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How Does that Make You Feel: Students’ Affective Engagement with Feedback

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Abstract

Understanding how students engage with written feedback (WF) on L2 writing is crucial. Given the mediating role of learner perceptions and beliefs about WF (including in relation to teacher behaviour and perceived persona), our research explores learner perceptions and affective responses to – or affective engagement with – WF in a university context. Furthermore, because it has been shown that learners relate differently to native and nonnative English-speaking teachers, who themselves relate differently to WF, we investigate how Chinese students engage with WF given by a Chinese English teacher (CET) and a native English-speaking English teacher (NET). Ninety-nine Chinese undergraduates at an East China University participated in the study. They received anonymous feedback from three NETs and three CETs, and then completed a survey about their feelings and reactions regarding the feedback received. Our results indicate that student writers expect to receive feedback that is detailed without overwhelming with corrections. When the WF provided in this study met these requirements, it stirred positive feelings in the students. More and more detailed WF was associated with feeling “moved,” “touched,” and “motivated,” and seemed to encourage the students to follow up with revisions and other actions. In all the aspects investigated, the NETs’ WF and approach was appreciated more positively than that of the Chinese teachers. The latter provided less WF, which was also more unclear and included a higher proportion of written corrective feedback (WCF). We propose recommendations for increasing student-teacher interaction and communication about feedback to improve student engagement with feedback.

Keywords: *Feedback, Affective, Engagement, L2 Writing, Perception, Reaction, Response, NNES Teacher, EFL*

Introduction

The feedback process is more than a one-way communication from teachers to largely passive receivers and can only be effective if learners actively engage with it (Hyland, 2003; Hyland & Hyland, 2019b, p. 11). Learner engagement “unlocks[s] the benefits of feedback” (Zhang & Hyland, 2018, p. 90). Therefore, understanding how students of L2 writing engage with written feedback (WF) on L2 writing is crucial. The implementation of teacher WF has been the object of research in L2 writing since the 1980s (Radecki & Swales, 1988; Zamel, 1985). It has been the focus of studies about teachers’ perception or practice (Lee, 2004, 2008b) and about the impact of teacher’s WF on student writer revisions (Ferris, 1997, 2018; Hyland, 1998; Treglia, 2009). Most of the feedback research has been seeking to understand how teachers can improve their techniques of offering WF and what cognitive factors (such as feedback directness and focus, and learner proficiency) influence successful uptake (Ellis et al., 2008; Ferris, 2010). It is only recently that the argument has been made that feedback as a socio-cognitive process needs to be understood as something that encompasses not only cognitive and behavioural but also affective factors (Hyland & Hyland, 2019b). All of these influence the level of engagement that renders feedback effective.

Engagement is the umbrella term for learners’ cognitive, behavioural, and affective responses to feedback (Ellis, 2010, p. 342). The cognitive dimension encompasses the strategies learners use when attending to feedback. Behavioural engagement is about whether and how learners uptake the feedback and revise their texts through positive involvement in tasks and classes. Affective engagement comprises students’ emotional responses to feedback. These have not been studied extensively, but some studies suggest that whether and how students’ uptake feedback is heavily influenced by their attitudes, beliefs, and goals (Han & Hyland, 2019, p. 247; Hyland, 2003; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010). As the potential key that unlocks cognitive and behavioural engagement, affective engagement plays an important role that must be better understood (as also argued by Goldstein, 2012; Han & Hyland, 2019; Hyland, 2003) by researchers and teachers alike.

Additionally, there is a need to better understand how learners perceive and react to the WF received from both native English-speaking (NES) and non-native English-speaking (NNES) teachers. In practice, more NES teachers teach English in NNES countries each year (Rao & Li, 2017). In China alone, the number of foreign teachers grew from 3,495 in 2002 to 18,510 in 2019 (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2002, 2020). This means that more EFL learners will receive WF from both NES and NNES teachers, whose feedback and evaluation practices may differ (Hughes & Lascaratou, 1982; Hyland & Anan, 2006; Porte, 1999; Rao & Li, 2017). Therefore, it is important to understand how WF practices might differ and which ones engage students positively.

The present study contributes to the growing body of research that investigates the crucial aspect of learners’ affective engagement with teachers’ WF on L2 writing. We explore undergraduate Chinese students’ impressions, feelings, preferences, and confusions about NES and NNES teachers’ WF.

Literature Review

In the context of feedback as a two-way communication, students are “subjects who actively respond to the feedback they receive” (Yu & Liu, 2021, p.1). A myriad of dynamic affective, cognitive, individual, social, and contextual factors influence how students perceive and react to teachers’ WF.

Affectively, learners are generally positive and appreciative of teachers’ WF (Cunningham, 2019; Elwood & Bode, 2014; Ferris, 1995; Radecki & Swales, 1988; Seker & Dincer, 2014). They want written comments from teachers and show a great deal of interest in having their errors pointed out or corrected (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Lee, 2008a; Leki, 1991; Radecki & Swales, 1988). Students feel frustrated when the WF is too abundant (Mahfoodh, 2017) or vague (Busse, 2013; Vattøy et al., 2020), but a lack of feedback can result in lowered confidence and motivation (Lee, 2008b; Busse, 2013).

Within the realm of WF, which includes commentary or responses on content and organization, form-focused WCF holds a special space. Even though many believe that written corrective feedback (WCF) induces adverse emotional responses and feelings (Han & Hyland, 2019), empirical studies indicate that ESL and EFL learners show great concern for formal text features and great appreciation for their teachers’ pointing out their grammatical problems (Ferris, 1995; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994). For example, Seker and Dincer (2014) found that students greatly preferred receiving feedback about their grammatical accuracy. Additionally, Elwood and Bode’s (2014) participants strongly asserted that error correction was necessary and welcomed as it was needed to increase their proficiency in their L2. Those positive perceptions of the helpfulness of WCF can also be found in Hyland (2003) and Lee (2004, 2008a).

From a cognitive standpoint, it has been well established that learners may not use WF because they do not understand it due to its difficulty relative to their stage of development (Ferris et al., 2013; Goldstein, 2012). This was also shown in more recent studies of electronic/computer-mediated feedback (Ene & Upton, 2014, 2018). In Best et al. (2015), students reported that they would ignore comments they could not understand (p. 343). Findings in Weaver (2006) also suggest that students may lack confidence about the meaning of terms used by their teachers in their comments. Goldstein (2012) and Ferris et al. (2013) also showed that a mismatch between teacher and student perspectives about the intent and meaning of WF could affect students’ response to it negatively.

Individual factors, including some related to how teachers are perceived, influence students’ engagement with WF as well. As Goldstein (2012) points out, students can question or ignore feedback because they believe that the teacher’s feedback is not valid or correct or that the teacher does not have enough content knowledge; in addition, students may be unmotivated or resistant to revision (p. 187-188). According to Han & Hyland (2015) and Han (2017), learners can ignore WF based on personal beliefs or goals.

More recently, it has been suggested that the way a teacher’s personality is perceived can influence learners’ perception of and response to WF, which in turn can influence their perception of the teacher’s helpfulness, personality, and dedication. For example, Han and

Hyland (2019) found that the two students in their case study perceived their teachers as interested and dedicated when they gave a lot of feedback or communicated interest through body language in student-teacher conferences; consequently, they engaged with the feedback more when they had a positive impression of the teacher. Similarly, Zheng and Yu (2018), which focused on 12 low-proficiency learners, reported that every student was willing to receive WCF; 10 out of 12 students expressed appreciation towards the teacher's effort; 11 of them spoke highly of the worth of WCF and stated that they felt upset if WCF was not provided. They also described the teacher who gave WCF positively as helpful and dedicated to her work, and "five students mentioned that the amount of WCF could be an indication of how their efforts had been received by the teacher" (Zheng & Yu, 2018, p. 19). In contrast, students were upset about seemingly lazy or rushed feedback, feeling their hard work was not acknowledged (O'Donovan et al., 2019).

Teachers' NES or NNES status affects how they are perceived by their students (Chit Cheong, 2009; Mahboob, 2004; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005). However, students' responses to the WF of NES and NNES teachers in EFL writing have not been explored. In early work about the NES-NNES dichotomy, Medgyes (1992) acknowledged considerable differences between NES and NNES teachers in general, identifying strengths for both. With respect to feedback, studies found that NES teachers judged language errors in the context of intelligibility, showing a higher tolerance for errors than their NNES counterparts, who prioritized rules (James, 1977; Hughes & Lascaratou, 1982; Porte, 1999; Hyland & Anan, 2006; Rao & Li, 2017). Árvá and Medgyes (2000) found that NES teachers focused on fluency, meaning, and language in use, while NNES teachers focused on accuracy, form, and grammar rules. While NES teachers tolerate errors, NNES teachers correct or punish errors (Árvá & Medgyes, 2000).

Given the mediating role of individual differences, such as learner perceptions and beliefs about WF (including in relation to teacher behaviour and perceived persona) (Han & Hyland, 2015; Han, 2017; Ferris, 1995), our research explores learner perceptions of WF in a university context. Furthermore, because it has been shown that learners relate differently to NES and NNES teachers, who themselves may relate differently to WF, we investigate whether Chinese students respond differently to WF given by a Chinese English teacher (CET) and a native English-speaking English teacher (NET).

Research Questions

Our study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ₁: How do Chinese undergraduates perceive teacher WF? Specifically, what are students' impressions, feelings, preferences, and confusions regarding teachers' WF?

RQ₂: Are there differences in their responses to NET's and CET's WF?

Methods

Context and Participants

Ninety-nine Chinese undergraduates at an East China University participated in the study. Most of them were sophomores who had learned English through classroom instruction for at least six years. At the university, they were placed, according to their scores on the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), into a required *College English* course. The course met 3 hours per week, 16 weeks per semester, and aimed to improve students' listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation skills. The participants were randomly selected from different sections of the course. Influenced by the grammar-translation method and the communicative approach, the class includes teacher lectures, group discussions, and student presentations. Little time is left for writing instruction. As non-English majors in an EFL context, the students are not required to write in English in their daily life. The students self-reported writing three pieces in English on average per semester.

The three native English teachers were two male teachers, Allen (NET, from the USA) and Barry (NET2, from the UK), and one female teacher Cherry (NET3, from New Zealand). They all received their PhD (NET1) or MA (NET2 and NET3) in their homelands. They had been teaching *English Composition* and *English Speaking* for English majors in China for three years on average. Their Chinese counterparts were Xiao (CET1), Yang (CET2), and Zeng (CET3), all female English teachers with a MA in English Language and Literature, with an average of seven years experience in teaching *College English* to non-English majors (all names are pseudonyms).

Data Collection

Students were asked to write a persuasive composition of 150~200 words on one of the following topics after class: *My View on the Certificate Craze*, *My View on University Rankings*, *My View on Distance Education*, *My View on Job-hopping*, *Will e-books Replace Traditional books?*, *“Work to Live” or “Live to Work”?* and other similar prompts.

Ninety-nine pieces of student writing were collected and numbered. No.1 - No.33 were distributed to NET1 and CET1, No.34 - No.66 were handed to NET2 and CET2, and No.67 - No.99 were given to NET3 and CET3. The six teachers (in three pairs) were asked to regard the compositions as their own students' homework and give WF as they usually would. Teachers' WF was collected and returned to students. Each student received two copies of their own composition with WF from a NET and the other from a CET. A bilingual version of a student questionnaire with open-ended questions was administered to the students; the English version of those questions can be found in the Results section. The students were asked to edit their compositions according to the two teachers' WF, then complete the questionnaire within 30 minutes. Students were told that the WF was from two English teachers, and other information about the teachers was provided after the questionnaires were collected.

Data Analysis

A content analysis of the students' responses to the open-ended questions in the questionnaire

was carried out. First, open coding was employed by reading through students' responses and looking for patterns. Individual responses were categorized and collated according to themes. Some responses were made up of two or three parts and coded for more than one category. For example, a response such as "The teacher corrected (the essay) conscientiously, and I did make many mistakes." (Q1: NET#12) was categorized as two comment units, one is "positive comment on T's attitude," the other "self-criticism." Two independent raters, colleagues of the second researcher, were given a random sample of the data. The second researcher then discussed any coding disagreement with each of the raters and came to a consensus.

Results

In the subsections below, we present the results corresponding to the survey questions related to our research questions.

What was your impression of the teacher's feedback?

In their responses about teachers' WF, the students addressed the question by giving their impression of the WF as well as of the teachers, demonstrating that they viewed the WF as a reflection of the teachers' engagement and quality. Sometimes, the distinction was not clearly made. Given that the question was about the WF itself, we agreed that if no specific subject was given in the response, this would be labelled as a comment on the WF rather than the teacher. For example, if the comment was simply "meticulous," we assumed that the feedback was "meticulous." We also agreed to label the comment "the feedback is so-so," which occurred in 2.9% of the comments about the CET's feedback as "neutral" instead of "negative," although it carries mild disapproval.

As shown in Table 1, students' impression of the NETs and their feedback was more positive than of the CETs. Comments about the NETs stand firmly on the positive end, with a total of 60.5% positive comments about the NETs (41.9%) and about their feedback (18.6%). In contrast, only 2.9% of the comments about CETs were positive, and 47.1% of the comments about CETs' feedback were distributed between "neutral" and "negative."

Table 1

Students' Impression of NETs' and CETs' Feedback

Category	Number and percentage of students' comments on NETs' WF	Number and percentage of students' comments on CETs' WF	Illustrative quotations
Positive comment on T	54 (41.9%)	3 (2.9%)	The teacher is detail-oriented / careful / conscientious / devoted / responsible / professional.
Negative comment on T	0 (0%)	3 (2.9%)	The teacher is superficial / irresponsible / not fulfilling their duty.
Neutral comment on T	0 (0%)	5 (4.8%)	The teacher looked through my essay quickly / modified just a few mistakes.
Positive comment on T's feedback	24 (18.6%)	10 (9.6%)	Teacher's feedback is detailed / accurate and concrete / clear / helpful. The handwriting is beautiful.
Negative	5 (3.9%)	21 (20.2%)	The feedback does not help.

comment on T's feedback			There are too few comments. Handwriting makes the feedback hard to read.
Neutral comment on T's feedback	20 (15.5%)	28 (26.9%)	The feedback is so-so / simple. There are many corrections / comments.
Positive feelings	6 (4.7%)	2 (1.9%)	I'm moved / touched / greatly inspired.
Negative feelings	3 (2.3%)	3 (2.9%)	I'm confused / disappointed. I don't know how to correct.
Neutral feelings	0 (0%)	6 (5.8%)	I have no special feelings.
Self-critical	16 (12.4%)	4 (3.8%)	I've made a lot of mistakes. I'm not good at writing. There're much room for me to improve.
About the score	1 (0.8%)	19 (18.3%)	The score is low / high. There is a score.
Total	129	104	

Students did not separate their impression of the feedback and its provider. This was quite remarkable in responses about the NETs' feedback: while 38% of the comments responded to the question by focusing on the WF, 41.9% of them were concerned with the feedback provider's perceived attitude toward their work.

How did you feel when you received the feedback?

The students held more positive feelings toward NETs' feedback than the CETs', as illustrated in Table 2. Positive feelings toward NETs' feedback took up 56.8% of the comments, while negative feelings were expressed in just 11.9% of the comments. The most frequently mentioned positive feelings for the NET's feedback were "moved" (7) and "motivated" (6). In contrast, positive feelings toward CET's feedback were mentioned in only 17.3% of the comments, whereas negative feelings represented 45.9%. Neutral feelings were mentioned in 24.5% of the comments. The most frequently used words to describe the negative feelings for CET's feedback were "disappointed or at a loss" (8), "indifferent" and "no interest" (5), and "confused" (5). Given the cultural tendency of Chinese students to downplay negative feelings (Liu, 2001), it is possible that their neutral feelings were hedged expressions of dissatisfaction.

As with the previous survey question, a subset of the answers showed again that students did not view the feedback and the feedback provider separately. For example, the comment "I'm so touched because the teacher was very conscientious, providing detailed commentary" illustrates the connection a student drew among the teacher's practice ("providing detailed commentary"), the teacher's character or personality ("very conscientious"), and their own feelings ("I'm so touched").

The responses about the NETs' WF triggered more self-critical comments (26.3%) than the CETs' (12.2%). This may be because the NETs provided far more feedback, including WCF. The students' "self-critical" feeling is an indication that the WF managed to raise their awareness about their language and writing, orienting their attention and helping them notice what they

needed to change (as postulated by Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis). It can also be an indirect way of expressing one's motivation to improve in the future. In Chinese culture, this is often accomplished by lowering oneself (acknowledging one's shortcomings) and committing to applying the advice from an authority figure, according to Leech's Modesty Maxim and Gu's self-denigration Maxim (Chen, 1993).

Table 2

Students' Feelings upon Receiving NETs' and CETs' Feedback

Category	NET	CET	Illustrative quotations
Positive Feelings	67 (56.8%)	17 (17.3%)	(I'm) moved, (and) marvelled at how detailed the feedback is! (NET#6) I'm very happy that a lot of grammar mistakes were pointed out. (NET#8) (I'm) grateful. (NET#19) I've learned a lot (NET#10)
Negative Feelings	14 (11.9%)	45 (45.9%)	(I'm) shocked though it makes sense. (NET#50) (I'm) upset and confused. (CET#59) (I have) no interest in reading it. (CET#13) (It seems that) the teacher got through my essay carelessly. (CET#49)
Neutral Feelings	6 (5.1%)	24 (24.5%)	Just so-so. (CET#21) No feelings (CET#55). It'll take me a while to look into it. (NET#57)
Self-critical	31 (26.3%)	12 (12.2%)	Huge room for improvement (NET#11)
Total	118	98	

Which feedback items were the most confusing?

As shown in Table 3, 40.2% of the students' comments claimed they could understand or were not confused by the NETs' WF. Similarly, 43.6% made the same response to feedback from CETs. The main reason leading to confusion about the NETs' feedback was different from CETs'. 16.1% of the comments reported that the handwriting was sloppy or illegible, which constituted a major barrier to understanding the NETs' feedback (as also found by Ferris, 1995). Regarding the CETs' feedback, 32.1% of the comments complained about the indirectness of the WCF. Typical comments were: "I'd like to know why the teacher underlined that phrase," and "What do those question marks mean?"

Items that caused confusion about the NETs' WF, second to their handwriting, had to do with what the WF was about and evenly spread across the categories of grammar (11.5%), vocabulary (10.3%), and mechanics (10.3%). For the CETs' feedback, the second most frequent reason for the confusion was a large amount of WCF feedback relative to commentary on the content. 11.5% of the student comments asked questions like: "Why there are so little feedback?" "Do you have any commentary on my essay?"

Table 3
Student Confusion about NETs' and CETs' Feedback

Category	NET	CET	Illustrative quotations
Understand all the feedback items	35 (40.2%)	34 (43.6%)	[I] understand all the items. (NET#3) No confusion. (CET#6)
Handwriting	14 (16.1%)	0 (0%)	The handwriting makes it hard to read. (NET#35)
Content	4 (4.6%)	1(1.3%)	The comment “why not” beside my sentence makes me most confused.(NET#18)
Vocabulary	9 (10.3%)	1 (1.3%)	Changing “such as” to “for example” makes me confused. (NET#21)
Grammar	10 (11.5%)	3 (3.9%)	Two uncountable nouns connected by “and” should be regarded as a plural noun? (NET#23)
Mechanics	9 (10.3%)	0 (0%)	What does the teacher mean by the margin comment “You should have double spaced and used a larger font.” (NET#56)
(Indirect) Way of correction	3 (3.5%)	25 (32.1%)	What does that question mark under the sentence mean? (CET#13) Some words and phrases are underlined, but I don't know why and how to correct. (CET#54)
Score	3 (3.5%)	5 (6.4%)	What would be the score for this “very good” essay? (NET#95) What are the reasons for this score? (CET#43)
(Too few) number of corrections or comments	0 (0%)	9 (11.5%)	It seems to me that a lot of mistakes have not been pointed out. Why? (CET#22)
Total	87	78	

Which feedback items do you particularly prefer?

Students were asked to mark the WF that they preferred and give a brief explanation. Then their answers were categorized into five groups: commentary (including end comments and comments on content), CF (on vocabulary, grammar, mechanics, and general), both commentary and CF, comments on the score, and no particularly preferred items.

As displayed in Table 4, the major difference between students' response to NETs' and CETs' feedback lies in the category of *no particularly preferred items*, with 56.9%, the highest across the categories, finding no particularly preferred feedback items from their CET (compared to 9.0% for NET). With regard to the NETs' WF, 91.1% of the comments showed that the students preferred *commentary* (43.6%), *CF* (37.2%), or *both commentaries and CF* (10.3%). This high percentage was in striking contrast with the 32.7% for CET feedback, who offered primarily WCF. Regarding NETs' commentary, more than 70% of the comments in this subcategory indicated a preference for overall commentary and nearly 30% are comments on content.

Because the CETs' CF mainly focused on grammar, the students' preferences were automatically based on this category, whereas, in the NETs' case, the preferences were more balanced between vocabulary and grammar. 37.2% of responses indicated a preference for NETs' CF (compared to 29.3% for the CETs). NETs' vocabulary CF was the most preferred (according to 41.4% of the responses about NET CF), closely followed by grammar CF (37.9%).

For the CETs' CF, grammar CF took the lead with 70.6%, leaving vocabulary CF (17.6%) and general CF (11.8%) far behind.

Table 4

Students' Preferred WF from NETs and CETs

Category	NET	CET	Illustrative quotations
Commentary	34 (43.6%)	2 (3.4%)	
Overall commentary	24 (70.6%)	0 (0%)	Suggestions offered in the end are very good. (NET#19)
Commentary on content	10 (29.4%)	2 (3.4%)	"Conclusion seems too strong" benefits me most for it has never occurred to me it can be problematic. (NET#10)
CF	29 (37.2%)	17 (29.3%)	
CF Vocabulary	12 (41.4%)	3 (17.6%)	"except for" changed into "rather than" (NET#49)
CF Grammar	11 (37.9%)	12 (70.6%)	"Is paid" changed into "is being paid" (NET#25)
CF general	5 (17.2%)	2 (11.8%)	Marked out mistakes with suggestions to correct them, very good! (NET#28)
CF mechanics	1 (3.4%)	0 (0%)	"no space between punctuation and next word" (NET#78)
Both commentary and CF	8 (10.3%)	0 (0%)	I like both the end remarks and all the corrections (NET#13)
Comment on Score	0 (0%)	6 (10.3%)	There is a score. (CET#95)
No preferred items	7 (9.0%)	33 (56.9%)	No preferred. (CET#64)
Total	78 (100.1%)	58 (99.9%)	

What are you going to do with the feedback?

About 12% of the comments expressed the students' determination to apply the feedback from both NETs and CETs to subsequent assignments by avoiding the same mistake, improving in a certain area, or revising under the guidance of the teacher's feedback and setting it as a model for writing in the future. Other actions such as rewriting, checking dictionaries or other reference books, asking for the teacher's help, or discussing with peers were rarely mentioned.

As shown in Table 5, the top three actions planned upon receiving feedback from NETs were *Revise* (30.1%), *Further process after reading* (26.3%), and *Read* (23.1%). Thus, many students reported the intent to cognitively process the feedback and set about revising rather than just passively read the WF. The follow-up to CETs' feedback was *No action* (26.1%), *Revise* (24.3%), *Read* (17.4%). *Further process after reading* may be missing from the follow-up on CETs' WF because the CETs gave primarily WCF and only scarce commentary. The fact that one of the main reactions to CET feedback was "to do nothing with it" indicates that WF, which is scarce and dominated by corrections, is not engaging.

Table 5
Students' Actions on Feedback from NETs and CETs

Category	NET	CET	Illustrative quotations
Read	36 (23.1%)	20 (17.4%)	Read it several times (NET#4) Read it carefully (CET#19)
Further process after reading	41(26.3%)	17 (14.8%)	Try to understand all the feedback points and find my problems with writing. (NET#62) Reflect on these mistakes (NET#76) Summarize language points (CET#8) Memorize the (corrected) mistakes (CET#50) Recite the composition (NET&CET#12)
Revise	47 (30.1%)	28 (24.3%)	Revise accordingly (NET#87) Correct my mistakes. (CET#32)
Apply feedback to subsequent writing	20 (12.8%)	14 (12.2%)	Regard it as a model for next writing assignment (NET#39) Avoid the same mistake next time (CET#61)
Rewrite	5 (3.2%)	3 (2.6%)	Rewrite it. (NET&CET#29)
Seek extra assistance	3 (1.9%)	3 (2.6%)	Ask the teacher questions (NET#34) Check dictionary to replace the words (CET#11) Compare scores with peers and read their compositions (CET#63)
No action	4 (2.6%)	30 (26.1%)	I may ignore it. (NET#24) Do nothing. (CET#77) I don't know what to do /how to correct. (CET#49 /CET#87) I may throw it away because it's of no use. (CET#47) Keep it. (NET41/CET41) Take a glance, and put it away (CET#74)
Total	156	115	

What are the differences between the two sets of feedback you received?

This question assessed students' perceptions of the major differences between NET and CET feedback. When they answered the question, the students did not know that one set of WF was from a NET and the other from a CET. The amount of WF and its directness were the main differences, and both were in the NETs' favour. As illustrated in Table 6, 31% of students' comments found the main difference in how detailed the WF was. More detailed and direct feedback was perceived as helpful; in conjunction with the appropriate amount, WF was perceived as a reflection of teachers' diligence, sense of responsibility, and willingness to help.

Table 6
Students' Perception of the Differences Based on which NET Feedback Was Preferred over CET Feedback

Category	Count (number of comments)	Percentage
Amount of detail	36	31%
Attitude	21	18.1%
Helpfulness/Usefulness	18	15.5%
Number of corrections	11	9.5%
Focus	11	9.5%
Score attached	9	7.8%
Directness	8	6.9%
Easy to understand	2	1.7%
Total	116	

Discussion

Our results indicate that student writers expect to receive an amount of feedback that allows the feedback to be detailed without overwhelming them with corrections. Affectively, when the WF provided in this study met these requirements, it stirred positive feelings in the students. Detailed WF was associated with feeling “moved,” “touched,” and “motivated.” Behaviorally, the students’ positive perceptions of the feedback and of their ability to work with it cognitively (because it was manageable) seemed to encourage the students to follow up with revisions and other actions. Thus, our findings illustrate the interplay among affective, cognitive, and behavioural factors pertaining to engagement with feedback.

Another affective response of our students was that they closely associated WF that was detailed, direct, specific, and not overwhelming, with positive perceptions of the teacher as helpful and conscientious. Furthermore, when the student writers had a positive reaction to both the WF and consequently the teacher who provided it, they displayed interest in further engaging with the WF through follow-up actions, which included revision and other types of cognitive processing of the WF.

In all the aspects investigated, the NETs’ WF and approach was appreciated more positively than that of the Chinese teachers. The latter provided less WF, which was also more unclear and included a higher proportion of WCF. As for differences between feedback from NETs and CETs, students in our study appreciated that NETs provided more detailed feedback than CETs. Detailed meant more quantitatively as well as more direct. Consistent with prior literature regarding the NES-NNES dichotomy reviewed above, the CETs were more concerned with form and grammar rules, while NETs focused more on fluency and meaning.

This is not only consistent with conclusions of previous studies that students are generally positive and emotionally appreciative toward teacher’s WF but also in line with studies on students’ reactions to teacher’s WF in which it is reported that students interpret feedback provision as an indicator of teacher’s sense of responsibility and care for them (Han, 2017 & 2019). Meanwhile, non-detailed feedback will be regarded as low-quality work from “lazy and irresponsible” teachers (Lee, 2008b). By reading teachers’ feedback, student writers are “reading” the teacher. They form their opinions about the teacher based on the feedback, and those opinions are likely to mediate their engagement of the teacher’s feedback in turn.

Our study reinforces that students’ engagement with feedback depends on understanding it from a cognitive point of view. Many of our participants indicated that they understood the WF from the NETs (in 40.2% of comments) as well as the CETs (in 43.6% of comments). This finding is similar to the findings in Ferris (1995), in which close to half of the students surveyed said they never had difficulties with understanding their teacher’s feedback. Furthermore, the major reason for being unable to understand CETs’ WF, which was largely WCF, was due to its indirectness. This type of WCF assumes that students are capable of correcting errors themselves as long as they are pointed out. However, the research finds that indirect feedback is not preferred, especially for lower language proficiency writers, due to their lack of a robust linguistic repertoire that they can use to self-correct (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010).

In addition to indirectness, an important reason for being unhappy and confused about the CETs' feedback was related to the lack of written commentary. When both comments and WCF were given by the NETs, the students expressed a slight preference for receiving written commentary (43.6%) to CF (37.2%). Because written commentary was scarce in the CETs' feedback, more than half of the students' comments (56.9%) could not identify a preferred type of feedback, and the remaining almost 30% listed CF likely because of a lack of alternatives. As Goldstein (2005) pointed out, learners require feedback, in some form, as it helps them understand how their writing is being interpreted by readers and what revisions may help strengthen their text. Teachers, in most cases, as students' primary readers of their school writing, need to cultivate a sense of audience in student writers by responding to their writing with more than CF. As a reader, the teacher can tell the student writer what part is easily understood, what reads convincing, where the reader starts to lose track of questions and doubts emerge, etc. As a special reader, a writing teacher "can explain why and provide strategies for remedying these problems" (Goldstein, 2005, p. 5). Hence, providing written commentary can arouse and enhance students' awareness of writing for potential audiences and purposes and help them become more effective writers. From this perspective, it is not surprising that students are more eager to receive written commentary than CF.

Our student writers questioned the CETs' level of engagement itself due to the lack of written commentary and prioritization of WCF. As a result, their willingness to further engage with the CETs' WF behaviorally, through revision, was low. Like our findings above about the negative affective reactions to insufficient feedback, this highlights the complex, dynamic, and socio-cognitive nature of the feedback process as a form of a dialogue between teachers and learners, in which the feedback not only serves a mediating purpose from a cognitive perspective but also involves an affective dimension in which the cognitive qualities of the feedback (such as its indirectness or quantity) influence the receivers' affective reaction and their further engagement with it (or lack thereof). Indeed, Hyland and Hyland (2019a, 2019b) signal this dynamic in promoting the need to deepen our understanding of engagement as a process with cognitive, behavioural, and affective dimensions.

Another encouraging finding of our study is that students not only *read* the feedback (23.1% for NET and 17.4% for CET) but also *further processed after reading* it (26.3% for NET and 14.8% for CET) and *revised* (30.1% for NET and 24.3% for CET) as a result. Previous research also found that students read the feedback they received but remained divided on whether students respond to their teacher's WF (Ferris, 1995; Elwood & Bode, 2014; Cunningham, 2019). In our study, because the NETs provided more WF than WCF, their WF resulted in more students reporting that they would be willing to revise their writing in the future. In contrast, the CETs' WCF did not trigger the form of engagement which may lead learners to intend to revise their writing. This signals that to engage learners more wholly, WCF should be combined with commentary. It is important for teachers to teach students how to address WF/WCF themselves, including by accessing other resources and peers.

In environments where teachers provide handwritten WF, it is important to realize that the

legibility of the teachers' handwriting is crucial. While this may be regarded as a minor issue, it turns out to be as much of a game-changer as other factors. The illegibility of handwriting was identified in 16.1% of our participants' comments as a factor that hindered them from understanding and relating to NETs' feedback. This was a noteworthy reason for students' incomprehensibility of teacher's WF in both Ferris (1995) and Lee (2008a). Teachers in Lee (2008a) had to write fast to deal with their heavy grading load. In the current study, since the NETs and CETs had the same teaching load and the NETs gave more WF anyway, the amount of grading was not a differentiating factor. Changing the feedback delivery mode from handwritten to electronic/digital/computer-mediated feedback can solve this problem of having to decipher teachers' handwriting.

Future research may further explore the connections between engagement – affective and otherwise – and grades as an assessment practice that is so closely connected to feedback. Our study suggests that grades may play a positive affective role in encouraging Chinese students' engagement with teacher's WF. 18.3% of our participants' comments indicated that they were interested in how their grade was assigned by the CETs, and – if a grade was not given, as in the case of the NETs – why it was not there. Given that our participants were foreign language learners situated in a generally exam-oriented context, it is not surprising to find students' interest in having a score to assess their writing and room for improvement. Cunningham (2019) also found that 54% of his respondents read their teacher's feedback to earn a higher grade in the class. As teachers, we may expect our students to be “writing-driven” rather than “grade-driven,” but it is also not realistic for teachers to deny students a grade as a motivation to engage with the teacher's WF. Consistent scoring criteria, valid rating scale, or classroom relevant rubrics can provide guidelines and assistance to students' writing in addition to the teachers' and peers' WF. As Goldstein (2012) also noted, without having grades on her drafts, her participant, Hisako, appeared to lack the extrinsic motivation to revise her writing (p. 202).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Our study provides evidence that student writers have a range of affective responses to WF, which influence their perception of their teachers and, more importantly, their further engagement with the WF. In addition, we showed that there might be differences between native and nonnative English-speaking teachers' approaches to WF. Further investigations are needed to elucidate what causes these differences so that gaps that can affect learners' affective, cognitive, or behavioural engagement with feedback can be addressed in an informed way in professional development. It appears that student writers expect to receive a decent amount of feedback and a grade to clarify teacher's evaluation of their writing ability. They prefer written commentary on content to CF, although they are also interested in direct CF. Students also have to understand the feedback received. When these expectations are fulfilled, students may further engage with the feedback provided by thinking about it or attempting to implement it in their revisions. Therefore, teachers need to be familiar with a range of feedback strategies and make their feedback choices by integrating students' needs and the teacher's purpose to encourage

students' engagement with feedback. Using feedback that triggers positive affective responses from the students emerges as important due to the relationship between affective engagement and engagement as a whole.

We suggest that teachers should have open discussions with students in two directions. On the one hand, instead of taking students' understanding of WF for granted, teachers need to take the initiative to dialogue with students to better understand their preferences and previous experience with teacher WF. Based on this understanding, teachers can choose from their WF repertoire the strategies that accommodate students' preferences and needs, providing scaffolding feedback from high to low degrees of directness so that students can grow from heavily relying on teacher's directions and assistance to using teacher's feedback independently and confidently. On the other hand, teachers should thoroughly explain their feedback strategies and expectations because students may not necessarily understand teachers' teaching objectives or the rationale behind the feedback. As Price et al. (2010) remind us, "the learner is in the best position to judge the effectiveness of feedback but may not always recognize the benefits it provides" (p. 277). To this end, teachers can communicate with the students about feedback types and their benefits. In practice, teachers can adopt different ways to foster the dialogue about feedback with students, asking them to request feedback on their own concerns, or asking for feedback on (teacher's) feedback. Dialogic, democratic communication helps build students' literacy about feedback (Han & Xu, 2019; Yu & Liu, 2021), which in turn helps regulate student writers' emotions about feedback and academic writing (Mahfoodh, 2017; Yu & Liu, 2021). If we agree that students' engagement "unlock[s] the benefits of feedback" (Zhang & Hyland, 2018, p. 90), recognizing their specific needs and unpacking their emotional responses, which mediate cognition, is essential.

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