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‘This is not what I need’: Conflicting assessment feedback beliefs in a post-secondary institution in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Exploring students’ perspective on feedback is high on the research agenda following the comparatively lower satisfaction scores for assessment and feedback in the National Student Survey. However, limited research examines how teachers and students perceive the same feedback events in the post-secondary context. This case study fills the gap by comparing the views of two teachers and twenty first-year students on assessment feedback in an Academic English module in a post-secondary institution in Hong Kong. Data collection methods involved documentation of feedback on marked assignments, recordings of verbal feedback sessions, stimulated-recall interviews with teachers and focus group interviews with students. The conflicting beliefs indicated three problems: insufficient explanation of criteria and standards for feedback interpretation; use of praise for rapport building at a cost of feedback sincerity; limited uptake of error corrections in end-of-term assignments. Possible reasons behind the divergence are discussed. The paper argues that using praise to save students’ face may paradoxically heighten the tensions in feedback processes in a high-stakes assessment context. A more effective method is to foster students’ ‘feedback resilience’ to help them manage negative emotions in feedback processes. Recommendations for developing ‘feedback resilience’ are provided, and avenues for future research discussed.

Keywords: assessment feedback; conflicting beliefs; teachers; students; emotions; feedback resilience

Introduction

Feedback is a catalyst for successful learning, for it provides students with useful information to set task goals, to recognise their strengths and weaknesses and to improve their performance (Sadler 1989). However, the comparatively lower scores for assessment and feedback in the National Student Survey (HEFCE 2014; 2015) suggest that its potential to aid learning has not been fully realised. A multitude of feedback studies attempt to reveal the sources of students’ dissatisfaction: fairness in grading process (Carless 2006); insufficient knowledge of academic discourse to interpret feedback (Duncan 2007); inconsistency between feedback and assessment results (Brown 2007); lack of strategies to act on comments

(Burke 2009); inadequate comments to support feed-forward to future tasks (Orsmond and Merry 2011). Despite the articulation of students' voices, how to make feedback communication effective remains an unresolved issue. One possible reason is that improving feedback communication involves an understanding of the dilemmas in feedback processes. It is important to make sense of teachers' and students' difficulties in feedback processes in a particular institution because the same contextual environment may have different demands on teachers and students. Only through juxtaposing different parties' beliefs can researchers look into the source of conflicts in feedback and have an accurate picture of the phenomenon under investigation. This paper explores teachers' and students' perceptions of assessment feedback in an academic English module in a post-secondary institution in Hong Kong with the aim of deriving insights for feedback improvement.

Comparative studies of feedback perceptions are not lacking in the university context (see, for example, Adcroft 2011; Carless 2006; Orsmond and Merry 2011). Similar studies, however, are scant in the post-secondary context in Hong Kong. Given the rapid expansion of post-secondary education opportunities from 33% to 63% in the recent decade in Hong Kong (University Grants Committee 2010), it is worth investigating the feedback dilemmas in this sector for two reasons. First, since post-secondary students have less positive assessment experiences compared with their undergraduate counterparts, they may encounter more problems in feedback utilisation. Second, Hodkinson et al. (2007) pinpoint that in many British further education institutions teaching and learning is done in the straitjacket of financial resourcing, college policies and quality inspection. This inspires me to investigate to what extent these constraints impact on feedback communication in the post-secondary context in Hong Kong.

This paper reports a case study of feedback beliefs conducted in two academic English classrooms in a post-secondary institution in Hong Kong. It first documents the feedback practice of two English teachers and then compares teachers' and students' views on different feedback events. The feedback referred to in this study encompasses written comments and error corrections on submitted work as well as teacher-student dialogues in pre-assignment consultations and post-assessment discussions. The significance of this paper lies in unpacking the feedback dilemmas in the post-secondary context, examining the reasons behind divergent views and developing insights for feedback enhancement.

Comparison of feedback perceptions

Viewing feedback as a social process, the current assessment literature generally sees feedback perceptions as closely linked with emotions, prior assessment experiences, learner identity, power relations and other factors in a situated context (Price, Handley, and Miller 2011). The reciprocal nature of feedback leads to a growing body of comparative feedback perception studies ranging from large scale questionnaire surveys across different universities to small-scale qualitative studies at a single institution. The three studies to be reviewed

(Carless 2006; Orsmond and Merry 2011; Maggs 2014) bear relevance to the findings, research design and institutional context of the present case study.

One of the influential comparative perception studies is Carless's (2006) mixed study in which a questionnaire survey elicited the assessment experiences of 460 academic staff and 1740 students in eight publicly funded universities in Hong Kong and follow-up interviews further explored particular feedback issues. The teachers and students had different perceptions of the provision of feedback to improve future learning, which implies that the latter may overlook the feedback given in the verbal medium. A recurring theme of his study is the different emotional burdens of teachers and students in the assessment process. Some teachers were anxious about students' emotional reaction to unsatisfactory results, and some interviewed students felt the grading of teachers subjective and biased. Both parties however agreed that students had difficulty in interpreting assessment criteria. In view of different tensions in feedback processes, the author proposes using 'assessment dialogues' to introduce students to the 'guild knowledge' (Sadler 1989) possessed by teachers and the procedure of the assessment process.

Instead of ascertaining respondents' opinions about feedback using a questionnaire, Orsmond and Merry (2011) analysed feedback comments on marked assignments and conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 biological sciences undergraduates and six teachers of a British university to explore how students and teachers perceived feedback and how students utilised it for learning. Brown, Gibbs, and Glover's (2003) system was adopted to classify feedback according to functions. Compared with other feedback categories, praise was the most frequent type of feedback given, even if the assignments received a low grade. The researchers did not report teachers' reasons for using praise, but this observation raises the question of whether the teachers used praise to promote learning or to establish interpersonal communication. The analysis of comments showed that feedback was provided to explain students' misunderstandings of concepts, but not to guide students to approach future work. The majority of the interviewed students used feedback to find out teachers' requirements in particular assignments. The findings suggest that the teachers' feedback seems unable to fulfil its developmental function, particularly scaffolding self- and peer assessment and lifelong learning skills. There is a need for encouraging feedback dialogues in class so as to guide students to learn from feedback and to develop self-evaluation skills.

The third study under review is a case study in a specialised higher education institution in the UK. In Maggs's (2014) study, two separate questionnaires were distributed to 41 teachers and 188 students to investigate their level of feedback satisfaction, teachers' feedback methods and students' views on feedback. The major disagreement centres on the perception of the availability of feedback to students. A large proportion of the teachers believed that students received sufficient feedback to improve learning, whereas this belief was challenged by their students, who argued that not enough feedback was given on their work and the feedback came too late to facilitate learning. The divergence is ascribed to two reasons: (i) verbal comments given in class were not recognised by the students as feedback;

(ii) the moderation of scripts by external examiners delayed returning graded assignments and feedback to students. The second reason draws our attention to the potential impact of the institution's quality assurance policy on the assessment process (cf. Bloxham 2009). In view of the first problem, Maggs (2014) suggests providing training for teachers to give productive feedback. For the second problem, the institution can consider giving feedback on the electronic platform to reduce students' waiting times.

In summary, comparative perception studies enable researchers to have a greater understanding of the dilemmas in feedback processes. Differing perceptions are seen in feedback sufficiency (Carless 2006; Maggs 2014), feedback utility (Orsmond and Merry 2011) and fairness in grading (Carless 2006). What seems appropriate to teachers can be viewed differently by their students because students' sense-making is susceptible to the emotions triggered by feedback (Värlander 2008), prior experiences (Price, Handley and Millar 2011), trust in teachers (Carless 2013) and the support received in the assessment process. If the social perspective is adopted as a lens for investigation, it is important to understand how feedback decisions and perceptions are reciprocally shaped by personal beliefs, teacher-student relationship, prior assessment experiences and college policies in a particular institution. This direction prompts me to design this case study around two research questions:

(1) What is the feedback practice of two English teachers in a post-secondary institution in Hong Kong?
(2) How do the teachers and their students perceive the assessment feedback?

Context

The case study was conducted at a leading self-financed post-secondary institution in Hong Kong which offers secondary school leavers (equivalent to year 12) an opportunity to pursue further education. Upon completing a two-year associate degree programme, the majority of students wish to obtain a top-up undergraduate place (second-year place of a three-year programme or third-year place of a four-year programme) from a government-funded university. The success in securing a place is determined by their academic results and the number of top-up places. Due to limited public resources, there is fierce competition for top-up places. In 2014, only 35.8% of the students were offered a government-subsided place, and approximately 50% continued their education in private universities.

The participants consisted of two English teachers and 20 first-year students (ten from business studies and ten from health care studies). Two cases (one teacher and ten students in each case) were selected because Edward and Sue (teachers' pseudonyms) had different feedback conceptualisations, which may influence their feedback decisions and their students' perceptions accordingly. Edward saw himself as a consultant answering students' queries and an editor correcting language errors, while Sue considered herself to be a facilitator guiding students to independent learning. Most of the student participants were not proficient English users. Twelve of them obtained a marginal pass in the university entrance examination, four a

good pass and four a fail grade. All regarded associate degree studies as the springboard for undergraduate education, so they strove hard to obtain outstanding performance in every assessment task.

The module taken by the students was English for Academic Studies, a general education compulsory subject for first-year students of all disciplines. Its assessment tasks included a group project (an essay outline with no marks assigned to this task, a 1500-word argumentative essay and a 20-minute oral presentation), an individual 300-word reflective essay and a test. There were approximately 25 students in each class. Except for the essay outline and the test, students submitted all written assignments and made the oral presentation in the last two weeks of a 13-week semester. The institution did not issue any guidelines on feedback provision but required teaching staff to return marked assignments to students within one month after submission. For quality assurance, some samples of graded assignments were passed to examiners (called moderators in the institution) to see if there was a large discrepancy in the judgement of subject lecturers.

Method

Case studies are appropriate for undertaking inquiries when there are no clear-cut boundaries between phenomenon and context (Merriam 1998) and multiple sources of evidence are required to cast light on participants' thoughts and behaviour (Yin 2009). By adopting this approach, I used analysis of written and verbal feedback, stimulated-recall interviews with teachers and focus group interviews with students to probe into feedback decisions and participants' perceptions.

Data collection

There were four data-gathering methods. First, marked assignments were collected to examine written feedback and to look for the alignment between teachers' feedback practice and their description in the interviews. The documents collected from each case included two essay outlines, two argumentative essays and ten reflective essays. With the consent of student participants, a copy of the marked work was made for analysis. Second, verbal feedback sessions were audio-taped to explore how the teachers commented on essay outlines and oral presentations. Four recordings of approximately 15 minutes each (two for essay outlines and two for oral presentations) were done in each case. Third, three stimulated-recall interviews were carried out with individual teachers within two days of the completion of marking and verbal feedback sessions. They were asked to explain why they adopted particular methods to provide feedback and how they perceived their feedback. The marked assignments and parts of the recordings were shown to them as a stimulus. Fourth, six focus group interviews were held to investigate students' perceptions of feedback, their difficulties in understanding feedback and their preferred feedback practice in each case. For each case, there were three interview sessions, and the ten student participants were divided into two

focus groups of five. All interviews were done in Cantonese, recorded and transcribed for analysis (see Appendix 1 for interview questions).

Data analysis

The data analysis procedure first involved the classification of written and verbal feedback. The feedback was divided into individual feedback points which are defined by Hyland (1998) as a teacher's intervention that focuses on a particular aspect of student work. A feedback point can be a marking symbol, an error correction, a question, a comment, a suggestion for improvement, etc. The feedback classification system of Brown, Gibbs, and Glover (2003) was not applied, as its sole focus on functions is inadequate to analyse the multiple perspectives of feedback on language work. Instead, I adapted Hyland's (1997) classification system to categorise each feedback point according to focus, purpose, degree of intervention and strategy (see Figure 1 for the modified feedback classification system). The newly added category is strategy which refers to the way feedback is communicated to students (see Figure 2 for explanation and examples of different strategies). A frequency count of the feedback points in each category and sub-category was done to reveal the characteristics of teachers' feedback practice. The numbers were then converted into percentages for data display in the findings.

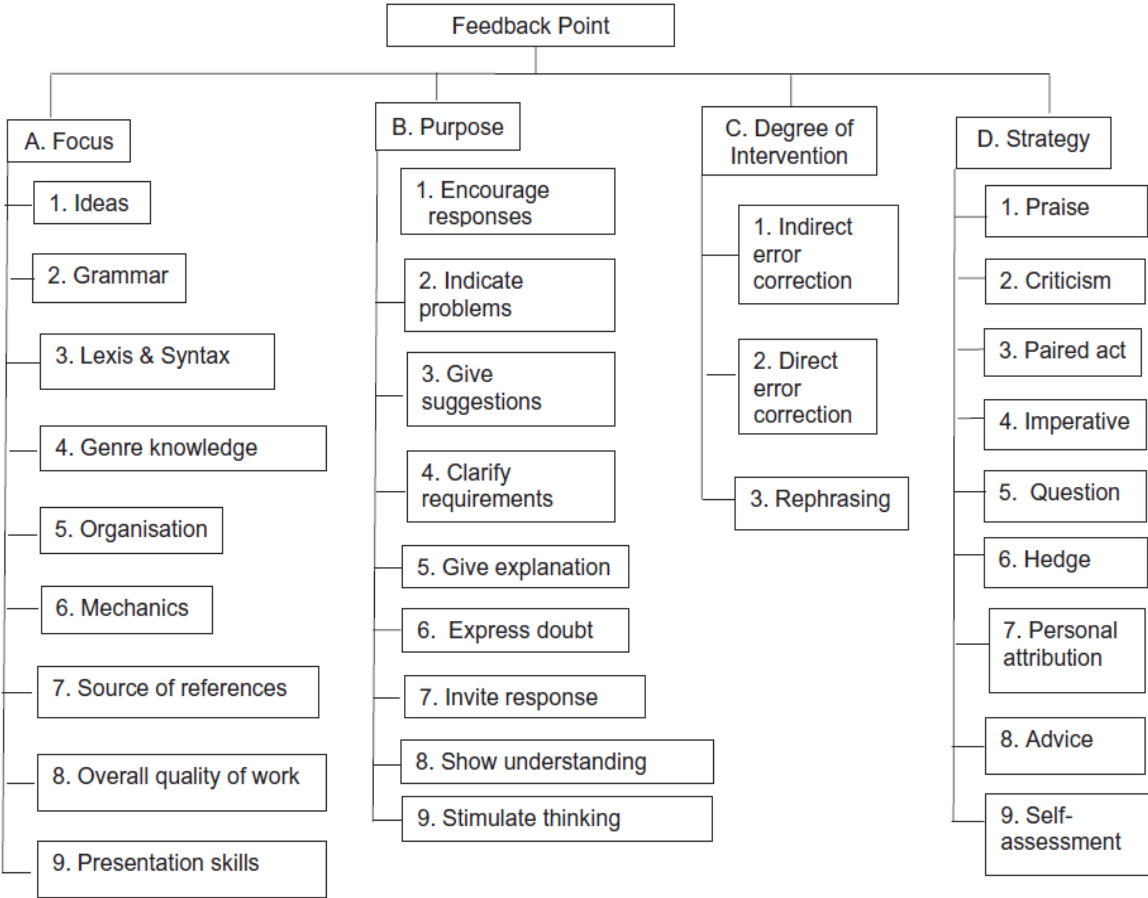

Figure 1. Modified feedback classification system. Source: Adapted from Hyland (1997).

Strategy	Explanation	Example
1. Praise	- Identify strengths in student work	- Clear organisation. - Accurate pronunciation.
2. Criticism	- Point out a problem in student work	- The second argument is not convincing.
3. Paired Act	- Use praise to soften the force of negative comment	- The organisation is clear, but the conclusion is not strong enough.
4. Imperative	- Give the comment as if it is an order from the authority / an expert	- Proofread your work carefully before submission.
5. Question	- Point out a problem in the form of an interrogative; make the criticism less direct	- Is it appropriate to discuss private schooling in this essay?
6. Hedge	- Make teacher's judgement less certain and less direct	- I am afraid that the framework may not work in the way as you suggested. - Perhaps you could use more visual aids to improve the presentation.
7. Personal Attribution	- Give comment as if the teacher is sharing his / her personal feeling with students	- I like the way your group introduced the topic. It is very interesting.
8. Advice	- Rephrase the problem as if it is advice	- Do more rehearsals to develop your confidence in presentation.
9. Self-assessment	- Invite students to evaluate their performance as an opening to feedback dialogues	- What do you think about your performance?

Figure 2. Strategy use in feedback communication.

Grounded theory concepts were applied to process interview data as the concepts allowed me to see patterns from the data and to use the discovery to explain teachers' feedback decisions and participants' perceptions (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Open coding was conducted to identify key concepts, and similar open codes were grouped into selective codes to form categories of ideas. During the coding process, theoretical memos were written to note the relationships between categories and to compare the discoveries with existing literature. The completion of coding was followed by the use of matrices for data comparison. A role-ordered matrix (Miles and Huberman 1994) was drawn to compare the voices of the teacher and students in each case, and a partially ordered meta-matrix to exhibit the similarities and differences between both cases.

Findings

As feedback varies according to task nature (Hyland and Hyland 2006), the findings are presented around task types in the sequence of essay outlines, oral presentations and end-of-term written assignments (argumentative and reflective essays). In view of the space limit, only the distinguishing feedback characteristics of each task type are discussed. The feedback analysis for Edward and Sue is juxtaposed for comparison, followed by the views of the teachers and their students on the same feedback event.

Feedback on essay outlines

Formative in nature, feedback on essay outlines facilitated students' idea development of argumentative essays. It consisted of a written component (error corrections and comments) and verbal component (discussion of outlines). For both teachers, nearly 60% of their written feedback focused on language-related issues (A2 Grammar and A3 Lexis and Syntax), and over 70% of their verbal feedback on idea development (A1 Ideas). Despite similar focuses, Edward and Sue used feedback to perform different purposes, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Purpose of feedback on essay outlines

	Purpose	B1 Encourage responses	B2 Indicate problems	B3 Give suggestions	B4 Clarify requirements	B5 Give explanation	B6 Express doubt	B7 Invite response	B8 Show understanding	B9 Stimulate thinking
Case 1 Edward	Written N=78	0%	**66.7%**	21.8%	0%	11.5%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Verbal N=133	**15%**	9%	9%	**22.5%**	**28.6%**	0.8%	7.5%	3.8%	3.8%
Case 2 Sue	Written N=68	2.9%	**73.5%**	17.6%	0%	6%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Verbal N=148	4.1%	11.5%	9.5%	**18.9%**	**34.5%**	0%	4.1%	5.4%	**12%**

Nearly 70% of their written feedback was used to indicate students' problems (B2). Different methods were employed to pinpoint students' inadequacy in content. For example, Edward wrote 'Ocean Park' to highlight the need for using real-life examples as supporting evidence, and Sue put down brief comments such as 'need comparison' to suggest a way to strengthen arguments. Their verbal feedback performed multiple functions: giving explanation (B5), clarifying requirements (B4), giving encouragement (B1) and stimulating thinking (B9). They utilised different ways to offer scaffolding. Edward explained why real-life examples were required for argumentation and elicited more examples from students in the discussions. He would say 'Very good' and 'Well done' to encourage students when they gave relevant examples. Sue first elaborated how comparison could enhance the quality of an argument and then asked students to use the comparison method to develop their own arguments.

In short, Edward and Sue provided cognitive and emotional scaffolding to prepare students for the subsequent essay task. Written feedback highlighted major problems in content, and verbal feedback allowed teachers to illustrate students' problems, to explain task requirements, to encourage students and to stimulate thinking. The question for consideration is how the participants perceived the clarity and usefulness of such pre-assessment support.

Issue of clarity

When asked about the usefulness of feedback, Edward and Sue had the following comments:

> I explained their problems and gave them some examples, hoping that they could look for more examples as supporting evidence. This should be useful as they would know my expectations of their essays. (Edward)
>
> This feedback session helped students realise their problems at the early stage of the project so that they could develop their work in the right direction. I focused on the way of constructing an argument as it was crucial for effective argumentative writing. (Sue)

Both thought the discussion of outlines was useful as the feedback indicated the right task direction to students, clarified the task requirements and developed task processing skills at the early stage of the project. When their students were interviewed about their perception of the outline discussion, they stated the following:

> Her feedback lets us know the right direction of doing the task… We have more confidence about the next step, and we will devote more time and effort to the essay. (S12)
>
> It is good to understand the importance of supporting evidence, but I cannot visualise how to use it to strengthen my arguments. Should I mention the examples immediately after the topic sentence or add some explanation first? If I can be given a well-written essay as a sample, I can figure out how to do it. (S6)
>
> There was no discussion of criteria. If we follow all his suggestions, can we get a good grade in the essay? (S7)

The above quotes demonstrate students' mixed opinions about feedback on essay outlines. On the one hand, feedback on a low-stakes assignment could enhance motivation. S12 enjoyed more confidence after being assured of the task direction, thus encouraging her to expend more effort on the subsequent task. On the other hand, S6 pinpointed the inadequacy of the feedback. He had difficulty translating Edward's suggestions into practical actions. This is because he found it difficult to conceptualise the way of developing an argument based on merely the verbal explanation. He believed a sample or an exemplar could help him understand the requirements of good quality work and make improvement. S7 voiced his

concern about the potential of feedback in improving the learning outcome of his subsequent essay. His quote implies that he needs feedback not only for assuring task direction but also for obtaining good results in the subsequent task.

The comparison of both parties' views demonstrates differing perceptions of formative feedback. From the teachers' perspective, explaining problems and brainstorming suggestions constituted effective feedback. From the students' perspective, understanding assessment requirements through exemplar analysis was equally important to discussion of strengths, weaknesses and suggestions for improvement as they could hardly take remedial action without a clear understanding of quality. In fact, what had been overlooked in the feedback practice is a context for feedback interpretation. Edward and Sue highlighted some key points about topic selection and essay structure as assignment preparation, but they did not have a discussion or explanation of standards in class. It appears that engaging students in productive feedback requires more than evaluative comments and brainstorming of suggestions, but more importantly a shared understanding of task requirements and quality as the prerequisite.

Feedback on oral presentations

When all group oral presentations were done, Edward and Sue provided individual groups with verbal feedback in a small group setting (four to five students per group). Marks and grades were not disclosed so as to make students focus on comments. Both began each feedback session with overall comments on group performance and then the performance of individual student presenters. They adopted a variety of strategies (shown in Table 2) to comment on students' performance in face-to-face communication. Since not all feedback points involved strategy use, the total percentage was not exactly 100.

Table 2 Strategy of feedback on oral presentations

Strategy	D1 Praise	D2 Criticism	D3 Paired act	D4 Imperative	D5 Question	D6 Hedge	D7 Personal attribution	D8 Advice	D9 Self-assessment	No use of strategy
Case 1 Edward N=77	**48.1%**	3.9%	9.1%	0%	1.3%	9.1%	5.2%	**16.9%**	0%	6.4%
Case 2 Sue N=85	**48.2%**	3.5%	**20%**	0%	2.4%	4.7%	0%	**12.9%**	**7.1%**	1.2%

Praise (D1) accounted for nearly 50% of the feedback points in each case. Positive feedback was given at the outset of verbal feedback sessions. Edward praised students by saying 'Clear voice', 'Good eye contact' and 'You are a confident speaker'. Some examples of Sue's praise included 'Accurate pronunciation' and 'Clear organisation. I could understand your flow of ideas easily'. Comparatively speaking, they tried not to distress students,

indicated by less than 4% for criticism. When mentioning weaknesses, they adopted several strategies to help students accept negative feedback. For instance, they rephrased problems as advice (D8), used paired act (D3) and hedged (D6) comments. One particular strategy employed by Sue involved exploiting students' self-assessment (D9) to open feedback dialogues. At the beginning of each session, she invited students to talk about their strengths and weaknesses in front of other group members. Then, she responded to students' self-appraisal by exchanging views on their performance.

In summary, the feedback strategies employed by both teachers reflect the main feature of a 'feedback sandwich' (Molloy, Borrell-Carrió, and Epstein 2013) – using praise to cushion the impact of negative feedback. Nevertheless, their praise tended to be descriptive rather than indicative of specific strengths. What deserves our attention is the interpersonal impact on communication when feedback is given in an emotionally-sensitive fashion.

Issue of sincerity

Praise was a distinctive feature in the feedback communication in both cases. Edward and Sue explained their extensive use of praise in the following quotes.

> They prepared a lot, and they deserved appreciation. I mentioned their strengths and tried to deemphasise the problems. This was not easy if their performance was mediocre. So I praised their eye contact, volume, team spirit and body language… It would be embarrassing if I pointed out all their weaknesses in face-to-face communication. (Edward)

> Making a presentation is a nerve-racking experience, so I opened the feedback sessions with their self-evaluation, followed by praise and encouragement. This helped them release stress and be more aware of their weaknesses. This also helped me structure the feedback sessions around their areas of concern. (Sue)

The key message of the quotes is consideration of students' feelings in face-to-face feedback communication. Edward used a feedback sandwich to establish a harmonious atmosphere for communication, but he admitted this was not easy if students' performance was not exceptionally outstanding. Under the circumstances, he focused on the aspects which allowed him to give praise easily, for example volume and eye contact. In Sue's case, praise was used in tandem with students' self-assessment to achieve three purposes: (i) reducing students' emotional distress; (ii) making the feedback communication more learner-centred; (iii) making them aware of their own strengths and weaknesses in performance.

Students were also asked about their opinions of praise in the focus group interviews. Some representative views were stated as follows:

> When I heard the comments, I was very pleased. The praise made me think I could get grade A. But when I saw the score sheet later, this feeling vanished. I think the teacher was too friendly. (S11)
>
> I am not sure about my performance. He said I had three strengths but did not mention any problems. Maybe he did not want to hurt us, but I want him to tell me the truth. If my performance is not good, I will be unhappy for a while, but it is better than worrying about my marks all the time. (S3)
>
> He said to me 'good eye contact, good posture and loud voice'. He said more or less the same to others. However, I do not think we all receive the same mark. This is not what I need. I need something more specific. Tell me the mark. (S8)

The main idea of the quotes is students' awareness of the face-saving function of praise, but they were ambivalent about this strategy. S11 was first delighted by compliments but later disappointed by the assessment results. The false hope provoked her into wondering about the sincerity of teacher feedback. The second quote shows S3's scepticism about Edward's comments and expresses his wish for knowing about the actual comments. Inferred from the last quote, actual comments may mean specific and individualised feedback.

Juxtaposing the perceptions of both parties enriches our understanding of using praise in feedback communication. The teachers' intent of using praise to maintain rapport may be perceived by their students as insincere communication for three reasons. First, students' prior assessment experiences enabled them to distinguish real comments from simple platitudes. Sincere praise should point to specific strengths in the performance of individual students. Second, S8 expected that feedback should include not only discussion of strengths and weaknesses but also his performance level in comparison with peers. This norm-referencing use of feedback seems to be more prominent in the assessment context where results can influence the chance of further education. He may be sceptical about the value of feedback when he could not anticipate results based on feedback. Third, the false hope created by praise may undermine students' trust in teacher feedback. In consequence, they perceived marks as a more reliable indicator of performance. Their views imply that the use of praise in the two classrooms may heighten the emotional tensions in the feedback communication. There is a need for the teachers to explore an alternative way to manage students' emotions.

Feedback on end-of-term written assignments

Feedback on argumentative essays and reflective writing refers to error corrections and written comments. The marked assignments were returned to students during semester break. In terms of focus, over 70% of Edward's feedback points was language-related (57.9% for grammar (A2) and 20.3% for lexis and syntax (A3)), while Sue's feedback had a broader focus (23.7% for ideas (A1), 21.4% for grammar (A2) and 22.4% for organisation (A5)). Since Edward made more error corrections, the total number of feedback points in his case

(N=1189) was much higher than that in Sue's (N=388). The differences in their degree of intervention for error corrections are highlighted in Table 3.

Table 3 Degree of intervention for error corrections

	Error corrections			Written comments
Degree of intervention	C1 Indirect error correction	C2 Direct error correction	C3 Rephrasing	
Case 1 Edward N=1149	3.3%	**84.4%**	7.6%	4.7%
Case 2 Sue N=388	9.5%	**38.7%**	3.6%	**48.2%**

For degree of intervention, nearly 80% of Edward's feedback was direct correction of language mistakes (C2). In Sue's case, direct correction was made to syntactic, lexical and stylistic errors. This type of intervention took up 38.7%. Indirect correction (error identification but no provision of corrected forms) accounted for 9.5%, and this type of intervention was made to spelling mistakes and improper use of tense. Approximately half of her comments addressed idea development, organisation and genre features. Both teachers invested time and effort in identifying and correcting students' language mistakes. The question to be explored is how the teachers and students perceived the utility of the error corrections.

Issue of feedback uptake

Error corrections are a key characteristic in teachers' feedback on written assignments. Edward and Sue voiced their views on error corrections as follows:

> Suggestions on idea development for the last assignment have little impact on learning. Rather than writing comments they may not read, I corrected their common language errors. Error corrections help them learn from their mistakes and help me explain my judgement to them and the moderator. (Edward)

> Comments on strategy use would not help much at this stage, so I underlined their typos and made them work out their own problems. That is more useful to their long-term learning. (Sue)

Both discerned the limitations of post-assessment feedback on end-of-term assignments, but their individual beliefs influenced their way of giving feedback. Error corrections were perceived by Edward as a tool to justify his judgement to his students and the moderator. Sue valued long-term learning, so she utilised the indirect method to encourage students' self-correction of errors.

Upon collecting the marked assignments and knowing their marks, students articulated their views on error corrections in the following:

> It is okay for him to correct my wrong word choice. This helps me recognise my problem … His marking is serious, but I will not do the same task again. (S4)

> This is over-correction. I used present tense to write reflection, but he changed to past tense … My work is full of markings in red, and the mark is so low. I do not want to see it anymore. (S1)

The above quotes represent different views on error corrections. In the first quote, the use of adjectives 'okay' and 'serious' suggests that S4 acknowledged Edward's effort in error corrections, but he was not impressed because the corrections had limited use to future assignments. The second quote reflects S1's strong feeling of error corrections. Despite Edward's appropriate corrections, she did not understand her problem and even refuted the teacher's judgement. It is likely that the score and the corrections hurt her self-esteem, hence discouraging her from engaging with feedback.

The examination of both parties' perspectives infers that providing error corrections on end-of-term assignments may not be productive to learning for two reasons. First, the uptake of error feedback is susceptible to the transferability of language points to future tasks. The value of error corrections largely diminishes in one-off or end-of-term assignments. Second, reinforcing Värlander's (2008) idea, S1's volition to act on feedback is determined by her emotion of error corrections. Perhaps her self-identity as a proficient learner is not confirmed, so she may develop a negative attitude towards feedback. The data illuminate the drawbacks of the finality of feedback. Given that feedback utility is to some extent bounded by task design and available in semester time, it can be enhanced by practitioners commenting on generic skills on end-term assignments (Carless 2006) so that students can transfer the knowledge and skills learnt to future tasks.

Discussion

This study identified differing perceptions of assessment feedback on three types of tasks (essay outlines, oral presentations and end-of-term written assignments) in a post-secondary institution in Hong Kong. The divergent views of the teachers and the students cast light on the major problems in the feedback processes in the two academic English classrooms. The discussion of strengths, weaknesses and suggestions was not adequate to support students in the pre-assessment stage because they expected an explanation of standards to help them interpret feedback. The use of praise for relationship building was perceived as insincere communication due to unspecific compliments and creation of 'false hope'. Teachers' meticulous efforts on error corrections were not appreciated by their students owing to limited transferability of error feedback to future tasks and students' emotional response to this type of feedback.

The findings derived from the post-secondary classrooms show some resemblance to that in the university context. Similar to the undergraduates in Carless's (2006) study, the student participants of this study lacked a clear understanding of assessment criteria and standards for feedback interpretation. Without access to the context for feedback dialogues, S6 found it difficult to apply teacher feedback to regulate his performance. If feedback is to scaffold students to expand their zone of proximal development, then acquiring a shared understanding of quality in the pre-assessment stage is a prerequisite for effective feedback communication (Hounsell et al. 2008). Practitioners can consider engaging students with peer and teacher-led discussions of different exemplars as part of an assignment preparation activity to help students assimilate tacit knowledge of academic disciplines (see Rust, Price, and O'Donovan 2003 and Hendry, Armstrong, and Bromberger 2012 for details). This type of pre-assessment support is particularly useful for first-year students who are at the periphery of the assessment community, and the meaning negotiations with peers and teachers enable them to have a better understanding of the feedback discourse.

The second observation of the findings is the impact of institutional policies on feedback practice. In common with the teachers in Maggs's (2014) study at her specialised higher education institution, Edward was also under the pressure of the institution's quality assurance policy. The major differences are that those in Maggs's study delayed feedback provision because graded work could not be returned to students before the completion of external examiner's review, and Edward used extensive error corrections to justify his judgement to the moderator. His instance shows the interaction of individual feedback belief and the quality assurance measure in shaping feedback decisions. Compared with Sue who taught in a small subject team (eight classes), Edward suffered from stress when his moderator adopted the techno-rational perspective (Bloxham 2012) to compare his class average with that of the other 64 classes in his subject team. In a self-financed institution whose resourcing is linked with student enrolments, maintaining quality assurance is important for college survival. This phenomenon corresponds with the context of further education that the pedagogical practice of a teacher is deeply affected by college policy and funding issues (Hodkinson et al. 2007).

Another theme arising from the findings is students' perceptions of praise. This study extends our understanding of praise by probing into teachers' reason for adopting this strategy and post-secondary students' emotional responses to it. In line with the biology teachers in the study of Orsmond and Merry (2011), praise was also frequently used by the English teachers of this study. Theoretically speaking, praise contributes to the relational aspect of feedback communication by mitigating the force of negative feedback (Molloy et al. 2013). Nonetheless, the use of praise by Edward and Sue for rapport building heightened the tensions in feedback communication for two reasons. First, praise that does not point to knowledge mastery, strategy use and task-related performance is unproductive to learning as it fails to sustain students' engagement and efforts (Hattie and Timperley 2007). Second, it is likely that the sugar-coating component obscures the learning potential of constructive feedback delivered through paired act and hedged comments. This is compounded by the fact that S11

expected consistency between feedback and grades. If some students use feedback to determine their academic capability (Shields 2015), then the mismatch between their anticipated and actual grades may cloud their own judgement of learning capability and as a result weaken their communication trust in teachers.

The discussion here does not intend to blame the teachers for giving students a 'false hope' but emphasises the importance of looking for a more effective method for managing emotions in feedback processes. As shown in the findings, both teachers and students were faced with dilemmas in feedback communication: Edward was in a struggle of providing honest feedback and protecting students' feelings (cf. Higgs, Richardson, and Abrandt Dahlgren 2004). The students were in the objectivity-empathy dilemma (Crossman 2007) that S3 wished to know actual comments but S1 was vulnerable to extensive error corrections. The emotions of the post-secondary students in feedback processes are likely to be influenced by their pressure of pursuing further studies, self-esteem, results of assessment tasks, timing of feedback and the way in which feedback is communicated. In view of the complexities, it seems unwise to simply resort to praise to relieve emotional tensions.

This paper argues for the need to foster students' 'feedback resilience'. Building on Fredickson's (2004) definition of resilience as the capability to 'bounce back after adversity' (1371), I refer 'feedback resilience' to students' ability to tackle negative emotions in feedback processes and to produce insights from feedback for improvement. 'Feedback resilience' can be developed in the following way. In the pre-assessment stage, teachers can build trust by articulating assessment requirements to students via exemplar analysis and offering academic assistance to help students achieve the standards expected (Yeager et al. 2014). Once students understand the standards, they can be encouraged to perform self-assessment of performance, like Sue's practice of inviting students to identify their strengths and weaknesses at the beginning of a feedback session. The rationale is that if students are aware of their weaknesses, they can be more emotionally prepared to receive negative feedback (Värlander 2008) and can have a better interpretation of sugar-coated comments. With a shared understanding of task requirements and standards, teachers can brainstorm improvement plans with students to accomplish specific criteria and learning goals.

A major concern with 'feedback resilience' is how to promote this virtue in different contexts. Given the strong links between feedback responses and 'feedback resilience', it is likely that the cultural and individual factors shaping students' feedback responses can also impinge on the development of 'feedback resilience'. For cultural factors, students who are deeply influenced by Confucian values tend to show deference to teachers and have humility (willingness to admit one's inadequacies for self-improvement) (Li 2009). They may refrain from challenging teachers' judgements in face-to-face feedback communication, as opposed to their Western counterparts who believe that engaging in a heated discussion with teachers is a way to construct knowledge (Pratt, Kelly, and Wong 1999). The avoidance of direct conflict with teachers may deprive them of a chance to have a deeper understanding of their problems, but humility drives them to examine their weaknesses and to develop improvement

plans. For individual factors, students with higher levels of emotional maturity (Pitt and Norton 2016) and self-confidence (Wang and Li 2011) are more receptive to negative comments and more willing to reflect on performance, which sets the favourable conditions for building ‘feedback resilience’. In light of the cultural and individual differences, practitioners are advised to understand the traits of students from different cultural backgrounds and to be more flexible in their classroom practice of fostering ‘feedback resilience’.

Limitations and future research

There are two limitations of this study. First, it employed focus group interviews to examine students’ affective responses to feedback. Given the possibility of group dynamics in influencing student participants’ views in a focus group (Finch and Lewis 2003), the findings may not accurately reveal individuals’ affects in feedback processes and the interrelationships with their prior learning experience, learner identity and motivation. Future research can involve an in-depth investigation to see how various factors interact with one another in shaping individual students’ emotional responses to feedback, how students of different proficiency levels tackle negative emotions in feedback communication and how teachers can map out strategies to arouse positive emotions to facilitate learning. Second, the study analysed feedback from the perspectives of focus, purpose, strategy use and degree of intervention but did not examine the process of meaning negotiations between teachers and students. A fruitful line of inquiry would be adopting an interactional analysis approach (Ajjawi and Boud 2015) to explore the impact of feedback dialogues on teachers and students as well as the changes of affective state in response to feedback exchanges.

Conclusion

This study has identified teachers’ and students’ perceptions of assessment feedback in two post-secondary academic English classrooms. Its significance lies in unpacking conflicting beliefs of feedback on different assessment tasks and highlighting the complexities of feedback processes in the post-secondary context. The differing views indicate three major issues: (i) lack of explanation of criteria and standards to support feedback interpretation; (ii) use of unspecific praise at a cost of feedback sincerity and teacher-student trusting relationship; and (iii) limited uptake of error corrections on end-of-term written assignments. These issues are interlinked with feedback conceptualisations, emotional burdens in the assessment process, learner identity, institutional policies and other contextual factors. The fresh perspective of this paper is the comprehensive analysis for written and verbal feedback according to focus, purpose, strategy use and degree of intervention, which furnishes tutors of various disciplines with a systematic tool to examine their feedback practice.

On the road to lifelong learning, students will inevitably face criticisms or receive negative feedback. Instead of evading honest critical feedback or suppressing negative emotions, it is crucial to develop students’ ‘feedback resilience’ through encouraging self-

assessment and providing timely academic assistance in the assessment process. Only through increasing immunity to negative comments can students learn productively from feedback and regulate their performance for continuous improvement.

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Appendix 1: Interview Questions

Part 1: Stimulated-recall Interview Questions

Interview session 1: Feedback on essay outlines

1. What was / were the purpose(s) of your feedback?
2. I noticed you wrote comments on the outlines and also discussed the marked outlines with students in a small group. Why did you give feedback in this way?
3. Which aspect(s) of student performance did you focus on? Why?
4. When you gave feedback, which type of your comments was most useful to students? Why?
5. How did you guide students to the right task direction? Can you give one to two examples for explanation?
6. What factors influenced your way of giving feedback?
7. Apart from feedback on outlines, did you provide other pre-assessment support for students? If yes, how did you provide the support?

Interview session 2: Feedback on oral presentations

1. Did you tell students their marks or grades during the feedback sessions? Why or why not?
2. What was / were the purpose(s) of your feedback?
3. How did you communicate the feedback to students? Can you name some examples of the strategy(ies) used? Why did you use this / these strategy (ies)?
4. I noticed you praised students in the verbal feedback sessions. What was the praise about? Why did you praise them?
5. What factors influenced your way of giving feedback?
6. Did you encounter any difficulties when providing feedback? If yes, what were the difficulties?

Interview session 3: Feedback on end-of-term written assignments

1. What was / were the purpose(s) of your feedback?
2. What was the focus of your feedback?
3. Which is more important in marking student work, correcting language errors or commenting on writing skills? Why?
4. What factors influenced your way of giving feedback?
5. Did the moderation exercise affect your feedback practice? If yes, how did it affect your practice?
6. Did you encounter any difficulties when providing feedback? If yes, what were the difficulties?

Part 2: Focus Group Interview Questions

Interview session 1: Feedback on essay outlines

1. What do you think of the purpose(s) of teacher feedback?
2. Which type of feedback is most useful to your learning? Why? Can you name some examples for illustration?
3. Which type of feedback is least useful to your learning? Why? Can you name some examples for illustration?
4. How are you going to use the feedback to help you write the essay?
5. Did you encounter any difficulties in understanding the feedback? If yes, what were these difficulties? How did you overcome the difficulties?
6. Are there any aspects of work you wished your teacher would comment on but he/she didn't? If yes, what is/are the aspect(s)? Why do you want the teacher to cover the aspect(s)?

Interview session 2: Feedback on oral presentations

1. What do you think of the purpose(s) of teacher feedback?
2. How did you feel during the verbal feedback session? Why did you have such feelings?
3. Did you change your feelings afterwards? Why?
4. What is the most useful feedback to your learning? Why?
5. What is the least useful feedback to your learning? Why?
6. What do you think about the use of praise?
7. Did you encounter any difficulties in understanding the feedback? If yes, what were these difficulties? How did you overcome the difficulties?
8. Are there any aspects you wished the teacher would mention in the feedback session but he/she didn't? If yes, what is/are the aspect(s)? Why do you want the teacher to cover the aspect(s)?

Interview session 3: Feedback on end-term written assignments

1. What do you think of the purpose(s) of teacher feedback?
2. Before receiving the marked assignments, what did you expect to know from the teacher feedback? Could your expectations be met?
3. Are the error corrections useful to you? Why or why not?
4. What do you think about error corrections?
5. Are there any aspects you wished the teacher would comment on but he / she didn't? If yes, what is/are the aspect(s)? Why do you want the teacher to cover the aspects?