Abstract – My paper focuses on two forms of teachers’ written feedback: direct, i.e. correction of errors, including grammar, punctuation and spelling; and indirect, which identifies but does not correct problems – either real or potential. I argue that the two forms, when they are combined, have an important role to play in guiding students to an understanding of what constitutes a “good” written text in English. Such an understanding is an important element in the overall goal of academic writing, which is not only to produce a text that satisfies the requirements of the examiner but also to create and promote a distinct and stable scholarly identity – an aspect of writing that is often neglected in studies of writing. Unlike much research on the subject, my article focuses on an individual student, a Chinese postgraduate of English at Kristianstad University.

Keywords: direct feedback; indirect feedback; academic writing; scholarly identity

1. Introduction
Teacher’s written feedback is one of the most important keys to success in the field of Academic Writing in English, and, I would contend, is particularly crucial for English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) students. My paper focuses on two forms of written feedback: direct and indirect (defined in detail below). I argue that the two forms, when they are combined, have a significant role to play in guiding students to an understanding of what constitutes a “good” written text in English. My research is unusual in that it focuses on one student only, an approach which finds support in the work of Fiona Hyland (see below). Understanding what constitutes “good” written English is an important element in the overall goal of academic writing, which is not merely to produce a text that satisfies the requirements of the examiner but also to create and promote a distinct and stable scholarly identity. The latter is a pre-requisite for future development not only while studying at university but also in one’s future career. While feedback from fellow students is a valuable means of promoting learning, it is the teacher who is primarily responsible for providing the kind of feedback that leads to more accurate and sophisticated texts and that promotes the creation of a firm scholarly identity.

In any discussion of the role and effectiveness of feedback it is important to establish to what extent and in what ways students learn from and utilise teachers’ written feedback. One of the best-known researchers in the field is the earlier mentioned Fiona Hyland, who argues as follows
We need to be aware of the extent to which ESL students value and the way they use our feedback and we need more studies focusing on individual students, to help us build up a picture of the various ways that students incorporate feedback into their language learning processes. Such studies would enhance our understanding of the feedback process and help us to give more useful feedback to students. (Hyland, 2003:82; my emphasis)

It is the final sentence that forms the rationale for my study of one student’s perception and use of teachers’ written feedback.

1.1 Outline and Definitions
The present article discusses some reflections from a study of Masters students, whose theses I supervised in the spring term this year. The one student selected for my study is a Chinese teacher of English. Her various thesis instalments indicate clearly how she perceived and worked with my written feedback. The student is referred to as “Hui” throughout (Hui is a pseudonym). Hui’s thesis received an “A” grade; she quickly learned to understand and conform to the “rules of the game” (Bourdieu, 1998; discussed below in relation to scholarly identity), which enabled her to produce a stringent, well-researched and well-written thesis. Hui has given me permission to discuss and re-produce the instalments discussed here, and has also answered a number of questions relating to her reception and use of my feedback. Because she finished her thesis in good time, i.e. two weeks before the final date of submission, she was able to edit her thesis thoroughly, and without stress. This was an additional reason for choosing Hui’s thesis as my object of study.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to define the terms “direct feedback”, “indirect feedback” and “scholarly identity”. Direct feedback can take many forms, such as crossing out an unnecessary word, phrase or morpheme; inserting a missing word or morpheme; or writing the correct word or form near the erroneous form (Hyland, 2006:83). Indirect feedback, on the other hand, occurs when the teacher indicates in some way that an error has been made, by underlining, circling or coding. S/he does not provide the correct form but leaves the student to solve the problem that has been called to his or her attention (Hyland, 2006:83).

For undergraduate students and less proficient ESL learners, direct feedback is generally regarded as preferable, as these students generally do not have sufficient linguistic knowledge to self-correct errors – even when

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they are pointed out (Brown and Tyler, 1994; Ferris and Hedgcock, 1998/2004). Indirect feedback, however, is generally considered to be advantageous for more proficient ESL users and postgraduate students, as it enables them to engage in guided learning and problem solving (Lalande, 1982), and helps them to become independent self-editors (Bates et al., 1993). As my study confirms, a judicious combination of both forms of feedback is most helpful to students, even more advanced ones – a finding that is confirmed by Chaney (1999), Ferris (1999) and Hendrikson (1980), among others.

Scholarly identity is often omitted in discussions of the use and effectiveness of teachers’ written feedback. The image below is particularly suggestive when it comes to considering different questions related to the nature of scholarly identity: does such an identity, for example, imply conformity to a particular type or form, thereby excluding others? Is it bound by a set of clearly defined expectations and/or limitations? Does it develop, and if so, how? Can it be impaired, dented, cracked or destroyed – and if so, how and why? What happens if it is turned on its side or upside down as a result, for example, of misunderstanding or critique?

Many researchers in the field of academic writing have focused on the form and quality of the final product, i.e. essay, report, thesis etc (see, for example, Charles, 2009; Craswell, 2012). Barbara Kamler and Pat Thomson, on the other hand, have, like myself, preferred to direct their
attention towards scholarly identity and its relationship to the writing process, emphasising that

Research writing is an institutionally constrained social practice. It is about meaning and making learning to produce knowledge in particular disciplines and discourse communities. It is not simply about skills and techniques that can be learned in a mechanical way... While we argue that there is a startling lack of explicit attention given to writing the doctoral dissertation, the attention which is given is diminished when it treats writing as a discrete set of decontextualized skills, rather than as a social practice. (Kamler and Thompson, 2006:5)

Above all, it is the focus on social context and practice that is most crucial in terms of scholarly identity and its development in and through writing. As Kamler and Thompson argue:

In using the term practice, we are connecting to a scholarly tradition that regards writing as social action. Here, language is understood as being in use, bound up with what people actually do in the social and material world. Thus, ways of using language are not simply idiosyncratic or unique attributes of individual writers. They are repeated and practiced and so become part of the patterned routines of both individuals and institutions. (Kamler and Thompson, 2006:5)

The shift to writing as social practice is also emphasised by Lillis (2001), who emphasises the influence of specific contexts on writing performance:

In broad terms, what this [text as social practice] entails is that student academic writing, like all writing, is a social act. That is, student writing takes place within a particular institution, which has a particular history, culture, values, practices. It involves a shift away from thinking of language or writing skills as individual possession, towards the notion of an individual engaged in socially situated action; from an individual student having writing skills, to a student doing writing in specific contexts" (Lillis, 2001: 31).

Scholarly identity is thus intimately connected with the earlier mentioned "rules of the game" (Bourdieu, 1998), i.e. the rules, regulations and standards that characterise expectations and standards within a given field – knowledge of, and obedience to which are essential in order to achieve success and acceptance. The academic world is one such field. Students must learn to recognise and reproduce written texts that correspond to the ideals of “good” writing, paying attention to structure and patterns of argumentation, reproducing accurate and stylistically appropriate English, and applying terms and conventions characteristic of their
chosen discipline and the genre in which they are writing. Scholarly identity is a form of social and academic capital without which it is difficult, or indeed even impossible, to advance in the chosen field.

2. Method
Hui and her fellow students were, at the beginning of the Master’s programme (January 2013), issued with detailed guidelines illustrating and explaining the different sections of a Master’s thesis and what these should include. Instructions were also included as to how to carry out a field study. The students were referred to their course book, K. Richards et al., (2011), Research Methods for Applied Language Studies for further instructions about how to perform qualitative and quantitative studies and how to organise their theses.

Using a system of process writing, students submitted a limited section, or part of a section, of their thesis at a time and were given written feedback by myself. All six of my students were given both direct and indirect feedback: direct feedback was given in the form of track changes, in which the mistake was crossed out and an alternative inserted; indirect feedback, also given in the form of track changes, was used to give comments in the text itself. The comments appeared as suggestions or questions next to the word or statement identified as problematical.2 Hui was very diligent, always submitted sections of her thesis on time, responded to my feedback (this was usually by e-mail), answered my queries using a system of her own invention, i.e. a new colour (purple; see below), and returned her revised texts to me after a few days. Some sections of Hui’s thesis were revised two or three times.

Below are excerpts from three sections taken from Hui’s thesis: the questionnaire for the teachers (a questionnaire was also distributed to students), the introduction, and the analysis of the results (obtained from the teachers’ and students’ questionnaires). The sections were chosen in order to demonstrate how Hui responded to critique and how these responses changed during the writing process. As will be seen, as time went on, the number of errors and problems in Hui’s instalments became noticeably fewer.

3. Hui’s questionnaire
While working on her questionnaire, Hui learned to appreciate the importance of precision of expression and how to phrase questions in such a way as to obtain informative and analysable answers. Here, both direct and indirect feedback was useful: direct feedback, in terms of providing appropriate words and expressions; and indirect feedback, in suggesting 2 In the case of one Master’s student, I experimented with providing indirect feedback in the form of comments using the comment function. The results were positive. This, however, is beyond the scope of the present study.
additional or alternative areas of study as well as possible alternative questions.

Hui also learned by means of my indirect feedback that it is necessary to explain to her reader that while culture may be an important component in Western-style language tests, this is not the case in China.

Specific questions and sections have been chosen for the sake of clarity and because they are representative of Hui’s writing at different stages. As already established, track changes were used for both direct and indirect feedback.

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**Questionnaire for Teachers**

Dear teachers,

The investigation is concerned with the washback effects of the culture subtest in TEM 8. The aim is to know your perception of the culture subtest added in 2005 and its influences on your teaching about cultural knowledge. This sentence is not clear. Please answer faithfully? Honestly?, and be assured that your answers will be treated confidentially and will only be used for research purposes. Thank you for your cooperation!

Please put a cross (x) in the appropriate box,

In questions where numbers are used, 5 is the strongest and 1 is the weakest.

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The above example shows a mixture of direct and indirect feedback, with the former focusing on grammar, e.g. the omission of the definite article “the” in two cases, and the latter, where an alternative word, i.e. “honestly” has been suggested. The final two lines are additional suggestions of mine, aimed at achieving greater clarity. It is important that respondents know, for example, the value of the different numbers when ranking, i.e. whether 1 is highest or lowest. These two lines were not in the original version of the questionnaire submitted by Hui.
Questionnaire for Teachers

Dear teachers,

The investigation is concerned with the washback effects of the culture sub-test in TEM 8. The aim is a) to investigate your attitudes towards the culture sub-test added in 2005 and b) their influences on your teaching methods. Please answer honestly. Be assured that your answers will be treated confidentially and will only be used for research purposes. Thank you for your cooperation!

Please put a cross (×) in the appropriate box.

In questions where numbers are used, 5 is the strongest and 1 is the weakest.

It can be seen that at this initial stage of her thesis work, Hui was content to accept my changes and suggestion without question. It seems that she did not yet have the confidence to her own critical faculties; a tutorial with her shortly afterwards, however, revealed, that she had looked up in a grammar book the two main problems identified above, i.e. use of the definite article and how to use adverbs correctly. In subsequent instalments, problems with these two areas became fewer and less apparent, as can be seen in the extracts presented below.

Following is an extract from the first draft of Hui’s questionnaire, showing questions five and six, which relate to the teachers’ previous experience of teaching culture courses and their perceived necessity, or otherwise, of including a culture sub-test in the Chinese TEM8 test for college students majoring in English.
With respect to the two questions, 5 and 6, it can be seen that most of the feedback was indirect, pointing to problems or potential problems. The final version of the section of the questionnaire took the following form:

5. Which culture-related course did you take since 2005? What do you mean? Are you asking them as a student or a teacher?

- Comprehensive English  
- Linguistics  
- British and American Literature  
- An Introduction to Western Cultures  
- Other do you want them to specify what other course?______________

Part two: Your perception of the culture subtest in TEM8 this needs to be re-phrased more closely. It is too vague:

5=strongly agree   4=agree   3=neither agree nor disagree   
2=disagree        1=strongly disagree

6. It is necessary to include the culture subtest in TEM8. What do you mean by 'necessary' here? It's ambiguous

- 5  
- 4  
- 3  
- 2  
- 1

5=strongly agree   4=agree   3=neither agree nor disagree   
2=disagree        1=strongly disagree

5. Which culture-related course(s) have you taught since 2005?

- Comprehensive English  
- Linguistics  
- British and American Literature  
- An Introduction to Western Cultures  
- Other________________(Please specify courses taught)

Part two: Your apprehensions and understanding of the culture sub-test in TEM8:

5=strongly agree   4=agree   3=neither agree nor disagree   
2=disagree        1=strongly disagree

6. It is advisable to include the culture sub-test in TEM8.

- 5  
- 4  
- 3  
- 2  
- 1

5=strongly agree   4=agree   3=neither agree nor disagree   
2=disagree        1=strongly disagree
It can be seen that with respect to question 5 that the verb “take” was replaced by “taught”, as the appropriate form for indicating that the teachers had not taken a course, i.e. studied as students, but actually taught it. After “other”, Hui added the following information: “Please specify courses taught” (in parenthesis), which requires a more specific and detailed answer. In question 6, “necessary” was replaced by “advisable”. It is debateable if this is the best word from a Western perspective, but when I discussed this with Hui, she assured me that “advisable” would adequately convey the intended meaning to Chinese respondents – which indeed proved to be the case! This example demonstrates that indirect feedback is an effective way of creating independence and self-reliance, two major ingredients of a firm and durable scholarly identity.

4. Hui’s Introduction
The introduction was difficult for Hui to write, clarity of thought and precision of language being particularly challenging for her at this stage of her thesis work. In the introductory section, both direct and indirect feedback proved useful in terms of indicating appropriate words and highlighting important issues.

A Study on the Washback of the Culture Sub-test in TEM 8 ----From the Perspective of Teachers and Students

1. Introduction:
Acting as a gate keeper for language education, employment and career improvement, language testing is omnipresent where? All over the world? In schools? Colleges? Be precise! In China, the publicly recognized hometown?? I don’t think the West thinks of China in this way of testing, is language testing really consistent with its functions and people’s expectations? Among the various English tests in China, such as CET (College English Test), PET (Public English Test) and GSEEE (Graduate School Entrance English Examination), almost all traditionally concentrate on listening, reading, speaking and writing with the aim of measuring these four basic skills. Culture is not considered to be a part of these skills and is thus not included in achievement or a placement tests. This is an important omission.

The above extract, from the first part of Hui’s introduction, shows that there is an approximately equal distribution of direct and indirect feedback in the track changes, though direct feedback is still a little more dominant. The corrections in the direct feedback concern primarily word choice; they also serve to condense the text by removing superfluous words. The indirect feedback focuses primarily on clarity.

At this stage in her writing, and without my suggesting it, Hui chose to deal with my feedback in a new way: she sent me the text below, marking
her revisions/clarifications in purple to demonstrate which changes she had accepted. In the first sentence, she added the word “colleges” in response to my indirect feedback.

A Study on the Washback of the Culture Sub-test in TEM 8
----From the Perspective of Teachers and Students

1. Introduction:
Acting as a gate keeper for language education, employment and career improvement, language testing is omnipresent in colleges. In China, is language testing really consistent with its functions and people’s expectations? Among the various English tests in China, such as CET (College English Test), PET (Public English Test) and GSEEE (Graduate School Entrance English Examination), almost all traditionally concentrate on listening, reading, speaking and writing with the aim of measuring these four basic skills. Culture is not considered to be a part of these skills and is thus not included in achievement or placement tests. This is an important omission.

With regard to the second sentence, Hui modified her statement by presenting it instead in the form of a question. This is an intelligent solution, and while she does not answer her own question immediately, she does confirm later in the introduction that testing is, in fact, omnipresent in the Chinese educational system. She accepted the corrected and abbreviated form of the final sentence without question but stated in the e-mail in which she sent her revised version that she now recognises that she has “a tendency to use too many words”, and that this is a problem she wishes to correct.

5. Hui’s Analysis
Following is one of the final sections of the thesis to be corrected, i.e. the analysis of the results of the questionnaire for teachers. It demonstrates how indirect feedback proved particularly useful in highlighting potential misunderstandings and missed opportunities to link theory and practice, i.e. use earlier discussed theories to illuminate and substantiate the teachers’ answers. Direct feedback is less apparent in this later section because, by this stage, Hui had successfully identified and rectified many of her earlier problems with grammar, punctuation and style.
It is the final sentence that is of particular interest here (the errors marked with the aid of direct feedback were corrected without any problems). Hui responded to my question by e-mail; she did not send me a new version before submitting the whole thesis, a tactic which became increasingly common as her thesis progressed, as she learned to work with my feedback and as her confidence grew. She answered my question as follows: “Since the words are those of one of my teachers and not my own, I cannot change them. But I shall add the following comment in my analysis: ‘even if it is, as teacher C argues, sometimes easier for Chinese learners to understand cultural phenomena if these are explained in Chinese, students have a better chance of improving their vocabulary by getting explanations in English. Also, you can’t always find Chinese equivalents for certain cultural phenomena’. This addition demonstrates Hui’s increased self-confidence; it also shows an admirable astuteness of judgement. Indirect feedback prompted her to make an important addition to her analysis, demonstrating how her scholarly identity gradually developed in and through the writing of her thesis. She knew by this stage why she had made certain decisions, and she was able to defend them.

The above examples, though limited in number and extent, are representative of the development of Hui’s knowledge and understanding of how to write an academic thesis. Her answers below to some short questions on her use of my direct and indirect feedback (these were sent by e-mail after her return to China)\(^3\) bear witness to how feedback helped her

\(^3\) The questions sent by e-mail to Hui in China were a later addition prompted by the production of my conference paper for the “Lärarlärdom” conference in August 2013.
not only to produce a well-written thesis but also to develop a firm scholarly identity on which she can build her planned future studies.

6. Hui’s Evaluation of my Feedback (e-mail)
While Hui claims that at the beginning of her thesis work, it was direct feedback that helped her most, she explains under point “b.” that indirect feedback helped her in three important respects: to identify errors; help her to think about assumptions and question these; and introduce improvements that can be useful in her career as a teacher. She elaborates as follows (N.B. the answers are not edited and contain language, punctuation and spelling errors):

Direct feedback helped me more, especially grammatical problems. For example, I, as a Chinese student, have difficulty in using article very well. If the feedback was “please refer to some grammatical books about article”, I would feel helpless. So direct feedback can help me explicitly and improve my writing accuracy. Indirect feedback can contribute to improving my independent thinking.

She continues:

Feedback can help me in the following ways:

a. help me to identify the existence of errors and deficiency implicitly and explicitly. For example, your feedback that “please be precise, this is an important omission” can encourage me to explore the problem more deeply and turn to some reference books for more information about it to make my thesis more academical and reliable.

b. help to give me some enlightenment. For example, the feedback, such as “is it true? or is this as a basis for comparison?”, can lead me to think twice before revising. What impressed me most was when I began to choose a title for my thesis at the initial stage, I wanted to study that it is necessary to include culture testing into English tests in China, at that moment you asked me, “there isn't any English tests including culture sub-test in China?”, the immediate and enlightening feedback provided me a clear and definite direction for my thesis.

c. give me better suggestions about when and how to provide direct and indirect feedback to my students in the future because appropriate feedback acts as a good remedy to give students timely and accurate guidance.

Hui relates the benefits of feedback not only to her own thesis work but also to her role as a teacher of college students in China. In section a) she points to the advantages of direct feedback in correcting errors; in section b) she acknowledges the importance of indirect feedback in the
furthering of independent thinking, which is closely linked to the development of her scholarly identity; and in section c) she demonstrates how she can utilise what she has learned about feedback in her own teaching situation.

It is Hui’s final comment, however, that is perhaps the most significant in terms of the present article because it is here that she not only acknowledges what she has learned but also how she is now able to visualise a future beyond her Master’s degree:

_I remember that when I was revising my thesis, I often read again and again your summarized feedback, including my strengths and weaknesses. Your corrections on my wording, forms and grammar make my thesis more like English, and your comments on my contents and structure make each part of my thesis more relevant. And I think I know, as a master student, how to finish a thesis from beginning to end, including idea, aims, methods and data analysis. I believe that all of that lay a solid foundation on my next goal—-to be a Ph.D._ (my emphasis)

7. Conclusions
The present study of an individual student is necessarily limited in scope but nonetheless demonstrates that a judicious combination of direct and indirect feedback can enable a student not only to improve the accuracy of his/her language and style but also further the formation of a stable scholarly identity based on an understanding of the rules of the game. Hui’s ambition to write a doctoral thesis and to develop in her profession as a college teacher of English will, if realised, enable her to influence developments within her field and to move forwards to a position of responsibility. This is possible because Hui “believes” that it is possible, and because she has received validation in the form of a high grade for her thesis.

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