestions for revision were associated with a higher rate of success than hedges only, and that the rate of no revision for the hedges with actual ways to revise was lower in comparison to hedges without revision strategies. The analysis suggests that students had greater difficulty in making successful use of hedges in their revisions when the comments called for their ability to properly decode the implied messages. Editing for indirect comments may be challenging for students, leading to unsuccessful revisions or no attempt at revision. The results also suggest that students tend to be better able to revise their drafts when the intended function of the comments is explicitly stated in the teacher's language. Otherwise, they might feel there were some editing issues they needed to work with, but that there was no attempt to improve or simply eliminate the problematic areas that were expected to change.

Table 2. Relationship between Types of Hedges and Revision Success

Types	Hedges	Successful Revisions	Unsuccessful Revisions	No Revisions
Revision Strategies	120	61.67 % (74)	24.16% (29)	14.16% (17)
No Revision Strategies	187	29.41% (54)	44.92% (84)	26.20% (49)
Total	307	41.69%	36.81%	21.50%

As noted in the literature (Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Hyland, 1998; Hyland & Hyland, 2001, 2006), writing teachers communicate with their students through written comments that may be formed as suggestions or questions while avoiding speaking directly, which displays politeness in communication. After receiving the messages, students must decode the intended meaning of these comments and use them to edit their drafts. As this process involves bidirectional communication, miscommunication may occur if written feedback is indirect, or implied. Furthermore, communication may often break down when students have different educational and cultural backgrounds from their writing teachers, leading to confusion and misunderstanding. The finding suggests that indirect feedback may be challenging for L2 students to understand, often creating potential misinterpretation.

Interviews with Students

Shi and Cumming's (1995) content analysis procedure was conducted to analyze the data collected from retrospective interviews conducted with students. The data analysis involved distinguishing the topical content of students' perception and description statements, resulting in the identification of emerging themes. These themes were then organized into four distinct categories, namely: (1) Interpretation of intended meaning, (2) Cognitive and emotional struggles, (3) Coping strategies, and (4) Intercultural conflict in L2 writing. These four categories were used as the means by which their perceptions of hedging comments in L2 writing were inferred.

To assess the impact of hedges on the students' revision process, the analysis incorporated Tables 1 and 2, which provided insights into the students' revision success. The findings indicated that certain comments on L2 writing went unattended, failing to achieve their anticipated instructional effect, while others led to substantive revisions. Moreover, the retrospective interviews yielded valuable examples and corroborated the data, illustrating how the students' revising success or failure could be accounted for. To establish the reliability of the coding process for the student interview data, inter-coder agreement was established (.80**, $p < .01$), using Cohen's kappa coefficient. The value of .80 indicated a relatively high level of inter-coder agreement, providing confidence in the consistency of the coding process.

Interpretation of Intended Meaning

The findings of the study indicated that students were more likely to incorporate revisions when students accurately understood the intention of the feedback, particularly when specific suggestions were provided by the teacher. To illustrate this, one of the interviewees, Sila, was presented with her draft writing along with the comment, "[You could go into a bit detail by adding a couple of examples here, for example, how did they increase the status related to their style of speaking?]" Subsequently, Sila's interpretation of the comment was explored during the interview. She responded by stating, "*I think I need to add more examples to support my point, so I think about the cases when men often say to raise their status. I researched more to find some good examples that support my argument. Yes, I think this comment is clear to me.*" Sila's accurate understanding of the comment, which provided explicit guidance on improving the identified issue in her draft, enabled her to successfully revise her paper by incorporating relevant examples to bolster her argument.

However, the study revealed that students often struggled to meet the teacher's expectations for revision when the intended function of hedged comments was only implicit in the feedback. This was evident with David, who encountered difficulty in understanding the teacher's comment, "[I wonder if the author's argument could have been persuasive]." David expressed uncertainty, stating, "*The teacher said this, but I don't know how I have to change it. Do I have to or not?*" It appeared challenging for David to grasp the contextual meaning behind the written feedback in this particular instance. Additionally, he sometimes chose not to attempt revisions in response to implicit feedback, assuming that changing the commented section was optional. He remarked, "*This comment, [Maybe a bit more formal word?], is confusing, but I don't think the revision is necessary, right?*"

Furthermore, some students even attempted to remove the commented part from their revisions. In her interview, Tina mentioned that she deleted a sentence based on the comment, "[I might just see if this is part of Tannen's ideas]." Tina interpreted the comment as suggesting that the section was not her own idea rather than as a request for modification. She believed that eliminating the referenced part from her writing would be a reasonable strategy to improve the quality of her text from her perspective. These instances demonstrate the challenges students faced in accurately interpreting and responding to implicit feedback. Some struggled to understand the intended changes, while others perceived certain comments as optional or even misunderstood their purpose, resulting in revisions that did not align with the teacher's expectations.

Cognitive and Emotional Struggles

Extracts from the interview data also shed light on the cognitive challenges and emotional struggles that students faced when dealing with implicit feedback, particularly in the context of hedges. These challenges stemmed from a breakdown in communication between the teacher and students during the process of giving and receiving messages. Students often perceived hedged comments in a more negative light than initially intended, leading to emotional distress caused by the way the comments were written.

During his interview, Hong expressed his emotional responses to receiving feedback, stating that "*When I got the feedback, I was so depressed because I had no idea how to do it. I keep thinking, trying to know what he meant, but I don't want to email him or talk to him because I don't want to give him the bad impression about my English.*" He further added, "*Writing is so hard, and reading feedback and revising are so stressful too. I have tons of work to do for other classes, so I just left it aside and did other assignments.*" This interview highlighted Hong's reluctance to seek help from his teacher for fear of showcasing his English proficiency in a negative light. It exemplifies the emotional burden and pressure students experienced when grappling with the complexities of writing, receiving feedback, and managing their academic workload. These extracts from the interview data illuminate the cognitive and emotional struggles that arose due to the misinterpretation of implicit feedback, leading to feelings of distress and affecting students' engagement with the revision process.

Due to their limited understanding of implicit written feedback, students often experienced a lack of motivation when working on their drafts and began to doubt the effectiveness of their revision efforts. In her interview, Wenwen disclosed that she consistently received the same feedback regarding the thesis statement, specifically

the comment “[You could be more specific with the thesis],” for most of her essay assignments throughout the course. This recurring feedback indicated that she encountered significant challenges in crafting a strong and specific thesis statement in the introduction. When asked why she believed the teacher provided such feedback repeatedly, she expressed, “*I tried to write a good introduction, but it’s really hard because I haven’t done it in my culture. I have no idea how to make it specific. I don’t think my rewriting can satisfy his expectation, so I’m so depressed, and I think I’m so stupid. Is this so bad?*”

Wenwen further shared during the interview that she had attended a prestigious international high school in her home country, where she had been recognized as an outstanding student. However, she expressed a sense of diminished self-worth, reporting “*I felt like I am so low,*” as her writing did not meet the approval of her teacher. The difficulty in understanding the concept of thesis in L2 writing had a significant impact on her self-esteem and confidence as she navigated the demands of a new academic culture. These insights highlight the detrimental effects of struggling to comprehend implicit feedback, leading to a decrease in self-worth and self-esteem as students worked hard to grasp new concepts within the unfamiliar academic environment.

Coping Strategies

The analysis of the interview data further revealed that students employed two distinct strategies in their revision processes when faced with difficulties in comprehending the teacher’s intended meaning behind the comments. They either refrained from attempting any revision or selectively removed the portion of the text that the teacher indicated needed revision. According to Baker and Bricker (2010), the revision of indirect comments by L2 writers may be protracted, as the intended functions of the comments might be invisible to them. As shown in Table 1, out of the total of 315 hedging comments, 66 remained unattempted for revision, while 8 comments were entirely omitted from the revised versions of their work.

On the other hand, certain students adopted their own coping strategies by actively seeking additional support from the teacher through face-to-face meetings. These students, though few in number, exhibited a strong motivation to address the stress associated with the feedback by articulating their specific needs and seeking further assistance with their writing. One of the interviewees, Zeru, exemplified this approach by scheduling an individual conference with the teacher in order to make sense of feedback to figure out the meaning behind the comments. In his interview, Zeru expressed, “*Some feedback is clear. Yes, I know to make it better, but for others I don’t know. I sometimes ask my friend, or I email my professor for an in-person meeting.*” During the interviews, students expressed their desire for more explicit feedback and guidance, seeking clarity on what they needed to do and how to do it. They exhibited a strong preference for direct corrections that addressed language-related errors, including grammar and vocabulary. Students found themselves perplexed by comments such as “[Maybe a bit more formal word?] that lacked specific suggestions regarding formal word choices expected by the teacher.

The students like Zeru demonstrated a strong intrinsic motivation to learn within the target culture, displaying a determined effort to enhance their writing weaknesses. During his interview, Zeru acknowledged, “*I kind of know what I can do well, but sometimes grammatical errors make my writing bad. I want him [the teacher] to correct*

my grammar. I think I can learn more from corrections. That's what I need to do to be better." Despite his initial concerns about engaging in in-person communication with his teacher in English, it appears that the face-to-face meetings contributed to an increase in Zeru's personal self-confidence. He further expressed during the interview, *"I really want to improve my writing. This is the reason why I came to the U.S."* These personal interactions with the teacher not only addressed their concerns regarding their writing skills but also fostered a sense of regained self-assurance in L2 writing within the new academic culture. It became evident that those who possessed a strong motivation to learn were willing and eager to adapt to the academic practices of the target culture, endeavoring to acquire new rules and adjust their behaviors in order to meet the teacher's expectations.

Intercultural Conflict in L2 Writing

According to the students interviewed, they expressed a greater likelihood of making successful revisions when the teacher stated directly and explicitly his intentions regarding the required revisions. Andy, in his interview, highlighted an exemplary comment from his draft, "[You could describe your personal experience about language discrimination]," remarking *"The comments that helped me most were when he told me specifically which part I have to change and gave me some examples. This is pretty easy to rewrite."* He recalled his prior learning experience in his home country, India, where he had a limited exposure to formative feedback in his previous schools. In his high school days, paper-based standardized tests were the primary assessment method utilized.

Similar to Andy, other students also revealed their unfamiliarity with formative feedback, and if any feedback was provided, it primarily consisted of direct corrections for grammatical or spelling errors, lacking written comments, and summative evaluations accompanied by a grade based on their overall academic performance. Shutong shared in her interview, *"My English teacher in my high school didn't write anything on my paper when I practiced a TOEFL essay test. She crossed out grammar errors with a red pen and graded it. She corrected the errors directly. We didn't have any chance to revise and change the grade."* Since they had rarely experienced the dialogic nature of formative feedback in their L1 schools, the students may have found themselves perplexed as to whether they should interpret hedged comments as imperative for revision or as mere suggestions or criticisms that did not necessarily require editing.

In the context of writing classes in the U.S., the pragmatic function of hedging is commonly employed during the discursive process of giving feedback and revising. However, it is important to note that the use of hedging in this manner may be culturally specific and may not be readily apparent to L2 readers (Baker & Bricker, 2010; Hyland, 1998). When it comes to the types of feedback provided, students revealed they highly valued the teacher's straightforward approaches, including direct corrections, simple and clear imperative forms, or concrete revision strategies combined with hedges. A student interviewed reported, *"My teacher simply said [The article, 'the,' is missing here," or "Change the verb tense] something like that. It's so clear].* The students found these types of feedback to be easily understandable and appreciate concrete revision strategies when accompanied by hedging language. Additionally, the students expressed a desire to receive a tentative or possible grade for their early draft writing, as it helped them gauge the potential quality of their work after making substantive revisions.

Previous research on student perspectives regarding teacher feedback has consistently emphasized the importance of considering students' preferences when providing feedback on their writing (Evans & Waring, 2011; Ferris, 2004; Goldstein, 2004; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Leki & Carson, 1997). Thus, conducting interviews with students to examine their values and reactions towards teacher feedback practices becomes crucial from this standpoint. In the L2 writing classroom, feedback plays a vital role as a communication channel for students to acquire the new norms of the host institution and develop essential critical skills. Particularly in cross-cultural writing classrooms, the manner in which teachers provide written feedback assumes paramount importance as it influences how L2 writers interpret the intended purpose of the feedback. However, the findings of this study indicate that implicit comments, specifically hedged comments without explicit revision suggestions, pose a significant challenge for many L2 writers in comprehending such feedback. Nevertheless, it was observed that L2 writers tended to effectively utilize these hedged comments as concrete suggestions in their subsequent writing. Consequently, L2 writers are more inclined to address issues that they perceive as relatively easier to rectify, rather than more substantive ones (Faigley & Witte, 1981; Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1985).

As demonstrated in feedback and revision studies (Bonneton et al., 2011; Hyland, 1998, 2000b; Riley & Mackieitz, 2003), the developmental stage of L2 students in the target language can impact their comprehension of the implied messages conveyed through hedged comments and influence their success rate in making revisions. While the participants in this study, as international students, exhibited English proficiency suited for academic purposes, as assessed by TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), their linguistic competence does not necessarily equate to an equivalent level of pragmatic competence, although linguistic competence may serve as a necessary prerequisite for a mastery (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999).

The findings of the present study indicate that certain students, despite their mastery of English, may not be developmentally prepared to interpret implicit comments from teachers and understand their intended meaning and corresponding expectations for a response. This aligns with the research of Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) and Niezgoda and Röver (2001), illustrating that individuals with limited pragmatic competence in L2, particularly at an early stage, may struggle to grasp specific expressions and tend to identify more pragmatic errors than grammar ones. Conversely, advanced and self-motivated L2 writers are capable of deducing the intended meaning of hedges frequently employed as politeness strategies in English-speaking academic cultures, thus effectively addressing the writing issues during the revising process.

In the context where the process-oriented approach to writing is prevalent, writing teachers prioritize the development of students' writing strategies through multiple stages of writing and the exchange of feedback, rather than solely focusing on producing error-free final products (Elbow, 1999; Ferris, 2003; Matsuda, 2003; Shrestha, 2020; Williams, 2004). Formative feedback has emerged as an effective dialogic tool in this process-oriented approach, commonly used by teachers to support students' writing improvement. However, L2 learners, particularly those from non-traditional cultural backgrounds, may find this approach challenging. Unlike L1 students, L2 learners are not accustomed to the feedback dialogue process that has long been established in the academic culture of the host language (Ajjawi & Boud, 2018). As a result, L2 writers often perceive formative feedback as a summative assessment or negative judgment of their academic performance and even their self-

worth, especially when they struggle to interpret feedback on their work. This mismatch between L1 and L2 academic writing cultures creates cognitive and emotional challenges for students, influencing their reactions to feedback.

The way students interpret and make meaning of formative feedback is closely tied to their actions in response to the feedback. They perceive formative feedback as effective and beneficial when it is detailed, explicit, and actionable (Dawson et al., 2019, as cited in Shrestha, 2020). However, in this present study, some students found hedged comments to be vague and confusing because they lacked specific guidance for revision. The L1 teacher may attempt to provide feedback in a dialogic and polite manner, avoiding direct statements and absolute truths. However, it has been argued that politeness is culturally contingent, and the pragmatic functions of politeness strategies vary across cultures (Bell & Youmans, 2006; Dressen-Hammouda, 2013; Hinkel, 2004; Nurmukhamedov & Kim, 2010). As a result, the different cultural interpretations of politeness can obscure the intended messages in implicit hedged comments, making them invisible to L2 students.

In some cultures, including the participants in the present study, students value the power relationship between students and teachers. In their home cultures, teachers are viewed as authority figures in a writing context, responsible for imparting their expert knowledge to students who are considered novices in the educational context. This relationship differs in the North American academic writing system, where teachers act more as “a collaborator than an evaluator” (Casanave, 2004, p.69). In the process-oriented approach, teachers and students work together through multiple writing stages, focusing on students’ ongoing writing improvement. However, for students with different educational experiences, this can be distressing, confusing, or raise questions about how to respond to new learning encounters. Consequently, these students may be more inclined to act upon imperative or direct teacher comments (Ferris, 1997; Nurmukhamedov & Kim, 2010; Sugita, 2006).

The successful interpretation and response to hedged comments in L2 writing require pragmatic competence beyond linguistic competence, as previously mentioned (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999). It appears that some novice L2 writers struggle to effectively address hedged comments in their subsequent writing. It is important to acknowledge that learning politeness norms is a gradual process of socialization, typically acquired from early childhood in one’s L1 culture and language and continuing through adolescence (Dressen-Hammouda, 2013; Gerholm, 2011). Consequently, developing politeness strategies in L2 may take a longer time for students to fully grasp the intended meaning of a teacher’s written message and revise their work accordingly. Many of the participants in this study were international students who learned English in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context that emphasized strong grammatical knowledge rather than linguistic forms of language use. As Bardovi-Harlig (1999) notes, EFL students tend to underuse hedges compared to ESL students. Furthermore, in their own cultural backgrounds, where the power distance between teachers and students is valued, students are accustomed to receiving direct and straightforward feedback, whether it is given orally or in writing, and are less concerned about the manner in which comments are delivered.

The findings of this study suggest that the use of hedges in formative feedback may not always result in a positive change in L2 students’ learning. The breakdown of communication between teachers and students during feedback

discussions could be a contributing factor. While polite and hedged language is generally preferred and encouraged in the assessment culture of L1 contexts (Ginsburg et al., 2016), this may lead to confusion, distress, and even demotivation for L2 students when attempting to understand and act upon the feedback. Indirect language can be susceptible to misinterpretation (Bonedfon et al., 2011), which further complicates the feedback process.

Therefore, it is important to recognize that L2 students bring a distinct cultural and linguistic background to the writing classroom that differs from that of the L1 teacher. While a dialogic approach to writing assessment has been prevalent in many American academic contexts, feedback dialogue should be carefully tailored and adapted to accommodate students' prior academic cultures and their levels of L2 proficiency. By considering these factors, teachers can create a more effective feedback environment that facilitates student learning and addresses their specific needs.

Conclusion

Process models of writing typically endeavor to “simulate the non-linear, recursive nature of composing and learning” (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994, p. 145), providing a framework for teachers and L2 writers to effectively reconstruct texts together. While it has been questionable and doubtful as to the effectiveness of teacher feedback in the context of L1 writing (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982; Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Elbow, 1999; Zamel, 1985; Truscotte, 1999), many empirical and practical studies have demonstrated the positive impact of teacher feedback on L2 writing improvement (Danesi, 1993; Ferris, 1997; Hyland, 1998; McLaren, et al., 2011; Sugita, 2006).

Formative feedback plays a crucial role in the process of acculturation, where students gradually adapt to the rules and norms of the new academic culture. Considering that pragmatic competence may develop later than linguistic knowledge in the second language (Bardovi-Harlig, 1999), excessive use of polite language should be avoided. Using too much hedging can give students the impression that there are underlying issues that are not being addressed. Instead, teachers should strive to make the intended meaning of feedback explicit and clear by providing concrete suggestions for revision strategies that students can directly apply in their subsequent writing. For example, offering specific prompts (e.g., “[You could describe your experience in an American restaurant- did you talk to other people in English? Or did you not have any problem in ordering food?])” and formulating feedback as requests or imperatives (e.g., “[Mention what Tannen says about parental pressure]”) can be more effective for L2 writers (Sugita, 2006), as it provides direct guidance.

Additionally, teachers may consider incorporating explicit instruction in pragmatics through dedicated writing workshops. These workshops can be timed appropriately within students' linguistics development and serve as opportunities to enhance second language pragmatic acquisition. By drawing students' attention to specific aspects or features of their L1 and facilitating their understanding of L2 pragmatics, teachers can support students in developing their pragmatic competence alongside their linguistic proficiency.

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