Key capabilities for promoting student feedback literacy

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Feedback literacy in higher education has come as a reaction to the ineffective focus on teacher’s delivery of feedback and its passive reception by students rather than on students’ active participation in receiving feedback and constructing it (Nicol & Macfarlane-dick, 2006; Nicol, 2019). Therefore, the aim of this theoretical paper is to identify students’ capabilities of feedback literacy. To meet this objective, three questions are targeted: 1) How is feedback literacy defined? 2) How is it characterized? 3) What are its practical dimensions from student’s perspective? Based on the analysis of theoretical and empirical studies retrieved via reliable databases, a thorough description of the existing definitions of feedback literacy and its frameworks (Carless & Boud, 2018; Carless & Winstone, 2020; Molloy, Boud, & Henderson, 2020; Sutton, 2012) can be highlighted. Four dimensions of student feedback literacy and their adaptation to the writing context are also targeted: appreciating feedback, making evaluative judgments, managing affect, and acting upon feedback (Carless & Boud, 2018). This paper is relevant because it addresses the shift from feedback as a one-way process of transmitting information from instructors to feedback as a process of using diverse communication channels, through which teachers and students collaborate to improve learning outcomes.

KEYWORDS

capabilities, feedback, feedback literacy, higher education, student, writing

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INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that feedback is an essential key element in the teaching and learning process. Feedback has also been acknowledged to have the potential in improving learners’ abilities to assess their own work and that of others (Carless & Boud, 2018; Tai, Ajjawi, Boud, Dawson, & Panadero, 2018) throughout the learning process. However, despite the positive perception of the value of feedback, there is little room for the use of it effectively in the learning process, especially in EFL/ESL writing at the university level. This could be the result of the dominant view of feedback as being the job of the teacher as a key provider of feedback (Malecka, Boud, & Carless, 2020) rather than being a common shared responsibility between the teacher and the student. Most of the time, the teacher is the one who provides comments to students either by addressing the linguistic parts or by providing some information related to the content of the text (Henderson et al., 2019). Even though there are some scholars who supported this approach, especially its effectiveness in correcting students’ errors, still it lacks efficiency in encouraging students to deal with their own mistakes and to act on feedback information provided by the teacher as well as peers in an active way through engaging themselves in it as a way to develop their self-regulation and self-editing strategies (Henderson et al., 2019).

Therefore, investigating feedback and its effectiveness on the learning and teaching process of writing has become a priority not only to improve learners’ writing and the way they progress in learning, but also to develop teachers’ approach in responding to learners and in encouraging them to be active participants in feedback processes.

Recently, feedback literacy has emerged as a new area within feedback literature, mostly in the context of higher education, which requires attention from researchers to conduct empirical studies on the extent to which teachers and learners are feedback literate. Exploring feedback literacy of students could contribute to the heated debate on the effectiveness of written feedback on the development of students’ writing. Some researchers (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Sia & Cheung, 2017) have confirmed the role of this feedback in developing students’ writing at the linguistic and the micro level of writing (grammar, vocabulary, syntax), while others (Hyland, 2013; Vattøy & Smith, 2019) argued that the usefulness of this written feedback resides on its extent to contribute to the development of students’ cognitive and metacognitive processes of writing as well as their macro aspects of writing (developing students’ ideas, rhetorical development, and areas of revision including coherence/cohesion, content, paragraphing, purpose, lexical choice, and developmental aspects of a text). Exploring feedback literacy would also provide a response to the questions of Esterhazy and Damșa (2019) when they identified some new avenues for future research. A few examples of these questions revolved around teachers’ role in the interactional process of making sense of feedback comments, whether teachers are open to dialogue rather than dominating the meaning-making process or whether they are authoritative knowledge sources or equal partners in the students’ interactional meaning-making. Other questions also targeted the position of students in their interaction with the teacher and the extent to which they are proactive in inquiring about new meanings.

Since feedback literacy is a new concept and a promising area of research, exploring it would contribute to the lack of empirical scientific studies in this field. Therefore, this theoretical paper aims to identify the capabilities of feedback literacy and how it can be adapted in students’ engagement with written feedback in writing.
For the structural organization, this paper first defines the concept of feedback literacy. Second, it elaborates on the characteristics of the existing frameworks describing feedback literacy. Finally, the paper focuses on describing in detail the major practical dimensions of student feedback literacy and the extent to which they can be adapted in the engagement with written feedback in writing.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

To meet the objective of this theoretical paper, three questions are targeted:

1. How is feedback literacy defined?
2. How is it characterized?
3. What are its practical dimensions from students’ perspective, especially their engagement with written feedback in writing?

To answer these research questions, this research paper defines the concept of feedback literacy and presents its emerging frameworks which are student-oriented (Carless & Boud, 2018; Molloy et al., 2020; Sutton, 2012). These frameworks are distinguished in the literature from the framework of teacher feedback literacy (Carless & Winstone, 2020) which does not overtly address teachers’ capabilities, but rather justifies the mutual interplay between teachers and students in developing the capabilities of feedback literacy. Based on the frameworks, the second research question can be answered by describing briefly the most essential characteristics of feedback literacy and the third research question can also be answered based on four practical dimensions derived from Carless and Boud’s (2018) framework of student feedback literacy. Even though these dimensions are discussed separately for the purpose of giving detailed information, they have rather a mutual influence and complement each other.

**METHODS**

This review has two sections: the first section deals with the first two research questions based on the descriptive review of a total number of 11 English peer-reviewed research articles related to feedback literacy and the characteristics of its frameworks. The reason for selecting these articles is not only due to their frequent citation and detailed information they provide to define feedback literacy concerning the first research question, but also due to their focus on the four frameworks of feedback literacy to answer the second research question. The second section targets the third research question regarding the practical dimensions of students’ feedback literacy and their engagement with written feedback in writing. As an answer to this question, Google Scholar, EBSCO, and Scopus were used. The resources from these databases were reviewed by going through the screening of title, abstract, and keywords; the analysis of the full text, and the selection of appropriate English articles that meet the objective of the third research question. After removing conference proceedings, and excluding resources that were not published in English, not peer-reviewed, and not focused on student feedback literacy and engagement with feedback in writing, two books (Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981/1992; Falchikov, 2005), three chapters in edited books (Boud, Dawson, Tai, & Ajjawi, 2018; Holliway &
McCutchen, 2004; Panadero, 2016) and 25 peer-reviewed journal articles, published between 2012 and 2020, were considered for inclusion eligibility criteria because they cast light on practical capabilities that reflect students’ feedback literacy and how they respond actively to feedback. Other 18 articles, published between the period of 1989 and 2011, were also included to illustrate and support students’ engagement with feedback processes in writing, which therefore enable them to become feedback literates.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Definitions of feedback literacy

From an academic literacy perspective, Sutton (2012) defined the notion of feedback literacy as “the ability to read, interpret and use written feedback” (p. 31). Recently, feedback literacy is defined by its relation to either students or teachers. Thus, Sutton (2012) defined student feedback literacy (SFL) as “a set of generic practices, skills, and attributes which […] is a series of situated learning practices” (2012, p. 33). It is also defined by Carless and Boud (2018) as “the understandings, capacities, and dispositions needed to make sense of information and use it to enhance work or learning strategies” (p. 1316). This definition stresses the need for students to understand the nature of feedback and how it can be managed effectively. Feedback literate students are able to make use of teacher feedback in a productive way as well as perceive it positively to guide their own learning. Based on the notion of feedback literacy developed by Carless and Boud (2018), which was previously stimulated by Sutton (2012), student feedback literacy is defined by Molloy et al., (2020) as “students’ ability to understand, utilize and benefit from feedback processes” (p. 528). Based also on Xu and Carless’s (2017) notion of student feedback literacy and Carless and Boud’s (2018) definition of it, Han and Xu (2021) conceived student feedback literacy “as students’ cognitive and social-affective capacity and disposition prior to substantial engagement with feedback” (p. 3).

Unlike student feedback literacy, Xu and Carless (2017) defined teacher feedback literacy (TFL) as involving awareness and skills of three interconnected aspects: the role of feedback in developing student self-regulative capacities; strategies for supporting student cognitive development in understanding feedback, and in generating useful feedback on one’s own and other’s work; and attentiveness to sociocultural, relational, and affective aspects of feedback processes. As a detailed and broad definition, Carless and Winstone (2020) conceptualized teacher feedback literacy as:

“the knowledge, expertise and dispositions to design feedback processes in ways which enable student uptake of feedback and seed the development of student feedback literacy. Knowledge includes understandings of feedback principles and practice. Expertise encompasses the pedagogic skills and capacities to design and implement feedback processes in principled research-informed ways. Dispositions include the attitudes and will-power to overcome challenges and strive to develop productive feedback processes for students. The teacher knowledge, expertise and dispositions are enacted within disciplinary learning activities which require appreciation of how effective feedback processes are managed within specific disciplines’” (p. 4).

Based on the operational definitions provided by researchers within the area of feedback literacy, it can be noticed that the capabilities and the characteristics that both teachers and
students need to possess to become feedback literate have reflected the new paradigm shift from feedback as a one-way process of transmitting information from educators (teachers/tutors) to feedback as a process using multiple channels of communication, through which teachers and students collaborate to improve learning outcomes (Carless, 2020; Ibarra-Sáiz, Rodríguez-Gómez, & Boud, 2020). This shift has been a reaction to several problematic issues arising from the transmission view of feedback. As explained by Nicol and Macfarlane-dick (2006), the first issue is related to the uncertainty of the effectiveness of this feedback in enhancing and developing the learners’ skills of self-regulation to enable them to learn in an informal context and through their life experience. The second is the possible students’ inability to understand and use teacher feedback information especially when they lack the opportunity to engage with it and construct their understanding of it before using it. The third is the lack of consideration of the motivational factors that can influence student learning and their interaction with feedback. The last problem is related to the heavy workload of teachers due to large classes, especially at the university level.

**Feedback literacy frameworks**

To serve the need for investigating teachers’ and students’ feedback literacy, this paper describes briefly four current feedback literacy frameworks in the literature by revealing some key points of their match and/or mismatch.

1. Conceptualizing student feedback literacy as a first attempt (Sutton, 2012)

   Sutton (2012) highlighted three dimensions of SFL: an epistemological dimension, an ontological dimension, and a practical dimension. The first involves giving feedback for knowing as well as feedback on knowing so that learners have something to work with to improve their performance. The second involves providing feedback that enhances learners’ self-confidence without assuming them to possess a weak educational identity. The third dimension focuses on the engagement of learners in acting (reading, thinking about, and feeding forward feedback). It requires learners and teachers to address the language barriers which inhibit the capacity for learners to understand, interpret, and act upon feedback. In this last dimension, learners’ action on feedback is also emphasized in the following framework of Carless and Boud (2018), which indicates the stages through which students go to act upon feedback.

2. Student feedback literacy framework (Carless & Boud, 2018)

   Recently, Carless and Boud (2018) described in their framework of SFL four interrelated components, namely appreciating feedback, making judgments, managing emotions, and taking action (see Fig. 1). Some of these components, such as the provision of peer feedback during the evaluative judgment process and the action upon feedback, are stimulated from Sutton’s dimensions of feedback literacy.

   As explained by Carless and Boud (2018), feedback literate students, who appreciate feedback, understand and appreciate the role of feedback in improving work and the active learner role in these processes; they recognize that feedback information comes in various forms and from different sources; and they access, store and revisit feedback via technology.

   To make the most of feedback processes, Carless and Boud (2018) emphasized the active role of students in making evaluative judgments. Thus, feedback literate students develop their
capacities when making sound academic judgments about their own work and the work of others; they participate productively in peer feedback processes and refine their self-evaluative capacities over time in order to make more robust judgments. As indicated in Sutton’s (2012) ontological dimension, learners develop their self-confidence when they give feedback to their peers. Based on this, they assess themselves by reflecting on others’ work.

Carless and Boud (2018) argued that feedback literate students manage affect by maintaining emotional equilibrium and avoiding defensiveness when receiving critical feedback; are proactive in eliciting suggestions from peers or teachers and continuing dialogue with them as needed; and develop habits of striving for continuous improvement on the basis of internal and external feedback.

To achieve the purpose of acting upon feedback, Carless and Boud (2018) pointed out to feedback literate students’ awareness of their imperative role to take action in response to feedback information; to draw inferences from a range of feedback experiences for the purpose of continuous improvement (Boud & Molloy, 2013a, 2013b); and to develop a repertoire of strategies for acting on feedback. As a new contribution, Molloy et al. (2020) designed their framework of SFL and interpreted its major features from a learner-centered perspective. However, most of the features (e.g., appreciating feedback, seeking it from multiple sources, managing emotions, receiving/providing feedback, and responding to it) were also mentioned in Carless and Boud’s (2018) framework.

3. Student feedback literacy framework developed by Molloy et al. (2020)

This framework comprises seven core groups, derived from 31 categories representing the capabilities of students as feedback literate. These capabilities can be considered characteristics of student feedback literacy. This new framework emphasizes knowledge about the role of feedback, skills required to utilize feedback processes as well as volition to see oneself as a learner striving for improvement. The advantage of this framework is that it gives a strong emphasis on feedback from students. In this framework, some categories highlight the value of building students’ evaluative judgments in feedback processes as indicated in the previous framework, their academic skills, and self-regulation. Such categories are very important in learners’ future learning and employability. The framework by Molloy et al. (2020, p. 529) aims at promoting seven capabilities:

The first involves feedback literate students’ commitment to feedback as an improvement. This helps them to understand the value of feedback as a way of improvement and continuous practice which are gained over time. The second pertains to students’ appreciation of feedback as an active process in which they identify their own needs and evaluate their performance and that
of others based on assessment criteria. The third requires students to elicit information to improve learning. For example, they seek information from others or even request the receipt of feedback on specific aspects they need to solve. The fourth pertains to how students process feedback information. Examples include students’ consideration of quality work based on certain criteria that identify the nature of good work. The fifth involves students’ acknowledgement and work with emotions. Thus, they welcome comments from others without displaying defensiveness and they establish a trust to guarantee honest and meaningful information exchanges with others. The sixth relates to students’ acknowledgement of feedback as a reciprocal process. This indicates the pivotal role of learners as feedback providers and receivers. The last capability is about feedback literate students’ enactment of outcomes of processing feedback information. This includes analyzing, recording and responding to feedback information from others in appropriate forms and through goal-setting and planning how it might be implemented in future work. Since this framework and the two previous ones have not addressed the mutual connection between students and teachers, Carless and Winstone (2020) initiated a new framework for teachers, in which they strive to enhance students’ capabilities of feedback literacy. In this framework, Carless (2020) considered teachers as having “knowledge and expertise to design feedback processes effectively and promote the development of student feedback literacy” (p. 3). Thus, the attainment of feedback literacy can be enacted at design, relational and pragmatic levels.

4. Teacher feedback literacy framework developed by Carless and Winstone (2020)

This framework describes capabilities that feedback literate teachers create and utilize to engage effectively in feedback processes and therefore to promote students’ learning. The framework is composed of three main dimensions (design, relational, and pragmatic dimension) and each dimension includes some features (see Fig. 2).

In the design dimension, as stated by Carless and Winstone (2020), feedback literate teachers design curriculum and assessment sequences to encourage student generation and uptake of feedback; they support students in making judgments about their own work and that of others, through activities such as peer feedback and evaluating exemplars; they use timely guidance and intrinsic feedback to make expectations clear and avoid the problem of post-task feedback coming too late for student uptake; and they deploy technology, as appropriate, to facilitate students’ engagement with feedback and their uptake of it.

In the relational dimension, as explained by Carless and Winstone (2020), feedback literate teachers show supportiveness, approachability, and sensitivity in how feedback is shared with students; they envisage feedback processes as partnerships between teachers and students; and they deploy technology to strengthen the relational aspects of feedback communication with students.

In the pragmatic dimension, as addressed by Carless and Winstone (2020), feedback literate teachers navigate tensions between different functions of feedback (formative and summative); they manage disciplinary factors in feedback processes to meet students’ needs; they deploy technology for timeliness, efficiency, and portability; and they balance teacher workload devoted to feedback with what is useful to students.

Practical dimensions of student feedback literacy

Owing to some reasons such as students’ lack of academic preparation, their non-satisfaction with teacher feedback (Evans, 2013; Mulliner & Tucker, 2017), and lower proficiency in writing
by addressing various aspects of writing (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, content, organization, and flow of ideas) and its process (e.g., planning, editing, and revision), this section aims at identifying four dimensions (appreciating feedback, making judgments, managing affect, and taking action) which help students to act as feedback literates (see Figs 1 and 2) who are able to engage with feedback in EFL/ESL writing.

Appreciating feedback. Appreciating feedback refers to both students recognizing the value of feedback and understanding their active role in its processes (Carless & Boud, 2018; Molloy et al., 2020). The understanding of what feedback is, how it works, and what role it requires in the learning process is a key element to move beyond seeing it as input. Therefore, for appreciating feedback, feedback literate students, as pointed out by Carless and Boud (2018) and adopted by Carless and Winstone (2020), a) understand and appreciate the role of feedback in improving work and the active learner role in feedback processes; b) recognize that feedback information comes in different forms and from different sources; and c) use technology to
access, store and revisit feedback. As illustrated in the upcoming information, teachers’ role in this framework is complementary and helpful to meet the previously mentioned criteria.

Since more attention is needed to be given to writing in order to develop students’ writing, learners’ understanding of the value of written feedback does not demand looking at feedback as a grade or score given on writing performance but rather as an opportunity for promoting learning. Feedback in this regard requires both teachers and students to supplement each other in the feedback process to achieve a better understanding of each one’s role. Learners’ appreciation of their active role in the written feedback process (Carless & Boud, 2018; Molloy et al., 2020) is also warranted. It can be achieved either by developing their abilities when trying to seek written feedback from multiple sources (e.g., teachers or peers) or by reflecting on their writing from the comments provided by their instructors or other students (Carless & Boud, 2018). Students can also develop their evaluative judgment in the sense that they can give written feedback on the work of others and at the same time reflect on their own writing performance and the way others could respond to feedback (Tai et al., 2018). In the feedback process, the role of students is not only restricted to receiving feedback, but also to composing it (Cho & Cho, 2011). Therefore, receiving and composing are two important acts that justify the integrative roles students might have when acting as feedback receivers (assesses) and feedback composers (assessors), especially in the reviewing process. The teacher’s role in helping students to appreciate their two different roles in the feedback process, especially as feedback assessors can promote their long-term process of learning. Active students in the feedback process are engaged in self-evaluation as well as peer assessment. When learners generate feedback, they benefit more from learning.

Learners’ engagement with written feedback from multiple sources (e.g., teachers, peers, online communities, tutoring software, program stimulators, and stimulators) and their use of diverse modes (e.g., audio recording, short and detailed written comments) to communicate feedback would help them understand feedback and work on it to meet their learning needs in different learning environments (Henderson et al., 2019). All these available sources and modes encourage learners to make sense of the information provided. Henderson et al. (2019) highlighted several advantages of technology that can stimulate and support learners learning by providing them with innovative feedback practices. For example, teachers’ use of screens, whiteboards, and microphones is effective when students are working in groups or studying as a whole class. Teachers’ integration of technology in feedback provision provides rich feedback information to students through the use of video feedback (Henderson & Phillips, 2015), and screen cast recording (Thompson & Lee, 2012). Therefore, teachers are allowed to focus on more global aspects of students’ performance (e.g., argument, analysis, synthesis) rather than on mechanics of writing (e.g., spelling and grammar, syntax). Information given through these media could be richer, more detailed, valuable, personal, and motivating (Henderson & Phillips, 2015).

**Making judgments.** To make the most of feedback processes, Carless and Boud (2018), supported by Carless and Winstone (2020), emphasized the active role of students in making evaluative judgment. According to them, feedback literate students a) develop capacities to make sound academic judgments about their own work and the work of others; b) participate productively in peer feedback processes; c) and refine self-evaluative capacities over time in order to make more robust judgments.
In the writing context, especially during the writing process, students often engage in self-assessment when they evaluate the quality of their written work. The act of self-evaluation is part of what is now referred to in the literature as evaluative judgment. The latter is defined as “the capability to make decisions about the quality of work of oneself and others” (Tai et al., 2018, p. 471). This definition suggests two actions: assessing one’s own work and the work of others. It also involves assessing the work based on assessment criteria such as rubrics or exemplars. These types of assessment are enacted through feedback which can either be written or oral. The first is defined as a process of correcting errors and/or commenting on student writing (Lee, Mak, & Burns, 2015). Written feedback is also conceptualized as teacher’s input to a writer’s composition in the form of information to be used for revision (Keh, 1990). The second can be defined as communicated information given by an agent about one’s performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). It can have corrective, evaluative, descriptive, interactional, and motivational role (Irawan & Salija, 2017). As feedback in written mode (written feedback) has frequently received attention in classroom practices, it becomes the focus of this discussion.

The term “Work” in the previously mentioned definition of evaluative judgment is conceptualized in a broader way. It describes any product that learners can do or perform (Boud et al., 2018). However, in the field of writing, work is specific to the written work or writing performance. Therefore, students can not only make evaluative decisions about their own written work, but also, they can contribute to others’ written product or text when making sound decisions about the quality of their writing. On the one hand, when students assess their writing, they can involve themselves in self-regulating strategies which enable them to monitor their performance in writing and promote their learning as lifelong learners (Joughin, Boud, & Dawson, 2019). On the other hand, students can reflect on their own written work through their engagement in making sound decisions on others’ written work. “Supporting students to make judgments about their own and their peers’ work may have more impact on student learning than traditional, transmissive tutor feedback” (McConlogue, 2015, p. 1504). For learners to have effective evaluative judgments, they might rely on writing assessment criteria, rubrics, exemplars, peer review, self-assessment, peer assessment and self-regulated learning (Panadero, 2016; Tai et al., 2018). For students to become self-regulated learners, who are able to set their own goals and monitor or evaluate progress to achieve targeted goals, they need to engage with feedback information they receive either from the teacher or peers (Esterhazy & Damşa, 2019).

Evaluative judgment is a conscious and analytical process in which students can distinguish between what is and what is not a well-written work (Boud et al., 2018). For example, effective learners are able to make sense of their own work and that of others based on their high level of understanding, their ability to use writing assessment criteria, and their ability to make objective decision-making apart from their subjective feelings or personal beliefs (Joughin et al., 2019). To provide quality feedback to peers, learners can use rubrics or written feedback assessment criteria in order to develop their capabilities in evaluative judgment. In literature, there is scant research on the way students make their evaluative judgment on writing performance. What is obvious in higher education institutions is that teachers try to base their judgment on comparisons they make between students and on which they can give a mark (Boud et al., 2018). Thus, there is no or little room for assessing students writing performance against certain writing assessment criteria or standards. The old-fashioned way of judgment could be due to the earlier policy era which is prevalent in traditional approaches to assessment. Escaping this comparison-oriented approach will remain difficult if current classroom practices are still
shaped by assessment practices of this kind (Boud et al., 2018). Encouraging students to make their evaluative judgment against sound criteria and not based on the comparison, is recently warranted. A good way to do this is to provide students with the seven standards of textuality, (e.g., cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, and intertextuality) mentioned by Beaugrande and Dressler (1981/1992), and against which they can judge their own written work and the work of their peers in the feedback and writing process. If students base their writing on these standards, their written text will be communicative. As an illustration of how writers can achieve this communicative purpose, Mikhchi (2011) referred to prerequisite connections between these standards as follows: At the cohesion and coherence level, writers can pay attention to the syntactic and conceptual relationships when they write their text. At the intentionality and acceptability level, writers can connect their attitudes about the text with that of the readers by considering their accepted preferences. At the informativity level, writers can pay attention to the way the written message is conveyed or the way meaning-making is achieved. At the situationality level, writers can take the context/setting into account when writing, and, finally, at the intertextuality level, writers consider the reciprocal relationship of separate texts. All these standards can serve as elements that can help students to make evaluative judgments in the feedback and writing process.

In formative peer assessment, the peer also should be encouraged to construct relevant and useful judgment. Peers have a lot to contribute to the development of others’ abilities (Cowan, 2010) such as their writing abilities. With the help of writing assessment criteria, peers can yield sound decisions and critical and constructive evaluative judgments of their own written work and that of others (Tai et al., 2018). As an example of productive practices, students can be encouraged to negotiate the strengths and the weaknesses of their written work with a peer, and this could be done when they are fully engaged with learning and peer-reviewing. In process writing, for example, students are usually involved in exchanging constructive comments, suggestions, and feedback for the sake of improving their written work with a peer, and this could be done when they are fully engaged with learning and peer-reviewing. In process writing, for example, students are usually involved in exchanging constructive comments, suggestions, and feedback for the sake of improving their written drafts. Students often benefit from these exchanges of feedback with peers both as receivers of judgment and as peer providers of evaluative decisions. In the peer-feedback process, the role of a peer is not only restricted to receiving feedback, but also to constructing feedback. This effective process of taking active roles of peer assessors and of peer-assesses can promote students’ long-term process of learning (McConlogue, 2015), for example, learning to write. Cowan (2010) argued that university students, especially in writing assignments, “should make judgments of the quality of their own work as they are drafting. These evaluations may lead in turn to decisions on their part about the adequacy of a draft assignment, or the scope and means to improve aspects of it” (p. 326). Therefore, as Cowan (2010) stated, “Teachers should plan to develop and assess this ability in all students and encourage them to use it and further develop it, in their time in higher education and thereafter” (p. 327).

Managing affect. Carless and Boud (2018), supported by Carless and Winstone (2020), argued that feedback literate students maintain emotional equilibrium and avoid defensiveness when receiving critical feedback; they are proactive in eliciting suggestions from peers or teachers and continuing dialogue with them as needed; and they develop habits of striving for continuous improvement on the basis of internal and external feedback.

To avoid the mismatch that could arise in the feedback process between the teacher and the student, establishing a good relationship is mandatory. This relationship would develop an
understanding between the two and therefore would encourage them to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the written work (Yang & Carless, 2013). Feedback is a social practice in which the management of relationships, teacher-student, and student-student relationships can influence positively or negatively students’ reactions and emotions and therefore their way of learning (Yang & Carless, 2013). Trust can have a potential factor that affects how students respond to feedback. Based on the results obtained from the open-ended questionnaires and interviews, Chong (2018) found in his study that students’ positive relationship with their teachers has resulted in a higher degree of trust towards teachers. This helped students to agree with and accept teacher feedback. “A close relationship between students and teachers helped students to understand the teacher, his way of giving feedback or his ‘style of feedback’; owing to such understanding, there is an increased likelihood that students would agree with teacher feedback” (Chong, 2018, p. 508). Yang and Carless (2013) also argue that an equal power relationship with teachers can also arouse positive emotions, which can enable students to self-regulate their own learning strategies. Whereas an unequal relationship can lead students to lose confidence in responding to teacher feedback and, therefore, act as passive learners who heavily draw on their teachers’ guidance. As a remedy, teachers need to respond positively by showing empathy to students when engaging with written feedback and writing assessment (Yang & Carless, 2013).

In Pokorny and Pickford’s (2010) study, students indicated the value of teacher-student relationships during the engagement with feedback. To take teacher feedback into consideration, students preferred to have a shared responsibility in feedback rather than receiving one-to-one feedback opportunities with the teacher. Students needed to feel comfortable when receiving feedback. They appreciated if teachers are flexible, not rigid, and always put themselves in the students’ shoes. Students needed to be engaged in dialogue with their teachers rather than be engaged in a power distance relationship with them. This would help them feel relaxed to ask for feedback information and express themselves when faced with some writing issues. Students related their engagement with feedback and their high level of confidence to the good feedback relationship with teachers who are supportive, relaxed, approachable, playful, open, and desiring to have feedback conversations. Feedback also needs to be a two-way process between a student and a peer (Pokorny & Pickford, 2010). Encouraging a feedback culture in which both the student and the peer can play pivotal roles as key providers and receivers of feedback is important to create an atmosphere of collaboration and develop the skills of self- and peer-feedback assessment.

Several researchers also argued that technology (audio and video feedback) can strengthen the relational aspects of feedback information exchange (Carless & Winstone, 2020; Espasa, Mayordomo, Guasch, & Martinez-Melo, 2019; Mahoney, Macfarlane, & Ajjawi, 2019; Thomas, West, & Borup, 2017). Video feedback can create a social presence in an online environment to substitute the absence of teacher’s interaction and can also support students’ need of feedback information in distance learning. For less confident students who are reluctant to engage in face-to-face discussions with the teacher, audio feedback might be a useful tool to respond to student writing and to review their performance at distance and anytime.

Taking action. To act upon feedback, Carless and Boud (2018), supported by Carless and Winstone (2020), emphasized that feedback literate students are aware of their imperative role to take action in response to feedback information. They draw inferences from a range of
feedback experiences for the purpose of continuous improvement (Boud & Molloy, 2013a, 2013b), and they develop a repertoire of strategies for acting on feedback.

Feedback literate learners act upon comments that they have received (Sutton, 2012). Molloy et al., (2020) argued that it is not enough for students “to know the importance of being an active player, they need the dispositions and capabilities to put these into practice and an awareness of the complexity of putting these skills together in context” (p. 532). Students are required to respond to feedback information from the teacher and peers through goal-setting and planning how it might be utilized in improving future performance (Molloy et al., 2020). This information could be analyzed and recorded in appropriate forms for the purposes of acting on it subsequently (Molloy et al., 2020).

Peer review in the drafting process of writing is one way to engage students with written feedback and a better alternative to the criticized approach of teacher feedback. Through peer review, students are active participants in both the receipt and the production of feedback reviews (Nicol, 2019; Nicol, Thomson, & Breslin, 2014); hence, their learning due to this peer review can be enhanced without relying on the teacher to tell them what is right and wrong in their writing (Sadler, 2010). McConlogue (2015) has proved that teacher feedback does not support students learning in the same way peer feedback does. Despite the effort teachers make to help their students’ progress in their learning, several studies indicated the dissatisfaction of students with teacher feedback (Carless, 2006; Mulliner & Tucker, 2017; Nicol, 2010), which most of the time was non-understandable, confusing, and non-helpful (Dowden, Pittaway, Yost, & Mccarthy, 2013). Therefore, it is important to consider the positive impact and the benefits that peer revision/reviewing could have on students’ performance, for example, in writing.

The merits of receiving feedback reviews from peers have been acknowledged in the literature. At its best, feedback from peers is more accessible and understandable for learners than teacher feedback (Falchikov, 2005; Topping, 1998). Learners can benefit from varied amounts of feedback information due to the involvement of multiple peers in responding to their writing (Topping, 1998). The more feedback students receive from multiple peers, the more chances they will have to improve the quality of their writing (Cho & MacArthur, 2010). Feedback received from diverse peers is more useful than feedback received from one peer or one teacher (Cho & Schunn, 2007). Unlike teacher feedback, peer feedback from multiple peers can target general features of writing rather than focusing on one or two specific features (Cho & MacArthur, 2010). Receiving feedback reviews from many peers gives students the opportunity to look at the text through the eyes of different readers (Cho & MacArthur, 2010; Holliway & McCutchen, 2004). They will understand that feedback provision could be interpreted and provided differently by different readers (Cho, Cho, & Hacker, 2010).

Compared to the aforementioned studies and some other studies on the benefits of receiving feedback from peers, there is scant research on the learning benefits of constructing feedback for peers. In an experimental study carried out by Cho and MacArthur (2011), the findings demonstrated that students who rated and commented on their peers’ written papers wrote higher quality papers than students who read their peers’ written work or who read materials not related to the given topic. The researchers argued that their controlled study “provides support for peer review of writing as a learning activity” (p. 73), which encourages students to be active feedback providers by producing feedback reviews for their peers. Based on another study that proves the productivity of giving feedback comments to peers in the revision process of writing, Cho and Cho (2011) investigated the effects of the provision and the reception of
feedback comments on undergraduate students’ laboratory reports. They found that improvement in writing arises more significantly when students give written feedback comments to their peers rather than when they receive them. Studies revolving around the merits of receiving and constructing feedback reviews could be “more informative about what students learn from reviewing rather than how they learn” (Nicol et al., 2014, pp. 104–105).

Drawing on their own studies, Cho and MacArthur (2010) and Cho and Cho (2011) proposed actually a number of relevant learning implications for students’ engagement in the reviewing process. The first one pertains to learners’ opportunity in analyzing the text through the eyes of the reader. This helps them not only understand that readers might have different interpretations of the produced text (Cho et al., 2010), but also helps them develop the way they plan, monitor, and improve their writing. The second implication relates to the development of learners’ skills in the writing process (e.g., self-editing, self-evaluation, and problem-solving). Students read, analyze, edit, evaluate, and fix problems related to their own writing. All these cognitive processes are effective in composing a final quality draft. The third implication concerns the student’s ability in understanding the good criteria that make others’ work effective or non-effective.

In acting upon written feedback, feedback literate students monitor their own progress in writing to indicate where feedback might be helpful and to influence the setting of new learning goals (Molloy et al., 2020). In order for learners to utilize process-based written feedback and develop their self-regulated learning, learners can engage in three processes suggested by Sadler (1989, p. 121): (a) developing a concept of the goal/standard or reference level being aimed for (the need to provide dialogue around assessment criteria through which to share tacit expectations), (b) comparing the actual (or current) level of performance with that goal or standard (c), and engaging in appropriate action which leads to some kind of closure of the gap.

CONCLUSION

This literature review has aimed at discussing the issue of feedback literacy and how its practices can be implemented to help students engage with written feedback. The relevance of this theoretical paper resides in giving a new conceptualization of feedback in higher education. The feedback that is needed in the learning and teaching context at the university level should be provided in high quality and at an advanced level. To achieve this, feedback literacy as a relevant issue of this paper is warranted to be implemented in other areas, especially in writing as one of the most important skills that demonstrates students’ language abilities. Therefore, raising awareness of what shapes students’ feedback literacy is one of the intended contributions of this paper. Connecting also feedback literacy with students’ writing performance can contribute to solving the problem of students’ inability in responding to teacher feedback as well as their inability in performing their written tasks/work effectively. The nature of the shared responsibility between teachers and students and between students and their peers in feedback literacy is a solid argument that this paper goes with the current development or demand in education, which is, the call for a learning-centered approach and its effective objectives and practices.

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