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Exploring International Students' Experiences of Assessment Feedback in the UK Higher Education

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Abstract

Recent attention in literature has been given to the agency of students in the feedback process. This research aims to explore the experiences that students have of assessment feedback during their study in EAP programmes. It aims to understand the experiences of international students studying in pre-session courses in the United Kingdom and explore their varied reactions and the factors behind such variations. Results of thematic analysis showed that international students demonstrated a variety of positive attitudes, as well as some negative feelings to assessment feedback on their academic writing. The study showed that the process of feedback involves a complex interplay between the cognitive and affective dimensions that could be affected by different factors. The analysis highlighted the potential factors that either facilitated or hindered the use of feedback, which may contribute to these variations. These were categorised into feedback-related variables, teacher-related variables and learner-related variables. Some practical implications were identified for teaching and learning in UK pre-session settings.

Keywords: assessment feedback; international students; pre-session course; qualitative research.

Introduction

Feedback is generally considered the most powerful tool to influence students' learning and achievement, as it is considered an important function that assessment can and should perform (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; K. Hyland & Hyland, 2006). Traditionally, the old paradigm of feedback was transmission-focused, which was mainly concerned with teachers providing information. Feedback in this manner is seen as only comments without considering what occurs, conceptualising it as a one-way transmission of information from teachers who are considered to be experts to the novice learners. Additionally, students are prevented from being involved in producing their own judgements regarding the feedback process, as they are viewed as passive recipients of the feedback information (Boud & Molloy, 2013); this view of feedback is cognitivist in its representation (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017). The new paradigm is learning -focused, which aims for more of a partnership between teachers and students (Winstone & Carless, 2019). Being positioned as active constructors of feedback, students can establish ongoing dialogues to inform their own judgements with different people in different contexts (Boud & Molloy, 2013). In this model, not only do teachers dominate feedback, but also students can initiate the process through the identification of where feedback information can help them to improve their skills and actively seek it. This requires teachers to assist students to understand how to be

productively engaged in feedback interactions, in order to maintain their active roles in the feedback process.

Additionally, Winstone et al. (2017) stressed the significance of students' 'proactive recipience' of feedback, which indicates "a state or activity of engaging actively with feedback processes; thus, emphasising the fundamental contribution and responsibility of the learner" (Winstone et al., 2017, p.17). This emphasises the concept that the process of effective feedback is not one sided and requires a dialogue and partnership. Briefly, feedback in its new paradigm is a process and not a product, where students are the ones who drive the process instead of the teachers. It is a process where their active involvement is essential to its impact. Students' abilities to evaluate the quality of their own work is central to their involvement in feedback processes within a new paradigm approach (Winstone & Carless, 2019). This paper sheds lights on students as being active agents in the feedback process and aims to find out how they experiences assessment feedback on their academic writing in UK pre-sessional courses. It aims to explore their responses to assessment feedback and what could influence such responses.

Literature Review

Students' experiences of assessment feedback

The literature has revealed that the focus on students as 'proactive recipients' of feedback (Winstone et al., 2017) included an investigation into their perceptions, engagement, responses, as well as uptake of the feedback. It has been found that how students' engage and respond to feedback leads to the facilitation of writing development (Han & Hyland, 2015). In order to understand students' responses, it can be realised through cognitive, behavioural and affective elements that facilitate effective responses to teacher feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2019b). The cognitive dimension is concerned with the beliefs that language learners have in relation to knowledge (i.e. feedback and how they attend to it). The affective dimension refers to students' emotional reactions and their positive or negative feelings to feedback. The behavioural aspect of students' responses deals with students' uptake of feedback, and the revisions they make after they receive it (Ellis, 2010). These three components have been found to be closely interrelated, as students' affective reactions could influence both their cognitive and behavioral responses (Han, 2017; Han & Hyland, 2019; Mahfoodh, 2017; Z. (Victor) Zhang & Hyland, 2018; Zheng & Yu, 2018). However, it has been stated that even though students' responses have pivotal roles in their learning, it remains an under-researched area (Hyland and Hyland, 2019).

The interplay between emotions and student responses

Students' understanding and utilisation of feedback can be influenced by their emotional responses to teacher feedback (Zhang & Hyland, 2018). Furthermore, negative emotional effects or demotivation might cause students to ignore feedback comments (e.g. Poulos & Mahony, 2008), which can be worse for international students who are involved in a new learning community (e. g. Tian & Lowe, 2013). In fact, international students tend to find feedback more critical and upsetting in comparison to home students (Ryan & Henderson, 2018). In addition to the motivational effect, emotions can also directly affect cognitive processing of feedback. Positive emotions, for instance, can increase the focus of attention, whereas reduced attention can result from negative emotions (Huntsinger, 2013). The influence of the emotional aspect was evident in various studies. For example, Hyland (2003) found the level of engagement with form-focused feedback greatly varied among the students in her two case studies. She determined that the emotional reaction of the lower-intermediate student strongly influenced her responses to teacher feedback.

Recently, in their case studies on L2 Chinese learners who were studying in EAP courses, Han and Hyland (2015) revealed the complex nature of students' responses to written corrective feedback. They suggest that the affective dimensions of the learners might hinder or limit students' cognitive and behavioural engagement with feedback. On the other hand, Mahfoodh (2017) investigated the influence of emotional reactions

of EFL learners to teacher written feedback and students' success of revisions. Results have shown that negative emotional responses, such as disappointment, frustration and shock did not influence or limit students to use teacher written feedback effectively. Supported by Han and Hyland (2019), two case studies of Chinese EFL university students demonstrated varied, dynamic and rich emotional reactions to written corrective feedback. They noticed the emergence of negative emotions in both cases, but they were not dominant. They concluded that written corrective feedback may cause positive and neutral emotions - not just negative emotions. They stated that students' negative emotions are not necessarily overwhelming, as these emotions can be only evanescent or might influence students' motivation and revision. Interestingly, they suggested that positive emotions might lead to a reduction in students' mental effort and less commitment to long-term learning goals.

Other research has tried to consider the reasons behind students' disengagement with feedback. In a recent study by Han (2017), it was found that learners' language proficiency influenced all the three dimensions of students' engagement with feedback. The low linguistic levels of the participants affected their ability to notice and correct errors resulting in the feeling of frustration and subsequently failings to successfully revise their work. Similarly, (Z. (Victor) Zhang & Hyland, 2018), as well as Zheng & Yu (2018) found that language proficiency, together with other learner factors, such as beliefs regarding learning, play a crucial role in students' responses to teacher written

feedback. These results are important in highlighting the learners' characteristics and individual needs that might subsequently influence the way that students respond to the feedback.

Researching the factors that affect students' responses to assessment feedback may help in increasing the understanding of the reasons behind both their negative and positive responses. This understanding could form a base knowledge that can be used to enhance their experiences with assessment feedback abroad. Unfortunately, it seems that there is a dearth in research regarding the reasons or factors that cause such variations in students' responses and influence learners' effective use of feedback upon improving their academic writing. Students experience different factors that might either facilitate or hinder their appropriate uptake of feedback. However, limited research appears to focus on exploring these factors and investigating the connection with students' responses to assessment feedback.

Based on the above review, the current study therefore intends to understand the experiences of international students studying in EAP courses in the UK with the assessment feedback on their academic writing. The aim is to explore how they react to their feedback, exploring the reasons behind those variations, and the factors that may either hinder or facilitate their use of assessment feedback and possibly affect their responses. The following two research questions guided the study.

- 1- How do international students respond to assessment feedback on their

academic writing?

- 2- What factors influence students' responses to assessment feedback in the UK pre-sessional courses?

Methodology

This paper reports part of a bigger project that uses a mixed-method approach and follows a sequential exploratory design. In this design, the researcher started with a qualitative research phase that explored participants' views. The data of this phase were first analysed to build into the second quantitative phase. The qualitative phase built up a new instrument that best suits the sample under study and identified specific variables that needed to be examined in a follow-up quantitative phase. In this paper, only the methods and results of the first qualitative phase are reported.

Participants

Ten international students who are studying on an English for Academic Study course (EAS) in the United Kingdom were invited to semi-structured interviews. This course is similar to EAP, as it targets international students who intend to continue their undergraduate or postgraduate study in the United Kingdom and would like to improve their language and academic study skills before they start. This context of study was selected mainly because the focus of the programme is on developing students' academic writing and, therefore, they are exposed to both formative and summative feedback. Table 1 presents the demographic information on the participants.

Table 1 Participants' demographic information

ID	Gender	Age	Discipline	Nationality	Study level	IELTS score	Previous feedback experience
A	Female	25-30	English studies	Saudi	Postgraduate	5.5	None
B	Male	30-35	Business	Saudi	Postgraduate	5.5	None
C	Female	20-25	Business analysis and management	Chinese	Postgraduate	6.5	Limited
D	Female	20-25	Design management	Chinese	Postgraduate	4.5	Limited
E	Female	30-35	Business	Saudi	Postgraduate	6	Limited
G	Female	25-30	Computer science	Saudi	Postgraduate	5.5	Limited
H	Female	25-30	Risk management	Saudi	Postgraduate	6	Limited
J	Female	20-25	Business management	Chinese	Undergraduate	5	None
F	Male	25-30	Applied linguistics	Saudi	Postgraduate	5	None
I	Female	30-35	Applied linguistics	Saudi	Postgraduate	5.5	None

Data collection instrument - Interviews

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, qualitative methods seem to be best as these evaluate the reasons for the occurrence of a phenomenon as well as how it acts and present details of individuals' specific experience (Creswell, 2014). In the current study, the area of interest is exploring international students' experiences of assessment feedback, in both its formative and summative types, on their academic writing in a UK pre-session course.

The interviews were semi-structured, directed by a list of predetermined questions that aimed to keep the interviews within similar parameters and leave a space

for other topics to be discussed. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to be flexible to develop further questions that arise during the interviews in an exploratory manner (Dornyei, 2007). The interview questions were based on the research questions after extensive reading of the literature. The general pre-designed questions were divided into three categories:

- 1) Students' previous feedback experiences before they joined the EAS.
- 2) Students' current views and reaction to assessment feedback on their academic writing including their feelings.
- 3) The factors that either facilitate or hinder their use of feedback with a focus on their emotional aspect.

The interest lies not only in what influences their experiences but also in how they are affected differently and why they responded to the feedback in a particular way. The participants were asked about their previous feedback and experience of academic writing, as the influence of such experiences on learners' responses to feedback has been reported widely in the literature, so it was important to capture this information in advance. Moreover, questions were asked about their assessment feedback experiences, expectations, feelings and thoughts, attitudinal and emotional reactions and the reasons for their reactions. Other questions that were posed related to the challenges that they faced in using assessment feedback.

Data collection procedure

An ethical approval was first obtained from the ethics committee at the University of Southampton (ID:52597). Then, prior to collecting data for the main study, a piloting phase with two participants was carried out to examine the appropriateness of the interview questions in terms of content clarity, procedures and the results that they might yield. The interviews were conducted in three phases on a one-to-one basis. This step strengthen the instrument used in this study as it helps to capture students' responses in different phases during their study. In addition, conducting the interviews after the participants receive their assessment feedback helped in deepen the understanding of their experiences especially the emotional aspect.

The first interview took place a few days after each student had received their first formative feedback. Interviews were audio recorded and notes taken to avoid any unforeseen problems in recording. The data were then transcribed and a memo attached to each participant's files to give their demographic information, a summary of their feedback experiences and any interesting events or comments. This process of attaching memos to raw data in the form of a short narrative helps a researcher to document any thoughts about the data throughout the stages of analysis and to generate a rich understanding of the data set (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). This step facilitated later comparison of the interview data and checking the saturation point.

One month later, after they had received their second formative feedback, the same participants were contacted again to arrange a second interview. After a month, the participants received their summative feedback and grades, and were keen to keep me updated and share their experiences with me. Eight agreed to meet for a third and final interview. The data were then transcribed and analysed, following the general principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data was examined inductively and deductively. It was an iterative process of revisiting the data and the emergent findings by systematically going back and forth through the transcripts. After creating a satisfactory representation of data, the names of themes were reviewed, compared to the literature and refined, making sure that the collated data extracts were coherent and internally consistent.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the interview data revealed that participants in general recognised the importance of assessment feedback, whether formative or summative, and valued its usefulness in improving their academic writing. They all showed highly positive attitudes to their experience of assessment feedback. This is in line with what the literature demonstrates, in that students greatly value their teachers' comments on all aspects of their writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). Their responses to assessment feedback can be classified into two types: Positive responses to assessment feedback and negative responses to critical assessment feedback, along with the variables that

influence their attitudes. These identified themes, along with their codes, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Results of thematic analysis of students' responses to experience of assessment feedback

Theme	Subtheme	Subtheme description
Responses to assessment feedback	Responses to general assessment feedback	This subtheme includes codes related to students' cognitive, affective and behavioral responses to assessment feedback.
	Responses to critical feedback	Statements related to how students respond to the negative comments on their writing.
Potential variables influence language learners' responses	Feedback-related variables	Includes codes related to assessment feedback, which are its quality, quantity, mode and time of delivering feedback.
	Teachers' role	Statements related to the influence of the teacher in either facilitating or inhibiting students' uptake of feedback.
	Learner-related variables	Codes related to learners' emotional and psychological state and contributing to their reactions to assessment feedback. These include their expectations, previous learning experiences, language learning beliefs, goal orientation, resilience, personality hardiness, self-efficacy and attribution style.

Responses to general assessment feedback

The responses to general assessment feedback have been structured into three components based on Hyland and Hyland (2019). They are a cognitive component, which represents thoughts, perceptions, beliefs and ideas about assessment feedback; an affective component, which refers to learners' emotions and feelings towards feedback; and a behavioural component, which relates to the actions or intended behaviour following assessment feedback.

Cognitive responses

Most participants perceived assessment feedback as a source that they can rely on to develop their academic writing. Even though some use other ways, such as reading and practising, they still consider assessment feedback to be a guidance tool that they can make use of to find out their weaknesses. They believe that it helps them to notice their mistakes so they can avoid them in future (feedforward). This feedforward feature, which is demonstrated in the literature as a main aspect of effective feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), results in an increase in students' satisfaction with assessment feedback. All the participants emphasised the benefits of feedback in helping them to notice their mistakes and improve future drafts accordingly. This could be an important aspect to increase the level of students' satisfaction with assessment feedback. Hyland and Hyland (2019) demonstrated that language learners highly appreciated their teachers' feedback, and trusted them as a source of knowledge. Similar to the findings of this study, the participants found that both formative and summative feedback are useful in terms of understanding their weaknesses and explaining the grades that they received.

Behavioural responses

This subtheme is concerned with students' subsequent actions that are taken after they had received their feedback. Most participants took an action after they received comments on their written assignments, even if they aroused negative feelings in them.

They perceived the feedback as a facilitator and opportunity to improve and pass the course. Some preferred to work independently to address the comments, while others asked for more explanation from their tutor, preferring to discuss these comments face to face. These results, which included students' willingness to respond to, seek clarification, and take notice of feedback, as well as perceiving it as important and useful, have been noted as significant aspects that students are required to have in order to successfully engage with feedback (Jonsson & Panadero, 2017).

Even though they had experienced negative feelings, it seemed not to discourage them or inhibit their use of feedback. They appeared resilient in the face of being able to respond to unexpected or, as they described it, negative feedback. A possible explanation for this might be the interplay between students' cognitive and affective reactions to assessment feedback. Students in the qualitative phase commonly believe in the usefulness of their teachers' feedback and its role in developing their writing seems to outweigh their negative feelings towards it. Similarly, this is what Li & Curdt-Christiansen (2020) concluded in their study on five Chinese postgraduate students' reactions towards teacher feedback that affective reactions can be moderated by their changing cognition of the feedback content. Learners' cognition of the learning scaffolding function of critical feedback helped in relieving frustration over the feedback and enabled more effective engagement with it.

Affective responses

The assessment feedback provided to the participants was not without its emotional consequences. Overall, the feelings were different among the participants, as some of them expressed feelings of happiness, excitement, satisfaction and acceptance of their teacher's feedback. Others show feelings of disappointment, anger, sadness and confusion; these feelings varied depending on the type of feedback they received. For example, students who received comments on grammar tended to accept the feedback comments and considered such feedback as minor. Others felt happy and satisfied when the comments showed their weaknesses and provided them with the chance to improve. Comparatively, the vague or overgeneralised comments led some of the students to feel disappointment or sad. Similar to the findings of Mahfoodh (2017), it was found that EFL students expressed various emotional responses to teacher written feedback, and these varied feelings were associated with the type of feedback comments that students received on their writing. Mahfoodh (2017) found that students' feelings of happiness and satisfaction with teachers' feedback was related to different feedback aspects, such as grammar and editing or providing information that were easy for them to address.

The participants in this study justified their positive feelings, stating:

(#E) I got encouraged, the general feedback was motivating and the negative comments were on minor issues for me

(#F) I am satisfied because I see that I am on the right track

(#G) I took all the comments positively because I want to improve my writing

On the other hand, some participants experienced negative feelings upon receiving formative feedback. They mentioned various reasons for these feelings, such as their expectations:

(#B) I got disappointed when I receive the same grade. I was shocked because I thought I would get a high score

(#F) I felt shocked because of unexpected results and notes

Students' expectations, as the findings revealed, can make them feel sad, disappointed or angry at the feedback comments. This subtheme will be discussed later in more details.

Responses to critical assessment feedback

Most of the participants were willing to respond to critical or negative feedback rather than to abandon it. The participants admitted the negative impact of the critical feedback on their emotions, yet some showed various levels of resilience in the face of responding to unexpected or, as they described it, negative feedback. This included the control and regulation of emotions, considering obstacles as a part of their learning journey and remaining positive despite the existence of setbacks. Some participants

perceived the negative comments on their work as their best source of learning and improvement. They indicated that, in order to improve their learning experience, they should learn from these mistakes and increase their efforts. Even when they experienced negative feelings upon first receiving the feedback, they were able to recover and overcome their emotions to achieve their goals. They knew how to interact positively with the difficulties that they faced because of their awareness that these are part of the journey. The following are examples of how they responded to negative feedback:

I put my learning goal in front of me to remember and go back to the track I should be on (#F).

This participant felt shocked and depressed when he first received his feedback; however, he described a strategy that he uses to overcome the influence of the undesirable feedback. Generally, the participants in the qualitative study showed their awareness and appreciation of teacher assessment feedback and they seemed able to control and overcome their negative emotions. A possible explanation is that students' feedback literacy could help them control their emotions and think of feedback as an opportunity to improve, leading eventually to a longer-term uptake of the feedback. They showed that they developed some traits that indicate they become literate students. Feedback literacy is related to students' understanding of what feedback is and how it could be managed effectively. It also includes managing their capacities and

dispositions to use feedback productively and to be able to appreciate teachers' roles and themselves in the feedback process (Carless & Boud, 2018).

They appeared resilient in the face of being able to respond to unexpected or, as they described it, negative feedback. A possible explanation for this might be the interplay between students' cognitive and affective reactions to assessment feedback. Students in the qualitative phase commonly believe in the usefulness of their teachers' feedback and its role in developing their writing seems to outweigh their negative feelings towards it. Similarly, this is what Li & Curdt-Christiansen (2020) concluded in their study on five Chinese postgraduate students' reactions towards teacher feedback that affective reactions can be moderated by their changing cognition of the feedback content. Learners' cognition of the learning scaffolding function of critical feedback helped in relieving frustration over the feedback and enabled more effective engagement with it.

Variables influencing language learners' responses

Multiple variables have been revealed in the data that could affect learners' responses to feedback received. These are grouped and presented in three categories in the following sections, they are feedback-related variables, teacher-related variables, and learner-related variables. The learner related variables are presented in the following five categories: student expectations, previous learning experiences, language mindset beliefs, goal orientation and self-efficacy.

Feedback-related variables

When responding to the teacher formative feedback, several variables were reported by the participants and were found to either facilitate or inhibit students' proper uptake of feedback. Among these is the feedback quality in terms of its specificity and clarity and its quantity. Some learners found it difficult to respond to the comments that are general and not clear. In comparison, the majority tend to find teachers' feedback to be clear and related to their work which resulted in facilitating its use and increasing students' satisfaction.

With regard to the volume or quantity of feedback, some students commented unfavourably on the feedback that is very detailed while others were looking for more detailed comments on their writing; only comments that focused on grammar were not favoured by most of the participants and considered superficial. The variations in their responses might be related to their individual development, where each student looks at the assessment feedback based on their individual needs

Teacher-related variables

The qualitative data analysis showed the significant role of the feedback provider, who was the teacher in this study. The way students perceive their teachers evidently helps to determine how to respond to the feedback they receive. Hyland & Hyland (2019b)

concluded that students' appreciation and value of teacher feedback over other sources is due to the perceptions they have of teachers as knowledgeable and trustworthy. Similarly, the results of the current study showed similar and important dimensions related to the teachers and its influence on students' responses. One of these dimensions was related to students' perceptions of the teachers' characteristics, such as the level of knowledge and experience.

Specifically, one of the interviewees mentioned that she prefers to receive formative feedback from one specific teacher, as she believes that due to his age he would have more knowledge and experience. She felt that such characteristics made her perceive this teacher as a credible source of feedback. This could indicate that the feedback from senior academics is appreciated more, as they are seen as more valid and reliable.

Learner-related variables

It is important to consider feedback from the perspective of how it is received, such as learners' individual, social, cultural and psychological factors. These variables have been reported to be crucial in learners' use of the feedback, as well as the psychological aspects of the learners, which seem to direct the way students respond to assessment feedback. Different subthemes have emerged that are related to learners. These variables include their expectations, previous learning experiences, their mindset beliefs, goal orientations, and self-efficacy.

Student expectations

One strong subtheme that arose from the data and affected students' responses to assessment feedback is their expectations. It was seen in both the formative and summative feedback data, with the latter being more apparent as learners' satisfaction with the grade and feedback comments was influenced by their expectations. Almost all participants' responses, feelings and use of the feedback were affected by their expectations. When asked for their first impressions of feedback, the participants answered:

I felt good about the feedback, almost as expected (#G)

The last feedback I got was very good and expected. I am happy with it because the formative feedback helped me to notice my mistakes and I was able to avoid them (#H).

The feedback of these two participants met their expectations and influenced them positively. Those who found the feedback went against their expectations felt depressed and shocked, but they did not ignore it completely. It is apparent that learners' expectations may be part of what lies behind the differences in their satisfaction (Robinson, Pope, & Holyoak, 2013) and responses to assessment feedback. The results of this study show that students' expectations did not obstruct the use of their feedback

comments to improve their academic writing. All the participants were keen to understand their feedback and address all its comments, even if they were not satisfied. However, it seems that the negative emotions were evanescent and did not affect participants' engagement with feedback. These results are consistent with Mahfoodh (2017), together with Han and Hyland (2019), who also found that the emergent negative emotions did not influence or limit students to use teacher written feedback effectively. These feelings were temporary and usually emerged initially when reading the feedback, and would then gradually disappear.

Previous learning experiences

Previous learning experiences seem to influence participants' responses and attitudes toward feedback. Some of them had limited experience of feedback, while others had no experience of either academic writing or using feedback. For many participants, it was their first exposure to an academic environment in which is expected that formative feedback plays an important role in learning.

Learners' experiences are considered in the literature as a fundamental determinant of whether one can perform certain tasks. Similarly, participants' responses may be influenced by their previous learning experience, in the context of feedback (Evans, 2013). Even the negative emotions that they experienced upon first receiving feedback may be due to their lack of experience in dealing with feedback. This was evident in one of the interviewee's answers. She had noticed a gradual change in her

attitude. At the beginning of her study, she used to be shocked, disappointed and could not understand how to use the feedback: *At the beginning, I did not understand these comments which affected me negatively but now I feel I am much better because I got used to it (#G).*

Previous studies, such as Tian and Lowe (2013) reported the gradual change of Chinese students' attitudes towards tutor feedback in a 12-month longitudinal multiple-case study in a British university. They found that students expressed intense initial emotional reactions that obstructed their engagement with the content of feedback, as it was contrary to their expectations and different from their previous learning experience. This dissonance led them to interpret formative feedback comments as summative judgement of their work and themselves.

Language mindset beliefs

This subtheme includes learners' beliefs about language learning and how they perceive ability in learning a language. Participants' responses showed that they appear unconvinced that people are born with an innate ability to learn languages. When asked about the main factors in language learning, all attributed successful learning to malleable traits that are controlled by the learner. These include 'the desire or passion to learn', 'determination', self-autonomy and 'intrinsic motivation'. These participants explicitly attributed successful learning to personal choices, over which learners have

control. Attributing successful language learning to controllable traits or factors that can be developed makes learners feel that the whole learning process is under their own management. In addition, participants were asked about their perceived ability in academic writing. All felt that it is a trait that can be changed and developed, and they believed in the malleability of their writing ability and language learning in general.

Those with such beliefs about language learning have been described in the literature as having a 'growth mindset' (Dweck, 2000), in contrast to those with a 'fixed mindset', who believe that personal attributes such as intelligence are fixed and cannot be changed. A growth mindset considers these traits flexible and that there is always a possibility to change or improve them. The literature suggests that fixed-mindset individuals engage to a lesser extent with the academic feedback that they receive, as they believe that attempts at improvement are useless (Forsythe & Johnson, 2017). Participants in this study adopted more growth-mindset beliefs and were willing to make use of the feedback comments to improve their writing skill. A possible interpretation of this finding is that most participants are postgraduates, and it has been assumed that they normally experience fewer challenges when starting to deal with new learning environments.

Goal orientation

Goal orientation refers to learners' propensity either to learning or to performance goals (Dweck, 2000). Performance goals are about showing one's abilities and intelligence to

win positive judgements of performance and avoid negative ones, and to look smart rather than stupid. People who set such goals try to avoid mistakes by completing tasks that they already know they are good at and avoiding challenging ones. By contrast, a propensity to have learning goals is about increasing competence by mastering new skills and understanding new things to increase intelligence (Elliott & Dweck, 1988).

Learners' goal orientation was found to be a factor in their use of feedback. Although the majority showed an interest in learning a language for internal instrumental motives, some showed a change in their preference for studying English for contextual reasons. Some clearly demonstrated their orientation to learning goals when it came to English learning. They revealed a desire to improve their skills, including academic writing, and to increase their abilities. Therefore, they exploited each opportunity to achieve their goals: *'The feedback is an opportunity for me to improve my writing and I'll make use of it'* (#E). By contrast, a participant with a performance goal stated, *'I wanted to see the grade because it will determine if I will work more or no'* (#G). This participant was not interested in the feedback to learn but in the grade, because her goal was to pass the course.

It has been reported that students' high uptake of feedback is driven by the goal to improve their learning (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010; Lou and Noels, 2017). This means that learners who set learning goals are more likely to make use of the feedback that they receive, as they are keener to learn and improve their writing. On the other

hand, learners with performance goals may ignore or not use the feedback, as doing so could draw attention to their incompetence. Thus, they might end up opting to avoid the feedback that they receive on their writing.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to students' beliefs regarding their abilities in academic writing and the capability of the use of assessment feedback and to adhere to the academic writing conventions. In regards to their capacities to address their assessment feedback comments, most of the participants talked confidently about their abilities to use their feedback and improve their academic writing. They also indicated that the role of the teacher was the main reason behind their confidence. One of the participants mentioned that *"I am very confident in using the feedback; our teacher guidance was of a great help for me"* (#E). Comparatively, another participant showed a different level of self-efficacy, who stated that *"I am not that confident about using the feedback the way I should use it, but I think I will be able to do so later by practicing"* (#B). The participant was evidently not sure about his ability to use the feedback appropriately, although he is hoping to change this through practice. Being reluctant to use assessment feedback could lead to the ignorance of important comments or misuse of them.

Another participant illustrated that feedback comments affected her confidence in word choice, in particular, which she considered a confident area for herself. This

demonstrated that students tend to judge their abilities in writing through their teachers' feedback comments. In addition, some of them expressed their willingness to receive more constructive feedback, while others seek positive feedback to enhance their confidence and provide them with positive feelings. These findings are also in line with previous studies that noticed a development of students' SE, due to teacher feedback over a period of academic writing courses (Ruegg, 2018; Zhang & Province, 2018) indicating the significant influence of teacher feedback on students' SE in writing, especially with students whose English proficiency level was low.

Conclusions

This study focused on the active role of students as active constructors in the feedback process, as well as outlining the factors that could affect them. It reveals the variations in their responses and what could lead to such differences in the way that they respond to assessment feedback. Results showed that most participants showed positive responses to assessment feedback, even though they expressed negative feelings at some point. Various variables or factors seem to play a role in either facilitating or limiting the uptake of assessment feedback, and psychological aspects seemed to have an important influence on their interpretations and reactions.

Additionally, this study adds to research on the EAP contexts and the experiences of international students who are undertaking these courses. By uncovering the factors

that influence their experiences, EAP teachers' awareness in regards to what could limit the effectiveness of the feedback they provide can be increased, and international students' experiences with assessment feedback can consequently be enhanced. By understanding students' responses to assessment feedback, teachers in EAP programmes might determine certain ways to promote the effectiveness of the feedback provided to their students. Teachers need to be aware of the impact of the feedback provided on their students' emotional responses. Specifically, the significance of these emotions should not be overlooked, as Poulos and Mahony (2008) argue that negative feelings lead students to blame themselves for their performance, which could lead them to withdraw from their study if they lose confidence in their abilities (Poulos & Mahony, 2008). In addition, the negative feelings might affect students in improving their writing effectively and to feel negative regarding their learning experiences.

Furthermore, enhancing students' self-efficacy and mindsets are other aspects that need to be considered in order to enhance a positive experience with assessment feedback.

The way feedback is provided can affect students' motivational beliefs either positively or negatively, which subsequently influences how and what they learn (Lou and Noels, 2017). These variables emphasise the importance of the psychological dimension, as it plays a critical role on how students respond and act upon feedback. It is argued that these beliefs affect the learning goals that students set for themselves and influence the amount of effort they apply (Gan, Hu, Wang, Nang, & An, 2020). Therefore, it is suggested that enhancing students' competence in writing should be provided with

special consideration in these programmes, which could be achieved through positive feedback and encouragement. In particular, previous research (e.g. Gan et al., 2020) found that a good level of English language SE is likely to function as a catalyst for students' feedback engagement.

Even though the findings of this study are useful, it has a number of limitations that need to be acknowledged. This study was conducted with a small sample from a single course in one institution. In addition, most of the participants were mainly from two groups: Arabs and Chinese. Including more participants from different EAP programmes in the UK and from various nationalities might yield different perspectives on the phenomena under research. Another limitation is that the current study focused on students' perspectives only; thus, future research could include teachers' perspectives and what they consider when providing assessment feedback. It can also explore their reactions to students' responses, in order to portray a holistic picture of students' experiences of assessment feedback.

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