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Spoilt for choice: A plethora of modes for electronic feedback on second language writing

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Given the growing significance of multiliteracies in the age of new media, language learners no longer read, write and interact only on paper using writing and speech, but they also do so electronically and through multiple modes of meaning-making. This shift in writing practices has led many researchers to investigate the role and impact of multimodality in language learning, predominantly in the area of online language teaching (e.g., Guichon, 2017; Hampel & Stickler, 2012, Satar & Wigham, 2017), learner interactions (Lamy, 2007; Lamy & Flewitt, 2011; Norris & Pirini, 2016; Satar, 2016), and more recently in online collaborative writing (see the Special Issue in *Journal of Second Language Writing* edited by Li & Storch, 2017). Given this development, research on multimodal electronic feedback in foreign and second language writing (SLW) is a timely, but still under-researched topic (Ene & Upton, 2014). Although automated writing evaluation, or computer-generated feedback, has taken much of the spotlight in electronic feedback research within the last decade, humans (i.e. instructors, tutors and peers) remain critical sources of feedback. Therefore, this special issue seeks to identify key issues in and potential for research investigating multimodal aspects of e-feedback given by humans to L2 writers.

In the context of webconferencing, Guichon and Cohen (2016) contemplated that '[l]earning may be enhanced when teachers and learners have access to diverse modes' (509) because opportunities for interaction and engagement provided by multimodal communication can enhance intersubjectivity and joint attention. The role of multimodality with regard to joint attention is critical also in the work of Jewitt (2017) as follows:

> The question of what to attend to, what to 'make meaningful' is a significant aspect of the work of meaning making. In other words, the task of what to attend to and to select as salient to the task at hand is amplified by a multimodal focus. (Jewitt, 2017: 27)

We argue that the concepts of *what to attend* and *what to make meaningful* are highly pertinent and prerequisite elements for acting on and successful uptake of feedback on SLW. Multimodality offers the feedback provider a wide range of possibilities to make meaning and to make certain aspects of meaning more salient for the receiver. Thus, through increased

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opportunities for engagement rendered via multiple modes, we expect feedback provision to become increasingly relevant and compelling, which might potentially lead to increased uptake.

Practitioners, however, face a conundrum: Which of the multiple modes that are afforded by new technologies should they adopt for their own targeted public, task, and skills within SLW? This special issue seeks to shed light on the options of multimodality in feedback on writing by critically documenting empirical research studies, summarising main issues to consider and pointing towards new directions to explore, both for writing practice and research.

This editorial is structured in three sections: In the first section, we disentangle the terminology with regard to modes and multimodality and adapt it to the field of electronic feedback provision on SLW. We then contemplate mode in electronic feedback on SLW through a sociocultural lens, more specifically as a mediating artefact in an activity-theoretical system, to shed light on the complexity of the feedback process and on the role of modality herein. Finally, the contributions of this special issue are introduced within this framework and their specific focus on modality is described, taking the activity-theoretical system of electronic feedback provision as a point of departure.

Multimodality: working definitions for this Special Issue

As recommended by Jewitt (2017) and Jewitt, Bezemer and O´Halloran (2016), studies on multimodality should strive for *working definitions* of key terms, including mode and multimodality to achieve maximum consistency. This is important because as an emerging field of study, there is excessive variety in how these terms are defined and operationalised. As Jewitt et al. (2016) explain:

> There is, put simply, much variation in the meanings ascribed to mode and (semiotic) resource. Gesture and gaze, image and writing seem plausible candidates, but what about colour and layout? And is photography a separate mode? What about facial expression and body posture? Are action and movement modes? You will find different answers to the questions not only between different research publications but also within. (12)

Unsurprisingly, the use of the terms mode, modality and multimodality in SLW publications is no exception. In SLW research, based on a linguistic framework, modality is traditionally understood and operationalised as *grammatical mood*. However, in semiotic terms, multimodality is 'the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined' (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001: 20). Multimodality, in this sense, is interested in how meaning is made via multiple modes. In doing so, it does not foreground written or spoken language as the 'most important' resource, but acknowledge the differences between the meaning-making potentials of available semiotic resources (Jewitt et al., 2016). Likewise, attention to multimodality in feedback on SLW would not only focus on writing (written language, a visual mode) or speech (spoken language, an oral mode), but also include still and moving image, sound,

gaze, facial expressions, gesture, and movement employed in giving feedback. Moreover, the meaning maker/feedback provider does not necessarily have to choose one mode or the other, but can orchestrate different modes in a complementary or hierarchical fashion (Norris, 2004; Hauck, 2010) selecting appropriate ones based on their potentials for meaning-making. The potential of each mode for expressing a particular meaning is explained in the term *affordance* (Jewitt et al., 2016). Despite being a highly contested term in multimodal research, it is possible to talk about *modal affordance* as 'what is possible to express and represent easily with a mode.' (Jewitt, 2017: 26). That is to say, 'each "mode" offers distinct possibilities and constraints'. (Jewitt et al., 2016: 3)

For example, in a digital writing tool, such as Google Docs, feedback may be expressed in many forms of meaning making, such as writing using the material form of alphabetic symbols, marked-up written language making use of colour and strikethrough text, and written comments in comment bubbles or spaces in the margins with direct reference to the text or hyperlinks to external resources bringing in external voices to be considered in the production of written language. Moreover, the modal affordances of Google Docs for feedback provision would be distinct from a feedback session via Skype, or screen-recorded feedback, which could incorporate modal affordances of speech and gestures.

We would like to end this section by drawing on two other features related to modes in feedback on SLW. First, although the computer screen brings the visual character of written feedback to the fore (Jewitt, 2017), *digital communication is not necessarily considered a mode in itself*. We do acknowledge that the digital written form is not exactly the same as writing on paper and communication via Skype is not the same as talking to people face-to-face. However, the differences here relate to how modes take different shapes when transformed from the three-dimensional real world to the two-dimensional digital world represented via the computer screen. We believe this differentiation is beyond the limits of the present issue, and thus we only focus on multimodality in e-feedback on writing and avoid comparison to face-to-face situations as much as possible, which has been the focus of some earlier studies (e.g., Ho & Savignon, 2007; Jones, Garralda, Li, & Lock, 2006; Warschauer, 1996).

Second, in feedback on SLW studies, the notion of synchronicity is sometimes considered to be a mode by referring to Synchronous and Asynchronous Computer Mediated Communication (SCMC and ACMC) as different *modes of communication* (e.g., Chang, 2009, 2012). However, we prefer not to consider synchronicity as a mode, but a temporal quality of the written or spoken mode in digital communication. More specifically, it refers to the potential of the digital communication tool as regards immediacy, or chronemics. Moreover, Kalman and Rafaeli (2007) further argue that synchronicity is not a feature of the tool, but a feature of the conversation contingent on the response time of the interlocutors. Yet, this is again beyond our discussion in this issue and therefore we choose to define ACMC and SCMC as two different *forms of communication*.

Broadening the picture: Multimodal feedback as an activity-theoretical system

Lantolf (2000) introduced the term *Sociocultural SLA* to mark a clear distinction from cognitive and linguistic approaches to SLA. Sociocultural SLA broadens the focus of analysis from the product (output) towards the process (how this product is shaped in activities) by approaching learning as a *mediated activity*. *Mediated learning* applied to SLA means that a learner (*Subject*) engaging in a language related activity resorts to an artefact in order to successfully achieve the object of the activity. In order to fruitfully benefit from the artefact, its affordances have to be perceived by the subject of a learning activity. The relationship between artefacts, objects, subjects, and context-specific dimensions can be visualised in an activity theoretical system.

The sociocultural approach, and more specifically Activity Theory (AT) has been adopted as a theoretical underpinning by researchers in the field of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) ever since the so-called sociocultural turn in language learning and teaching at the end of the 20st century (Johnson, 2006: 235). Still, as Bitchener and Storch (2016) point out, AT has hardly been adopted by studies on written corrective feedback. Lee (2014) analysed teacher written corrective feedback within an AT framework and uncovered contradictions within the system that explain the limitations of conventional feedback approaches. Lee´s example serves as a showcase that AT is a good framework to understand the complex interplay of factors impacting feedback on writing, taking into account contextual and sociocultural aspects. Taking her approach as an example, we would like to suggest the following AT system for electronic feedback provision and the role that mode plays herein.

Mediating artefacts
Platforms
Modes: e.g., speech, writing,
symbols, error codes, …
L1, L2, L_n

Object
Electronic feedback on SC´s writing performance,
targeting a specific writing subskill

Subject
Feedback provider

Subject collective (SC)
Feedback receivers

Outcome
Improved writing performance of the SC
Improved *noticing* of potential errors
High/low engagement of SC with Object
SC: Pass exam / Get credits for participation

Rules
Who participates how in the
activity? Are SC´s actions on
fb required and/or rewarded?
Formative or summative fb?
What are the requirements of
genre and task?

Community
Are institution(s), co-
teachers and tutors
involved
supportive or not towards
electronic fb?

Division of labour
Who takes action in the feedback
process before, during and after fb
provision (e.g., SC actions: indication
of needs / preferences / redrafting
according to fb, correcting errors)?
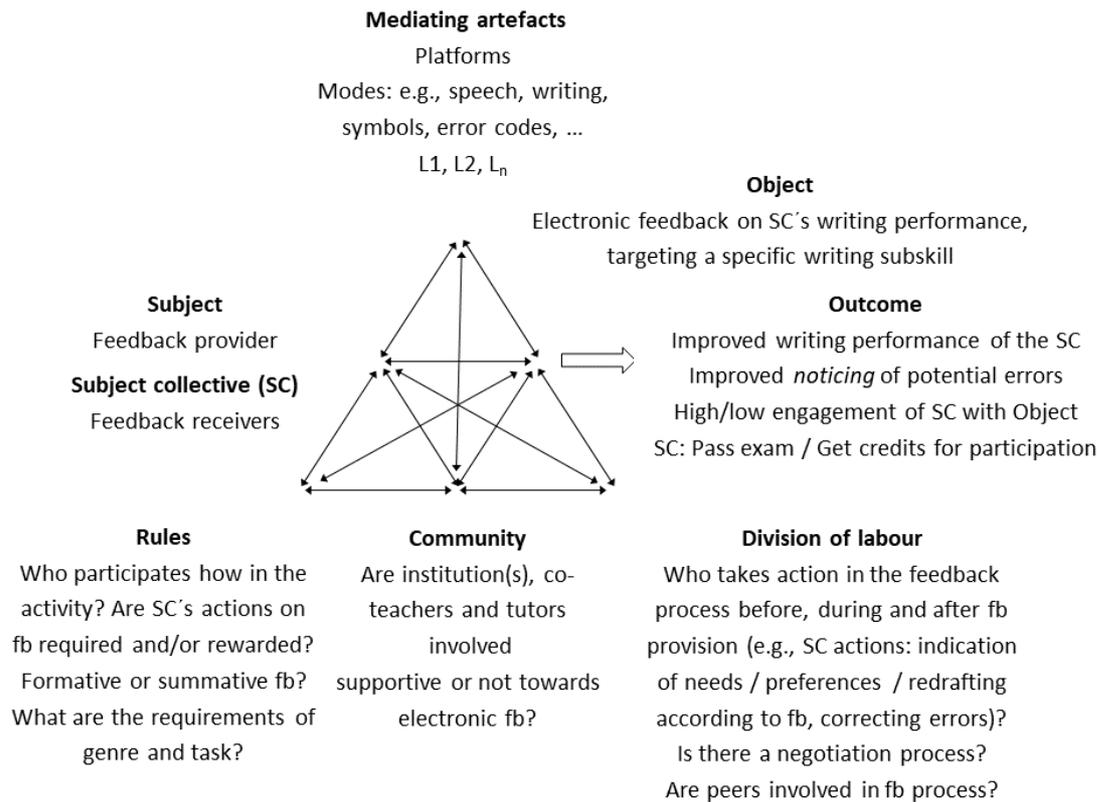Is there a negotiation process?
Are peers involved in fb process?

Figure 1: An activity system of electronic feedback (fb) on SLW with mode as mediating artefact (based on Lee 2014:209).

Central to the AT system of electronic feedback provision are different and new modes as *Mediating Artefacts*. They bear an innovative character which can initiate the transformation from conventional, product-oriented feedback to process-oriented feedback by allowing for more flexible and interactive feedback loops. However, there are other constituents in the system that need to be taken into account while designing successful and innovative feedback practices. In our representation of the AT system for multimodal e-feedback (see Figure 1), we point to important questions to be considered, according to each constituent, some of which are being dealt with in the individual contributions of this special issue. We will not discuss the model in detail at this stage, but rather exemplify the impact of the different constituents in the description of the individual contributions in the following section.

The contributions of this Special Issue

The empirical studies of this special issue form a contribution to the socioculturally inspired introspection into the feedback process. Central in all contributions is the impact of communication mode as a *Mediating Artefact* for the object of feedback provision on the activity outcome, taking into account in a more or less outspoken way the other constituents of the activity system.

As interactivity is an important asset of new modes for electronic communication, labour division can (and should) change accordingly. This is the specific focus that is taken

by Clare Maas with her innovative method of Learner Driven Feedback (LDF). The *Subject Collective*, i.e., the feedback receiver, in this approach takes an active role by *initiating* the feedback process rather than solely *reacting* to it by incorporating or rejecting suggestions, or asking for clarification. This initiation both includes a choice with regard to the *Object* of the activity (focus of the feedback) and to the *Mediating Artefact* (preferred feedback mode). In her contribution to this special issue ('Perceptions of Multimodal Learner-Driven Feedback in EAP')*,* she builds upon this method, reporting on an empirical study in which she applied LDF in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) class. In this article, she widens the focus towards the *perceived* affordances of the different modes (written comment bubbles, track changes, e-mail, and audio recorded feedback) for the different foci (aspects of general language accuracy and academic skills related to writing) of feedback, shedding light on the complex interaction between the *Subject Collective*, the *Mediating Artefact*, and the *Object* in the activity system of electronic feedback.

Division of Labour is also an important constituent in a peer feedback activity system. In his contribution about three different web 2.0 applications (Google Docs, Sakai VLE, and Sakai Wiki) for peer feedback provision on EAP writing in a business school, Niki Canham ('Comparing Web 2.0 applications for peer feedback in language teaching') closely examines the different modes for written feedback that the applications provide, and how these impact choices about *Division of Labour* in the student-peer-teacher triangle and about *Rules* for peer feedback provision. He also touches upon *Community*-related questions, as the choice for applications to provide electronic feedback often is guided by institution policy and resources.

With an emphasis on how the nature of feedback (*Object*) may vary according to modes (*Mediating Artefacts*), Kelly Cunningham ('APPRAISAL as a Framework for Understanding Multimodal Electronic Feedback: Positioning and Purpose in Screencast Video and Text Feedback in ESL Writing') offers APPRAISAL as an empirically based theoretical framework to analyse multimodal feedback provision. In her paper, the author evidences how feedback positions the provider (*Subject*) as authority and targets correctness when delivered via track changes and comment functions of MS Word; whereas, screencast feedback offers suggestions and possibilities thereby positioning the feedback provider as *one of many possible perspectives*. In other words, the interplay and possible tensions between *Subject*, *Subject Collective*, *Object*, and *Mediating Artefacts* (i.e., mode) in the AT of electronic feedback are being explored in this contribution.

Using Google Docs as a collaborative writing platform, Yim, Zheng and Warschauer ('Feedback and Revision in Cloud-based Writing: Variations across Feedback Source and Task Type') explore feedback practices of teachers and students at a sixth grade school in the USA. Given the modal affordances of the platform for feedback provision, i.e., asynchronous written comments and direct edits on the text, the authors investigate variation in the nature of feedback (i.e., *Object*: whether feedback targets macro- or micro-level features) and revisions made (i.e., *Outcome*: whether engagement with feedback is high or low) as regards who the feedback provider (*Subject*) is, teacher or peers, and task types (i.e., *Rules*: argumentative, narrative, report). In their conclusions, the authors foreground the importance of the shift towards digital literacy practices (i.e., cloud-based collaborative online writing) in SLW and the repercussions of this shift on the provision, nature and outcomes of feedback.

The empirical studies in the special issue therefore provide examples of how different constituents of the AT system can be considered when researching multimodal electronic feedback. It should be mentioned that two constituents are underrepresented in this special issue, *Community* and *Outcome*. This certainly does not indicate that these two constituents should or can be disregarded. Earlier research on (electronic) feedback in language learning has pointed to possible tensions caused by different views on the outcome of the feedback activity by *Subject* (e.g., the teacher trying to raise awareness for potential errors through indirect feedback) and *Subject Collective* (e.g., students preferring quick fixes through direct feedback or even corrections) (e.g., Pujolà, 2001; Radecki & Swales, 1998; Strobl, 2015). Also, the *Community* should not be underestimated as a possible source of tension. If an institution, for instance, does not provide the necessary infrastructure for electronic teaching and learning activities, *Subject* and *Subject Collective* have to resort to freely available web 2.0 environments and to their personal resources which can cause tensions with regard to *Rules* (access, compatibility, and anonymity). In the same vein, students´ prior experiences with feedback activity systems in other communities (e.g., secondary schools or other language learning courses within the same curriculum) can cause external tensions that have an impact on an innovative feedback activity system (see also Lee, 2014). Therefore, the design of (electronic) feedback for language learning needs to take into account the knowledge about the *Subject Collectives´* background (i.e., experience with former learning and feedback activity systems) and by their learning goals (the *Outcome* of the activity).

In the Featured Essay of this issue (Chang, Cunningham, Satar, & Strobl: 'Electronic feedback on second language writing: A retrospective and prospective essay on multimodality'), a broad overview of the research field, including directions for the future, is displayed. This narrative review of studies in the field of electronic feedback on writing separates out the modes and display the differences in terms of their modal affordances as regards how they shape the nature of feedback and how they are perceived. The focus of this essay is not the effectiveness or superiority of one mode above the other. Instead, in our Featured Essay, we explore the reported studies in terms of innovative practices for feedback on writing through emerging technologies that afford new and different modes. This exploration provides evidence for the importance of taking into account all constituents of the AT system when making decisions about electronic feedback. The FE mentions, among others, instructional design and task design (representing the *Rules* constituent) and learner/instructor variables (representing the *Subject Collective*) that can have an equally strong impact on the feedback activity as the choice of modes, if not even stronger.

The reader can, thus, expect to draw inspiration from this review-essay, and to gain understanding of possibilities and pitfalls of the use of new technologies and modes to provide feedback on writing. The featured essay might also inspire a yet-to-be-undertaken meta-analysis of modes for electronic feedback in e-language learning. For this aim, a critical number of studies would be needed that share a minimal common framework, among which aspects of the *Rules* constituent, like task design and genre, and aspects of the *Object* constituent, like the subskills of writing that are being targeted in the feedback. This would greatly contribute to our understanding of multimodality and what it affords for online writing pedagogy. We are confident that this understanding is important for practitioners and

researchers in SLW alike, as we are facing a multimodal turn in feedback on SLW in the future.

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