Teacher Feedback in UK Higher Education:
Affective and Cognitive Perceptions of Chinese postgraduate students

Authors: Fangfei Li College of Foreign Language, Donghua University, Shanghai, China
Email address: lifangfei@dhu.edu.cn

Xiao Lan Curdt-Christiansen* (Corresponding author) Department of Education, University of Bath, Bath, the United Kingdom
Email address: X.Curdt-Christiansen@bath.ac.uk

Abstract

This article reports on a case study of five Chinese postgraduate students’ experiences and perceptions of teacher feedback in UK higher education. Situated within an international higher education context, the study focuses on the affective and cognitive aspects of teacher feedback. Employing qualitative methods, the study involved five participants in two phases of their education - the pre-sessional English for Academic Purpose (EAP) programme and the MA TESOL programme. Data were collected through background interviews, stimulated recall and retrospective interviews. The findings show that a recursive process was taking place in students’ affective and cognitive engagement with feedback, and their affective reactions were moderated by their cognitive understanding of the feedback. The study has important implications for internationalisation of higher education through students’ academic experiences in different higher education contexts.

Keywords: teacher feedback; student perspective; affective perception; cognitive perception; Chinese international student
1. Introduction

In the field of higher education (HE), teacher feedback plays a critical role both in students’ learning experience and for their academic performances. Teachers’ feedback in response to students’ performance has been regarded as essential for students to monitor, evaluate, and regulate their own learning and develop into independent learners (Ferguson, 2011). Over the past decades, studies in feedback have examined a variety of topics including effective feedback practices (Quinton & Smallbone, 2010), mediators in feedback production (Dunworth & Sanchez, 2018) and the relationship between feedback practices and students’ learning (e.g., Ion, Cano-García, & Fernández-Ferrer, 2017; Robinson, Pope, & Holyoak, 2013; Williams & Smith, 2017; Esterhazy & Damsa, 2017). While these studies have provided insight into the ways in which feedback can enhance student learning, many of them focused on teachers’ perspective and only a relatively small number on students’ perspective.

Teacher-feedback has often been regarded as one-way “information transmission” (Boud & Molloy, 2013) because their comments are often considered to be unambiguously interpreted by students as information from teachers telling them what to do. There is, however, a growing amount of evidence showing that teachers’ expectations and students’ actual practices with feedback are inconsistent (e.g., Beaumont, O’Doherty, & Shannon, 2011). Those inconsistencies reflect an agentic and responsive role of students in the feedback process and highlight the need for a close examination of students’ understanding of teacher feedback. Individual differences
such as students’ intrinsic values, motivation, self-regulation, and self-efficacy, all play a key role in determining how students perceive and subsequently engage with teacher feedback (Vattøy & Smith, 2019; Van der Kleij, 2019). There is, however, a relative dearth of investigations that examine feedback from the perspective of students, especially with regard to how students make sense of the feedback affectively and cognitively. This study addresses the gap by examining how a group of Chinese international postgraduate students studying in the UK perceive teacher feedback in affective and cognitive dimensions.

2. Feedback Provision in China

When students study abroad in a new academic context, their prior learning and feedback experiences may be very different from those they now experience in the host setting. This difference may influence their perception of the teacher feedback they receive in the host context (Tian & Lowe, 2013; Bailey, 2013; Ekstam, 2015).

In China’s Higher Education, teacher feedback provision is considerably different from institution to institution and from teacher to teacher. Most universities provide clear policies on teacher feedback provision for undergraduate students’ compositions, course essays and dissertations. For example, supervisors are required to track progress and assess the quality of dissertation drafts and give students “heuristic guidance” on research topics, project argumentation, and research design, to meet with students every
week, and to answer their questions in person (cf. Notification of Undergraduate Degree Dissertation Supervisory Work of Tongling University, 2017). Yet, the implementation of the policies is significantly influenced by practicalities. Feedback quality and the amount of effort that teachers devote to students’ written work are different. Some teachers provide little feedback on students’ dissertations, some provide brief comments like “good”, “excellent” and “grammar mistakes”, and some may offer intensive feedback and pay close attention to student work progress (Wang & Ding, 2011). The variation in feedback practices on the part of teachers is largely influenced by teaching and research commitments, supervisory experience, disciplinary knowledge, the sense of work responsibility as well as expectations for individual students (Hao & Gao, 2011). Overall, the various feedback norms in Chinese universities have profoundly shaped individual students’ experiences of feedback during their undergraduate period.

In addition, not all universities in China teach students academic conventions at the undergraduate level. Lack of academic instruction at Chinese universities at the undergraduate level results in students’ obtaining limited knowledge of academic writing discourse (Bailey, 2013). Ekstam (2015) discussed the writing problems encountered by Chinese international students at Western universities. By studying the writing practices and conventions of Chinese undergraduate writers in a series of academic writing workshops carried out at the universities of China and Sweden, he found that the Chinese student writers under investigation had very limited knowledge of academic writing discourse in relation to the standard IMRAD structure (i.e.,
Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion that is used in Western universities). They were not familiar with the usual components of an academic text, such as thesis statements, hypotheses and referencing formats, nor did they have the skills required in academic writing, including interpretation, critical discussion, analysis and summary. Lack of instruction on academic writing at Chinese universities may cause difficulties when Chinese students engage in academic activities in overseas institutions. This is particularly true when it comes to making sense of teacher feedback, which often requires understanding of academic conventions.

Chinese students’ engagement with teacher feedback in an overseas context would be further complicated when taking into account the differences in feedback provision norms and academic instruction. However, how experiences of different cultures of feedback affected Chinese students’ perceptions of teacher feedback in international higher education institutions is generally overlooked. In this regard, it is important to know how students’ expectations, experiences, ideas and practices, shaped during their Chinese undergraduate studies, influence their perceptions of teacher feedback in the UK postgraduate educational context. This study, therefore, investigates how Chinese international postgraduate students engage with teacher feedback in the UK academic community and how their affective-cognitive perceptions influence their long-term uptake of feedback. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Chinese students perceive teacher feedback in UK HE?
2. How does the interplay between the students’ affective and cognitive perceptions of teacher feedback take place?

3. Literature Review

Students’ engagement with feedback is mainly mediated by their affective reactions to teacher feedback (Mahfoodh, 2017; Pitt, 2014) and cognitive understanding of feedback (Zheng & Yu, 2018). Affective perception relates to students’ emotional and attitudinal responses to feedback, as well as their appreciation and critical evaluation of feedback quality (Ellis, 2010). When responding to teacher feedback, students experience a range of emotions, including “surprise, happiness, dissatisfaction, disappointment, frustration, and satisfaction” (Mahfoodh, 2017, p. 53). Cognitive perception refers to student mental investment in processing feedback, at both a cognitive and a metacognitive level (Ellis, 2010; Han & Hyland, 2015). At the cognitive level, students invest mental effort to understand the meaning of feedback comments and develop ideas about how to revise their texts accordingly (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010). At the metacognitive level, it involves students’ uptake of feedback in relation to their in-depth reflections on their weak points in written tasks, knowledge they have learned from feedback and adjustments they intend to make in future writing tasks (Mirzaee & Hasrati, 2014).
When students engage with teacher feedback, their affective and cognitive perceptions are closely interrelated. A number of studies have shown the interlocking relationships between these two perceptual elements (Zhang & Hyland, 2018; Sargeant et al., 2008). On one hand, students’ emotional reactions to teacher feedback are affected by their interpretation of harsh criticism or praise, self-efficacy in meeting the demand of feedback, as well as inconsistencies between teacher feedback and students’ self-evaluation of own work (Carless, 2006; Rowe, 2011; Pitt, 2014). Based on 52 surveys and 15 interviews with English teacher trainee students at a Hong Kong university, Carless (2006) found that the participants’ emotional responses to feedback arose from the inconsistencies between the feedback comments from the tutors and their self-perceptions of performance. The participants experienced unpleasant emotions when they received feedback seen as being lower than their self-evaluation, and such negative feelings were relieved when the feedback was seen as consistent with their self-perceptions of performance. The influence of limited cognitive understanding of feedback upon emotional reactions is seen in the study by Robinson, Pope and Holyoak (2013). By studying feedback experiences on coursework of 166 first-year undergraduate students through questionnaire survey, the researchers found that the students’ perceived difficulty in improving the coursework according to teacher feedback caused their upset and helpless feelings towards the feedback. Research conducted thus far identifies the connection between emotional and cognitive engagement. The findings from those studies, however, provide little information on the process of students’ engagement with feedback. It has been suggested that students’
cognitive understanding of teacher feedback can be developed over time (Carless, 2019), though the dynamics of whether and how the development of students’ cognitive understanding of teacher feedback may moderate their affective responses is generally underplayed.

On the other hand, a student’s understanding and uptake of feedback could be affected by their emotional responses to the feedback. Studies revealed that negative emotions such as anger and frustration, caused by a teacher’s comments, could result in students’ complete ignoring of feedback and initiating of cognitive disengagement with the feedback (Mahfoodh, 2017; Han & Hyland, 2015; Zhang & Hyland, 2018; Ryan & Henderson, 2017). By examining four Chinese EFL learners’ engagement with teacher corrective feedback through the learners’ written texts, interviews, retrospective verbal reports, and teacher–student writing conferences, Han and Hyland (2015) found that a participant’s feeling of uncertainty and worrying about her revision lasting throughout the feedback process decreased her concentration on the processing of the feedback. A contrasting finding was presented in the study by Zhang and Hyland (2018) who interviewed two Chinese students about their engagement with teacher feedback. The researchers found that a participant’s appreciation of the detailed feedback provided by her lecturer promoted her cognitive investment in revising her work. Survey from 4514 students from two Australian universities suggested that international students were likely to be more emotionally vulnerable to teacher feedback than domestic students (Ryan & Henderson, 2017). Earlier research has revealed that international students’
perceptions of their adaptation into the host academic environment and learning behaviours are changeable and developmental as students become more immersed in the new setting (Tian, 2008). However, little is known about how international students’ evolving emotional reactions to the feedback provided by lecturers in host institutes may affect their cognitive engagement with the feedback.

Despite the interrelationship between students’ affective reactions to teacher feedback and their cognitive understanding of it, research suggests that the affective-cognitive perceptual interplay is more than a single loop of interaction. It could develop into a recursive process wherein affective and cognitive perceptions are subject to change as they interact with one another. A recursive interaction of feedback perception has been delineated in the study of Sargeant et al. (2008) who interviewed 28 family physicians to explore their emotional reactions to feedback that they received from reviewers such as medical colleagues and patients. The results indicate that when feedback is inconsistent with self-assessment, participants experience distress and powerlessness to a degree that affects their ability to improve their performance as required in the feedback. The disengagement with the feedback was the result of recursive interactions between negative emotions and limited cognitive processing of the feedback.

Although the recursive process of feedback engagement illustrated above is observed in the medical context, perceptual change of feedback also occurs in the HE context. Analysis of written assignments, computer-generated feedback and retrospective
An interview from a local student at a Chinese university found that the participant’s emotional responses to the feedback on her EFL writing came to change from “extremely sad” to “very happy” (Zhang, 2017). The evolving emotions were affected by the grades and comments she received. Although this study does not explicitly present the student’s affective-cognitive perceptual recursion, it identifies the evolving and dynamic nature of student perceptions of feedback. This kind of evolvement is particularly apparent when taking into account the transitional impact caused by the disparity between different educational systems. International students’ accommodation to and resistance against as well as transformation of teacher feedback are, to some extent, influenced by their familiarity with the host learning context and by their confidence in the disciplinary norms (Tardy, 2006). Given the above, Chinese international students, who move from their home educational setting to the less familiar UK educational context, may go through a range of perceptual changes with regard to how they deal with teacher feedback over the process of their adaptation to the UK academic community. However, current studies in higher education have not given much attention to the nature of feedback which is recursive, continuous and evolving, particularly in the context of international higher education. To better understand the dynamic nature of students’ perceptions of teacher feedback in an international setting, an in-depth investigation into how Chinese international students perceive and comprehend teacher feedback during the process of their adaptation to the UK HE context is imperative.
4. Methodology

This study was part of a larger exploratory study that focused on a group of Chinese international students at a UK university. The study lasted seven months and aimed at tracking the process of student engagement with teacher feedback in a naturalist learning setting. In the following sections, information about participants, research site, tools of inquiry, data collection and analysis procedures are described.

4.1 Participants

Research participants were selected by two criteria: (1) that they had completed an undergraduate programme in China, (2) and that they had no previous overseas study experience before studying in UK. After obtaining written permission from the programme director of the MA TESOL at a UK university to recruit participants, an email was sent to all 76 Chinese students in the programme, explaining the research purpose and participant selection criteria. Five female students responded and agreed voluntarily to participate. In this study, they were identified by the pseudonyms Di, Hong, Chun, Xiao and Mei, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant profiles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Subject area in China</th>
<th>Writing and feedback experiences at Chinese universities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Di</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Year 2 postgraduate student</td>
<td>Chinese Language and Literature</td>
<td>No English writing courses and no relevant feedback experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Writing and feedback experiences in EFL writing courses and dissertation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
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<td>----------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Business English</td>
<td>Writing and feedback experiences in EFL writing courses and dissertation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mei</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>English Teaching</td>
<td>Writing and feedback experiences in EFL writing courses and dissertation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chun</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>English-Chinese Translation</td>
<td>Writing and feedback opportunities in EFL writing courses provided by foreign teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiao</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>English literature</td>
<td>Writing and feedback experiences in EFL writing courses and dissertation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2 Setting

Before starting their MA TESOL programme, all participants attended a pre-sessional language programme at the university. Both programmes provided students with teacher feedback on their written assignments. Data collection took place in two phases, a) the pre-sessional language programme and b) the MA TESOL programme. The two consecutive programmes were selected because this helped to explore whether and if so how the students’ familiarity with the pre-sessional academic discourses and the feedback system may have led to any changes in their perceptions of teacher feedback in their subsequent engagement in the MA programme.

**Pre-sessional language programme:** Throughout the five-week programme, students were required to work on a 2,000-word essay, which was part of the course completion assessment, for which they received the tutors’ written and oral formative feedback, both on the outline, the first draft and the final text. The tutor’s feedback focused on content, text structure, reference format and language issues.
**MA TESOL programme**: Upon completing the pre-sessional programme, students started the master’s programme. There were four units (i.e., courses) per term and students were required to complete four assignments (3,000-5,000 words essays) at the end of each term for assessment. They received the tutors’ feedback in written and oral form during the course of writing assignments and after submitting them. Feedback suggestions were given 1) at Q&A sessions when assignments were prepared, 2) by booking tutorials with or contacting tutors via email, and 3) on the feedback form from submitted assignments - which consists of a summative part (i.e., grading) and a formative part, including an overall comment and specific formative comments on structure, content, presentation, analysis and use of sources.

4.3 Interviews

Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the participants’ perceptions of teacher feedback. They were arranged after the tutors had provided feedback or after the students had spontaneously sought suggestions from tutors at different stages of writing (see the column of “Interview schedule” in Table 3). Documents such as assignment topics, lesson slides, copies of written feedback, or students’ drafts (the original and revised ones) were used to help participants recall their writing processes.

These interviews facilitated an in-depth examination of the central issues concerning the dynamics and many facets of the students’ affective and cognitive responses to feedback. Interview topics and probing questions were designed to elicit information
concerning how they felt about feedback comments, how they managed such emotional reactions as well as how their emotional reactions and cognitive understanding of feedback interacted with each other to influence their writing practice. The interviews included 1) background interviews, 2) stimulated recall interviews and 3) retrospective interviews (see Table 3).

- Background interview was conducted once at the commencement of the study to obtain information about the participants’ previous academic writing and feedback experiences and their expectations about teacher feedback in their upcoming study at the UK university.

- Stimulated recall was conducted three times asking participants to introspectively reflect on their responses to the feedback on their written assignments and present their interpretations of their engagement with the feedback. Key interview questions included “How did you feel when you read this comment? Are you happy with this?”, “How do you understand this comment?” and “What did you plan to do with this comment, and why” (More details in appendix). Table 2 shows the stimuli used to initiate concrete discussions about how the participants perceived teacher feedback.

- Retrospective interview was also carried out three times inviting the students to recall how they dealt with the feedback they received and how they integrated the feedback into revision practices. These interviews were to explore whether and if so how the participants' emotional and cognitive responses to teacher feedback
changed over time, at what point such changes happened, how their emotional and cognitive perceptions interacted to influence their learning (see key questions in appendix).

Table 2
Stimulus materials used in stimulated recall.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ written work</th>
<th>Number per student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-sessional project outline</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-sessional project first and final drafts</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-sessional project final submission</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA assignment drafts</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA assignments final submission</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>12</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Copies written feedback</th>
<th>Number per student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feedback on pre-sessional project outline and drafts</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback forms on MA assignments</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oral feedback and tutors’ suggestions</th>
<th>Number per student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students’ notes of one-to-one tutorials and Q&amp;A sessions;</td>
<td>Depending on students’ own learning needs and willingness to share the materials in interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ email enquiries about assignment writing along with tutors’ replies.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15
Table 3
Interview schedule.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tool of enquiry</th>
<th>Interview schedule</th>
<th>Collection of material artefacts</th>
<th>Interview duration (minute)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase one: Pre-sessional language programme</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Background interview</td>
<td>Beginning of the pre-sessional programme</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>15-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Stimulated recall</td>
<td>After participants received tutor feedback on the pre-sessional project outline</td>
<td>Outline of the pre-sessional project with teacher’s written feedback</td>
<td>22-35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Stimulated recall</td>
<td>After finishing final project by following the tutors’ feedback</td>
<td>First draft of the project with teacher’s written feedback, tutorial notes and the revised submitted project</td>
<td>32-55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase two: MA TESOL degree programme</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Retrospective interview</td>
<td>After four assignment topics were assigned and the tutors provided suggestions to drafting</td>
<td>Tutorial notes; Q&amp;A session notes/slides; email enquiries with tutors’ replies</td>
<td>22-60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Retrospective interview</td>
<td>After participants finished the first drafts of the assignments</td>
<td>Tutorial notes; Q&amp;A session notes/slides; email enquiries with tutors’ replies</td>
<td>15-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Stimulated recall</td>
<td>After participants submitted their final assignments</td>
<td>Submitted assignments; students’ notes of tutorials and Q&amp;A sessions, and email correspondence with tutors.</td>
<td>25-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Retrospective interview</td>
<td>After participants received tutor feedback forms for the assignments</td>
<td>Feedback forms of the submitted assignments</td>
<td>30-65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.4 Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and studied repeatedly. Data analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis. Firstly, repeated readings of the transcripts were done to familiarise us with the data. Secondly, initial coding was conducted to identify feedback features. Forty codes were generated, including students’ emotional reactions to teacher feedback, their limited, developing and developed understanding of the feedback form, its content and function. These initial codes were then consolidated and combined (step 3) to form the following themes: positive and negative emotions, ongoing development of cognition, and the discrepancies existing between self-evaluation and feedback judgement. In step 4, these themes and data were reviewed again to check if all data were mapped to the themes. Then two major themes were decided on and labelled as affective and cognitive perceptions (step 5). For details of data categorisation, see Table 4. In step 6, we present the findings in the two major themes. In addition, feedback documents, learning resources, assignment topics, participants’ original drafts and completed assignments were used to triangulate interviewees’ accounts and further explore how the students’ affective and cognitive perceptions of feedback affected their uptake of teacher feedback.
### Table 4

Data categorisation of affective perceptions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Affective perceptions</td>
<td>Positive emotions</td>
<td>Type: happiness; excitement; respect; appreciation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Emotion trigger: tutors’ positive feedback; tutors’ positive attitudes to students’ work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Influence of emotion: willing to engage with feedback cognitively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative emotions</td>
<td>Type: frustration; distress; anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Emotion trigger: overwhelmed criticism in feedback; tutors’ negative attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Influence of emotion: cognitive disengagement with feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Cognitive perceptions</td>
<td>Limited cognition</td>
<td>Type: cognitive engagement with feedback form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing development of cognition of feedback</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reason: lack of previous feedback experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Developing cognition</td>
<td>Type: cognitive engagement with feedback content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reason: raising awareness of writing and professional competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Influence on affection: frustrated; distressed; stressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Developed cognition</td>
<td>Type: cognitive engagement with formative feedback function</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reason: learned from local peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Influence on affection: changed attitudes towards feedback and learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discrepancy between self-evaluation and feedback judgement</td>
<td>Inconsistencies between feedback and self-evaluation</td>
<td>Emotion: Frustration; anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cognition: disagreed with feedback content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reason: limited capacity to evaluate own work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consistencies between feedback and self-evaluation</td>
<td>Emotion: affectively accepted feedback; relieving negative emotions to feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cognition: agreed with feedback content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reason: tutors’ explanation of feedback; enhanced self-evaluation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Results

The research findings are organised according to two key themes identified as the participants’ affective and cognitive perceptions of teacher feedback. While the themes that emerged from data analysis have been presented separately for the purpose of clarity of description, the interplay and recursion taking place between affective and cognitive perceptions are marked across both themes, where necessary. Detailed discussion of each theme is presented below.

5.1 Affective perceptions

Findings show that participants had different affective reactions to feedback, such as happiness, surprise, respect, frustration and fear, which facilitated or prevented the students from engaging cognitively with teacher feedback. These affections were moderated by the praise and critique that participants received in feedback and their perceptions of teachers’ attitudes towards their assignments/queries while providing feedback suggestions.

(PS: pre-sessional language programme; MA: MA TESOL programme; BI: background interview; SRI: stimulated recall interview; RI: retrospective interview; 1, 2, etc.: 1st or 2nd interview).
It has been found in all the participants that praise in feedback generated positive emotions which increased participants’ willingness to engage with the feedback at a deeper level. As suggested by Mei, “If the feedback can point out some of your strengths, it makes you feel recognised and it won’t give you a psychological resistance to the feedback (Mei, PS, SR - 2).” This indicates that inclusion of positive comments that recognise strengths in students’ written work may ease their affective resistance to engaging with the input provided by the teachers.

On the other hand, negative emotional reactions to teacher feedback, such as frustration and distress, caused participants’ cognitive disengagement with teacher feedback. When asking Hong how she interpreted the comments in her MA assignment, she reported,

I read the feedback once but didn’t study it further because it’s all about criticisms. It makes you feel uncomfortable, you know. So, I didn’t touch it then. (Hong, MA, RI - 7)

Xiao expressed a similar view.

The first glance at the feedback made me desperately upset. I needed to put it aside for a few days to “recover” from that heartbreak before studying the feedback content. (Xiao, PS, SR - 3)

The excerpts indicate that when there were a large number of criticisms, it overwhelmed the students, they chose not to read the feedback in order to protect themselves from
the harshness of the critique. This is an interesting insight in view of the fact that, generally speaking, rather than being a threat to the students’ emotional wellbeing, the provision of critical feedback is meant to be instructional and to help students recognise the distance between their current performance and the desired performance and to improve their work (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). As shown in the above quotes, negative emotions caused by critical feedback seemed to prevent it from serving its instructional function.

The students’ perceptions of the teachers’ work responsibility/attitudes towards their queries and assignments strongly influenced their cognitive engagement with teacher feedback. For example, Chun perceived the first piece of feedback that she received at the pre-sessional programme as “careful and detailed”. Chun noted that she was respectful of the feedback:

Since the tutor gave feedback very carefully, I think, this degree of responsibility, I should respect. Then I followed the suggestions in the feedback and revised my draft carefully as well. (Chun, PS, SR - 2)

This quote indicates that Chun’s attitudinal perception of the feedback was affected by how the tutor was perceived when she dealt with Chun’s work. Chun believed that she needed to compensate for such detailed and careful feedback by making efforts in working with the comments and carefully revising her draft. This finding is consistent with what was shown in the study by Zhang and Hyland (2018) who found that a student’s appreciation of detailed feedback enhanced her cognitive engagement with it.
In contrast, Hong’s perception of carelessness in a tutor’s feedback led her to distrust him:

The reason why I did not listen to the tutor is that … when I asked him a question about my assignments, he always said that I can write anything that appears in the lesson slides. So, I doubt that this tutor responded to my questions with care.

(Hong, MA, RI - 5)

In this comment, Hong noted that the suggestions from the tutor made her assume that the tutor had a careless attitude when responding to her queries. The perceived carelessness led to her disengagement with the feedback in the cognitive dimension.

Overall, results in this section suggest that participants’ affective responses to teacher feedback positively or negatively influenced their cognitive engagement with it. As Lipnevich, Berg and Smith (2016) suggest, students’ reactions to feedback are significantly influenced by the tone in which the feedback is shared. To enhance students’ cognitive engagement with teacher feedback and help them make productive use of it in learning, teachers may need to be aware that the language they use and the attitudes they show may have implications for the students’ affective reactions to the feedback.

5.2 Cognitive perceptions
The research found that the participants’ cognitive perceptions of teacher feedback were developmental, and that the evolving nature of cognition influenced their emotional reactions to teacher feedback. This section illustrates 1) the students’ cognition of what formative feedback is, and 2) the discrepancy between teachers’ feedback judgements and students’ self-evaluation of performance, and how this discrepancy influenced their affective reactions to teacher feedback.

**Ongoing development of cognition of formative feedback**

The interview analysis showed that before the participants moved to the UK educational context, their cognition of formative feedback was very limited. When they received written feedback on their project drafts provided by the tutors in the pre-sessional language programme, they expressed that this was the first piece of teacher feedback they had received on academic essays and that they had very limited feedback experience at their home Chinese universities. Comments were made:

I just practised writing on my own by reading some reference books. I did not experience such kind of feedback before (Di, PS, BI - 1).

We just had one or two opportunities to have feedback from teachers each semester […] with a few comments at the end of our English compositions (Mei, PS, BI - 1)

The foreign teacher gave some feedback on our compositions, but the local teachers didn’t give us feedback (Hong, PS, BI - 1)
Because of the sparse teacher feedback provision in China, these participants had a very limited cognition of what formative feedback is, and they experienced some noticeable emotions when they moved to the UK pedagogical context where formative feedback plays a major part in learning. Predominantly, participants reported experiencing pleasure in response to the written feedback on their first assignment - the pre-sessional project first draft. All five students expressed that they were impressed by the feedback, reporting some positive responses to it, such as happiness, appreciation, pleasant surprise and excitement. For example, Di was happy with the caring sense displayed in teacher feedback, “the first feeling is happiness because someone carefully read my stuff (Di, PS, SR - 2).” Chun showed appreciation to tutor scaffolding through feedback where there had been none in her previous educational experiences, “I really appreciated it because the tutor not only pointed out my problems, but also gave detailed suggestions. This is what I didn’t experienced before (Chun, PS, SR - 2).” Hong associated the provision of detailed feedback with the niceness of the tutor’s disposition, “Wow! I found that the teacher provided very careful evaluation of every sentence we wrote. The teacher is very nice (Hong, PS, SR - 2).”

The findings also suggest that, as the participants’ cognition of formative feedback developed, the emotions it caused came to change. Despite the initial positive impression of the highly detailed feedback from their UK tutor, the students reported that they felt frustrated and pressured by the feedback. Such emotions were generated after the students had had a closer look at the feedback and realised the problems that
existed in their writing and of which they had not previously been aware. The increased awareness of their professional competence and writing qualities with the assistance of teacher feedback demotivated them and eroded their belief in their professionalism and self-confidence as a writer. As the participants reported:

I found that the teacher gave too many comments. I realised that what I wrote is just a mess (Xiao, PS, SR - 2).

The teacher is sensitive to the implication of every single word I used, which scares me’ (Hong, PS, SR - 2).

It makes me feel that I am not professional and still have a long way to go. This would make me lose self-confidence in writing (Chun, PS, SR - 2).

The students’ multiple emotional reactions to teacher feedback resulted from the enhanced cognitive understanding of teacher feedback. This finding enriches what was found by Zhang (2017) who suggested that the participant in his study experienced a range of emotional feelings as she engaged with the feedback on her assignments.

However, the data show that once the students had built an understanding of the learning scaffolding function of formative feedback, they became more willing to approach the feedback for developmental purposes. In the case of Xiao, she described how she altered her perception of critical formative feedback by understanding the purpose of it.

I received many critical comment and felt very disappointed. […] a senior schoolmate said to me “Receiving feedback is different from classroom teaching.
We gain knowledge by learning from feedback and revising the work over and over.” Then I realised teachers’ feedback is more of a pathway to learning than judgement. I need to change my way of dealing with teacher feedback. So, I reread the feedback and tried to learn something from it (Xiao, PS, SR - 3).

This instance indicates that Xiao initially saw teacher feedback as an assessment and associated the quantity of critical feedback with her writing ability; consequently, she felt upset when she came across criticisms in the feedback. After understanding the learning scaffolding function of teacher feedback, she changed her attitude towards criticisms and tried to learn from them. This echoes the findings in the study by Tian and Lowe (2013) who investigated Chinese postgraduate students’ emotional reactions to criticism in teacher feedback in UK HE from the perspective of cross-cultural learning. The researchers found that at their home universities, the participating students had usually been assessed by means of paper-based tests or course work, the feedback on which was no more than congratulations or exhortations to improve, in other words assessment. This group of students, who entered the UK academic environment where formative feedback is a key component in pedagogy, showed reactions of distress when encountering critical feedback comments. They interpreted formative comments as quantitative evaluations of their performances. The study reported in this paper extends what Tian and Lowe (2013) investigated, and found that although a limited understanding of the function of formative feedback may lead to students’ negative feelings for it, they could cope with such emotions after enhancing their understanding of the developmental function of formative feedback.
Discrepancy between self-evaluation of performance and feedback judgement

The study found that the cognitive gap existing between the given feedback (external judgement) and the students’ own evaluation of their performance (internal judgement) affected participants’ emotional reactions. Tai et al. (2017, p. 467) conceptualised student self-evaluative judgement as “the capability to make decisions about the quality of work of oneself”. When there is a consistency between the feedback opinions and students’ self-evaluation of performance, they are more likely to affectively accept the feedback. Hong affectively accepted the low grade of one of her MA assignments as the feedback reflected her understanding of the quality of her work. Whether or not the feedback was understandable, she still “accepted” the problems identified in the feedback.

I got a low grade of the Unit 2 assignment. I can accept the feedback somehow as I knew I did not write it very well. Although I can’t understand some of the comments, there must be problems somewhere in my assignment as the tutor said. (Hong, MA, RI - 7)

The gap between feedback judgement and the students’ self-perceptions of own performance, in most cases, appeared when the students had a limited capacity in evaluating the quality of their work. The gap caused emotional reactions such as frustration and anger. Mei expressed her frustration with the final feedback on an MA assignment because she was given a grade lower than what she had anticipated. She
reported, “I felt very disappointed when I got the result. When I was writing it, I felt most satisfied with it, yet it got the lowest grade” (Mei, MA, RI - 7). The quote indicates that failing to evaluate her own performance in the same way as the tutor had done led to frustration with the grade she had received. Similar findings have also been reported in the study of Carless (2006), where feedback receivers’ emotional feelings arose from inconsistencies between the feedback and their self-evaluation of performance.

Similarly, Di was angry in the interview when she was talking about the feedback in one of her MA assignments. She disagreed with the failed result given in her MA assignment as she thought that the written feedback, explaining the grade, was not adequately justified.

Even though I didn’t write it very well, it could have reached the pass level. […]

The tutor said I needed to explain how I had answered the question? But there is no question to answer in my essay. He also said I needed a thesis statement, but I’ve given it in my conclusion, haven’t I?’ (Di, MA, SR - 6)

It is clear that Di had a misunderstanding of the academic writing conventions, such as how to propose a thesis statement and a central question guiding the whole essay. Such limited understanding caused the gap between the feedback judgement and her own evaluation of her writing quality and prevented her from making sense of the low grade she had received. Notably, Di’s confusion over the feedback comments was resolved in the next tutorial where she sought the tutor’s explanation of his feedback. She got
positive feelings about the explanation as it was sufficiently clear and detailed to enable her to understand the reason that she had been awarded this grade. Di described,

The tutor told me how to put forward a question and answer it in my essay. Now, I know what a thesis statement is. […] The explanations made a lot of sense to me. I know there are many mistakes in my work, and yeah, I deserve this grade. […] I really appreciated his advice and learned how to write an academic essay better in future. (Di, MA, RI - 7)

As seen in this account, the accompanying explanations of the tutor’s feedback improved Di’s comprehension of the feedback comments and enhanced her self-evaluation of her performance. When Di’s self-evaluation was no longer at odds with the feedback opinions, she felt convinced that the failed result and the tutor’s advice were correct. This finding indicates that teacher feedback can be focused on scaffolding students to construct their own internal judgement and facilitating student learning. Learners are more willing to revise their behaviour when their capacity to make sound judgements has been strengthened. The enhanced cognitive understanding of teacher feedback relieved her initial anger over the feedback, which in turn helped Di to learn from the feedback and develop metacognitive writing skills for future use. The interaction developed into a positive recursive process as Di’s enhanced understanding of the feedback meaning eased her emotional resistance against it and motivated her to achieve longer-term uptake of the feedback. Di’s effective communication with the tutor played a key role in this positive perceptual recursion.
6. Discussion

This paper presents five Chinese postgraduate students’ affective and cognitive perceptions of teacher feedback in the UK HE context and highlights the interactive relationship between them. The findings present the recursive process in these students’ affective and cognitive perceptual interaction and the dynamics in their perceptions (see the instances of Xiao and Di). As shown in Fig. 1, the students’ affective-cognitive perception is more than a single loop of interplay, it can evolve into the second and third loops to achieve more advanced cognitive understanding of teacher feedback and eventually a longer-term uptake of the feedback. During the recursion, the students’ affective reactions may be moderated by their ever-changing cognition of the feedback content, and reversely, influence their cognitive engagement with teacher feedback.

![Emotional and cognitive evolvement](image)

**Fig. 1.** Recursive process of affective-cognitive engagement with feedback.
The study also identifies the factors that may prohibit the establishment of a positive perceptual recursion. The factors include students’ emotions evoked by feedback language and the level of their feedback literacy. Findings suggest that students’ negative emotions caused by feedback can be so intense that they may lead to an interruption of a positive perceptual recursion and hinder student subsequent learning. Emotional reactions to feedback could be significantly affected by the language that teachers use. Participants’ initial, negative emotions, evoked by the harshness of critical feedback, prevented them from engaging with teacher feedback cognitively at a deeper level and developing their affective-cognitive interaction into the second loop. To enhance students’ cognitive engagement with teacher feedback and help them make better use of feedback in learning, teachers may need to be aware of the implications of the language they use when writing feedback. Moreover, the way in which the students perceived the teachers’ views on their written work and related queries (such as detailed comments and careless responses by tutors in the cases of Chun and Hong) affected their attitudes (respect or distrust) towards teacher feedback. This finding suggests that the content of teacher feedback not only affects students’ cognitive engagement with it, teachers’ views conveyed in their feedback can also affect students’ attitudes towards their revisions and even the perceived value of their learning. This finding aligns with the view of Sutton (2012) who suggests that students’ engagement with feedback can be enhanced when teachers signify in written or oral feedback that they care about their students. Regardless of how much students may presumably learn from feedback, teachers’ careful and responsible feedback will have an effect on them and motivate
them to learn carefully, and this is the best way to build a positive recursion of feedback engagement and achieve long-term uptake.

In addition, a positive perceptual evolvement is mediated by the level of student feedback literacy. Students’ feedback literacy relates to “an understanding of what feedback is and how it can be managed effectively; capacities and dispositions to make productive use of feedback; and appreciation of the roles of teachers and themselves in these processes” (Carless & Boud, 2018, p. 2). As shown in the case of Xiao, she enhanced her cognition of formative feedback from her peer’s suggestion. Her cognition of the learning scaffolding function of critical feedback helped relieve her frustration over the feedback and enabled more effective engagement with it. This indicates that, although it won’t be possible to make a feedback strategy or design that will lead to positive emotional responses for all students (Molloy, Borrell-Carrio, & Epstein, 2013; Warner & Miller, 2015), it is worthwhile improving learners’ understanding of the function of different types of feedback and what they are expected to do. Moreover, Di’s capability to build effective communication with her tutor gave her a better understanding of the comments’ meaning, and helped her to learn more efficiently from the feedback suggestions. The findings emphasise the significance of effective teacher-student communication and inputs from resources such as peers, in enhancing students’ cognition of feedback and facilitating a positive perceptual recursion.
Transition from the Chinese educational context to the UK HE context also had an effect on the participants’ affective and cognitive engagement with teacher feedback. Due to the sparse feedback experiences at their home universities, the Chinese students’ limited cognition of teacher feedback led to their difficulties in making sense of the feedback provided by the tutors at the UK university. This finding is consistent with the studies by Bailey (2013), Ekstam (2015) as well as Tian and Lowe (2013) who demonstrated that Chinese students’ previous learning experiences at the undergraduate stage in their home HE institutions created challenges when they engaged with academic writing tasks and relevant teacher feedback in the overseas academic setting. Findings in this paper enrich the previous studies by investigating ways to improve these students’ efficiency to engage with teacher feedback in the host setting. As shown in the cases of Xiao and Di, effective communication with the local teachers and peers can enrich international students’ insights into the academic culture and feedback provision norms in the host pedagogical environment. Our findings shed light on the transitional influence of China’s and UK’s educational systems on Chinese students’ engagement with teacher feedback in an overseas context. They can promote teachers’ need to reflect on how to provide feedback for international students who may not have the same educational background as the local students.

To help this group of students build a positive recursion of feedback engagement, local teachers in the UK academic context may need to be aware of the academic background of these international students and the difference in academic cultures between UK and
other countries, in particular China. In some cases, these students cannot revise their work according to teacher feedback because the particular terms/academic language (e.g., “build up argument” and “critical writing”) used in feedback may be constructed by the students to mean something different with which they have been familiarised in their home academic setting. Such meaning construction moderated by students’ pre-existing learning experiences does not necessarily lead to a shared understanding of feedback information as intended by teachers. By this token, more frequent communication between local teachers and international students is a positive approach to promoting international students’ academic socialisation within the host feedback provision setting and helping them reach the expectations of the academic community.

Therefore, teachers should create more opportunities to promote teacher-student and student-student communication in the feedback process. The communication can be carried out in the form of discussion fora and Q&A sessions to allow both teachers and students to engage in discussion about the meaning of academic terms, how to apply writing conventions on different levels, and students’ own writing challenges. Through such communication, students could learn about academic writing conventions. They would then be in a better position to understand the demands of teachers who require them to follow those conventions.
7. Conclusion

Examining students’ perceptions of teacher feedback is central to any attempt to increase teachers’ awareness of how the feedback they produce is filtered through student agency. This paper sheds light on the student perspective on teacher feedback in a number of ways. The study is of value to teacher education in relation to feedback production as it provides some illustrative examples of the ways in which students construct meaning from teacher feedback. It reveals the complex realities of the exertion of student agency in the feedback process in terms of how students’ perceptions of teacher feedback may vary in response to different contexts and the inconsistencies between what is presented in feedback and what students perceive.

The argument elaborated in this paper is that the interplay between students’ affective and cognitive perceptions is more than a single loop, but could develop into a recursive process wherein the perceptions come to change over time. Ongoing development of students’ cognitive understanding of teacher feedback represents a positive recursion of feedback engagement, whereas non-growth of cognition of teacher feedback and worsening emotional reactions to feedback form a negative recursion. In view of the dynamics of student perceptions, this study reveals some evolvement in terms of participants’ perceptions of feedback, from the initial pleasure at receiving “detailed” feedback to a stressful feeling towards the feedback that helped to raise the students’ awareness of problems in their writing and to a clear understanding of the learning
scaffold function of formative feedback. Future research could build on this to obtain a more nuanced understanding of the perceptual/cognitive evolvement that students go through as they engage with feedback, by conducting a further longitudinal study and making a design to examine students’ progress. We also need to know how the perceptual evolvement interacts with key variables, such as curriculum design and academic social networks. In doing so, we will be in a stronger position to design future feedback to better support learning and to promote teachers’ reflections on their feedback practice.

References


## Appendix

### Key questions in interviews

| Interview 1 – BI | 1. Did you receive any teacher feedback when you studied at your Chinese university?  
|                | 2. What kind of teacher support and feedback do you expect in your academic writing? |
| Interview 2 – SR | 1. Tell me what you think of the teacher feedback you are given; Did you think the feedback you received was useful?  
|                | 2. How do you understand this comment?  
|                | 3. Please explain to me what you plan to do with these comments and why. |
| Interview 3 – SR | 1. Tell me about your experience when you were revising the first draft based on the feedback.  
|                | 2. I notice you made a change in here. How did you understand this comment and why did you change in this way?  
|                | 3. I also see this comment. But you didn’t deal with it. Why didn’t you respond to it? |
| Interview 4 – RI | • What did you take from the first Q&A sessions? What difficulties or confusions with your assignments have you encountered during this period? How did you solve them? |
| Interview 5 – RI | ・ What have you taken away from the second Q&A sessions?  
                           ・ Can you tell me what tutors’ suggestions to this draft you have got since our last interview and what you have done with them?  
                           ・ Are you satisfied with the draft you have written?  
                           ・ Do you think the teachers’ suggestions you obtained for this draft can make any sense in your subsequent writing? |
| Interview 6 – SR | ・ Now we look back through what you have done with your assignments in the last two months. Here is all of the teachers’ suggestions you obtained during your writing process. Can you show me what teacher suggestions you actually took on board in your final assignments and what suggestions you didn’t respond and why? |
| Interview 7 – RI | ・ Can you explain to me how you make sense of the feedback forms you are given and what you can take away from them? |