

The Influence of Foreign Language Proficiency on the Uptake of Written Corrective Feedback

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Abstract: Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) is commonly used in second and foreign language classroom contexts to provide students with feedback on the accuracy of their writing. However, it is unclear whether the proficiency level of the student influences the effectiveness of this feedback. This study investigates the influence of learner proficiency on the effectiveness of two different types of WCF: direct and indirect. This study employs an embedded, mixed methods design in which seven participants provided three writing samples and received two different types of feedback. After each writing sample, the participants participated in think-aloud interviews, followed by a retrospective, semi-structured interview. The findings suggest that learner proficiency does not influence the effectiveness of the different feedback types, but that learner proficiency level can influence the students' affective responses to feedback. The study also revealed that beginner and advanced students lack effective strategies for taking up feedback.

Keywords: Written Corrective Feedback, Foreign Language Learning, Feedback Uptake

Introduction

Teachers spend a significant amount of time correcting learners' work (Lee, 2011) and students are expected to use those corrections to improve their work, yet it is unclear whether these corrections help students to make lasting improvements to their writing. Written corrective feedback (WCF) is a common formative assessment strategy in the language classroom and has been shown to improve the grammatical accuracy of student writing (Ferris, 2010; Kang & Han, 2015). While the power of feedback to improve learning has been well established in the literature (e.g., Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Shute, 2008; Stiggins, 2006), it is important that teachers at all levels understand which kinds of corrections will be most effective for language learners, as well as which corrections the learners will use to help them improve their written work.

Based on the research conducted for my master's thesis (Paris, 2017), this investigation initially stemmed from my own classroom experiences as a secondary school German teacher and the literature on this topic. This research study has two purposes: (1) to investigate the relationship between learner language proficiency and the effectiveness of two different feedback types, and (2) to investigate the relationship between learner language proficiency level and affective responses to and perceptions of feedback. Though not well defined in the literature, I have defined *affective responses* as those relating to moods, feelings, attitudes, or emotions which may influence how learners perceive feedback. Both purposes of this study support the intention of informing the ways that teachers provide feedback to their language learners.

Literature Review

Feedback to learners has long been established as effective in improving learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Shute, 2008; Stiggins, 2005); however, the efficacy of WCF, which is feedback provided through the marking or correcting of written student work, has been debated. While Truscott (1996) declared grammar correction ineffective, and even harmful, much work has been done on the effectiveness of WCF since, focused on addressing whether or not WCF can improve the accuracy of L2 writing (e.g., Bitchener, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008; Sheen, 2007). Given the multitude of studies on WCF and the varying conditions under which WCF has been applied, recent studies have focused on describing and quantifying the effects of moderating variables that influence the effectiveness of the feedback, such as the type of both the feedback and the task, learner proficiency and setting, and the role of affect (Kang & Han, 2015; Ruiz-Primo & Li, 2013).

Feedback Types

This study focuses on two types of feedback: direct and indirect. *Direct feedback* is defined as the teacher providing the student with the correct written form, as, for example, correcting "hors" to "horse". *Indirect feedback* involves the teacher indicating the location and possibly the type of error, but not providing the corrections (Ellis, 2009). There is some evidence in the literature that suggests that direct feedback may be more effective, even for advanced

learners, as Bitchener and Knoch (2010) found that advanced learners who received direct feedback retained their improvement levels longer than those who received indirect feedback. Kang and Han (2015) also found that direct feedback was more effective than indirect feedback; however, the difference was not statistically significant. This lack of clear evidence continues to drive debate in the literature. There is also an ongoing discussion in the literature regarding how variables such as language proficiency and learner setting influence the effects of feedback and therefore make conclusions more complex (Kang & Han, 2015).

Task Type

Truscott (1996) claimed that WCF does little to improve writing over time or on new pieces of writing. However, revision tasks can be unclear because they do not always elucidate the long-term or transfer effects of WCF. Authors such as Ellis et al. (2008) and Bitchener (2008) have argued that conclusions on the effectiveness of WCF should only be made from studies which include new pieces of writing in the design of the study as only this type of study design can clearly illustrate learners' improvements over time. Bitchener (2008), Bitchener and Knoch (2009), and Hartshorn et al. (2010) all found positive effects in new pieces of writing after WCF. These findings suggest that task type needs to be considered not only when discussing positive results, but also when designing studies.

Learner Setting and Proficiency

Another moderating variable identified by Kang and Han (2015) is whether language learning is situated in a foreign or second language setting. In a foreign language environment, learners have very little exposure to the target language outside the classroom, while in a second language environment the learners are exposed to the target language both outside and inside the classroom (Kang & Han, 2015). Though much of the existing research on WCF is in a second language context, Ellis et al. (2008) studied the effects of both focused and unfocused WCF on the use of English articles in an English as a foreign language (EFL) setting. While the study did not include a second-language control group, there was a positive result on scores for the treatment groups, which shows that WCF is also effective in foreign language contexts.

Learner proficiency is often operationalized in the literature as the level of the course in which the students are registered. This variable is often included in the description of participants but is rarely directly investigated (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010). However, learner proficiency may be closely related to the argument for direct feedback over indirect feedback as some have suggested that direct feedback is more appropriate and useful for beginners, while advanced learners are more able to use their metacognitive skills to make use of indirect feedback (Ellis, 2009; Kang & Han, 2015). However, this is difficult to discern from the existing literature, as the majority of existing research has been conducted with lower proficiency learners only (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010). Further research is needed, particularly that which compares beginner and advanced learners, in order to make conclusions about the influence of learner proficiency on the effectiveness of feedback.

Student Affect

Another factor influencing the effectiveness of feedback is whether or not the feedback encourages a "mindful response" (Wiliam, 2013, p. 208). A mindful response indicates students "at least read and take seriously those comments" (Ferris, 1995, p. 48). Wiliam (2013) also suggested that in order for teachers to be able to encourage a mindful response, they need to have an understanding of learners' affective reactions to feedback.

Students' attitudes and preferences towards WCF can also influence their responses to feedback. While several studies have found that students want to receive corrections and that they value the feedback they receive (e.g., Elwood & Bode, 2014; Ferris, 1995; Lee, 2005; Zacharias, 2007), "excessive attention to errors may prove frustration for students and exhausting for teachers" (Lee, 2005, p. 2). The findings of these studies suggest that students prefer comprehensive (Lee, 2005) and direct feedback (Elwood & Bode, 2014). In particular, students preferred direct feedback because "this would make life easier for the students" (Lee, 2005, p. 7).

In summary, existing research on WCF consists of quantitative studies investigating the conditions necessary for feedback to have lasting effects on students' written work and qualitative studies which have investigated student responses to feedback. There has been a lack of research aiming to investigate both the effectiveness of feedback and students' perceptions of feedback through a mixed methods design.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study are: 1) Does learner's proficiency level relate to the effectiveness of two different written corrective feedback types? 2) Does learner's proficiency level influence their affective reactions to and perceptions of two different written corrective feedback types? For this study, corrective feedback is deemed to be effective if it has a positive impact on the error rate of students' writing.

Context

This study took place at a large research-intensive university in Western Canada with undergraduate students learning German as a Foreign Language. This choice was motivated by several factors including the large amount of research on feedback with students learning English in a second language context, the dearth of research investigating the transferability of previous research on feedback in English as a second language (ESL) contexts to other languages and contexts, and my own experience as a German as a foreign language learner and teacher. After receiving ethics approval, I recruited participants through classroom visits and posters posted in the vicinity of the German classes. Participation was entirely voluntary and not linked to course grades. All interviews took place on the main campus of the university in the 2017 winter semester between January and April 2017.

Methodology

Based on my research questions, the design of this study was heavily influenced by Creswell's (2014) description of embedded mixed methods designs, as my research questions inspired both quantitative and qualitative data collection. Embedded mixed methods is characterized by nesting one or more data forms within a larger design (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, the data collection phase of this study consisted of a single interview session with four components. The first component consisted of the participants responding to a writing prompt for ten minutes, followed by the provision of direct feedback with metalinguistic comments and a think-aloud interview. In the second component, there was indirect feedback with metalinguistic comments instead of direct feedback. I included metalinguistic comments based on previous research, which indicated that such feedback can reduce confusion or misunderstandings (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009, 2010; Sheen, 2007). Metalinguistic comments were also provided in English to limit misunderstandings in order to focus specifically on the effect of direct versus indirect feedback.

In the third component, no feedback was provided. The fourth component consisted of a topical, semi-structured, reflective interview. Figure 1 provides a high-level overview of this mixed methods design.

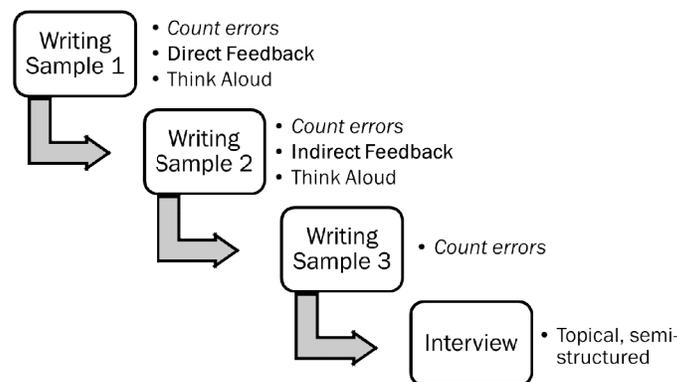


Figure 1: Overview of the mixed methods research design.

Data Collection and Analysis

I collected demographic data through a short survey that provided detailed information on the participants (see Table 1). This information was collected to ensure the exclusion of native German speakers and to categorize participants

as beginner or advanced, based on their current course of study. The participants were seven foreign language learners of German in either beginner or advanced level courses.

Table 1: Participants

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Proficiency Group</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>1st Language</i>	<i>Study Abroad</i>
<i>Miriam</i>	19	Beginner	Female	Mandarin	Yes
<i>Martha</i>	26	Beginner	Female	English	No
<i>Adam</i>	65	Beginner	Male	Lithuanian	Yes
<i>Brittany</i>	18	Beginner	Female	English	No
<i>Melissa</i>	21	Advanced	Female	Russian	Yes
<i>Sarah</i>	33	Advanced	Female	French	No
<i>Courtney</i>	23	Advanced	Female	English	Yes

I conducted the study in an iterative cycle, which consisted of three ten-minute writing samples, two think-aloud protocol (TAP) interviews lasting between three and five minutes each, and one topical, semi-structured interview which lasted between fifteen and thirty minutes. The writing samples were based on three different topics that were accessible to all learner proficiencies based on topics covered in the introductory textbook. The first topic was a self-introduction, the second a weather report, and the third a description of the participant’s family and friends. Limiting the writing time to ten minutes ensured that a reasonable amount of text was produced to correct within the experimental conditions (Hartshorn et al., 2010). Each writing sample was corrected using unfocused feedback, meaning that I corrected content, grammatical, and spelling errors, as well as punctuation, instead of focusing on a particular grammar or content issue (Ellis, 2009). In the first instance, this feedback was direct, and in the second instance, it was indirect feedback. Once the samples were presented to the students, I engaged them in a TAP interview.

In terms of data analysis, each writing sample was scored with an error rate determined by dividing the number of errors by the number of words in the sample (Truscott & Hsu, 2008). The TAP and retrospective interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, then analysed thematically—first inductively, then deductively.

Findings

I first analysed the quantitative data, which revealed that the uptake of corrections did not vary by proficiency level or by feedback type. The qualitative data showed that the affective responses did vary by proficiency level, but not by feedback type; strategies for responding to feedback mostly did not vary by proficiency level; and the preference for one feedback type over another did not vary by proficiency level.

Finding 1: Proficiency Level Unrelated to Effectiveness of Feedback Type

To evaluate the relationship between learner proficiency level and the effectiveness of direct versus indirect WCF, I compared the error rate of each writing sample. I compared these both by the individual students and by the mean for each proficiency group. In the first writing task, the beginners had an average error rate of 15%, while the advanced group had an average error rate of 6%. After receiving direct feedback from the first task, the error rate in the second writing task increased to 17% for beginners and 12% for the advanced group. As can be seen in Figure 2, the error rate in the third writing task then dropped from 17% to 14% for beginners and from 12% to 8% for the advanced group. Both groups’ error rates dropped after receiving indirect feedback.

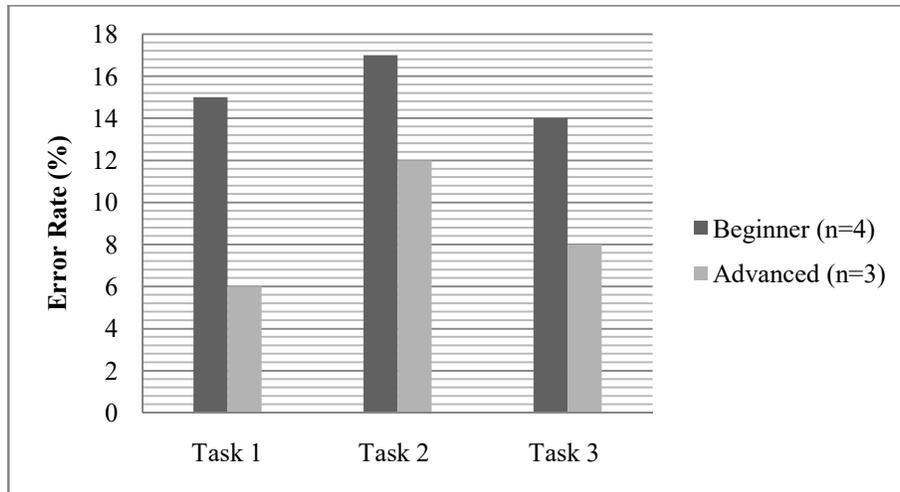


Figure 2: Percentage of Average Error Rate of Beginner and Advanced Learners

While the advanced learners typically wrote more words per task, both proficiency groups had more errors in the subsequent task following the direct feedback as compared to the indirect feedback. The result suggests that there are no differences between the two proficiency groups in terms of the effectiveness of direct and indirect feedback. The data also indicate that indirect feedback may be more effective in terms of reducing the error rate on subsequent tasks.

These findings contradict those of Kang and Han (2015), who found that direct feedback was generally more effective. Some studies have also suggested that direct feedback is more useful or effective for beginners, while indirect feedback is more suitable for advanced learners (Ellis, 2009; Kang & Han, 2015). In addition, Kang and Han (2015) found that advanced learners benefited more from WCF than beginners. However, given the sample size of the present study, further research is needed before any claims can be made regarding the effect of the feedback and proficiency level.

Finding 2: Student Affective Responses Varied by Proficiency Level

One factor that did vary by proficiency level was the students' affective responses to the feedback. Affective responses refer to responses related to moods, feelings, attitudes, or emotions. Such variation was most evident in the prevalence of negative self-talk among beginners as contrasted with advanced learners. The beginner learners were more likely to speak negatively about mistakes, while advanced learners were more likely to view mistakes as part of the learning process. Negative self-reflective language such as referring to mistakes as "silly" or "messing up" occurred 19 times for beginners, in comparison to only four times for the advanced learners. These comments did not appear more frequently after one type of feedback over another, so did not appear to be related to feedback type.

For example, Martha, a beginner, often spoke about "messing up" or "screwing up", and in general not being good at languages. "I'm usually so bad at language... but I guess I did better than I expected...I gotta remember to actually not screw up capitalization for once" (Martha). Other beginner learners made similar comments. For example, Brittany remarked that "I'm just noticing that it's basically a lot of the same things that I tend to mess up in writing". While Adam spoke about careless mistakes, saying "I find too on exams too usually that I don't make that many errors but usually the ones I make are just like careless things".

In comparison, the advanced learners did recognize their more common mistakes but were more likely to refer to it as struggling rather than messing up. For example, Courtney remarked, "but yeah basically that's normally just what I struggle with is when I have longer sentences and I don't know how to add on things or I don't know if I can add something onto the end". Melissa also described why she was not surprised by her errors, "yeah um I'm not yeah I'm not surprised it's the same things that I consistently struggle with".

The advanced learners were also more likely to comment on things they got correct, speaking to this six times versus only once for the beginners. However, the students interpreted a lack of feedback as getting something correct, which is good for instructors to be aware of when they are not correcting everything, as students may actually interpret something as being correct when it was simply just not marked. Teachers should be aware of whether they are providing focused or unfocused feedback and communicate this with their students.

This finding supports Ferris' (1995) study of affective student reactions to teacher feedback, where most participants felt they were excellent or good learners but only good or fair writers. This helps to explain the negative self-talk that was exhibited in the interviews as an expression of anxiety or inadequacy that language learners (beginners in particular) may feel during writing tasks. Elwood and Bode (2014) also found that "higher levels of proficiency corresponded with lower levels of anxiety" (p. 340), therefore higher proficiency students are less likely to have anxiety when writing and then less likely to engage in negative self-talk.

Finding 3: Strategies for Responding to Feedback Vary by Proficiency Level

When asked to describe how they typically respond to feedback, four themes arose from the participants' responses: 1) just looking at the feedback, 2) looking up the error in the textbook, 3) talking to the professor, and 4) re-writing the work with corrections. The first three strategies were described by both advanced and beginner students but the fourth strategy was only mentioned by the advanced students.

Looking at or reviewing the feedback was the most reported strategy. It is characterized by looking through, reviewing, or reading the feedback, and only making a mental note of the errors. For example, Courtney stated, "I fix it in my head as I read and try and remember not to do that mistake again".

Other strategies came up when the students reported not understanding the feedback. They mentioned that they knew they should approach the professor but felt uncomfortable doing so. Melissa stated, "I don't really want to approach the professor because I feel like the professor thinks I should know this". Miriam also reported hesitation in visiting the professor: "I don't really like to go to the prof or instructor or whatever. I'm just I don't know yeah. I guess I'm kind of shy. I don't think shy, but I don't know". This then led to frustration for some students: "It would be really nice if professors were really a whole lot more encouraging um about us like approaching them after feedback after receiving the feedback and asking to help with the feedback" (Melissa).

For beginner students, their comments suggested that they did not know of other strategies or ways to make use of their feedback, while the advanced students suggested that making active use of the feedback was more time consuming than the more passive strategies. The students' reticence to meet with the professors was particularly concerning and should be a flag to instructors to be explicitly approachable. If beginner students know that discussing their mistakes with the professor is welcomed, it may also help reduce their anxiety when writing.

Re-writing after corrective feedback was suggested as a strategy only by the advanced students, and typically only at the prompting of the instructor or professor. "There has been a couple assignments, like one we're working on where we were allowed to send her a first draft and she edited it which was nice and then we could correct it and sent it back in" (Courtney). However, both Courtney and Sarah admitted to not using this strategy if it was not required by the instructor: "I know what I should do is re-write it with the um corrections in it, but a lot of the time I don't do that just because I think of it but then I don't end up doing it" (Courtney). Sarah also reported only looking at her feedback, unless being prompted to do more by the instructor:

I well, I look at it closely and uh I don't necessarily write it again, but uh she's had us do that for exams where you wrote a text, there were some mistakes and she's asking you to write it again. (Sarah)

These findings are supported by those of Ferris (1995), who found that students generally lack strategies for making use of feedback and may just try to remember their corrections. Elwood and Bode (2014) also found that students make minimal use of feedback if not given explicit direction. Further studies should focus on how metacognitive language learning skills such as attending to feedback are taught at the postsecondary level. It can also provide evidence to support explicit teaching and modeling strategies that will enhance students' effective use of teacher feedback.

Finding 4: Preference for Feedback Type Does Not Vary by Proficiency Level

When comparing the two writing samples with the two types of feedback they received within the study, both the beginner and advanced learners indicated a preference for the direct feedback. For beginner learners, the preference was because it made the error explicit. For example, Martha said, “I definitely would prefer the direct feedback cause then you know I know for sure what the correction should have been,” and Brittany said, “I liked that it directly points out...exactly what is kind of missing or need to be like fixed.”

The advanced learners also held this opinion—appreciating the clarity of direct feedback: “It tells me what the correct way of writing is, while not erasing the mistakes I’ve already made so I can see it’s not that, but it’s this” (Melissa). However, some advanced learners also recognized that direct feedback might be too easy. Sarah pointed out that “it’s almost making it too easy so you’re not challenged to figure it out.” Some of the advanced learners also recognized that the act of making corrections creates more meaningful learning experiences: “It’s too easy to just glaze over it and just like oh yeah I should have done that and I should have done that without actually correcting it” (Courtney).

It appears that this preference came, in part, from the discomfort in approaching the professor. Sarah summarized this by saying:

[I]f I don’t feel that the teacher’s approachable and I can’t ask a question about it if I don’t understand. So, I don’t mind this kind of [indirect] feedback but you know there needs to be an outlet where you can ask questions if need be.

This finding is in line with those of Lee (2005) and Elwood and Bode (2014) who found that students preferred direct feedback as it provided clear corrections and “because this would make life easier for the students” (Lee, 2005, p. 7). However, even though the advanced students preferred the direct feedback, they could articulate that indirect feedback may be better for learning, as the direct feedback does not present the same level of challenge or requirement for active learning. This creates questions of how teachers can provide feedback that is both accessible and challenging in order to encourage the advanced students to take risks in applying the feedback to their work.

Discussion

Based on these findings, there are two recommendations that foreign and second language teachers should follow. The first is to scaffold feedback, and the second is to explicitly teach, model, and require practice of strategies for the uptake of feedback.

Scaffolding feedback may look like providing direct feedback to beginner students and indirect feedback to advanced students. It may also look like giving direct feedback on newer content and indirect feedback on more familiar content. While this study did not investigate the use of focused over unfocused feedback, Ellis et al. (2008) found that unfocused feedback is just as effective as focused feedback; however, providing more focused feedback may help to reduce the cognitive load and therefore the anxiety that beginner students experienced and then expressed through negative self-talk.

While a misunderstanding of the feedback very rarely occurred in this study, based on the lack of questioning or utterances of confusion that occurred during the think-aloud interviews, Amara (2014) found that generally students had difficulty decoding their feedback. Therefore, metalinguistic comments, as were used in this study, could be used to support students in decoding the feedback and then making better use of it. This may also help further reduce student anxiety because if students are able to understand their feedback, they are better able to make use of it and be less stressed about the feedback.

The second recommendation is to instruct students in the effective use of feedback through explicit instruction, modelling, and required practice. The findings of this study suggest that both beginner and advanced students are unaware of learning strategies that are effective for using feedback. Instead, they just look at the feedback and hope to remember it, as described above. In addition, the advanced students do not see value in the strategies that they are aware of, because of the time commitment that they require. For example, even though the advanced students recognized the value in working with the corrections to re-write their assignments, they did not do this in most cases,

because it was not required by the instructor. The students also commented that they did not take risks in their writing because of the grade that is normally attached to writing assignments. Other research, such as Butler (1987), has addressed the impact of grades on performance and interest as compared to comments only. Further research in this area is needed, particularly in how instructors might adopt the findings of this research into their assessment designs.

Given that this study did not find significant uptake of feedback between different task types, indicating that students may struggle with transference of feedback, it may be beneficial to have students develop a sequence of drafts over time as they develop the needed skills and strategies to make more effective use of feedback. For example, Bitchener and Knoch (2010) and Han and Hyland (2015) reported reductions in error rates on drafts of tasks over time. In this study, only one student reported being required to submit a draft of a writing task before the final submission, and that she found this process to be extremely helpful. As requiring action on the feedback is important to close the feedback loop for the student (Carless, 2018), incorporating drafts with revisions could be an important step towards students actively using feedback.

Conclusion

This study has provided evidence that students' foreign language proficiency does not influence the effectiveness of direct or indirect feedback, which contradicts the hypothesis proposed by Bitchener (2008), Ellis (2009), and Kang and Han (2015). However, the findings of the quantitative component of this study should be repeated, given the small sample size and gender imbalance. The qualitative interviews did reveal, however, that this may be due to the students' lack of effective strategies for using feedback. Therefore, future research should focus on training students to use feedback effectively. When students are using feedback effectively, then further studies may show differences in feedback uptake between the two types of feedback and the different learner proficiency levels.

This study also provides some evidence that the students' foreign language proficiency does have an influence on the affective response of learners toward WCF. Beginner students are more likely to exhibit anxiety in writing through negative self-talk when reviewing feedback, while advanced learners are more likely to see mistakes as part of the learning process. This indicates that teachers need to be explicit about their expectations for feedback uptake, but also be open and approachable for students.

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