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Interface between feedback, assessment and distance learning written assignments

Η διεπαφή ανατροφοδότησης, αξιολόγησης και γραπτών εργασιών στην εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση

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Effective feedback is regarded as one of the cornerstones of students' development and progress (Ferris, 2008; Granville & Dison, 2009; Li, 2007). However, several areas of contention among instructors and students still exist, especially in improving academic writing skills, e.g. nature of effective feedback, students' motivation in responding to instructors' feedback, and so on. Within TESOL, M.Ed. programmes and distance education, this is even more challenging, as feedback is provided to non-native language users with time and interaction constraints. Therefore, feedback needs to be informative, accurate and effective and take into consideration the identities and needs of the student writers, who are themselves teachers and feedback providers. In this article, I discuss the link between feedback and assessment with particular reference to distance learning written assignments. More specifically, my discussion will be based on the following questions:

- *What is the relationship between assessment and feedback?*
- *What are the most recent models/ways of thinking about feedback in assessment?*
- *What kind of assessment is used especially in Distance Learning academic contexts and how can feedback best respond to its role as part of the assessment process?*
- *What does the literature tell us about feedback on and assessment of writing in the Distance Learning academic context?*
- *What are the lessons learnt in terms of pedagogy? What are the implications of research and discussions in the area of feedback as part of assessment so far, with particular reference to distance learning written assignments?*

I hope that the paper can shed some light on the seriously under-researched topic of feedback on written assignments in TESOL contexts.

Η αποτελεσματική ανατροφοδότηση θεωρείται ένας από τους ακρογωνιαίους λίθους για την ανάπτυξη και την πρόοδο των μαθητών (Ferris, 2008; Granville & Dison, 2009; Li, 2007). Ωστόσο, υπάρχουν κάποια σημεία διαφωνίας ανάμεσα σε εκπαιδευτικούς και φοιτητές, ιδίως όσον αφορά στη βελτίωση των δεξιοτήτων ακαδημαϊκού λόγου, όπως η φύση της

αποτελεσματικής ανατροφοδότησης, το κίνητρο των μαθητών να ανταποκριθούν στις ανατροφοδοτήσεις των εκπαιδευτών. Εντός του χώρου του TESOL (Διδακτικής της Αγγλικής σε Ομιλητές Άλλων Γλωσσών), των Μεταπτυχιακών προγραμμάτων στην Εκπαίδευση και της εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευσης, το θέμα της ανατροφοδότησης και της ανταπόκρισης σε αυτήν είναι ακόμη πιο πολύπλοκο, καθώς η ανατροφοδότηση παρέχεται στους μη φυσικούς ομιλητές της γλώσσας με περιορισμούς ως προς το χρόνο και την αλληλεπίδραση. Ως εκ τούτου, η ανατροφοδότηση πρέπει να παρέχει την κατάλληλη ενημέρωση, να είναι ακριβής και αποτελεσματική και να λαμβάνει υπόψη τις ταυτότητες και τις ανάγκες των φοιτητών-συγγραφέων οι οποίοι έχουν πολλαπλούς ρόλους, δηλ. είναι οι ίδιοι και εκπαιδευτικοί και πάροχοι ανατροφοδότησης. Σε αυτό το άρθρο συζητώ τη σχέση της ανατροφοδότησης και της αξιολόγησης με ιδιαίτερη αναφορά στις γραπτές εργασίες στην εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση. Συγκεκριμένα, το άρθρο βασίζεται στα ακόλουθα ερωτήματα:

- *Ποια είναι η σχέση ανάμεσα στην αξιολόγηση και την ανατροφοδότηση;*
- *Ποια είναι τα πιο πρόσφατα μοντέλα/οι πιο πρόσφατες θεωρήσεις για την ανατροφοδότηση στην αξιολόγηση;*
- *Τι είδους αξιολόγηση χρησιμοποιείται ιδιαίτερα σε ακαδημαϊκά περιβάλλοντα εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευσης και πώς μπορεί η ανατροφοδότηση να ανταποκριθεί καλύτερα στο ρόλο της ως μέρους της αξιολογητικής διαδικασίας;*
- *Τι μας λέει η βιβλιογραφία για την ανατροφοδότηση και την αξιολόγηση του γραπτού λόγου στο ακαδημαϊκό περιβάλλον της εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευσης;*
- *Τι έχει δείξει η έρευνα μέχρι στιγμής;*
- *Ποια είναι τα παιδαγωγικά οφέλη που έχουμε αποκομίσει; Ποιες είναι οι συνέπειες της έρευνας και των συζητήσεων μέχρι σήμερα στον τομέα της ανατροφοδότησης ως μέρους της αξιολόγησης των γραπτών εργασιών στον χώρο της εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση;*

Ελπίζω πως το παρόν άρθρο να μπορεί να διαφωτίσει το θέμα της ανατροφοδότησης των γραπτών εργασιών στο χώρο του TESOL.

Key words: distance education, TESOL, feedback, writing, assessment

1. Introduction

Feedback is generally acknowledged as a crucial component of assessment. Tang & Harrison insightfully note that the important part of the assessment process begins when the work is marked, that is, when feedback comes in (2011, p.584). The role of feedback, though, goes far beyond the assessment process. By providing information about learners' actual performance and guidance on intended goals and developments, feedback connects assessment to teaching and learning (Rogier 2014), influencing all aspects of effective pedagogy. This multi-layered influence has been frequently praised by authors in the field, who consider that feedback is one of the most potent influences on student learning and achievement (Jonsson, 2012, p. 63), an essential component of all learning contexts and purposes (Hatziapostolou & Paraskakis 2010, p.111), or even "the lifeblood of learning" (Rowntree, 1987, p. 24).

Despite its acknowledged significance, however, feedback lacks a generally agreed upon definition (see also Evans, 2013, p.71). In general, feedback is conceptualized as a responsive action, and, more specifically, as information about how successfully a task has been fulfilled (Tang & Harrison, 2011, p. 583). For instance, Richards defines feedback as "information

which provides a report on the result of behavior" (1992, p. 137), while Ur approaches feedback as "information that is given to the learner about his or her performance of a learning task, usually with the objective of improving this performance" (Ur, 1996, p. 242). For Hattie & Timperley, feedback is "information provided by an agent regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding" (2007, p. 81).Connecting feedback to the learner's performance, conceptualizations of this sort seem to suggest that feedback is an integral part of assessment. Nevertheless, insisting on the responsive and informative aspect of feedback, the aforementioned definitions conceptualize it as an end product, in the sense of some measurement instrument or a consequence of assessment (see Evans, 2013, p.71).

Against conceptualizations approaching feedback as a product, some authors describe it as a pedagogical process or activity. Thus, Hounsel argues that feedback is "any information, process or activity which 'affords' or accelerates learning, whether by enabling students to achieve higher-quality learning outcomes that they might have otherwise attained or by enabling them to attain the outcomes sooner or more rapidly" (2003, p.1). Apart from emphasizing the procedural dimension of feedback, Hounsel's definition emphasizes the fact that feedback is tightly connected to particular pedagogical purposes, such as enhancing learning and assisting students in achieving higher-level learning outcomes (see also Tang & Harrison, 2011, p.583). Similarly, Lizzio & Wilson (2008) approach feedback in functional terms, and offer a definition which considers feedback as a process serving evaluative and educative functions. According to Lizzio & Wilson, in its evaluative function, feedback provides students with information on their performance, while in its educative function, feedback facilitates students' development and task improvement (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008, p. 263).

A conceptualization of feedback in terms of its functions has also been provided by Hattie & Timperley (2007). Hattie & Timperley distinguish four levels of feedback, corresponding to respective pedagogical functions: feedback about the task, feedback about the processing of the task, feedback about self-regulation, and feedback about the self as a person. Feedback about the task concerns information aiming at clarifying and reinforcing aspects of a learning task, feedback about the processing of the task involves information on what learners can do in progressing with a learning task, feedback about self-regulation focuses on metacognitive aspects, such as self-monitoring abilities and strategies, and feedback about the self emphasizes personal attributes. In a similar way, Nelson & Shunn (2009) postulate three main functions of feedback and categorize feedback processes accordingly: a) motivational feedback, i.e. feedback influencing learners' beliefs and motivation to participate b) reinforcing feedback, i.e. feedback rewarding or criticizing learners' behavior, and c) informational feedback, i.e. feedback providing information with a view to changing learners' performance and providing guidance towards a specific learning direction.

A great amount of feedback definitions emphasize the role of feedback in pointing to the gap between a student's actual performance and a "reference" level, that is, the performance aimed for (see, for instance, Sadler, 1989). However, this conception has received strong criticism, since it evokes an "ideal minus" model, in which feedback comments are mainly useful for indicating where and how students have fallen short of the intended performance (see Nicol, 2008). Rejecting "ideal minus" models, Chetwynd & Dobbyn argue that "threshold plus" models of feedback, in which students are praised for the extent to which they have exceeded a basic standard, might be more motivating (Chetwynd & Dobbyn, 2011, p. 68). Following Walker (2009), Chetwynd & Dobbyn assume that feedback may target either the gap between a student's performance and the ideal in a particular assignment (retrospective feedback), or it can relate to more generic themes,

applicable to future work (future-altering feedback). Moreover, adopting Brown and Glover's (2006) classification, Chetwynd & Dobbyn argue that feedback comments may refer to either the content of learners' work or to more general learner skills. Combining the aforementioned distinctions, Chetwynd & Dobbyn offer a four-category functional taxonomy, in which feedback is considered as either retrospective-on-content, future-altering-on-content, retrospective-on-skills, or future-altering-on-skills (Chetwynd & Dobbyn, 2011).

The aforementioned conceptualizations seem to suggest that feedback is a fixed process or product which involves an active giver, i.e. the instructor, and a passive recipient, i.e. the learner. Conceptualizations of this sort involve a cognitivist, telling perspective on feedback, according to which feedback comments are corrective in nature and are provided by an expert to a passive recipient (see Evans 2013, p.71). Against this view, several authors have pointed out that feedback is not a fixed process in which learners' have a passive and uniform role. Jang *et al*. (2015), for instance, argue that students demonstrate dynamic learner characteristics and do not merely receive feedback. Instead, students interpret feedback individually, according to their internal beliefs, perceptions and strategies (Jang *et al.*, 2015, pp. 360-361). Emphasizing learners' role, Hattie & Timperley (2007) claim that the process of feedback involves both giving and receiving. As they note, "students construct their world of learning and it is critical for teachers to appreciate that providing feedback is only a part of the equation" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 13). Similarly, Barker & Pinard conceive feedback as an interface between a tutor's teaching objectives and a student's learning requirements (2014, p. 899). Focusing on the interactional aspect of feedback and students' active role in the process, Guasch *et al*. define feedback as a dialogic interaction (2013, p. 326). Compared to the cognitivist, corrective perspective, these views seem to suggest a socioconstructivist approach to feedback. In this approach, feedback is a dialogic, dynamic process between and among students and tutors, in which comments and suggestions do not aim at dictating learning directions but at triggering dialogue, students' reflection, and responsibility. Unlike the cognitivist view, the socioconstructivist approach does not restrict feedback to providing information; instead, it is also concerned with the reception and use of feedback comments (see Evans, 2013, p.71; Guasch *et al*., 2013, pp. 324-325).

For some authors, using information provided is the most crucial aspect of feedback. Sadler (1989), for instance, argues that information on student performance should be denoted as feedback only if it is used to alter the gap between current performance and the performance aimed at. If information provided is not used, then it is not feedback. For Sadler, there are three key parameters that must be met if students are to be able to use the information provided as feedback: a) students must know the performance targeted, b) students must be able to assess their performance in relation to some standards, and c) students must possess some strategies that enable them to modify their performance according to the information provided. It is conceivable that, in Sadler's model, feedback – rather, effective feedback – cannot be guaranteed by tutors alone but involves the active participation of students. If Sadler's model is to be generalized, then a relatively small proportion of the comments and guidance actually offered should be called feedback. As the literature reveals, students commonly fail to act upon received feedback (see, for instance, Chetwynd & Dobbyn, 2011; Johnson, 2012). One possible reason for this might lie in the quality of the feedback provided. Considering, however, that students' failing to use feedback is widespread in most educational contexts, the assumption that students do not act upon feedback provided because the latter is of low quality does not seem to constitute an adequate explanation as to why students do not use the feedback they receive (Jonsson,

2012, p. 64). It is equally possible that students do not use the feedback they get, because they are unable to understand it, because they do not understand the assessment criteria involved, because they do not understand the discourse of the discipline or, simply, because they decide not to engage with it – especially if they see no link between assessment tasks/modules/tutors (see Price *et al*., 2010; Handley & Williams, 2011; Chetwynd & Dobbyn, 2011).

Feedback can also be defined with respect to its source. Thus, Alavi & Kaivanpanah (2007) distinguish between external and internal feedback. External feedback might come from teachers or from peers, in the form of peer feedback. Internal feedback involves self-regulated learners who can assess their current state and adopt appropriate learning techniques. In the latter case, feedback is rather a process of self-monitoring and it consists of knowledge which is available to learners alone (see Alavi & Kaivanpanah, 2007, p. 183). The problem with conceptualizations of this sort is that they ignore the fact that tutors, too, can receive feedback from learners (see Rogier, 2014). As Alavi & Kaivanpanah acknowledge, the feedback that teachers receive from students is an invaluable source for finding out to what extent teaching has been successful (2007, p.182). Rogier argues that assessment results can provide information to teachers and administrators for adjusting teaching practices, for guiding the curriculum, and even for reviewing curriculum objectives (2014, p.12). Ypsilandis notes that teachers commonly receive feedback from students by inviting questions to check students' understanding of module objectives, by asking questions to check understanding of content, and by monitoring students' reaction to content (2002, p.72). According to Ypsilandis, these commonly used methods of receiving feedback can be further supported with the addition of after class interviews with students or by collecting students' written reports of their thoughts on a particular lecture (see Ypsilandis, 2002, p.72).

2. Effective feedback in classroom and distance education

Although scholars have provided numerous suggestions for enhancing feedback quality and effectiveness, we do not possess some definite description of effective feedback. However, drawing on previous empirical research and theoretical investigations, we can express with relative certainty the qualities and criteria that effective feedback should meet.

Focusing mainly on the instructional function of feedback, Howard (1987) argues that effective feedback design should address four important criteria: a) content of feedback, b) degree to which feedback is individualized, c) feedback immediacy, and d) the source and delivery methods used (feedback "format", according to Howard). Concerning the content component, Howard claims that feedback must provide precise information on a learner's correct and incorrect answers, precise information explaining why a certain answer was correct, incorrect or incomplete, but, also, precise information pointing to the skills and knowledge demonstrated by the learner's answer. On this view, the content criterion predicts that feedback must be specific and should point to both assessed performance and learners' demonstrated abilities. The degree of individualization in Howard's list of criteria refers to the extent to which learners' performance must be evaluated individually. According to Howard, assessment tasks with limited possible answers (e.g. mathematics assignments) restrict the extent of feedback individualization. Assessment tasks with multiple possible answers require more individualized evaluation and feedback. With the criterion of feedback immediacy, Howard refers to feedback timing. He acknowledges that feedback immediately following a learner's performance is more beneficial than delayed

feedback. Nevertheless, he maintains that a short delay in the provision of feedback (e.g. one or two days) might be more beneficial for some purposes and in specific learning tasks. Hence, Howard suggests immediate feedback for tasks requiring procedural knowledge (i.e. what one can do) and relatively delayed feedback for tasks requiring declarative knowledge (i.e. what one knows). Finally, the last criterion of effective feedback in Howard's list concerns feedback source and delivery methods. For Howard, these two parameters are interrelated and influence – to a great extent – the options for all other feedback criteria. So, for instance, pre-programmed computer feedback is highly individualized, immediate and provides limited content options. On the other hand, group conferences and seminars are immediate, more individualized – since each student can ask different questions – and more varied in content. The delivery method seems to also determine the source of feedback. Thus, tutor and peer feedback is possible in group conferences, but *a priori* excluded in the case of automatic, computer generated feedback. As the above discussion shows, the point in Howard's list is not to suggest a specific set of features that feedback should possess but to indicate feedback components that tutors should take care of when designing feedback. Howard's model points to a correspondence between assessment tasks and respective feedback characteristics, without suggesting properties that must apply in feedback generally.

A similar set of parameters for effective feedback has been provided by Price *et al*. (2010). Price *et al.* abstract away from particular methods and features and argue that effective feedback should adequately respond to three major questions: a) what is it for, b) when and how, and c) who and what. The point in the first question is that feedback has different purposes and, thus, feedback provision should be designed in accordance with the purpose set in each case. Assuming that feedback performs five main roles, i.e. correction, reinforcement, forensic diagnosis, benchmarking, and longitudinal development (feed-forward), Price *et al.* claim that these roles might not be equally prioritized in each educational context. In the context of higher education, for instance, the function of feed-forward appears to be more important than the corrective function. Therefore, feedback should be designed and provided accordingly. The second question in the Price *et al.* account refers to the content and timing of feedback. Price *et al*. argue that the content of feedback should conform to its purpose. So, if the purpose is just to correct errors, then the delivery of detailed corrective feedback would be sufficient for the aim at issue. If the aim is to bring effects on future learner performance, then feedback content should include more advice and suggestions for future action. The third question addressed by Price *et al.* functions as a reminder that feedback includes at least two major players: instructors and learners. These players have quite different views as to what counts as effective feedback. Instructors measure effectiveness according to their intentions and beliefs, while learners perceive effectiveness on the basis of their own expectations and needs. This means that the answer to Price *et al*.'s third question is largely dependent on who answers it. Price *et al*. argue that real effectiveness can only be measured by looking at the impact of feedback. However, considering the complexities involved in providing and using feedback, Price *et al.* remain skeptical as to whether the impact is a measurable and accurate indication. As they point out, "input measures such as timing, frequency, quantity […] can only indicate that some of the conditions for effective feedback are in place. They cannot prove that feedback is effective" (2010, p. 280).

Against the aforementioned abstract models, some authors have provided more detailed accounts of the characteristics of effective feedback. Drawing on previous work on feedback (i.e. Giroux, 1992; Black *et al.*, 2003; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Juwah *et al*., 2004; McConnell, 2006), Hatzipanagos & Warburton (2009) presented a model of effective feedback consisting

of feedback dimensions and corresponding feedback attributes. According to the model, effective feedback should target the following dimension: autonomy and ownership, dialogue, timeliness, visibility, appropriateness, action, community and reflection. For Hatzipanagos & Warburton, feedback should improve levels of learners' confidence and support management of one's own learning, in order to promote autonomy and ownership. Dialogue should be promoted by ensuring that feedback is provided often enough, by supporting peer/tutor discussions, and by allowing learners to question and respond to feedback. Timeliness requires that feedback should be prompt and in adequate quantity, while visibility requires feedback to discern learning needs and unpredicted achieved outcomes. In order for feedback to be effective, it must be comprehensible to students and it should be linked to assessment criteria and learning outcomes. Establishing task-performance-feedback cycles and helping students set personal goals promote the dimension of action, while supporting peer assessment and learning communities enhances the community aspect of Hatzipanagos & Warburton's feedback model. Finally, encouraging reflection on the work and comparing actual performance to standards promotes the reflection dimension of feedback.

Summarizing similar theoretical approaches to effective feedback characteristics, Hatziapostolou & Paraskakis (2010) also suggested a list of features that are generally assumed to contribute to feedback effectiveness. Based on previous work on the issue (see Juwah *et al*., 2004; Race, 2006; Irons, 2008; Shute, 2008), Hatziapostolou & Paraskakis argue that feedback is effective when it is timely, motivational, personal, manageable and directly related to assessment criteria and learning outcomes. Timeliness suggests that feedback should be provided at a time at which students can still recall how they have addressed the assessed task, and can still incorporate suggestions provided in future work. Feedback is motivational when it is empowering, encouraging and constructive and when it avoids negative effects on students' self-esteem. Considering that each student has unique weaknesses and strengths, effective feedback should be personal, too. This means that feedback comments, suggestions and style should be personalized and tailored to the achievements and needs of each student. The manageability criterion suggests that feedback should be detailed enough to make students understand their strengths and weaknesses, but not over-detailed, because then it risks being misleading, confusing, and non-applicable in future work. Feedback should also be linked to clear assessment criteria and standards. This link is crucial for feedback effectiveness, since it enables students to identify the gap between their actual performance and the desired learning goals. In addition to the aforementioned well-established feedback features, Hatziapostolou & Paraskakis argue that effective feedback should be effectively communicated, too, in order to enhance students' motivation and engagement with its content.

Chetwynd & Dobbyn note that "effective feedback on assessment is nowhere more important than in distance education courses, where comments on assignments may be the principal, or even the only, learning communication between tutor and student" (2011, p. 67). Certainly, distance education exhibits certain differences compared to the classroom context. The distance that separates activities of teaching and learning and the media that are required to bridge that gap are among the most commonly cited differences between face-to-face and distance education (Bernard *et al*., 2009, p. 1243). Tsagari (2013) argues that distance learning education involves challenges and opportunities that are not present in the classroom context. For instance, learners in distance education have more opportunities to choose the content and the ways they learn, they have more freedom in choosing tasks and learning materials and they have the option to ignore activities that they do not consider useful for their development. On the other hand, distance learning raises

challenges that do not appear in the classroom context, such as maintaining students' initial motivation, providing access to real time interactions and developing learners' awareness of the rate and direction of their learning (Tsagari, 2013, p. 386).

The aforementioned differences between distance and face-to-face learning are not translated into some special feedback characteristics applying to distance learning exclusively. Instead, the relative advantages and disadvantages of distance learning indicate that the attributes of effective feedback must be manipulated appropriately in order to address the conditions applying in the distance learning context. Thus, considering the fact that distance learners work in isolation along with the high drop-out rate in distance education (see Ypsilandis, 2002, p.172), some authors emphasize the motivational role of feedback, arguing that motivation may be the most significant feature of effective feedback in the distance learning context (see Hyland, 2001, p. 234). This focus on motivation is reflected in Cole *et al*.'s (1986) list of essential items for effective feedback in the distance learning context. As Cole *et al*. argue, feedback in distance education should adopt a sympathetic and supportive approach, it should provide encouraging comments and it should also offer opportunities for dialogue and responses to feedback.

Apart from the emphasis on the motivational aspect of feedback, the particular characteristics of distance learning has led some authors to assume that distance education feedback requires more clarity compared to classroom context feedback. Considering that distance learning does not offer as many opportunities for rich interaction between tutors and students, Price (1997) argues that learners and tutors in distance education need a crystal clear explanation of which assessment criteria are being used, when and how; absolute clarity is also necessary in the feedback that the tutor should offer (1997, p. 158). Moreover, Price observes that the tone of feedback comments and the choice of words are crucial for feedback effectiveness in distance education, since distance learners have limited opportunities to understand the tutor's sense of humour and style of commenting, or other context-specific parameters (1997, p.159).

Another aspect of feedback that requires special care in the context of distance education is personalization. In the classroom context, tutors have frequent and profound opportunities to identify the strengths and the needs of each learner. This is not so in the context of distance education, where tutor-student interactions are less frequent. This means that personalization and context-sensitivity of feedback is more important in distance learning (see also Blake, 2009), and the need for processes that facilitate the identification of learners' abilities is more urgent. Similarly, the setting of distance education restricts the opportunities for the development of a learning community. In view of this fact, feedback effectiveness in distance education requires more opportunities for interactions between students, more collaborative tasks and more frequent contact sessions between tutors and students (see also Tsagari, 2013).

In order to better address the conditions and needs of distance education, scholars have tried to identify methods of feedback provision that maximize feedback effectiveness while minimizing the negative aspects of distance learning. For instance, some authors have claimed that the use of synchronous communication (especially audio/video teleconferencing) is beneficial for feedback effectiveness because it allows the provision of timely feedback, it enhances students' motivation and engagement in the learning process and it promotes interactions between and among students and tutors (see Branon & Essex, 2001; Tsagari, 2013; Watts, 2016). Asynchronous feedback, in the sense of text-based communication, can be beneficial, too, since it promotes learners' autonomy, it allows for

deep engagement with feedback and learning content, and it is more flexible in terms of temporal and local restrictions (see Branon & Essex, 2001; Watts, 2016). Despite their advantages in enhancing feedback effectiveness, both methods present significant deficits, however. In particular, the use of asynchronous communication for feedback provision involves the risk of misunderstandings and misinterpretations, since it does not provide enough communicative cues to students (see Vonderwell, 2003). On the other hand, synchronous feedback is usually not structured enough, and, thus, it can consist of large amounts of information which are not relevant to feedback and learning content (see Watts, 2016).

When examining distance learning feedback, one should be mindful of the fact that, in the context of distance education, tutor feedback is usually the only communicative channel between instructors and learners (see, also, Tang & Harrison, 2011, p. 584). This means that, in tutor-student interactions – whatever form or content these might have – tutors must perform multiple roles (see, for instance, Stevenson *et al.*, 1996; Price, 1997; Ice *et al*., 2007). Apart from providing comments, guidance, motivation and encouragement to learners, through distance education interactions and contact sessions, tutors must facilitate students' learning, they must provide information and help on issues that go beyond the learning content (i.e. information about resources and communication tools available), and they have to promote the creation of a learning environment (see, for instance, Tsagari, 2013). In face-to-face teaching and learning, these needs might be addressed through other channels. In the context of distance education, they are inevitably taken care of through tutor-learner feedback interactions. Thus, feedback in distance education must do much more than providing feedback comments on assessed tasks. This does not mean that the principles of effective feedback in distance education are different to those applying in the classroom context. The point is that feedback processes in distance learning might target aims that lie beyond feedback provision, and, thus, any evaluation of distance education feedback should clearly distinguish between actions aiming at providing feedback and actions aiming at other educational issues.

3. Feedback on writing: Key ideas

Writing is a central activity in education of all levels. According to Dysthle (2007), writing is an important tool for thinking, learning, and knowledge creation. For Macdonald, effective writing involves learners' understanding of the subject, but also learners' development of independence and self-direction in learning (2001, pp. 179-180). In the context of second language learning, progress in writing skills is considered as evidence of language acquisition (Elola & Oskoz, 2016, p. 59). Despite its pedagogical significance, however, writing is somehow undermined in both teaching practices and scientific research. Guasch *et al*. note that academic writing, for instance, is not explicitly taught and university students in general do not receive adequate help in the writing process (2013, p. 324). In this context, it is not surprising that investigations of feedback on writing – let alone writing in a distance learning environment – are rather limited.

Although recent research suggests that the teaching and assessment of writing cannot be captured by binary classificatory dichotomies (see, for instance, Tai *et al.*, 2015, p. 285), a great amount of previous studies approached feedback on writing through a distinction between feedback on form and feedback on content (for a discussion, see Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Feedback on content concerns corrections, comments and guidance on the ideas that students express in their writing, whilst feedback on form focuses more on the accuracy of

students' writing, that is, students' errors in syntax and grammar. In the literature, strategies of providing feedback on content are generally distinguished into corrective/verification feedback (feedback that provides correct answers to an assignment task) and elaborated feedback (feedback that regulates learning) (Guasch *et al*., 2013, p. 326). Alvarez *et al*. (2011) have proposed a more elaborate model, according to which feedback on writing falls into four categories, i.e. corrective feedback, epistemic feedback, suggestive feedback, and epistemic + suggestive feedback. In this approach, corrective feedback on content refers to comments that indicate the correct answer to an assignment, epistemic feedback refers to processes that require students to elaborate, clarify, and reflect critically on the content of their answers, suggestive feedback refers to the advice and guidance given to students on how to proceed and improve their ideas, and epistemic + suggestive feedback is a combination of strategies that trigger students' critical thinking on the content of their writing while suggesting possible ideas for content improvement.

Studies have shown that learners appreciate and expect feedback on both the form and the content of their writing, and researchers have pointed out that feedback on both form and content is useful (Hyland, 2001; Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Nevertheless, language instructors tend to overemphasize providing feedback on form, especially in the context of second language learning (see Hyland & Hyland, 2006). In general, feedback on form aims at improving the accuracy of learners' writing and is usually performed through written corrective feedback. The effectiveness of corrective feedback is largely debated in the literature. Some scholars have claimed that error correction does not produce significant improvements and can be discouraging and harmful to students, whilst others consider that error correction contributes to second language development and can be effective when combined with classroom discussions (for a discussion, see Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Hartshorn *et al*., 2010). Arguing that written corrective feedback is crucial in the revision process for student writers, Tai *et al*. (2015) maintain that written corrective feedback serves an irreplaceable role as the medium between teachers and learners (2015, p. 285).

Beyond the form/content distinction, the literature reveals scholars' concern on whether feedback on writing should have the form of explicit corrections (direct feedback) or should merely indicate errors to students with the use of codes and other symbols (indirect feedback). Discussing the issue, Hyland & Hyland (2006) note that indirect feedback is usually connected with long-term improvement, since it is considered to encourage students' reflection and self-editing. On the other hand, direct feedback leads to immediate, more accurate and effective revisions of students' drafts (see Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Elola & Oskoz point out that direct feedback produces accuracy gains in new pieces of writing while indirect feedback fosters long-term acquisition and greater writing accuracy, by engaging students in reflection on their existing knowledge (2016, p. 61).

Findings on the influence of direct and indirect feedback are rather inconclusive (see Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Elola & Oskoz, 2016). Indirect feedback can also produce accurate immediate revisions and long-term improvement is not straightforwardly guaranteed by students' short-term ability to use indirect feedback (see also Ferris, 2006). In educational practice, instructors tend to use direct feedback for errors that they assume are untreatable by students; indirect feedback is preferred for errors perceived to be manageable by student writers themselves (see Ferris, 2006). Considering that indirect feedback is more difficult and can be confusing if error indications are not clear, the use of direct feedback seems more appropriate for low-level language learners, whilst indirect feedback appears to be more suitable to the needs and abilities of students with intermediate or higher language level (see Elola & Oskoz, 2016).

Aiming at exploiting the advantages of indirect feedback in the correction of students' writing errors, Hartshorn *et al.* (2010) presented an alternative form of corrective feedback, which they labelled 'dynamic corrective feedback'. Following other researchers (Howard, 1987; DeKeyser, 2001, 2007), Hartshorn *et al*. assume that students' writing involves declarative knowledge (i.e. what one knows) and procedural knowledge (i.e. what one can do). Further, Hartshorn *et al.* argue that writing accuracy presupposes procedural knowledge which can only be attained through frequent and authentic practice. Frequent practice, though, is very demanding for both students and tutors, since it entails an extensive amount of time and effort for providing and using feedback. These limitations challenge the manageability and the consistency of feedback. In view of these considerations, the authors suggest the adoption of an assessment strategy which includes shorter and more frequent writing assignments. According to Hartshorn *et al*., shortening the length of students' writing assignments can ensure high frequency of assessment tasks as well as high quality in the production and use of feedback. In order to make assessment and feedback processes meaningful to students, dynamic corrective feedback adopts an indirect method of indicating errors. More specifically, students are taught certain symbols which correspond to error types. Errors in students' writing are only marked with these symbols, and students are expected to correct errors appropriately in subsequent drafts. Aiming at raising students' awareness and self-monitoring, dynamic corrective feedback predicts that students should keep a record of their errors in an error list. Students are expected to consult their error list in order to monitor their progress and identify areas of persisting difficulty.

Scholars' concern in designing feedback methods that enhance feedback usefulness, manageability and timeliness is also apparent in other feedback strategies proposed. In order to ensure that feedback is provided to students at a time when it can be useful and engaging, some authors have proposed the provision of feedback-on-drafts. As argued, using feedback comments and suggestions before the final submission of the assignment can help students improve their writing (see Handley & Williams, 2011, p. 97). Another proposed option is the provision of formative feedback in a process of iterative review of writing drafts (see Macdonald, 2001, p. 181). Some scholars consider that the usefulness and timeliness of feedback can be enhanced by the provision of exemplars (Handley & Williams, 2011; Bell *et al*., 2013). In the latter case, feedback on writing work of previous cohorts is shown to students in order to increase students' familiarity with assessment marking criteria and feedback interpreting. According to the advocates of the use of exemplars, the development of students' ability to interpret and understand feedback on assignments of a different context (i.e. on works of previous cohorts) can increase their ability to use criteria and feedback in the context of their own work (see Handley & Williams, p. 2011). Other suggested advantages of using exemplars in feedback on writing is the potential of engaging students in a more active role in their learning and the possibility of clarifying the writing style and language aimed at (Macdonald, 2001; Handley & Williams, 2011). An inherent deficit of this method, though, is that students tend to perceive exemplars as models, especially when exemplars are not critically discussed through tutor-student dialogue (see Handley & Williams, 2011).

The most prominent method of including students in the feedback process and turning them into active learners is peer feedback. Peer omments and responses on writing can be used either in a proper method of peer assessment and feedback provision or through collaborative writing (see Guasch *et al*., 2013). Hyland & Hyland note that effective peer responses constitute a key element in helping novice writers understand how readers see their work (2006, p. 90). Moreover, peer feedback is generally accepted as a factor contributing to students' awareness of assessment criteria and self-judgment abilities (see,

for instance, Macdonald, 2001). Drawing on evidence that shows that peer feedback enhances learners' writing capabilities in all domains (cognitive, linguistic and social), Tai *et al*. argue that peer feedback is a significant supportive mechanism for the writing class (2015, p. 286). Despite its acknowledged significance, however, the usefulness and value of peer feedback is debatable. Research shows that students have a strong tendency to consider tutor feedback more reliable, probably due to some more general appreciation of the tutor's authority (see Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Guasch *et al*., 2013). Similarly, it has been argued that peer feedback is not always sufficient or valid and that interpersonal relationships interfere with students' expressed comments (see Tai *et al*., 2015). Several studies have questioned the ability of students to detect errors and provide useful feedback, pointing to the fact that only a small percentage of peer comments is actually included in students' writing revisions (for a discussion, see Hyland & Hyland, 2006; see also present volume).

Apart from issues relating to the method and the giver of feedback, the literature reveals that the way in which feedback is communicated plays a significant role for its effectiveness. Several studies have tried to explore and compare the influence of oral and written feedback but their findings are rather inconclusive (see Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Research has shown that learners who successfully negotiate received feedback in oral conferences are more likely to achieve better and more extensive revisions (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 89). Similarly, investigations of students' preferences have indicated that students prefer oral, face-to-face, feedback to electronic or computer-mediated written feedback (see Elola & Oskoz, 2016). It has to be noted, though, that students' ability to negotiate feedback comments with teachers and actively engage in critical dialogues on feedback is tightly connected with sociocultural values and especially with students' perceptions and beliefs about the tutor's authority.

The style of comments provided seems to play an important role in feedback effectiveness, especially in the affective and emotional reception of feedback. Although some studies suggest that negative feedback on form might have a beneficial impact on second language development (Hartshorn *et al*., 2010, p. 86), in general, negative feedback and criticism may have a damaging effect on student writers' confidence. Trying to avoid this risk, tutors often adopt mitigation strategies in their feedback. A very common strategy of this sort is to praise students frequently in order to build their confidence. However, as Hyland & Hyland observe, students expect constructive criticism on their work, and not platitudes (2006, p. 87). In order to avoid negative reactions from students, some tutors are more indirect in their criticism of students' work. This strategy, however, involves the risk of making students miss the point of feedback or misinterpret feedback comments (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 87).

As the discussion so far shows, effective feedback on writing involves several parameters and can be achieved through a variety of methods and modes. The debate on the most appropriate feedback form or method is still on in numerous theoretical investigations. One of the few certainties that we can retain from previous approaches to feedback on writing is that effectiveness is highly context- and purpose-dependent. This point is more crucial in the case of distance education. Some of the methods described in this section, such as dynamic corrective feedback, are not easily transferable into the context of distance learning. Time and location restrictions applying in distance learning largely influence interaction and assignment frequency. Nevertheless, technology has provided several means of obviating these difficulties, retaining feedback quality. Audio and video teleconferencing, for instance, can facilitate interaction between and among students and peers (see Hyland, 2001). The

possibility for distance learners to use feedback provided at the place and time of their preference is an advantage of distance learning that tutors should fully exploit. In the next section, we will examine a number of empirical studies which investigated how feedback purposes can be better fulfilled through the use of particular communication methods and technological tools.

4. Findings of recent research on feedback

The growing interest in theoretical investigations of feedback is reflected in scholars' increasing tendency to collect authentic empirical data on feedback-related phenomena. Recent empirical studies can be informally distinguished into three thematic areas, according to corresponding topics of interest: a) investigations on feedback beliefs, experiences and expectations, b) research on the implementation of specific feedback processes, and c) investigations on the influence of particular technological tools and interactional methods on feedback.

4.1. Feedback perceptions, experiences, and beliefs

Aiming at identifying feedback expectations of Iranian EFL learners and using a questionnaire they developed themselves, Alavi & Kaivanpanah (2007) collected data from a large sample of junior and senior high school Iranian students. According to their findings, Iranian students overwhelmingly prefer the teacher's feedback over peer feedback. Students in the sample considered that the teacher's feedback is generally more effective, accurate, precise, and reliable than feedback received from peers. Students also expressed significant concern on whether their peers have the linguistic ability required for providing effective feedback. Moreover, Alavi & Kaivanpanah's study showed that students were doubtful on whether their peers can provide accurate feedback. An interesting finding of the study is the positive relation observed between student achievement and feedback expectations. Other variables that seemed to affect students' expectations in Alavi & Kaivanpanah's study were educational level and gender. Cultural factors did not have a significant impact on feedback expectancies, although the general tendency of Iranian students to be individualist and to disfavour cooperative learning is probably rooted in the educational tradition of Iran and in Iranian students' previous experience.

Students' perceptions of feedback were also studied by Lizzio & Wilson (2008). Using a mixed method consisting of questionnaires and anonymous written reports, the authors collected data on Australian university students' beliefs and experiences of written feedback. Lizzio & Wilson's findings suggest that university students approach feedback primarily as a tool for providing performance-gap information. Furthermore, students in the sample valued and expected developmental, encouraging and fair feedback. Interestingly, students were able to distinguish particular forms of encouragement (e.g. acknowledgment of correct responses, recognition of the effort spent) as well as feedback fairness factors (e.g. clarity). They held the view that the provision of effective feedback is an indication of the tutor's engagement with and interest in the work assessed. Supporting Alavi & Kaivanpanah's (2007) findings, Lizzio & Wilson's investigation did not reveal any significant correlation between cultural factors and feedback perceptions. On the other hand, unlike Alavi & Kaivanpanah, Lizio & Wilson's findings did not show any influence of academic achievement on students' feedback beliefs.

Australian university students' perceptions on feedback were further examined by Dowden *et al*. (2013). Drawing on questionnaire-collected data, Dowden *et al*.'s analysis revealed that university students, both distance and on-campus, have an emotional response to feedback and that students' emotional reactions significantly influence their perception of feedback. Some students expressed the view that tutors are not sensitive enough and do not acknowledge the challenges involved in the transition to tertiary studies, while others expressed frustration over cryptic and idiosyncratic marking or marking which is not supported by explanatory comments. In general, students also had a negative emotional response towards marking that does not focus on academic content but on text-production skills, such as writing technique and punctuation. These findings suggest that there is a substantial gap between teachers' intentions in providing feedback and students' perceptions in receiving it. Another theme that emerged from Dowden *et al.*'s study is that students prefer to receive feedback from their tutors rather than from casual markers. Unlike findings from other similar investigations (see Dzakiria, 2008; Price *et al*., 2010), Dowden *et al*. found that the overwhelming majority in their sample (i.e. 82%) were satisfied with the quality of written feedback they had received.

Strong emotional responses were also observed in Hargreaves' (2013) study on UK primary school students' perceptions and experience of feedback. Students in Hargreaves' study felt angry and upset that the teacher did not give them enough individualized feedback (2013, p. 241). Moreover, students expressed frustration towards overly directive teacher feedback and reacted negatively towards unnecessarily burdensome feedback. On the other hand, they appreciated and welcomed substantial feedback, i.e. feedback that gives them enough cues, but, also, enough time and autonomy to reach correct answers on their own.

Expectations, experiences and beliefs about feedback have also been examined from tutors/teachers' perspective. Investigating the perceptions of 50 tutors supporting an online university English course, Tang & Harrison (2011) found that tutors' beliefs about feedback exhibit considerable diversity. For instance, while some tutors believed that feedback is useful only to some students, particularly the weak or those who have failed some test, others maintained that good work also needs feedback. Similarly, while some tutors expressed the view that the purpose of feedback is to correct mistakes in students' work, others believed that feedback should also identify strengths in students' work, so that students can build on their achievements and make greater progress. The same diversity was observed in tutors' beliefs on students' use of feedback. Though all tutors were uncertain about how well students use feedback, some argued that the only feedback students care about is their scores, whilst others claimed that students do care and make use of the feedback provided. Despite the differences, though, all tutors acknowledged the fact that training in marking assignments is necessary.

Chetwynd & Dobbyn (2011) examined tutors' attitudes towards providing feedback in distance learning higher education. Drawing on evidence from 70 tutors of Open University UK, Chetwynd & Dobbyn compared tutors' beliefs to the centrally produced marking guides that form the feedback framework of Open University. The study showed that there was a clear clash between tutors' intentions in relation to their feedback and the reality of the support provided by the marking guides. While tutors' emphasis was on future learning and not on current performance, the University marking guides were only useful as a short-term tool for retrospective assessment of the assignments in hand. Tutors in the study perceived that centrally produced marking guides offered no help for future-altering feedback and feedback in the pre-assignment study stage. Moreover, Chetwynd & Dobbyn's analysis of

the University's marking guides revealed that the centrally produced framework offered no help to tutors on how to contextualize, personalize and present their feedback.

Valuable information on tutors' and teachers' beliefs on feedback has been also provided by comparative studies. Hyland (2001), for instance, compared tutors' and students' perspectives on the feedback offered in a distance language course in Hong Kong. Her method included data gathered from questionnaires, interviews and analysis of data collected from the feedback offered by tutors. Hyland found that almost half of the feedback provided was on content and less than 17% focused on the process of learning. In the study, each tutor used a different pattern of feedback, although they had all received similar training on marking. Students were generally positive about the helpfulness of the feedback they had received. They found feedback comments on text organization and structure very useful, while they also appreciated comments on content and ideas. On the other hand, comments on spelling, punctuation, and academic conventions were perceived as less useful. Concerning language errors, the majority of students preferred to receive feedback in the form of comments that summarize and explain major language problems. A significant proportion sought complete corrections of all language mistakes, while an equal amount of students wanted tutors to simply highlight problematic areas, leaving for students the responsibility of correcting errors. An interesting finding in Hyland's research concerns the strategies that students adopt in dealing with problematic feedback. The study showed that, in case of misunderstandings or inability to apply the feedback offered, students tended to rely on their own resources, being reluctant to contact the tutor for further help. In general, students considered that tutors are facilitators of learning who also have an important role as correctors of students' work. From their perspective, tutors in the study considered that feedback serves an important function in distance learning, especially in encouraging and supporting students, but they were unsure as to whether their feedback was useful to students or even used at all. Moreover, tutors had different views on what kind of feedback is most useful to students. According to Hyland, her findings reveal the individual nature of both students' and tutors' expectations on feedback and feedback practices (2001, p. 245).

More recently, Price *et al.* (2010) investigated perspectives on feedback, in a study that focused on the academic context of UK universities. Drawing on data from observation case studies, interviews and questionnaires, Price *et al.* examined student and staff perceptions on feedback in three partner business schools. Students in the study perceived that they were given vague, ambiguous and even illegible feedback. Moreover, students expressed the view that their tutors provided feedback which was less directive than what they were used to at school and they tended to believe that this perceived difference was indicative of tutors' lack of care. They considered that difficulties in interpreting feedback should be addressed with dialogue and interaction with the tutor and suggested discussion of exemplars as a desirable strategy for solving feedback problems. Concerning students' preferences, the study showed that students appreciated feedback that can be used immediately, as they felt that it is more engaging and motivating. From their perspective, staff in the Price *et al*. sample acknowledged that feedback is important for students' longitudinal learning and development but had no clear idea as to whether students understand it. Moreover, staff could not identify the benefits students gained through the feedback offered. Interestingly, they argued that there was no mechanism requiring students to show how the feedback provided was used. Price *et al.* found diverse views on feedback purposes between students and staff as well as among each of the two groups. More specifically, while some members of the staff perceived that feedback's purpose is to contribute to students' learning, others considered feedback as a justification of the mark given. On the other hand, students distinguished clearly between mark and feedback but

they seemed to approach feedback as a short-term tool that should have immediate application in the next assignment. Despite the extended diversity in their views, however, both students and staff recognized the importance of dialogue and interaction for effective feedback practices.

Students' and teachers' perceptions of feedback in the largely unexplored context of Nigeria were presented by Omoroguiwa (2012). Drawing on questionnaire collected data, Omoroguiwa investigated perceived benefits and challenges in feedback in a distance learning institution in Nigeria. The study showed that Nigerian students considered that feedback is beneficial mostly in giving opportunities for interaction with peers, opportunities to discuss difficult concepts, as well as opportunities to ask why a question was marked wrong. Difficulties in interpreting feedback, anxiety about open scrutiny, and the time-consuming nature of the process were the challenges that Nigerian students mentioned most. From their point of view, Nigerian tutors acknowledged most the opportunities that feedback gave them to learn about students' concepts, to understand students' learning progress, and to establish better communication with students. Maintaining objectivity in scoring, time considerations, and poor presentation of concerns by students were the greatest challenges that Nigerian tutors indicated in Omoroguiwa's study.

4.2. Research on the implementation of particular feedback methods

Apart from studies on perceptions and beliefs, a large amount of recent literature on feedback consists of investigations that tried to explore the impact of particular feedback methods and the perceived experience of these methods among learners and teachers. Handley & Williams (2011), for instance, explored how students' learning can be enhanced by the use of exemplars posted onto the university's virtual online environment. Using anonymous questionnaires, informal discussions, and usage statistics (i.e. the number of "hits" counted on the university's databank), the authors investigated the interaction of undergraduate students with database exemplars, and the effect of this use on students' understanding of assessment requirements. Handley & Williams found that students made significant use of the posted exemplars and found the databank provided very useful. Almost half of the students considered that seeing the structure and layout of exemplar analysis was beneficial to them. Nevertheless, the analysis showed that no student posted comments or asked questions about the exemplars provided and students' marks did not significantly change after these exemplars were introduced. According to Handley & Wilson, this rather disappointing finding is due to deficits in the implementation strategy used, and should not be interpreted as an indication that exemplars are not beneficial to students.

The use of exemplars has also been examined by Bell *et al*. (2013). Bell et al. examined the perceptions of first year accounting students on grade descriptors and annotated exemplars. Although the study did not examine the impact of grade descriptors and exemplars on students' actual performance, Bell *et al.*'s investigation largely supported Handley & Williams' findings. More specifically, students in Bell *et al.*'s research showed high engagement with the resources provided and the majority of them found descriptors and annotations very useful in completing the assessment task. Students expressed the view that the resources provided helped them understand what was required of them in a challenging and unfamiliar task. The authors found two main themes in students' responses: a) students who were requiring guidance in completing the task, and b) students that were happy with an idea of standards. Students of the former category used exemplars and grade descriptors as a recipe for the task in hand and required more examples in general and more examples

for each grade descriptor. Students of the latter category used exemplars and descriptors as a framework and were more likely to find the resources restrictive (2013, p. 774).

Barker & Pinard (2014) investigated the implementation of iterative feedback on postgraduate students of biological sciences in Aberdeen, UK. The focus of the research was students' perceptions of iterative feedback and the impact of the process on students' achievements. Barker & Pinard found that students valued iterative feedback highly, particularly because it could be used in a progressive way, and because it gave students the opportunity to use tutors' comments for improving future work. Moreover, students appreciated the reassurance that they felt receiving iterative feedback. Applying a thematic analysis of the feedback offered, the authors found that tutors' comments varied remarkably. Brief comments or comments that could not apply immediately were not valued by students. Similarly, students did not seem to engage with negative or dismissive comments. In what concerns students achievements, Barker & Pinard's study revealed that students can achieve significantly higher marks when they are encouraged or motivated to respond to their feedback.

Focusing on cognitive diagnostic assessment and diagnostic feedback, Jang *et al*. (2015) investigated how perceived abilities and goal orientation influence the ways in which students process diagnostic feedback, both in terms of feedback interpretation and in terms of feedback use. Investigating the educational context of Canada, and the case of 11-12 year old students, Jang *et al*. revealed that students' profiles mediate both the interpretation and the use of diagnostic feedback. More specifically, Jang *et al*. found that students' perceptions of their abilities were either inflated or deflated. Students with a mastery orientation showed incremental beliefs, while students with a performance orientation had the fixed belief of intelligence. Mastery-oriented students were more likely to disagree with their diagnostic feedback report, thus showing a critical engagement with the content of the feedback. A very interesting finding of the study was that the greater influence on students' achievements was not students' goals, but their perceptions of their parents' goal orientation.

In the educational context of Taiwan, Yu & Wu (2016) examined the contribution of online peer feedback with respect to students' question generation. The methodological design used included three student groups, one group in which students functioned as assessors, one group in which they functioned as assessed, and one group in which they had both roles. Yu & Wu found that students benefited by playing both the roles of assessor and assessed. In the group of assessors, those students who provided better peer feedback produced better quality questions. Of the assessed, those who received better feedback also produced better quality questions. Students who had both roles produced better quality questions than those who had a single role. Despite the increased demands of the task, students in the Yu & Wu study did not present any cognitive overload.

Apart from studies on the implementation of feedback in general, recent literature exhibits an increased interest of scholars in investigating the impact of feedback on learners' writing. In their study, Hartshorn *et al*. (2010) investigated the influence of dynamic corrective feedback on students' writing accuracy. Responding to criticism on corrective feedback, Hartshorn *et al*. proposed what they called dynamic corrective feedback (see section 3 above) and investigated the effectiveness of their model in an experimental condition which included two groups of students, one who received dynamic corrective feedback and one who functioned as a control group. The research revealed that students who received dynamic corrective feedback produced significantly higher accuracy scores compared to

students who had been taught with the traditional approach. On the other hand, students instructed with the traditional approach performed better in writing fluency and complexity. Hartshorn et *al*.'s findings revealed that dynamic corrective feedback can be highly beneficial for writing accuracy but it does not contribute tostudents' development in writing fluency and complexity.

Guasch *et al*. (2013) conducted a study in order to identify what type of feedback best improves students' collaborative writing in an online learning environment based on asynchronous communication. The study used data from psychology bachelor degree students of Open University Catalonia. Guasch *et al.*'s findings showed that collaborative writing among students who received epistemic feedback improved more than the writing of students who received either corrective or suggestive feedback. No significant differences in improvement were found between students who received corrective feedback and those who received suggestive feedback. In what concerns the giver of the feedback, Guasch *et al.*'s research revealed that tutor epistemic feedback improved students' collaborative writing best. Tutor epistemic feedback seemed to better promote collaboration among students because it required of them to make and justify decisions together, and to form collaborative plans of further action.

Focusing on the educational context of Taiwan, Tai *et al*. (2015) explored the effects of peer review and the teacher's corrective feedback on the writing of low proficiency EFL learners. The study showed that students were generally positive towards their experience of peer review feedback and perceived that their peers could identify errors in their writing. Moreover, the students felt that serving as both learners and reviewers contributed to their learning. Nevertheless, students expressed their concern about vague and confusing peer feedback and did not appreciate peer feedback comments that emphasized superficial linguistic form. Considering that the tutor has more authority and is more qualified and competent than their peers, students in Tai *et al.*'s study preferred tutor to peer feedback. In general, Tai *et al*.'s findings showed that students benefited from the combination of peer and tutor feedback, mainly because this combination created opportunities to engage in interaction and deeper reflection. The use of peer feedback seemed to have increased students' self-awareness, as well as their familiarity with assessment criteria. Apart from the aforementioned benefits, however, the study also revealed serious challenges in implementing effective peer feedback. In particular, low proficiency in English had a negative impact on students' ability to function as facilitators.

Elola & Oskoz (2016) examined the use of specific technological tools in the provision of feedback on writing. Drawing on a questionnaire and interviews with Spanish learners enrolled in a Spanish advanced writing course, Elola & Oskoz compared feedback uses of text-based computer software (Microsoft Word) and oral feedback based on screencast software. The authors found evidence that oral feedback was commonly used for commenting in the areas of content, structure, and organization. Written feedback was more frequently used for comments on form. Feedback on the content and structure was more frequent, more elaborate and included lengthier comments. These findings seem to suggest some relation between the software used and feedback form or some manipulation of the feedback according to the limitations set by the medium used. With respect to learners' performance, Elola & Oskoz's study showed that learners revised similarly, regardless of the tool used. Students expressed the view that oral feedback based on screenshot software offered some of the features of actual conversation and made them feel like engaging in an actual dialogue with the instructor. However, they found both

feedback methods useful and suggested that their ideal type of feedback would combine both oral and text-based communication tools.

4.3. Research on the influence of interactional methods and technological tools on feedback

Focusing on the context of distance education, several authors have conducted empirical investigations on the influence of particular interactional methods and technological tools on feedback. For instance, Vonderwell (2003) explored postgraduate students' perceptions on and experiences of asynchronous communication in online learning. Drawing on data collected from informal interviews with students, student-teacher mails and transcripts of discussions on the University's blackboard, Vonderwell revealed students' perception that asynchronous communication is not personal enough. Students in the Vonderwall research complained about the lack of a one-on-one relationship with the instructor and about the low level of communication with their classmates and teammates. Students expressed the need for consistent and timely feedback and perceived that the feedback they received was generally delayed. Moreover, they felt that online communication requires clear and carefully constructed messages. On the other hand, asynchronous communication was perceived as beneficial in some respects, especially in that it provided students with enough time to carefully form and express their ideas. Another perceived advantage of asynchronous online communication was the "anonymity" that it offered, which made students less hesitant in asking questions.

Park & Bonk (2007) explored the benefits and challenges of a mixed system of synchronous communication in distance learning, as perceived by postgraduate students of a Midwestern university. The communication system that Park & Bonk explored consisted of a web-based collaboration system (Breeze) and an audio-conferencing tool. The authors found that students appreciated synchronous communication, because it gave them the opportunity of prompt feedback. Students felt that timely feedback had a reassuring function in their progress and it also offered them significant encouragement and motivation for keeping up on their work. The provision of peer feedback was also highly valued. Students considered that synchronous interactions with their peers offered a variety of useful new perspectives and ideas on their projects. The use of multiple channels for communication was generally perceived as beneficial by students, who felt that seeing, hearing and communicating was better than merely reading text on the screen. Park & Bonk also found that the use of a text-based system together with a conferencing tool contributed to decreasing cases of miscommunication and eliminated the sense of isolation that students experienced in the first weeks of the course. Beyond perceived benefits, the Park & Bonk study revealed several challenges and disadvantages that students perceived in synchronous feedback. More specifically, students found that synchronous feedback restricted reflection time and caused trouble in scheduling their activities. Internet connection problems and audio-related issues were also mentioned as challenges. In addition, for those not speaking English as a native language, synchronous communication seemed to worsen language barriers.

Experiences of feedback in distance learning in the Malaysian educational context were investigated by Dzakiria (2008). Dzakiria found that university students in her study experienced difficulties in becoming distance learners. Diversity in age, educational background and working experience made this transition more challenging. Students in Dzakiria's research felt isolated and inadequate with regard to technological skills. Moreover, they were dependent on the tutors and concerned about not getting immediate

response to their questions. Although they valued timely feedback, they were generally not satisfied with the feedback they had received.

The importance of interaction and communication in distance learning was also highlighted in Tsagari's work (2013). Tsagari investigated the ways in which a group of Greek EFL learners enrolled on a distance learning programme experienced the effectiveness of their contact sessions. The study drew on data from learners' reflective journals, a method which allowed for a dynamic and in-depth analysis of learners' experiences, feelings, and reactions. Tsagari found evidence that contact sessions contributed to students' learning, providing support of three kinds: cognitive, affective, and systematic. Concerning cognitive support, learners in Tsagari's sample felt that the feedback that they received from the tutor during contact sessions helped them in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of their work, as well as in planning future actions. Moreover, the use of high-quality materials, such as mini-quizzes, advanced learners' independence and self-sufficiency. Overall, the feedback provided in contact sessions was perceived as helpful for the writing of course assignments. On the affective level, contact sessions offered opportunities of growing relationships among members of the group. Contact sessions were also perceived as promoting collaboration and exchange of ideas among members of the group, which contributed to psychological and motivational support. On the level of systematic support, students in Tsagari's sample stated that contact sessions helped them in their time management as well as in identifying Information Technology (IT) strategies and sources that they could use in their study.

Investigating particular feedback tools, Ice *et al*. (2007) conducted a case study in which asynchronous text-based feedback was replaced by asynchronous audio feedback. Using data from an end of course survey, post course interviews, and learners' final project, the authors explored master's and doctoral level students' beliefs and experience of asynchronous audio feedback. Ice *et al.* found that the majority of students preferred audio to text feedback and considered that audio feedback contributed to a better understanding of the tutor's comments, while creating a less formal learning environment. Moreover, audio feedback increased students' feeling of participation in a group, lessened social distance and gave students the impression that the instructor was caring. On the level of effectiveness, Ice *et al*. found that audio feedback increased the possibility of students applying higher order thinking and problem-solving skills. Audio feedback was also beneficial to tutors, who could reduce the time required for providing feedback by approximately 75%.

Students' requirement for timely feedback and tutors' burden of consuming considerable amounts of time for providing feedback motivated Bayerlein (2014), who explored the effectiveness of automatically generated feedback as an alternative for its manually generated counterpart. Bayerlein examined the reactions of both on-campus and off-campus students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) to automatically generated feedback and their perceptions with regard to timely and extremely timely feedback. Her findings suggest that, except on-campus undergraduates, students in general do not perceive any difference between timely and extremely timely feedback. Similarly, among all students in the sample, only off-campus postgraduates found automatically generated feedback more constructive.

5. Pedagogical implications

The characteristics of effective feedback seem to be well established in the literature. Scholars generally agree that our pedagogical interventions should aim towards timely,

motivational, personalized, manageable and criteria-related feedback. These principles are neither challenged nor modified by recent investigations. Nevertheless, recent research contributed some important pedagogical lessons, by scrutinizing, clarifying, and elaborating on the theoretical principles of effective feedback in the context of pedagogical reality.

Probably the most important pedagogical implication of recent research is the identification of balance as the key factor in effective feedback practices. To take an example, authors unanimously argue that feedback should be timely. They do not specify, however, how prompt feedback should be. Recent research showed that extremely timely feedback and immediate responses to students are not helpful to students' performance and learning (see, for instance, Howard, 1987; Hargreaves, 2013; Bayerlein, 2014). Feedback should be provided in a timely and constant manner but it should also leave enough time for students to work out their own solutions and answers. Recent studies revealed that feedback should be timely enough to be useful, care-indicative and re-assuring but it should also be delayed enough to ensure that students have been given the time and autonomy to engage with the learning content and increase their abilities of self-awareness and self-monitoring (see also Howard, 1987; Hargreaves, 2013).

Balance is the key to the quantity issue, too. Feedback is effective when it provides the amount of correction and information that students really need. Any amount of information that goes beyond this point is threatening to students' autonomy and development, is not appreciated by students and it adds a useless informative burden to assessment and learning (Hargreaves, 2013). In the case of error correction, for instance, recent research pointed out that students prefer to correct highlighted errors on their own, instead of having all their errors corrected by the tutor (see Hyland, 2001). Research findings suggest that this method is more engaging for the students, it develops their familiarity with the assessment criteria, and it has a positive impact on their learning and achievements (see Hartshorn *et al*., 2010). Similarly, in providing feedback, instructors should be mindful of keeping the balance between the amount of information that concerns the assignment in hand and the amount of information that aims at future learning and development (see Lizzio & Wilson, 2008). As concerns feedback comments, tutors must use the appropriate proportion of praise and criticism in order to protect students' confidence while providing constructive feedback (see Lizzio & Wilson, 2008, p. 264).

Another area that needs careful calculation concerns the relation between assessment criteria and feedback provision. Research has shown that students need clarity in the criteria on which they are assessed (see, for instance, Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Hatziapostolou & Paraskakis, 2010; Handley & Williams, 2011). Good and critical understanding of assessment standards and task requirements are essential for the effectiveness of students' performance and learning (Bell *et al*., 2013). Similarly, grades should be clear and intelligible to students. On the other hand, effective feedback necessitates a certain degree of flexibility, in that it has to be contextualized and individualized so that it can meet every student's needs. In feedback, what works for one student might not work for some other (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 88). Jang *et al*. (2015) revealed that perceived abilities, goal orientation and even perceptions of parents' goals influence students' interpretation and use of feedback. These are factors that instructors should identify in forming and delivering their feedback. Creating opportunities for meaningful interactions and dialogue between students and the instructor might suggest a useful diagnostic tool for identifying students' personal needs, expectations, and beliefs.

Interaction and dialogue could also help in building warm relations with and among

students. Creating a warm atmosphere between participants in assessment and feedback will be beneficial on many levels. More specifically, empirical evidence shows that students often have emotional negative reactions to feedback (Hargreaves, 2013; Dowden *et al*., 2013) and sometimes believe that tutors do not care about them or their work (Price *et al*. 2010). Dialogue and interaction could contribute to the tutor-students relation and could weaken students' perception that the tutor is not caring or has no respect for their personalities (see also Dowden *et al*., 2013). The provision of timely and helpful feedback can also deliver a message to students, i.e. that the tutor really cares about their development and personalities. Research also revealed that some students are hesitant in asking questions when found in contexts in which they are not "anonymous" (see Vonderwell, 2003). This tendency seems to indicate that certain students are somehow frightened to express their pedagogical needs in front of their teammates/classmates. Opportunities for interaction and collaborative activities could enhance students' feeling of belonging to a team of learners with similar needs. This sense of belonging to a community would arguably make students more confident and less hesitant in asking for feedback and guidance.

A very important and productive area of recent research focused on investigating who is, and who is perceived as the most effective feedback giver. Research shows that learners in general value forms of peer feedback and self-assessment but prefer receiving tutor feedback (see Alavi & Kaivanpanah, 2007; Dowden *et al*., 2013; Tai *et al.*, 2015). Several studies support this tendency, especially in the context of second language learning, where tutor feedback appears to be more effective and useful to learners (see Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Certainly, tutors play a crucial role in feedback provision. The problem is that students tend to justify their preference for tutor feedback on the basis of conservative views about the tutor's authority and biased beliefs on peers' abilities (see, for instance, Alavi & Kaivanpanah, 2007; Guasch *et al*., 2013). Despite students' biases, peer feedback can be equally valuable to tutor feedback. Moreover, certain pedagogical purposes are much better promoted through peer assessment and feedback processes. For instance, Alavi & Kaivanpanah note that, in language learning, peer feedback can be more powerful than teacher feedback, because its concern is with topics of interest and relevance to the learners. Research has shown that peer feedback is very effective in developing students' familiarity with assessment criteria and in engaging students with concepts presented in the class (Odo, 2015; Yu & Wu, 2016). The exchange of different ideas and perspectives on learning content and assignments is another beneficial factor of learning which is best served by peer feedback (Park & Bonk, 2007). Further, peer feedback is crucial for engaging students in meaningful interactions, and also for strengthening the feeling of belonging in a team. Especially in the context of distance education, where opportunities for interaction are limited, peer feedback can have a crucial contribution in maintaining learners' motivation and engagement with the course, as well as in eliminating their sense of isolation.

In view of the aforementioned advantages, pedagogical efforts should concentrate on promoting and enhancing peer feedback. Tutors and institutions should focus on eliminating biases towards peers' ability to provide feedback, by including peer feedback in their standard assessment and feedback practices. Moreover, tutors and institutions should take action towards ensuring the quality of peer feedback. The provision of training, guidance, and resources (written and computer-based) on peer feedback could contribute to improving the effectiveness of the peer feedback offered, but it would also help in raising students' appreciation of peer feedback (see Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Attention should be paid to using peer feedback only in contexts and tasks in which learners can fully perform

their role as feedback providers. Research has shown that linguistic barriers might impede students – especially those of low language proficiency - performing their role as feedback givers (see, for instance, Tai *et al.*, 2015). To avoid problems of this sort, tutors should create and select peer feedback opportunities that suit students' abilities.

As discussed in section 2, previous research has not identified some particular feedback method as most helpful or most effective. Although in certain contexts and tasks some feedback practices seem more fruitful than others, all methods have advantages and disadvantages. Thus, it would be better to consider that feedback practices and methods form complementary tools for effective pedagogy, rather than competitive approaches to assessing and learning. Depending on the pedagogical purpose and the context (e.g. educational level, nature of the course, distance vs face-to-face learning), tutors should choose the appropriate feedback method for the task in hand.

For instance, iterative feedback has been proven to be helpful and effective for writing, since it engages students by giving them the opportunity to use guidance provided immediately (see Barker & Pinard, 2014). Considering these benefits, writing courses – especially in the distance learning context and particularly in the text production phase – could be more effective, if they included some form of iterative feedback. Similarly, exemplars and grade descriptors could be adopted as feedback methods, when the pedagogical aim is the development of students' familiarity with assessment criteria and the maximization of students' understanding of the intended goals (see Handley & Williams, 2011; Bell *et al.*, 2013). Of course, tutors should be careful in choosing exemplars, since students often misunderstand exemplar paradigms and interpret them as models that they should imitate. Thus, it would be better for tutors to use constructed exemplars that illustrate clearly the point that students should get. Discussion of exemplars with students could further help towards enhancing the clarifying force of the method (Handley & Williams, 2011). The inclusion of self-assessment practices, portfolios and error lists would also be helpful, especially for developing students' abilities in self-learning and in monitoring their own progress (see Lam, 2014). Finally, considering that detailed and useful feedback requires significant amounts of effort and time on both tutors' and students' part, the adoption of practices which shorten the length of assessment tasks in order to maintain the quality and length of feedback would be highly beneficial for feedback usefulness and practicality (see Hartshorn *et al.*, 2010).

Beyond particular feedback types and strategies, scholars have also explored the impact of communicative methods and tools on feedback. For instance, recent research scrutinized the influence of asynchronous and synchronous communication on feedback processes (see, for instance, Branon & Essex, 2001; Dikli, 2003; Watts, 2016). These studies revealed that synchronous communication promotes students' engagement and motivation as well as students' sense of belonging in a team. These effects are highly beneficial, especially in the context of distance learning, where students' drop-out rates are high and learners often experience isolation and lack of motivation (see, for instance Ypsilandis, 2002; Tsagari, 2013). Another benefit of synchronous feedback, and particularly video/audio conferencing, is that it provides multiple communicative cues (such as gestures, tone of voice, facial expressions) which diminish the possibility of misinterpretation. These advantages make synchronous communication feedback indispensable for distance learning, especially for constructs requiring clear and extensive feedback comments, such as writing.

Certainly, synchronous communication raises a number of challenges, predominantly in what concerns the quality of the technological tools used and the ability of learners to

participate in synchronous communications. Most previous studies have shown that technological tools used for audio and video synchronous communication often present sound and vision problems which impede effective interaction. Research revealed that some distance learners (and some tutors as well) are not competent enough to use technological tools of synchronous communication (see Dikli, 2003; Watts, 2016). Moreover, synchronous communication seems to worsen language barriers for learners of lower language proficiency. The aforementioned disadvantages indicate that the use of synchronous communication should be well designed. Institutions and tutors must provide appropriate training in technological tools for both tutors and students (see Blake, 2009; Watts, 2016). The provision of some institutional support service in technology and communication would also be valuable. Technological tools should be chosen carefully in order to fit students' abilities (technological and linguistic) and the pedagogical purpose at issue.

Feedback practices can also benefit from the use of asynchronous communication. Research shows that learners appreciate asynchronous communication feedback because it gives them enough time to reflect on the learning content and carefully express their ideas (see Branon & Essex, 2001; Watts, 2016). Considering research findings, asynchronous communication can be very effective in cases in which feedback's aim is to trigger learners' profound reflection and deep engagement. Another advantage of using asynchronous communication for feedback provision is that it does not impose any time and place restrictions on students. This "freedom" aspect can be crucial for feedback provision, especially in cases where distance learners are located in different time zones or when learners have professional and other non-academic time restrictions. Of course, the provision of feedback through asynchronous communication always involves the disadvantage of not creating chances for interaction and personal communication between students and tutors. Thus, tutors should avoid using only asynchronous communication for providing comments and guidance, especially in the context of distance education, where feedback is often the only channel of interaction between learners and instructors. The inclusion of audio and video material in asynchronous feedback seems to enhance asynchronous feedback effectiveness, since it increases students' feeling of belonging in a learning community, it decreases the possibilities of misinterpretation, while reducing the time needed for providing quality comments (Ice *et al*. 2007). In general, the appropriate and carefully designed combination of synchronous and asynchronous communication seems to be the most effective form of feedback provision. As research shows, a combination of this sort is also preferred by students (see Elola & Oskoz, 2016

Regardless of the communication method and the technological tools available, tutors should be aware that the pedagogical purpose and the needs of the particular educational context in which they perform determines the choice of instruments, not the other way round. Tutors should identify their teaching and assessing aims and then calculate how these aims could be better promoted by the communicative means available (see Howard, 1987). Similarly, tutors must design and provide feedback, bearing in mind that their contribution is valuable only if it is used by students (see Sadler, 1989). Communication methods, technological tools and feedback strategies should enhance feedback usefulness and actual use. The adoption of practices that ensure that students incorporate in their work the feedback they are given would greatly contribute to promoting the actual use of feedback. For instance, tutors could ask students to submit assignments together with some written description of how the work in hand addresses previous feedback comments. Encouraging or requiring students to respond to feedback (either in oral discussions or in written reports) might also promote students' engagement with and negotiation of feedback.

Above all, recent research has made it clear that there is an urgent need for training and assessment literacy development for both instructors and learners (see also Price *et al*., 2010). Students' emotional, negative responses to feedback, as well as some tutors' expressed views on their role as feedback-givers suggest the existence of major misconceptions about assessment and feedback (see, for instance, Price *et al*., 2010; Tang & Harrison, 2011). The promotion of assessment literacy (Vogt & Tsagari, 2014) could help both tutors and learners understand what is assessed in the assessment process and for what purpose. The development of assessment literacy (http://taleproject.eu) would clarify the educational aim of feedback to all parts involved. The illumination of these issues can contribute to raising the quality of feedback provided and promoting the effective use of feedback comments.

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