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Cultural and linguistic dimensions of feedback: A model of intercultural feedback literacy

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ABSTRACT

Universities around the world are attracting students and educators from increasingly diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, which presents an exciting but complex context in which teaching and learning activities take place. An important aspect of educational practice is feedback, but there is evidence that there is often dissatisfaction among students about the feedback practices they experience. We argue that this situation is exacerbated by the lack of attention that has been paid to cultural and linguistic factors in feedback processes, particularly in highly internationalised institutions. We begin by exploring the complex concepts of culture and intercultural competence before providing an overview of some of the recent work on feedback literacy from student and teacher perspectives. We then make the case for an intercultural dimension, introducing the concept of intercultural feedback literacy. We conclude by presenting a model of how aspects of intercultural competence can enhance the practices of feedback literate students and teachers.

KEYWORDS

Intercultural competence; feedback; student feedback literacy; teacher feedback literacy; intercultural feedback literacy

Introduction

In the global higher education context, universities around the world are attracting students and teachers from increasingly diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Nada & Araújo, 2019). This process of internationalisation is multifaceted and complex, but generally refers to the incorporation of an ‘international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education’ (Knight, 2008, p. 21). The international, intercultural dimension is particularly prevalent in high-level study, where students and teachers from a variety of backgrounds often use English as a lingua franca. However, it cannot be assumed that proficiency in English equips either party with the skills to negotiate the more nuanced, subjective and idiosyncratic language used in educational contexts, neither does it indicate familiarity with and understanding of cultural practices of a given context.

An essential part of the learning and teaching process is feedback, but there is a large amount of evidence that students are often dissatisfied with feedback practices they experience (e.g. Winstone & Boud, 2019). Contributing to this is the wide variety of roles and activities enacted by higher education teachers, resulting in different workloads as

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well as a range of motivations, depending for example, on contractual agreements (fixed term versus permanent) and casualisation of labour in university teaching (Leathwood & Read, 2022). This, we argue in this paper, is exacerbated by the fact that little attention has been paid to cultural and linguistic factors in feedback processes, which leaves a gap in our understanding of how language and culture impact teachers' and students' conceptualisations of feedback and their feedback practices, taking into consideration students' different motivations, preferences and expectations (Pazio Rossiter, 2022a).

We begin by exploring the complex concepts of culture and intercultural competence before giving an overview of some of the recent work on feedback literacy from student and teacher perspectives. Drawing on existing frameworks, available research as well as our own studies, which explored international teaching staff and students' feedback beliefs and practices, we present a model of intercultural feedback literacy. We define intercultural feedback literacy (IFL) as: appreciating and understanding the role that different levels of culture play in feedback processes, and taking action to participate effectively and appropriately in intercultural feedback interactions. We will unpack this concept further in relation to intercultural feedback literacy of students and teachers.

Understanding culture and intercultural competence

Culture is a difficult construct to define, but a long-standing and prevalent conceptualisation comes from Hofstede (Hofstede, 1980, p. 25), who characterised culture as 'collective programming of the mind which distinguishes one human group from another'. In this conceptualisation, we can think of culture as a set of norms along national and ethnic lines. An alternative view is Holliday's (Holliday, 1999, p. 237) concept of small culture, defined as 'social groupings or activities where there is a cohesive behaviour'. This shifts the focus to 'emergent' behaviour rather than "prescribed international differences' (Holliday, 1999, p. 237), which enables us to transfer this idea to the university context, where we can explore our institutional or even departmental cultures. We therefore consider feedback practices to be influenced to an extent by students' and teachers' national cultures, but strongly situated within their local institutional and departmental cultures.

This is starting to be reflected in the current literature through consideration given to authentic assessment and acknowledging disciplinary differences (Dawson et al., 2021). Drawing on Shulman's (2005) concept of signature pedagogies, these differences are explored further in the concept of signature feedback practices (Carless et al., 2020; Quinlan & Pitt, 2022), where norms and behaviours differ along disciplinary lines. In the context of *feedback*, Carless et al. (Carless & Winstone, 2020, p. 13) explain that 'signature feedback practices [...] denote the characteristic ways feedback practices are enacted in specific disciplines'. This moves definitions of and practices around feedback from broad, one-size-fits-all conceptualisations to more granular notions of feedback at the disciplinary level. This is one level of culture but in highly internationalised higher education institutions, we need to extend our understandings of feedback so that we incorporate cultural conceptualisations within disciplines, within institutions, and also across national cultures. Hence, we need to acknowledge that feedback cultures exist at several levels and that students might belong to multiple (feedback) cultures. We therefore must give

greater prominence to an intercultural dimension in feedback literacy, taking into account disciplinary, institutional and national levels of culture.

If we are interested in conceptualisations of feedback across cultures, we need to explore what it means to be interculturally competent. As with the term culture, the concept of intercultural competence is complex and difficult to define. Broadly speaking, it relates to how people from different cultural backgrounds communicate and interact with each other in different communicative contexts (Hua, 2019). Deardorff (Deardorff, 2006, p. 194) defined intercultural competence as 'the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes'. Her model centres around knowledge, skills and attitudes, that are required in order to effect internal changes in a person, resulting in external outcomes in the form of effective and appropriate intercultural interactions. At an individual level, these attitudes enable knowledge and skills to be acquired. According to Deardorff (2006), the aspects of knowledge required by interculturally competent individuals are: cultural awareness and sociolinguistic awareness. In terms of skills, interculturally competent people need: to listen, observe and evaluate, and to analyse, interpret and relate. The attitudes of openness (willingness to learn about others' cultures without judgement), respect (valuing others' cultures and cultural diversity), and curiosity and discovery (tolerating, or rather embracing, ambiguity and uncertainty and using cultural knowledge in order to engage fruitfully in intercultural interactions) are required if successful intercultural interactions are to take place (Deardorff, 2006, p. 256). Depending on the extent to which an individual develops these attitudes, knowledge and skills, certain desired outcomes may be achieved. Such outcomes may be internal in the form of a shift in the individual's frame of reference, leading to more adaptable, flexible and empathetic responses to others. As Deardorff puts it, '[T]he overall external outcome of intercultural competence is defined as *effective* and *appropriate* behavior and communication in intercultural situations, which again can be further detailed in terms of indicators of appropriate behaviour in specific contexts' (Deardorff, 2006, p. 66, original emphasis). This definition affords some flexibility to determine what constitutes effective and appropriate outward demonstration of intercultural competence in given situations, such as in feedback dialogues.

Feedback literacy and culture: Building the case for the cultural dimension

For many years, there have been calls in the literature for a much needed paradigm shift around assessment and feedback (Winstone & Carless, 2019). Building on Carless' (Carless, 2015) definition of feedback as a dialogue, the role of the teacher in the feedback process has been reshaped and a greater sense of agency has been placed on students. Increasing emphasis in the literature has been on quality, actionable feedback over quantity, hence moving away from asking teachers to give *more* feedback and instead thinking about *how* teachers create feedback opportunities, and how students interpret, act on and engage with them. This new paradigm requires feedback literacy. A feedback literate teacher has 'the knowledge, expertise and dispositions to design feedback processes in ways which enable student uptake of feedback and seed the development of student feedback literacy' (Carless & Winstone, 2020, p. 4). This translates into an ability to design environments that facilitate uptake, take into account student emotions around feedback

(relational sensitivities) and manage practicalities around feedback dialogues (Carless & Winstone, 2020). From the student perspective, literacy allows for ‘the understandings, capacities and dispositions needed to make sense of information and use it to enhance work or learning strategies’ (Carless & Boud, 2018, p. 1316). This means that students appreciate what feedback is and the role it plays in their learning, are able to make judgements and take actions from feedback they receive taking into account how their emotional responses to comments might affect their engagement with feedback.

While the concept of feedback literacy is a relatively recent development, it gives little consideration to the role that culture plays in feedback conceptualisations and practices. This is reflected in discussions around crucial competencies of feedback literate teachers (Boud & Dawson, 2021), which do not consider teachers’ awareness of students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds as well as recent discussions around authenticity of disciplinary feedback, which have paid little attention to multiculturalism as a feature of authentic feedback practice (Dawson et al., 2021).

This omission from the theoretical discourse needs addressing as it has implications for practice. As the authors of this paper, we have experience of being international staff members, former international students, and educational developers working across discipline boundaries in a highly internationalised institution. We have experienced and witnessed the impact that a lack of acknowledgement of cultures can have on students’ engagement with feedback and by extension their learning. Our observations are supported by research and practice literature. Rovagnati et al. (2022) and Rovagnati and Pitt (Rovagnati et al., 2022) recently evidenced that international students have different feedback literacies that impact on their ability to participate in dialogic feedback interactions. These data align with earlier research conducted by Tian and Lowe (2013) and Wang and Li (2011), who called for more culturally sensitive feedback approaches. This sensitivity also highlights language as the main tool of feedback, an area explored also in relation to disciplinary cultures (Jones & Ellison, 2021). As Pazio Rossiter’s (2022a) study indicates, interpretation of feedback messages is culturally situated and can present challenges for comprehension and taking action from feedback, especially when exchanges happen in multicultural and multilingual contexts, where both the teacher and the student may speak English as a second, third or fourth language and have different perceptions of disciplinary conventions.

To address some of these issues, the default action taken seems to be educating students around what feedback is (Pazio Rossiter, 2022b) or creating glossaries of common feedback terms (Withey, 2013). While there is a good rationale behind these interventions, when applied to international cohorts specifically, they tend to prioritise acculturation and at times indicate and perpetuate a deficit model around international students, *i.e.* an attitude of *our practices are better than yours*, as argued by Bax (2003) in the context of language teaching. In line with more inclusive approaches that liberating and decolonising the curriculum initiatives have introduced, we suggest that a similar approach be adopted in the international discourse around feedback literacy. This calls for a change in thinking from acculturation to mutual understanding and acknowledgement that all feedback parties have something to learn from each other and to offer to each other. This suggested change is outlined in our proposed theoretical model below (Figure 1).

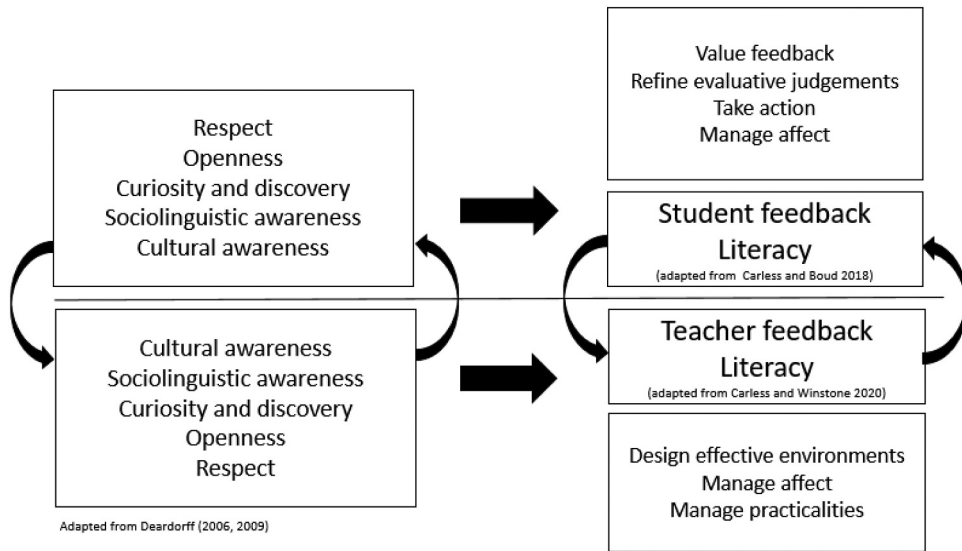


Figure 1. Model of intercultural feedback literacy.

Intercultural feedback literacy model: The relationship between intercultural knowledge and attitudes and student feedback literacy

As mentioned above, the available literature as well as our own observations and research point to a strong relationship between intercultural competence and student feedback literacy – one influencing the other. Attitudes of openness, curiosity, discovery, and respect in relation to different cultural conceptualisations of feedback facilitate appreciation of feedback in different cultural contexts. This level of openness, curiosity and discovery comes sometimes with the choice to study in a given country, institution or department and an expected level of adjustment or ‘culture bump’ (Wu & Hammond, 2011, p. 423). However, this initial openness can be impeded by comparisons of practice, especially when after that comparison the practices in the past context compare more favourably (Pazio Rossiter, 2022b). This means students must understand their own cultural background and how it might affect their perceptions of and interactions with students and teachers from other contexts. This aspect of respecting others outside of the new educational context is important, as it moves beyond adapting to the prevailing cultural feedback practices and instead focuses on intercultural understanding between teachers and students from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds. This will influence the level of value students place on feedback and the feedback practices in the new context, which as studies suggest, tends to vary (Rovagnati et al., 2022).

Sociolinguistic and cultural awareness are also paramount, as without a level of understanding of and sensitivity towards how feedback might be phrased by teachers from different cultural backgrounds, it will be difficult for students to understand where their performance stands, refine evaluative judgements, and take action as a result of this understanding. This is evidenced by studies on international students’ feedback comprehension (Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Pazio Rossiter, 2022a)

and the issues this presents, but also reflected in general studies related to intercultural communication in the field of pragmatics (Ogiermann, 2009). This lack of understanding of culturally situated language impacts on students' ability to refine evaluative judgement and take action from feedback (Carless & Boud, 2018). In fact, Pazio Rossiter (2022a) found that language features such as indirect requests or the use of politeness can sometimes hide the true meaning and obscure the interpretation of what action that needs to be taken from feedback.

Relational factors, *i.e.* managing affect, have gained prominence in recent years (Esterhazy, 2018), and the affective aspect of feedback is particularly important in intercultural contexts. As research suggests, feedback can elicit strong emotions that are heightened by a lack of familiarity with new feedback contexts (Olave-Encina et al., 2021) and by the language of feedback itself, which therefore links Deardorff's (2006) skills and knowledge of sociolinguistic awareness with students' ability to manage affect. If students have well-developed sociolinguistic and cultural knowledge, and understand contextual rules around honesty, politeness and requests, they are better able to interpret feedback through that cultural lens (Pazio Rossiter, 2022a) and manage their emotional responses to it.

Intercultural feedback literacy model: The relationship between intercultural knowledge and attitudes and teacher feedback literacy

Compared with student feedback literacy, the concept of teacher feedback literacy (Carless & Winstone, 2020) has been researched to a relatively lesser extent. Yet the available evidence suggests strong links to intercultural competence. From the teacher perspective, if the requisite attitudes of respect, openness, curiosity and discovery are displayed, teachers are more likely to design effective feedback environments that take into account students' cultural backgrounds. Hence, they will be open to embracing the different experiences that their students and colleagues bring to the new context. These accommodating attitudes will be further reflected in the development of knowledge of cultural awareness and awareness of others' cultures by understanding that feedback experiences and literacies are not homogenous, but in fact differ depending on cultural conceptualisations of what feedback is and what it means to engage in feedback dialogues (Rovagnati et al., 2022).

An open, respectful and curious teacher will be attuned to relational sensitivities displayed by students from different cultures, enabling them to manage affect. As discussed in the previous section, understanding that feedback is an emotional endeavour in general and that these emotions can be intensified by cultural misunderstandings can help establish better relationships between the parties participating in feedback dialogues. As Pazio Rossiter (2022a) claims, outside of misunderstandings around what action needs to be taken, poor sociolinguistic awareness can affect the student's perception of the teacher. Our experience suggests this is also the case with teachers misinterpreting students. Hence, better understanding of how norms around communication in one context can affect feedback dialogues that take place across different cultural contexts can help teachers to manage relationships and create more opportunities for learning from feedback at the design level, but also at the practical levels with interventions that will help both parties negotiate meaning. This could include creating an action

plan for feedback or embedding reflection on feedback as part of the feedback and assessment process.

In terms of managing practicalities, a key factor is how teachers 'navigate tensions between different functions of feedback' (Carless & Winstone, 2020, p. 7). There are cultural conceptualisations about the purposes of feedback, and these conceptualisations exist at various levels. Teachers should therefore be aware that formative feedback is not necessarily a concept that is understood the same way across different cultures (Tian & Lowe, 2013). On a disciplinary level, a culturally competent teacher will be aware of disciplinary cultures with regard to feedback, or signature feedback (Carless et al., 2020) and will adapt practices to take these cultures into account.

Mirror mirror on the wall: The relationship between teacher and student intercultural competence

The first key aspect of our model (Figure 1) is the link between intercultural competence and teacher and student feedback literacy, as we outlined above. The other key aspect is the relationship between intercultural knowledge and attitudes (as outlined by Deardorff, 2006) of teachers and students. In our model, we depict this as a mirror, with the knowledge and attitudes from the teacher's perspective represented above alongside the features of teacher feedback literacy, and the student's perspective represented below, as a mirror image, alongside the characteristics of student feedback literacy. It is of little surprise that the teacher feedback literacy model does not mirror the student feedback literacy model, as responsibilities and actions differ for each party. It is generally accepted that responsibilities are shared between educators and students (Nash & Winstone, 2017), but each party has a greater role at different stages of the feedback process. As Winstone et al. (Winstone et al., 2021, p. 119) put it, there is 'a varying balance between parties for redressing the particular challenges involved'.

What is mirrored, however, is the intercultural aspect. This means that despite different responsibilities of each party, as expressed in the teacher and student feedback literacy models, the underpinning principles of interculturally competent teachers and students are the same. Namely, they must display the attitudes of openness, respect, curiosity, and be culturally and sociolinguistically aware, both with regard to themselves and their own cultures, but also with regards to others. What we mean by 'others' is not just the host country, institution or department in which they find themselves, but also other cultures within the polycultural learning context. In short, we consider that intercultural competence and mutual understanding are the responsibility of all involved in feedback encounters. This means we must not only strive to understand others but also reflect on our own cultural beliefs, norms and behaviours, and on how these might be interpreted by our interlocutors. This does not mean every teacher and student must learn about every culture in a reductive way, i.e. Germans tend to do X, or Japanese students interpret feedback like X. This would serve to perpetuate a prescriptive and somewhat reductive Hofstedian view of culture which, despite its virtues, does not take into account the institutional and disciplinary levels of culture that we outlined above. What we emphasise is awareness and openness in order to aid communication and understanding.

Changing our thinking around international students and feedback – Mediation alongside acculturation

The discussion around mutual responsibility outlined above has strong implications for practice. The focus of cultural training in the UK more broadly has been to help students and teachers transition by unpacking the new context in which they are studying or working and the rules and expectations that govern that new context. In practical terms, this means either producing written resources around the purpose of feedback or organising assessment briefing sessions which emphasise the importance of feedback and clarify the marking process to reframe students' thinking about grading. For teaching staff, these practices centre around workshops delivered either by central educational development units or course/programme leads that aim to establish common understanding around institutional and departmental feedback practices and, in some rare cases (see, Lazar & Ryder, 2018), facilitate some reflection on language and culture. Overall, these interventions are an important step in helping students understand cultural differences and help with acculturation.

Acculturation and adaptation to cultural norms is only one part of the picture, however. According to our model of intercultural feedback literacy (IFL), the onus is not only on incoming students and teachers to learn about and adapt to the host culture. Intercultural competence is about reciprocal learning and understanding, so that all parties work to understand themselves and others, as expressed by the mirror in our model. As Hofstede (Hofstede, 1986, p. 216) points out, 'the focus of the teacher's training should be on learning about his/her own culture: getting intellectually and emotionally accustomed to the fact that in other societies, people learn in different ways'. This focus on reflection on self and others is missing from current training. Hence, training initiatives need to be extended to encompass sessions in which students and staff also have space to reflect on their own cultural background and engage in intercultural exchange with their teachers and other students in order to develop the attitudes and knowledge of openness, respect, curiosity and discovery, sociolinguistic and cultural awareness. This reflection could focus on sharing experiences from different contexts and reflecting on how these impact on expectations of the new context. This might help to create deeper understanding of how students learned and engaged with feedback in the past, identifying how this learning can be supported in the new context. Similar reflections could be embedded into a feedback session where students could create action plans from feedback to ensure that the messages are understood as intended (Pazio Rossiter, 2022a). The key difference is where such sessions might be facilitated. For teachers, useful spaces might be in educational development workshops or in structured qualifications such as PG Cert or Master's courses that can have a transformative impact on practice (Ippolito & Pazio, 2019). For students, training could be provided at a disciplinary level as an integral part of course delivery.

Concluding remarks

The model presented in this paper draws together insights from the literature on feedback literacies and intercultural competence in an attempt to incorporate an intercultural dimension in feedback processes. We acknowledge that culture is a complex construct

and that students and teachers are members of multiple cultures. We also acknowledge that feedback has a variety of functions (e.g. formative and summative). The purpose of our model is to identify overarching principles and to lay the foundations for productive intercultural feedback dialogues regardless of the type of feedback.

So far, our model has focused mainly on evidence from international students and teachers, as this has been the focus of our practice and research with some references to disciplinary cultures. The next steps will be to explore other levels of culture, such as disciplinary and institutional cultures, to investigate further how our model helps to conceptualise how feedback practices are enacted in different cultural contexts beyond the international lens. This might include exploring the potential interplay between cultures at national and organisational levels, and how this might help to shape feedback discourses within the higher education sector across different institutional and national contexts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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