SRHE Society for Research into Higher Education

Feedback [hi]stories

Exploring the role of linguistics and culture in feedback

Research report

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Contents

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Society for Research into Higher Education

Acknowledgments

First and foremost I would like to thank the Society for giving me an opportunity to conduct this project. This grant allowed me to explore an area that I am personally interested in and excited about, and gave me the platform to share the results with others with similar interests, for which I am very grateful.

It was an exciting year but it was by no means an easy one. Covid continued to create challenges that affected the shape of the research as well as added workload to an already difficult academic year. Therefore I would like to thank to all of those who contributed to making this process easier and smoother. In particular, I would like to thank Rob Gresham for his continuous support, Camille Kandiko Howson for being a role model in more than one way and Richard Bale for his insight and feedback.

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Finally, I would like to thank my participants who were enthusiastic about the project and contributed their time and anonymity to put an important message across.

Executive summary

The student body in the UK is highly multilingual and multicultural. With the growing emphasis on the importance placed on feedback for students' learning, the role of students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds in their feedback comprehension has not been widely researched. While there is some recognition, it often places the discourse within the west and east divide, assuming a level of uniformity of experiences which in fact can be quite diverse on either side. While the literature (and to some extent practice) tends to prioritise Confucian backgrounds in terms of cultural diversity, there is very little discussion of European students, who, as own experience and their former fee status suggest, were often considered to be 'home'. This means that there is often an assumption amongst staff that those students easily adapt to (if not already are familiar with) the UK feedback practices and that their linguistic competence demonstrated through an appropriate IELTS score will enable them to comprehend the nuances of culturally situated feedback messages. As reflected in communicative competence theory and intercultural communicative competence theory, the ability to communicate in a foreign language requires more than just linguistic competence that language tests prioritise. Sociolinguistic or sociocultural competence, *i.e.* appropriately using and interpreting the language in given social contexts, is equally important especially when it comes to feedback that is culturally situated.

The purpose of this research was therefore to explore the cultural and linguistic diversity within the European student body and how it might impact on students' understanding of the concept of feedback and their comprehension of feedback messages. This exploration took place through digital storytelling methodology and interviews with 13 European Science Technology Engineering and Medicine (STEM) undergraduates. The data suggest that the students' past feedback experiences were in no way uniform and varied depending on the value attached to feedback within their broader and local cultures. Their current understanding of feedback has been shaped by their past experiences and further enhanced by the conceptualisation of feedback they were exposed to in the UK. Students' past cultural experiences also shaped their comprehension of feedback messages which was influenced by power balance and communication style around directness and politeness. While students experienced a level of acculturation in terms of grading, this did not directly translate to the understanding of the language of feedback and its intended message. Grade was found to be an important component aiding comprehension. The findings of the research suggest a greater need to discuss inclusivity of feedback in terms of the language and the role that past cultural experiences play in comprehension, calling therefore for adding a cultural dimension to the feedback literacy discourse.

Introduction and rationale

Recent literature around feedback defines it as a dialogue (Nicol, 2010; Careless, 2015). This conceptualisation ties in with rethinking the role of feedback (Winstone and Carless, 2019) placing more agency on the student and therefore emphasising the need for developing greater student feedback literacy (Carless and Boud, 2018). While this thinking broadens the sources of feedback beyond the teacher, dialogue will still happen at some level between the student and the teacher.

For dialogue to take place both parties need to ensure there is a level of comprehension. This can be made challenging in polycultural environments (Hofstede, 2011) such as internationalised Higher Education institutions in the UK (THE, 2021). Despite diversity, there still is a tendency to discuss culture within the east versus west dichotomy, with the research prioritising Confucian contexts of the east. As Tien and Lowe (2013) and Hofstede (2011) explain, a lot of variety is hidden under the term 'eastern' or 'international' and same can be said about the term 'western'. My own experience of working with staff suggests that more often than not 'western' students, who used to be treated as 'home' due to their fee status are thought to have a level of familiarity with the UK feedback practices. This also comes with expectations of linguistic competence and assumptions around sociolinguistic competence (and lack of awareness of the differences between the two).

Hofstede (1980, p.25) defines culture as "collective programming of the mind which distinguishes one human group from another". Here, following Hofstede (1986) I accept that there are some large culture imprints in each society, however, similarly to Tien and Lowe (2013) I apply Holliday's (1999, p.237) notion of small cultures, attaching "'culture' to small social groupings or activities wherever there is cohesive behaviour". This extends the understanding of culture beyond the national level to institution and discipline hence situates this discussion at different levels of culture.

When discussing culture it is impossible not to consider language as those two are inseparable (Sapir, 1921). Culture will be reflected and imprinted in how messages in a given language are conveyed (Hofstede, 1986). Drawing on Carless' (2015) feedback as dialogue conceptualisation, language is the main tool for dialogue. When it comes to international students there are sector wide standards as to the linguistic/ grammatical competence (defined as a "speakers' ability to formulate 'well-formed' sentences" (Thornbury 2006, p. 37)) they need to demonstrate to qualify for undergraduate and postgraduate study in the UK. This is demonstrated via their IELTS score that confirms that they will be able to cope with linguistic burden of studying their discipline in a foreign language. Hence often linguistic competence representing the working ability to use the language is conflated with students' ability to understand cultural imprints in the language. This is even more so the case in a Science Technology Medicine (STEM) context where the language of the discipline is cognitively challenging hence can further blur the boundaries.

While linguistic competence is important, it is not the only indicator of a successful communicator. Several theories around communication (Canale and Swain, 1980; Canale, Celce-

Murcia et al. 1995; Deardorff, 2006; Byram, 2003, 2009; Celce-Murcia, 2008) emphasise sociolinguistic/ sociocultural competence, *i.e*. appropriately using and interpreting the language in sociocultural contexts, as an important component of (intercultural) communication. This ties into my own experiences. As an international staff member and a former international student, despite having advanced working proficiency of the English language, I still often find myself in sociolinguistically/ socioculturally confusing situations where a request of "Do you want to say more about this" is interpreted by me as a question where I have the freedom to say 'no'. This can easily extend into feedback practice which is highly situated in culture and therefore messages with intentions that are clear to the feedback giver might not be understood as such by the receiver.

Studies that looked into comprehension of feedback tended to look at the issue from two somewhat opposing angles. They either prioritise conceptualisation of discipline specific vocabulary or language representing key skills such as criticality, analysis without the focus on the international dimension (see for example Chanock, 2000; Zsohar and Smith, 2009; Winstone et al., 2017; Jones and Ellison, 2021; Maxwell, 2021); or the evidence comes from international students in a pre-university language courses (see Hyland and Hyland, 2001) focusing therefore on foreign language contexts situated outside of the discipline with teachers more attuned to the role that language and culture may play in understanding. Hence the purpose of this study is to situate European students' feedback practice within the context of the discipline and explore the role that language and culture plays in their uptake of feedback. In doing so the following questions are posed:

1. What does feedback mean to European students of different cultural backgrounds?

2. To what extent do linguistic factors affect students' understanding of specific feedback messages and functions?

The focus on European students aims to unpack the variety within this group that remains under-researched.

Methodology

The nature of the questions situated the research within the interpretive paradigm. Digital storytelling was chosen as a methodology that has the potential of exposing the complexity of participants' experiences with added benefits of interactivity, nonlinearity, user participation and co-creation (Barber, 2016). The method involves presenting participants stories as told in their own words through the use of short "mini-films" (Rodrigues et al, 2021, p.13) hence while it's ethically more complex due to lack of anonymity, Rieger et al., (2016, p.2) rightly point out that the outputs have the potential to "enhance the meaning of research findings". Given that the aim of the research is to encourage rethinking practices around feedback, this method has the potential to provide a more convincing evidence for change.

Savin-Baden and Tombs (2017) enumerate a number of approaches to creating stories with the interviewer taking on different roles. For this project I followed Stenhouse et al (2013) approach who took a central role in facilitating a creation of stories around important issues, or as is the case here, main themes and subthemes.

In order to create digital stories 13[1] STEM undergraduate students studying at a research intensive institution in London that identified themselves as European were interviewed (Table 1). To allow a level of flexibility the interviews were semi-structured and lasted for an approximately an hour. Those interviews, with the participants' consent, were video or audio recorded and snippets were used to create videos illustrating their stories[2].

The participants were recruited via student led social media channels, emails distributed through cultural societies as well as emails sent via departmental reps. The recruitment took place between December 2020 and April 2021.

The researched institution demands high grades to be accepted onto any course and therefore attracts high achieving, ambitious students. This is important to note as they are very ambitious, motivated and focused on improvement which is what underpinned our conversations around feedback.

The interview consisted of two parts. Part 1 uncovered students' past feedback experiences and how they compare to and influence their feedback practice in the UK, therefore fleshing out their feedback histories. Part 2 focused on discussion of selected feedback samples and unpacking their comprehension of the language of feedback. The chosen samples of a lab report, an assessment familiar to all STEM students, highlighted different features of feedback such as balance of praise and criticism, feedback focusing only on praise, feedback sandwich, feedback without any judgment and a sample that could be considered harsh. The participants were asked to first discuss their impressions of each sample, how it is understood, action they would take and a grade they would expect. Then the grade was revealed and a similar discussion was repeated.

The research followed BERA ethical guidelines and gained ethical approval from the host institution's ethics committee.

The interview data was analysed using thematic analysis. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance, once the codes were generated inductively they were then combined into themes. A theme is defined here as capturing "…something important about the data in relation to the research question and representing some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.82). Hence it combines the recognition of a pattern emphasised by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) and an overall relevance to the question.

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[1] One participant only allowed to use her data in publications and one participant only consented to audio
[2] The video playlist can be found here:
https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLnVdXt_sGQDeYlxzk29Q_MYVmRM1JQJz-

Participant Pseudonym	Country of origin
Ionut	Romania
Elena	Romania
Cristina	Romania
Jan	Slovakia
Jarka	Slovakia
Magdalena	Poland
Kostas	Greek Cyprus
Timus	Estonia
Kiki	Finland
Greta	Italy
Defne	Turkey
Daniela	Portugal
Rasa	Lithuania

Table 1. Summary of participants

An indicative timeline for the project is presented below (Figure 1).

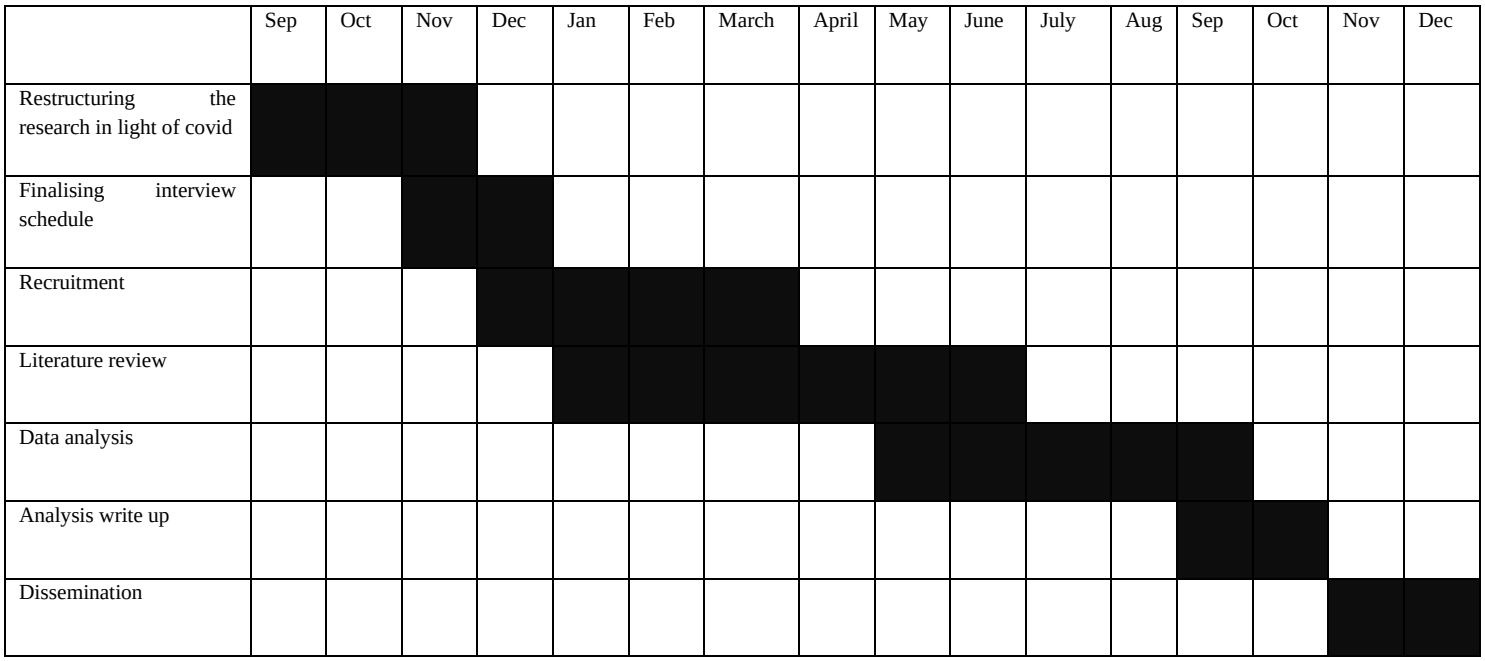


Figure 1. Project timeline

Results and discussion

Feedback histories

Translating and defining feedback

Figure 2. Students' translations of the word feedback in their mother tongues.

The understanding and expectations of feedback that the students brought to the UK were influenced by their past conceptualisations of feedback rooted in what the word meant in their mother tongue and how this meaning translated onto practice. The majority of the participants more often than not were not able to locate an exact translation of the term 'feedback' in their mother tongue. This mirrors my own experience where an equivalent does not exist which indicates different status and value attached to feedback. Whatever translation the participants provided, it tended to flesh out some of the characteristics of feedback they received, such as 'negative comments' in Lithuanian, emphasis on 'grading' in Romanian or focused on satisfaction surveys in Polish; hence the translation put emphasis on different aspects/ functions of feedback that were prevalent in a given context.

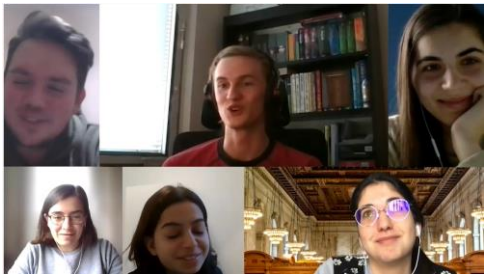
A direct translation that indicated an entirety of feedback practices was present in those contexts with a well-embedded feedback culture such as Finland. For those participants their UK experience compared less favourably with feedback practices they experienced at home. Some countries tended to adopt an English equivalent of the word with a closer alignment to how feedback is described in the UK context.

Video 1: Translating the word 'feedback'

The emphasis would direct expectations around feedback. So for example the Lithuanian word *pastabos* that emphasises negative comments created an expectation for feedback to focus on that. This led this particular student to be dissatisfied with a more balanced approach found in the UK:

"I think at the start I was quite frustrated with the lack of especially negative feedback. 'Cause, I think for a lot of coursework you get back with some comments, but most of them are saying that how you did things well and how they like that specific figure. And then you think but why don't I get a maximum grade then? Where are the areas that I need to improve in?" (Rasa, Lithuania)

Regardless of the translation and what is prioritised, similarly to Rasa, all participants defined feedback in terms of information on how to improve hence thought of feedback as a tool to become better. This thinking aligned with the type of ambitious and high achieving learner that the university attracts.



Video 2: The meaning of feedback

Past feedback experiences

The participants' feedback experiences were highly polarised providing evidence as to the variety hidden under the term European. Those experiences were ranging from what the participants would describe as "no feedback whatsoever" (Romania, Italy) to a highly developed culture of rich feedback or dialogue (Finland, Turkey) (Figure 2).

Video 3: Past feedback experiences

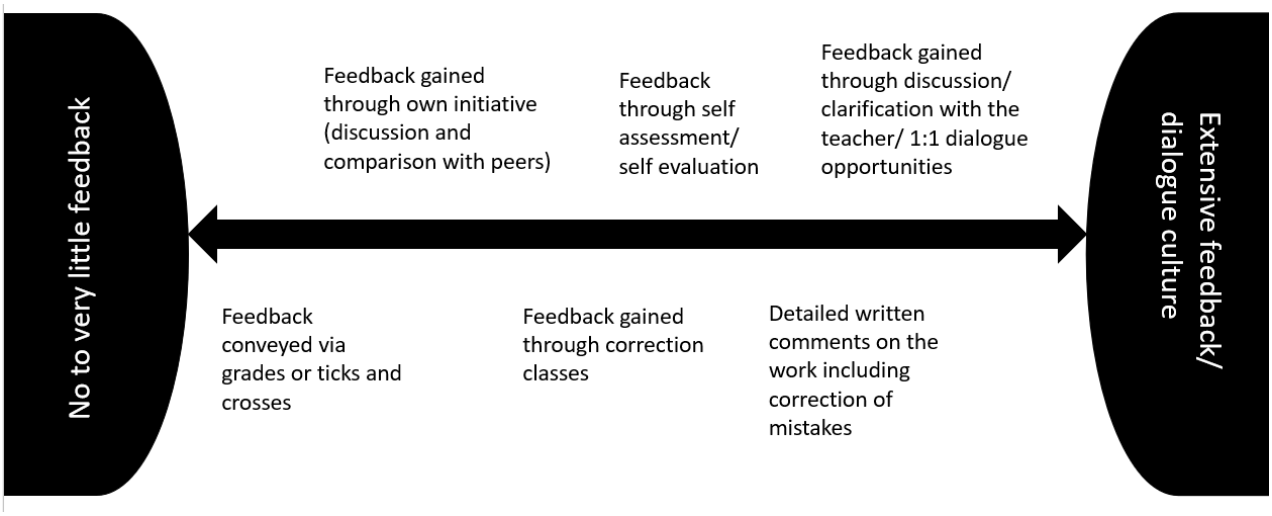


Figure 3. The variety of students' feedback experiences

An interesting finding relates to the fact that in real or perceived absence of tutor feedback, students developed own strategies to ensure that feedback serves the intended purpose of helping them improve. This would usually revolve around discussion and comparison with peers to determine where and why mistakes were made. Own experience suggests that such behaviours are often interpreted negatively by staff as students finding faults with feedback, however, it seems to be a successful past strategy that is being re-adopted in the absence of or lack of understanding of the feedback that was provided. This behaviour indicates students taking a great agency and displaying some self-regulation (Nicol, 2006) – qualities that are priorities in the new feedback paradigm (Winstone and Carless, 2019). A question for further exploration is whether those students whose past feedback cultures forced them to adopt feedback seeking behaviours enter the UK HE with a better developed feedback literacy (Carless and Boud, 2018)

Overall, despite an initial perception of receiving no feedback, all students were able to identify regular correction classes (*i.e.* going through graded tests as part of the lesson and identifying mistakes) as instances of feedback. This type of feedback initially deviated from the idea of feedback that their UK experiences shaped (*i.e.* written feedback forms) but was eventually recognised as feedback when further unpacking their histories. Hence overall the students were able to recognise feedback talk (Heron et al., 2021) as feedback, however, in some instances indicating insufficiency of their past experiences when compared with their newly shaped feedback norms.

Reading between the lines – interpretation of messages

Sociolinguistic or sociocultural knowledge played an important role in students' ability to comprehend feedback messages and take action. This was exemplified at different points in the interview by students' interpretation of what is advice and what is a necessity, and what is meant by politeness.

Phrases such as 'you might want to add X", "you could have included X" or "the essay would have benefitted from X" were interpreted differently by different participants. Some would understand this as a "kinder way of saying, "oh, you did not have this and you should" (Defne, Turkey), some would interpret the phrases as an option as "It doesn't say like you must" (Ionut, Romania).

This interpretation was often culturally influenced and depended on students' conceptualisation of feedback as advice rather than mandate and the past power balance between students and teachers (Hofstede, 1986) and the participants' attitude to that power balance. Students who came from contexts where the social positions of teachers and students were very distinct and the word of the teacher was final would interpret the examples above as a mandate. Those students with more relaxed patterns of student/ teacher interaction or those who would oppose the strict hierarchical relationship would treat it as an option and advice that they may ignore if they wish.

The participants' interpretation of politeness was another main point for discussion. What is defined as politeness here are instances of feedback where some of the more negative messages are communicated positively or supplemented with praise that may be disproportionate to the actual level of performance. Such feedback practice, often associated with the feedback sandwich, has been widely criticised on the basis of having no real value (MacDonald, 1991), masking the complexity of feedback (Scott and Coate, 2003) and disguising helpful information (Boud and Molloy, 2012). However, with the growing understanding of the role of emotions in feedback (Pitt and Norton, 2017; Carless and Winstone, 2019) a more nurturing approach reflected in the language used that could be interpreted as politeness is still often used as a way to help manage affect in social situations (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

Video 4: Padding, politeness and diplomacy

Students more familiar with what is considered to be the British style of communication and the UK HE system were able to recognise the motivational purpose of "politeness" (Greta, Italy), "padding" (Jan, Slovakia) or "diplomatic feedback" (Ionut, Romania) and interpret the feedback through that lens understanding that the overall message "suggests I'm in pretty big trouble" (Ionut, Romani). This, however, was not the case for all students who would take the message as "what is said rather than what is meant" (Jan, Slovakia). This led to a disconnect between an action students intended to take based on their interpretation and an action they should be taking.

Overall, as any English as a Foreign Language textbook suggests, the participants understood politeness to be an inherent characteristic of the British culture with a protective function of trying to "not hurt our feelings" (Greta, Italy), however, there was an agreement that especially for those coming from contexts with less tolerance for uncertainty (Hofstede, 1986) it introduces an element of ambiguity that according to students has no place in feedback. All interviewed students agreed that feedback "is a chance for us to be honest with each other where is good and where is bad" (Ionut, Romania). Drawing on honesty as a characteristic and purpose of feedback, clarity attributed to straightforwardness is something that students preferred over politeness. Students acknowledged a potential level of discomfort in hearing 'bad news' but concluded that "if there is mutual respect and …If it's clear what was wrong, no one should be afraid of telling and no one should be afraid of reading it" (Greta, Italy).

Video 5: Straightforwardness, honesty and clarity

Grade as the context for interpretation

As discussed above, the interpretation of the language tended to be problematic and depended on the students' familiarity with the culture and as well as some historical assumptions from past experiences they brought to the new learning context. What made that message clearer was the presence of a grade, which provided a context for interpretation.

In the first instance the grade provided a context for translation of the language of feedback. Adverbs 'quite' or adjectives 'sufficiently' were directly translated differently without and with the presence of the grade. 'Quite' no longer meant 'very' and 'sufficiently' was appropriately associated with meeting the minimum requirements. This also extended to interpretation of such sentences as "It was a good attempt" and "Well done for completing this part". Without the grade the phrases were interpreted as praise, with the grade it became clear that the key to understanding is 'attempt and 'completing this part'. This links to the idea of 'conventional indirectness' that implies different interpretations across contexts (Ramani et al., 2017).

The grade also changed the interpretation of the tone of feedback. While initially the abovementioned phrases were welcome and seen as a positive encouragement, once the grade provided context as to what they really mean, the tone was interpreted as "slightly patronizing" (Rasa, Lithuania) and "passive aggressive" (Defne, Turkey).

Most importantly, having this additional context to decipher the hidden messages changed the students' interpretation of what action needs to be taken from feedback, which in turn added more clarity that the students appreciate and allows to take full advantage of feedback to improve learning.

Translating the language onto the grade

The discussion of feedback led to the discussion of assessment and the grading as the grade deflation the students experience in the UK was one of the biggest adjustments. All of the students admitted this change in grading was effectively communicated to them by their respective departments and expectations were managed. While they claimed this understanding and the ability to translate their old grades onto the new context meaning that 100% is not achievable and 70% is an excellent grade, this didn't translate further onto the language of feedback. Despite understanding that 'satisfactory' or 'sufficient' indicates a lack of something or meeting 'bare minimum' requirements, the grade expectation would still be around 70% as a number that adequately represents just meeting the requirements. This would be the case based on their past experiences in their home countries with 100% within reach but not in this case. Hence some participants understood the language and the grade inflation in isolation but the final interpretation of those two components together took place through the lens of their past experiences.

Conclusions/ recommendations

The student stories unpack the variety of feedback conceptualisations and experiences hidden under the umbrella term 'European'. The data suggest that for the interviewed students there was a link between their cultural imprints, their conceptualisations of feedback and their understanding of what action needs to be taken from the language of feedback. The data also suggest that at times, despite good linguistic knowledge, the students found themselves at a loss as to the real message the feedback was trying to convey hence lacking some sociolinguistic skills. Those students who were more familiar with the British culture either by getting their secondary school education in a British school or because of the acculturation were better able to interpret the meaning behind some feedback functions. In many cases, the grade was the factor that helped with untangling the complexities of messages packaged in feedback.

The discussion of the role of culture and feedback aligns well with discourse around inclusivity, which has already been recognised by Rovagnati et al. (2021) and Rovagnati and Pitt (2021). Alongside decolonising the curriculum initiatives, Bond (2021) has been calling for a more language aware curriculum and this call should extend to the language of feedback given its role in student learning.

From a theoretical perspective, our understanding of feedback literacy needs to include a closer consideration of culture and language. It is clear from the data that both of those factors influence all areas of feedback literacy (Carless and Boud, 2018), *i.e*. students' ability to appreciate feedback can be culturally bound and affected by the status and conceptualisation of feedback in their home countries. Similarly, in order for the students to be able to refine evaluative judgements, take action in response to feedback and work with emotions productively they need to be able to comprehend the message they receive and interpret accurately the intention of the feedback giver. This is also determined by their understanding of the language that is culturally situated. Current thinking about feedback literacy does not emphasise the cultural dimension and is also absent from the discussion of what competencies feedback literate teachers should possess (Boud and Dawson, 2020).

In practical terms, current discussion around the differences in grading and what feedback is should be further extended to include a reflection on how own cultural and linguistic past experiences might affect current practice in the new context.

The data from this study suggest that for students who are new to the system or haven't had a chance to fully develop their sociolinguistic awareness, a grade is an important context for interpretation of feedback containing cues about what actions need to be taken from feedback. This calls for a rethink about the impact that detaching feedback from the grade might have on students' learning. This, however, could be problematic for some contexts and in such cases feedback should prioritise clarity and honesty over any other function that aims to manage affect.

Further research

The UK HE is highly international and that is also reflected in the body of staff, not just the students. It is naïve to consider that feedback dialogues are taking place within the context of the English as a first language teacher and an English as a second/ third language student. While this was not an assumption in this study, it is important to explore how culture might impact on staff's approach to feedback giving and how such intercultural interactions happen within the constraint of the host culture. This will complement current work by exploring the views of those on the other side of the feedback dialogue. This work is already being undertaken as an extension of this project.

Dissemination

Presentations/ conferences	Publications	Other outputs
SRHE conference presentation (completed)	Journal article in Studies in Higher Education or Assessment and Evaluation HE (manuscript in preparation)	Videos illustrating student stories to be embedded into provision and made available publicly for use
ICED in November 2022 (abstract accepted for the 2021 conference, however it will be resubmitted for the 2022 in person event)	A chapter in a feedback book edited by Carol Evans and Michael Warring (draft came back from review)	
Assessment and Evaluation HE (June 2022) – abstract preparation in progress		
Institutional educational network presentation (ChersNet)		

Table 2. Dissemination plan

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