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Influence of Culture on Chinese University Students' Interaction with Feedback

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Abstract: Feedback is a powerful learning tool; however, cultural elements may inhibit its effectiveness. In China, the teacher-student dynamics are different than in the West and the methodologies purported by Western scholars may not be effective. This paper identifies cultural elements of Mianzi and Guanxi that influence social relationships in Chinese academic environments. The research explores the needs and perspectives on feedback practices of twenty-five senior undergraduate students at a Chinese University via semi-structured interviews. The results offer insight into best feedback practices when working with Chinese students. The key takeaway is that most Western effective feedback guidelines translate into the Chinese classroom; however, power dynamics inherent in Confucianist society inhibit students from engaging with teachers. It is also important to note that peer feedback may not be as effective because students may be reluctant to make a peer lose face or may not see peers as having valid opinions. Understanding key cultural concepts can facilitate communication between teachers and students, improving feedback effectiveness.

Keywords: feedback, Chinese, culture, university, higher education, learning

1. Introduction

Feedback is essential to teaching and learning [1]. However, the cultural context where the learning occurs is crucial. In Chinese culture, the roles of the teacher and the learner are different than in the West [2]. The Chinese educational system is rooted in Confucianism, where teachers are respected and revered as sources of knowledge. Students are reluctant to engage their teacher as questions can be seen as disrespectful [3]. Many of the guidelines for feedback practices were written by Western academics, and cultural differences can often lead to dissonance in the student-teacher interaction.

Carless et al. [4] define feedback as "dialogic processes and activities which can support and inform the student on the current task, while also developing the ability to self-regulate performance on future tasks." A large body of evidence suggests that feedback is crucial to teaching and learning. Hattie's [5] synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement established that feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement. The academic support for the effectiveness of feedback resulted in a paradigm shift toward a more student-centered education model [3]. A plethora of academic studies explore feedback through student perspectives [6], what makes feedback good [7]; emotional responses to feedback [8], student engagement with feedback [9], developing sustainable feedback [4], and what constitutes effective feedback [10]. The body of research resulted in textbooks dedicated to the science of giving feedback [10, 11]. Feedback quality is taken seriously, as surveys on individual university and national levels collect student responses to ascertain whether the feedback they are receiving is meeting their needs [12, 13].

Giving quality feedback takes time and effort. National surveys in the UK and Australia indicate that students often find the feedback received unsatisfactory. The studies resulted in research probing student discontent identifying several poor practices that undermine motivation and inhibit the ability to implement feedback and improve their performance [12, 13]. Based on the identified issues, a growing body of research has developed best practices for effective feedback practices.

Nicol [14] outlines that feedback should be:

1) Understandable: expressed in a language that students will understand.
2) Selective: commenting in reasonable detail on two or three things that the student can do something about.
3) Specific: pointing to instances in the student's submission where the feedback applies.
4) Timely: provided in time to improve the next assignment.
5) Contextualized: framed with reference to the learning outcomes and/or assessment criteria.
6) Non-judgmental: descriptive rather than evaluative, focused on learning goals, not just performance goals.
7) Balanced: pointing out the positive as well as areas in need of improvement.

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8) Forward-looking: suggesting how students might improve subsequent assignments.
9) Transferable: focused on processes, skills, and self-regulatory processes not just on knowledge content.
10) Personal: referring to what is already known about the student and her or his previous work.

While these guidelines are underpinned by a growing body of academic research [4, 7–10], there is not a singular approach that works for all students. Low-achieving [15] and unmotivated students [16] need additional support to get them to engage and improve.

The research took place at a Chinese university partnering with a UK university. The partnership allows Chinese students to earn a UK degree by enrolling in UK modules with Western lecturers. One of the key issues is low engagement with feedback as many students do not read the feedback on Moodle or discuss it with the lecturers during tutorials. Attempts to integrate peer feedback yielded poor results. The same modules in the UK had significantly better interaction with feedback. This research aimed to explore the barriers to feedback adaptation in Chinese higher education and improve teaching outcomes.

2. Literature Review

Modern education encourages students to understand the task and improve their performance, with feedback serving as a central conduit for improvement; however, this form of evaluation is a relatively new phenomenon. In traditional Western teaching approaches, feedback is limited to grades or being shown their mistakes. This form of evaluation focuses on the student's ability to memorize and regurgitate data. For example, behaviorists believe that learning is based on interaction with the environment and focuses on stimuli and responses. The behaviorist approach to education is based on the idea that behavior can be manipulated and controlled where the results can be empirically measured [17]. The cognitive learning philosophy sees learning as the interaction of psychological processes. Learning is viewed through the lens of how knowledge is received, stored, and organized in the mind [18]. Such methods are criticized as resulting in surface learning since students memorize rather than understand the reasons for doing what they are being instructed to do [3].

In the twentieth century, constructivism emerged as a new educational paradigm prioritizing connecting new knowledge to existing understanding over memorization. Constructivism sees students as active agents in their learning process who construct knowledge through experience and social interaction [19]. Feedback becomes an essential part of the learning process that supports students on their tasks by "scaffolding" their progress by offering just the right amount of support to help the student find the solution independently [20]. Feedback in the context of constructivism transformed from rote learning and traditional grades to a more dialogical process where the learner and the teacher work together to understand and solve the problem. This form of teaching offered more flexibility for different learning styles and yielded better learning outcomes [21], with many higher education institutions reformatting their approach to teaching and learning by employing student-centered models [22–24].

2.1. The evolution of education in China

Much like traditional Western education, Chinese education is focused on grades and memorization. The contemporary Chinese education system has its roots in Confucianist traditions that were implemented during the Sui and Tang Dynasties, where an examination-based system was the predominant criterion for evaluation for imperial positions. The exams were notoriously difficult and consisted mostly of memorizing classic works of literature. As a result, contemporary education reflects the role of the exams and the rigid hierarchy of a bygone era.

Confucius was a teacher and philosopher who influenced Chinese culture, education, and politics [25]. His writing formed ethical, moral, and social standards that governed the basic way of living [26]. The main objective of Confucianism was to maintain a healthy society by encouraging people to lead virtuous lives, in an orderly fashion [25]. Social harmony is achieved through a rigid hierarchy, collectivism, and respect for parents and ancestors and by extension, for one's country and its leaders. This notion is also applied to elders, teachers, and individuals of higher rank [27].

In contemporary society, these Confucianist values are reflected through the notions of "Mianzi" and "Guanxi." "Mianzi" translates to Face, and the concept represents one's public dignity and reputation for integrity and morality [27]. Loss of face breaks social harmony; therefore, care must be taken to preserve one's face, and the face of others, especially those in higher positions. "Guanxi" represents the status quo and maintaining the relationships among people [28]. Individuals are expected to behave for the good of the whole society and according to their rank [29].

In collectivist cultures, social order is paramount; therefore, individuals will go to great lengths for the preservation of face and avoidance of conflict [30]. These cultural elements result in the relationship between teachers and students being dramatically different than in the West [2]. The Confucianist foundations of the Chinese educational system establish the teachers as a source of knowledge who are respected and revered. Students are reluctant to engage their teacher as questions can be seen as disrespectful [3]. The cultural tenets of Guanxi and Mianzi inhibit the integration of feedback into the Chinese learning environment. Because teachers are seen as occupying a higher social tier, Chinese students are reluctant to engage. Due to elder veneration rooted in Confucianism, the students passively accepted feedback from the teacher without questioning or asking for clarification. In the same vein, peer feedback is often viewed with skepticism unless coming from a high-ranked student [2]. In many instances to save face and preserve group harmony, the students follow traditional etiquette, avoiding criticizing others [27].

Confucius's doctrine highly influences contemporary Chinese education. Mianzi, Guanxi, and elder veneration inhibit effective teacher feedback and peer feedback. The traditional way of rote memorization and high grades is still the predominant way to achieve academic merit. One of the main criticisms of the Chinese reliance on scores for evaluating academic standing is that it hinders development [31, 32]. A system of evaluation that relies on scores and measurable merits focuses on correcting errors rather than improving the quality of outcomes [33]. In such a system, the purpose and application of what is being learned are less important than meeting the requirements. The result is that Chinese students prioritize high grades, rather than an understanding of the subject [34]. The focus on obtaining knowledge from textbooks leads to learning by rote [35], resulting in many Chinese university students emphasizing results and ignoring the learning process [36].

Song et al. [37] outline the flaws in the system of academic evaluation through the "Five Only" principles:

1) Only for scores. The score is the only criterion for evaluating student learning outcomes.

2) Only for school entrance. The student enrollment rate is the only criterion for evaluating teachers' teaching quality and school development level.
3) Only for diplomas. The education level is the only criterion for testing students' abilities.
4) Only for papers. The number of published papers and the reputation of publications are regarded as the only criteria for judging students' academic abilities.
5) Only for an honorary title. The honorary title is the only criterion for evaluating students' comprehensive qualities.

The focus on grades results in students disregarding the value of feedback. This is reflected in the low utilization, as many students fail to comprehend the positive impact of feedback on learning [38]. The second reason for the poor utilization is low quality or the lack of feedback from the teachers [39]. The teacher's higher social status makes students hesitant to ask for clarification out of fear of being seen as disrespectful. This is reflected in the research by Jiang and Zeng [33] that surveys undergraduate students' perceptions of assignment feedback. The study showed that although many students valued teachers who offered quality feedback, many were sympathetic to the teachers who did not provide feedback attributing this to the heavy workload. Only 9.4% of students considered teachers who don't give feedback as irresponsible.

2.2. Reform in Chinese education

The need to modernize and improve the educational system is not amiss on the Chinese government which recognizes that using exam scores to measure the entire learning process neglects the personalized developmental needs of students as active learners. The Overall Plan for Deepening the Educational Evaluation Reform in the New Era (OPDEERNE), as adopted at the 14th Meeting of the Commission for Deepening Overall Reform of the CPC Central Committee in 2020, emphasizes the importance of educational evaluation in guiding education development. The proposal of "Four Evaluations" underscores specific areas of focus to enhance the effectiveness and relevance of educational evaluation.

The first reform covers selection criteria for admission into universities. Currently, Chinese schools commonly tend to prioritize grades over quality education, which hurts students' physical and mental health and comprehensive development [40, 41]. The commission calls for changing the evaluation standards for schools at all levels and types, establishing a multidimensional evaluation system. The reformed evaluation standards would be based on the types of different institutions. Vocational colleges should emphasize students' mastery of working skills. Normal colleges should prioritize cultivating qualified teachers as the main evaluation indicator. For undergraduate educational evaluation, the new system would include factors such as the workload of professors teaching undergraduate courses, faculty-student ratio, development of distinctive disciplines, quality of undergraduate graduation theses and student management and services, student participation in social activities, and satisfaction of employers [42].

The second evaluation reform focuses on the role of academics, a prevalent issue in universities where research achievements serve as the main criterion for evaluating teachers. Rewards income and promotion opportunities are closely tied to release papers, leading to a situation where university teachers prioritize research work over teaching [43]. The committee suggests prioritizing teachers' professional ethics and conduct as the primary criterion for teacher evaluation, guiding them to deliver every class effectively and care for every student. Universities should consider categorizing teachers into research-oriented, teaching-oriented, and application-oriented types, with corresponding teacher evaluation systems for each role [31]. The committee suggests that participation in teaching method research, teaching workload, students' reviews, guidance in students' academic competitions, final year projects, and employment should be included in the teachers' evaluation system. For research evaluation, emphasis should be placed on quality orientation, focusing on academic contributions, social contributions, and support for student development. Quantitative indicators such as the number of papers, projects, and research funding should not be directly tied to performance salary or rewards.

The third reform focuses on recruitment. Employers tend to prioritize students' diplomas while overlooking their moral character and abilities. The commission sees it as important to establish a talent utilization mechanism to promote the alignment of individuals with suitable positions [42]. Therefore, government, public institutions, and state-owned enterprises will rely less on factors such as the rank of the graduating institution, international study experiences, or learning methods as restrictive conditions in recruitment.

The most important reform comes in the evaluation of outcomes. The committee suggests changing the assessment methodologies that rely solely on paper-and-pencil tests to determine students' knowledge and skills. The members see it as essential to fully analyze the characteristics of each discipline, practical literacy, and innovation capabilities. The goal is to apply optimal examination formats to gauge whether the students are meeting the desired learning outcomes. Student self-assessment and peer assessment can generate a more objective learning evaluation. It is recognized that the purpose of assessment is not only to correct errors but also to improve students' learning results.

The committee calls for reforming the evaluation to not only provide grades but also include detailed and specific feedback based on students' performance during teaching activities. Traditional evaluation often uses students' single-test scores as indicators of their achievements. The new value-added evaluation would assess students' progress as the standard for evaluation, embracing the concept of "evaluation promoting development" [44]. This approach avoids emphasizing short-term benefits at the expense of students' long-term development. It pays attention to the differences and personalized needs among students, ensuring the fairness and effectiveness of the evaluation methods.

Feedback should be timely and targeted and teachers should adjust their teaching content and methods in response to students' learning needs. By shifting the focus from a knowledge-based to a competency-based approach, process evaluation promotes the enhancement of students' learning abilities and individual development. Adopting tailored teaching methods according to student's individual needs also helps to boost their interest and confidence in learning [45].

The essence of comprehensive evaluation lies in making multidimensional and systematic value judgments on educational activities and establishing an independent evaluation supervision system to ensure fairness and transparency in assessment. This involves incorporating relevant stakeholders such as government bodies, universities, and parents into the evaluation supervision system. It would allow them to participate in assessment in a fair and quality-driven manner [46].

2.3. Giving feedback in China

The discussion above shows some similarities in the educational reform in Western and Chinese Cultures. In both

instances, there is a push for a transition from traditional learning models to more student-oriented models in which constructive feedback plays a significant role. We also see similarities in difficulties with execution where both educational systems struggle to engage students to utilize feedback and improve the quality of feedback from the teachers.

One of the main obstacles to feedback in the Chinese educational system derives from the traditional Confucianist foundation. The desire to preserve harmony and the status quo often inhibits honest and direct dialect that leads to improvement, inhibiting building growth-oriented partnerships between students and teachers. This is reflected in research by Zhan [2] that explores the differences between Western and Chinese learning cultures with peer and teacher feedback. The researchers found that Chinese students focus more on judging than on improving aspects of feedback. These constraints can be overcome by building personal relationships based on trust, harmony, and support. Their findings are supported by similar studies [3, 47] highlighting an important area for research into how to deliver effective feedback to Chinese students.

3. Methodology

An interpretive qualitative approach was adopted to explore the "why" in students' perceptions of the usefulness of feedback and their feelings about discussing feedback with their teachers and peers. This approach facilitates making sense of complex issues and finding meaning behind the data [2, 16]. The data were collected via semi-structured interviews. Initially, the students were asked to respond to the question in a Likert scale format, followed by open-ended questions to explore the reasoning for the selection. This format is effective for situations where the language may be a barrier [48]. Before the main interviews, the questions were piloted for clarity and logical structure. During the pilot, it became clear that interviewing in English face-to-face would be cumbersome for students who struggle with English or find it intimidating to speak directly to teachers. Therefore, the WeChat application was chosen as the medium for the interviews. Collecting data from in-person interviews offers additional insight from observation of body language [48–50]; however given the nervousness and language barrier, the written format was a more suitable option. The interviews were conducted in English; however, WeChat offers translation allowing students to read and reply in their native language if they find it necessary. This gave the students time to consider their selection resulting in more detailed, well-thought-out answers that revealed insight into their feedback preferences [51].

3.1. Sample

The sample comprised seniors enrolled in the Final Year Project module. Students' ages ranged from 20 to 22 years. All participants were enrolled in the Final Year Project module, where they met with a tutor weekly to receive feedback. The feedback is an opportunity to improve their work and review the changes with the tutor during the following session. A total of twenty-five students volunteered to participate in this study. Among them, fourteen students majored in Digital Media Art, and eleven students majored in Environmental Design and Planning. The students are all native Chinese speakers with English as their second language with various English level proficiency and academic motivation.

3.2. Data analysis

WeChat created digital transcripts that facilitated data analysis by mining the data for keywords and active themes. The data were also explored through interpretive data analysis. This approach allows the researchers to actively make sense of the phenomena through the meaning that is assigned to them [52]. It is typically applied when people and their social relationships are the primary focus of the investigation [53].

3.3. Results

3.3.1. I read the feedback I received

As shown in Figure 1 below, the majority of students read the feedback, with 40% of them always doing so, 24% most of the time, and 28% sometimes. A very small partition replied rarely (4%) and never (4%).

When asked about their selection, there was a clear consensus that feedback can effectively help them improve. It is worth noting that several students stated that they prioritize grades over feedback, looking at feedback only when the scores are below expectation.

The open-ended questions allowed students to elaborate on their Likert scale selections. The results revealed varying levels of engagement with feedback among the students. More than half of them approached feedback to improve their work, a trend particularly noticeable among those with high grades and strong English proficiency.

For example, Viki answered:

> *"I believe that feedback plays a very important role in reviewing work content, which allows teachers to provide more professional and targeted suggestions, which can improve students' work efficiency and students' understanding of the content."*

Conversely, students who selected "sometimes" and those with lower English proficiency tended to read feedback only when they deemed it necessary, such as after receiving low marks. While they acknowledged the utility of feedback, their comments revealed that they did not take further action, sometimes failing to comprehend the purpose of feedback entirely. A few students admitted to prioritizing their ideas over teacher comments. Additionally, some students ignored feedback sent via email, especially during vacation periods, while others cited difficulties in downloading it from the Learning Management System. Several students admitted to rarely or never reading feedback altogether, instead focusing solely on final grades—a belief consistent with previous studies highlighting a tendency among Chinese students to prioritize outcomes over the learning process [36, 41, 54].

3.3.2. Feedback is important to understand my mistakes

The majority of students stated that feedback can effectively help them understand their mistakes. As shown in Figure 2, 46% strongly agreed and 31% agreed with only a minority remaining neutral (15%) or disagreeing (5%). No students chose "Strongly Disagree" as an option.

When asked What kind of feedback is most effective for understanding their mistakes, the majority of the comments reached a consensus suggesting that feedback should succinctly point out the mistakes and use clear and concise language to suggest how the assignment could have been improved.

For example, Alex answered:

> *"Clearly pointing out my mistakes with suggestions on how to fix them is what I would consider very good feedback. I can clearly understand how*

Figure 1
Frequency distribution of how often students read the feedback they received

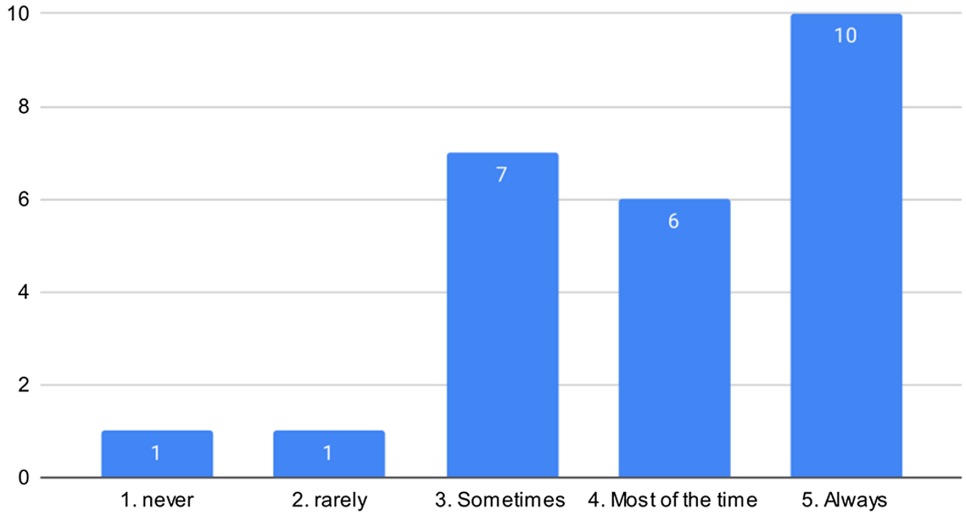
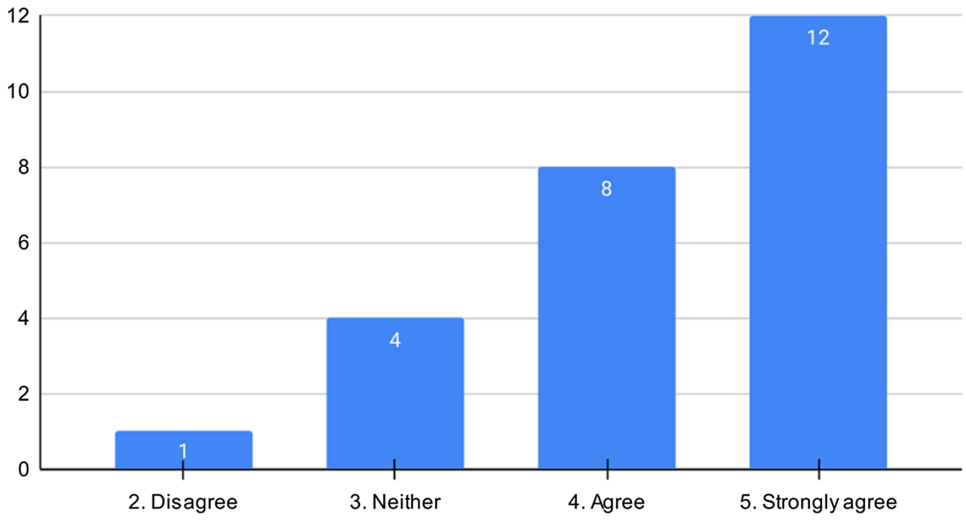


Figure 2
Distribution of agreement levels for the statement "Feedback is important to understand my mistakes"



to change after reading the feedback. But if I don't see it well in brief, that kind of feedback doesn't help me, and I still don't know how to make the next change."

A few students mentioned that being presented with good examples during the feedback session would assist them in understanding how to improve their work:

"*Giving me an example of what is right, while making it clear where I'm wrong, will make me more aware of the gap between me and the good examples*."

3.3.3. Feedback is important for me to understand how to improve in the future

The majority of participants acknowledged that feedback contributes to improvement. As shown in Figure 3, 44% Strongly agreed with another 28% Agreeing. 8% Chose a neutral response with 12% disagreeing and 8% strongly disagreeing.

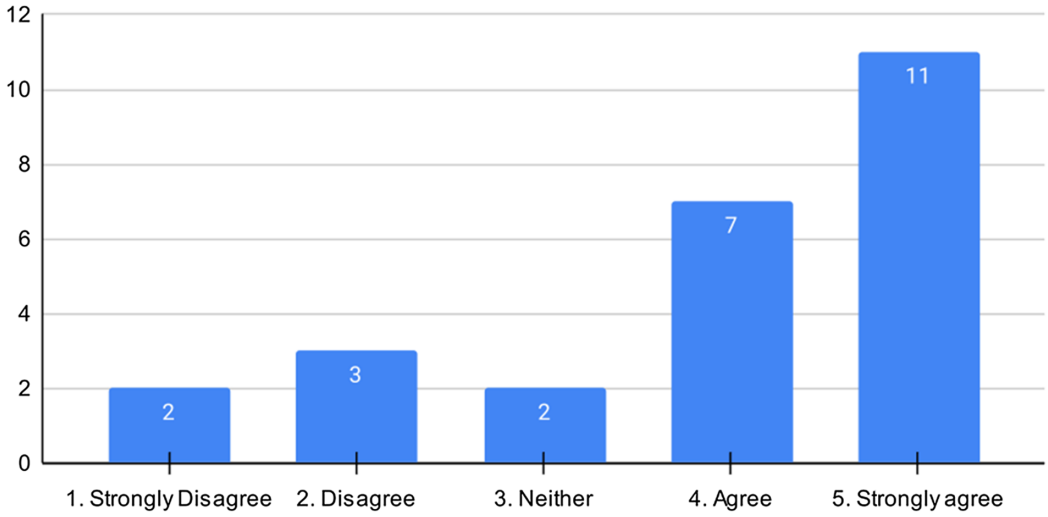
If we look at just the numbers, it would seem that 72% of the students look at feedback as a way to improve in the future; however when asked what they value about feedback, many described the primary point of feedback as a tool to identify mistakes. This aligns with Jiang and Zeng's [33] conclusion that many Chinese students care more about fixing errors rather than improving the quality of comprehension. In ten replies, we saw that students were looking for meeting the assignment requirements rather than what is being learned [34–36].

For example, Lui answered:

"I'd like to see feedback that points directly to the problem, which is also more efficient, Personally, I prefer to understand the mistakes directly. It takes more time and thought to improve"

Most of the students who chose Disagree and Strongly Disagree were mid and low English proficiency levels who struggled with the translation and looked for feedback to directly guide them on

Figure 3
Feedback is important for me to understand how to improve in the future



what to do. This finding is consistent with the research of Orsmond and Merry [15] as well as Brown [16], highlighting the necessity for scaffolding to facilitate the low-achieving students. For example, Wang wrote:

> *"I want the teacher could give me more useful links that are relevant to my project."*

Only a select few students prioritized feedback for enhancement purposes and mentioned the connection between understanding the mistakes and understanding how to improve them. For example, Zhang answered:

> *"I think it is more important to understand how to improve on it because if you know the mistake exists but don't know how to improve on it, then the mistake will always be there"*

3.3.4. The wording (language) used in feedback is clear and easy to understand

As shown in Figure 4, the data for this question indicate that only 52% of the students suggest that feedback is mostly easy to understand (always 20% Most of the time 32%). 32% of the students selected the neutral option, while never (8%) and rarely (8%) remained small, the fact that they were selected indicates a problem.

When asked to discuss some of the issues with the comprehension of feedback, the main theme was the language barrier. Students alluded to issues with understanding English, technical, and academic language. Several students stated that they preferred the comments to be placed next to the issue referred to by the feedback, as feedback detached from their work made it hard to identify what it was referring to. This issue aligned well with replies to other questions where students expressed a clear preference for face-to-face interaction. Some students found that feedback for design-oriented courses was subjective and abstract, vs technical courses where the feedback was subjective and clear.

For example, Cynthia mentioned:

> *"We always have two different types of courses, which are technique and art design. The art design courses' feedback usually is hard to understand. Because it is always too abstract. Too many broad works like 'it doesn't look pretty. The structure is not clear' have been demonstrated in the feedback. I have no idea how to fix it."*

3.3.5. I ask the instructor for further clarification on feedback

It is noteworthy that the majority of students refrain from engaging in further discussions with their teachers regarding feedback. 40% selected "Never" and another 16% selected "Rarely." A third (32%) only occasionally communicated with the instructor, and only 12% selected most of the time. No students selected "Always." Please see Figure 5 below:

In the interviews, students stated they felt uncomfortable discussing feedback with their teachers. Their concerns revolved around issues revolving around "Guanxi" and "Face" where talking to the instructor may imply dissatisfaction with their grades, or potentially lead to the teacher admitting errors. Many feared offending the teacher or making it seem like they were questioning their authority. A second theme emerged regarding the interaction with the teacher where students feared they would not understand the explanation due to their level of English. Additionally, several students stated that once the grades had already been assigned they did not see the purpose of discussing them with the teacher.

3.3.6. I discuss the feedback I have received with my classmates

Peer feedback had mixed results among students. A quarter of those interviewed indicated never (28%) or rarely (8%) discussing feedback with their peers. The most popular option selected was "sometimes" (40%). A fifth selected most of the time (20%) and only (4%) selected "always." Please refer to Figure 6:

Although nearly all students replied that discussing feedback with peers is more comfortable than with teachers, few saw peer feedback as valuable. Motivated students felt comfortable discussing the meaning of the teacher's feedback acknowledging that most peer discussions revolved around grades or the assessment criteria. Most did not see value in peer feedback especially if it went against the teacher's comments or their judgment.

For example, Xia mentioned:

> *"I don't feel peers give insightful feedback. I feel more confident in my judgment. I will listen to my friends but will not take it. Sometimes I will reflect on that."*

Figure 4
The wording (language) used in feedback is clear and easy to understand

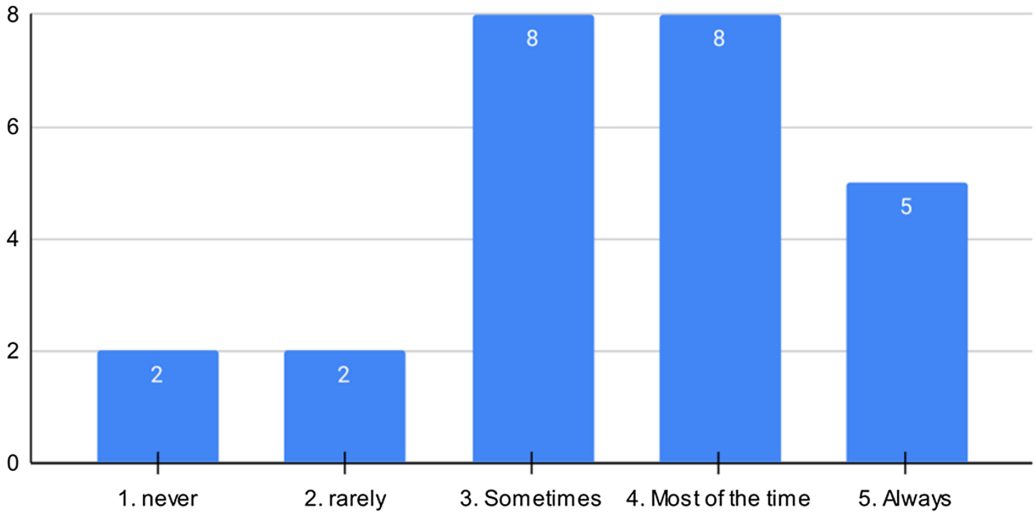
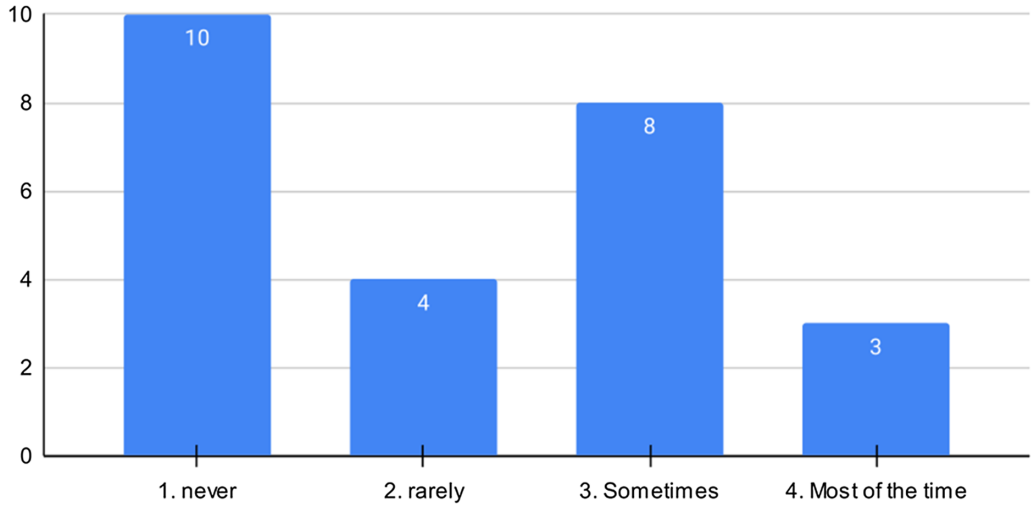


Figure 5
I ask the instructor for further clarification, based on the feedback I receive



The nine students who either never or rarely engaged in feedback discussions with their peers were mostly in the less motivated category. Many expressed a preference for consulting the teacher, yet hesitated to do so due to their lack of confidence to explain and express their understanding in English.

For example, Yang mentioned:

> *"A small number of students may come up with creative suggestions, but compared to teachers, teachers will provide suggestions that are suitable and achievable for the projects."*

This reluctance reflects a "Guanxi" social hierarchy dynamic, wherein students doubt their peers' ability to offer valuable, actionable feedback. Instead, they gravitate toward seeking feedback from teachers whom they hold in high respect and perceive to occupy a higher social position over them.

3.3.7. How long after you have submitted an assessment do you want feedback on it?

The majority of students perceive that feedback should be provided within two weeks, with 64% of students suggesting that feedback should be returned within one week after submitting their assignments and another 24% within two weeks. Please see Figure 7:

Students who selected a slightly longer timeframe described the importance of giving teachers time to thoroughly review and understand projects, enabling them to provide more detailed and personalized feedback.

For example, An mentioned:

> *"Receiving the feedback within 6–11 days not only allow students to readjust their content on their own, but also give busy teachers time to review and understand projects, and provide more detailed feedback to students one by one."*

Figure 6
I discuss the feedback I have received from my classmates

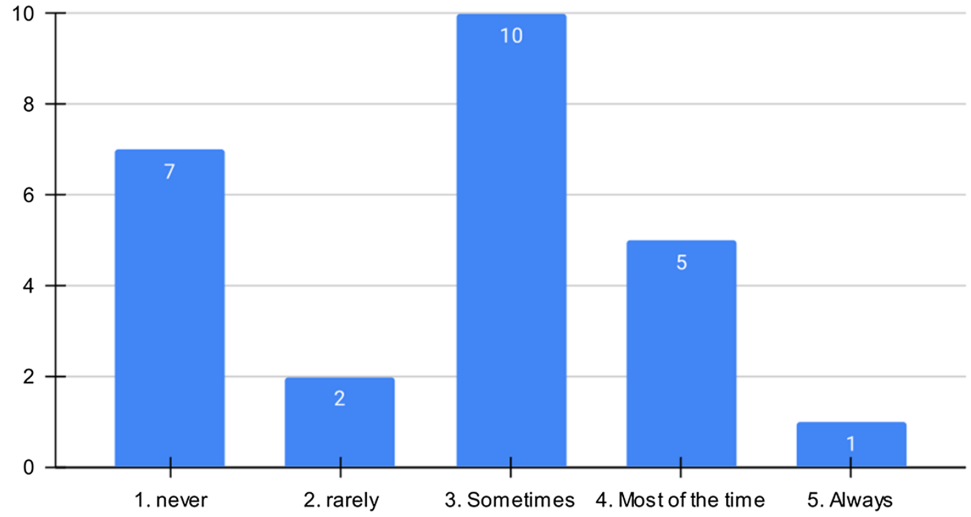
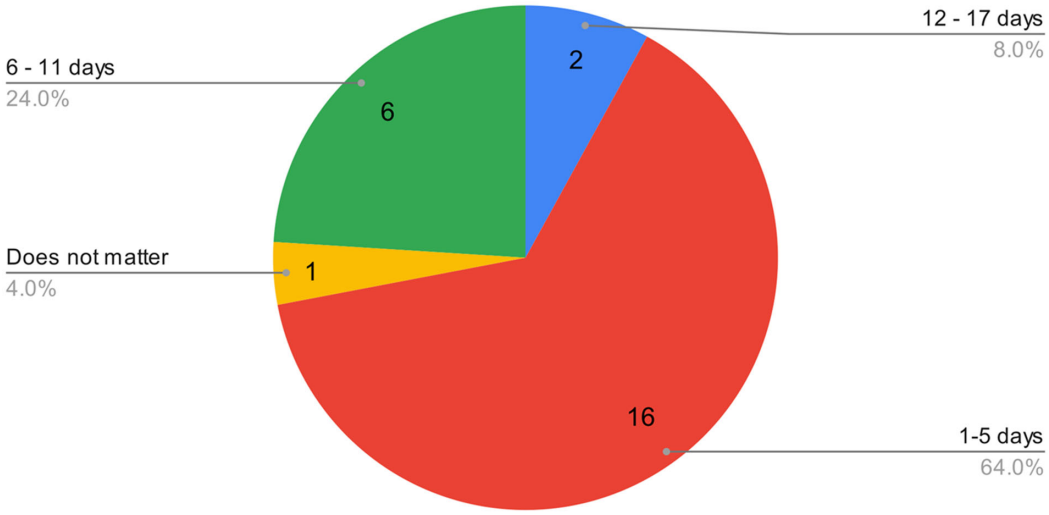


Figure 7
How long after you have submitted an assessment do you want feedback on it?



3.3.8. What, in your opinion, constitutes bad feedback?

Students generally said that the poor quality of feedback stems from its vagueness, lacking clear indications of mistakes, and suggestions for improvement. They find that the feedback does not align with their assignment content, leaving them unsure of where to commence modifications and enhancements. Additionally, some students struggle to comprehend feedback due to language barriers. When they use the translation tools with poor quality, it would lead to misunderstandings and distorted interpretations of the feedback.

3.3.9. What, in your opinion, constitutes good feedback?

Students perceive good feedback as utilizing clear and simple language to pinpoint their mistakes accurately. They prefer well-organized feedback, explicitly indicating where improvements should commence and how to make them. Some students believe that feedback should incorporate a combination of text and graphical representations, as this could provide a clearer understanding of the feedback content.

4. Discussion

Based on Nicol's [14] list of what qualifies as good feedback, most of the concepts align with Chinese student's preferences. In the interviews, students indicated that feedback should be:

1) Understandable: Students indicated that they prefer easy-to-understand language. This was referred to in the content of both academic language and English proficiency. This notion was supported by the discussion that identified bad feedback as ambiguous or confusing.
2) Selective: Students indicated a preference for personalized feedback with a clear indication of how they could improve.

Many students indicated that they preferred face-to-face feedback.

3) Specific: Several students mentioned that feedback should point to specific instances where it applies. This also aligns with students describing "bad feedback" as generic, lacking connection to their work.
4) Timely: The majority of the students picked the option with the shortest turnaround rate with several picking the second option in consideration of the teacher's time.
5) Forward-looking: Students identified good feedback as guiding them on how to improve. However, we found that in many instances the motivation for the selection was grades rather than a desire to understand the subject. Looking at feedback solely as a way to identify mistakes rather than understanding the subject deeper undermines several key tenets of good feedback. Feedback cannot aim to develop transferable skills if the students are focused on knowledge content. Nor can feedback be contextualized if the core desire is to know "what I did wrong" rather than understanding the bigger picture.
6) "Only for the Grades": We found strong evidence that reflects Song et al. [37] "Five Onlys" fallacy, especially that students value grades over understanding. To get value from feedback students must see its benefits and understand how to use it. To implement this correctly instructors must work within the Chinese social constructs of "Face" and "Guanxi".
7) "Guanxi" or relationships: Our research indicates that social hierarchy plays a significant role in classroom interaction. Chinese students are very unlikely to seek guidance from the teacher for fear of troubling a higher-ranking person or asking questions that could undermine the instructor's authority. It is up to the instructor to bridge the gap and build a positive relationship with their students. We also found that social hierarchy affects students' interaction with their peers. Students are unlikely to see value in advice from their peers of the same or lower social level. Additional research would help better understand how to employ peer-to-peer feedback in a Chinese classroom.
8) "Mianzi" or Face: In many instances "Mianzi" overlaps with "Guanxi" in its role in maintaining the status quo and preserving harmony. For example, students want to avoid making the teacher lose face by asking questions or making their peers lose face by criticizing their work. Students also fear losing face by asking a question deemed stupid by the instructor or their peers. Encouraging discussion and rewarding students for doing so may facilitate overcoming some of the anxiety. Saving the student's face via feedback is a way to build trust and open communication. When giving feedback being descriptive rather than evaluative and adding praise where it is due fits Nicol's [14] criteria for good feedback by being "non-judgmental" and "balanced."

5. Conclusion

Feedback is a powerful learning tool. Research into feedback effectiveness established guidelines for educators to follow. However, those guidelines do not work universally. Individual student characteristics, such as self-esteem [55] and motivation [8], impact whether action is taken on feedback. Culture is a key factor that must also be considered for effective feedback [14].

This study found similarities in Chinese student preferences that are similar to their Western counterparts. For example, students preferred receiving feedback quickly [9]. Feedback should be easy to understand [14], not overly critical [8], and relevant to the student's work [6]. Higher achieving students expressed that understanding how to improve moving forward is just as important as going over mistakes. The data underpins previous findings that students' level of motivation significantly impacts their level of interaction with feedback. Similar to Brown's 2007 research, this study found that more motivated students expect more detail from feedback and look to feedback to provide ways to improve in the future. Less motivated students engaged less with feedback, mainly using feedback to provide context for the grade.

"Face" and "Guanxi" have a major influence on how Chinese students interact with their instructors. Unlike their Western counterparts, Chinese students were reluctant to discuss feedback with their teachers because asking questions is seen as inappropriate [2]. Teachers working with Chinese students should not expect to be contacted by them and take the initiative to discuss feedback with their students. Students expressed a preference for face-to-face interaction with the teacher. The feedback verbal or written should use clear language and should highlight both strengths and weaknesses with a focus on how to improve rather than what the student did wrong.

In the same vein, "Face" and "Guanxi" play a significant role in peer-to-peer feedback. Although there is significant evidence indicating the effectiveness of peer-to-peer feedback [6, 56], in the context of the Chinese classroom, additional considerations are needed for it to be effective. This study found that students placed little value on the opinions of their peers. In addition, social dynamics play a significant role as some students may not value feedback from peers deemed academically weak, while others may not want to participate to avoid making students lose face to maintain group harmony. Setting up peer-to-peer feedback sessions should be done with care to avoid loss of face, keeping in mind the social dynamics and hierarchy.

5.1. Limitations and future research

This research was conducted on a small number of students in a single Chinese university. Although the results align with similar findings, more research with larger sample sizes and various locations in China would offer greater insight into student preferences on this topic.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support this work are available upom reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Author Contribution Statement

Vladislav Ilin: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration. **Jiaming Ke:** Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Visualization. **Sunantana Nuanla-Or:** Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft.

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