

## Article

# Sustainable Development of Students' Learning Capabilities: The Case of University Students' Attitudes towards Teachers, Peers, and Themselves as Oral Feedback Sources in Learning English

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**Abstract:** In order to promote the sustainable development of students' learning capabilities, students are expected to take an active role in the feedback process. Ideally, students should not only actively interpret and act on the feedback received from their teachers, but they should also serve as feedback generators for their peers and themselves. Our study aimed to explore Chinese university English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) students' perceptions of the feedback practices in their classrooms and their feelings about teacher feedback, peer review and self-review as credible feedback sources. Adopting a qualitative research design, we recruited three teachers together with seven to eight of their students (in total 23 students) from two universities in Northwest China. Data were collected by using focus group interviews and classroom observations. Findings indicated that students relied on teachers to provide informative feedback to help them progress. They also attached limited value to either peer or self-review. Our interview data revealed three possible reasons for students' devaluation of peers and themselves as feedback sources: insufficient understanding of students' roles and responsibilities in the feedback process, perceived limited capability and capacity to generate quality feedback; and affective and relational concerns if engaging in the feedback process. These findings highlight the need for teachers to foster student feedback literacy, and hence help them utilize different feedback sources to enhance their learning and sustainable development.

**Keywords:** dialogic feedback; teacher feedback; peer review; self-review; student assessment literacy

## 1. Introduction

There is a growing consensus that education should aim to foster lifelong learners who can learn and develop sustainably after schooling [1,2]. To fulfil this purpose, students, when they are at school, should be equipped with self-regulatory knowledge and skills that enable them to monitor, adjust, and improve their learning independently [2,3]. As an important pedagogic and assessment strategy, feedback can help students understand their learning goals and progress towards becoming self-regulatory [4–7]. However, this only happens when students are fully engaged in the feedback process and, most importantly, activated as feedback generators for both themselves and each other [8,9].

Given that the proactive role of students has been constantly emphasized in the recent feedback literature, our intention in this paper is to report on Chinese university EFL students' feedback experiences. Although feedback can exist in a variety of forms such as written comments, grades, oral remarks or gestures, our study mainly focused on oral feedback as it occurred in the context of the classroom. As such it addresses a gap in the literature given a large body of existing literature on feedback in Chinese EFL classes mainly focuses on how students felt about, engaged with, and responded to written feedback (e.g., [10–12]). Furthermore, our study aimed to investigate students' attitudes towards not

only teacher feedback but also peer and self-review in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the value Chinese University EFL students placed on different feedback sources. The following research questions were raised to guide our study:

- (1) What are Chinese University EFL students' attitudes towards the teacher as a feedback provider?
- (2) What are Chinese University EFL students' attitudes towards peers and themselves as feedback generators?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Effective Teacher Feedback: Informative and Dialogic

Teachers have long been considered as an important source of feedback. Teacher feedback serves as an external reference point for students to monitor and adjust their behaviours and cognition as they move towards their learning goals [7,13]. A large number of previous studies have pinpointed the vital role teacher feedback plays in enhancing student learning and in doing so highlights what constitutes effective teacher feedback (e.g., [14,15]). In recent years, effective teacher feedback is usually considered as serving to help students reduce the discrepancy between their current performance and their desired goals [14]. To this end, teacher feedback is expected to provide detailed information about the following three questions—'Where am I going?' 'How am I going?', 'Where to next?' [14,16]. In addressing the above-mentioned three questions, teachers help their students understand their weaknesses and strengths, areas for remediation, and possible strategies and ways forward in order to accomplish their goals.

The effectiveness of teacher feedback also depends on how learners receive and respond to feedback. It has been stressed that teachers should assist students to understand the feedback they receive, or they will not act on it [17,18]. As others have argued, deep learning happens only when students are willing and able to act on the teacher feedback received [19]. To increase the utilization of feedback, there has been a growing trend to frame feedback as a dialogic exchange between teachers and students rather than focusing on unidirectional teacher comments [9,20,21]. Instead of being passive recipients of teacher feedback, students are encouraged to establish a partnership with their teachers. With the help of their teachers, students should take the initiative to seek information, make sense of it, and use it to adjust and improve their learning and performance [9]. Dialogic feedback is beneficial for the sustainable development of students' learning capabilities because opportunities for sharing their understanding with teachers can build students' confidence in their abilities and provide motivation for them to take a proactive role in learning [22]. In addition, during such a collaborative process, students may gradually acquire the evaluative knowledge and expertise needed to assess their learning independently [6].

A number of empirical studies have examined Chinese language students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the feedback provided by their teachers in written form. For example, in their small-scale qualitative study conducted in English writing classes, Zhang and Zheng [23] found that students valued teacher feedback that provided explicit information concerning how to make improvements in future assignments. Likewise, Lee [24] collected both qualitative and quantitative data from students and teachers from two secondary classrooms in Hong Kong. She found that most feedback given by the two teachers involved in the study was error correction. The students, however, expected their teachers not only to correct errors but also to provide explicit explanations of error types, comment on other aspects of students' writing, and suggest improvements. The study conducted by Plank et al. [25] in New Zealand is one of the few studies that reveal students' attitudes towards dialogic feedback. Their results indicated that New Zealand secondary students considered dialogic feedback as the most helpful feedback and they were willing and ready to play an active role in the feedback process. Nevertheless, little is known about Chinese university EFL students' perceptions of the value they place on teachers' oral feedback.

## 2.2. *Peer and Self-Review: Activating Students as Feedback Generators for Each Other and Themselves*

Although teachers are traditionally important sources of feedback, students should also be empowered as feedback generators if they are to become self-regulatory [6,26]. Teachers should provide opportunities in their classes for students to undertake peer and self-review in support of closing the gap between current and desired performance [27,28]. It is activities such as these that can support the development of self-regulatory behaviours.

The feedback generated by peers, like teacher feedback, can help students identify their knowledge gaps and regulate their learning, but enjoys some advantages over teacher feedback in that it can be richer, more understandable, negotiable, and enjoyable from students' perspectives [29,30]. Furthermore, peer feedback is able to increase students' task engagement and motivate students to take ownership of their learning [31]. In addition to providing or receiving feedback from their peers, students should also be encouraged to reflect on and evaluate their own performance, and further generate internal feedback themselves. In this process, students should have opportunities to make judgements related to what has been achieved in relation to learning goals. They also need encouragement to manage and adjust their cognitive strategies and learning efforts in order to attain these goals [27,32]. Serving as producers of feedback information for each other and/or themselves, students are assigned an active role in the learning and assessment process, and can gradually move away from dependence on their teachers and become self-regulatory lifelong learners.

Although peer and self-review have been advocated as indispensable classroom activities that support student generation and use of feedback information to alter and improve their work, previous research on students' peer and self-review experiences has revealed students' strong reluctance to engage in these activities for various reasons. Harris and Brown [28], for example, found that their student participants were resistant to act on the feedback provided by their peers because they doubted their peers' competence as assessors and failed to realize the function of peer review to improve their self-regulatory skills. It has also been widely reported that students preferred to receive feedback from their teachers rather than from their peers or generated by themselves (e.g., [33,34]). There are also some authors who have found that students' relational concerns might affect students' willingness to provide sincere feedback to their peers [35]. Others have found that peer review is likely to evoke students' negative emotional reactions and hence hinder the positive acceptance of peer feedback (e.g., [36,37]). Most of these studies were either conducted in primary and secondary schools or focused on written feedback. Evidence generated from Chinese university EFL classes is rare and little is known about students' attitudes towards peer and self-review conducted within the context of the classroom.

## 2.3. *Student Feedback Literacy Needed*

Students need to share responsibilities with their teachers and be willing to take a central role in the feedback process [38,39]. It has been argued that if students are to control the feedback process and utilize feedback to improve their learning effectively, they need to develop sufficient feedback literacy, namely, the understandings, capacities and dispositions needed to make use of feedback, either from their teachers, peers or generated by themselves, to enhance their learning [8]. Carless and Boud [8] identified four important aspects of students' feedback literacy and argued that, to effectively uptake feedback, students need to (1) value feedback and understand their active role in the feedback process, (2) have the capability to make sound judgements about the quality of the work of their own or others, (3) manage their emotions and affective responses in the feedback process, and (4) possess strategies and motivation to act on feedback they have received.

The necessity to develop student feedback literacy is supported by a growing body of studies which have indicated that students' feedback-related knowledge and skills affect the extent to which they are engaged in the feedback process and how they utilize feedback

to improve their learning [9,10,19,28]. Therefore, there have been strong calls for teachers to develop students' feedback literacy to enable them to fully engage in the feedback process. To be specific, teachers should help their students appreciate their active role in the feedback process, equipping students with necessary knowledge and skills needed to make evaluative and productive judgements through carefully planned instructions, coaching and scaffolding. Essential also is a trusting learning environment which can mitigate against the emotional obstacles to providing, receiving and acting on feedback [8,38,40].

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Participants

This study was part of the first author's Ph.D. research, which adopted a two-phase mixed methods research design to investigate the implementation of Assessment for Learning in Chinese university EFL classrooms. After the first-phase questionnaire-based survey, six teachers who responded to the questionnaire indicated their willingness to participate in the follow-up qualitative study. Based on their time schedules, demographic information, and a preliminary analysis of their answers in the questionnaires, we chose three teachers from two universities in Northwest China to represent different backgrounds and assessment experiences. The three teachers were given pseudonyms: Nancy, Luke, and Zack. Nancy was a young 30-year old teacher, who had been working as a lecturer for more than six years. Luke was in his late twenties and had been working as an assistant instructor for three years. Zack, who had been working as a university EFL teacher for 25 years, was the most experienced teacher among the three teacher participants. When he was recruited for this study, he was in his mid-forties and worked as an associate professor. All the three teachers taught English to first- and second-year university students. Demographic information about these teachers is available in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Teacher Demographic Information.

Name	Luke	Nancy	Zack
Gender	Male	Female	Male
Age	27	30	47
Teaching experience	3 years	6 years	25 years
Academic credential	Master	Master	Master
Academic rank	Assistant Instructor	Lecturer	Associate professor

Seven to eight students from one class taught by each teacher participant were recruited in this study. In order to select student participants to represent different English proficiency levels, we consulted with the teacher participants about the academic performance of the students who volunteered to participate in the qualitative study and used as reference students' scores in final exams in the previous terms. In total, 23 students were chosen, and pseudonyms were created to ensure their confidentiality. The 23 student participants were composed of 15 males and eight females aged between 17 and 20 who majored in science or engineering (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Student Demographic Information.

Student Name	Gender	Age	Major	Teacher
Alex	Male	19	Automation	Nancy
Karl	Male	19	Computer science and technology	Nancy
Colin	Male	20	Communication engineering	Nancy
Jenny	Female	19	Automation	Nancy
Frank	Male	19	Electrical engineering	Nancy
Vivian	Female	19	Electrical engineering	Nancy
Jack	Male	20	Communication engineering	Nancy

Table 2. Cont.

Student Name	Gender	Age	Major	Teacher
David	Male	19	Chemical engineering	Luke
Gary	Male	20	Chemical engineering	Luke
Daisy	Female	19	Chemical engineering	Luke
John	Male	19	Metallurgy engineering	Luke
Sunny	Female	18	Metallurgy engineering	Luke
Jasmine	Female	19	Mechanical engineering	Luke
Simon	Male	20	Material shaping and control engineering	Luke
Ken	Male	19	Mechanical engineering	Luke
Lin	Female	17	Civil engineering	Zack
Tian	Male	20	Industrial transportation	Zack
Qin	Male	19	Water and wastewater engineering	Zack
Anna	Female	19	Water and wastewater engineering	Zack
Jeremy	Male	20	Environment science	Zack
Fang	Female	19	Environment science	Zack
Long	Male	19	Environment science	Zack
Lei	Male	19	Functional material	Zack

### 3.2. Data Collection

Data in relation to the student feedback experience were mainly collected by conducting classroom observations and focus group interviews. Each teacher participant's class was observed four times, one at the beginning of the term, two in the middle, and one at the end to collect adequate data across time. The foci of the classroom observations were on how teachers provided oral feedback to their students and to what extent they gave their students opportunities to engage in peer and self-review orally. The observation data were used as a basis to understand students' feedback experiences, which provided references for later focus group interviews and were also used to triangulate student data with regard to their perceptions of the occurrence of feedback practices in their classrooms.

In order to collect ample data within a limited period of time, focus groups were used to find out about students' perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the teacher feedback as well as peer and self-review. In the present study, the students from the same teacher participant's class constituted a focus group. Two 40-min focus groups were conducted for each group of students during their free time. Questions (see Appendix A) were asked of the students with regard to the forms of feedback provided by their teachers, their opportunities to review their peers' works and that of their own, and their attitudes towards the teacher feedback, peer and self-review.

The language used for all the interviews and communications was Mandarin, because most participants said it was easier for them to express themselves in their mother tongue. With the permission of the teacher and student participants, all the interviews were audiotaped, and some of the classroom observations were videotaped to ensure accuracy.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

The observation data were analyzed first to help build a general understanding of the feedback practices in the three classes. We watched the videotaped classroom observations multiple times and recorded and transcribed all the occasions of teacher feedback, peer and self-review. We then identified the patterns and characteristics of the feedback practices, and jotted down some questions to be asked in the later focus groups.

Then the focus group interview data were organized, formatted, transcribed, and analyzed by using a thematic coding process [41]. In the initial line-by-line coding, a code list was generated. Based on the advice of Saldaña [42], these codes and their related data chunks were reviewed several times for further refinements. Then pattern coding was used to cluster and condense these initial codes into a smaller number of categories or themes.



Two themes were identified from the qualitative data: ‘Reliance on teachers to provide informative feedback’ and ‘Peer and self-review as under-valued practices’.

The trustworthiness of the present study was established by checking intra-coder agreement (which reached 88%) and inviting a Ph.D. candidate who had similar research interest to work as a peer debriefer. Before writing up the findings, the direct quotes from the interviews and classroom observation excerpts serving as supporting evidence were translated from Chinese to English. A back-translation method [43] was used to ensure the accuracy of the translation.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Reliance on Teachers to Provide Informative Feedback

The observation data indicated that the classroom feedback practices of the three teacher participants differed to a great extent. The feedback given by Nancy was, in most situations, a holistic score followed by brief evaluative remarks on some superficial aspects of her students’ performance. For example, after one student finished a presentation, Nancy rated her 87 out of 100, and praised his slides: “It is simple and clear, and I like the idea of bullet points” (Nancy Obs 4) ((Nancy Obs4) indicates that the quotation is from the fourth classroom observation in Nancy’s class). Luke’s feedback, however, was corrective in nature, identifying students’ language errors, and then giving further explanation and/or modelling of the correct use. For example, Luke asked a student to practice pronouncing the consonant [u]. First, he pointed out to the student that he mistook [u] for [u:]: “it is a short consonant, not a long one”. After that, he explained how to make the sound correct by changing the shape of the lips: “Do not push out your lips too much. Hold them” (Luke Obs1). Compared with Nancy and Luke, Zack’s feedback was relatively informative, pointing out the strengths of his student’s works. For example, when one of his students finished an oral presentation to share a science fiction book he had recently read, Zack remarked in a detailed way on the aspects in which this student had done well, including the content of the speech: “I am happy that you not only told us the story, but also shared with us your thoughts about the origin of the universe”; the organization of ideas: “You arranged your speech logically”; and the speaker’s presenting manner, “Your gestures helped you convey your ideas well” (Zack Obs4).

Despite the teachers’ different feedback practices, students involved in the present study seemed to see their teachers as the sole source of external feedback and equated feedback to teachers providing an evaluation of their work and/or performance. Karl was a typical example, who believed that assessment was “teachers’ objective scoring and comments on (students’) learning attitude and English level” (Karl N/FG2) ((Karl N/FG2) indicates that the quotation is from Karl, a student from Nancy’s class, in the second focus groups). Jack viewed the teacher as “an authority”, who, compared with his peers, was “more experienced in finding (his) problems and providing suggestions” (Jack N/FG2). Most students cared about the feedback their teacher gave them. For example, Anna, said she would “think carefully” about the feedback Zack gave to her (Anna Z/FG2), and Sunny shared that she would “follow Luke’s advice to correct (her) language errors” (Sunny L/FG2).

However, when invited to comment on the effectiveness of their teacher’s feedback to promote their language learning, the majority of the students from Luke and Nancy’s classes expressed dissatisfaction with the feedback they received. Although they valued the scores and error corrections given by their teachers, they expected more than that. Vivian, a student from Nancy’s class, for example, considered the scores Nancy gave to her to be “useful” and “necessary” which could help her track her progress (Vivian N/FG2). However, she found it difficult to interpret the scores and expected Nancy to “explain why she gave such scores” (Vivian N/FG2). Similarly, Sunny expected that Luke would provide systematic explanations of the rules governing the errors instead of mere corrections: “I wanted to know why an article was added before a noun, or why some verbs were deleted” (Sunny L/FG2). Some other students, especially some high achievers, said they hoped to

receive more feedback beyond comments on language features. Seemingly these students sought not only to rectify their errors but also to understand how and why the error had occurred.

Presumably because their teachers' feedback, especially that provided by Nancy and Luke, was generalised, most students said they appreciated opportunities to discuss with their teachers the feedback they received. They had a desire to seek more information as to how to improve their work. For example, Daisy, based on her experience in high school, found that "the feedback was easier to understand after teachers gave detailed explanation" (Daisy L/FG2). She, therefore, would have liked her teacher, Luke, to "arrange a face-to-face meeting" (Daisy L/FG2). Zack was the only one of the three teachers to have provided such opportunities to his students. Qin, when he had an opportunity to meet with Zack to talk about the feedback he received, felt that it "helped (him) understand better what aspects needed to be improved" (Qin Z/FG2). Fang, however, reported that while she also wanted an opportunity for teacher-student communication, she kept silent when this opportunity was a whole-class one. She conceded that she would have liked a one-on-one conference with her teacher in an informal way, because she could only "open (her) mouth" to seek for help from her teacher if in a "relaxing and private atmosphere" (Fang Z/FG2). Fang's comments were echoed by many students, who expected teacher-student conferences to be held in a safe environment to avoid "exposing disadvantages in front of (their) classmates" (Colin N/FG2) or "being mocked by others" (Simon L/FG2).

#### 4.2. Peer and Self-Review as Undervalued Practices

Only limited and superficial peer and self-review practices were observed in the three teachers' classes. For example, in the second session observed, after explaining how to pronounce /v/, Luke asked his students to practice words containing this consonant such as "every", "very" and "view". Then, he played a video clip, in which a native speaker modelled how to pronounce these words, against which students were required to compare their own pronunciation. This self-review practice was merely confined to students checking the correctness of their pronunciation, creating little opportunity for them to conduct deep reflection on their learning or generate oral comments themselves. The rare occurrence of peer and self-review was confirmed by the student interview data. Colin, for example, stated that "peer review almost never happened in this class" (Colin N/FG2). Likewise, Luke's students also commented that Luke "rarely" gave them opportunities to comment on their own work or that of others' (David, Ken, and Simon L/FG2). Zack's students also reported that the opportunity for them to express their opinions was limited to "applaud(ing)" or "smil(ing)" to show support for their classmates (Jeremy Z/FG2).

When the students were asked about whether they expected opportunities to generate feedback to help their peers, most of them gave negative responses. Many of the student participants considered peer feedback as class activities were "just for fun" (Jenny N/FG2) or "for relaxation" (Lin Z/FG2), and as such were "meaningless" (Jenny N/FG2), "not helpful" (Vivian N/FG2) and "not necessary" (Simon L/FG2). In addition, these students seemed to lack confidence in their ability to contribute to the feedback process. Gary, for example, believed the prerequisite for being a feedback provider was a good level of English proficiency, and as "we are of almost the same level, so I don't think I have the ability to find out their (his classmates') mistakes" (Gary L/FG2). Similarly, Colin revealed that his flimsy mastery of this subject prohibited him from figuring out any "substantive problems" in his peers' work (Colin N/FG2). Frank also considered his "poor spoken English" as a major barrier in giving oral feedback to his classmates (Frank N/FG2). Other students, for example Lin, considered his lack of assessment knowledge to be a barrier to giving quality feedback to his classmates. As he noted "I do not know what to say about the work of my classmates. The teacher never taught us how to do peer-feedback" and as a result he "only corrected spelling or grammatical mistakes" (Lin Z/FG2).

As feedback receivers, most students appeared to doubt the quality of feedback they would receive from their peers. For example, David revealed that he once refused to act

upon the feedback given by his high-school classmate whose English level was inferior to his: “He (his classmate) corrected some grammatical mistakes . . . But I did not want to listen to him. I also did not want to discuss with him. It did not make any sense to listen to someone who had a lower English level” (David L/FG2).

Jenny worried that her classmates would not display a serious attitude when providing feedback. Alex worried that his peers would be “half-hearted” in giving feedback because “everyone was busy” (Alex N/FG2). Simon asserted that, owing to the fear of damaging interpersonal relationships, his peers might only “point out minor mistakes” to “avoid embarrassment” (Simon L/FG2). Only Anna considered peer feedback to be “useful” because it was “easier to understand” compared with teacher feedback (Anna Z/FG2). Nonetheless, she only trusted the feedback she received from classmates who had a much better command of the subject than her: “I only want to give my work to those who rank top in the class, and I never suspect they will make mistakes” (Anna Z/FG2).

The majority of the students involved in this study did not expect opportunities to undertake any form of self-review. Ken, for example, regarded feedback as an “external and objective evaluation of (his) learning”, and said he “had got used to receiving information passively” (Ken L/FG2). Some students worried that they might have difficulties forming substantial remarks on their own performance, because it was challenging to diagnose their own problems. Yue, for example, shared that he “would have had no clue of what to say” if his teachers had asked him to comment on his presentation two weeks ago: “I could have only apologized that I had not prepared well for my presentation. I actually did not know what problems I had, whether it was about my pronunciation, or my limited vocabulary, or my grammar” (Yue Z/FG1). There are other students who felt uncomfortable commenting on their own performance in public for fear that they might leave a negative impression on their teacher and classmates. Alex, for example, shared that “we are supposed to be modest. It sounds boastful if I stress my good points . . . (but) it is also embarrassing if I talk too much about my mistakes” (Alex N/FG1).

## 5. Discussion

Feedback, when used properly, holds a great promise of helping students to develop the self-regulatory knowledge and skills needed to be lifelong learners [6,7]. In the present study, a qualitative approach was adopted to investigate students’ perceptions of the feedback practices in their classrooms and their attitudes towards teacher feedback, peer and self-review. The most important finding surfacing from the present study is that students ascribed far greater value to teachers than to peers and themselves as oral feedback sources. These results corroborated the findings of a great number of the previous studies on student feedback experience [33,34], and suggested that students in the selected Chinese university EFL classrooms were not ready to assume an active role in the feedback process.

One possible reason revealed by our data seemed to be that our student participants lacked a sound understanding of their roles and responsibilities in the feedback process. In conventional Chinese classrooms, teachers usually take on the role of the expert, while students are usually considered as submissive recipients of their teachers’ pedagogic and assessment decisions [44,45]. It can therefore be argued that if students have become accustomed to deferring to teachers as authorities and controllers, it might be difficult for them to realize their active participation in the feedback process, which is as an important dimension of student feedback literacy [8].

Students’ resistance to peer and self-review also appeared to result from their lack of the capabilities to provide feedback for their peers and/or themselves. For example, the current study found that students lacked subject knowledge to judge their own learning (e.g., Gary and Colin) or had limited language abilities to provide oral feedback (e.g., Frank). Carless and Boud [8] have argued that if students are to fully engage in peer or self-review they must have the pre-requisite knowledge and skills to do so. Therefore, previous literature has constantly advocated that teachers provide training opportunities in an authentic manner for their students to enhance their feedback skills and become assessment



literate [8,38,40]. Given the limited peer and self-review opportunities provided to students in the current study, it is, hence, no surprise that students lacked both willingness and confidence to work as feedback generators.

Our data also suggested another possible explanation for the low values students ascribed to student-centred feedback practices—students appeared to be unready for this activity emotionally and affectively. Consistent with the observations of some authors [28,37], the current study found some students' (e.g., Simon and Alex) relational concerns affected their willingness to judge their and their peers' learning in public, and that some students (e.g., Alex) felt discontented with their peer reviewers' careless attitude in the peer review process, and hence doubted the value of peer feedback. Carless and Boud [8] proposed emotional readiness as another important aspect of student feedback literacy because feedback does not only involve a cognitive, but also affective and emotional dimensions [35,46]. When students are required to subject their learning to public evaluation, especially to the judgement of their inexperienced peers, they may consider it as a threat to their self-esteem, which is especially true in Chinese classrooms where the notion of face is highly emphasized [45]. This finding suggested that only when students are capable of dealing with the negative affective and emotional reactions aroused from the feedback process can they genuinely utilise their peers and themselves as useful oral feedback sources.

Student emotional and affective factors also appeared to influence students' responses to teacher feedback. There was an expectation voiced by some students that their teachers should provide more detailed explanations to help enhance their English learning. These findings echoed the findings of previous studies of students' feedback experience [23,24]. Presumably because of their expectations of more clear and understandable feedback from their teachers, students also expressed the willingness to make feedback an interactive process between teachers and students. These findings indicated that the Chinese university EFL students in our study might have recognized the function of informative and dialogic feedback in promoting their language learning, which are highly advocated practices in the feedback literature [9,14,20,21]. However, an interesting yet worrying finding is that when one teacher, Zack, provided opportunities in class to discuss with his students the feedback they received, some students were reluctant to take the opportunity for fear of losing face. These results convey an important message that merely appreciating dialogic feedback does not necessarily ensure students' engagement in the feedback process and students may be reluctant to interact with their teachers for emotional reasons. These findings again remind us of the importance of developing students' feedback literacy and making them emotionally ready to engage in the feedback process. It is imperative that teachers help students understand that mistakes, misconceptions, and misunderstandings are natural in the learning process so that students may feel emotionally safe in discussing their learning with their teachers.

## 6. Conclusions

Adopting a qualitative exploratory research design, our study set out to investigate Chinese EFL students' attitudes towards teachers, peers and themselves as oral feedback providers. We found that our Chinese University EFL student participants relied on teacher feedback and in doing so devalued peer and self-review as possible additional sources of feedback information. Our study also identified the close relationship between students' attitudes towards feedback and their feedback literacy, supporting the claim of Carless and Bound [8] that for students to utilise feedback effectively, especially that provided by their peers and themselves, they need to develop sound understanding of students' roles in the feedback process, be equipped with the capabilities to provide quality feedback, and be cognitively and emotionally prepared to shoulder their responsibilities in the feedback process, along with a willingness to take action based on the feedback generated.

It has been repeatedly stressed in the literature that students need to take a central role in the feedback process to develop the self-regulatory skills needed for their sustainable

development [47]. The findings in the present study, however, reminded us that before Chinese university EFL students can be active in the feedback process, a number of pedagogic preparations are needed. We suggest that teachers change their teacher-centred teaching methods, and draw their students' attention to the benefits of peer and self-review, which may well gradually enhance students' willingness to engage in such practices. It is also imperative that teachers address their students' emotional concerns by, for example, establishing a trusting atmosphere in which students can feel psychologically safe in revealing their learning in public [8,48].

This study has two major limitations. First, the teacher and student sample in this study was drawn from a limited number of higher institutions in Northwest China, and the findings in the current study may not be generalisable to other areas of China. For subsequent research, it is necessary to conduct more studies in other regions in China to confirm, validate, and complement the findings of the present study. Another limitation of the current research is that our data failed to reveal how students acted on the feedback received from teachers, peers and themselves, another important dimension of student feedback literacy in Carless and Boud's [8] framework. Future research can also attempt to investigate the strategies students adopted to respond to feedback from different sources.

Our study has revealed the urgent need for teachers to prepare their students for their responsibilities in the feedback process. Therefore, it is also suggested that future research specifically address how teachers, within a Chinese cultural context, can enhance student feedback literacy to increase their engagement in the feedback process, and hence promote the sustainable development of students' learning abilities.

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## Appendix A. Focus Group Interview Schemes for Students

- 1 Does your teacher provide immediate feedback to you during lessons?
- 2 Would you please describe or give an example of how your teacher provide oral feedback to you during lessons?
- 3 What kind of feedback do you think will help your English learning?
- 4 Have you ever had opportunities to do self-review in this term?
- 5 How often does your teacher conduct peer review in this term?
- 6 Would you please give an example of how you assess your own English learning?
- 7 Would you please give an example of how you and your peers provide oral feedback to each other?
- 8 Does your teacher provide guidance to help you and your peers give feedback to each other?
- 9 Do you think peer and self-review are important for your English learning?

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