

Institutional influences on academic writing feedback practices: A case study from an EFL context

Qianshan Chen, Hangzhou Dianzi University, China

qianshan@hdu.edu.cn

Meng Ge, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, China

gemeng@fltrp.com

Yongyan Li, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

yongyan@hku.hk

A growing body of recent research has explored feedback in relation to the context where it takes place; however, up to now, little is known about how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) institutional contexts influence feedback on academic writing. This paper reports an ethnographic case study on how the institutional context of a major foreign studies university in Mainland China impacted feedback practices. Based on data collected over three semesters through interviews, process logs, documents, and emails, this research found that teachers' and students' perspectives on and experiences with feedback were shaped by the EFL institutional context mainly through curriculum structure, institutional regulations, and power relations. Informed by the situated understanding of feedback on academic writing, we call for more efforts to develop productive feedback practices by fostering supportive pedagogical contexts.

Keywords: feedback practices, academic writing, EFL context, academic literacies (AcLits)

Introduction

Academic writing has been a prominent issue in teaching and learning in higher education around the globe. In the context of Mainland China, the Ministry of Education has emphasized the importance of English academic

writing and encouraged specialized courses to develop this skill set since as early as 1981 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 1981); it has further required random checks of undergraduate theses of English majors for quality since 2021 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Nonetheless, Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students have often been reported to have only limited competence in academic writing (e.g., Sun, 2004; Yang, 2015). (In this paper, EFL contexts refer to the contexts in which English is not the dominant language in public. Compared with English as a Second Language (ESL) students who are immersed in English-speaking contexts on a daily basis, EFL learners are mainly exposed to the English language in classroom setting (Pecorari, 2018)).

Among the efforts for improving students' academic writing, feedback is believed to be crucial in providing students with the knowledge and practices needed to succeed in a particular discourse community (Hyland & Hyland, 2019; Kim, 2018). However, the de facto effect of feedback is often not as satisfactory as expected. Problems diagnosed by previous researchers include those with the form and focus of feedback (e.g., Bitchener & Ferris, 2012) and those rooted in students' inadequate feedback literacy (e.g., Han & Xu, 2019). Researchers increasingly tend to adopt a social practice approach to explore feedback in the context where it takes place: institution is found to be a major source of constraints on productive feedback practices (Hyland & Hyland, 2019; Lea & Street, 1998; Tuck, 2012); the institutional context can influence whether, when, how, what, and why teachers and students interact around academic writing (Esterhazy et al., 2019; Hyland & Hyland, 2019).

Despite such attempts in anglophone contexts, most of the existing research in Mainland China still focuses on the corrective aspects of feedback, among which argumentative writing has received the most attention (Xu, 2021). To date, only limited research has been carried out on feedback on academic writing (e.g., Li & Liu, 2018; Man et al., 2017). As a result, little is known as to whether, how, and to what extent Chinese EFL tertiary institutions affect teachers' and students' perspectives on and experiences with feedback on academic writing. As a 'powerhouse' of EFL education (Braine, 2005, p. xvii) which carries many of its own distinctive characteristics, China is apparently under-represented in the literature in terms of its empirical research on the institutional implications for feedback. The present paper thus sets out to develop an understanding of Chinese EFL students' and teachers' academic writing feedback practices as situated in their institutional context.

A social practice approach to feedback research

From a social practice perspective, feedback is seen as ‘a form of social action designed to accomplish educational and social goals’ that ‘occurs in particular cultural, institutional, and interpersonal contexts’ (Hyland & Hyland, 2019, p. 37; Kim, 2018). Among the researchers adopting a social practice approach to explore feedback are those in the fields of second language writing, higher education, and academic literacies (AcLits) research.

Second language writing and higher education

Researchers in second language writing and higher education have examined the impact of institutional context on feedback, especially how institutional curriculum provision, resource allocation, and administrative regulations affect teachers’ feedback-giving practices (e.g., Bailey & Garner, 2010; Goldstein, 2016; Séror, 2009). Séror’s (2009) eight-month qualitative research on Japanese exchange students in Canada illustrated the gap between desired and actual feedback practices, which resulted from university resources, merit systems, and grade distribution requirements. In particular, teachers were found to prefer spending time on more valued activities in university reward system (e.g., conducting research and writing for publication) to teaching activities (e.g., feedback-giving), leading to insufficient feedback on students’ writing assignments. Likewise, Bailey and Garner (2010) interviewed forty-eight teachers from a British university and found that institutional policies and procedures which were formulated in line with U.K. tertiary educational policy turned out to be a reduction in teacher feedback due to modularized curriculum, summative evaluation, and teachers’ heavy workload.

The AcLits model

The AcLits model conceptualizes academic writing as an institutionally produced literacy practice and examines feedback practices by searching for evidence from university policies, curriculum structure and content, institutional resources and constraints, and student-teacher power relations (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis et al., 2015). In particular, AcLits researchers regard institutions as sites of ‘contested meaning making’, which regulate the ways students and teachers understand and experience writing and feedback via the procedures and policies issued (Lea, 2016, p. 90; Lea & Street, 2006).

AcLits researchers, typically adopting an ethnographically oriented approach to build ‘context-rich understandings of writing and literacy’ (Lillis et al., 2020, p. 436), have observed through their prolonged engagement with the research site and participants how feedback practices and contextual factors interact. For instance, Lea and Street (1998) found that the modular design of curriculum at their research sites limited students from benefiting

fully from teacher comments; students could not incorporate teachers' suggestions into subsequent writing as they received feedback only after module completion. Tuck (2012) also discovered that the amount, format, and content of feedback were affected, even constrained, by the institutional policies and procedures; nonetheless, a small number of teachers still provided comprehensive feedback to their students despite the sometimes adverse contextual factors.

In the context of Mainland China, teachers' feedback practices surrounding EFL undergraduates' academic writing remain underexamined, especially in relation to their institutional context (Xu et al., 2019). The small number of studies to date, mostly adopting a survey or interview method, also pointed to the great potential of this line of inquiry. Specifically, Sun's (2004) survey research revealed that institutional factors negatively impacting on teachers' feedback practices included implicit writing requirements and assessment criteria. Tian and Low (2012), based on interviews with and surveys of forty Chinese students at a U.K. university, identified similar curriculum impacts along with a broad consensus on Chinese undergraduates' 'little actual writing practices' including feedback practices (p. 303). In Han's (2019) case study research about the factors affecting students' engagement with written corrective feedback, instructional factors and interpersonal ones were found to be sources of inadequate feedback-giving.

The studies reviewed above have generated a situated understanding of feedback practices, but more research focusing on feedback on academic writing in EFL contexts is needed. Because of their contextually rooted nature and the differences in 'cultural expectations, learning experiences, teacher variables, and teaching practices' (Hyland & Hyland, 2019, p. 25), feedback practices in EFL contexts do not necessarily accord with those taking place in English-dominant contexts. Moreover, feedback on EFL students' academic writing, compared with that on other types of writing by either EFL students or learners in English-dominant contexts, remains an under-researched area (Yu et al., 2020). Questions such as to what extent and how the EFL contextual factors influence the implementation and effectiveness of feedback on academic writing call for more research attention (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). This paper reports a longitudinal case study on how the Chinese EFL institutional context influences academic writing feedback practices through the lens of students' and teachers' perceptions and experiences.

Research design

This study is part of a larger research project exploring the academic literacy practices around Chinese novice writers' English academic writing. The methodology adopted overall was an ethnographically oriented case study

approach, characterized by sustained engagement with the site and data collection from multiple sources and over an extended period of time (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2008). The ethnographic design is useful in disclosing the contextual impact on writers' evolving perceptions of feedback (Malecka et al., 2020), and is particularly suitable for our research purpose.

Research site

This study was conducted at the English faculty of a major foreign studies university in Mainland China. The faculty, at the forefront of higher English education, has been formulating its training objectives and structuring its curriculum in line with national socio-economic needs. China's engagement in the globalization process since the early 1980s has led to a growing demand for workers with both English proficiency and professional knowledge (Chang, 2006). To meet such emerging demands of the opening-up policy and market-oriented economy, China's Ministry of Education issued the national syllabus for English majors in 2000 to advocate the cultivation of 'professionals with multiple skills' (*fuhexing rencai*) (National Advisory Commission on English Teaching in Higher Learning Institutions, 2000, p. 1). More than twenty years after its promulgation and implementation, the cultivation model continues to be manifested in the *Yingyu zhuanke benke jiaoxue zhiliang guojia biaoqun* [National Standards of Teaching Quality for Undergraduate English Majors] (hereafter 'National Standards') in 2018 and the *Putong gaodeng xuexiao benke jingyulei zhuanke jiaoxue zhinan* [Teaching Guidelines for Undergraduate English Majors] (hereafter 'Teaching Guidelines') in 2020. The focal faculty, oriented to the cultivation model, is committed to cultivating students for employment in careers related to English education, foreign affairs, international trade, tourism, and information technology – the main speciality areas it developed over time. A total of six departments were established under the faculty for that purpose.

In line with the orientation mentioned above, English majors at the university are required to declare their specialization areas on university admission, and develop both English language skills (Years 1–4) and content knowledge (Years 3–4) in their four-year study. After taking the same general English courses, students will take six content courses in their own specialization areas from Year 3, and in Year 4, they will take the Academic Writing course, the main purpose of which is to instruct students on the writing of their graduation theses. That is to say, from Year 3 on, students will need to apply specialization-specific content knowledge to academic writing assignments in content courses, the Academic Writing course, and their graduation theses.

Method

Participants

To explore teachers' and students' perspectives on and experiences with feedback on academic writing, we adopted 'maximum variation sampling' (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002, p. 234) when recruiting participants. That is, one student from each of the six departments in the focal faculty was invited to participate in the study, as were their respective content teachers, teachers of academic writing, and thesis supervisors. (Not all content teachers assigned writing tasks for their courses; only those who did were invited to participate in this study.) In this way, we could not only take account of the contextual factors of all six departments, but also trace students' and teachers' feedback practices from the sixth semester of the students' four-year study until their graduation. Information about the participants is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Student and teacher participants

Department*	Student**	Content teacher***	Teacher of academic writing	Thesis supervisor
A	Linda	T1-cs	T11-w	T1-cs
B	Lita	T2-c, T3-c, T4-c	T12-w	T15-s
C	Tracy	T5-cs	T12-w	T5-cs
D	Torrey	T6-cs	T11-w	T6-cs
E	Carol	T7-c, T8-c, T9-c	T13-w	T17-s****
F	Ina	T10-c	T14-w	T16-s

Notes

*: To ensure anonymity, all the departments were assigned codes (A–F).

** : All student names are pseudonyms.

***: Teacher participants were labelled as 'T(number)-the code for their roles', with 'c' standing for content teachers, 'w' for teachers of academic writing, 's' for teachers serving as thesis supervisors, and 'cs' for teachers who doubled as content teachers and thesis supervisors.

****: T17-s declined the interview invitation due to her heavy workload.

It is worth noting that most of the seventeen teacher participants have academic expertise in both language and specialization areas; seven of them (i.e., T5-cs, T6-cs, T7-c, T8-c, T9-c, T13-w, T16-s) held at least two degrees, one in English language and literature, and the other in a specialization area (e.g., tourism management, mass communications). Teachers with 'dual certificate-based qualifications' (Li, 2021, p. 48) usually play multi-faceted roles like language instructors, content teachers, thesis supervisors, and researchers.

Data collection

Aiming to develop a contextualized understanding of feedback practices, we collected multiple sources of data that included 1) interviews with students and teachers; 2) draft and final versions of students' writing tasks; 3) students' process logs; 4) student-teacher email correspondence; 5) policy documents; and 6) course materials. This allowed us to achieve data and methodological triangulation (Merriam, 2009) which enhanced the trustworthiness of our findings. Data collected over a sixteen-month period were summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Overview of data collected

Data source	Data collected
Interviews with students	64 sessions
Interviews with teachers	31 sessions
Students' draft and final versions of writing tasks	38 pieces of writing
Students' process logs	239 log entries
Student-teacher email correspondence	14 emails including feedback on writing
Policy documents	supervision policy documents
Course materials	writing prompts, handouts

At the beginning of the sixth semester, the six student participants were interviewed about their backgrounds, writing experiences, and perceptions of feedback. During the process where the students were engaged in academic writing, they participated in multiple text-based interviews (Lea & Street, 1998) to share how they received, understood, and used feedback as well as their feelings toward feedback. Each of the content teachers, teachers of academic writing, and thesis supervisors was interviewed twice. After assigning a writing task to their students, the teachers were interviewed to share their perceptions of feedback, especially whether they would provide feedback, why, and (if yes) how. After grading, the teachers were interviewed again about the feedback and grades they had provided, responding to questions such as 'What kind of feedback have you given to the student?' and 'Why did you give that feedback to her?'

The interviews, each lasting 30–60 minutes, were all conducted in Mandarin Chinese, the native language of both the interviewees and the interviewer, to ensure that participants could share their thoughts without difficulty.

Draft and final versions of three types of academic writing tasks were collected from the six students: 1) content course papers written in Years 3–4; 2) research proposal for the graduation thesis, which was a task of the Academic Writing course in Year 4; and 3) the graduation thesis.

In order for the researchers to access their instant thoughts and experiences in various settings, the students were also invited to keep process logs by recording the dates, activities, and their feelings toward feedback. They were provided with a guide for writing process logs, adopted from Li (2007, pp. 78–79) with minor modifications.

Email correspondence between the students and their teachers provided direct insights into what, when, and how they interacted around academic writing, while policy documents and course materials, as supplements to other data sources (Ivanič, 1998), provided a situated understanding about feedback at institutional level.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two phases, within-case analysis and cross-case analysis, and via a recursive and dynamic process (Duff, 2008; Merriam, 2009). In within-case analysis, we regarded each student participant as a case to develop detailed and thorough understanding. Through careful reading of the data, we assigned codes to units of data and then reorganized the codes into categories. We repeatedly examined how codes and categories relate to the original data and the literature (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), and formulated a summary of the codes and categories used across the six cases in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Summary of codes and categories

Student	Feedback on course papers	Feedback on proposals*	Feedback on theses		
			Written feedback	Oral feedback	
				Format	Issues addressed
Linda	N/A	General oral feedback to the whole class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> T1-cs's summative comments in four emails T1-cs's in-text comments (on three drafts) 	Group	Topic selection
Lita	N/A	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> T15-s's summative comments in two emails T15-s's in-text comments (on two drafts) 	Group Individual Individual Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supervision arrangement Deadline of thesis drafts Supervision relationship Literary textual analysis Thesis significance Thesis structure Thesis statement Literary textual analysis Thesis outline Thesis statement Thesis significance

Student	Feedback on course papers	Feedback on proposals*	Feedback on theses		
			Written feedback	Oral feedback	
				Format	Issues addressed
Tracy	N/A	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> T5-cs's hand-written and email-based summative comments T5-cs's in-text comments (on two drafts) 	Group Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supervision arrangement Deadline of thesis drafts Supervision relationship Thesis outline Topic selection Language, content, and structure of Tracy's first thesis draft
Torrey	T6-cs's formative oral and summative written comments	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> T6-cs's summative comments in five emails T6-cs's in-text comments (on two drafts) 	Group Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supervision arrangement Deadline of thesis drafts Thesis outline Topic selection Literature reading Topic selection Literature reading
Carol	N/A	N/A	Summative comments (on two drafts)	Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supervision arrangement Deadline of thesis drafts Thesis outline Topic selection Literature reading
Ina	N/A	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> T16-s's summative comments in one email T16-s's in-text comments (on one draft) 	Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supervision arrangement

To further explore the relationships between data within and across the categories, we then read the full data set in chronological order to look for connections in terms of time, settings, and causal relationships (Maxwell & Miller, 2008). For instance, we identified that teachers' different feedback-giving strategies for course papers and theses could be explained by the impact of institutional policies and the impact of teachers' personal context.

We then conducted cross-case analysis to compare the data sets of the six cases to ‘build abstractions across cases’ (Merriam, 2009, p. 204). By cycling back and forth between the data and AcLits model, we identified ‘institutional forces underlying feedback on academic writing’ as the overarching theme for all cases, subsuming three major categories that we coded as ‘curriculum structure’, ‘institutional regulations’, and ‘power relations’.

Findings

As shown in Table 3, different types of feedback were given by different teachers and also by the same teacher on different tasks. In the sections below, feedback on course papers and proposals, and that on theses are reported respectively. In each section, we first present the way teachers gave feedback and how students acted on it, and then proceed to show students’ perceptions of and teachers’ perspectives on these practices.

Feedback on course paper writing and proposal writing

Among the ten content teachers involved in this study (T1–T10), T6-cs was the only one who offered comments on students’ course papers, and in both formative and summative formats. Specifically, during the Consumer Behavior in Tourism course in the sixth semester, T6-cs arranged a total of four sessions to provide formative oral comments on students’ semester-long group project, stating ‘It is the first time for students to write academically, so I need to help them tackle the problems, especially those common ones’ (T6-cs, interviews). At the four sessions, T6-cs asked students to ‘firstly present the literature [they] had read, and then show the questionnaire and the preliminary findings’ (Torrey’s process log). After the course, T6-cs also offered summative written comments on the graded papers, saying ‘Students are expected to experience the process of conducting and writing up research, so it is necessary for them to know the strengths and weaknesses of their own papers as well as the requirements on writing in our specialization’ (T6-cs, interview). Understandably, Torrey appreciated T6-cs’s comments which kept her ‘on the right track’ (Torrey, interview).

Regarding the Academic Writing course, none of the four teachers (T11–T14) provided specific feedback directed at individual students’ proposals. As T11-w put it, ‘It is not my duty to comment on students’ proposals unless they ask for it’ (T11-w, interview). However, T11-w turned out to be the only writing teacher providing general comments on students’ proposals in class, stating ‘Their drafts are problematic, so I pointed out the common problems in general’ (T11-w, interview). Linda, who was in T11-w’s class, seemed unsatisfied, saying ‘I did not find [such] comments helpful as they are too general for me to relate them to my own proposal’ (Linda, interview).

Obviously, Linda would have preferred tailored comments directed at her own writing to generic ones.

For the nine content teachers and three teachers of academic writing who did not provide feedback (T1–T5, T7–T10, T12–T14), heavy workload and unspecified institutional requirements on feedback-giving seemed to be the main reason. As T9-c put it, 'Apart from teaching and research, I have more than eighty papers to mark at the end of each semester. I barely have the time to go through and grade them, let alone give feedback to each student' (T9-c, interview). Furthermore, as added by T1-cs, 'We are not required to give feedback on course papers' (T1-cs, interview). Providing feedback, a labour-intensive task, seemed to be perceived as 'a marginalised aspect of academics' work' (Tuck, 2012, p. 12), rather than an essential part of the instruction that students are entitled to receive.

Three content teachers (T4-c, T7-c, T8-c) also mentioned the requirement of keeping student papers as evidence for national assessment on undergraduate teaching. T4-c, for example, explained, 'I wrote one to two sentences on each paper as justification of the grade, but did not return the papers to the students because the Faculty needs to keep them as evidence for the national teaching evaluation' (T4-c, interview). In this case, feedback seemed to have served as an administrative record, rather than a pedagogical genre.

As mentioned, Torrey was the only student who received feedback on her course paper; all the other students had not received any comments directed at their writing until they were engaged in thesis writing. The latter group all expressed regret for not receiving any comments on their writing earlier after they started working on graduation theses and experienced the effectiveness of feedback from their supervisors. Clearly, students had expected to receive feedback that could help them to improve their writing and to better understand the requirements. However, most of them did not have the chance to incorporate such comments into their subsequent writing, and missed out on an important learning opportunity.

Feedback on thesis writing

During thesis writing, as shown in Table 3, all supervisors provided comments, whether individually or in groups, verbally or in written form. On the whole, at the thesis drafting stage, teachers and students tended to communicate orally; whereas at the stage of thesis revision, they tended to adopt written communication, as elaborated below.

Oral feedback at thesis drafting stage

During the thesis drafting process, all six supervisors (T1-cs, T5-cs, T6-cs, T15-s, T16-s, T17-s) followed the university guidelines stipulating what and when to supervise. They requested the students to attend the scheduled

supervision meetings, individually or jointly, at least once. As shown in Table 3, topic selection and thesis outline were the two most frequently addressed issues at these face-to-face meetings. These focuses were consistent with *The University's Procedures for Managing BA Thesis Writing*, which states that 'at the early stage of supervision, supervisors should help students choose a thesis topic and formulate a thesis outline' (2012, p. 4; to avoid identification of the institution, this document is not included in the References list).

T15-s, for instance, provided individual oral feedback to Lita four times at this stage based on her academic background and teaching experience in both the English language and the British and American literature. As she explained, 'teaching writing courses and supervising theses made me realize that the negotiation and scaffolding at meetings could be tailored to individual needs. So I have been arranging individual meetings with students to talk about their writing for more than ten years' (T15-s, interview). T15-s further emphasized that she had to help students with textual analysis during supervision because 'textual analysis was the main challenge for our students. They started learning literary theories only in Year 3, and it takes time for students to understand how the theories can be applied to analyzing texts' (T15-s, interview).

T15-s's intention was gratefully received and her aim well achieved according to Lita. She acknowledged the usefulness of the meetings: 'I am following the outline [drawn up during the supervision] to develop logical flow of ideas and to ensure I am on the right track' (Lita's process log). Apart from using the thesis outline as a guide for writing, Lita also found the notes she took during the supervision meetings useful: 'The notes guided me through the writing process by reminding me of the thesis focus. When I referred to the notes of the fifth meeting today, I realized that the textual analysis should focus on the complementary relations [between Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson] rather than Sherlock's investigation' (Lita's process log).

T15-s's concern over students' insufficient development from acquiring to applying content knowledge was echoed by another four teachers (T1-cs, T6-cs, T8-c, T11-w) and four students (Ina, Torrey, Carol, Linda). They all suggested that content courses be offered early on and before Year 3, which could help students build a solid foundation in content knowledge and thus become better prepared for thesis writing.

Written and oral feedback at thesis revision stage

After reading students' thesis drafts, all six supervisors gave written feedback either in the form of a mixture of summative and in-text comments (T1-cs, T5-cs, T6-cs, T15-s, T16-s) or by using summative comments only (T17-s); they then encouraged the students to approach them with queries, but only one supervisor (T5-cs) made face-to-face communication compulsory.

T6-cs's reason for providing written feedback alone was representative among the five supervisors who did so: 'It is hard to find any time slots for supervision meetings because students are busy with internships and job-hunting, and I am burdened with research, teaching, and family' (T6-cs, interview). T6-cs further mentioned her personal context as an additional reason to do so, saying 'I tried to arrange individual supervision meetings to further discuss the written comments, which happened before my daughter was born. But after that, I tended to provide feedback via email to save time' (T6-cs, interview). Torrey, T6-cs's supervisee, found the written-feedback-only form understandable, saying 'Of course it would be better if we could meet face-to-face, but we are too busy to do that' (Torrey, interview).

After providing written comments on the first draft, as just mentioned, all supervisors encouraged students to communicate with them, either by making appointments to meet face-to-face or by sending revised drafts for further comments via email. For example, T1-cs made it clear that 'Please let me know if you need any other help during the revision' (T1-cs's email). In this way, students were facilitated by the chances of negotiation rather than being left with one-off feedback only.

T5-cs, who made such follow-up communication compulsory to clarify and supplement hand-written comments on Tracy's printed draft, was the only supervisor who arranged face-to-face meetings at the revision stage. She had insisted on providing both written and oral comments on students' writing for around ten years to 'avoid misunderstandings'; the advantages being, as expressed by her, 'I can not only explain what I wrote but also ask students to clarify anything unclear in their writing. I can also take the opportunity to emphasize certain issues to raise their awareness' (T5-cs, interview). T5-cs's aim seemed to have been achieved. Tracy commented that 'the 30-minute supervision meeting is more useful than the whole of Academic Writing course because the writing course mainly addressed the mechanics' (Tracy, interview). Tracy also expressed her gratitude to T5-cs, saying 'I greatly appreciate that my supervisor went through every bit of my writing by underlining problems and providing suggestions' (Tracy, interview). It seems that such specific and iterative feedback enabled Tracy to understand the weaknesses in her writing and to foster learning.

For most students, however, it seems they still preferred sending revised drafts to supervisors via email to initiating face-to-face interaction, mainly for the purpose of convenience. For example, Lita sent her revised drafts with *Track Changes* to T15-s via email, saying 'My supervisor is in the U.S.A. [as a visiting scholar] now, so I do not want to bother her. If she was on campus, I would have knocked at her office door' (Lita, interviews). For the other three students (Tracy, Carol, Ina) who were confused about certain aspects of the written feedback, face-to-face meetings were also not requested, as they did not want to burden or disappoint their supervisors. Tracy, for example,

expressed her worries, stating 'I dare not bother my teacher [T5-cs] because I know she was extremely busy. Also, if I tell her I still do not know how to analyse, she might blame me as she has provided some suggestions already' (Tracy's process log).

Such reluctance to initiate face-to-face meetings did not seem to be helpful for students to engage in dialogic and communicative feedback. T5-cs, for instance, thought that the students did not fully avail themselves of the opportunities for communication, saying 'It should be the students' responsibility to contact teachers during supervision' (T5-cs, interview). In addition to a general and perhaps stereotypical perception of Chinese students being highly respectful to authorities like teachers and tending to treat them with awe, case students' awareness of teachers' busy schedule could also add to their hesitancy about seeking clarification.

Discussion

What has been revealed is the observation that the Chinese EFL institutional context both empowered and constrained feedback practices and writing development, mainly in the aspects of curriculum structure, institutional regulations, and power relations. These three influences are discussed in the following sections.

Curriculum structure

The curriculum structure of the faculty, guided by the cultivation model for English majors to foster in students a good command of both English language and content knowledge, impacted on teachers' and students' experience with feedback in important ways. The way teachers provided comments, in particular, was shaped by the curriculum arrangement, which in turn, affected students' understanding and use of them.

Specifically, the curriculum structure of the faculty basically reflects the cultivation objectives by offering content courses, the Academic Writing course, and thesis supervision. This arrangement provided students with chances to experience feedback as a mechanism for learning to write academically. In particular, students found it rewarding to receive supervisors' formative oral and written feedback, which served as 'a constructive judgment of text that reflects concern for students' future writing and development of their writing process' (Hyland & Hyland, 2019, p. 20). Obviously, such constructive feedback can provide students with a space in which to improve academic writing and foster learning.

Despite the effectiveness of the current curriculum in providing students with feedback, a few issues impeding productive feedback practices and fruitful academic writing instruction were also observed. Firstly, the separation of training in content knowledge and academic writing seems

to be problematic, resulting in students' limited experience of applying content knowledge to academic writing even when they were engaged in thesis writing. Previous researchers (e.g., Lea & Street, 1998; Li, 2020, 2021; Wingate & Tribble, 2012) working in different contexts have identified similar problems, arguing that writing should not be taught as a set of technical skills outside of a disciplinary context. EAP practitioners, in particular, have called for 'language-content partnership' to support students' English-medium academic success (Li, 2020, p. 1; Li, 2021; Zou & Jiang, 2021). As a matter of fact, *National Standards* (2018) and *Teaching Guidelines* (2020) have also suggested integrating the teaching of language and content knowledge in curriculum arrangement. In the context of the case institution, where most teachers have expertise in both specialization areas and English language, embedding writing instruction into content knowledge teaching could be a feasible and more beneficial arrangement.

Secondly, the timing of course offerings was found to negatively impact on students' progressive engagement with feedback and accumulative writing development. Based on the national syllabus, six content courses and the Academic Writing course were offered starting from Year 3 and Year 4 respectively. Such arrangement failed to take students' needs for continuous training and progressive development in academic writing (Sun, 2004; Tian & Low, 2012; Yang, 2015) into consideration, which resulted in their insufficient practice in academic writing on the whole. To address this problem, in the case institution, content and Academic Writing courses could be offered from Year 1 or Year 2, which seems feasible in view of students' improved English proficiency on the whole (Cai, 2020) and the fact that they have declared their specialization areas on university admission.

Thirdly, the sequence of the courses offered could also be optimized. As a tentative suggestion, if students received training on academic writing from Year 1 or Year 2, they could have built a solid foundation in writing before Year 3. That would not only facilitate the learning of content courses by reducing the extra burden from learning to write academically, but also, as just mentioned, promote the integration of language teaching and content knowledge instruction. The progressive development would also benefit thesis writing in Year 4. Earlier provision of academic writing instruction has also been endorsed by researchers like Sun (2004).

Institutional regulations

University regulations were often cited by the teachers to account for why they provided or did not provide feedback as well as the way they provided it. It is clear that institutional regulations played an important role in shaping teachers' practices and students' experience.

Specifically, institutional regulations guided supervisors' feedback-giving in terms of whether, what, when, and how to comment in most direct ways.

For instance, two of the teacher participants who doubled as content course teachers and thesis supervisors both followed the university's supervision policy and provided feedback on students' theses, although they did not comment on students' course papers. Moreover, the same policy directed supervisors to focus on thesis topic and outline during the early-stage supervision, which was valued by the students.

At the same time, however, institutional regulations limited students' opportunities to benefit from teachers' feedback to a greater and fuller extent. Firstly, five of the six students received comments on their academic writing for the first time only when they engaged in thesis writing. This observation is in accord with an earlier research reporting that thesis supervisors' feedback functions as the main opportunity for Chinese undergraduates to read teachers' comments on disciplinary writing (Tian & Low, 2012). Secondly, the teachers provided mainly written and minimal oral comments, which failed to deepen students' active involvement in scaffolding and negotiation as would have occurred during oral feedback exchanges. Obviously, the institutional regulations, without specifying the nature and form of feedback-giving, failed to duly address students' needs of practicing feedback over time (Malecka et al., 2020).

The less-than-productive feedback practices were found to be associated with institutional regulations in three important ways. Firstly, despite the teachers' awareness of feedback as an integral part of instruction, they found it difficult to translate such perception into practice due to regulations on teachers' workload and teacher appraisals' emphasis on research over teaching. In an era of ever-intense pressure to bid for funding and get published, the teachers, with dual identity as teacher and researcher, were experiencing intense teaching–research conflicts. Several recent studies have also demonstrated that Chinese academics' inadequate teaching efforts may lie in the high priority placed on conforming to research output expectations (Cai, 2020). Therefore, institutional regulations should be structured in ways to better support teachers' pedagogical practices, including giving due weight to teaching in teacher appraisals.

Secondly, the institutional regulation on keeping student papers as evidence for national teaching evaluation reflected the administrative nature of feedback from the perspective of the faculty, where the essential function of feedback as 'a central pedagogical device' (Li et al., 2017, p. 52) was compromised. To deal with or accommodate such administrative demand, university guidelines should create spaces for 'carefully designed and implemented' feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2019, p. 251) to balance pedagogical power and administrative power. For instance, digital archives of writing assignments and teacher feedback could be kept to meet both pedagogical needs and administrative needs.

Finally, feedback-giving seemed to be a rather hidden practice in the institution, where teachers sometimes spent extra time and effort to provide feedback in line with their personal pedagogical beliefs and experiences, even if it was not required by institutional regulations. Previous research in the U.K. has also found teachers' pedagogical beliefs could determine feedback-giving practices (Tuck, 2012; Weaver, 2006), but such teacher-initiated practices were often 'small-scale and sometimes short-lived' (Tuck, 2012, p. 20). The pressure to balance work and family life, especially for women, may constrain teachers' decisions about time allocation and instructional methods, which could further exacerbate the negative contextual and interpersonal influences on feedback-giving practices (e.g., Goldstein, 2016). Given the tension between research and teaching, as well as between family life and work, university policies should be made more teacher-friendly by providing adequate assistance and promoting supportive work environments, instead of resorting to teachers' personal conscience and autonomy.

Power relations

The amount, content, and form of feedback teachers provided on students' academic writing were affected by the hierarchic teacher–student relationship.

At the drafting stage, supervisors mandated that students attend supervision meetings; at the revision stage, they encouraged students to initiate dialogues on the written comments with them. All six supervisors encouraged the students to approach them with questions throughout the writing process, which well reflected previous researchers' suggestions on engaging students with feedback via overt instruction (Fischer, 2015), feedback dialogues (Carless, 2015), and talkback with a focus on 'text in process' and students' voice (Lillis, 2003, p. 204).

Yet three of the six students felt reluctant to seek clarification from their supervisors for fear of approaching teachers or disturbing them, which increased their difficulties with writing. This kind of unwillingness to turn to teachers for help has been widely reported in the literature (e.g., Han, 2019; Hu, 2002), which may have to do with the more modest and introverted personality of students or the teacher-centred learning culture believed to still prevail in some educational contexts in China. In order to build a more learner-centred educational environment and to further enable more students to benefit from dialogic feedback practices, a good rapport between teachers and students should be nurtured, and more attention and support should be given to those timid and passive learners.

In the meanwhile, it is important to note that equal number of students showed positive attitudes toward negotiating with their supervisors. Even if not all intentions translated into actual meetings in the end, they are an important step toward engaging students in productive 'staff-student partnerships' (Carless & Winstone, 2020, p. 2; Lillis et al., 2015). Such initiatives,

seldom reported in the literature, could also contribute to overcoming the inherent teacher-student power imbalance, and be perceived as a sign of the shifting learning culture from a more teacher-centred one to a student-centred one in the larger context under discussion.

Similar to feedback-giving being a rather hidden practice often contingent upon individual teachers' pedagogical beliefs and experiences, as discussed earlier, the type and amount of feedback individual students can receive is highly contingent upon how willing they are and how well they are able to negotiate with their teachers and supervisors. In other words, students do not seem to view feedback from their teachers and supervisors as a right. Rather, they tend to view it as a favour, and seldom request it even when in need.

Conclusion

This ethnographic case study aimed at exploring the influences of the Chinese EFL institutional context on academic writing feedback practices. Through analyzing multiple types of data collected from teachers and students over three semesters, we found that students' and teachers' perceptions of and experiences with feedback were deeply rooted in the institution, which was oriented to the cultivation of 'professionals with multiple skills', particularly in the aspects of curriculum structure, institutional regulations, and power relations.

Viewing feedback as a social practice, we examined but went beyond individual practices in our research, and have thus expanded the knowledge base of the relationships between institutional settings and personal practices in relation to feedback. By echoing previous researchers' call for setting feedback research in a broader socio-political landscape and situating our study in an EFL institutional context, we have also taken a step forward toward widening the literacies lens that is shown to be useful in educational research.

Methodologically, our ethnographically oriented approach demonstrated the value of longitudinal studies for elucidating how students' feedback literacy and teachers' feedback-giving practices change 'in the light of different prompts and opportunities' (Malecka et al., 2020, p. 12).

Practically, our research shed new light on the cultivation model of 'professionals with multiple skills', which has been implemented in China since 2000, but has not yet been a focus of discussion from the perspective of feedback on academic writing. Our findings point to the potential usefulness of a more supportive institutional context afforded by a well-structured curriculum, systematically designed guidance, well-developed institutional regulations, and co-operative teacher-student partnerships, which could contribute to the implementation of *National Standards* (2018) and *Teaching*

Guidelines (2020) in the new era. Moreover, in view of the rapid growth of EAP research and education in Mainland China, facilitating and further exploring content and language integrated training with a focus on academic writing at undergraduate level would also be a meaningful effort to make (Bruce, 2021; Cai, 2021; Li, 2021; Pu & Lu, 2021).

Considering the limited generalizability of any case study, more longitudinal research is needed to further enrich our understanding of the feedback practices surrounding academic writing in diverse regional, institutional, and disciplinary contexts. However, this in-depth investigation conducted in a Chinese EFL context would contribute to the teaching and research of academic writing with the insights it generated for teachers, researchers, and administrators.

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Biographies

Qianshan Chen received her PhD from the Faculty of Education, the University of Hong Kong. She has taught second language writing in English for a few years at Hangzhou Dianzi University. Her main research interests include second language writing and English for Academic Purposes, and she has published in *Writing & Pedagogy*.

Meng Ge received her PhD from the Faculty of Education, the University of Hong Kong. She is now working as a senior editor at Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Beijing. Her research interests include disciplinary/academic writing, second language writing and literacy education, and she has published in *Publications* and *Writing & Pedagogy*.

Yongyan Li is Associate Professor in the Unit of Social Contexts and Policies of Education, the Faculty of Education, the University of Hong Kong. Her areas of research include scholarly practices and teaching English for Research Publication Purposes. She has published extensively on her research, including in *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* and *International Journal of English for Academic Purposes: Research and Practice*.