

# Teacher-written feedback in L2 writing education: Insights into student tensions and responses

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## Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the perceptions and experiences of six undergraduate students enrolled in two writing courses within an L2 teacher education programme. The focus was on understanding the tensions these students experienced when engaging with their tutors' written feedback and the impact of these tensions on their responses. Adopting a qualitative methodology, the research involved semi-structured background interviews and stimulated recall interviews. Key findings reveal multiple dimensions of tensions, including emotional, interpersonal, academic, and institutional. Students employed various adaptive and maladaptive strategies to navigate these tensions, ranging from proactive engagement and peer support to avoidance and selective feedback engagement. The study also identified five characteristics of the interaction between tensions and responses: dynamic, context-dependent, idiosyncratic, cumulative, and interconnected. These insights emphasise the need for educators to provide clear, specific, and constructive feedback, and foster a supportive environment that mitigates negative impacts and promotes adaptive strategies. The findings have significant implications for research and practice, advocating for the development of feedback literacy among educators and students to enhance the effectiveness of written feedback in L2 writing education.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 22 March 2024

Revised: 20 August 2024

Accepted: 03 September 2024

## KEYWORDS

teacher-written feedback, student tensions, adaptive and maladaptive strategies, L2 writing education

## Introduction

Feedback has long been recognised as a critical component in education, particularly in supporting student learning and development (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) and addressing diverse learning needs (Boud & Dawson, 2021). Feedback is known to be notably widespread, actively sought, and effective in second/foreign language (L2) writing classes within both school and higher education environments (Ene & Kosobucki, 2016; Ferris, 2014; Lee, 2017), including L2 teacher education programmes (Ferguson, 2011). Despite its acknowledged potential, feedback remains an area of significant challenge and contention. Recent research indicates that feedback practices are "poorly understood and enacted by both educators and

students" (Henderson et al., 2019, p. 1237), with students often finding feedback to be non-actionable or unusable (Li & De Luca, 2014).

The study reported in this paper investigated the perceptions and experiences of six undergraduate students enrolled in two writing courses within an L2 teacher education programme. This research was motivated by a need to understand the specific tensions these students encountered when engaging with their tutors' written feedback and how these tensions impacted their responses to this feedback. While there is a wealth of literature on the effectiveness of feedback in promoting student learning (Weaver, 2006; Watling & Ginsburg, 2019), there remains a significant gap in understanding the nuanced and often negative experiences students face in this process (Yu et al., 2021).

Teacher written feedback (TWF), defined as information provided in prose by the teacher about student performance and understanding (Jolly & Boud, 2013), is particularly prevalent and valued in formal education settings (Ferris et al., 2013). Its perceived effectiveness is attributed to its potential ability to be personalised, explicit, tangible, traceable, and easily made private (Jolly & Boud, 2013). However, the potency of written feedback to foster learning is contingent upon its actionable nature and the capacity of students to engage with and utilise it (Henderson et al., 2021).

The present study aimed to address the following research questions:

**RQ<sub>1</sub>:** What tensions do L2 writing students experience as they engage with their tutors' written feedback?

**RQ<sub>2</sub>:** How do these tensions impact the way they respond to their tutors' written feedback?

These questions were situated within a broader discourse on the complexities of feedback as a communicative process influenced by social relationships and power dynamics (Carless, 2020). The study also sought to contribute to the ongoing debate on the effectiveness of feedback by highlighting the often-overlooked negative aspects and the barriers that impede its utility (Yu et al., 2021). This is particularly relevant in higher education, where feedback remains a prominent source of student dissatisfaction (Bell & Brooks, 2018; OfS, 2019) and where there is a pressing need for approaches that recognise feedback as a collaborative and constructive process (Burke & Pieterick, 2010).

## **Literature Review**

### ***Student Perceptions of Quality Written Feedback***

A review of the literature on student perceptions of quality TWF is essential for understanding the complexities and challenges faced by L2 writing students. This section serves to contextualise the subsequent analysis of the tensions students

encounter when engaging with TWF. Examining these perceptions highlights the subjective nature of feedback reception and its impact on motivation, confidence, and writing development.

Student perceptions of quality TWF are multifaceted and complex, and encompass various dimensions that significantly influence their academic engagement and development. Dunworth and Sanchez (2016) identified three primary dimensions of quality TWF: affective/interpersonal, orientational, and transformational. The affective/interpersonal dimension emphasises the role of feedback in building confidence, motivation, and interpersonal relationships, and in fostering a positive learning environment. The orientational dimension inducts students into the academic context by clarifying academic standing, specifying required level of achievement, and outlining staff and task requirements. Lastly, the transformational dimension involves supporting learning and personal growth by enhancing understanding, reflection, academic performance, and autonomy.

Studies consistently show that students prefer detailed, specific, and comprehensive feedback. Ene and Kosobucki (2016) found that at lower levels of linguistic proficiency, direct and focused feedback is more helpful and preferred by both teachers and students. Students appreciate detailed supplemental comments, which they perceive as clarifying and boosting confidence. Similarly, Chong (2019) reports that ESL/EFL learners favour comprehensive feedback, though they acknowledge that an abundance of feedback does not always lead to successful self-corrections of errors. Dawson et al. (2019) also found that detailed, specific, and thorough comments are highly valued, with personalised feedback often seen as more effective. In their systematic review, Li and De Luca (2014) noted that the most desired features of feedback among students include being personal, explicable, criteria-referenced, objective, and applicable for further improvement. Henderson et al. (2021), too, emphasise the need for feedback to be detailed, understandable, and usable, tailored to meet the diverse needs of different cohorts of students.

Clarity and timeliness emerge as crucial elements of perceived quality feedback. Hadjieconomou and Tombs (2021), for instance, highlight that students prefer feedback that is clear, specific, and delivered in a positive tone. They appreciate feedback that aligns with the grades given and includes explicit marking criteria. The importance of timely feedback is also stressed; feedback that is not provided in time for the next assignment is perceived as ineffective. This emphasis on timeliness and clarity ensures that feedback is not only useful but also actionable, allowing students to apply the guidance to subsequent tasks and improve their academic performance progressively.

The format, modality, and orientation of feedback also have a significant impact on student perceptions of feedback quality. Rouhshad et al. (2024) report that students favour individualised, strengths-based, and future-oriented feedback, with a

particular preference for in-text over summary comments. In-text comments are seen as more detailed and specific, and allow students to engage with the feedback more effectively. Beaumont et al. (2011) further emphasise that students view quality feedback as a system of guidance which provides reassurance, information about current level of performance, and corrective advice. They also stress the importance of tutor accessibility and responsiveness, and of student-tutor dialogue.

Students' perceptions of quality feedback can evolve over time and vary based on their academic level, experience, and career goals. Long (2014) notes that students' feedback preferences shift as they progress through their degree programmes, with a growing emphasis on feedback that provides clear guidance for future improvement. Nguyen et al. (2021) suggest that L2 students' preferences for feedback scope may differ, with more experienced writers, particularly those trained to become English teachers, preferring feedback on not only form, content, and writing style, but also higher order skills such as critical and creative thinking. This variation highlights the need for educators to be adaptable in their feedback approaches, and consider the unique needs and expectations of their students at different stages of their academic journey.

### ***Student Experiences with Written Feedback*** ***Emotional and cognitive reactions***

Emotional responses to feedback are complex and multifaceted, and significantly shape students' perception of and engagement with TWF. Anxiety can arise from gradeless feedback or perceived inconsistencies in tutor feedback styles, which may lead to struggles with ambiguity and uncertainty (Sanchez & Dunworth, 2015). When feedback contradicts students' self-perceptions of performance, it can trigger strong emotional reactions, such as feelings of inadequacy and lack of achievement, especially when delivered publicly (Carless, 2020). Moreover, perceived difficulty in improving coursework based on feedback can cause feelings of upset and helplessness (Robinson et al., 2013). Strong emotional reactions, such as frustration, can arise when students perceive the feedback as focusing on minor details rather than substantive academic content, or as cryptic without any clarifying comments or explanations (Dowden et al., 2013). These negative emotions can result in cognitive disengagement and ignoring feedback altogether (Dowden et al., 2013; Han & Hyland, 2015; Mahfoodh, 2017).

For L2 students, emotional responses to feedback can be particularly intense. Emotional responses to TWF, particularly written corrective feedback (WCF), among L2 students are highly nuanced and influenced by their self-concepts and previous experiences. Students who view themselves as L2 underachievers or lazy L2 learners often set lower goals, which can protect them from disappointment but also reduce their motivation to engage deeply with feedback (Han, 2017). While many L2 students expect and appreciate WCF, positive attitudes do not always translate into positive emotional experiences (McMartin-Miller, 2014). Research shows a wide range of emotional reactions to WCF, including pride, self-confidence, frustration, and

disappointment (Han & Hyland, 2019). These reactions can be fluid, with some students quickly transforming initial negative emotions into motivation, while others remain mired in frustration (Han & Hyland, 2015). Emotions also vary in their impact on motivation and revision efforts (Han & Hyland, 2019). For instance, anxiety can activate a student to engage more deeply, whereas hopelessness can lead to disengagement. Furthermore, the nature of the feedback itself plays a crucial role; harsh criticism, miscommunication, and an overwhelming number of comments can trigger negative emotions such as dissatisfaction and frustration, while clear, constructive suggestions can lead to acceptance and satisfaction (Mahfoodh, 2017). Miscommunication about the amount and delivery of feedback can further exacerbate negative emotions and result in feelings of disappointment and perceived unfavourable evaluations of writing proficiency (Zacharias, 2007).

Teachers play a crucial role in providing feedback that considers students' emotional responses, as addressing the affective purposes of feedback - such as recognising students' effort, motivating them to improve their performance, and fostering positive self-perceptions about their work - is essential to prevent negative experiences (Dawson et al., 2019). Clear and specific feedback can enhance students' confidence, whereas ambiguous feedback may cause anxiety and other negative emotions (Hadjieconomou & Tombs, 2021). The tone of feedback also plays a significant role in how it is received, with positive language and tone in feedback resulting in easier acceptance of negative comments and having a positive impact on student confidence (Hadjieconomou & Tombs, 2021). Therefore, while criticism is necessary, it should be carefully presented to avoid detrimental emotional impacts. Some students prefer criticism to be preceded by positive feedback, while others favour starting with their strengths to ease into the critique (Dunworth & Sanchez, 2016). However, praise must be managed carefully, as it can sometimes detract from learning and performance by directing the learner's attention to themselves rather than the task (Shute, 2008). Providing opportunities for students to discuss written feedback with tutors can also help mitigate adverse emotional reactions and transform them into positive outcomes (Hadjieconomou & Tombs, 2021).

Equally important as tutor feedback is the students' agency and emotional management in engaging effectively with TWF. For instance, Sanchez and Dunworth (2015) found that peer support and group discussions helped students predict outcomes and prepare for resubmissions, while individual reflection, such as comparing positive and negative comments, balanced emotional responses and improved feedback comprehension. Frustration persisted, though, when students faced issues beyond their control, such as delays or policies on ungraded feedback. The student thus sought creative solutions to controllable difficulties, using challenges as motivation for self-directed activity. By employing these strategies, students can transform initial negative reactions into more positive and productive engagement with feedback.

### ***Interpersonal and communication challenges***

One major challenge in written feedback arises from potential misunderstandings, which can severely impact how TWF is received and engaged with by students. The lack of immediacy in written feedback often results in misinterpretations due to the absence of real-time clarification (Jolly & Boud, 2013). Misunderstandings can arise from messy handwritten comments, complex language, inconsistent information, and unclear criticism (Henderson et al., 2021). When feedback merely identifies errors without explanations, it can foster frustration and a 'fix it' mentality without a clear path to improvement (Ene & Kosobucki, 2016). Sanchez and Dunworth (2015) found that instances where students misinterpret feedback, such as participant Rose thinking no comments meant everything was satisfactory or participant Julie finding her tutor's techniques confusing, suggest the need for clear, comprehensive, and directive feedback.

The use of complex academic language or specialist terminology by tutors may further compromise understanding (Henderson et al., 2021; Sanchez & Dunworth, 2015). International students, in particular, face additional challenges due to their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, sometimes struggling with unfamiliar academic terminology and differing educational norms (Li & Curdt-Christiansen, 2020). For instance, terms like 'build up argument' and 'critical writing' may be interpreted differently based on previous educational experiences. To mitigate these issues, promoting dialogue can enhance clarity and comprehension, bridging communication gaps and making feedback more accessible (Rae & Cochrane, 2008).

Tutor-student and student-student interpersonal dynamics, as well as tutor accessibility and responsiveness, are crucial components that influence how students receive and respond to TWF. Teachers' views conveyed in feedback can foster either respect or distrust among students, depending on how clearly and respectfully those views are communicated (Li & Curdt-Christiansen, 2020). Simplistic feedback, delays in providing comments, or a lack of engagement from teachers can make them appear detached and uninterested, damaging interpersonal ties (Hyland, 2013). On the other hand, strong, emotion-laden relationships between tutors and students can enhance feedback reception and effectiveness (Dowden et al., 2013). This often requires addressing power imbalances and developing feedback partnerships in order to promote mutual understanding and reduce dissonances, fostering a more collaborative feedback environment (Carless, 2020).

Student-student relationships in supporting them to cope with unclear or inadequate feedback, and engage with feedback effectively. Peer networks, for instance, play a significant role in helping students discuss and understand feedback. Sanchez and Dunworth (2015) found that students Vivian and Lucy engaged in peer networks to discuss the feedback they received with a view to comparing notes and deepening their understanding of their tutors' TWF in preparation for revising their work. Peer support thus not only promoted collaborative learning but also served as a coping

mechanism to bridge gaps left by tutors' feedback, highlighting the value of a supportive and communicative learning environment.

### ***Academic and institutional tensions***

One primary source of academic tension is the inconsistency in feedback practices across different tutors and courses. Sanchez and Dunworth (2015) highlight that students frequently struggle with discrepancies between formative and summative feedback. For instance, Tom experienced confusion and frustration due to the perceived lack of alignment between feedback on draft submissions and the final feedback received. Similarly, Vivian felt that areas for improvement identified in her summative feedback could have been addressed earlier if highlighted during the formative stage. Inconsistencies are further amplified in courses taught by multiple tutors, where varying standards and expectations lead to significant tension. Students like Lucy found it challenging when different tutors provided conflicting feedback, with one focusing on content while another emphasised structure and mechanics, leaving students uncertain about the criteria they should prioritise. Such variability in feedback practice thus hinders students' ability to make meaningful revisions and improvements and may potentially undermine their confidence in the feedback process and in their ability to meet diverse expectations.

The timing and relevance of feedback are also key factors affecting its effectiveness. Students often disregard feedback perceived as untimely or irrelevant to their next assessment task (Beaumont et al., 2011; Henderson et al., 2021). Feedback provided after the teaching period or too late to be applied to ongoing assignments significantly diminishes its utility. Students prefer feedback that 'feeds forward' to future tasks, and offers clear expectations and actionable insights for subsequent assignments (Hendry et al., 2016). Moreover, policies such as ungraded feedback or the lack of timely feedback can leave students feeling disempowered and unable to address their academic challenges proactively (Sanchez & Dunworth, 2015). These issues contribute to a sense of frustration and helplessness among students, as they feel they have no control over the feedback process.

Unified feedback that aligns with well-communicated marking criteria is crucial for maximising its effectiveness. Such feedback helps students understand the expected standards and how to apply feedback across different tasks (Hadjieconomou & Tombs, 2021). Promoting dialogue among tutors and between tutors and students can help clarify expectations and address misunderstandings arising from feedback, which can contribute to fostering a supportive and constructive feedback environment. This approach ensures that feedback is not only informative but also actionable, enabling students to make continuous improvements in their academic work.

## Methodology

### *Study Design and Participants*

The present study is part of a broader investigation into the role of TWF in enhancing pre-service L2 teachers' language awareness, as well as the cognitive, affective, and contextual factors that either facilitate or hinder this development. The overarching project employed an exploratory-interpretive approach with a within-site, embedded, multiple-case design. Specifically, two case studies were undertaken within the same initial English language teacher education (IELTE) programme at a state university in Argentina. Each case was centred on an academic writing module and involved three students, along with a team of tutors who provided instruction and feedback on both drafts and final written assignments. Participants, consisting of six L2 students and five academic writing tutors, were selected through convenience sampling. They were fully informed about the study in advance and provided written consent. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned, and any identifiable personal and contextual details were omitted.

This paper focuses on the experiences and perceptions of the six students across the two academic writing modules: Mora, Ambar, Maria (Year 3) and Carmen, Ana, and Celia (Year 4). By concentrating on these student participants, I aimed to explore the depth and breadth of individual narratives and the complexity of their engagement with and responses to TWF. Within each class, the students collectively produced essays spanning all grade bands (Fail, Pass, Good, Very Good, and Excellent), accompanied by corresponding formative and summative feedback. While the small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings to wider populations or contexts, I align with Lincoln and Guba (1985) in believing that researchers should provide rich, substantive data so as to enable readers to independently assess the potential for transferability. Consequently, the detailed findings presented here offer valuable insights into the intricate relationship between feedback engagement and response, which may be applicable to other L2 teaching contexts involving assessment feedback.

The study took place in Argentina, a country known for its well-established IELTE programmes but underrepresented in English-medium L2 journals (Banegas et al., 2020). Data were collected within a four-year IELTE course structured around four core curricular areas: linguistic foundations, linguistic skills, teacher education, and cultural studies. The two modules analysed in this study were compulsory components of the linguistic skills area, and focused on creative and academic writing. These modules aimed to enhance students' academic writing skills and literacy through a scaffolded process-writing approach (e.g., see Flower, 1993), which included iterative cycles of planning, drafting, obtaining teacher and occasionally peer feedback, revising, and editing. Both modules were team-taught by at least two teachers responsible for writing instruction and feedback. In addition, students received support from student teaching assistants, who were advanced undergraduates enrolled in the same IELTE programme and had previously completed the academic writing modules. Each module comprised weekly lectures and practical seminars

(eight hours per week, totalling 128 hours) over 16 weeks. The primary focus was on academic essay writing, using traditional and rigid typologies such as expository, descriptive, and narrative essays. Assessment included an oral mid-term exam (evaluating students' analysis of fiction and non-fiction texts) and a written end-term exam (consisting of a single essay completed within two hours).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

A multi-method approach to data collection was adopted, which comprised two types of interviews and document analysis across two distinct stages:

**Stage 1:** At the outset of the project, each student participated in a 90-minute semi-structured background interview. This interview aimed to establish profiles detailing their educational backgrounds and academic writing learning experiences, as well as their perceptions of TWF. It also provided valuable contextual insights into the IELTE course, including explicit and hidden curricula, pedagogical and learning practices, and linguistic values and biases. Moreover, specific information about the modules under investigation, such as core aims, content, teaching approaches, and feedback practices, was gathered. During this stage, student participants also submitted copies of the TWF they had received in their modules.

**Stage 2:** This stage comprised two key activities. First, an analysis of the TWF samples was conducted to identify key feedback types, including formative/summative, direct/indirect, comprehensive/focused feedback, and corrections/commentaries. The content of the feedback - its focus and delivery method - was also examined. These TWF samples served as written stimuli in the subsequent stimulated recall interview. Second, each student attended a 90-minute stimulated recall interview where they discussed their engagement with and responses to the TWF they had received. The focus was on exploring the tensions they had experienced as they interacted with their tutors' written feedback and on understanding how these tensions had influenced their responses.

The interviews were conducted in English, with occasional references to Spanish for cross-linguistic comparisons, as preferred by the participants. In total, the twelve student interviews generated 99,184 words.

The interview data underwent inductive analysis following a systematic and continuous process of data familiarisation, code generation, theme searching, reviewing, defining, labelling, and thematic categorisation (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as well as descriptive and interpretative phases (Patton 2002). Special attention was given to the students' experiences with feedback, which offered insights into the tensions they encountered and the impact of these tensions. Data collection and analysis were cyclical throughout the fieldwork, with each stage informed by the data analysis of preceding stages until the completion of data collection.

## Results

This section examines the multifaceted tensions which L2 writing students encountered in response to their tutors' written feedback as well as the adaptive and maladaptive strategies they employed to navigate and respond to this feedback. The following conventions are used to locate participant quotes within the data set: background interview (BI) and simulated recall interview (SRI).

### *Tensions Experienced by L2 Writing Students*

#### *A. Emotional tensions*

The emotional tensions which students experienced in relation to their tutors' written feedback were intense and varied and played a significant role in shaping their academic experiences. The anticipation of feedback, the stress of receiving negative comments, and the emotional tone of feedback all contributed to the heightened anxiety and stress they faced.

Most students reported intense nervousness while awaiting feedback on their essays and assignments. Carmen, for instance, described the dread she felt when opening emails with feedback as she feared the corrections they contained. This anxiety was intensified by the anticipation of negative comments, which made her question her writing choices and resulted in less effective subsequent drafts: "I worry so much about what they'll say that I end up changing things that were fine, just to avoid potential criticism" (BI).

Ambar experienced similar debilitating fears of making mistakes when writing draft essays or completing in-class assessments: "I'm terrified of making mistakes and I shouldn't be terrified" (BI). This fear affected her ability to write confidently and often led, she believed, to over-editing and producing incoherent essays. The pressure to avoid mistakes rather than express ideas clearly was a common theme among students. Carmen conveyed this feeling of nervousness and its impact on her performance: "The anxiety level on the course is terribly high. You get so nervous that you make terrible mistakes that you would never do at home" (BI). Mora, in turn, noted that harsh comments disheartened her, which impacted negatively on her ability to concentrate on future assignments: "I feel so deflated by negative feedback that it's hard to focus on the next task" (SRI).

The emotional toll of consistently receiving negative feedback was significant and often resulted in feelings of discouragement and hopelessness. Carmen mentioned that the absence of positive reinforcement led her to perceive herself as a "complete disaster at writing" (SRI), which impacted her confidence and engagement. Likewise, Ana mentioned that "when you are told all the negative things all the time, you get discouraged" (BI). Mora described how grades like 'Poor' or 'Poor+' without constructive comments made her question her ability to succeed: "after you get negative feedback a lot of times, you get frustrated and you just don't care what you did wrong. You just know that you are awful and you'll never improve" (BI). Lucia

expressed similar feelings: "I felt completely hopeless ... like there was no way I could improve" (SRI).

The tone of the feedback also played a critical role in how students perceived and responded to their tutors' comments. Overly critical remarks that seemed to question their competence rather than their performance left students feeling incapable of improvement. Carmen shared that such feedback made her feel as if she were "trapped in a vicious cycle" of never meeting expectations and "worth nothing as a human being, as a person" (BI). Mora highlighted how feedback which focused solely on mistakes without offering guidance diminished her motivation and resilience: "When they only point out what's wrong, I feel like giving up" (BI). Ambar described the emotional impact of negative feedback as "paralysing" and as "inhibit[ing] [her] participation in class" (SRI). While positive feedback helped build confidence and a sense of progress, its absence often overshadowed students' achievements and left them feeling disillusioned about their capabilities: "When all you hear is what's wrong, you start to believe you can't do anything right" (Carmen, BI).

### ***B. Interpersonal tensions***

The quality of the relationship between students and tutors, particularly in terms of accessibility and responsiveness, significantly influenced how students engaged with and responded to feedback. Positive experiences with approachable and responsive tutors were reported by several students as enhancing their motivation and confidence. For instance, Ambar described the support she received from one of her tutors: "She was always willing to provide feedback through email and stayed after class to chat about any questions. This support really boosted my confidence and motivation" (BI). Likewise, Carmen valued a tutor who offered detailed feedback and additional support: "The detailed feedback and extra support from [name of tutor] were invaluable. It was a huge difference compared to another tutor who hardly interacted with us beyond the basics" (BI). Such positive interactions encouraged students to actively seek feedback and improve their work.

Challenges arose, however, when students encountered indifferent and unresponsive tutors. Mora's frustration was evident when she described a tutor who ignored her emails seeking clarification on feedback: "I sent several emails asking for help with the feedback I received, but [name of tutor] never responded. It was really discouraging and made me feel like I was on my own" (SRI). This lack of responsiveness left her feeling isolated and unsure of how to address the issues raised by the tutor. Ana further emphasised the inconsistency in tutor responsiveness: "Some tutors were always around and super helpful, but others were hard to reach and ignored requests for feedback" (BI). This inconsistency created an unpredictable learning environment and made it difficult for students to know where to turn for help.

The role of tutor accessibility and responsiveness was crucial in shaping students' learning experiences. Approachable tutors fostered a supportive environment which

encouraged students to engage constructively with feedback. As Ambar noted, "Tutors who give quick and detailed feedback in different ways really boost you confidence and motivation to improve writing" (BI). In contrast, indifferent or unresponsive tutors left students feeling neglected and demotivated. Celia shared how this lack of support impacted her: "I had to really push to get feedback from a tutor who didn't want to give it. It made me uncomfortable asking for help because he seemed annoyed and acted like I should already know the answers" (BI). This lack of support triggered feelings of frustration and helplessness as students struggled to understand and implement feedback without adequate guidance.

Furthermore, the absence of additional support beyond written comments aroused feelings of isolation and uncertainty. Maria's experience with minimal feedback from her tutor highlights this issue: "[My tutor's] feedback was always short and never opened up chances for more discussion" (SRI). Similarly, Ambar faced challenges with reluctant tutors: "When I asked for clarification, [my tutor] seemed annoyed and didn't want to explain more. It made me feel like a burden and stopped me from asking for help again" (SRI). These experiences highlight the critical need for tutors to offer not only comprehensive written feedback but also engage in meaningful dialogue with students. Without this support, students are left feeling isolated and demotivated, which ultimately hinders their ability to comprehend detailed feedback, appreciate and apply constructive criticism effectively, and develop their academic writing literacy.

### ***C. Academic and Institutional Tensions*** ***Inconsistent feedback practices***

The inconsistency in feedback practices among tutors posed a significant challenge for students and impacted on their ability to understand and improve their work. For example, students experienced a wide range of feedback styles, from detailed and specific to vague and general. Maria appreciated tutors who wrote extensive comments on both strengths and weaknesses, which provided clear guidance on how to improve: "I liked that she pointed out both the good and the bad. It made it easier to see where I needed to focus my efforts" (SRI). On the other hand, Ana expressed frustration with vague feedback, such as comments with only a question mark or brief notes which lacked an indication of how to make corrections. This ambiguity in feedback made her feel "unsure of how to proceed" and "on [her] own in trying to improve [her] writing" (SRI). Mora, in turn, expressed that she "would get upset if something is crossed out and there's no explanation, so [she] prefer[red] there to be a lot of corrections but with the explanation" (BI).

The inconsistency in feedback styles left students uncertain about what was expected of them. Ambar noted that different tutors emphasised different aspects of writing, which caused confusion about priorities: "One tutor was all about grammar, and the other was more into content, so I never knew what to focus on" (BI). This lack of alignment hindered students' ability to systematically address their improvement

areas and build on their strengths. The diverse expectations from tutors created a fragmented learning experience, which made it difficult for students to develop a cohesive understanding of their strengths and weaknesses or of effective writing techniques.

Detailed feedback was generally perceived as more helpful because it provided a clear direction for improvement. Ambar shared that receiving detailed feedback on her essay structure and language use made it easier to make targeted revisions, which enhanced the overall quality of her writing: "The detailed comments on my structure and language were really helpful. They showed me exactly what I needed to fix" (SRI). Ana preferred detailed feedback because it provided clear and actionable guidance, and "made [her] feel more confident in [her] revisions" (SRI). Maria highlighted that detailed feedback helped her understand not only what was wrong but also how to address it, which was crucial for her learning process: "Knowing exactly what to change and how to do it made revising far easier" (BI). However, the volume of comments could sometimes be overwhelming, as Mora described feeling demotivated when her essay was returned with extensive corrections, which made her feel that her work was fundamentally flawed: "When I got my essay back covered in red ink, it felt like my beautiful work had been torn apart ... it's really frustrating getting your essay with lots of comments ... it makes you feel discouraged" (BI). This resulted in a loss of confidence in her writing abilities.

The challenge for tutors, as suggested by students' comments, was to balance thoroughness with sensitivity to students' emotional responses. Vague feedback, while less overwhelming, often left students confused about how to improve. Maria recounted receiving comments such as "awkward phrasing" (BI) without further explanation, which did not provide sufficient guidance on what was wrong or how to correct it. Ana mentioned that "concise comments made [her] feel unsure about what to focus on" (BI), which caused uncertainty about whether her changes were adequate. Such brief feedback undermined students' confidence in their ability to make meaningful improvements.

The lack of alignment for providing feedback created confusion and frustration among students. Ana noted that feedback practices varied so much that "it was difficult to know what to expect from different tutors" (BI), which led to inconsistent preparation and responses to feedback. This unpredictability in feedback made it challenging for students to develop a consistent strategy for improvement. Maria highlighted that the lack of consistency often resulted in feedback that was either overly critical or too lenient, which "made it hard to assess their writings and spot areas needing improvement" (BI). Moreover, students experienced varied expectations and grading standards from tutors. For example, Carmen recalled how she had received high marks from one tutor for a particular style of writing, only to be criticised by another tutor for the same style in a subsequent assignment: "It was confusing to get high marks from one tutor and then be told my style was wrong by another" (BI). This

misalignment in feedback not only affected students' academic performance but also their motivation to engage with feedback and their writing assignments.

### ***Unrealistic expectations***

The pressure to conform to native-speaker standards in writing was a common source of stress. Students unanimously noted instances where feedback highlighted their deviations from native-speaker norms, which amplified their anxiety and added to their sense of inadequacy. They recalled being repeatedly told that certain phrases they used were "awkward" because they were not typically used by native speakers, even though they were grammatically correct (e.g., "I was often told my phrases were awkward simply because they weren't native-like," Maria, BI). Ana argued that "you get that word so many times that you really don't know how to correct what you wrote because it's not a grammatical or language problem, it's just 'awkward'" (SRI). This constant comparison to native-speaker norms made them feel that their efforts were never sufficient, regardless of how much they improved. Ambar, for example, argued that the relentless focus on native-speaker standards and minor grammar details, rather than content or depth of analysis, "made [her] feel like [she] would never be good enough" (SRI) and resulted in self-doubt and discouragement from participating actively in classes.

The unrealistic expectations also had broader implications for students' academic trajectories. Ana pointed out that such demanding goals contributed to high dropout rates, as students struggled to meet the standards and often had to retake L2 writing modules multiple times ("The high expectations caused a lot of students to drop out because they couldn't keep up," BI). This pressure resulted in many students feeling demotivated and discouraged, which ultimately affected their academic progress and retention rates.

Despite these challenges, some students felt reassured by feedback that recognised their progress and efforts rather than focusing on achieving native-like standards. Knowing what they were doing well helped them maintain their confidence and encouraged them to keep improving. Ambar, for instance, appreciated a tutor who provided positive reinforcement alongside constructive criticism and corrective advice, which helped her feel more motivated and capable of improving her writing ("Feedback on strengths together with constructive critical comments and suggestions made a huge difference in my motivation," SRI). This balanced approach to feedback was crucial in helping students feel valued and capable of making meaningful progress. Moreover, realistic feedback that acknowledged the challenges faced by non-native speakers while offering specific suggestions for improvement was seen as more effective and encouraging.

## ***Student Responses to Feedback***

### ***A. Adaptive responses***

Students demonstrated resilience and commitment to improvement through various adaptive strategies in response to the feedback they received. Despite challenges posed by inconsistent, negative, and sometimes vague feedback, their approaches highlight the importance of engaging proactively, adapting to different feedback styles, and seeking peer support to enhance their learning experience.

Students often took proactive measures to seek additional feedback and clarification, which reflected their determination to understand and improve their work. For instance, Carmen persistently sought answers from her tutor by asking the same question multiple times across different classes until she received a satisfactory response: "I asked him five times the same question from different classes until he had to answer it" (BI). She explained that she had "been able to get feedback from teachers who are absolutely not willing to give any feedback" and added that it was "either that or not passing the exam" (BI). This persistence shows her dedication to grasp the feedback and enhance her work quality. Similarly, Mora, despite her nervousness, approached tutors for clarification on unclear feedback: "I was really nervous, but I went ahead and asked [my tutors] to explain the comments I didn't understand" (BI). Her proactive behaviour not only helped her correct her mistakes more effectively but also gradually improved her confidence over time.

Students also adapted to varying feedback styles by focusing on actionable items and seeking peer support. Ambar explained that when tutor feedback was vague, she would consult more experienced peers: "We usually compare our writings or talk between classes about our doubts. But after talking to a peer, I would always confirm with a teacher" (BI). Celia noted: "I share feedback with my study group ... They help me understand what [tutors] meant and I can see things from a different angle" (BI). This collaborative effort both improved their work, fostered a sense of community and mutual support, and made the feedback process less isolating and more supportive. Celia sought help from student teaching assistants: "Sometimes it is easier to approach teaching assistants as they are still students and understand your problems" (BI). Maria developed a personal strategy to handle detailed feedback by identifying specific, actionable points and prioritising those in her revisions: "Once I knew what to fix and how to go about it, working on the second draft became more focused and a lot simpler" (SRI). This method allowed her to manage the overwhelming number of corrections and improve her writing incrementally.

### ***B. Maladaptive responses***

In contrast to adaptive strategies, some students developed maladaptive responses to feedback, which potentially hindered their academic progress and emotional well-being. These maladaptive responses included avoiding specific tutors or feedback sessions, ignoring feedback, and engaging with feedback selectively, all of which were driven by the need to protect their self-esteem and mental health.

Some students refrained from engaging with specific tutors or attending these tutors' feedback sessions due to previous negative experiences. For example, Maria avoided submitting work to a particular teacher known for publicly criticising students' mistakes: "My affective filter was so high that I could not get anything from there. And it was terrible because he made the other students make comments on my essay. So it was not only the teacher insulting me but also the other students" (BI). This avoidance stemmed from a desire to protect her self-esteem and avoid further negative experiences, which in turn deprived her of potentially valuable feedback.

Students also reported ignoring feedback to protect their mental health. Ambar shared that after receiving overly critical feedback, she felt so discouraged that she chose not to read further comments to prevent feeling worse: "Sometimes the feedback was so harsh that I just couldn't bring myself to read the rest of it. I didn't want to feel even more discouraged" (BI). This selective ignorance was a defensive strategy to maintain some level of emotional well-being in the face of the negative feedback received. Likewise, Mora described how the sheer volume of corrections and negative remarks on her essays made her feel overwhelmed, which motivated her to set aside the feedback and not engage with it: "I saw so many corrections that it felt like my entire essay was wrong. It was too much to handle, so I just put it aside and didn't look at it again" (BI). This response indicates a breakdown in the feedback process, wherein the student felt unable to process and benefit from the comments provided.

Students often preferred feedback from tutors they perceived as more supportive and less intimidating. For example, Ana highlighted that she felt more comfortable seeking feedback from a tutor known for balancing criticism with positive reinforcement: "I always went to [name of tutor], who was more supportive. She made the feedback sessions less stressful and more productive" (BI). This selective engagement contributed to her feeling more encouraged and less anxious about receiving feedback. Similarly, Ambar chose to approach tutors who provided clear, constructive feedback over those who were vague or excessively critical: "I stick with tutors who give clear and helpful advice. The super critical or harsh ones just leave me feeling lost" (BI). This preference indicates that students sought environments where feedback was delivered in a manner that fostered improvement without causing undue stress.

Some students reported selectively engaging with feedback by focusing on comments they found constructive and disregarding those they deemed unhelpful. Maria shared that she prioritised feedback that offered specific suggestions for improvement while ignoring vague or exceedingly critical remarks: "I focused on the feedback that told me exactly what needs changing. The vague comments, I just ignored them because they didn't help me at all" (SRI). This selective approach helped her make tangible improvements while minimising the emotional impact of negative feedback. Ambar described how she would implement actionable items from feedback but would mentally dismiss critical comments that did not provide clear guidance: "When the feedback was just harsh with no real guidance, I simply ignored it. But if there were

clear things I could work on, I focused on those" (BI). This selective engagement allowed students to benefit from the feedback process without becoming demoralised by unconstructive criticism.

## Discussion

The study revealed several dimensions of tensions – emotional, interpersonal, academic and institutional - that L2 writing students experienced in response to TWF. In the emotional dimension, students reported intense nervousness and dread while awaiting feedback, and strong feelings of anticipation and anxiety. Consistently negative feedback led to feelings of discouragement and hopelessness, which significantly impacted their motivation and self-esteem. Overly critical remarks further affected their perceived competence and amplified these negative emotions. In the interpersonal dimension, the accessibility and responsiveness of tutors played a crucial role in shaping student experiences. Positive interactions with approachable tutors boosted students' confidence and motivation, while unresponsive tutors left them feeling isolated and demotivated. Students also sought peer support and engaged in collaborative learning to interpret and implement feedback. In the academic and institutional dimensions, students highlighted inconsistencies in feedback styles among tutors, which often resulted in confusion and difficulty in understanding expectations. Misalignment between formative and summative feedback caused frustration and hindered their ability to make meaningful improvements. Unrealistic expectations, such as the pressure to conform to native-speaker standards, resulted in significant stress and a sense of inadequacy. Students also reported that feedback perceived as untimely or irrelevant was often disregarded, and delayed feedback contributed to feelings of frustration and helplessness. These tensions have been collectively addressed by a number of previous studies, as discussed in the literature review, but few studies have paid particularised attention to students' negative experiences with TWF, with Sanchez and Dunworth (2015) in postgraduate programmes and Yu et al. (2021) in L2 writing education being notable exceptions.

The study also identified a range of adaptive and maladaptive strategies that students adopted in response to the tensions they experienced with TWF. Among the adaptive strategies, students demonstrated proactive engagement with feedback by actively seeking clarification and additional input from tutors to enhance their understanding and improve their work. They also employed focused and incremental revisions, and developed methods to manage detailed feedback by identifying specific actionable points and prioritising these in their revisions. On the other hand, the maladaptive strategies observed included avoidance of feedback and specific tutors. Some students chose to disengage from particular tutors or feedback sessions due to prior negative experiences. Moreover, selective engagement with feedback was common; students often focused on constructive comments while disregarding vague or overly critical remarks. This selective engagement sometimes extended to completely ignoring feedback to protect their mental health and self-esteem. These findings illustrate students' agentic and strategic engagement with tutor feedback and align with those

within (e.g., Han, 2017; Han & Hyland, 2019) and beyond (e.g., Rae & Cochrane, 2008; Sanchez & Dunworth, 2015) L2 writing education.

The analysis also revealed five key interrelated characteristics - dynamic, context-dependent, idiosyncratic, cumulative, and interconnected - that shape the complex interaction between tensions and L2 student responses to TWF, and this, I believe, is a particularly valuable contribution of this study.

***Dynamic:*** The interaction between tensions and student responses is not static; it evolves over time as students encounter different types of feedback and their perceptions and emotions change. This dynamic nature means that a student's response to feedback can shift from adaptive to maladaptive and vice versa, depending on various factors such as the context, type of feedback, and the student's emotional state. Emotional responses, such as anxiety or motivation, can evolve based on their experiences with different types of feedback (Mahfoodh, 2017) and fluctuate in the revision process (Han & Hyland, 2019). Feedback can dynamically influence students' motivation and engagement levels, where constructive feedback can foster positive change while feedback that is perceived as negative or irrelevant may result in disengagement or discouragement (Dowden et al., 2013; Li & Curdt-Christiansen, 2020; Mahfoodh, 2017; Robinson et al., 2013). For instance, Carmen initially felt intense anxiety and dread while awaiting feedback, which motivated her to over-edit to avoid potential criticism (maladaptive). This maladaptive response resulted in incoherent essays as she second-guessed her decisions. Over time, Carmen's strategy evolved as she persistently sought clarification from her tutors (adaptive). This shift towards proactive engagement allowed her to increase her understanding of tutors' feedback and make meaningful improvements in her writing.

***Context-dependent:*** Students' responses to feedback tensions are influenced by specific contexts, including the tutor-student relationship, perceived fairness of feedback, and alignment with academic goals. Strong tutor-student relationships enhance feedback effectiveness and engagement, with supportive tutors leading to better student responses (Carless, 2020; Dowden et al., 2013). In contrast, misunderstandings (Sanchez & Dunworth, 2015) and delayed feedback (Hyland, 2013) can negatively impact how feedback is received and acted upon. Clear, comprehensive feedback reduces misinterpretations and improves student responses (Dawson et al., 2019; Hadjieconomou & Tombs, 2021; Henderson et al., 2021). The emotional tone of feedback is also crucial; positive language promotes acceptance and constructive engagement, while harsh feedback leads to frustration and disengagement (Dawson et al., 2019; Dunworth & Sanchez, 2016; Hadjieconomou & Tombs, 2021). For example, Ambar experienced a significant boost in confidence and motivation when interacting with a supportive tutor who provided detailed feedback and was readily available for follow-up questions. This positive relationship encouraged her to engage deeply with the feedback (adaptive). In contrast, Mora felt isolated and demotivated when another tutor ignored her emails seeking clarification. This lack of responsiveness led Mora to

feel unsupported, resulting in a reluctance to engage with the feedback and a sense of helplessness (maladaptive).

***Idiosyncratic:*** Students respond to similar tensions in unique ways based on their own personal backgrounds, prior experiences, learning styles, and emotional resilience. Students' preferences for and responses to feedback can vary significantly based on their academic level, experience, and personal characteristics, with different students having different needs and expectations from feedback (Han, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2021). Prior experiences with feedback, whether positive or negative, shape how students perceive and respond to new feedback, with individual differences in emotional resilience and self-efficacy playing a critical role (Han, 2017). Providing personalised feedback that considers individual student needs and contexts is crucial, as it can significantly influence how feedback is received and acted upon (Dawson et al., 2019; Hadjieconomou & Tombs, 2021). For example, despite facing vague feedback, Celia took the initiative to consult her peers and teaching assistants to enhance her understanding. This collaborative effort helped her decode the feedback and improve her work (adaptive). On the other hand, Maria avoided submitting work to a particular tutor known for publicly criticising students' mistakes. This avoidance was driven by a desire to protect her self-esteem, which prevented her from receiving potentially valuable feedback (maladaptive).

***Cumulative:*** The accumulation of feedback experiences can intensify the effects of tensions and reinforce behaviours over time. Consistently negative feedback without constructive suggestions can lead to feelings of helplessness and disengagement, as students may start to feel that improvement is impossible (Busse, 2013). Over time, these negative experiences can reinforce maladaptive behaviours, such as avoiding feedback or ignoring constructive comments (Li & Curdt-Christiansen, 2020). In contrast, positive reinforcement and supportive feedback can enhance student engagement and motivation (Dawson et al., 2019; Dunworth & Sanchez, 2016). Repeated positive experiences can build confidence and result in more adaptive behaviours, such as proactive engagement with feedback. For example, Ana experienced cumulative negative impacts from solely critical feedback, leading to discouragement and disengagement (maladaptive). In contrast, Carmen's persistent efforts to seek clarification gradually paid off. Despite initial negative experiences, her continuous proactive engagement led to a better understanding of feedback, improved revisions, and increased confidence (adaptive).

***Interconnected:*** Tensions in one dimension can influence or heighten tensions in another, highlighting the complex and interrelated nature of feedback experiences. Inconsistent feedback practices among tutors can create confusion and anxiety, and impact students' ability to understand and act on feedback (Rand, 2017; Sanchez & Dunworth, 2015). This inconsistency can cause academic tension that further intensifies emotional distress. Misalignment between formative and summative feedback can cause frustration and demotivation, and affect students' academic

performance and emotional well-being (Sanchez & Dunworth, 2015). Conflicting messages increase academic tension and heighten emotional stress, while a lack of tutor accessibility and responsiveness can arouse feelings of isolation and hopelessness, impacting on both interpersonal and emotional dimensions (Hyland, 2013). For example, the inconsistency in feedback practices among tutors (academic tension) caused confusion and heightened anxiety (emotional tension) for Ana. She struggled to understand varying expectations, which affected her ability to focus on improvements. Similarly, Mora's experience with an unresponsive tutor (interpersonal tension) intensified her feelings of isolation and hopelessness (emotional tension), which made it difficult for her to stay motivated and engaged with her coursework.

## Conclusion

This study advances the theoretical and practical understanding of feedback within and beyond L2 education by highlighting the interplay between emotional, interpersonal, academic, and institutional dimensions, thereby providing insights into how students experience and respond to TWF. It offers a framework for educators to improve feedback practices by addressing inconsistencies, enhancing tutor accessibility and responsiveness, and fostering supportive environments. The findings also emphasise the importance of developing feedback literacy among educators and students, advocating for clear, specific, timely, meaningful, and constructive feedback delivered through a dialogue-oriented approach. By viewing feedback as a dynamic, context-dependent, idiosyncratic, cumulative, and interconnected process, educators can mitigate negative impacts, promote continuous improvement, and encourage adaptive rather than maladaptive strategies. Ultimately, this research highlights the transformative potential of feedback to inspire change, foster growth, and empower learners to achieve their academic goals.

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## Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

## Funding

Not applicable.

## Ethics Declarations

## Competing Interests

No, there are no conflicting interests.

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