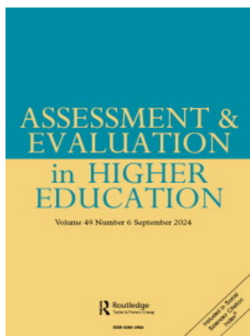

Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/caeh20

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To cite this article: Joseph Arthur Davies (07 Oct 2024): ‘*Feedbackpacking*’: mapping the journey towards independent L2 student feedback literacy, Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, DOI: 10.1080/02602938.2024.2410305

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2024.2410305

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Published online: 07 Oct 2024.

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ASSESSMENT & EVALUATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2024.2410305

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'Feedbackpacking': mapping the journey towards independent L2 student feedback literacy

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ABSTRACT
Generally, there are two kinds of travellers: package tourists and independent backpackers. The journey towards second language (L2) student feedback literacy shares many features with independent backpacker travel, and there are benefits to viewing student feedback literacy this way. Despite feedback playing a fundamental role in higher education learners' development, students and teachers are currently dissatisfied with feedback. This research uses the metaphor of independent backpacker travel to explore how L2 learners can become more effective users of feedback through *feedbackpacking*. Specifically, seven Chinese undergraduate English for Academic Purposes students at a Sino-foreign joint venture university were interviewed. Data were analysed thematically to highlight salient features of students' journeys towards L2 student feedback literacy and to demonstrate that for such learners, this journey is perhaps more complex than current understandings assume. By linking students' self-reported feedback practices to the concept of independent backpacker travel, the practical insights reported will benefit higher education practitioners across disciplines who wish to develop their L2 learners' feedback literacy. The results emphasize the importance of context, culture, and language for effective feedback, highlighting the benefits for L2 learners to adopt a mindset of *feedbackpacking* in order achieve L2 feedback literacy.

KEYWORDS
English as a medium of instruction; English for academic purposes; feedback culture; student feedback literacy

Introduction

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of travellers: package tourists and independent backpackers. Despite both groups often sharing similar travel goals to relax, visit new places, and explore new cultures, they achieve these in very different ways. For instance, package tourists tend to, as the name suggests, purchase one hassle-free package where flights, transfers, hotel, food and sightseeing trips are all included. In contrast, independent backpackers plan all the details of a trip by themselves and as such, aim to maximize time and value. Having travelled to over 75 different countries as both an independent backpacker and a package tourist, I believe that the concept of independent backpacker travel can be used to enhance higher education feedback understandings and practices. In this article, I will use package travel and independent backpacking as metaphors for feedback. Through this, I aim to elaborate upon current

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understandings and frameworks of feedback to provide an alternate way of thinking about feedback that is more appropriate for second language user (L2) higher education learners.

Inspiration for applying this traveling metaphor to higher education feedback practices was taken from Wilder-Davis et al. (2021) fast food (feedback), McArthur et al. (2011) boot grit (feedback) and Huxham et al.'s (2015) natural lines (curriculum design) analogies. Specifically, Wilder-Davis et al. (2021) differentiate between fast food feedback, designed for rapid consumption to satisfy only basic needs and balanced diet feedback, which applies a slower approach with links between meals (modules/assessments), introducing learners to different flavours and ingredients that they may wish to use independently. Moreover, McArthur et al. (2011) use the metaphor of boot grit to develop a novel dialogic feedback mechanism to address immediate student questions in lectures that if left unresolved, like stones in a hiker's boots, could have longer-term negative consequences for student learning (or for hikers' feet). Finally, Huxham et al. (2015) apply the mountaineering metaphor of natural lines, a navigation technique that uses the natural features of the rock, to support students' co-navigation and co-construction of curriculum with teachers. All three of these metaphors when applied to higher education research enhance understandings of complex phenomena by allowing readers to make connections with tangible real-life experiences.

This research uses the traveling analogy of independent backpacking to develop upon the useful but culturally homogenous concept of student feedback literacy (Carless and Boud 2018) for L2 higher education learners through the concept of *feedbackpacking*. For the purpose of this research, *feedbackpacking* refers to both the process that second L2 higher education learners go through and the mindset that they must adopt in order to become successful independent users of feedback. For example, becoming a competent and confident independent traveller requires careful planning, meticulous resource allocation, adaptability to different cultures, comprehension and accurate use of different languages, and resilience to overcome the unexpected. In this paper, I argue that using the *feedbackpacker* metaphor to apply such skills to the development of student feedback literacy, especially for L2 higher education learners, allows for a greater understanding of feedback within such contexts.

Unique travel experiences can shape one's personality, growth and development. Similarly, feedback can have one of the biggest positive influences on higher education learners (Hattie and Timperley 2007). To achieve such positive influences, this paper will begin by using the literature to outline the essential tools *feedbackpackers* should pack before embarking on their journey towards L2 student feedback literacy. Following this, the qualitative methodology used for this empirical study in terms of data collection and analysis will be outlined. Finally, the *feedbackpacking* analogy will be used to frame the discussion which culminates in practical implications for readers.

Packing the (feed)backpack: what to include?

When preparing to travel on their independent journey towards L2 student feedback literacy, *feedbackpackers* need: essential travel destination information, language phrase books and cultural guides. Regular access to such information will facilitate safe and smooth traveling. Therefore, these will now be discussed in relation to the feedback literature.

Essential travel destination information

In order to safely and successfully travel to and through a destination independently, backpackers require detailed information of their destination(s) that they use to plan and execute their trip. Similarly, learners cannot be expected to achieve feedback literacy without explicit information and knowledge of what it is and access to some techniques and tools to achieve it. Therefore,

this paper begins by sharing insights from the literature to determine some of the essential tools and skills students need to pack in their (feed)backpack to have at their disposal to support their journey towards L2 student feedback literacy.

Carless and Boud (2018) define feedback as 'a process through which learners make sense of information from various sources and use it to enhance their work or learning strategies' (1315). Here, feedback is much more than information transmitted from the teacher. Instead, students' active role in the feedback process through sense-making is emphasized. However, according to higher education student evaluation data, students frequently report being unhappy with feedback (Winstone and Carless 2020, 5) and teachers report dissatisfaction with the time required to produce feedback and the limited obvious impact it has on their students (Price et al. 2010; Price, Handley, and Millar 2011). Further confusion is caused by the lack of consistent feedback practices across modules and programmes (Wilder-Davis et al. 2021). Even published feedback research articles (Winstone et al. 2022), UK university best practice documentation (Winstone 2022), and UK university feedback policy (Davies 2023) have all been shown to use outdated transmission focused language when referring to feedback. Consequently, although much feedback research has been conducted within higher education contexts (Tight 2021, 124-128), it would appear that current practices are ineffective, inefficient and often contradictory, requiring further conceptualization and refinement.

An important line of current feedback research has centred on student feedback literacy, which Carless and Boud (2018) define as 'the understandings, capacities and dispositions needed to make sense of information and use it to enhance work or learning strategies'. They elaborate that students require 'an understanding of what feedback is and how it can be managed effectively; capacities and dispositions to make productive use of feedback; and appreciation of the roles of teachers and themselves in these processes' (1316). This conceptualization takes a social constructivist approach as feedback is generated through dialogue, sense-making and the co-construction of knowledge. However, as teachers and students have been found to hold different perceptions of what feedback actually is (Carless 2006; Dawson et al. 2019; Davies 2024), co-constructing such knowledge may prove challenging. This is akin to traveling with a companion who has completely different travel preferences and expectations for the trip. Furthermore, such a framework, although helpful in better understanding how students can use feedback to succeed, fails to address the powerful influence context and culture have upon feedback (Chong 2021).

Just like successfully planning and navigating an independent backpacker trip, Carless and Boud (2018, 1318) argue students need a range of strategies to understand and use feedback. However, it is unclear how students can develop such strategies and who is responsible for this. Furthermore, Winstone et al. (2017) found students noticed information pertaining to such strategies within feedback comments but struggled to enact them. Despite most higher education institutions providing support for students with academic writing, study skills and research methods, there is currently far less systematic student support for feedback at an institutional level despite its obvious potential benefits (Winstone and Carless 2020). For example, students may fail to recognize forms of feedback other than written comments on their work (Price, Handley, and Millar 2011) and may hold expectations that it is the teacher's responsibility to correct their work. In response, de Kleijn (2023) proposed a promising instructional feedback model that uses Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development to develop both students' and teachers' feedback literacy, however, overall, such systematic support is lacking.

To develop students' feedback literacy through curriculum, Carless and Boud (2018) propose designing peer review tasks so students become familiar making judgements and applying criteria to the academic work of others. Students need to develop evaluative judgement skills to evaluate their own work and the work of their peers (Cowan 2010; Boud et al. 2018). A further advantage is that peer feedback can reduce the affective/emotional impact of receiving feedback as it provides an opportunity to discuss and negotiate following social constructivist principles

(Yang and Carless 2013). However, training and explicit instruction of its benefits are needed. For example, Min (2006) found that training students in peer review using a model student essay significantly improved uptake. Carless and Boud (2018) also recommend using exemplars which clearly demonstrate to students the required outcomes of an assessment by showing them rather than telling them; exemplars are tangible not abstract. Furthermore, using exemplars can reduce anxiety as assessment requirements are made clearer, which can help avoid unexpected negative teacher judgements.

Finally, much feedback research has been conceptual, with various models and approaches proposed, which can be challenging to apply in practice. In response, Lipnevich and Panadero (2021) and Panadero and Lipnevich (2022) synthesized fourteen prominent feedback models to propose a new and useful integrative MISCA feedback model. The MISCA model categories the sampled feedback models according to message, implementation, student, context and agents, highlighting key interactions between each and points towards future feedback theory and practice. Of the fourteen models, Carless and Boud's (2018) student feedback literacy framework includes four key features: appreciating feedback, making judgements, managing affect and taking action. Furthermore, Hattie and Timperley's (2007) feedback model suggests feedback operates at four levels: self-regulation, process, self and task levels. They argue feedback operating at the self-regulation and process levels are most likely to lead to student uptake and improvement. Taking an empirical approach, Molloy, Boud, and Henderson (2020) explored which capabilities students required to develop student feedback literacy, identifying seven categories: commits to feedback as improvement, appreciates feedback as an active process, elicits information to improve learning, processes feedback information, acknowledges and works with emotions, acknowledges feedback as a reciprocal process, and enacts outcomes of processing of feedback information. Ultimately, it is important to share such information, insights and strategies with learners, so they are well prepared to safely and smoothly embark on their independent *feedbackpacking* journey towards L2 student feedback literacy.

Language phrase books

Despite such useful insights into student feedback literacy, what seems to be lacking is an appreciation that cultural, linguistic and contextual influences are likely to impact students' ultimate success engaging with feedback (Chong 2021; Rovagnati, Pitt, and Winstone 2022). Independently travelling the world requires a range of contextualized travel guides for different countries and regions, with useful language phrases and cultural tips. Similarly, as L2 students must navigate contextual and linguistic differences in the various higher education feedback practices they are exposed to (Wilder-Davis et al. 2021), it is unlikely that one ubiquitous framework for student feedback literacy will be suitable for all contexts. One crucial factor that is often overlooked in the feedback literature is the fact that L2 learners may lack the linguistic ability to successfully interpret and use complex feedback language (Sutton 2012). For example, research has shown students' linguistic inabilities can inhibit both the feedback process (Higgins 2000; Jönsson 2013) and students' ability to successfully study English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) courses (Hu and Lei 2014). Li and Han (2021) argue teachers need to raise awareness of the challenges such students face and adjust their own feedback practices accordingly. Not only do L2 learners have to comprehend feedback information in another language, but they must also decipher complex discipline-specific academic metalanguage much like how global travellers must interpret strong accents, colloquialisms and idiomatic expressions.

Mirroring the support that independent backpackers receive from language phrase books, L2 higher education learners often take compulsory English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. This is an acknowledgement that communication using academic discourse and within academic genres requires a more complex and accurate execution of disciplinary-specific lexicogrammatical features. To scaffold learners' academic language development, the frequent provision of

comprehensive written corrective feedback is a common feature of such courses (Han and Hyland 2019; Zhang and Cheng 2021). However, there is some debate over the effectiveness of written corrective feedback (Truscott 2007; Lee 2017) and such teacher-centric information transmission modes do not necessarily align with current new paradigm learning-focused feedback approaches (Winstone and Carless 2020). Furthermore, as Hyland (2013) correctly argues, the goals of EAP courses go far beyond writing accurately and instead should focus on supporting students' entry into and engagement with disciplinary communities. As such, Hyland (2013) argues that feedback within such contexts has often incorrectly focused too heavily on error correction and on the final written product at the expense of developing students' disciplinary communication skills.

This stance emphasizes students' active use of language in the feedback process rather than passive correction of their errors, and this is more in line with the independent backpacker experience of communicating with locals along their travels. Based upon the previously identified challenges associated with current higher education practices, the goals of EAP courses, and many L2 higher education students' linguistic limitations, including formalised student feedback literacy language training within EAP courses seems reasonable. Such training could easily include the provision of a feedback phrase book to assist learners in both better understanding L2 feedback comments and error correction codes and verbalizing their own feedback comments and queries to facilitate feedback dialogue and engagement with peer feedback.

Cultural travel guides

It is hoped that this research can lead to the creation of a more nuanced and culturally sensitive understanding of L2 student feedback literacy that is applicable for L2 learners within higher education contexts. Even if independent backpackers can successfully manage the language differences along their journey, they must also overcome cultural barriers. Similarly, *feedbackpackers* must also navigate between and across institutional, disciplinary and individual instructor feedback differences. As consistent programme-wide approaches to feedback are generally lacking (Wilder-Davis et al. 2021), and feedback policy varies wildly (Davies 2023), this creates different feedback cultures of which students, just like the independent backpacker, need to navigate to succeed.

Feedback culture can be defined as 'the values and beliefs of the individuals involved and how these shape the norms and expectations for feedback interactions' (Watling, Ajjawi, and Bearman 2020, 294). This is of particular importance to L2 learners studying in EMI contexts. As Nguyen, Terlouw, and Pilot (2006) argue, conflicts can arise when 'Western' pedagogies are applied to other cultural contexts without careful consideration. For example, in Korea, Young-Ihm (2002) found a clear discrepancy between what teachers believed and their actual practices due to a conflict between 'Western' pedagogy and local cultural beliefs. Such conflicts will resonate with backpackers who have experienced culture shock. What is needed is a culturally appropriate pedagogy that shows respect for cultural differences in its design and implementation; the design and implementation of feedback should be no different. However, much of the feedback literature shows little regard for culturally appropriate feedback designs and, overall, contextualizations based on learners' sociocultural and educational backgrounds are lacking. One simple method to help achieve culturally appropriate feedback practices would be to develop specific feedback culture guides that outline to students the various feedback practices, expectations and norms across programmes and modules.

To demonstrate such cultural inappropriacy, despite many assessment and feedback scholars advocating for peer feedback tasks (Lundstrom and Baker 2009: Carless and Boud 2018), this approach may not be wholly appropriate for all learners. For example, learners of Confucian heritage often hold strong views, based on previous educational experiences, that point towards hierarchical relationships of high power distance between students and teachers (see Nguyen, Terlouw, and Pilot 2006, 4-7 for an excellent explanation). Such strongly held cultural perceptions

may inhibit peer and self-feedback tasks as such learners expect the teacher to have all the answers (Maley 1983). Further challenges of applying feedback research insights to users of Confucian heritage relate to the powerful concept of '*face*'. For instance, Zhang and Head (2010, 3) explain how *'face'* can discourage Chinese students within international or transnational educational contexts from disagreeing with others. Such observations not only have implications for peer feedback but may inhibit the execution of dialogic and conversational learning-focused feedback practices (Winstone and Carless 2020). Therefore, it is important that cultures and contexts are respected and considered within both pedagogical and feedback designs to avoid Englishisation (Kirkpatrick 2017) and potential pedagogical colonisation.

Finally, an important related issue is how to design culturally appropriate pedagogies and feedback processes for learners studying within Sino-foreign higher education contexts. As opposed to thoughtlessly adopting 'Western' pedagogies and policies in potentially inappropriate ways, which UK feedback policy analysis has identified (Davies 2023), such universities enroll students located in a country (China) different from where the awarding institution is based. Therefore, learners quite rightly expect an international EMI curriculum and pedagogy. However, the same linguistic and cultural challenges still exist, and as Ou and Gu (2021) explain, learners within such contexts must transition to completely new educational, social and linguistic environments. Moreover, students in Asia (Kirkpatrick 2017, 32) and China (Hu and Lei 2014) have generally been shown to lack the linguistic ability to successfully study in English. Despite this, in 2021 there were 2,539 transnational higher education programmes in China (Ou and Gu 2021). Such data suggests Chinese learners are becoming more open to exploring international education; much like the independent global backpacker.

The question is, if feedback can have one of the biggest impacts upon learners (Hattie and Timperley 2007), but their linguistic and cultural backgrounds are potentially inhibiting their successful engagement with such feedback, what support do L2 Chinese learners require on their journey towards L2 student feedback literacy? So far, this paper has argued that the concept of *feedbackpacking* can help better operationalize the complex phenomenon of student feedback literacy for such learners. Furthermore, I argue that the provision of essential feedback literacy information and techniques, feedback language phrase books and feedback culture guides can support *feedbackpackers* on their journey towards L2 student feedback literacy. To examine the concept of *feedbackpacking* further, this empirical research will now explore the actual feedback practices of L2 Chinese EAP students at a Sino-foreign joint venture university.

Learning about the *feedbackpacking* experience

The following sections will outline the methodology used in this research to gather and analyse primary qualitative student data.

Gathering feedbackpacker testimonials

As this research aims to understand L2 students' feelings about and use of feedback within a Sino-foreign EMI context, a qualitative approach was adopted. Specifically, 45-minute semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven conveniently sampled Chinese undergraduate EAP students (AKA the *feedbackpackers*) at a Sino-foreign joint venture university. Interviews were flexible and dialogical and focused on students' perceptions of and engagement with feedback. The feedbackpacker analogy was not explicitly discussed with students but rather used as a lens for data analysis and presentation. For context, convenience sampling was used as the sampled students had already taken an undergraduate language teaching methodology course (taught by the author) and had knowledge of feedback and assessment principles and could consider both student and teacher roles. However, as no male Chinese students enrolled

on this course, all participants were female. Finally, as power dynamics could play a role, interviews were conducted after final course grades were calculated and had been communicated to students.

To provide more accurate data pertaining to students' engagement with feedback, and to promote recall, participants provided example feedback documentation from their EAP course during the interview. This design was used by Jiang and Yu (2021), whose interviewees provided snapshots of their digital footprint, when investigating English teachers' feedback practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. They argue this approach helps to situate participants' self-reported data into concrete feedback activities. Interviews were recorded using Zoom and transcribed verbatim. Prior to data analysis, to increase validity, interview transcripts were returned to participants to check accuracy, clarify any points, add further detail, and confirm identifiable information had been suitably redacted *via* member checks as recommended by Maxwell (2004, 259). Finally, university ethical approval was received following an institutional review board review and pseudonyms have been used to protect respondents' anonymity.

Interpreting and using feedbackpacker testimonials

When planning an independent backpacker trip, much information is available on travel review websites and forums for travellers to use. The successful backpacker will develop systems to analyse, screen and interpret such traveller testimonials based on context and their own personal travel experiences. In line with this analogy, once member checked, the *feedbackpacker* testimonial data for this study were thematically analysed to identify, analyse and report patterns broadly following the six steps (data familiarization, coding, theming, reviewing themes, naming themes, reporting) proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 87). Specifically, Nvivo 12 software was used to facilitate a deductive analysis of the data. A deductive analysis was conducted to compare the results to current student feedback literacy research, as recommended by Nieminen and Carless (2022), and to a linked study on EAP teacher feedback literacy (Davies 2024) within the same higher education context. Finally, it is worth noting the dual positionality of the researcher and analyst as both a cultural member and cultural commentator (Braun and Clarke 2006, 94) whose own knowledge, assumptions and expectations actively contribute towards qualitative data analysis. This brings us back to the analogy of the successful backpacker who reads and interprets online travel reviews with their own past travel experiences and expectations in mind.

Feedbackpacking – the journey towards independent L2 student feedback literacy

Before discussing the results, to demonstrate how the concepts of independent backpacking and L2 student feedback literacy align, a series of comparative features are provided in Table 1. What follows is a discussion of the four most important *feedbackpacker* features.

Finding a suitable travel companion

Based upon current feedback research, there is a clear preference for new paradigm learning-focused feedback practices that rely on social constructivist (Winstone and Carless 2020, 12; Carless and Winstone 2023, 3) shared student and teacher roles and the dialogic co-construction of common understandings. However, the theories, models and concepts reported, despite their potential benefit to learners, are not always practiced in reality. Much like how the successful planning and execution of a backpacking trip relies heavily on fellow travellers' personalities, preferences and general compatibility, for such feedback approaches to succeed, a positive and supportive relationship between feedback provider and receiver must be established and

Table 1. Comparison of independent backpacking and L2 student feedback literacy.

Independent backpacking	L2 student feedback literacy
Finding a suitable and compatible travel partner with similar interests and travel preferences	Understanding different teachers' feedback practices and working with peers who can satisfy learners' feedback needs.
Navigating different cultures and contexts.	Navigating different educational contexts, levels, disciplines, modules, teachers etc. and their associated feedback practices and requirements.
Understanding and using different languages.	Understanding and using English as a foreign language, academic and disciplinary language, and feedback metalanguage.
Packing essential clothes, tools and travel items for different climates and activities (e.g. mountain trekking vs beach sunbathing).	Developing and applying various skills and tools to seek and use feedback from different sources for different assignments across different courses and disciplines.
Independent planning and execution of a trip with no support from a travel agency.	Students demonstrating agency by taking a central independent role in the feedback process with much less reliance on their teacher.
Limited financial and time resources that need to be maximized.	Seeking opportunities to receive and use valuable feedback from various sources and maximising that feedback's value.
Dealing with unexpected challenges independently.	Managing the emotional and affective impact of receiving criticism on personal academic work.

maintained. This need to find and work with the ideal travel partner on a students' feedback literacy journey applies to both instructor and peer feedback.

Firstly, the benefits of peer feedback are well reported (Carless and Boud 2018; Tight 2021) as this encourages students to make judgements about academic work, exposes them to positive and negative models and allows them to apply the findings from such peer evaluations to their own academic work (Lundstrom and Baker 2009). However, despite playing a prominent role in all the EAP courses reported by respondents, which was corroborated by EAP teachers (Davies 2024), peer feedback results varied, often depending upon who students were paired with for peer feedback tasks.

As previously mentioned, if the aim is to develop social constructivist (Winstone and Carless 2020, 12; Carless and Winstone 2023, 3) dialogic feedback approaches, then more care and consideration should perhaps be given to how students are paired for peer feedback tasks. In fact, when incompatible students are paired, more harm can be done than good, wasting valuable time and resources and causing frustration. This was explained vividly by Mingzhu:

> One thing that makes me really upset is that I took two hours to write two peer feedbacks for my classmates at one EAP course. It's detailed, it's really friendly. It used EAP professor's style, and it's really constructive…
>
> When I received their feedback, one student told me, "Look, I'm too busy, I can't have time to give you feedback… I only give the feedback of the first paragraph." It's all compliments. I feel angry when I received this not truthfully written feedback from my classmates…
>
> It really depends on the person, their self-control and self-discipline, and there are moral issues.

In response to the commonly reported imbalance between students' peer feedback provisions, students suggested that EAP teachers could grade and provide feedback on peer feedback submissions in order to increase students' extrinsic motivation to complete such tasks wholeheartedly. This supports Han and Xu's (2020) findings that providing consistent teacher feedback on students' peer feedback has the potential to develop student feedback literacy.

> The teacher can have a window to submit our [peer] feedback just to have a letter grade like A or B (Meilian)
>
> Count [peer] feedback quality as part of our final grade. It's extrinsic motivation. (Mingzhu)

Further suggestions centred on providing specific details of the roles students need to take and information they should include within their peer feedback *via* checklists and guidelines.

> One professor gave us an instruction on what information we need to include in our peer feedback. He gave us a checklist. It's very detailed and very specific and very easy to handle. (Mingzhu)

However, linking back to the concept of finding a suitable travel partner, it would be worth considering the benefits of pairing students for peer feedback tasks according to their academic needs, feedback preferences, and general motivation for completing peer feedback tasks. Such data could easily be elicited through initial needs analyses. Additionally, allowing students to continue working together throughout a course to develop long-term mutually beneficial relationships could help. This was well articulated by Zhuli and follow-up research exploring the impact of different peer review pair dynamics could prove insightful.

> I think the first challenge is to find appropriate partner because different students have different studying styles and learning styles and they may have different personalities… Even though they give feedback, you don't think you can use them. (Zhuli)

Using an experienced tour guide

Given the reported challenges higher education students have with feedback (Price et al. 2010; Jönsson 2013; de Kleijn 2023), students need to work with a knowledgeable and supportive teacher who can help scaffold their understanding and use of feedback information. This is similar to the selection of a reputable and experienced local tour guide when maximizing local knowledge on a tour. Furthermore, teachers and students often hold divergent views related to feedback (Carless 2006; Dawson et al. 2019; Davies 2024), and higher education policies (Davies 2023) and programmes (Wilder-Davis et al. 2021) generally lack consistency in how teachers (should) implement feedback. Therefore, consideration of students' feedback preferences and compatibility with different teachers' feedback approaches and expectations should be considered more in curriculum and assessment design to maximize feedback efficacy. For instance, respondents reported varied feedback practices from their EAP teachers and even wider variation beyond EAP courses, with students demonstrating different preferences for different approaches:

> I actually have several different EAP professors and they have different [feedback] styles. I think each of them have some benefits that I appreciate. Some are more detailed and some are more concise and give me more room to think by myself. (Zhuli)

> I would prefer less like spelling mistakes or grammar mistake. I would like to focus more on the word choice and maybe the structure of paragraph and also the idea of my whole essay. (Meilian)

However, students also acknowledged the challenges teachers face in adopting feedback practices that are suitable for all learners.

> It's very hard to give a feedback that accommodate all the needs of our students. (Shanhu)

As feedback has been shown to have such a huge impact on learners (Hattie and Timperley 2007), students should be informed of the feedback practices and expectations of different teachers and courses much like how course learning outcomes and assignment details are provided within course syllabi. This would allow learners to make more informed course selection decisions as they map out their academic journey, much like planning an independent backpacking trip. Linking to this, students reported that they received very little information about different EAP teachers' feedback practices and expectations, but suggested that such information would be helpful to know at the start of courses.

One further suggestion put forward by students that could help reduce the previously identified incongruence between students and teachers (Carless 2006; Dawson et al. 2019; Davies 2024) was to provide learners with an opportunity to state their feedback preferences *via*

interactive cover sheets or short class surveys. Bloxham and Campbell (2010) report the benefits of such interactive feedback cover sheets and this could also improve teachers' efficiency, linking to Carless and Winstone's (2023) pragmatic teacher feedback literacy dimension. It would also help to ensure the feedback students receive is most relevant and useful for their needs maximizing the feedback's value.

Experiencing and navigating different cultures

Learners transitioning from traditional Chinese high schools to EMI Sino-foreign higher education contexts share characteristics with package holidaymakers embarking on their first backpacker trip as both encounter and must overcome culture shock. For example, Ou and Gu (2021) highlight the educational, social, and linguistic differences students must adapt to. For *feedback-packers*, these socioeducational differences apply directly to the new feedback practices learners are exposed to. Previous research has investigated the major challenges students' face in relation to feedback (Jönsson 2013; Winstone et al. 2017) but specific insights into how Chinese learners handle the transition from L1 high school to EMI higher education feedback practices are lacking.

Respondents reported several factors that they had to adapt to when transitioning to Sino-foreign higher education context feedback practices. For instance, factors related to Confucian heritage culture, high school and higher education differences, disciplinary differences, and the expectation to engage in regular peer feedback were widely reported. Of particular note, was an obvious acknowledgement of the perceived high power distance between teachers and students (Nguyen, Terlouw, and Pilot 2006, 4-7), with learners still relying heavily on their teacher for feedback much like traditional Chinese high school contexts. Such findings imply that the cultural influences reported by Maley (1983) are still relevant today, some 40 years later, and should therefore be carefully considered within feedback design. For instance, Shanhu commented that 'above all, teachers should be the people who is most responsible for our feedback' because they are 'in charge'. She elaborated by explaining 'We as students should value the teachers' feedback most because they also have experience or the careers that could benefit our article.'

These findings not only support much research investigating Chinese students, but when applied to feedback, demonstrate that such cultural expectations have the potential to inhibit the adoption of dialogic learning-focused feedback approaches. For example, Shanhu reported 'At first, I was quite reluctant to talk to my professors because I always feel nervous, and also the face-to-face talking can really reveal my authentic opinions.' Meilian's comments were also quite telling, she explained how she reverts to the traditional Chinese way of feedback as that 'experience' is 'carved' in her brain. She emphasized how these 'painful' past feedback experiences were actually motivating. Such comments emphasize the challenges students face when adapting from traditional Chinese high school to Sino-foreign university feedback practices, suggesting more carefully thought-out scaffolding is required. This is likely also true for students of other cultures and follow-up research exploring the extent to which such cultural barriers affect students across different contexts would be worthwhile.

Such cultural influences have further implications for peer feedback. From my own experience of working with such students and as supported by the results, Chinese students' peer feedback is often overly positive, too general and lacks constructive criticism. This was highlighted by Shanhu who interestingly pointed out that this phenomenon does not exist with her international classmates' peer feedback in non-EAP classes:

> There is also the personality thing. Chinese students hardly feel they need to show the disapproval or to refute their peers. The feedback cannot be quite effective and direct. They will use very vague language to express their opinions. Yes, and for international students, this problem does actually disappear.

This supports Zhang and Head's (2010, 3) assertion that *'face'* can discourage Chinese students from disagreeing with others. These results suggest that like preparing for an extended trip overseas, more could and perhaps should be done, pre-departure, to prepare students for such a different socioeducational feedback culture (Watling, Ajjawi, and Bearman 2020; Chong 2021; Rovagnati, Pitt, and Winstone 2022) in terms of the norms and expectations for feedback within such contexts.

A final point that links to Chinese students' previous educational experiences is a lack of autonomy, agency and independence (key independent backpacker skills) to make informed decisions about their academic work based on feedback. As students have previously relied upon their teachers for ultimate guidance and the 'correct' answer (Maley 1983), it can prove challenging when they are presented with alternative peer feedback opinions and particularly when peer feedback contradicts their teacher's feedback. For instance, Shanhu explained 'the most extreme case is if the peer feedback I received contradicts my professor's feedback, then I would be quite confused.' To address this, students should be encouraged to focus on the fact that for peer feedback, it is often the reviewer who benefits more than the receiver (Lundstrom and Baker 2009). Such findings also lend further support to the importance of developing students' evaluative judgement skills (Cowan 2010; Boud et al. 2018).

Learning the language

The linguistic, academic, and disciplinary barriers to feedback that L2 Chinese learners face closely resemble the challenges independent backpackers must overcome whilst communicating with locals during their trip. Jönsson's (2013) meta-analysis of higher education feedback research identified that students failed to understand academic feedback language due to linguistic inability. This is supported by Higgins (2000) who argues that many learners are unable to understand and interpret feedback comments. Such findings should be concerning for those engaged in designing assessment and feedback mechanisms for L2 higher education learners. Furthermore, it is not just that L2 learners have to interpret feedback in a second/foreign language, but as Carless (2006) points out, such feedback is often embedded within disciplinary and academic discourse which many L2 students do not have (full) access to. With more training, exposure to, and practice using specific feedback language, L2 students' comprehension and appropriate use of such language should be developed, benefiting the feedback process.

Within EAP and academic writing courses, error correction feedback is commonly provided (Han and Hyland 2019; Zhang and Cheng 2021). To achieve this, error correction codes are commonly used as an efficient student-centred method of informing students of errors without directly correcting their work. However, the results showed a lack of correction code comprehension, leading to confusion and subsequent embarrassment to ask the teacher for clarification. For example, despite excellent English language competence, Meilian failed to understand the error correction code PL (plural) despite her EAP teacher giving her a correction code sheet with clear explanations and examples:

> At that time, I was super confused and I don't even remember that the teacher mentioned that in class, but the teacher did mention it right after the feedback in her next class. I was quite confused at the feedback initially and I try to Google PL, what does PL mean?

This once again suggests that more pre-departure support is needed in terms of scaffolding and training before feedback is given so that students can better comprehend academic and feedback metalanguage and avoid feelings of anxiety and embarrassment. This was echoed by other students:

> I was given that [error correction] handout, but I actually didn't use it. I cannot even find it now. I think it may be hard to check that in the class since every student have different situations and have different mistakes. (Zhuli)

English language competence can also have implications for peer feedback. For instance, students may pay less attention to peer feedback that is received from students who they perceive to have lower English language ability. For instance, when discussing peer feedback, Xin stated '…his English is not that good. Why should I listen to him?' The importance of students developing and practicing their academic English language skills for giving feedback was also raised. Specifically, Shanhu complained that providing and receiving EAP peer feedback in Chinese reduced her opportunities to develop such skills.

> A lot of my [EAP] peer feedback is written in Chinese. That's a real big problem because developing a peer feedback can be a very essential skill for us in academia. If you always adhere to the Chinese way of writing, then it can be not quite beneficial for us in the future career.

To overcome this and the previously mentioned culture-related challenges, teachers should, once again, explicitly explain to students the benefits of completing peer review for the reviewer (Lundstrom and Baker 2009). By reviewing peers' academic work, learners can develop their evaluative judgement skills (Cowan 2010; Boud et al. 2018) irrespective of the language ability of their peer, which is key to developing student feedback literacy (Carless and Boud 2018).

Implications for aspiring *feedbackpackers*

To neatly summarize the key takeaways from this research and make the results applicable for those engaged with L2 Chinese higher education learners, Table 2 presents a *feedbackpacker* framework of key implications. Although based on a small sample, from one specific context, these practical implications should be applicable for teachers to support L2 learners on their journey towards becoming independent *feedbackpackers*.

Conclusion: transitioning from package tourist to independent *feedbackpacker*

The independence, authentic cultural interactions, and personal satisfaction associated with independent backpacker travel are what draw individuals to the backpacking community. The transition from Chinese high school to Sino-foreign EMI university feedback practices shares some

Table 2. *Feedbackpacker* implications for L2 Chinese higher education learners and their teachers.

Feedbackpacking factor	Implications
Finding a suitable travel companion	• Pair students appropriately based on level, need and motivation • Grade and provide feedback on students' peer feedback submissions • Train students how to give and discuss peer feedback in class
Using an experienced tour guide	• Different teachers have different feedback styles • State feedback methods, expectations, and norms on course syllabi and teacher profiles • Allow students to specify feedback preferences and needs through interactive assignment cover sheets
Experiencing and navigating different cultures	• Be mindful of students' transition from Chinese high school to EMI higher education contexts when designing feedback mechanisms • Reduce traditional high power distance to encourage dialogic feedback practices • Promote the benefits of peer and self-feedback to students and reduce reliance on the teacher
Learning the language	• Feedback language should be customized and graded according to students' language levels • Provide specific feedback language training and support in class before the assignment deadline • Promote the benefits of peer review for the reviewer themselves, irrespective of their classmates' English language competence

similarities with the transition from package tourist to independent backpacker. For instance, such higher education contexts offer a more authentic feedback experience, better reflecting future occupational and academic feedback mechanisms. Much like independent backpacker travel, students can learn transferable life skills through such feedback processes, but they need carefully planned support to succeed.

This research has developed upon the concept of student feedback literacy (Carless and Boud 2018), to propose a more culturally appropriate feedback model for L2 Chinese students studying within Sino-foreign high education contexts. Through interviewing seven undergraduate Chinese EAP students, this research has argued that if Chinese university students aspire to develop their L2 student feedback literacy, they should adopt the mindset of an independent *feedbackpacker*. Although at first, much like the traveller who is used to package holidays, this transition may prove challenging, with appropriate scaffolding and support from teachers, students will be better equipped to understand and more importantly use feedback to improve future academic performance. In conclusion, albeit from a small sample in a specific context, the results have shed light on the specific educational, cultural, and linguistic challenges Chinese students face when transitioning to Sino-foreign higher education feedback practices. Although there are more conventional and theoretical models of feedback available, it is hoped that the *feedbackpacker* analogy appeals to teachers and students as it is relatable and simplifies a complex phenomenon. By presenting a more specific and appropriate understanding of L2 student feedback literacy for Chinese learners, higher education practitioners within Sino-foreign contexts and beyond should be better equipped to design appropriate feedback mechanisms for this group of learners.

Acknowledgements

This research was undertaken as part of the PhD in Educational Research – Higher Education in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University. I am pleased to acknowledge the contribution of Dr Jan McArthur and my peers in supporting the development of this research. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their time and effort reviewing this manuscript. Finally, I am grateful to Duke Kunshan University's Center for Teaching and Learning for supporting this research *via* a teaching and assessment research grant.

Disclosure statement

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

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