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Beyond corrective feedback: A learner-centred approach to GenAI feedback for EAL academic writing

Shaghayegh Hosseini, Michael Henderson, Ekaterina Tour, Joanne Blannin
Monash University

Students in higher education are increasingly using Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools in feedback for academic writing. This is important for English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners for whom immediate and accessible support in revising their writing, including its linguistic, rhetorical, and cultural dimensions, is particularly valuable. However, GenAI feedback cannot be assumed to be learner-centred simply because it is available and interactive, or that it appears to be fluent. This conceptual paper uses a learner-centred feedback framework, which foregrounds enabling sensemaking, focusing on future impact, and supporting agency, to examine GenAI feedback for EAL academic writing. It argues that GenAI feedback should be understood as a feedback process, the value of which depends on whether it enables EAL learners' sensemaking, supports future writing development, and sustains learners' agency in deciding how to use GenAI-generated feedback information. The paper contributes a learner-centred conceptualisation of GenAI feedback for EAL academic writers and offers practical considerations for designing feedback activities that support future impact, sensemaking, and agency.

Keywords: EAL learners, learner-centred feedback, generative artificial intelligence, academic writing, higher education

Introduction

Students in higher education are increasingly using Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) tools in feedback processes for academic writing. These tools might offer immediate, accessible, and interactive feedback opportunities (Luo et al., 2025). However, despite being available, interactive, and fluent, GenAI feedback cannot be assumed to be beneficial or learner-centred. This issue is especially important for English as an Additional Language (EAL) academic writing. In higher education, EAL learners require feedback on different dimensions of writing beyond language. Such aspects might include meaning, argument, academic conventions, disciplinary expectations, and writer identity (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). This means that learner-centred feedback for EAL academic writing needs to be understood beyond correction or text improvement alone.

This paper brings learner-centred feedback literature into conversation with EAL academic writing feedback to consider what learner-centred feedback requires for EAL learners, and what this means for the use of GenAI in feedback. It uses a learner-centred feedback framework as a conceptual foundation (Ryan et al., 2023). The paper addresses the following question: How can learner-centred feedback practices inform GenAI feedback in EAL academic writing? The contribution of the paper is a set of learner-centred considerations for evaluating when and how GenAI feedback can support EAL academic writers' learning beyond immediate text revision.

Learner-centred feedback in higher education

Learner-centred feedback shifts the focus from the delivery of feedback information to the process of feedback and the conditions under which learners can understand and use that information for learning (Henderson et al., 2019a). In earlier transmission-focused views (e.g., Hattie & Timperley, 2007), feedback was mainly understood as information provided to learners about their performance. Contemporary feedback research, however, conceptualises feedback as a process where learners make sense of information from various sources and use it to improve their work or learning strategies (Carless & Boud, 2018; Henderson et al., 2019b; Winstone & Carless, 2019). From this process-oriented perspective, feedback information alone does

not necessarily lead to learning, and learners need opportunities to interpret that information, judge its relevance, and make decisions on whether or how to take action.

Ryan et al.'s (2023) learner-centred feedback framework is helpful for this paper as it identifies principles for designing feedback information that supports learners' active engagement. This framework foregrounds three principles of learner-centred feedback: focusing on future impact, enabling sensemaking, and supporting agency (Ryan et al., 2023). In this framework, focusing on future impact refers to feedback that supports improvement beyond the immediate task, including future tasks, learning outcomes, and learning strategies. Enabling sensemaking refers to supporting learners to understand the meaning, purpose, and relevance of feedback information, and, finally, supporting agency refers to positioning learners as active participants who can seek clarification, engage in dialogue, make decisions, and take action in the feedback process (Ryan et al., 2023).

EAL academic writing feedback: going beyond corrective feedback

EAL academic writing feedback should not be understood only as corrective information about language errors (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). Like all academic writers, EAL learners engage with feedback on content, structure, argument, and disciplinary expectations. However, they are also writing in an additional language while navigating academic norms, genre expectations, institutional practices, and questions of voice and identity, some of which may be unfamiliar or valued differently across educational contexts (Han & Hyland, 2019; Hyland & Hyland, 2019). Therefore, EAL learners' engagement with feedback may involve interpreting how feedback relates to academic expectations and intended meaning, not only identifying surface-level revisions.

At the same time, EAL learners should not be positioned only in terms of difficulty or deficit. Translanguaging perspectives foreground how multilingual learners can draw on their linguistic and semiotic repertoires to make meaning, interpret texts, and support learning (Li, 2018). Regarding higher education, this also challenges English-only orientations to academic communication and knowledge-making (Chang, 2019). In writing and feedback contexts, EAL learners may draw on multiple languages and semiotic resources as they interpret feedback, consider alternative revisions, and make decisions about meaning, stance, and voice (Sun, 2026). This perspective helps frame EAL learners as active meaning-makers rather than passive recipients of corrective input.

Second-language writing feedback research also emphasises that feedback is situated, shaped, and negotiated within wider sociocultural contexts, modes of delivery, participant interactions, and learners' reception of feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). From this perspective, in addition to deciding whether feedback improves accuracy or fluency, EAL learners' engagement with feedback may also involve making decisions on whether feedback information preserves intended meaning, supports an appropriate stance, and aligns with academic expectations. Such decisions are important for learner-centred feedback because learners interpret feedback in relation to what they perceive as valuable, useful, credible, and meaningful (Carless & Boud, 2018).

Rethinking learner-centred feedback for EAL academic writing

Bringing learner-centred feedback together with EAL academic writing feedback raises questions about whether general higher education feedback principles operate in the same way for all learners. Ryan et al.'s (2023) principles of future impact, sensemaking, and agency remain useful, but applying them to EAL academic writing requires a consideration of learners' linguistic, rhetorical, cultural, and institutional contexts (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). This section considers what each principle entails in the context of EAL academic writing.

Focusing on future impact

In Ryan et al.'s (2023) learner-centred feedback framework, focusing on future impact is the main purpose of learner-centred feedback and refers to the extent to which feedback supports improvement beyond the immediate task. Feedback information should support learners to improve similar future tasks, achieve learning outcomes, and develop learning skills, processes, or strategies (Ryan et al., 2023). For EAL academic writers, future impact needs to be understood beyond immediate correction or text polishing. Feedback needs

to support learners to develop transferable knowledge about academic writing by helping them notice language patterns, understand why particular revisions are effective, reflect on how language choices affect clarity, meaning, stance, and argument, and apply similar strategies in subsequent work. From a translanguaging perspective, this also involves supporting learners to draw on their linguistic and semiotic repertoires to make sense of feedback and make informed decisions about language and meaning in context (Li, 2018; Sun, 2026).

Enabling sensemaking

Sensemaking refers to learners' capacity to understand the meaning and purpose of feedback information. This is not always straightforward. A study of teacher intent and student sensemaking found that exact alignment between teacher intention and student interpretation occurred only 37% of the time, and that sensemaking was limited when comments were vague, very brief, overloaded with multiple intentions, or softened in ways that obscured critique (Ryan et al., 2024).

This is important for EAL academic writing feedback because learners may need to interpret not only what feedback says, but also why it matters for their writing. For EAL learners, sensemaking may involve interpreting whether feedback concerns language accuracy, vocabulary, structure, argument, academic convention, assessment criteria, or disciplinary expectation. Therefore, feedback may need to make explicit the linguistic, rhetorical, cultural, or disciplinary conventions that are not immediately apparent to EAL writers (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). It may also need to invite learners to compare these conventions with those from their own languages, prior educational experiences, and writing practices. From a translanguaging perspective, this comparison can support learners in drawing on their linguistic and semiotic repertoires as resources for sensemaking (Li, 2018). Learners might then be better positioned to decide whether a suggestion improves their writing, preserves their intended meaning, and fits the writing context (Han & Hyland, 2019). Sensemaking in EAL academic writing feedback is therefore more than understanding the surface meaning of comments; it also involves judging their purpose, relevance, accuracy, and contextual fit.

Supporting agency

Supporting agency according to the learner-centred feedback framework involves encouraging learners to take an active role through dialogue, further study, seeking help, and independent decision-making (Ryan et al., 2023). In EAL academic writing feedback, agency also involves maintaining ownership of meaning, voice, and textual decisions. Learners need to decide how to use feedback while preserving their intended argument and working within academic conventions and institutional expectations.

This is aligned with sociocultural perspectives on second-language writing feedback, which position learners as active participants in interpreting and using feedback rather than as passive recipients of correction (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). It also aligns with translanguaging perspectives, which foreground multilingual learners' capacity to draw on their linguistic and semiotic repertoires when negotiating meaning, norms, and rhetorical choices (Li, 2018; Sun, 2026). However, EAL learners may not always be familiar or comfortable with exercising agency in relation to feedback, especially if their prior educational experiences have positioned feedback as something to accept or implement. A learner-centred approach therefore needs to explicitly invite agency and create opportunities for learners to make informed decisions. In practice, this could include offering revision options, explaining the implications of different choices, and encouraging learners to justify their decisions and actions in the feedback process; for example, how and why they use, adapt, or reject feedback information.

What does this mean for GenAI feedback?

Once learner-centred feedback is considered in regard to EAL academic writing, the use of GenAI in feedback can be examined more critically. In this paper, GenAI feedback refers to the broader process in which learners seek, interpret, judge, and respond to the comments, explanations, and feedback generated by GenAI tools. These tools may offer immediate, accessible, and interactive feedback opportunities including follow-up questions, clarifications, and redirection of feedback focus (Luo et al., 2025). However, the availability or

perceived fluency of GenAI-generated feedback information does not necessarily mean it is learner-centred feedback.

In terms of future impact, GenAI feedback could support EAL learners if it were to help them gain specific skills, such as understanding revision choices or developing transferable writing strategies. However, GenAI may also limit future impact if learners use it only to make their written text more fluent or academic without actually developing their writing skills. In relation to the sensemaking principle of learner-centred feedback, GenAI feedback may create opportunities for clarification and explanation, but GenAI feedback comments may also appear clear, fluent, and authoritative even when the feedback's relevance to the learner's intended meaning, task, or academic context is not always clear. In relation to agency, using GenAI in the feedback process may be seen to give learners more control over when they seek feedback, what they ask about, and whether they ask follow-up questions; however, it may also constrain learners' agency if they become dependent on its suggestions or treat GenAI's feedback information as authoritative. This is particularly significant for learners navigating new linguistic and cultural contexts, who may find it difficult to judge the credibility and appropriateness of GenAI outputs (Creely & Henderson, 2025). Research on GenAI and digital feedback suggests that learners may need support to evaluate feedback critically, avoid superficial engagement, and make selective use of AI-generated suggestions (Chen et al., 2026; Sun, 2026; Zhan & Yan, 2025).

This emphasis on practice is in line with recent work on AI-generated feedback, which shows that the provision of feedback comments is only one part of the challenge; students also need support to enact them through interpretation, judgement, and action (Alsaiari et al., 2026). The learner-centred principles discussed in this paper can therefore be translated into practical activities for EAL academic writing. To support future impact, educators might ask students to use GenAI feedback to go beyond revising the current text by identifying transferable writing strategies such as strengthening topic sentences, clarifying their arguments, or connecting evidence to claims. To support sensemaking, students might compare GenAI feedback suggestions with assessment criteria or ask follow-up questions about why a suggested revision improves clarity or argument. They could also evaluate whether the suggestions change their intended meaning. Finally, to support agency, students could keep a short revision rationale explaining which GenAI suggestions they accepted, adapted, or rejected, and why. These examples suggest that the value of GenAI feedback depends on how students are supported to interpret feedback information, connect it to future writing, and make informed decisions about its use.

The implication is that GenAI feedback for EAL academic writing should not be judged only by whether it is immediate, detailed, fluent, or interactive. Instead, it should be judged by whether it supports the learner-centred conditions previously identified in this paper: future writing development, meaningful sensemaking, and learner agency.

Implications and concluding remarks

Bringing learner-centred feedback principles into GenAI feedback for EAL academic writing has implications for how educators and institutions support learners' engagement with GenAI feedback. Learners need support to use GenAI feedback developmentally, interpretively, and agentically. For educators, this means designing GenAI feedback activities that require students to engage with feedback information; for example, question, compare, justify, and selectively use it instead of simply applying the suggestions to the immediate text. For EAL academic writers, such practices can support future impact, sensemaking, and agency by helping them treat GenAI feedback comments as information for judgement instead of automatically reliable advice.

A key limitation of this paper is that the proposed conceptualisation, while grounded in established constructs from learner-centred feedback and EAL writing research, has not yet been examined empirically. Future research should investigate how EAL learners engage with GenAI feedback in authentic higher education writing contexts, and whether and how this engagement supports future impact, sensemaking, and agency. This could involve a qualitative study combining screen recordings, stimulated recall interviews, draft analysis, and learner reflections to examine learners' interpretations, judgements, and actions across the feedback process.

This paper has argued that GenAI feedback for EAL academic writing needs to be understood, and therefore used, as more than automated correction or accessible writing support. By bringing Ryan et al.'s learner-centred feedback principles together with EAL academic writing feedback, the paper has shown that the value of GenAI feedback depends on whether it supports EAL learners' future writing development, enables sensemaking, and sustains agency. The paper contributes a learner-centred conceptualisation of GenAI feedback that foregrounds learners' active role in this feedback process. A learner-centred approach to GenAI feedback, therefore, requires moving beyond corrective feedback towards practices that support EAL learners to interpret, evaluate, justify, and selectively act on feedback in ways that develop their future writing.

Ethics statement

As the present paper reports no empirical participant data, ethics approval was not required.

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