International Students' Perspectives on the Use of Summative Feedback in UK Higher Education

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Abstract

Feedback is a crucial element in higher education, essential for academic improvement. It can come from various sources such as teachers, peers, and personal experiences. The main goal of feedback is to correct mistakes, close gaps, and enhance knowledge and skills. The study focuses on international students at UK universities, identifying several factors that hinder their engagement with summative feedback. These include the timing of feedback release, often coinciding with exams or holidays, and the lack of detail in feedback content. The study suggests adjusting the timing and tone of feedback to make it more effective and encouraging.

Keywords: higher education, summative feedback, international students

1. Introduction

Nowadays, feedback is an essential component of learning, serving as a crucial mechanism for academic improvement in higher education (Rand, 2017). According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), feedback can come from various sources such as teachers, parents, oneself, peers, books, or experiences. It is sought by teachers, students, peers, and others based on performance. The primary goal of feedback is to correct mistakes, close gaps, and enhance knowledge and skill acquisition (Tan et al., 2020). Recognized as one of the most effective methods for significantly influencing learning outcomes (Al-Hattami, 2019; Hattie & Timperley, 2007), feedback plays a vital role in the educational process.

However, as a complex form of communication initiated by tutors to evaluate and enhance students' performance, feedback is often prone to misinterpretation and involves unequal power relationships (Ashwin, 2020; Carless, 2006; Sadler, 2010). Therefore, this paper aims to investigate students' perceptions of feedback, its usage, and the factors influencing their utilization of feedback.

According to the literature, feedback typically includes both formative and summative components. Formative feedback is a process where evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers to decide the next instructional steps (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Summative feedback, on the other hand, provides a conclusive evaluation of a student's work, explaining the grades awarded and identifying areas for improvement in future tasks (Daka et al., 2021). Summative assessments focus on determining whether examinees are ready to advance to the next level. Archer (2010) found that this focus often results in limited effort from teachers in providing feedback and minimal engagement with feedback by students, particularly those who pass the assessment. This suggests that while summative assessments are crucial for certifying competence, they may not effectively contribute to ongoing learning if feedback is not properly integrated and utilized by teachers and students. Furthermore, ample evidence shows that students frequently criticize and are often reluctant to read the feedback they receive (Rae & Cochrane, 2008; Weaver, 2006).

The importance of feedback has been demonstrated in numerous studies (Archer, 2010; Eckel & King, 2004), and the significance of summative feedback also needs more attention, because it provides clear performance

indicators to understand student comprehension (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Positive feedback, when intended and directed towards promoting learning can maintain and enhance students' motivation by recognizing students' efforts and progress (Harlen & James, 1997), informs future instructional planning by identifying areas needing improvement (Brookhart, 2001), is critical for academic progression and credentialing (Sadler, 1989), and serves as a formal communication method with parents and stakeholders regarding student performance and curriculum effectiveness (Marzano, 2006). However, despite its recognized value, feedback also has unavoidable issues (Ashwin, 2020). At the same time, the international student community also needs to be considered. According to previous studies, international students face the risk of mental health issues caused by a lack of community support (Akinsulure-Smith & O'Hara, 2012) and must contend with language problems, which could directly or indirectly impact academic success (Chen & Li, 2022). However, the topic of international students' engagement with summative feedback remains under-researched (Xu, Teng, & Cai, 2020). Furthermore, some scholars criticize feedback studies for being decontextualized (Lee, 2014; Parr & Timperley, 2010) and for focusing too much on feedback itself rather than on the broader context in which it is received.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining Feedback

Feedback often entails a distinctive type of communication, and the definition of feedback can vary (Rand, 2017). Categorizing feedback shows different forms based on its purpose and the agent involved, including informal and formal feedback (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Despite its different forms, feedback is often conceptualized as information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This general definition, which primarily sees the teacher's role as giving out feedback, tend to focus on a cognitivist perspective, viewing feedback as something received passively by the student, a process referred to as the "information transmission model" (Sadler, 1989, Winstone et al., 2017).

However, Sadler's (1989) research explicitly objects to this view. In his model, feedback is designed to enhance learning by reducing discrepancies between current understandings/performance and a desired goal. In this model, increasing the effectiveness of feedback requires both students and teachers to work together: Students must increase effort and use effective strategies or adjust goals, while teachers provide specific, challenging goals and assist with effective learning strategies and feedback. Effective feedback in this model should address the student's learning goals, current performance, and next steps, while operating at four levels: Task understanding and performance, processes needed for tasks, self-regulation through self-monitoring and action regulation, and personal evaluations and affect.

Sadler's (1989) theory is frequently cited in previous articles. For example, Carless and Boud (2018) used it to support feedback literacy and the importance of developing students' tacit knowledge, crucial for understanding feedback, improving judgment, and adjusting work. Similarly, Wisniewski et al. (2020) use Sadler (1989) to discuss feedback's role in bridging the gap between current understanding and goals, and its cognitive complexity levels. Panadero and Lipnevich (2021) referenced Sadler, (1989) to emphasize that feedback should have clear purposes and contexts. Furthermore, Sadler's three conditions for effective feedback underpin the Hattie, and Timperley's (2007) model, highlighting feedback's essential role in educational systems for promoting student self-monitoring and self-assessment.

In summary, Sadler (1989) and related literature offer various strategies for researching how international students engage with summative feedback. Zhou et al. (2008) highlight the difficulties international students face in reconciling their identities, detailing the shift from traditional to contemporary models of culture shock and adaptation. Previous studies have shown that feedback mechanisms are crucial in helping international students adapt, thereby improving their academic progress and learning outcomes (Andrade, 2006). Additionally, Brown and Holloway (2008) emphasize the need for timely pastoral and academic support, social networks, and an understanding of cultural differences to enhance the adjustment process for international students. Crisp and Turner (2011) and Glass and Westmont (2014) also note that interaction with host nationals can improve international students' communication skills and overall adaptation. Feedback helps students understand and adapt to different cultural norms and academic expectations, thereby reducing culture shock.

These studies emphasize the development of feedback literacy, understanding the cognitive complexity of feedback, the clear purposes within formative assessment, and the conditions for effective feedback. These insights can help enhance international students' engagement with summative feedback and improve their learning outcomes.

In the case of teachers, we need to look at the impact that the quality and timing of feedback have on the rate of feedback usage. Several research studies show that students frequently encounter issues with feedback that include vagueness and the use of complex academic jargon, which largely reduce its effectiveness (Rand, 2017).

For instance, Higgins, Hartley, and Skelton (2001) and Rae, and Cochrane (2008) both show that students reported receiving simple feedback, such as "reference errors," without any specific guidance on what the errors were, leading them to repeat the same mistakes. Similarly, Weaver (2006) interviewed university students and found that feedback could be too general, with comments like "too vague," leaving students confused about what was required. Thus, such instances of lack of clarity resulted in students not understanding or being able to act on the feedback until they sought further explanation from tutors. In addition to vague language, Still, Koerber (2009) and Rand (2017) identified the use of complex language and long words in the feedback provided by teachers, which can further obscure the feedback's intent.

Timing can also play a role. According to Harrison et al. (2013), when summative feedback is released during preparation for other written exams, some students preferred not to let potential negative feedback disrupt their study. While many research studies show that students' motivation is crucial in determining the reception and application of feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), the usefulness of feedback can be constrained as summative feedback is typically given during exam periods. Also, Harrison et al.'s (2014) report articulates that some students reported feedback being relevant only to the specific exam, with "performance variations across sections negating its use for broader skill assessment" (p. 238). Consequently, research concludes that feedback is typically viewed as a one-time consideration, with many students reading comments just once because they perceive them as irrelevant to future coursework. For the above "time problems," students may refuse to read the feedback. Referring to Sadler's (1989) models, the effectiveness of feedback hinges on the quality of delivery by teachers and the students' utilization of that feedback. On the teachers' side, a deficiency in clarity and the inappropriate timing of the feedback can result in an inadequate reduction of the knowledge or skill gaps it aims to bridge. This lessens the effectiveness of feedback in achieving its instructional purposes.

Apart from the reasons stemming from the quality and timing of the feedback, students' individual circumstances, such as grades, may as well play a role in reducing feedback usage. For example, Orsmond and Merry (2009), Wakefield et al. (2013) and Rand (2017) highlighted that students' engagement with feedback varies based on their grades. Specifically, interviews with students exhibited that high grades generally prompt immediate review due to a positive mood, whereas receiving unexpectedly low grades can be disheartening, leading students to postpone reviewing the feedback until they can emotionally manage the disappointment, often waiting until the next day (Rand, 2017). While Wakefield et al. (2013) see that this "grade-based" use of feedback can result in higher achievers utilizing feedback and developing self-regulated learning skills, Orsmond and Merry (2009) specified that non-high achieving students tend to focus on the superficial aspects of feedback without fully engaging with its deeper meaning or recognizing its benefits for future projects. Further achievement gap may arise from such circumstances.

Additionally, Carless and Bond (2018) noted that the level of a student's feedback literacy can act as a barrier to the effective use of even well-structured formative feedback. In this case, Sadler (2012) further elaborates that despite tutors' best intentions, students often struggle to interpret feedback in a way that allows them to apply it effectively to subsequent assignments. Overall, the existing research highlighted a significant misalignment between how staff and students perceive feedback, suggesting a gap in expectations and understanding regarding the purpose and implementation of feedback (MacDonald, 1991; Price, O'Donovan & Rust, 2007).

The status of international students and second language learners can similarly affect the usage and effectiveness of feedback. Despite the lack of extensive research on feedback for international students, this group often emerges as a distinct cohort requiring special consideration. Several studies indicate that factors such as cultural differences, divergent thinking styles, and mismatches in expectations can render them less involved in the feedback process. First, ensuring that teachers' feedback is culturally appropriate is particularly important (Xu, Teng & Cai, 2020). According to East, Bitchener, and Basturkmen (2012), for international students, feedback engagement involves navigating multiple, sometimes conflicting cultural values, primarily from disciplinary norms and their inherited cultural backgrounds. Xu, Teng and Cai's (2020) research confirmed this finding. In their survey about feedback engagement, international students raised within Confucian culture, which emphasize humility and reflectiveness, often reported difficulties in using feedback effectively. Especially in interactions with seniors, the international students' cultural values can create a paradox, reflected in the tension between conforming to disciplinary norms and maintaining cultural identity. Thus, as Tian and Lowe (2013) and Agustin (2019) observe, international students may experience emotional and cognitive struggles as they adapt to another culture's way of interpreting and responding to feedback. Apart from cultural factors, international students with English as an Additional Language (EAL) face further transitional challenges when entering a new academic culture (Warner & Miller, 2014). Hyland (2006) emphasized that due to some international students' limited language proficiency, they might struggle to comprehend feedback that is complex or ambiguous. Feedback from teachers, which often includes sophisticated vocabulary or intricate sentence structures, can be particularly difficult for these students to fully grasp. Therefore, while feedback is crucial, international students face more significant challenges in this area, and this article will focus on addressing these issues for

international students.

2.2 Research Gap

Overall, observing the understanding of feedback progressively moving from a teacher-centered "information transmission model" to a more interactive, socio-constructivist approach, the majority of research identifies that feedback often falls short due to issues like vagueness and timing, frustrating students and reducing its effectiveness. Particularly for international students, cultural and linguistic differences compound these challenges, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive feedback.

As Rand (2017) proposed, incorporating students in the research, rather than merely treating them as passive recipients of feedback, leads to more genuine outcomes compared to traditional feedback studies. Thus, by examining Chinese undergraduate students' unique experiences, this research is not only crucial for filling the research gaps, but also informs interventions from a co-constructivist approach.

2.3 Research Question

The purpose of this research is to explore the factors that affect international students' engagement with summative feedback from tutors in UK universities. The study aims to demonstrate the impact of personal and social factors on students' interactions with the feedback they receive. This investigation is guided by the following primary research questions:

1) How do students perceive the importance of summative feedback in their academic studies, and how do they apply this feedback?

2) What factors influence students' engagement or disengagement with formative feedback?

Based on the students' responses, this research provides recommendations for educators and learners on how to effectively utilize feedback to enhance university-level studies.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design. As Bickmanand Rog, (2008) highlighted the importance of qualitative research in understanding participant meanings and contextual influences, this approach was particularly suited for this research, which aimed to understand individual students' perception and daily experiences of feedback.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis Methods

Interviews were a primary collection method in qualitative research, involving exchanging views on shared topics and highlighting the importance of human interaction in generating knowledge (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). In particular, semi-structured interviews used both verbal and non-verbal communication, enabling structured yet flexible exploration of complex issues (Ibid, pp. 349). Therefore, this study adopted semi-structured interviews as the method for data collection, balancing focus and flexibility, to investigate international students' feedback experiences (Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

3.3 Sampling and Participants

Considering the impact of sampling strategies on research outcomes, this study used convenient sampling, recruiting participants through the researcher's personal connections. This strategy was adopted due to its cost-effectiveness (Acharya et al., 2013). To understand international undergraduate students' experiences, five international students, with English as their second language, were recruited from a UK university. To ensure diverse perspectives and increase representativeness, participants included undergraduate and postgraduate students from various disciplines (See Table 1).

Table 1. Participants information

The main topics covered during the interviews included (See Appendix A)	Typical interview questions included:
Common types of feedback that participants received	"Tell me about your feelings about feedback"
The value of feedback as perceived by participants	"To what extent do you check summative feedback?"
The day-to-day frequency of using summative feedback by participants	"Why do you use or overlook the summative feedback you receive?"
The participants' reasons for engaging or disengaging with summative feedback	

4. Data Analysis

This study used thematic analysis to interpret interview data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide. The process began with familiarization, including transcribing and repeatedly reading the data while noting initial ideas. Next, initial codes were generated by systematically coding interesting features and collating relevant data. Then, codes were organized into potential themes, and all relevant data for each theme was collected. The themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the entire data set, resulting in a "thematic map" of the analysis. Finally, the themes were defined and written up in the report, with vivid extracts selected for the final analysis.

4.1 Research Procedure

I posted an article on Chinese social media to recruit interviewees, including an information sheet detailing the research purpose, background, and privacy protection measures. After recruiting, I maintained contact via email. The research involved five 20-minute online interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams.

This study adhered to BERA ethical guidelines (2018) and received ethics approval from the UK universities' ethics committee. Key ethical concerns included informed consent, the right to withdraw, confidentiality, and minimizing harm. Participants received an information sheet and provided both verbal and written consent. Their voluntary participation and right to withdraw were emphasized. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured using pseudonyms, and sensitive data was securely handled.

The interview process was respectful and transparent, with researchers clarifying their roles and any conflicts of interest. Interviews were scheduled based on participant availability, audio-recorded, transcribed, and securely handled.

5. Findings

Participants expressed their perceptions toward summative feedback, demonstrated their individual preferences for using such feedback and explained the factors influencing their engagement. Specifically, major themes they cited to explain their use include timing, feedback content and individual reasons.

5.1 Student Perceptions and Use of Summative Feedback

Answering the first research questions, all participants recognized the importance of summative feedback, with four of them using phrases such as "help understand" and "allows higher scores" to demonstrate the value of feedback. Specifically, two social science students articulated the value of feedback as helping themselves and understanding "teachers' expectations":

> When the grades and feedback are released together, I usually skim through it, but I don't look at it very closely, I'm always gonna focus a little more on grades... When I review the feedback, I can identify the specific areas that led to a lower score... understand where my reasoning is lacking... and recognize which aspects of my structure could be improved (Participant E).

From Participant E's interview, it is evident that he acknowledges the importance of reading feedback. He believes that feedback helps identify mistakes and provides opportunities for improvement. However, it also reveals that students might not thoroughly engage with the summative feedback provided by instructors, often only briefly reviewing it after seeing their grades.

> Because essays are quite subjective, even though it's the same essay question, the content you write needs to align more with what the teacher prefers... In this way, if your goal is to achieve higher scores, it can be easier to obtain them. (Participant D)

Both Participants E and D consider summative feedback an essential tool for developing a more in-depth understanding of future assignments and understanding the tutors' expectations, which they believe will guide them to achieve higher scores. Therefore, all participants view summative feedback positively and are willing to use it as a means to enhance their academic performance. However, they may not always engage with it as thoroughly as they should, often skimming through it rather than carefully reading and reflecting on the content.

5.2 Factors Influencing Students' Use of Feedback

While all the participants explicitly see the value of feedback and frequently use it, they claimed that they sometimes may not read the summative feedback carefully they receive due to the following reasons.

5.2.1 Timing of the Feedback

Most of the interviewees stated that the timing of the feedback resulted in them not, or only glancing at the results rather than reading the feedback carefully. Specifically, they believe that the feedback is often issued too "late". In scenarios mentioned by A, B and C, the summative feedback is often released at the end of the term, when some exams are still going on:

Because we have too much to study, I don't have time to look at these. I've already got this grade and won't be tested on it anymore. So I definitely won't look at the feedback. I might as well focus on the other things I have to do. (Participant B)

If you take an exam and this stuff isn't useful for future exams... it's not a paper or anything you'll use again — then I definitely won't look at the feedback. It's just not useful... (Participant C)

"Feedback might not be very helpful... Often, there may not be common points between two essays." (Participant A)

As shown by these quotes, it is this "lateness" that make them unable to cope with the heavy workload and the summative feedback received, which is often irrelevant to the upcoming exams they are intensively preparing for.

For some summative feedback that is posted during the holidays, when students tend to take internships and travel, similar scenarios occur. Participant C used the word "exhausted" to describe her feelings and explained her reluctance to look at feedback:

As an international student, when the summative feedback was released, I had already returned to my country and started my internship. I had a lot of work, which made me very tired... I didn't look at the feedback, I just checked the scores. (Participant C)

While this quote from participant B reveals student's tiredness, it is not just students but also teachers taking holidays:

During Easter break, they might not respond right away... Especially after Easter break, during the crucial exam revision period, it's frustrating when teachers don't respond to messages. (Participant B)

Overall, the lateness of the summative feedback often contributes to student and teachers being busy focusing on other things, making students use of feedback less frequent.

5.2.2 Contents of the Summative Feedback

Additionally, most respondents mentioned the content of the feedback as one of the reasons they infrequently review feedback. They often find that the feedback provided does not meet their expectations, exhibiting issues of "shortness" and "vagueness":

I feel like sometimes the feedback I receive isn't very good. It's often quite short. And it feels like they just scribble something down, and sometimes even repeat the same sentences. Well, sometimes it's just less than four lines of comments. They don't really go into detail about what I did well or where I need to improve. (Participant A)

Perhaps in a few papers, I feel the feedback shows that the tutor hasn't grasped my point. I would like to have a further discussion with them to explain my thoughts, but it's difficult. (Participant C)

These two quotes show that both A and C often feel lost and not guided by the feedback, and when students rarely have the chance to discuss the summative feedback with tutors, such issues can be exacerbated. A similar quote is expressed by participant B, who said that although some tutors pointed out the mistake she made, no directions for improvement were provided.

"Sometimes, the teacher would simply state that certain viewpoints are incorrect without providing detailed explanations as to why they are wrong. They would just note that it's incorrect." (Participant B)

Among the five interviewees, participants B, C, and D were enrolled in courses where the final grade was determined by exams. Through their interviews, I observed that the summative feedback provided for these exam-based courses differed from that given for courses concluded with written assignments. For exam-based major students, the issue of lack of guidance was particularly noted, with participants expressing dissatisfaction with feedback on their exams, describing it as impersonal and lacking explanations for their mistakes. For example, two interviewees both stated that "the feedback was for everyone".

... will provide answers, but these aren't just for me individually, they are for everyone... they will give a general overview based on the average situation of everyone and only make a simple evaluation based on that. (Participant B)

Another challenge I feel is a notable feature in our field is that many past exam papers only come with a score, without providing the answers... In my personal learning experience, I still believe having a reference answer is very helpful for understanding problem-solving approaches and the answering process. (Participant C)

Overall, the lack of specificity and personalization, brevity and superficiality all diminish its effectiveness for

learning and improvement across disciplines. This could lead to a lack of specific goals and affecting students' self-regulation.

5.2.3 Students' Emotional Factors

In these interviews, most respondents sometimes displayed low engagement with feedback due to personal reasons. Specifically, some respondents felt discouraged by the summative feedback because it did not provide any positive reinforcement. Feelings of frustration and sadness are frequently mentioned. According to participants, such feelings are often exacerbated when negative summative feedback comes with a low grade: "If I achieve the score I aimed for, I won't look at the feedback" (Participant A).

> After I saw the grades, there's no desire to look further. If the grades are low, it just makes me lose the mood to continue looking... (Participant D)

These quotes both illustrate two key reasons for students' low engagement with feedback: a lack of emotional support and the impact of grades. Students often feel discouraged when feedback lacks positivity. Additionally, their engagement with feedback is strongly influenced by their grades, they may ignore feedback if their grades are low.

6. Discussion and Implication

This study found that international students at UK universities value summative feedback for enhancing understanding and improving grades. However, their engagement is often hindered by late feedback, vague content, and individual factors.

RQ1: How do students perceive the importance of summative feedback in their academic studies, and how do they apply this feedback?

This study reveals that international students' perceptions of summative feedback align with the findings of Eckel and King (2004), Archer (2010), and Rand (2017), all of whom regard feedback as an essential component for learning, acting as a crucial mechanism for academic improvement. However, similar to the observations made by Ashwin (2020) and Rand (2017), there are instances where students do not frequently or thoroughly engage with the feedback. Participants in this study acknowledged the importance of feedback in guiding their academic progress, but their interactions with it often remained superficial. Various factors contribute to this, affecting both the utilization and effectiveness of the feedback. This superficial engagement could potentially undermine the feedback's ability to enhance students' understanding, as well as their learning at the task, self-regulation, and self-levels (Sadler, 1989).

RQ2: What factors influence students' engagement or disengagement with formative feedback?

This study revealed that feedback issued late, especially at the end of terms or during holidays, was often ignored as students were busy with upcoming exams or internships, rendering the feedback untimely or irrelevant. This aligns with Harrison et al' s (2014) finding, which identified that feedback timing overlapped with students' preparation for other exams, prompting many to ignore it, with the fear of receiving a failing grade being likened to a grief reaction. Besides, respondents in this study raised the issue of summative feedback, stating that the unavailability of tutors during holidays further reduced the perceived value of feedback. While such a finding is not yet shown by existing research, relevant studies confirmed the important role of tutors in facilitating feedback understanding (Gan, An & Liu, 2021). This view highlighted that the perceived value of summative feedback is further diminished as a result of the disconnection between students and tutors, which perpetuates the discrepancy between the students' existing understanding of assignment and future achievement (Sadler, 2010). Inappropriate timing is thus influencing the effectiveness of feedback, which students lose a chance with sell-monitoring, directing, and regulating of actions from teachers (Sadler, 1989).

Additionally, this study found that the content of feedback significantly affects students' use. Participants often reported that feedback lacked detail and specificity, describing it as too brief and vague, which led to perceptions of bias and misalignment with their own ideas. This finding reiterates the work of Weaver (2006) and Rand (2017), who noted that students often struggle with vague, jargon-filled feedback, which limits its usefulness. Non-specific comments can lead to repeated mistakes and confusion, and complex language also obscures feedback, emphasizing the need for clarity and specificity to bridge knowledge gaps effectively. However, the literature review did not differentiate between feedback received by students assessed through exams and essays. This study found that science students, in particular, criticized feedback for being generic and lacking explanations for mistakes, with little personalization. This aspect calls for further research on science major students' feedback engagement.

Personal factors affecting the frequency of feedback use were also evident in this study. Emotional responses, such as frustration and discouragement, were common, particularly when feedback lacked positive reinforcement or was paired with low grades. This often led to disengagement, with students ignoring feedback. This resonates

with findings from Sadler (2012) and Wakefield et al. (2013), who noted that high grades prompt immediate review, while low grades can delay it due to discouragement. High achievers typically utilize feedback more effectively, demonstrating better self-regulation, whereas lower achievers often overlook its deeper value, showing potential perpetuation of attainment gap. Consistent with the findings of Akinsulure-Smith and O'Hara (2012), this study also demonstrates that students' emotions can impact their learning outcomes. According to Sadler's (1989) model, without student's effective employment of feedback, the correctional function of feedback is not realizable. In this case, the efficacy of summative feedback is largely restricted.

Diverging from the literature that identifies the linguistic and cultural difficulties faced by international students, participants in this study did not indicate that cultural and language issues affected their use of feedback. This contrasts with findings by Hyland and Hyland (2006) and Warner and Miller, (2014), who noted that EAL students often struggle to understand complex or ambiguous feedback due to language proficiency challenges. The differences between the existing findings and this study may be attributed to two reasons. First, compared to the large-scale survey used in previous research, this study interviewed five students and showed a low representativeness of sampling. Second, whilst existing literature has highlighted issues if complex feedback language encountered by students, none of the respondents reported the feedback as being overly complex, which may reflect that the majority of feedback they receive is easy to understand. Thus, this study implicitly indicates that understanding feedback may alleviated potential cultural and linguistic difficulties for international students, highlighting the importance of using clear language, particularly for students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Overall, this study largely corroborates the existing research while provided nuances in understanding Chinese international students' experience. In particular, this study implies that changing the timing of summative feedback and ensuring the clarity of feedback language is more likely to eliminate barriers for international students and consequently, boost the effectiveness of summative feedback.

7. Conclusion

This study highlights the complexities international students face in engaging with summative feedback at UK universities. While students recognize the importance of summative feedback in enhancing their understanding and improving their grades, several factors hinder their engagement. The late timing of feedback, often coinciding with end-of-term exams or holidays, reduces its relevance and utility. Given the absence of tutors during holidays, when most summative feedback is released, this study suggests changing the timing of summative feedback to allow for better student-teacher communication and, subsequently, more effective feedback engagement.

Moreover, the content of feedback often lacks the necessary detail and specificity, leading to perceptions of vagueness and diminishing its effectiveness. Personal factors, such as emotional responses to low grades, further contribute to disengagement, particularly among underachieving students who are more likely to avoid feedback. Considering that this issue is also prevalent among international students, this research suggests changing the tone of feedback to make it more positive and encouraging and adjusting the format of feedback display to avoid showing grades first.

New findings also emerge from this study. Contrary to previous research, language barriers were not identified as a significant issue for international students, suggesting a need for further exploration.

Theoretically, this study builds on existing research by confirming that feedback is a crucial component of the learning process, aligning with established models by Sadler (1989) and others. It also provides a nuanced understanding of the specific challenges faced by international students, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive feedback that is clear and timely. Methodologically, the use of semi-structure interviews offered deep insights into students' personal experiences and perceptions, enriching the understanding of feedback engagement from an international perspective. Pedagogically, this study suggests that educators should focus on the timing and clarity of feedback to enhance its effectiveness. Providing feedback earlier in the term, ensuring it is detailed and personalized, and offering positive reinforcement could help students engage more thoroughly. Additionally, addressing emotional factors by providing supportive feedback can reduce student discouragement and improve their academic performance. Teachers should also be aware of the specific needs of international students and aim to create feedback that is not only clear but also culturally sensitive.

This study's limitations include a small sample size and potential sampling bias, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand the sample to include a more diverse group of international students from various disciplines and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, further studies could explore the impact of different types of feedback on student engagement and investigate the specific challenges faced by science students in interpreting and using feedback. Exploring the role of emotional and cultural factors in greater depth could also provide valuable insights for improving feedback practices in higher education.

In conclusion, this study not only reinforces the critical role of feedback in the academic journey of international students but also highlights the intricate interplay between timing, clarity, and cultural sensitivity in feedback delivery. By integrating these elements, educators can create a more supportive and effective learning environment that caters to the diverse needs of their students. This research serves as a call to action for educational institutions to re-evaluate and refine their feedback practices, ensuring that all students, particularly those from international backgrounds, are equipped to fully engage with and benefit from the feedback they receive. Ultimately, by fostering a more inclusive approach to feedback, we can enhance both student outcomes and the overall educational experience.

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Appendix A

Interview schedule

Main Interview Questions:

1) Do you have exams or an essay as the final assignment for your course?

2) Does the teacher usually provide any type of feedback?

3) Is the feedback given by the teacher mostly summative or formative?

4) How often do you review summative feedback?

5) Do you carefully read the summative feedback?

6) Why do you think it's important for you to read the summative feedback?

7) When you read summative feedback, what aspect of it do you focus on most?

8) Do you think the summative feedback you received this time was helpful for your subsequent assignments?

9) When you read summative feedback, do you have any feelings about it, such as thinking the teacher's feedback is very good, or lacking in some way?

10) If you could suggest improvements for this summative feedback, what would you suggest?

11) Do you encounter any difficulties when reading summative feedback?