

## **EFL students' response to assessment feedback in English debate: A process-focused perspective**

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Research on assessment feedback on EFL students' speaking and writing performances has largely focused on how to give effective feedback to students. Little, however, is known about how EFL students respond to assessment feedback on their performances. It should be noted that to benefit from assessment feedback, students need to actively respond to it to unlock its learning potentials. To date, few studies have explored the exact process of EFL students' response to assessment feedback on their speaking and writing performances. This study looks at how four Chinese EFL students respond to assessment feedback on their performances in two English debating tournaments held in China, and examines what factors influence their response process. Data were collected from two sources: observation of debates and the ensuing adjudication sessions, and interviews with each student. Findings of the study show that there are three phases in the students' response process: attention, understanding and application. Multiple factors including language proficiency, students' beliefs and schemata, applicability of feedback, and assessment criteria are found to influence student response to assessment feedback. This paper concludes with suggestions that more scaffolding needs to be provided by teachers to facilitate student response to assessment feedback.

**Keywords:** assessment feedback; student response; process-focused perspective; debating; EFL; China

### **Introduction**

The notion that feedback should not be viewed as a uni-directional transmission of pedagogic information from teachers to students has led many researchers to emphasize the role of students because the usefulness of feedback depends largely on how students respond to it. Studies in the UK and Australia show that many students did not respond effectively to feedback on their work (Ferguson, 2011; Higgins, Hartley, & Skelton, 2001; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Price, Handley, & Millar, 2011). It has also been suggested that it is difficult for students to fully understand feedback on their assignments (Weaver, 2006), and that engaging with feedback is a challenging task for students (Gibbs, 2006; Poulos & Mahony, 2008).

In an EFL context, difficulties in understanding and effectively responding to feedback may be further exacerbated by the limited English language proficiency of the students. While studies on assessment feedback on EFL students' written work have been well-documented (e.g., Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Lee, 2011), there is a paucity of research exploring how EFL students respond to assessment feedback on their speaking performances. It is worth noting that speaking tasks such as giving presentations and debate activities are an integral part of much English language teaching (ELT) and are used to allow students to practice their language skills under

the guidance of their teachers. English debating activities, in particular, offer students opportunities to use English language in an authentic communicative context (Iberri-Shea, 2009) where students are able to improve not only speaking skills but also listening skills. However, as suggested by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, language improvement needs both positive reinforcement and corrective feedback from more capable others. Therefore, teachers need to provide scaffolding for EFL students by giving oral feedback on their speaking performances to help them approach language learning more effectively.

Against this backdrop, this paper explores how four Chinese EFL students responded to assessment feedback on their English debating performances and tries to identify factors that influenced those student responses. The analysis shows the complexity of the process and suggests possible pedagogical interventions to facilitate this process.

## **Previous literature**

### ***Student response to assessment feedback***

Assessment feedback is conceptualized as a blanket term that encompasses the diversity of definitions proposed by researchers to include different meanings, types, foci, roles, and functions of feedback (Evans, 2013). Earlier researchers suggested that feedback is an integral part of assessment (Angelo, 1995) and should be used to inform student learning (Taras, 2002). More recent models of assessment emphasize dialogic feedback between teachers and students (Carless, Salter, Yang, & Lam, 2011) and focus on the role of student engagement in the assessment process (Price et al., 2011). Viewed as an end-product, assessment feedback refers to the evaluative information provided by teachers and peers about students' understanding and performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Seen as an integral part of the learning process, assessment feedback offers learners two types of information: verification and elaboration (Shute, 2008). Hattie and Timperley (2007) proposed four multiple functions of assessment feedback on student learning: task feedback, process feedback, self-regulation feedback, and self-feedback. Gradually, there has been a growing awareness of the role that students play in the process of assessment and learning.

The bulk of the existing literature on student response to feedback has been devoted to students' perceptions of and attitudes toward assessment feedback. Research on assessment feedback conducted at school-level education has explored how students perceive assessment feedback on their assignments (Ferguson, 2011; Wiggins, 1998). Students were found to be discontented with assessment feedback because it did not provide clear and detailed guidance on how to improve their performance (Higgins et al., 2001). Students also complained that it was not easy for them to act on feedback even if they were able to understand its meaning (Gibbs, 2006; Poulos & Mahony, 2008). A number of studies have shown that many factors may influence students' responses to feedback, such as the immediacy of the opportunity to apply the feedback in subsequent assignments (Price et al., 2011), trust in the teacher (Carless, 2009), and the degree of difficulty students experience in understanding the feedback (Higgins et al., 2001; Lea & Street, 1998). Shute (2008) believes that for students to act on feedback, they need motive, opportunity and means. It has been suggested that students usually take action when they

perceive that there could be an opportunity to use the feedback in future assignments (Price et al., 2011).

### ***English debate in the EFL context***

Debate is regarded as a highly useful classroom-based educational approach (Snider & Schnurer, 2002). Students' involvement in their educational process is greatly increased in debate activities where they also develop critical and independent thinking (Scott, 2008). Debate prompts language development because students practice reading and note-taking skills, and learn to construct written arguments in the preparation process for a debate (Iberri-Shea, 2009). Students' public speaking skills can also be improved through delivering debate speeches as they are encouraged to arrange and present effective arguments to the audience (Goodwin, 2003). Since the success of their performance is contingent upon the ability to listen carefully, students also practice and develop active listening skills (Snider & Schnurer, 2002).

Despite its pedagogical benefits, debate has not received much scholarly attention in the EFL context. Somjai and Jansem (2015) found that by participating in English debate competitions Thai students could be motivated to practice the language in communicative activities and improve their English speaking abilities. In the classroom setting, when English debate was integrated in a writing classroom in Thailand, Sanonguthai (2011) shows that EFL students viewed English debate as an effective way to enhance their critical thinking, thus helping them to develop better arguments in argumentative writing. In content-based EFL classes, Anderson (2016) argues that teaching and learning English debate should be a central part of second language classroom in Japan because content knowledge and language skills could be simultaneously acquired through debate. Similarly, advocating the use of debate in EFL classes in Saudi Arabia, Alasmari and Ahmed (2013) suggest that students could improve their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills through debate activities.

### ***The research gap***

The overwhelming majority of previous research conceptualizes student response to assessment feedback as students' attitudes toward and perceptions of teacher feedback, so there is not much discussion about the process of responding to assessment feedback. Likewise, although the benefits of English debate in the EFL context have been explored, these studies did not investigate how students responded to assessment feedback on their debate performances. It is clear from a review of the existing literature that empirical studies on how EFL students respond to assessment feedback on their speaking tasks are lacking. As a result, little is known about the process by which students respond to assessment feedback and the factors which are likely to have an impact on that process. This study aims to fill such a gap by examining the process of student response to assessment feedback by four Chinese EFL students in two English debating tournaments held in China. Two research questions are proposed:

1. What is the general process of student response to assessment feedback in English debate?
2. What are the factors that influence student response to assessment feedback in English debate?

## The study

### *The context*

The participants in this study were four Chinese university students with different levels of English proficiency who had varying amounts of English debate experience ranging from less than one year to three years (see Table 1). They were selected from a pool of 96 students who participated in a pre-tournament workshop in China. Purposive sampling was used to explore how students of different levels of English proficiency and with different achievements in English debate responded to assessment feedback.

English debate competitions are held on a regular basis in China and other Asian countries, and have become increasingly important as the communicative learning teaching (CLT) approach receives growing attention from both researchers and practitioners in the Asian EFL context. English debate tournaments, such as Canton Intervarsity Debate Competition, National English Debating Competition (China), China Open, Northeast Asia Open, and United Asian Debating Championship, are annual events in which EFL students can participate to improve their English and debating skills.

The two English debate tournaments which form the context of this study were held at an interval of approximately one month. The first was a national competition hosting 48 teams and the second was an international competition including 64 teams. As the British Parliamentary debate format was adopted in both tournaments, each team consisting of two students competed against three other teams in one debate that featured Government and Opposition sides. On each side, there were two teams known as the opening and closing factions. Therefore, in one debate session four teams competed against each other (known as Opening Government, Opening Opposition, Closing Government and Closing Opposition).

In both debate tournaments, there was an adjudication session in which adjudicators offered their evaluation and comments on the overall performances of the four teams and then individual feedback on each team and each debater's performance when a debate session was finished. The provision of oral feedback was compulsory because adjudicators were required to justify the scores and rankings they assigned to each team and to individual students. More importantly, the feedback offered by adjudicators aimed to help students improve their performance. Adjudication sessions took approximately 40 minutes.

Table 1. Participants

Name	Gender	CET-4 Score	Years of debate	Best Result
Jason	Male	635/710	3	Finalist of NEAO
Sophia	Female	642/710	2.5	Semi-finalist of China Open
Lisa	Female	519/710	1.5	Yet to enter knockout stage
Mark	Male	498/710	1	Yet to enter knockout stage

Notes:

1. All the student names are pseudonyms.

2. CET-4 is a national English proficiency test for undergraduate students in China.
3. NEAO is the abbreviation for Northeast Asian Open.

### ***Data collection***

The study encompassed a span of eight weeks during which the four students participated in the two English debate tournaments (as described above). Data were collected from two sources: observation of debates and their associated adjudication sessions and retrospective interview of the four participants. Observations of the four participants were conducted based on an observation protocol (Appendix A). Each participant was observed twice in each tournament, so in total 16 debate sessions were observed and audio-recorded. A 30-minute retrospective interview (Appendix B) was conducted with each participant at the end of both tournaments (a total of 8 interviews). Interviews were conducted in the participants' first language (Mandarin) and audio-recorded. Interview data were transcribed verbatim and translated and then checked by an independent reviewer who holds a master's degree in Translation Studies.

### ***Data analysis***

Prior to the coding process, transcripts of interviews and observation notes were organized into four sets. The data files of each participant were reiteratively examined to identify recurring and significant patterns and themes. Preliminary themes emerged as the observational data were coded based upon a revised flowchart informed by the temporal dimension of student engagement with assessment feedback proposed by Price et al. (2011). In the meantime, interview data were recursively analysed and factors that influence student response to teacher feedback were identified. Then, patterns and themes were revised and refined a number of times until subcategories of the preliminary themes emerged. Informed by previous studies and theories, student response to teacher feedback in this study is conceptualized as observable behavioural reactions and reported cognitive reactions to teacher feedback. The data analysis moved from individual perceptions to common elements (Polkinghorne, 1995). The categories and subcategories were checked by an independent researcher in the field of applied linguistics. After some discussions, the final inter-coder agreement was 93.7%.

## **Findings and discussion**

### ***The general process of student response to assessment feedback in English debate***

The analysis of observation and interview data offers insights into how the students responded to assessment feedback. The whole process was divided into three phases: paying attention to feedback, understanding feedback, and applying feedback.

Upon receipt of assessment feedback, two types of student reactions were found: students either paid attention to assessment feedback or simply ignored it. When students paid no attention to assessment feedback, the response process came to a halt. The reasons why they did not pay attention to assessment feedback were twofold. The observation data shows that some students were absent-minded during the adjudication session when they came last in the debate round. Their facial expressions indicated that they were despondent and disappointed about the result. Thus, emotional states were likely to cause the students to ignore assessment feedback. It was also found in the interviews that sometimes the students failed to

pay attention to a particular piece of feedback information due to a lack of linguistic proficiency and subject knowledge that prevented them from recognizing its importance. For example, Mark recalled that in one adjudication session he was baffled by the word *euthanasia* in the adjudicator's feedback because he neither knew this word nor understood the medical procedure of euthanasia.

When students paid attention to assessment feedback, the response process continued with students trying to make sense of the feedback. It was seen that understanding was the second phase in the process. The results of understanding assessment feedback were threefold: students were found to either understand, misunderstand or not understand assessment feedback. Some students felt confused when listening to adjudicators' feedback during the adjudication session, having difficulty understanding certain advanced vocabulary items or abstract concepts. For example, Lisa said:

... the adjudicator brought up the concept of social contract, but I had never heard of it... I didn't know the meaning of check and balance either.

Contextual factors might also play a part in the response process. Some students complained that they were unable to understand assessment feedback due to adjudicators' strong accents. In the interview, Mark was particularly frustrated about this.

This was my first time to hear Singaporean English... I simply couldn't follow the Singaporean adjudicators.

The interview data also indicated that students could misinterpret assessment feedback in one adjudication session and then subsequently use it in a wrong way in the following debate session. Lisa talked about her experience:

I misunderstood the concept of high-context cultures in one adjudication session, so I misused it when I talked about individualist cultures such as Western countries.

The third phase in the response process was found to be applying feedback, that is, students either acted on assessment feedback by applying it in other situations or took no action to apply assessment feedback. It is interesting that even if students misinterpreted teacher feedback, they might still apply it without knowing that the feedback was incorrectly understood. Sophia shared her experience of misapplying assessment feedback:

The previous adjudicator said that we can talk about the black market regarding the legalization of something, but when I discussed the black market in the legalization of euthanasia, it didn't work because this time the adjudicator pointed out that it was about illegal sales.

The interview data suggests that not applying feedback might be ascribed to a lack of solutions to act on assessment feedback. To apply feedback in other contexts requires the use of certain strategies such as planning and evaluating. Some students, however, were not armed with effective strategies to make use of assessment feedback. Lisa talked about her frustration over applying assessment feedback:

The adjudicator suggested that as the Opening Government we should take a hard line on policy motions, but oftentimes I don't know how to propose a good policy.

Finally, when students experienced success in the application of teacher feedback in other contexts, they continued making use of it. It was also likely that some students encountered failure when applying feedback, which caused them to stop further application. Jason discussed his way of applying feedback:

One adjudicator praised the use of the 3Rs: retribution, rehabilitation, and reintegration. This was actually the application of the other adjudicator’s assessment feedback. I often use this concept in some law-related motions.

In summary, the data shows that the process of student response to assessment feedback is broken down into different phases and each phase is characterized by specific student actions. The flow of this process is represented in Figure 1.

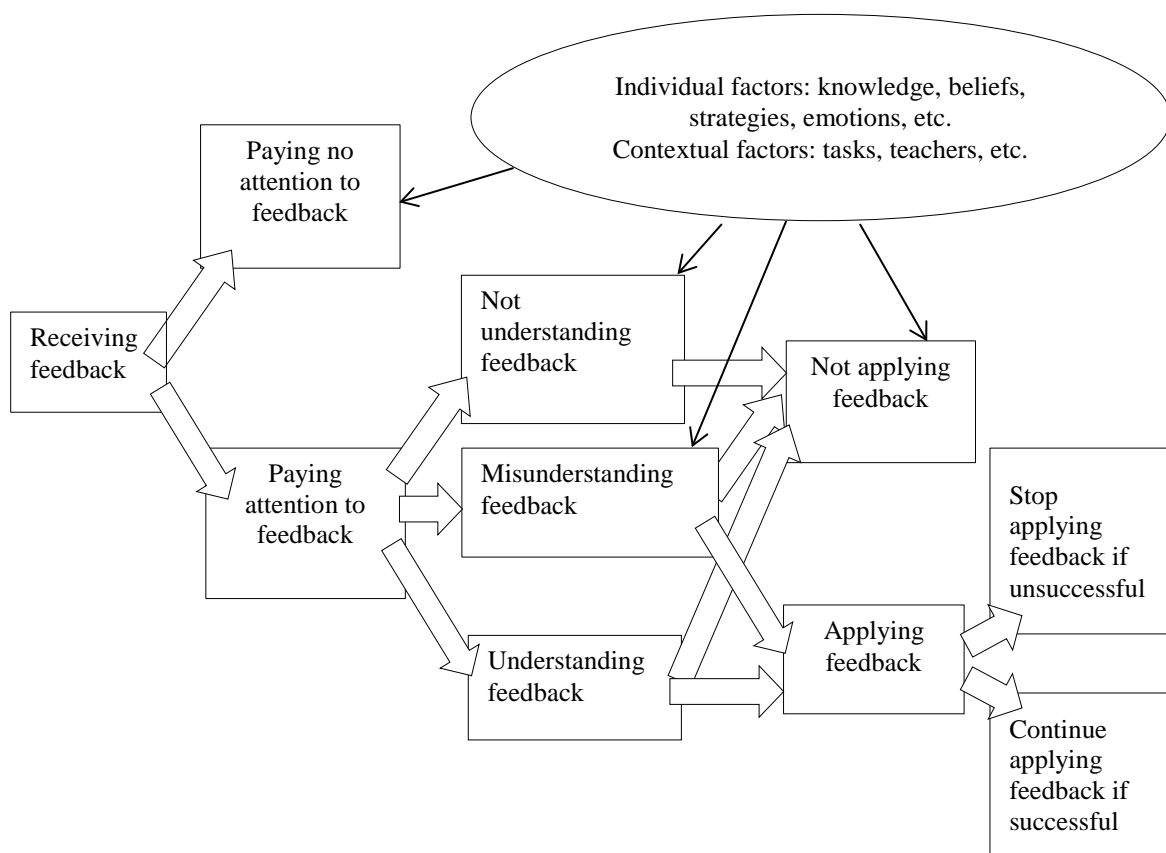


Figure 1. The process of student response to assessment feedback

***The factors that influence student response to assessment feedback in English debate***

*Language proficiency*

Being unable to understand clearly and thoroughly what adjudicators said in the adjudicator session was a common problem reported by the students with lower proficiency levels of English. For instance, Mark, the participant with the lowest

proficiency score and the least amount of debate experience, said that he often experienced difficulties in understanding adjudicators' feedback due to his language proficiency as well as background knowledge of debate motions. He mentioned that when adjudicators used some complicated words or brought up a complex conception in adjudication sessions, he could not understand them clearly:

Sometimes, I don't understand the words mentioned by the adjudicators, and I've never heard of these words before... You know what? Oftentimes, these words happen to be the key words that should have been brought up in my speech.

It is understandable that for EFL learners who are in the process of learning English, unfamiliar words can pose great hindrance in understanding adjudicators' comments. Further difficulties arise when adjudicators have strong accents or speak at a rate that is too fast for students to follow. Lisa complained about the adjudicators' accent and speech rate as follows:

In this tournament, there were some adjudicators from India who had very strong accents... Their pronunciation of many words was hugely different from what I've been normally exposed to, so I find their accents are too difficult to understand... In one adjudication session, I only understood 50 % of what the Indian adjudicator said, and I had to guess the main idea of the feedback.

To be able to initiate responses to assessment feedback, students need to pay attention to and understand assessment feedback. However, feedback is often phrased in a way that seems unfriendly to students who see it as densely worded with a large portion of metalinguistic terminology (Ware, 2011). EFL students' response to adjudicators' feedback may be suspended at the outset due to insufficient L2 linguistic knowledge and lack of exposure to different foreign accents. Students' language proficiency, therefore, is a crucial factor that has an impact on student response to assessment feedback.

#### *Students' beliefs and schemata*

While high proficiency students had fewer problems in listening comprehension, they sometimes encountered problems in the second phase of the response process which is understanding feedback. More specifically, they were often faced with intellectual challenges of how to integrate assessment feedback into their schemata. Jason said:

When I hear something opposite to what I believe, I find it difficult to accept that argument... I remember when I first heard the argument that small government was better than big government, I was not convinced... But gradually it dawned on me that the real thrust of the argument is that the government has no right to interfere with individual life so long as a person doesn't break the law.

Sophia also reported a similar problem when she tried to add new knowledge into her knowledge base. She said that it was difficult to change her deeply-rooted views about some controversial issues such as prostitution and euthanasia.

I always think it's morally wrong to endorse the legalization of prostitution and euthanasia, but adjudicators can always offer different perspectives... It's just that I don't know how to rise above conventional thinking.



The problems experienced by these two high proficiency students suggest that students' entrenched views and content area misconceptions may impede their understanding of assessment feedback. Students tend to interpret assessment feedback according to their relatively stable systems of beliefs about subject knowledge and the learning process (Butler & Winne, 1995). In order for assessment feedback to be appropriately understood by students, it is important for teachers to help students restructure their inadequate or misconceived schemata to facilitate smooth understanding of assessment feedback.

#### *Applicability of feedback*

One important role of adjudication sessions is to help students improve their performance in the future, so it is expected that students will make use of adjudicator feedback and appropriately apply it in other contexts. However, adjudicator feedback, according to some students, cannot be readily or directly utilized in some situations, which leaves them sceptical about the value of adjudicator feedback. Mark said:

...“violation of human rights” was one piece of feedback I learned from one adjudicator, but when I used violation of human rights in a similar debate motion, the other adjudicator told me that violation of human rights was not a piece of good argument for the motion. I was very confused.

The researcher observed that high proficiency students were particularly attentive in listening to adjudicators' suggestions for improvement in the next round. However, according to Jason, some suggestions offered in one context did not necessarily work well in other contexts:

I try to make use of the comments from expert adjudicators rather than those from relatively inexperienced ones...However, sometimes when I applied their feedback in my speech, the supposedly cogent argument didn't help me win the debate.

The application of adjudicator feedback properly in other contexts was also one of the concerns voiced by Lisa who was not very satisfied with the lack of explicit instruction on how to make use of adjudicator feedback. She said:

I didn't see many adjudicators offering instructions on how we can elaborate on some important concepts... For example, how can we argue for the importance of individual privacy? I always want to hear how adjudicators develop their argument, but they never show us how to do that.

The effective application of adjudicator feedback in different scenarios seemed to be very challenging for all the students, especially when there was seemingly not much relevance between two cases. Sophia talked about her problem:

Some debate motions are very difficult for us, and we don't have much background knowledge, so it is still very difficult for us to apply the feedback in other contexts... I think the problem is that I don't see much relevance to other topics...Perhaps adjudicators should teach us how to make connections between two issues rather than only focus on the current debate motion.

Students may not be capable of acting on the feedback without further help even if they understand the gap in their skills or knowledge (Price et al., 2011). All the

participants voiced their concerns in the interviews over the application of feedback. While assessment feedback aims to diagnose problems and offers suggestions for improvement, most of the time feedback cannot be applied directly to the next assignment. Students are under the impression that assessment feedback sometimes is not transferable and feel that there is a lack of sufficient instruction on how to make use of assessment feedback.

#### *Assessment criteria*

The inconsistency of the assessment criteria was one of the major factors pointed out by all four students. In every debate round, students receive feedback from different adjudicators. Some adjudicators focused on one particular area in their feedback, while others were concerned with different areas. Lisa said:

Some adjudicators paid much attention to the role fulfilment in each speaker's speech... they penalized the team that didn't have clear division of labour and mixed up individual responsibilities...in other rounds, I found that the winning team actually did a poor job in the role fulfilment... Different standards made me confused.

Mark echoed Lisa's complaint about the inconsistency issue, when he realized that what worked well for one adjudicator might not be equally effective for the next. He mentioned an unsuccessful case of feedback application:

Some adjudicators suggest we focus on the constructive speech rather than the rebuttal speech. Otherwise, we have no contribution to the debate... But when we focused more on constructive speech in the following round, the adjudicator said that we spent too much time on the constructive speech and too little time rebutting our opponents' arguments. It seems to me that every adjudicator has different assessment criteria...I'm really in a dilemma.

High proficiency students, Sophia and Jason also made complaints about the inconsistent criteria of different adjudicators. Theoretically speaking, the established assessment criteria for English debate encompasses three main areas: matter, method, and manner (known as the 3Ms), but in practice, adjudicators may hold different views about what is considered good manner. Sophia expressed her confusions over the assessment criteria:

I really don't know what adjudicators expect from me in terms of the criteria manner...Some adjudicators regard our "passionate speech" as "engaging and compelling", while others remind us of not being too "aggressive and impolite" to other debaters. So I'm very confused about how to strike a balance.

Jason, on the other hand, was more concerned about how to convince adjudicators with different standards, as he said that he was aware that it was not unusual for different adjudicators from diverse cultural backgrounds to approach the same debate motion differently. He said:

I have seen different approaches to the same debate motion demonstrated by different adjudicators. I've found that Chinese adjudicators' comments oftentimes are different from those of foreign adjudicators, especially when the issue is related to China, such as one-child policy and press freedom...

Students are sometimes confused about assessment criteria because they are likely to be exposed to various teacher practices and dispositions (Sadler, 1998). This study shows that students are often clueless and helpless when they are faced with adjudicators' idiosyncratic feedback practices that fail to delineate clear standards of assessment. The lack of clearly-formulated criteria or too much room for varying interpretations of criteria discourages students from actively responding to assessment feedback because they are unaware of what is expected of them.

### Conclusion

This study shows that EFL students, regardless of their levels of language proficiency and achievements, are faced with challenges and difficulties when responding to assessment feedback in the context of English debate competitions. Apart from difficulties related to language proficiency, students may face problems applying feedback due to insufficient working knowledge of some rudimentary concepts rendering them unable to convert assessment feedback into improvement for future tasks. As feedback providers in most educational contexts, teachers need to rethink how to construct and deliver clear and consistent feedback to students. In this study, inconsistent assessment feedback and multiple-standard assessment criteria caused students to feel confused and frustrated when they responded to assessment feedback. Students expressed concerns that they were not in the position to choose what patterns of feedback they could receive, but they displayed a preference for more clearly-crafted assessment feedback that could offer them information about how to make improvements.

To respond to assessment feedback, students need to be equipped with sufficient conceptual knowledge and higher-order thinking skills that can translate feedback into improvement. However, it is intellectually and cognitively challenging for students to acquire knowledge and skills on their own. This requires teachers to play a more active role in providing scaffolding for students to understand abstract concepts and assessment criteria. To facilitate student response to assessment feedback, teachers must take into account multiple factors that influence student response, and help students understand feedback and integrate it into their learning process. For EFL teachers, special attention needs to be paid to students' language proficiency when offering feedback on students' performances.

### About the author

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**Appendix A. The classroom observation protocol**

1. Background information

Student name \_\_\_\_\_ Observation date \_\_\_\_\_  
 Observation start time \_\_\_\_\_ Observation end time \_\_\_\_\_  
 Length of the observation \_\_\_\_\_  
 Debate motion \_\_\_\_\_ Debate round \_\_\_\_\_

2. Observation notes

Interaction between students and adjudicators

What did you see?	What did you think?
<p>Please summarize the students' performance in the debate round.</p> <p>Please summarize adjudicators' feedback in the debate round.</p> <p>How did the student respond to adjudicator feedback? What were the verbal and non-verbal responses?</p> <p>How did the student interact with adjudicators?</p>	

**Appendix B. The first student interview guide**

1. Tell me about your English debate experience.
2. What is your general perception of the feedback you have received from adjudicators so far?
3. What is your general impression of this debate tournament and the adjudicators?
4. Did you pay close attention to adjudicator feedback in adjudication sessions?
5. Did you fully understand adjudicator feedback in adjudication sessions?
6. In general, what do you do if you don't understand adjudicator feedback?
7. What problems did you have when you engaged with adjudicator feedback?
8. Did you apply adjudicator feedback in other situations? Why or why not?
9. If you applied adjudicator feedback in other situations, were your attempts successful?
10. Overall, how useful do you think adjudicator feedback is?