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Understanding How Chinese University Students Engage with Teacher Written Feedback in an EFL Context: A Multiple Case Study

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Abstract

While prior studies have highlighted that extensive student engagement could help maximize students' learning benefits in general, a paucity of research has explored student engagement with teacher written feedback (WF), especially when students processed various English proficiency levels. To fill this gap, this multiple-case study explored how six Chinese undergraduates (2 high proficiency (HP), 2 intermediate (IM) and 2 low-proficiency (LP)) cognitively, behaviourally and affectively engaged with teacher WF in an EFL context. Multiple sources of data were collected from students' drafts with teacher WF, students' immediate verbal reports and student semi-structured interviews. Findings demonstrated that learners' revision behaviours had an affective nature, which could build their confidence by presenting writing progress through multiple drafts. More obvious distinctions of engagement were found between HP and LP students. Other factors influencing engagement levels were the amount of WF, prior learning context and previous experience with other feedback. Changes in the extensiveness of engagement were observed across different writing tasks and over time, which implied that engagement could be cultivated and developed. To conclude, the study contributes to the conceptualization of student engagement with teacher WF and the understanding of why students benefit differently from teacher WF.

Keywords: *Teacher Written Feedback, Student Engagement, EFL Writing*

Introduction

Teacher written feedback (WF) has been argued to be a crucial and necessary approach in writing instruction (Mensah Bonsu, 2021). Since the 1990s, researchers have been actively exploring teacher WF on students' writing drafts from different perspectives, such as examining common characteristics of effective WF (e.g., Agbayahoun, 2016); comparing different types of WF that may benefit linguistic accuracy (e.g. Shintani et al., 2014) and factors mediating the effectiveness of WF (e.g. Chong, 2018).

Recently, researchers have focused more on students' perspectives and concluded that student engagement with WF could play a great role in unlocking the effectiveness of WF. Student engagement is conceptualized as a multi-construct involving behavioural, cognitive and affective perspectives (Ellis, 2010). While prior studies have touched upon the idea of student engagement with teacher WF, most of them ignored its multi-dimensional nature. For example, students' revision behaviours were found to be closely related to the types and forms of teacher comments (e.g., Ferris et al., 1997). Sachs and Polio (2007) demonstrated that the depth of processing could influence the effect of teacher WF. The affective engagement was proven to be related to students' improvement in their drafts in Saidon et al. (2018)'s study. Two exceptions were found which explored student engagement from cognitive, behavioural and affective perspectives. Han and Hyland (2015) and Zheng and Yu (2018) examined how students engaged with teacher written corrective feedback (WCF) and confirmed its tripartite nature. Zheng and Yu (2018) further argued that more research is needed to address how students respond to other aspects of teacher feedback, such as content and organization. However, little information was added to fill this gap. How students behaviourally, cognitively, and affectively respond to teacher feedback on both grammatical errors and content issues has still been under-explored. What remains even more unclear is whether students with diverse English proficiency levels would engage differently with teacher WF.

Against this background, this study explores 6 Chinese university students' cognitive, behavioural and affective engagement with teacher WF in an EFL context. These students are divided into high proficiency, intermediate and low proficiency levels for cross-case comparisons. It aims to enrich the understanding of the complex conceptualization of student engagement and how language proficiency could mediate student engagement with teacher WF.

Literature Review

Student engagement with teacher feedback

It has been proffered that extensive student engagement could help students with their learning in general (Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2011). Lee (2008b) found that learner engagement with

feedback was useful for students' writing development, especially when they possessed a higher level of feedback literacy.

Several attempts have investigated aspects of learner engagement with teacher feedback. Sachs & Polio (2007) implied a possible relationship between errors understood at a deeper level and accurate corrections. For example, when the students were able to provide metalinguistic explanations, their revisions were likely to be accurate. Chong (2018) indicated that affective factors such as harmonious student-teacher relationship and students' trust in teachers could impinge on how WF was used. However, as Fredricks et al. (2004) opined, student engagement could be better understood as a tripartite schema whose three dimensions (i.e., cognitive, behavioural and affective aspects) are interrelated and dynamic.

Limited efforts were put into examining student engagement as a multi-construct, especially in an EFL context. Han and Hyland (2015) focused on student engagement with WCF and conducted a study in a Chinese university with four non-English major intermediate-level students. Findings reported that students seemed to process WCF at a surface level, failing to provide accurate metalinguistic explanations. Negative emotions could be generated from WCF but may also relate to learners' beliefs and expectations. Zheng and Yu (2018) collected data from 12 low-proficiency students to investigate how they reacted to teacher WCF. Lower-ability students may be favourable to WCF but still engaged at a limited level from behavioural and cognitive aspects. Consequently, even when positive attitudes were detected among learners, their revisions might still be inaccurate (Zheng & Yu, 2018). Though being novel and inspiring, these studies mainly centred on teacher error corrections. In an authentic teaching context, teacher written responses to students' writing tend to go beyond local linguistic errors to cover more global issues as well (McGrath et al., 2011).

The only study concerning teacher WF was Zhang and Hyland (2018), who compared student engagement with teacher WF and automated feedback. Data was collected from two Chinese university students' writing texts, teacher WF, automated feedback and student interviews. While automated feedback had the advantage of timeliness and convenience, teacher responses on content and organization were favoured by student participants. Results also confirmed that student engagement was a crucial factor in the usage of feedback and the improvement of students' writing drafts. However, due to the drawback of involving only 2 participants, Zhang and Hyland (2018) recommended that more relevant studies could be done to suit the needs of teachers pedagogically and enrich the theoretical understanding of learner engagement with teacher feedback.

The conceptual framework guiding the current research

Coinciding with Ellis' (2010) typology, student engagement with WF is seen as a multi-

dimensional construct with cognitive, behavioural and affective perspectives. Relevant studies have explored cognitive engagement from the depth of processing (Qi & Lapkin, 2001), usage of cognitive strategies (Hyland, 2003), and adoption of metacognitive strategies (Oxford, 2017). The behavioural engagement was outlined as whether and how students revise their drafts. Han and Hyland (2015) also included observable behaviours of using meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies (e.g., usage of dictionaries) as sub-dimensions of behavioural engagement.

According to Martin and Rose (2002), affect could be manifested in the dimensions of affect, judgement, and appreciation. To apply this to teacher WF, affect could mean the students' immediate feelings of teacher feedback and emotional changes during revision. The judgment could be understood as the personal evaluation (such as admiration/criticism) and moral judgment (such as praise/condemnation) about teacher WF (Zheng & Yu, 2018). Appreciation refers to the extent of valuing teacher editions (Lewis et al., 2008). Oxford (2017) further posited that metaknowledge went beyond the cognitive domain and covered the affective, motivational, and social realms. How learners monitored and regulated their emotions were demonstrated to play a significant role in their engagement with feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Thus, the concept of "meta-affective strategies" was introduced to affective dimensions.

To conclude, cognitive engagement was explored from three scopes: level of processing, usage of cognitive strategies and the adoption of metacognitive strategies. The sub-dimensions of behavioural engagement incorporated revision behaviours and observable behaviours using cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Affective engagement refers to affect, judgment, appreciation and adoption of meta-affective strategies (Table 1).

Table 1

Adapted Model of Student Engagement (Modified from Han & Hyland, 2015; Martin & Rose, 2002)

Student engagement with teacher WF	Constructions of the three dimensions
Behavioural engagement	1) Revision behaviours 2) Observable behaviours when adopting cognitive strategies 3) Observable behaviours when adopting meta-cognitive strategies
Cognitive engagement	1) Level of processing 2) Adoption of cognitive strategies 3) Adoption of metacognitive strategies
Affective engagement	1) Affect 2) Judgment 3) Appreciation 4) Adoption of meta-affective strategies

Research Questions and Design

Given the prior conclusions corroborating the multi-dimensional nature of learner engagement, its feasibility to apply to teacher WF, and a modification of the existent framework of student engagement, three research questions were designed to tackle the research gap:

RQ₁: What writing issues are generally found among Chinese English-major university students with different levels of English proficiency?

RQ₂: What kinds of WF are provided by the teacher participant?

RQ₃: How do students with different English proficiency levels cognitively, behaviourally and affectively engage with teacher WF?

Specifically, the current study examined how 6 English-major university students engage with teacher WF. A qualitative approach was adopted using data from students' drafts, teacher WF, students' verbal reports and semi-structured interviews to shed light on how students with various English proficiency levels process WF from cognitive, behavioural and affective dimensions.

Methodology

A multiple-case study approach was adopted, including one university teacher and six of her English-major students with divergent English proficiency levels, to address the three research questions.

Research context and participants

This 8-week study took place at a teaching-oriented university in South China and involved 6 English-major undergraduates and one teacher in an English writing course that lasted throughout the students' 2nd year of study. In this year, the students were required to pass the Test for English Majors Band 4 (TEM4) as a premise of getting their bachelor degree. In TEM4, writing weighted 20 out of 100. While students learnt some writing skills from comprehensive English courses in their 1st year, the writing course specifically designed in their 2nd year provided a more systematic knowledge of English writing and more opportunities to write.

Catherine (pseudonym), a non-native English teacher who held a master degree in Linguistics, was purposively chosen as the teacher participant mainly because of her WF approach and focus. Students in her class followed a feedback-revision cycle for each writing homework, including writing the 1st draft, receiving teacher WF, and completing the 2nd draft based on WF. Normally, the minimum word count for each draft was 250. Catherine had 15 years of English teaching experience and has taught the writing course for seven years. She adopted a process writing approach that encouraged multiple drafts and provided feedback on grammatical errors, inappropriate word choice and content-related problems.

Purposive sampling strategies were adopted to target suitable student participants from

Catherine's class based on their English language proficiency, willingness to participate and teachers' recommendations. The proficiency levels were decided by English scores from the College Entrance Exam and average writing scores from previous writing pieces. Consequently, six students were selected by the researcher and were categorized into two high-proficiency students (HPs), two intermediate students (IMs) and two low-proficiency students (LPs).

Data collection procedure

The study took place in an authentic English classroom, and the researcher attempted to bring no intervene to the class instruction. Data sources included students' drafts with teacher WF, students' immediate verbal reports and semi-structured interviews with students to generate a comprehensive picture of learners' devotion to processing WF (see Table 2 for data collection timeline).

Two writing homework (HW1 & HW2) were assigned by Catherine during the research. Following the feedback-revision cycle, each student produced two drafts for each writing homework. In total, the study collected 24 drafts from the six students. In terms of the verbal report, students were asked to make individual appointments with the researcher before they decided to revise their 1st drafts with teacher WF. Then each student and the researcher met at a tutorial room where the student completed his/her 2nd draft. Immediately after the completion, a retrospective verbal report in students' native language (i.e., Chinese) was conducted where the researcher pointed to each piece of teacher WF, and the students were suggested to recall their mental activities when reading the certain piece of WF for the first time and when making their according revisions. Follow-up questions were asked when there was confusion. Using students' previous writing drafts with teacher WF, a trial run was conducted before the study to familiarize participant students with the verbal report practice.

Table 2

Timeline for Data Collection

Timeline	Data collected
Week 1	Semi-structured interviews with students
Week 2	1 st draft of HW1 with teacher WF
Week 3	Verbal report of the 2 nd draft of HW1
Week 4	2 nd draft of HW1 with teacher WF
Week 5	1 st draft of HW2 with teacher WF
Week 6	Verbal report of the 2 nd draft of HW2
Week 7	2 nd draft of HW2 with teacher WF
Week 8	Semi-structured interviews with students

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students at the beginning and the end of the research with different focuses. Each interview lasted for about 30 minutes and was conducted in Chinese, which was preferred by all students. The first interview primarily addressed students' English learning background and prior experience with teacher WF. The second interview concerned more about students' experience with teacher WF they received during the research. All interviews and verbal reports were recorded with the permission of the students.

Data Analysis

Analysis of students' drafts and teacher WF

Text analysis was applied to scrutinize writing issues on students' drafts and teacher WF to gain a general idea of students' writing levels and teacher feedback practice. Writing issues indicated by teacher WF included writing errors and content problems. Further categorization of the writing issues followed the taxonomy from Han and Hyland (2015) and Zamel (1985) with adaptations (see Appendix A). New categories such as "Chinglish" (Lee, 2004, p.296) was added to writing errors and "vague meaning" was categorized to content problems.

Teacher WF took the forms of in-text feedback and end-of-text commentary. Drawing from the definition of feedback points by Hyland (1998), each in-text WF addressing a different aspect of the drafts was coded as an independent feedback point. Informed by Ashwell (2000), in-text WF was firstly divided into form-focused and content-focused feedback. Form-focused feedback was then grouped into direct WF; indirect WF; indirect WF with a question mark or comments for clarifications, and indirect WF with metalinguistic explanations (Ellis, 2010). Content-focused feedback mainly dealt with vague, illogical and irrelevant content and was generally highlighted by the teacher using specific indications (e.g., underlining) in students' texts with marginal comments. It should be noticed that while previous research used feedback and comments interchangeably, the current study refers to comments specifically to marginal and endnote comments.

It is noteworthy that a new category, "Praise and Criticism" (P&C), was elicited from the current data and consequently added to Ashwell's (2000) classification. P&C incorporated teacher in-text responses emphasizing what has done well and "what has done poorly" (Hyland & Hyland, 2001, p.191). The original category from Ashwell (2000) did not include criticism, and praise was regarded as a sub-category of content-focused feedback. Yet the current data exposed different findings which supported this novel category: 1) criticism was found in one student's draft; 2) teacher compliments can concern well-written content as well as linguistic practices. To conclude, in-text feedback was categorized into form-focused feedback, content-

focused feedback and P&C. Alluding to terminal comments, they were analyzed following Lee's (2008b) taxonomy with adaptations.

As evidence of behavioural engagement, modification behaviours were observed by cross-referencing both drafts of students' homework. Informed by Hyland (1998), nine categories of modification were formed: accurately followed, initial stimulus, incorrect, deletion, substitution, no correction, reorganization, rewriting and new content (see Appendix B). To meliorate the validity of data analysis, one university English teacher with 9-year teaching experience was invited to code half of the textual data (i.e., students' texts and teacher WF). An average inter-coder agreement rate was 94.6%. Any dissensus was tackled by discussions until an agreement was reached.

Analysis of verbal reports and interviews

An inductive approach was adopted to qualitatively analyze verbal reports and semi-structured interviews with students. Recordings of student interviews and verbal reports were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were later uploaded to a cloud storage platform which can be accessed by student participants to ensure validation. When examining data of each participant, the phrases or textual segments which emerge reiteratively were recorded. These codes were subject to modification as the analysis went further. Dependability was achieved by inviting the same extra coder to code two of the participants' data. The consensus was reached by discussion.

Although the conceptual framework for student engagement with WF (see Table 1) was regarded as the guiding schema for analyzing verbal reports and interviews, the data were not forced into these prior categories. Transcripts were reiteratively examined within each student case and across all student cases to detect any emergent themes. As Bryant (2017) contended, new themes could help further develop and enrich the existing framework. Analysis of qualitative data will be cross-checked with text analysis to increase credibility.

Results

General patterns of student writing issues and teacher WF

All students showed linguistic errors and content-related problems in their drafts. As indicated in Table 3, HPs and IMs had most of their frequent writing issues at the word level. LPs, contrariwise, displayed writing issues ranging from word and sentence levels to content problems. Two students made the most errors in verbs, yet none of them was about the subject-object agreement. This finding was observed by the researcher during the data collection process, so relevant questions were added to students' second verbal reports. Qing's reply may explain this observation:

The teacher has emphasized a lot about this error. I remember very clearly. So usually, I will check this error type in my drafts after completion.

Table 3

Summary of Students' Errors marked by In-Text Teacher Feedback

	Chang	Qing	Song	Guang	Zhao	Ke
English levels	HP	HP	IM	IM	LP	LP
Number of writing issues	32	41	44	41	42	36
Error rate	3.92%	4.39%	5.02%	5.20%	5.74%	5.91%
Most frequent error type	word choice	errors with verb	sentence structure	errors with verb	fragment	1) errors with verb 2) misuse of phrases and idioms 3) sentence structure 4) content issues (including redundancy & repetition)

Error rate: number of errors indicated by WF points /number of total words * 100%

WF provided by Catherine involved two forms: in-text feedback and end-of-text comments. Guided by Ashwell (2000), in-text feedback was observed to have three focuses: form-focused, content-focused and P&C (see Table 4 for their proportions). Compared to Lee's study (2008a) that about 87% of teacher feedback were form-focused, Catherine provided more nonlinguistic edits. This resonated with students' expectations to receive both form and content feedback. An interview excerpt from Song represented most students' voices:

I think feedback on both grammar and content is indispensable. For a good writing piece, you need to have insightful main points and less linguistic error. So I really appreciate Catherine's feedback.

While form-focused feedback was rendered in various types, the majority was direct WF (92.9%) (Table 5). Content-focused feedback generally addressed vague, illogical and irrelevant content. Commonly, they were delivered by a combination of specific indications in learners' texts (e.g. underlining or circling) and marginal notes.

P&C accounted for 5.19% among all in-text feedback, with one criticism detected in Zhao's draft where the teacher commented "very bad expression!". An example of praise on content

would be the teacher's quotation "these suggestions are very specific! Good!" in Chang's drafts. Praise on linguistic features could be illustrated when Catherine underlined "Hold on to hope, hold on to faith and hold on to the future" in Guang's draft and cited "good" in the margin:

I specifically use this parallel structure in my draft since it was highlighted in class. So when I see "good", I ask Catherine whether it is about the sentence structure. And she confirms. I am really happy because she notices my effort. (Guang's 1st verbal report)

Table 4

Proportions of the Three Focuses of In-Text Feedback

Total in-text feedback point	Form-focused	Content-focused	Praise & Criticism (P&C)
236	73.38%	21.43%	5.19%

Table 5

Form-focused Feedback Types

Form-focused feedback types	%
Direct WF	92.9%
Indirect WF with a question mark or comments asking for clarifications	1.8%
Indirect WF with metalinguistic explanations	3.5%
Indirect WF	1.8%

While Lee's (2008a) framework provided insights to generalize terminal comment types, the current study yielded new patterns, such as "attention to native expression" (e.g., "Pay attention to expression. Try to make it smooth...") and "personal responses to writing content" (e.g. "Your story is very encouraging. Anxiety kills the chance of success"). Particularly, many students stressed their preferences for comments affectively related to their writing, rather than judging the quality of their content. For instance, Guang responded to the end comment "Once you have made up your mind, just go for it.":

This comment makes me feel like she's reading a story instead of just looking for the errors in my draft. So it encourages me to write a better story.

Behavioural engagement

Behavioural engagement could be investigated by revision behaviours and observable actions using cognitive and metacognitive strategies. All six students made feedback-generated revisions from word to content level, of which almost 50% were accurately revised following teacher direct feedback. For HPs, another main modification type was substitution. As Qing proffered in

her verbal report, “I don’t want to copy teacher direct WF, because it feels like I’m not thinking on my own.” By comparison, deletion was frequently found among IMs and LPs. There were 2 possible reasons: 1) students’ lack of understanding of WF; 2) students chose to rewrite or add new content, as illustrated by Song:

The teacher underlines this, but I don’t understand it, so I just delete it, because I don’t think it is a big problem...For this one, because the teacher questions the logic, so I’m planning to rewrite the sentences. (Verbal report)

Whereas half of the students corrected all feedback-indicated writing issues, there were still cases of no revision. Ke did not notice the teachers’ correction. Chang did not correct the sentence “I back to school”, as she explained “I often hear this in TV series, so I think it is correct.” Song did not correct 5 of her errors for 2 reasons: 1) the teacher’s illegible handwriting; 2) her belief that the teacher misunderstood her.

Regarding observable behaviours, all students had access to external resources to facilitate their revisions, such as consulting dictionaries, using online materials, or asking teachers or peers for help. However, the extent to which the strategies were used generally diminished from HPs to LPs. For instance, Chang and Qing chose to analyze the advantages of the writing drafts with higher ranking from their peers before their revisions. In contrast, LPs sometimes needed their friends to locate and analyze the problems. An additional finding about peer support was found when Chang displayed her concern:

I will ask my friends about uncertain revisions. However, I don’t trust peer feedback. Last year I received peer feedback and I found them perfunctory and useless. By comparison, I highly value Catherine’s detailed feedback. (2nd interview)

While Chang chose to ask her friends about uncertain modifications, her previous experience with peer feedback generated two results: 1) her distrust in peer comments; and 2) her greater appreciation and engagement with teacher WF.

Overall, HPs were found to devote more energy into revision rather than copying suggestions from the teacher. Less able learners might choose to either strictly follow teacher WF or delete them. All students used external resources, but the accuracy of revisions seemed more relate to how these resources were used.

Cognitive engagement

Students with different English levels demonstrated diverse patterns in the depth of processing.

HPs proved a deeper level of processing for showing more accurate revisions with proper explanations. Examples of relying on intuitions in revision was found in Song. It was noteworthy that accurate corrections may not imply accurate understanding. When Zhao explained why the teacher added “get” in her sentence “went for a walk with me to close to the nature”, she reported: “maybe ‘get close to nature’ is a set phrase.” Yet, the underlying reason was that a verb was missing.

All levels of students showed evidence in employing cognitive strategies such as providing metalinguistic explanations, activating previous knowledge, and making connections, but the extent varies. HPs showed a higher accuracy rate in explaining and correcting errors indicated by both explicit and implicit feedback. Of surprise, even LPs can provide metalinguistic explanations to some errors, but they showed uncertainty in applying the metalinguistic rules in practice. For example, relative pronoun “who” was added by Catherine to complete the sentence in Zhao’s 1st draft of HW1:

I saw a middle-aged women helped the old woman, who may be her grandma.

Zhao responded: “I know the teacher added ‘who’ to make it a subordinate clause. It also sounds more natural. However, I still don’t know why the sentence is wrong without the word ‘who’. Because of this uncertainty, this error remained untreated.

Previous knowledge was drawn by the learners in revision, such as teachers’ instruction in class, WF on previous writing drafts and writing skills learnt from external writing materials. Surprisingly, both HPs showed fewer examples in activating previous knowledge. Possible explanations were shown in Chang’s verbal report: “since there are not many issues marked by the teacher, I don’t need knowledge from different sources.” Later interview revealed Chang’s disappointment:

I hope to receive more individualized feedback. When there is not much feedback on my draft, I will feel at lost. Even with a high ranking, I still want to receive more WF.

Diverse metacognitive strategies were more frequently observed among HPs, including planning, monitoring, evaluating, managing attention, and reflecting. Chang and Qing showed their attempts at planning the time and energy before revisions. Both also tried to reflect themselves on their beliefs in writing, as Qing indicated:

Teacher WF makes me realize I still need to read more so I can have more concrete examples when explaining a main point. (2nd interview)

For other students, metacognitive strategies seemed limited, with only planning and managing attention being detected.

In sum, English proficiency level could influence students' depth of processing. However, lack of metalinguistic knowledge seemed not to be the only reason for students' lower level of processing. When LPs were equipped with some metalinguistic knowledge, they still had difficulty applying these rules in practice. While cognitive strategies could relate to higher cognitive engagement, it is the quality rather than the quantity that affect cognitive devotion. Conversely, the adoption of metacognitive strategies may indicate higher cognitive engagement.

Affective engagement

Affective engagement can be broken down into affect, judgement, appreciation, and meta-cognitive aspects (Martin & Rose, 2002). Commonly, all students confirmed the necessity and willingness to receive teacher WF and their appreciation and gratefulness for WF, as Guang suggested:

I am very grateful to receive feedback from Catherine, because I think marking our drafts is very tiresome. (2nd interview)

Generally, students agreed that teacher WF was beneficial for their revisions and writing abilities. Still, they proposed some problems which can contaminate the effectiveness of teacher WF. Most students reported that when the feedback was too general, it became more challenging for them to react to. Zhao elucidated that general feedback would be more valuable with concrete examples.

The teacher states “too colloquial” at the end of my draft but fewer corrections are found in my text. If the teacher underlines some words and sentences with the statement “colloquial” in the margin of my drafts, it would be more meaningful. (Verbal report)

While previous studies indicated that criticism should be used cautiously, Zhao's response disclosed that students might not be as vulnerable as expected to sharp comments:

(When responding to WF “very bad expression” in HW1): If I perform really poorly, I can accept criticism. But it may become more acceptable when it comes along with suggestions. Also, if all teacher WF are negative, I will feel frustrated.

Chang and Song underscored that controversial and unjustified WF (e.g., when the ranking was undesirable, but the number of in-text feedback was limited) would make them question the value of feedback, as Chang stated:

I get A for HW1 and B for HW2, but the number of WF for both tasks is similar. There is even more positive feedback in HW2. This makes me wonder why I only receive B. (Verbal report)

All students displayed a wide range of emotions, which seemed to vary across individuals and across tasks. Mixed feelings were most commonly found among students. For example, whereas Chang and Qing were happy about the ranking of their drafts, they also described their anxiousness because the teacher did not specify what was expected from students' second drafts. Confusion also resulted from teacher's illegible handwriting and students' insufficient English proficiency to identify and correct writing issues. Praises were detected to generate satisfaction when Guang expressed gratification with the remark "good" written in her drafts. Yet, different feelings towards praise were stated in Chang's verbal report:

I also want to know feedback on other students' drafts. If there are similar claims such as "You've done a good job" or "good" in other students' texts, I will not care much about these praises, since everyone will get them.

Emotional changes from HW1 to HW2 were detected in Zhao. Although she performed poorly at both tasks (B- and F respectively), Zhao seemed to be more encouraged and motivated by teacher WF:

I actually perform worse than last time. But I think I am less unhappy this time because I know what I have done wrong. By going through the revision circle of HW1, I do think I can do better in the future. (Verbal report)

Zhao also revealed the effect of modal verb on softening the teacher's request:

The teacher comments "could you rewrite it?". The word "could" makes me feel like the teacher is standing on my side to help me improve. So I am willing to rewrite the whole passage. Actually, I turn in my 2nd draft a few days before the deadline. (Verbal report)

Noticeably, both IMs showed their usage of meta-affective strategies to regulate their negative

emotions. Song mentioned “telling myself writing skills cannot be improved overnight” to build up her confidence during revision. Guang revealed her postponing strategy of HW2: “I didn’t do well this time, so I postponed my revision on purpose to calm myself”.

To encapsulate, while all students value and believe in the effect of WF, general and controversial feedback as well as criticism alone might affect how students react to WF. Various emotions were detected, but reasons attributing to these emotions differ among individuals and across homework. Meta-affective strategies were discernable among IMs to regulate negative emotions.

Discussion

Regardless of the English proficiency levels, all students had writing issues in linguistic forms and content. While most frequent issues among HPs and IMs remained at word-level, LPs showed writing issues from word to content level. Contrary to findings from Zhan (2015), subject-verb agreement error was not found in the current study. This could be attributed to the effect of explicit instruction. English teachers, especially in China, had put great effort accentuating this error type (Hinkel, 2001). Qing’s reply seems to prove that such effort has been worthy and efficient. Continuous classroom instruction could help students realize their errors cognitively, and accordingly, they might be more cautious when writing and reviewing their drafts (Sun, 2014).

Teacher WF on each writing piece incorporated in-text feedback and endnote commentary. In-text feedback was further divided into form-focused, content-focused and P&C (Ashwell, 2000). Previous evidence argued that content and form feedback should be delivered separately to avert confusing students about what aspects to centre on (Zamel, 1985). Interviews and verbal reports from student participants yielded converse evidence that they showed no sensitivity to whether form and content should be discretely provided. One feasible explanation would relate to students’ previous learning experiences (Han & Hyland, 2015). Since learners in the study seldom received teacher responses on their drafts during their year-1 study, they might be easily satisfied with teachers’ WF. Yet, students’ perceptions towards ideal WF might change as they get used to receiving teacher feedback.

With some previous studies corroborated teachers’ preference for implicit WF and the effect of indirect WF, text analysis exhibited that direct WF was the most common type used by the teacher participant. Such disagreement was also confirmed in Lee’s (2009) study. Although students were expected to pinpoint and correct their errors on their own, the teachers still provided more explicit corrections. Possible reasons came from school policy and exam-oriented culture. Nonetheless, Lee (2009) argued for more research to unpack more underlying and

internal reasons for the incongruity between teacher beliefs and teacher practice.

Silver & Lee (2007) accentuated that praises in end comments were pivotal since it could serve as a catalyst to regulate proper language behaviours and shape a more positive self-image. The current data lent further support to this conclusion that in-text compliments could also be beneficial. When praises with specific examples are provided, students can understand what they have done well and thus apply it to future writing.

Consistent with previous results highlighting terminal commentary as a summary of in-text feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2019), the study substantiated that end comments could also function to emotionally relate to students, which could impinge on how students value and react to WF (Chong, 2018). As Stern and Solomon (2006, p.39) purported, feedback would be more effective when it led to “better writing, better writers and better communication with students”.

Behavioural engagement concerns revision behaviours and observable actions using cognitive and metacognitive strategies. While prior studies argued that WF was more salient than oral feedback (Han & Hyland, 2015), the current data demonstrated that written responses can still be overlooked or neglected on purpose because of teacher’s poor handwriting, the beliefs that the teacher misunderstood the content (Mahfoodh & Pandian, 2011) or individual characteristics (Han & Hyland, 2015). The substitution was found to be used more frequently by HPs in response to direct WF. This finding argued against the previous observation that direct feedback could undermine student empowerment and thus provide little chance for learners to think of their own corrections (Baker & Hansen Bricker, 2010). Even when provided with accurate revisions, advanced students in the study took the initiatives to think of substitute corrections.

With reference to observable behaviours using cognitive and metacognitive strategies, whether to use external resources or not or what kinds of resources were used may not always imply extensive behavioural engagement. Instead, the level of engagement depends on the quality of resources and the way they would be used (Han & Hyland, 2015). Previous experience can also affect behavioural engagement (Zheng & Yu, 2018). Chang’s different experience between unpleasant peer feedback and satisfying teacher WF contributed to her appreciation and higher engagement with teacher responses.

Cognitive engagement incorporated the application of cognitive strategies, depth of processing, and demonstration of metacognitive strategies (Ellis, 2010). A variety of cognitive strategies were detected in participant students, such as providing metalinguistic explanations, activating previous knowledge, and making connections. Surprisingly, even LPs, at times, can provide clear explanations for some errors. However, even with accurate metalinguistic explanations, the corresponding revisions by LPs may still be inaccurate (Zhao’s example). A possible explanation could be the difference between language competence and language

performance (Chomsky, 2015). Language competence could be understood as the underlying linguistic rules of a target language, whereas language performance is considered as the actual act of speaking or writing in target forms. In other words, language performance could be a partial or sometimes incorrect manifestation of language competence (Koran, 2015). Thus, although students are equipped with some language rules, they may still have difficulty applying the rules to contexts. Therefore, when evaluating students' inaccurate revisions, teachers may try to understand whether they were due to a lack of language knowledge or an inaccurate application of this piece of knowledge, and then class instruction can be adjusted accordingly (Çakmak & Merç, 2021).

It is worthwhile mentioning that HPs showed limited experience using previous knowledge. While this may imply a lower level of behavioural engagement, teachers should be cautious about blaming this on students. Interviews from HPs revealed that the small amount of teacher WF provided less chance for editing, and they still expected more feedback even when they received a high score. This calls for more individualized feedback to suit the needs of students with different English proficiency (Zheng & Yu, 2018).

Depth of processing differed among students (Zheng & Yu, 2018). HPs showed more evidence of accurate understanding. IMs sometimes may rely on their intuitions to correct feedback. Observations from LPs showed that accurate correction did not always imply accurate understanding. Even with a limited understanding of target forms, writing issues can still be corrected because of direct WF. Therefore, teachers need to bear in mind student's varying proficiency levels and other individual differences when reviewing students' accurate revisions (Ferris et al., 1997). In regard to metacognitive engagement, HPs showed more frequent use of planning, managing attention and reflecting (Han & Hyland, 2015). For other students, the metacognitive engagement seemed less salient. This highlights the fact that students may be passive recipients of teacher feedback, showing a lack of effort in self-regulation (Kahu, 2013).

Affective engagement included affect, judgement, appreciation, and meta-affective strategies (Fredrick et al., 2004; Oxford, 2017). All students expressed the necessity and willingness to receive written evaluations and gratefulness for teacher WF (Han & Hyland, 2015). The benefits of teacher feedback to revisions and writing abilities were also corroborated by the learners (Çakmak & Merç, 2021). However, some students argued that feedback which was too general (Ferris, 2011) and controversial as well as criticism alone might be less valuable (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Previous studies highlighted that students felt unworthy about their writing levels and themselves when provided with harsh criticism (Silver & Lee, 2007). Yet Ke's examples show that students are more sophisticated than expected. While they don't welcome criticism, they can still accept them under two circumstances: 1) when they themselves acknowledge their

poor performance, or 2) when criticism is not provided alone. Praises or detailed advice that come together with criticism can act as alleviators to regulate students' negative feelings (Brimmer, 1982). This strategy was termed "paired act patterns" in Hyland and Hyland's (2001, p.194) study, which could mitigate the potential detrimental effect of disapproval from teachers. Teachers adopting these strategies could become more honest about students' writing performance with less possibility to hurt students' self-esteem and self-confidence (Cardelle & Corno, 1981).

A wide range of emotions was detected among students, such as happy, worry and confused. Praises commonly generated positive affective engagement (Chandler, 2003). For instance, less advanced students felt happy when they noticed their progress in writing (Chong, 2018). However, the usage of formulaic praises should be aware. Positive responses would be more helpful if they were supported by concrete examples in students' texts or explanations that students can apply to future learning (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). Confusion was engendered due to illegible handwriting (Lee, 2008a), unclear teachers' expectation of revised drafts (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004) and insufficient English abilities to identify target issues, especially indicated by indirect feedback (Ferris, 2006, p.99; Chandler, 2003).

As Mahfoodh (2017) posited that students' emotions with teacher feedback differ across essays, the current study further purported that such emotional changes could result from prior engagement with teacher WF. While Zhao experienced disappointment from HW1, the revision process allowed her to see progress in writing. Consequently, when she still performed poorly in HW2, she became more positive and confident than before. This case argues against the generality from MacDonald (1991) that, especially for low-level learners, they only feel frustrated or disappointed when receiving lower grades, and thus discredit teacher WF.

It also featured the function of revision not only as a facilitator to help students correct writing problems but also serve as an encouragement tool for students to discover their progress (McGarrell & Verbeem, 2007). Despite controversial opinions on the effect of revisions on students' writing abilities (Chandler, 2003), this finding provides a fresh perspective to value revision from its affective perspective. The act of revision per se and the improved draft could act as evidence to learners' writing development and thus install confidence in students (Mahfoodh & Pandian, 2011).

Another notable finding is about the advantage of hedges. Hedges such as the modal verb "could" was detected to soften negative feedback. This agrees with Hyland & Hyland (2001) that hedges could help alleviate the tense relationship between the teacher and the students. Negative emotions could also be adjusted by meta-affective behaviours such as self-comfort for continuous effort and delay of revision behaviours.

Conclusion

The present research investigated how 6 English-major Chinese university students of differing proficiency levels engaged with teacher WF in an EFL context from cognitive, behavioural and affective perspectives. Multiple sources were triangulated to explore the dynamic and complex relationship among the three dimensions of learner engagement.

Findings concluded that a more intense engagement with teacher WF could contribute to higher utilization of feedback (Han & Hyland, 2015). Proficiency level was observed to influence student engagement with teacher WF. Yet other mediating factors were also discovered, such as previous learning experiences and individual characteristics. In addition, the three dimensions were proven to interact with each other and thus supported Ellis' (2010) claim that a holistic view of cognitive, behavioural and affective engagement should be adopted when exploring students' responses to teacher WF. It is surmised that learner engagement with teacher WF is a dynamic, contextualized, and complicated construct that merits more attention (Zheng & Yu, 2018).

Nonetheless, some limitations of the study should be cited. Although some patterns of engagement were found among the learners, the small sample size implies that the results could not be generalized to students at all levels hesitantly. While changes in emotional engagement were observed in the study, other variations in engagement have not yet been detected. Future research could include a longer research period to evaluate whether students' cognitive and behavioural engagement might change. Moreover, the data was collected from an average-level university, where the English proficiency disparities were less obvious. Future research could be done in different instructional contexts to detect any other variances among different levels of students. Since WF includes at least two agencies, namely students and teachers, more studies could be done from the teachers' perspective, for instance, an investigation into the mismatch between teachers' beliefs and their real practice when providing WF.

Several implications could be drawn from the study for teachers struggling with WF. Firstly, students' attention could be drawn to recognize how WF can be supportive to their writing abilities and why such practice is provided in the way it is. Explicit instruction could be offered to explain teacher WF philosophy so that mutual understanding could be reached. Open discussions from time to time with students could generate a deeper understanding of how students perceive WF and what obstacles they have encountered when reacting to WF. Secondly, while face-saving culture is commonly acknowledged in Chinese culture (Yu & Lee, 2016), current data have reported that students are less vulnerable than expected. Thus, teachers could be more straightforward to indicate students' errors if necessary. However, if teachers are still aware of the possible detrimental effect of criticism, paired act patterns could be a reasonable

strategy (Hyland & Hyland, 2001). To conclude, regardless of different feedback strategies, teacher WF would be more easily accepted when it is delivered sincerely.

Moreover, since English proficiency levels could affect engagement, teachers need to familiarize themselves with students' ability levels to adjust their feedback strategies (Ferris, 2011). Advanced learners might desire in-depth revisions both on their grammatical accuracy and thinking levels to activate their cognitive, behavioural, and affective engagement more extensively. Praises would be more valuable to less skilled writers to motive their writing interest and improve self-confidence as L2 writers (Silver & Lee, 2007). Students can also be encouraged to work in pairs, especially with different proficiencies, to discuss teacher WF. In this way, scaffolding would be provided from the students' stance, where less power relations may involve (Gielen et al., 2010).

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Appendixes

Appendix A Taxonomy of writing issues (modified from Han & Hyland (2015), Lee (2004) and Zamel (1985))

Writing issues	Sub-categories	Explanation
writing errors	Word choice	Inappropriate and unclear use of words; Exclude part of speech, spelling, preposition, pronouns, informal, phrases and idioms, and Chinglish
	Part of speech	Exclude errors with verb
	Errors with verb	Misuse of verbs; Include errors with verb tense and verb form
	Singular-plural	Errors on noun plurals
	Article	Inaccurate use of zero, definite, and indefinite articles
	Pronoun	Misuses of pronouns; exclude unclear pronoun reference
	Run-on	Fused sentence and comma splice
	Fragment	Incomplete sentences that lack either a subject or a verb, or both
	Punctuation	Misapplication of symbols
	Spelling	Inaccurate spelling of words
	Sentence structure with word order issue	Sentences follow a wrong word order
	Sentence structure (others)	Inaccurate sentence structure; include dangling modifier
	Informal	Inappropriate choice of words or format
	Phrases and idioms	Misapplication of phrases and idioms
	Preposition	Inaccurate use of prepositions

	Chinglish	Ungrammatical and nonsensical English which is affected by Chinese
Content problems	Vague meaning	Unclear pronoun reference and confusing content, but still relevant to the main idea
	Other Content problems (including redundance & repetition)	Illogical and irrelevant content

Appendix B Modification taxonomy (adapted from Hyland (1998))

Modification taxonomy	Explanation
accurately followed	Writing issues are corrected following exactly the teacher's direct feedback
initial stimulus	Writing issues are accurately corrected initiated by indirect feedback
substitution	Writing issues are corrected but different from the teacher's direct feedback
incorrect	Writing issues are inaccurately corrected
deletion	Writing issues are deleted
no correction	Writing issues are untreated
reorganization	Students reorganize the sentences/paragraphs but with no or minor content modification
rewriting	Students write sentences/paragraphs in a different way, but the meaning remained similar or the same
new content	Students add new content

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