Lulu Zhang[a]; Ying Zheng[b*]

[a] *Faculty of Foreign Languages, Anyang University, China;*

[b]*Faculty of Humanities, University of Southampton, UK[*]*

Corresponding author email: ying.zheng@soton.ac.uk; ORCID: orcid.org/0000-0003-2574-0358
Avenue campus, Faculty of Humanities, University of Southampton, SO17 1BF.

Feedback as an Assessment for Learning Tool: How Useful can It be?

Abstract

This study investigates the feedback practices and perceptions of lecturers and students in a UK university setting. To assess how lecturers give feedback in practice, 47 pieces of lecturer-written feedback were categorised into a total of 571 analytical points. Analysing the feedback from lecturers' perspectives in terms of the value of feedback, the role of feedback and the effectiveness of feedback helps in an understanding of the rationale for and effects of feedback provision. The results of feedback analyses from students' perspectives show the impact of individual background and intercultural communication barriers on the effective reception of feedback. Differences were identified between students and lecturers' views of feedback as an assessment for learning tool.

Keywords: feedback analysis; referential feedback; expressive feedback; directive feedback; assessment for learning

Introduction

Feedback and assessment are integral parts of teaching and learning. Providing feedback on students' assignments is a fundamental pedagogical practice in higher education (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). 'Feedback is information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way' (Ramaprasad, 1983, p. 4). As a part of a continuing instructive process, feedback allows students to track their performance and focus their efforts, directions and strategies for improvement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Feedback enables students to feel valued and supported by teachers and peers, as well as to fit into the academic community. However, students sometimes find lecturer-written feedback overwhelming and difficult to understand

or process (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010); while on the other hand teachers may not be fully aware of the feedback students find beneficial (Montgomery & Baker, 2007). To explore the extent to which feedback can be useful in helping students improve, this study looks at the practices and perceptions of lecturers and students in a UK university context. The study aims to gain some insights into how lecturers and students utilise feedback to better their teaching and learning.

Literature Review

Feedback as a key assessment tool creates a learning environment for developing and informing learners' judgement for future-oriented or sustainable learning, and also for teachers' effective teaching (Boud & Molloy, 2013; DeLuca & Klinger, 2010; Hattie, 2011; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2002). The dialogic nature of feedback enables teachers and students to revisit and rethink their own teaching and learning (Dann, 2015). On one hand, teachers assess students' learning performance in the hope of providing students with the most appropriate suggestions possible. On the other hand, feedback given on a student's current performance and ideal performance encourages students to take necessary actions to close this gap. Students interpret what they think their teachers expect them to learn and make sense of these in their own ways based on self-assessment and self-adjustment. Teachers utilise students' response and achievement to plan instruction and refine their own approach to assessment professionally, which will, in turn, enhance student performance and achievement (Popham, 2008; Wiliam & Thompson, 2007).

Assessment for Learning (AfL), noted by Black and Wiliam (1998) as expanding the notion of formative and diagnostic assessment, is 'the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go, and how best to get there' (Assessment Reform Group 2002, p. 2). Researchers acknowledge that the ways students are assessed influence the quality of their learning (Biggs, 1999; Gibbs, 1999; Hyland, 2000). According to Jones (2005), successful assessment for learning strategies hinge on the nature of feedback, its content and the way it is received and used by learners. AfL takes advantage of various pedagogical techniques including self and peer assessment, providing feedback and establishing expectations of students, learning level and assessment criteria (DeLuca & Klinger, 2010). Feedback from the AfL perspective 'has the capacity to turn each item of assessed work into an instrument for the further development of each student's learning (Hyland, 2000, p. 234).

Different feedback models have been proposed by researchers over the years. Hattie and Timperley (2007) identified four levels of feedback, i.e. feedback about the task, feedback about the processing of the task, feedback about self-regulation, and feedback about the self as a person. They concluded that feedback about the self as a person is the least effective, while feedback about self-regulation and about the processing of the task are more powerful. Holmes (2001; 2013) suggested a model of three functions of speech, i.e. referential function, expressive function and directive function. Kumar & Stracke (2007) further extended Holme's three functions of speech in analysing written feedback and provided further categorisation for feedback analysis. In the extended model, referential feedback includes feedback on local issues and global issues. The former refers to language error correction,

editorial comments; while the latter centres on content, organisation and ideas. Expressive feedback provides praise and criticism, relating to the student and also to the task. The directive function of feedback, including indirect suggestions and direct instructions, aims to enhance students' performance. Directive feedback also involves students' self-regulation and students' passivity. Holmes (2001; 2013) further noted that many utterances may embody more than one function, and many functions may be fulfilled by a more extended discourse that goes beyond a single utterance.

The section below reviews relevant studies pertaining to the major types of feedback from both teachers and students' perspectives, as research seems to suggest that their perceptions of the usefulness of written feedback sometimes seem to diverge. When it comes to the referential type of feedback, one of the primary debates is on error correction feedback, also known as grammar correction (Truscott, 1999). Error correction feedback can be helpful (e.g. Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2003) or unhelpful (e.g. Truscott, 2004). Those who regard error correction feedback as ineffective do not consider it can satisfy students' demands on error correction (e.g. Krashen, 1982; Truscott, 2007). Students' failure to implement correction is an inherent problem, and teachers' error correction feedback could worsen their lack of confidence in writing. Those in favour of error correction feedback warn against dismissing students' strongly held beliefs that grammar instruction could help enhance their language knowledge (e.g. Ferris, Liu, Sinha & Senna 2013; Montgomery & Baker, 2007). Teachers should provide more error correction feedback reflecting their expectations of students, even where focusing on error correction is contrary to their original intent. In addition, researchers found that students valued error corrective feedback, but also paid attention to feedback on

global issues (e.g. Kumar & Stracke, 2007; Radecki & Swales, 1988). Students claimed teacher's feedback including substantial but not burdensome details could improve their learning (Hargreaves, 2013; Maclellan, 2001).

Expressive feedback is one of the most common forms of feedback. The common use of praise by teachers is considered useful to promote students' learning (Orsmond & Merry, 2011). Students might prefer positive comments in that praise tends to encourage them and lead them to the appreciation of their own achievement and enjoyment of acceptance from others (Ferguson, 2009; Walker, 2009; Weaver, 2006). More importantly, praise could have the feeding forward benefit, i.e., utilising feedback positively to improve future work (Bevan, Badge, Cann, Willmott & Scott, 2008; Duncan, 2007; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2001). Henderlong and Lepper (2002) and Hattie and Timperley (2007), however, noted that praise, which is considered less directly linked to the learning task or assignment per se, offers little help to learning and may undermines students' self-regulation. Some students might see praise negatively while regarding criticism as positive (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Where criticism was seen as a necessary component of the process, different strategies were adopted to avoid confrontational expressions and reduce potential loss of face, while praise had the potential to boost students' self-approbation. Pajares & Graham (1998) found teachers psychologically comfort students instead of pointing out what has been done wrong. Farr (2011) claimed that whichever form students preferred, the balance between praise and criticism should be the priority when giving feedback. Only when feedback provokes emotions, either positive or negative, could it support learning (Hargreaves, 2013).

Furthermore, researchers found that students valued explicit instructions and that feedback was able to identify students' weaknesses and strengths in writing and establish writing conventions (e.g. Poverjuc, 2011; Price, et al., 2010; Walker, 2009). Students associate the types of feedback that included explanations as to what was wrong, why and how to do better, with helpful and effective feedback (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008). Hidden messages in feedback which requires further investigation on the students' side tend to be regarded as ineffective (Farr, 2011; Hyland, 2013). Teachers, however, tend to favour implicit suggestions or vague feedback, which demand greater student involvement in self-regulated learning. They are inclined to adopt hedging in providing feedback, for example, negative feedback is included along with instructions and suggestions to help avoid embarrassment or the potentially depressing effects of criticism (Hyatt, 2007; Lee, 2013; Straub, 2000).

Tertiary education worldwide is witnessing more and more international students undertaking degree programmes together with domestic students. Different international learning environments may pose increased concerns in terms of the way feedback is delivered and received. Evans and Waring (2011) suggested that cultural variables should be considered when providing students' feedback, given that student assessment feedback preferences and the way of promoting students' learning could be affected significantly by these variables. Bartram (2008) also claimed that the interaction between culture and individual difference variables could influence how feedback is perceived. Findings of the studies reviewed above point out a need to carry out a study to investigate students' and lecturers' perceptions of the effectiveness of feedback in the more and more globalised higher education context. To study the content of feedback, this research adopts Holmes' model of functions of speech, i.e.

referential, expressive and directive functions (Holmes, 2001; 2013). The following two research questions were addressed:

- How do university lecturers give feedback on student written assignments?

- What kinds of feedback are considered valuable by student participants?

Research Methodology

Convenience sampling was conducted to recruit five full-time taught Masters students in two Applied Linguistics programmes (total students are around 45) in a UK university and two in-service lecturers in this discipline (there are close to 20 lecturers/professors in total). Student participants from different countries with various backgrounds provided their received module assignment feedback to the researchers.

Student participants' demographic and educational information were collected (see Table 1 in Appendix). They are referred to as S1, S2, S3, S4, and S5 hereafter. Four out of the five students were international students speaking English as an additional language. One held a Bachelor of Science degree while the other four held Bachelor of Arts degrees. Although some of them had previous essay writing experience, it was the first time any of these participants had written an academic essay in Linguistics. Pseudo names, Frank and Gabriella, were given to the two lecturers. Frank had extensive experience as a senior tutor and professor, teacher-trainer and curriculum developer in the field. Gabriella was a lecturer with an international background. The five student participants and two lecturers are from the same department, but due to the module selection and data collection constraints, the feedback

collected are not necessarily from the two lecturer participants.

The data consists of two sets, a coded analysis of written feedback complemented by interview data. To be specific, set one contains 47 pieces of feedback given on 24 assignments in 12 postgraduate courses. A total of 571 analytical points were identified corresponding to their referential, expressive and directive functions of feedback. The analysis of feedback aimed at identifying how lecturers give feedback in practice. Each feedback was coded by one researcher and reviewed by the other. For example, 'the assignment is well-written although it would have been useful to have different sections organising the themes' (S1). The word 'well' could be interpreted as a sign of praise; 'although' could be used as a marker for criticism; 'would have been' could indicate some potential for improvement; suggestions were accompanied with information on the importance of a structured arrangement of the topic.

Set two data contains semi-structured interviews from both students and lecturers. The questions inquired in the process of interviews were conducted based on the results of feedback analysis. The interviews of students focused on the feedback they received, centring on two parts: their previous writing and feedback experience, and their attitudes and preferences to different types of feedback. The lecturer interviews embraced three main themes to elicit their concerns in terms of referential, expressive and directive feedback; their experience in giving feedback; and their expectation on the application of feedback.

Combining these two sets of data is helpful in addressing the research aim stated in this study because not only actual feedback evidence from assignments are analysed, but also the views of feedback providers and receivers are gathered to understand their perception and

identify gaps of understanding, if any. The section below presents the results of the analysis

of the above two sets of data. Coded analysis of the written feedback are presented first,

followed by interview data organised according to the themes emerged from interviews.

Results

Analysis of Written Feedback

The distribution of 571 analytical feedback points from 47 pieces of feedback (see Table 2)

shows that students are given more feedback in the expressive category than in the other two

feedback categories. Referential feedback is the least given and local issues are rarely

mentioned among all types of feedback, accounting for less than 5%. Praise occurs 28% of

the time across the 571 analytical feedback points, with criticism represented at 12%.

Table 2. Distribution of feedback counts

	Referential Function		Expressive Function		Directive Function		Total
Students	Global issues	Local issue	Praise	Criticism	Indirect suggestion	Direct instruction	
S1	35(25%)	9(7%)	35(25%)	13(10%)	40(29%)	6(4%)	138
S2	39(26%)	4(3%)	48(32%)	16(10%)	29(19%)	15(10%)	151
S3	16(19%)	5(6%)	31(37%)	12(14%)	13(16%)	7(8%)	84
S4	18(24%)	3(4%)	10(14%)	12(16%)	22(30%)	9(12%)	74
S5	26(21%)	7(6%)	37(30%)	13(10%)	22(18%)	19(15%)	124
Total counts	134(23%)	28(5%)	161(28%)	66(12%)	126(22%)	56(10%)	571
	162(28%)		227(40%)		182(32%)		571

In terms of referential function, some pieces of feedback mention editorial issues, for example, 'unprofessional references', 'quotations', 'paragraphing' and 'word count'; three out of 47 pieces of feedback point out 'proofreading and phrasing'. Some comments relate to global issues with 'well written introduction' and 'coherent review of literature'. Among expressive feedback, there are no 'bad' direct criticisms but there are various forms of praise, for instance: 'clear and effective', 'generally very good', 'accurate use', 'I enjoy…' In the cases of descriptions of deficiency, expressions, such as: 'clear but occasionally confusing', 'a bit more', 'interesting but remains general', and 'not clear', were used. In terms of direct feedback, the word 'should' is used to give direct instructions while the structure of 'would / could have done,' and expressions such as 'would be better if you could', 'why', 'I am not sure' are adopted within indirect suggestions.

Lecturers' Views on Written Feedback

Two lecturer participants provided part of the 47 written feedback samples to students' module assignments examined in this study. They were then interviewed to gauge their views on written feedback stemming from Holmes' framework; in particular, they were asked about their views on referential feedback, why lecturers gave more emphasis to global issues instead of local issues, how they view expressive feedback, and what makes them value direct or indirect suggestions.

Referential Feedback

Examples of feedback show that lecturers tend to comment on the introduction and summary. For example, 'Your introduction is clear in describing research background of the chosen

study' (S4); 'This is a clear and well-written critique, with a sound summary which provides both an overview and key details - such as the themes developed from the content analysis of the interviews' (S3). Frank, the senior tutor and professor, mentioned that he concerned himself with the opening section, the introduction: '*If I was confused at the end of the first paragraph or at the end of first page, I will give feedback on that.*' He highlighted the necessity for a well-stated introduction, and stressed the function of the introduction is to shape readers' initial impressions of the arguments, the overall quality of the writing. The introduction should capture readers' interest, making him/her want to keep reading. He felt that his emphasis on the introduction might motivate the students to learn to write good introductions.

Another issue is striking a balance between being analytical and being descriptive. For example: 'There is very little analysis: there is some discussion about the cultural significance of red /black in Japan but this is very brief indeed' (S1). Frank suggested 'students should describe how things are, also make clear the reason why things are like this and what the connecting factors are'. Both lecturer participants mentioned that they also sometimes struggled with keeping the balance between being analytical and descriptive in providing feedback due to time and space limits. They felt good feedback should link individual feedback to the general phenomenon in the class, and believed that students are supposed to learn new techniques given in feedback, since feedback itself is regarded as a potential learning resource. They commented that ideally students shall be able to apply observations made in feedback to their subsequent pieces of work.

Contrary to feedback on global issues, error correction did not attract great support from lecturers. Both lecturers agreed that language accuracy is as important as written content, but that feedback at postgraduate level should emphasise originality, coherence and cohesion rather of language error correction. Frank mentioned that though he had previously focussed on language, nowadays he commented mainly on the content rather than the form. He commented on language only when the words chosen might confuse the readers. Meanwhile, Gabriella, the less experienced lecturer, concentrated her feedback primarily on writing assessment criteria. '*If the module does not specify language requirements, I think language is not that important in grading.*' However, when language uses hinder an understanding of the content, she added, '*I will make a comment on it… in the hope that the student would be able to clarify it*'.

Expressive Feedback

As well as the high frequency of referential feedback, expressive feedback is also commonly found. Praise was included in every case studied, no matter how bad the writing was. For example, S1 failed one assignment and the written feedback was full of suggestions for improvement; the lecturer was still able to discover some points of merit. 'One aspect I liked was your integration of your own experiences' (S1). Most praise within feedback is given in the context of specific explanations. For example: 'In general, your article fulfils the requirements of the assignment well. First, you provide a clear and accurate overview of your chosen research. You then begin your evaluation with the strengths of the chosen research in terms of methodology and data analysis, showing your good understanding of the selected writing. After that, you move on to critical evaluation with apt use of references to support

your points and critique.' (S2). Lecturers offer praise through a depiction of the structure of the essay. Such comments are plentiful at the beginning of the feedback. The synthesis of praise and criticism also makes feedback specific. Positive feedback is placed either immediately before or after criticisms, and linked with words such as 'however', 'but', 'apart from these'.

Both lecturer participants thought that appropriate expressive feedback somehow enhanced students' intrinsic motivation while negative feedback hurts students' feelings and increases anxiety about academic writing. Frank echoed Hyland and Hyland's (2001) findings that positive feedback boosts students' confidence and cushions impending criticisms. Subtle praise could comfort students both emotionally and practically inasmuch as it lends guidance on how to improve writing and encourage students to continue writing and learning. Lecturers use positive comments to hint at the improvements attainable in future writing. Frank recalled his story with the word 'interesting', which was followed by the word 'but'. '*Many years ago, a student said to me, the worst word for her was 'interesting'. When I said 'interesting', she always knew that 'but' would follow; there was always a 'but'. She did not like that word, a very negative word. It is not actually good, but the beginning of a negative comment.*' Frank hoped that students could spend at least the same amount of time reflecting on the feedback given as lecturers spent providing it. He considered that one secret of learning lay in the students investing as much as the lecturers did.

Directive Feedback

Language used in feedback practices is sometimes featured with certain tentativeness or

hedging. One of the tactics used is the involvement of the lecturer's personal feelings. For example: 'While I was reading and enjoying your critiques on page 3, I felt the need for a conclusion highlighting your main critiques' (S2). Unlike such expressions 'I feel', 'there is a feeling', wh- questions are also frequently utilised, thereby engaging the receiver at a deeper level. 'It is sometimes not clear why you begin and end paragraphs, i.e. why you separate sections which seem to belong together' (S3). Gabriella commented that lecturers do not usually point out problems directly or force students to rewrite according to the lecturer's idea. They urge students to reflect independently and decide what suggestions should be accepted. Gabriella argued students should not assume that tutors are always correct or even more knowledgeable than students. She thought sometimes students had better ideas or broader insights than lecturers. She expected students to consider lecturers' judgements objectively, hoping that students could transfer the questions and solutions to next assignments.

In written feedback, other linguistic devices besides personal involvement and wh-questions have been identified. Approximators, modality and hypothetical structuring account for a large proportion. To avoid overly controlling students' writing, lecturers apply such structures to show various possibilities. '*I liked your observations on the difficulty in maintaining equal roles here, but would have liked to have a bit more of a personal take on this too*' (S1). Lecturers tend to use the structure 'would', 'could', 'perhaps', 'may' and 'would have done', 'if' to confirm students' current ideas whilst offering choices for making improvements. Frank and Gabriella both said that the intention is to help students make a comparison between what they have done and what could have been done. For instance, if S1

14

had covered his personal experience in his observation, the writing would have been more substantial. Lecturers apply extensive linguistic devices to make suggestions more suggestive. As Frank said, '*…I am not saying you must do this. It is your choice, so it is just a suggestion.…But I know I use 'perhaps' because I want to be the adviser, I am not the writer. I said to my student, you are the writer. I am just a reader, a reviewer'*.

Although indirect suggestions sometimes seem vague, Frank values those vague comments as the most useful for student writing. '*I think all comments are useful and could help improve students' work, but I would say that the vaguer the comments are, the harder comments to act on, but they are probably the most useful*.' Frank believed that vague comments urged students to spend time analysing the implications and possibilities of their writing. The more time students spent on understanding vague feedback, the longer they would retain the information. Frank and Gabriella did not suggest giving straightforward instructions with an imperative tone. They commented that such a hierarchical lecturer-student relationship is not appropriate in a modern UK tertiary context.

Students' Perceptions of Written Feedback

This section addresses the issue of how students view written feedback they received. All students declared the same desire for effective feedback. '*Personally, I think every piece of feedback is aimed at improvement and making me think about my next piece of work*' (S2). Feedback is supposed to be designed to provide guidelines for improvement and techniques for future assignments. However, on some occasions, feedback provided does not meet students' needs. S3 does not think feedback is practical enough since some feedback is vague,

which hinders her understanding. As she claimed, *'I am confused by what is really good and what is really bad'*, *'I am not sure which path to follow to improve. It is not clear'* (S3). S2 also pointed out feedback did not exert influence on her writing approach. She highlighted that *'personal practice is more important than getting feedback'* (S2). S4 and S5 thought feedback should point out strengths and weaknesses directly. Both of them mentioned they are used to the traditional teaching method in their country, where spoon-feeding education is the usual norm instead of being encouraged to think independently and critically.

Participants also gave various reactions to the question of discussing feedback with lecturers. Four student participants with teaching experience, had made appointments with lecturers to discuss their writing and feedback. *'If I do not understand, I will normally make an appointment with the lecturer'* (S3). S1 mentioned that he discussed feedback with lecturers only when there was a second writing assignment for the module. S2 only ever emailed once on a question about plagiarism. S4 mentioned she had conversations with lecturers about failing an assignment. Participants with teaching experience did discuss the value of feedback, whatever the problem might be. S5, a student without such experience, was unwilling to discuss her writing, or perhaps less aware of such possibility than the others. The following sections grouped students' reactions to different types of feedback they received, namely referential feedback, expressive feedback, and directive feedback.

Referential Feedback

As mentioned before, referential feedback entails global as well as local issues. Almost all pieces of feedback contains feedback on global issues, very few dealt with language accuracy.

However, most non-native English speakers mentioned that they had been looking for feedback on language. S5 said she always paid more attention to her language accuracy when writing in English and had hoped that studying in the UK would help her to better her English, whereas S1, as a native English speaker, voiced his concern over the content of his writing rather than the language. '*Personally, I care more about the content. I normally ignore the language accuracy section but I do get a bit annoyed if my language accuracy is marked low!*' (S1). As an experienced English teacher in Japan as well as an overseas student studying in the UK and the US on several occasions, S2 is confident in her English. Her strict teacher in Japan helped her lay solid foundations for good habits in English writing. She cared more about content. S3, another English teacher with 6-year teaching experience, had a different view from S2. Her teaching focus affects her own writing. She explained that '*I know the language is always important, and I know that it is something that can be improved. As for the content, you just need to work harder. That is what you have to do. But to improve the structure and language, you need some specific feedback*' (S3). She believed that feedback on local issues could immediately improve her writing and could be able to be transferred to future assignments.

Concerning the focus on global issues, student participants had slightly different concerns. S1, the native English speaker, preferred feedback on writing style. He explained what he had written in his previous UK university was startlingly different from the essay requirements in this discipline. Writing here focused more on analysis whilst the writing he did before payed more attention to description (S1). He took one semester to get used to the new writing style. S5 had the same issue as S1 regarding the need to be analytical. She

attributed her lack of analysis to her previous traditional Chinese education, in which she was less encouraged to give her own opinion. S2 said she was confused by topic sentences in English writing, which differed from the essays she did in Japan. Japanese writers tend to place topic sentences at the end of the paragraph while English writing encourages the use of topic sentences to guide the direction of the argument. Similarly, S4 concentrated on the problem of organising ideas, while several lecturers pointed out that she did not have a clear picture of the focus of the topic.

Expressive Feedback

Praise, as a strategy of politeness and encouragement, was commonly used in feedback. Students of diverse backgrounds have diverging opinions on the usefulness of positive feedback. S1 advocated positive feedback because of the need for personal satisfaction. He stressed the function of positive feedback, saying that it could refine the preparation for an assignment and improve knowledge of writing conventions, provided the feedback was honest. However, females being interviewed claimed to be somewhat oblivious of praise. S5, a Chinese student, said *'I do not have any feelings about such praise. I think maybe I am used to it. It is too simple'* (S5). *'It (praise) does not mean much to me'* (S3). As S2 argued, praise is 'greeting words' which seems conventional and perfunctory in the UK context. Students feel that British lecturers are too polite. They see it as a stereotypical point of etiquette to be polite to everyone regardless of how terrible the writing might be. In addition, high expectations on marks can also contribute to a negative response to praise.

Compared to praise, criticism is considered more useful by most students. 'I need to know what is wrong. I pay attention to the critical comments' (S3). '*It is not clear how I can learn from praise, but I can learn a lot from criticism*' (S5). It is commonly acknowledged that criticism is an efficient method to reflect on one's own writing, leading to negative attitudes towards positive feedback and positive attitudes towards negative feedback. In terms of the combination of praise and criticism, two participants who had previously denied the impact of praise suggested that praise should be offered first. '*I do not like it starting with negative feedback. I think it should start with good things*' (S3); '*I would like to see praise first; praise indicates some recognition and that is what I want to see first*' (S5). All participants expressed their acceptance of expressive feedback, although not all of them thought expressive judgements could contribute to their improvement.

In addition, S1 was concerned about the honesty of expressive feedback. Many years of teaching experience had taught him that there might be no reliable basis to what lecturers said due to their extensive workload. Lecturers might skim the essay quickly and scribble down feedback quickly. While S4 emphasised the fairness of expressive feedback, S5 stressed the clarity of expressive feedback.

Directive Feedback

Giving instructions and suggestions is always considered the most challenging component of feedback. They emerge explicitly and implicitly through elicitation and reflection. The majority of students stated their preference for clear and elaborate feedback, as described in the interviews. '*I appreciate clear, easy to understand feedback that allows me to understand*

where I didn't do well enough or which parts were good' (S1); *'Direct comments are clear and that kind of comments give me a clear idea, and what should be done. Indirect comments are polite but not clear'* (S4). Students expected suggestions to be given directly with an explanation of why the work has been judged to be 'good' or 'bad'. Students felt they could learn better from explicit suggestions, partly because direct instructions allow students to *'change and adopt them without any doubt'* (S5); and partly because *'direct comments would be easier for a reader'* (S2). Student participants stated that the convenience and simplicity of direct advice leads to instant learning. Often, students receiving such perspicuous feedback spend little time rereading and questioning addressee-orientated meaning.

'Clear' and 'explicit' are two basic expectations of students regarding the language used in feedback. Lecturer feedback is regarded as being 'directive' simply because it comes from the lecturer, the gatekeeper to success in academic writing. To avoid 'teacherly' responses, lecturers employ linguistic devices to hedge 'high-handed' direction by using personal doubt, modality, wh- structures, hypothetical structures and approximators. A large proportion of the language couched in personal volition, such as 'I feel', 'I think', 'I am not convinced', and negotiation, makes students confused and frustrated. S3 complained *'So if there's something I should do to improve my assignment, I will do it. I'd prefer lecturers to be careful about the language used in their feedback. Sometimes it is vague, not specific enough, maybe sometimes it is complicated to give clear specific feedback, but I need to know how to improve'*. Students do not think the phrases such as 'a bit of'; 'sort of'; 'a little' exhibit any strong preference for one thing over another. Feedback with tentative suggestions such as 'would, could, may' or 'could have been, would have done' obscure direct instructions as to what students should do.

In summary, the majority of feedback is concerned with global issues, while students, especially international students, prefer more feedback on local issues, although some with varying teaching experiences have different attitudes towards local issues. Students benefit from various ways of combining praise and criticism, and they prefer to see their weaknesses and strengths specified and detailed. They also want to be directed rather than left to explore information for themselves. Students say they want to learn from feedback, however, they often do not appreciate the chance to reflect on the feedback they received.

Discussion and Conclusion

Previous research has indicated that feedback is one of the most powerful assessment tools to facilitate learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Adopting Holmes' function of speech model, the study looks at practices and perceptions of feedback from lecturers and students to explore how useful feedback can be used as a tool for learning. Differences were identified between the understandings and the significance of feedback among students interviewed, and more importantly among students and lecturers.

Students hold the belief that feedback is actually to feed forward in that it should be applicable to their future assignments, while lecturers lay great emphasis on nurturing students' awareness of their role as producers of their own writing in addition to the aspect of feeding forward. Teachers 'weigh options, toss the responsibility for making decisions back to the writer, and offer possibilities for a potentially better text' (Anson, 1989, p. 353).

The lecturers in this study recognise that information dealing with global issues is helpful to narrow the gap between current learning and desired learning. Feedback on global

as opposed to local issues might benefit students' long-term learning and cause them to rethink their writing (Krashen, 1982; Radecki & Swales, 1988; Truscott, 2004; 2007). Lecturers concentrate on the quality of writers' ideas and the coherence and cohesion of the writing which is consistent with the study by Li (2016), but Li also reported Chinese lecturers are concerned about language as much as students in the Chinese higher education context.

The students in this study require more feedback on language and think it could have an immediate effect on their current and future writing, which aligns with the results from other studies (Chandler, 2003; Ferris, 2003). All non-English speaking students in this study do not think their language errors are caused by their carelessness in writing. As previous studies have mentioned (e.g. Ferris et al., 2013), varied teaching experience and individual personality contribute to the level of concern over local issues, particularly in terms of language accuracy. The student without any teaching experience in this study cares more about improving their language ability when studying in an overseas university. Since English is the official and first language in the UK, she perceives that as a reason to improve her language accuracy through lecturers' error correction of her work. She hopes to raise her language competency by massive exposure to authentic English and especially with the help of lecturers, whereas the native student gets annoyed if he receives feedback on language accuracy. Their attitudes towards language accuracy might be swayed by previous strict learning environments or by their own teaching focus.

As to expressive feedback, positive feedback seems to be a priority for lecturers. Several pieces of data in Farr's (2011) study give evidence of the popularity of praise. Lecturers in this study prefer providing positive feedback the same as the results found in

other studies (e.g. Bevan, et al., 2008; Kumar & Stracke, 2007). Praise is used to 'sugar the pill' (Hyland & Hyland, 2001), and it has been found to be of great help in learning (Ferguson, 2009; Walker, 2009). Praise mentally redresses the imbalance between effort and gains and reduces students' anxiety about their writing competence and increases their enjoyment of writing; it helps students understand the elements that could refine their writing and facilitate success in future essays. Additionally, praise eases criticism, which might otherwise dampen students' enthusiasm in writing. Such mitigations are supposed to motivate students. The balance between praise and criticism sustains the student's emotional well-being. Although there is no guarantee that this combination will help students in their writing, Ferguson (2009) and Farr (2011) claimed that there was a need to balance praise and criticism in order to foster students' interest in writing and maintain a friendly teacher-student relationship. Not only can the combination show politeness but it can also mitigate potential loss of face from the students' standpoint.

However, results from this study show that students may not value praise and criticism equally, which aligns with the study done by Hyland & Hyland (2001). Some students do not consider praise as useful as criticism and do not expect to learn from it. Most students are eager to identify weaknesses and improvement of their writing. Praise when coupled with negative feedback is preferred, but expressive feedback seems to have little conscious impact on students. Personal expectations and gender differences influence students' engagement with and attitudes towards expressive feedback. Females are more sensitive to positive comments, while males treat them with more equanimity. The higher expectations participants have, the fewer concerns they have regarding positive feedback. Students

23

involved in the study have the same doubts about the truth of what lecturers say as Pajares &

Graham (1998) found.

Directive feedback provides scaffolding support in learning and improving writing.

There are also gaps in the area of directive feedback. Student participants expressed a desire

for clear instructions allowing them to improve current writing and learn writing conventions

(Bevan, et al., 2008; Poverjuc, 2011). This study shows that student participants do not feel

they can get all they want from indirect suggestions, and they do not value indirect feedback

or consider vague feedback to be the most effective form of assessment for learning which

echoes Weaver's findings (2006). All students feel that indirectness makes things somewhat

fuzzy and lacks useful guidance. Additionally, students spend little time questioning the

meaningfulness of feedback and what they can learn from it, but are very preoccupied with

marks. To some students, feedback is one of the lecturers' professional obligations rather than

an assessment tool for learning.

The experienced lecturer in this study claims that implicit suggestions using vague

language are the most useful feedback, which has been confirmed in Straub's study (2000)

and Price, et al. (2010). Teachers do not impose their own ideas on students. They employ

linguistic devices to encourage students to ponder over feedback. Lecturers prefer to use wh-

words to help students question their own writing and to use modals or hypothetical phrases

and other such reflexive elements to encourage students to reflect on their own writing.

Indirect feedback is regarded as one of the more effective approaches for developing an

awareness of self-learning in universities from lecturers' perspective. In addition, as Hyland

(2013) and Lee (2013) mentioned, rhetorical techniques make things sound more tentative

and less authoritative. It is students, as writers, who will choose what helps develop their thinking and what contributes to their writing now and in the future. Lecturers suggest that students claim ownership of, and responsibility for their own writing. These views from lecturers, however, are not necessarily echoed by students who prefer more direct and specific instructions in helping them improve.

In the more and more globalised higher education contexts, it seems appropriate for lecturers to offer clear feedback with attainable goals related to the student's performance and needs. Students' views on modules they took and on the module teacher constitute vital elements that influence their learning motivation and outcome (Zheng, 2015). Association has been observed between individual backgrounds and students' perceptions of feedback. To be able to maximise the effects of feedback as an assessment for learning tool, students should learn to recognise the usefulness of feedback and understand local assessment cultures. It is also equally important for lecturers to engage and consult students where necessary and to take time to tailor their teaching and assessment methods to students' need. To summarise, this study points to the importance of fostering assessment literacy competences from both lecturers and students perspectives. It is imperative to enhance assessment and evaluation efficiency in globalised higher education contexts.

References

Anson, C. (1989). Response Styles and Ways of Knowing. In C. Anson (Ed.), *Writing and Response: Theory, Practice, Research* (pp. 332–366). Urbana, IL: NCTE.

Assessment Reform Group. (2002). *Assessment for Learning: 10 principles.* Retrieved from https://assessmentreformgroup.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/10principles_english.pdf.

Bartram, B. (2008). Supporting International Students in Higher Education: Constructions, Cultures and Clashes. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *13*(6), 657–668.

Bevan, R., Badge, J., Cann, A., Willmott, C., & Scott, J. (2008). Seeing Eye-to-Eye? Staff and Student Views on Feedback. *Bioscience Education*, *12*(1), 1-15.

Biggs, J. (1999). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University.* Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education and the Open University Press.

Black, P. & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and Classroom Learning. *Assessment in Education*, *5*(1), 7-71.

Boud, D. & Molloy, E. (2013). Rethinking Models of Feedback for Learning: The Challenge of Design, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *38*(6), 698-712.

Chandler, J. (2003). The Efficacy of Various Kinds of Error Feedback for Improvement in the Accuracy and Fluency of L2 Student Writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 12,* 267–296.

Jones, C. A. (2005). *Assessment for Learning.* UK: Learning and Skills Development Agency.

Dann, R. (2015). Developing the Foundations for Dialogic Feedback in Order to Better Understand the 'Learning Gap' from a Pupil's Perspective. *London Review of Education*, *13*(3), 5-20.

DeLuca, C., & Klinger, D. A. (2010). Assessment Literacy Fevelopment: Identifying Gaps in Teacher Candidates' Learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, *17*(4), 419-438.

Duncan, N. (2007). 'Feed-Forward': Improving Students' Use of Tutors' Comments.

Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, *32*(3), 271-283.

Evans, C. & Waring, M. (2011). Exploring Students' Perceptions of Feedback in Relation to Cognitive Styles and Culture. *Research Papers in Education, 26*(2), 171-190.

Farr, F. (2011). *The Discourse of Teaching Practice Feedback: A Corpus-Based Investigation of Spoken and Written Modes.* New York: Routledge.

Ferguson, P. (2009). Student Perceptions of Quality Feedback in Teacher Education. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 36*(1), 51-62.

Ferris, D. R. (2003). *Response to Student Writing: Research Implications for Second Language Students.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Ferris, D. R., Liu, H., Sinha, A. & Senna, M. (2013). Written Corrective Feedback for Individual L2 Writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 22,* 307-329.

Gibbs, G. (1999) Using Assessment Strategically to Change the Way Students Learn. In S. Brown, & A. Glasner (Eds.), *Assessment Matters in Higher Education: Choosing and Using Diverse Approaches*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Gibbs, G., & Simpson, C. (2004). Conditions Under Which Assessment Supports Students' Learning. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education 1*(1), 1–31.

Hargreaves, E. (2013). Inquiring into Children's Experiences of Teacher Feedback: Reconceptualising Assessment for Learning. *Oxford Review of Education, 39*(2), 229-246,

Hattie, J. (2011). Feedback in Schools. In R., Sutton, M.J. Hornsey, & K.M. Douglas *(Eds.). Feedback: The Communication of Praise, Criticism, and Advice*. Peter Lang Publishing: New York.

Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The Power of Feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, *77*(1), 81–112.

Henderlong, J. & Lepper, M. (2002). The Effects of Praise on Children's Intrinsic Motivation: A Review and Synthesis. *Psychological Bulletin, 128*, 774–795.

Higgins, R.A., Hartley, P. & Skelton, A. (2001) Getting the Message Across: The Problem of Communicating Assessment Feedback, *Teaching in Higher Education, 6*(2), 269–274.

Higgins, R., Hartley, P., & Skelton, A. (2002). The Conscientious Consumer: Reconsidering the Role of Assessment Feedback in Student Learning. *Studies in Higher Education, 27*, 53–64.

Holmes, J. (2001; 2013). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Harlow: Pearson Education.

Hyatt, D. (2007). 'Yes, A Very Good Point!': A Critical Genre Analysis of a Corpus of Feedback Commentaries on Master of Education Assignments. *Teaching in Higher Education, 10*(3), 339-353.

Hyland, P. (2000). Learning from Feedback on Assessment. In . P. Hyland & A. Booth (Eds.), *The Practice of University History Teaching*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.

Hyland, K. (2013). Student Perceptions of Hidden Messages in Teacher Written Feedback. *Studies in Education Evaluation, 39*(3), 180-187.

Hyland, F. & Hyland, K. (2001). Sugaring the Pill: Praise and Criticism in Written Feedback. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 10*(3), 185–212.

Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and Practices in Second Language Acquisition.* Oxford, UK: Pergamon Press.

Kumar, V. & Stracke, E. (2007). An Analysis of Written Feedback on a PhD thesis. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *12*(4), 461-470.

Lee, K. Y. (2013). Hedging Expressions Used in Academic Written Feedback: A Study on the Use of Modal Verbs. *Research in Corpus Linguistics, 1,* 33-45.

Li, Zhan. (2016). Written Teacher Feedback: Student Perceptions, Teacher Perceptions, and Actual Teacher Performance. *English Language Teaching*, *9*(8), 73-84.

Lizzio, A. & Wilson, K. (2008). Feedback on Assessment: Students' Perceptions of Quality and Effectiveness. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 33*(3), 263-275.

Maclellan, E. (2001). Assessment for Learning: The Differing Perceptions of Tutors and Students. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, *26*(4), 307-318.

Montgomery, J. L. & Baker, W. (2007). Teacher-written Feedback: Student Perceptions, Teacher Self-assessment, and Actual Teacher Performance. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 16,* 82-99.

Orsmond, P. & Merry, S. (2011). Feedback Alignment: Effective and Ineffective Links between Tutors' and Students' Understanding of Coursework Feedback. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *36*(2), 125-136.

Pajares, F. & Graham, L. (1998). Formalist Thinking and Language Arts Instruction: Teachers' and Students' Beliefs about Truth and Caring in the Teaching Conversation. *Teaching and Teacher Education,14*(80), 855-870.

Poverjuc, O. (2011). The Experiences of Feedback Practices on Academic Writing Undergone by Students with English as an Additional Language in a Master's programme: A Multiple Case Study. *Journal of Academic Writing, 1*(1), 143-152.

Popham, W. J. (2008). *Transformative Assessment.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Price, M., Handley, K., Millar, J. & O'Donovan, B. (2010). Feedback: All That Effort, but What is the Effect? *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 35*(3), 277-289.

Radecki, P. M. & Swales, J. M. (1988). ESL Student Reaction to Written Comments on Their Writing Work. *System, 16*(3), 355-365.

Straub, R. (2000). The Student, the Text, and the Classroom Context: A Case Study of Teacher Response. *Assessing Writing, 7,* 23-55.

Truscott, J. (1999). The Case for ''the Case for Grammar Correction in L2 Writing Classes'': A Response to Ferris. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 8,* 111–122.

Truscott, J. (2004). Evidence and Conjecture on the Effects of Correction: A Response to Chandler. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 13,* 337–343.

Truscott, J. (2007). The Effect of Error Correction on Learners' Ability to Write Accurately. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 16,* 255–272.

Walker, M. (2009). An Investigation into Written Comments on Assignments: Do Students Find Them Usable? *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 34*(1), 67-78.

Weaver, M. (2006). Do Students Value Feedback? Student Perceptions of Tutors' Written Responses. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 31*(3), 379–394.

Ramaprasad, A. (1983). On the Definition of Feedback. *Behavioural Science, 28*(1), 4-13.

Wiliam, D., & Thompson, M. (2007). Integrating Assessment with Instruction: What will it Take to Make it Work? In C. A. Dwyer (Ed.), *The Future of Assessment: Shaping Teaching and Learning* (pp. 53-82). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associate.

Zheng, Y. (2015). Students' Voices: What Factors Influence Their English Learning and Test Performance? In G. Yu & Y. Jin (Eds.), *Assessing Chinese Learners of English: Language Constructs, Consequences and Conundrums* (pp.219-244). Palgrave Macmillan.

Appendix

Table 1: Background Information of Student Participants

Name	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5
Age Range	40-49	30-39	30-39	20-29	20-29
Gender	Male	Female	Female	Female	Female
Nationality	British	Japanese	Spanish	Indian	Chinese
Subject of 1st Degree	BSc Heritage Conservation	BA Language Education and Research	BA English	BA English	BA English Education
Average Score	65-69	65-69	70-74	60-64	65-69
Teaching Experience	>20	>10 & < 20	6	<6	0
Previous Writing Experience	Report	Short essay	Exam	Summarizing Essay	Exam and 500-word essay
Feedback Experience	Yes	Sometimes	No	Yes	No