# The tangle in the feedback loop: Learner agency through a feedback loop activity across four university language programs

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**Abstract**
This study investigated a semester-long feedback loop activity carried out by six colleagues in four different language programs at the same university. 38 students participated from six different classes with varied proficiency levels in Chinese, French, Japanese and Spanish. The goal of this activity was to provide tailored feedback with a view to enhancing the feedback process and improving learning.

While the success of the activity varied across the six classes, there was evidence of increased student engagement with feedback and improved understanding of their role in the feedback process. Unexpected differences emerged in the way the feedback loop activity was implemented in the respective classrooms. The reasons for these differences as well as for differences in levels of learner engagement were explored using Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1993) ecological framework, demonstrating its usefulness as a model for understanding feedback practices in university language programs.

**Keywords**
Feedback loop activity; Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework of human development; learner engagement; contextual factors.

## Introduction

This article describes a feedback loop activity carried out by six colleagues from the same university language department in collaboration with an external researcher. Within university disciplines, Foreign Languages and Cultures Education/Teaching is a context where written teacher feedback is particularly appreciated by students (Saito, 1994). However, despite the considerable time and effort language teachers put into to providing detailed feedback (Hyland, 2001), feedback continues to be a widespread source of dissatisfaction amongst students (Carless et al., 2011; Gibbs and Simpson, 2004; Sadler, 2010), i.e., it is either not perceived as useful (Ryan et al., 2019) or not sufficiently timely to allow revision prior to submission of an assessment task (Boud and Molloy, 2013; Court, 2014; Covic and Jones, 2007).

While the potential for feedback to improve learning in higher education is by now well established (Hattie and Timperley, 2007), what has been less widely appreciated is that feedback can only improve learning to the extent that it is actually engaged with and acted on by learners (Ajjawi and Boud, 2017). Feedback has traditionally been understood as taking the form of a single unidirectional transmission of information from teacher to student, constituting a responsibility for teachers and an entitlement for students. Winstone (2022) found 124 universities in the UK focussed on the transmission of feedback. However, in order to be productive (i.e., produce the desired change) feedback should be understood as an ongoing iterative process, or dialogue, between learners and their teachers (Gan and Leung, 2020; Nicol, 2010). A

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study involving an example of this type of process, the Dialogic Feedback Cycle (Beaumont et al., 2011), was shown to improve university students' ability to evaluate the quality of their own work as well as develop their understanding of feedback as a dialogic process and shared responsibility.

Dialogic feedback (Gravett and Petersen, 2002) implied a disruption to teacher power being replaced by teacher and student communication and sense-making. With international students and practitioners from diverse backgrounds being the norm in international education (Pazio and Bale, 2023) the space for 'doing' feedback should facilitate communication between diverse feedback cultures and literacies to support student agency in feedback interactions e.g., Rovagnati and Pitt (2022). Their findings show that after engaging in dialogue, students can better appreciate and act upon feedback, leading to more effective learning experiences and increased active agency. Nieminen et al. (2022) underline the importance of student agency in higher education as does research into classroom assessment (e.g., Adie, Willis, and Kleij 2018). It is also important to take into account the ecology of the context (Charteris and Smardon 2018; Chong 2021) when promoting feedback literacy (Gravett, 2020).

When feedback dialogues occur in multiple loops (Boud and Molloy, 2013; Carless, 2019) this style of interaction enhances student engagement and self-regulation. Such dialogic feedback loop processes have recently become the focus of studies (e.g., Carless, 2019; Willis, et al., 2021) investigating the challenges students face in understanding teacher comments and hence engaging with feedback. A dialogic style of feedback is intended to support students as active agents during feedback processes with implications for the potential development of 'an intercultural feedback literacy for long-term development' (Rovagnati and Pitt, 2022, p.1068). As Rovagnati and Pitt (2022, p.1058) point out, student agency is increasingly being connected with feedback interactions and feedback literacy. Students need to be actively involved in feedback processes and to act on feedback received; if they are not, they are less likely to benefit and learn from feedback interactions.

The genesis of the current study was an investigation of one teacher's feedback practices at three levels of a Spanish language program in an Australian university (Hill and Ducasse, 2020) which highlighted the importance of increasing learner agency by involving them in decisions around feedback and making them more accountable for their learning. The results of that study then led to the introduction of a feedback loop activity (see Figure 1, where T= Teacher and Ss= Students) in a single class of the same language program, designed to encourage learners to take greater responsibility for their learning by both seeking and acting on feedback (Ducasse and Hill, 2019).

During the feedback loop each time students submitted written work for feedback, they were asked to:

- provide details of action taken on previous feedback;
- self-assess, and
- request feedback on specific areas.

The teacher would then provide feedback on the areas requested and highlight any additional areas for improvement (without elaboration), making it the responsibility of the student to follow these up with the teacher, if desired. The teacher then returned an electronic copy of the document to the students for filing in an e-portfolio on the learning management system. The purpose of the e-portfolio was to enable students and teachers to track feedback over time. The goal of this more tailored feedback was to make the feedback process more efficient as well as to improve learning.

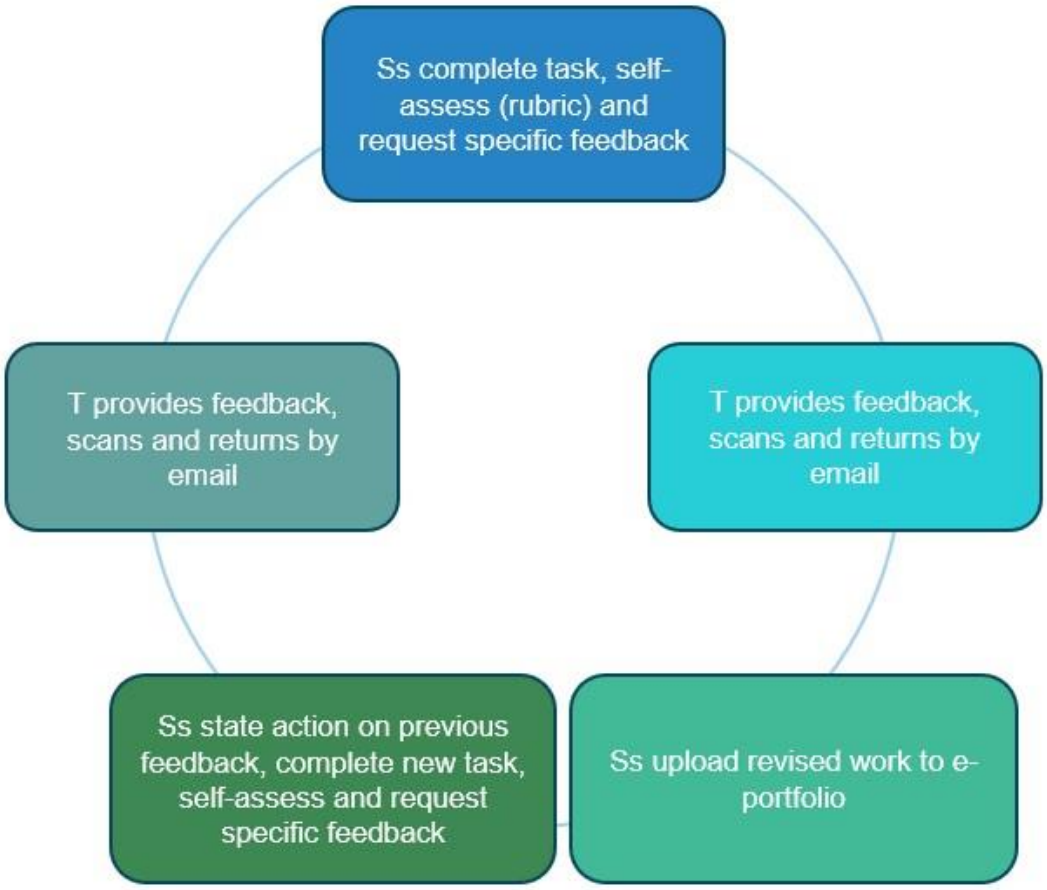


**Figure 1.** Feedback loop activity

After attending a presentation on the feedback loop activity at a departmental seminar, five colleagues from three additional language programs (French, Chinese and Japanese) expressed interest in trialling the activity in their classes. The main motivation stated was the opportunity to make feedback processes in their own classrooms more efficient and effective:

> I was not sure to what extent students utilised our feedback, which seemed to be endless work [for teachers]
>
> (Japanese 3 Practitioner Researcher).

It was also seen as an opportunity to learn about one another's teaching and learning contexts and approaches as well as to collaborate on a research project. Finally, there was interest in the affordances the technology might have for feedback interactions as well as for reducing workload.

As assessment and feedback are socially situated, it cannot necessarily be assumed that the success of a feedback loop activity in one setting will automatically translate to another (Ajjawi et al., 2017). As a result, researchers have begun to explore the impact of context upon teacher feedback practices as well as on learner responses. While context has been characterised in a number of ways (Swanson and Levine, 2020), Van Lier (2010) has argued for an overarching theory of context to enable a 'consistent and systematic view of context and a clear connection between person and context' (p. 205). Such a theory is provided

in Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework of human development (1977, 1993; Neal and Neal, 2013) and has been identified as a framework for feedback that encourages student agency (Niemann et al., 2022). Furthermore, the framework has been previously employed in practitioner research to investigate the influence of context on classroom-based assessments e.g., Hill and Ducasse (2022). Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework enabled a systematic examination of contextual influences in assessment research where teachers and learners were viewed together in their respective contexts; consequently, factors previously seen as distinct were viewed together. The framework is designed to investigate the impact of contextual factors on a focal individual (e.g., a teacher or student).

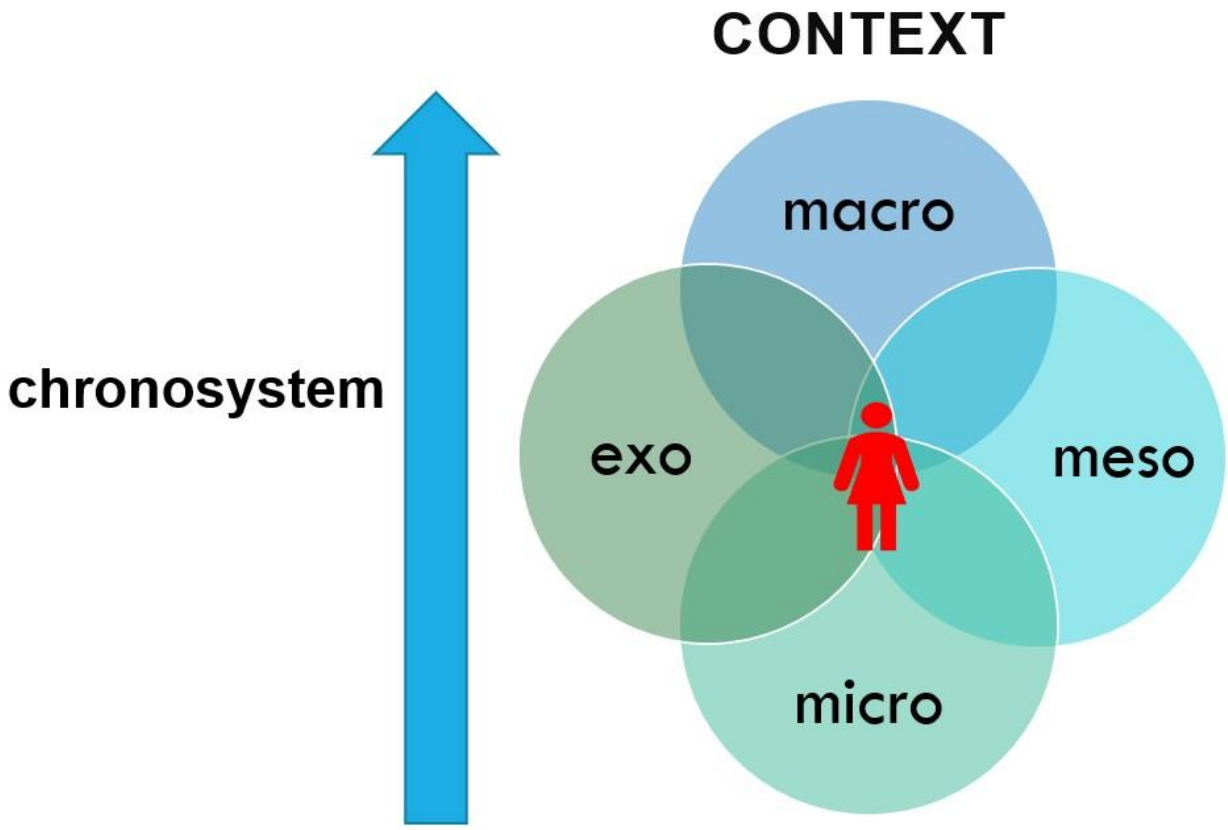


**Figure 2.** Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework of human development (1977).

The framework comprises a set of five interacting systems: the exosystem, the macrosystem, the microsystem, the mesosystem, and the chronosystem (Figure. 2). These were embedded into the research design for our context as is exemplified from this study. The exosystem comprises interactions external to, yet impacting on, the focal individual, for example institutional policies and the learning infrastructure. The macrosystem concerns the nature of the language discipline itself, (Chinese, French, Japanese and Spanish) comprising factors such as social or cultural norms, education and assessment policies, the dominant learning theories and discipline-specific feedback assessment and conventions. The microsystem includes the focal individual and comprises the interactions between participants (teachers N=6; students N=129) and features such as the planned curriculum focus, assessment and feedback practices in the language classrooms at two proficiency levels (3 and 7). The chronosystem comprises changes in patterns of interaction over time resulting from changes in the environment and/or within the focal individual e.g., changes with regards to feedback literacy. For the learner, interaction with feedback includes maturation as a language learner and for the teacher, greater experience and training. Finally,

the mesosystem comprises interactions between the various microsystems which include the focal individual, for example the different classes that the student or teacher (as the focal individual) participates in; however, this system largely falls outside the scope of our study.

In summary, although a digitally mediated dialogic feedback loop had been explored for providing faster feedback in higher education (Willis et al, 2021) there were no similar innovations in Language and Culture teaching spaces where the interplay between student agency and assessment (e.g., Nieminen and Hilppö 2020) had been explored in this way. Furthermore, the study was innovative because despite the languages programs being taught in the same university department and within the same discipline (i.e., Foreign Language and Culture Education), the inclusion of script and character-based languages and different proficiency levels provided a diverse range of teaching and learning contexts into which the feedback loop activity was to be implemented.

The team investigated the following overarching research question: How successful did the learners and teachers perceive the feedback loop activity to be? This was broken down into the following sub-questions:

1. Were there any differences in learner engagement with feedback across the four languages?
2. Which contextual factors might account for these differences?

**Method**

The study involved a collaboration between the six practitioner researchers (PRs) and an external researcher (ER). The ER, who had collaborated on the original feedback loop activity study with the Spanish PR, was a language assessment specialist with a particular interest in written feedback practices. The ER and Spanish PR were responsible for the coordination, collation of results and preliminary data analysis. The six PRs were responsible for implementing the feedback loop activity in their respective classrooms, verifying the results of the data analysis and making recommendations. The whole team met twice during the project; once immediately prior to the commencement of teaching and again in Week 5 of the 12-week semester. Interim team communications were conducted via email.

**Participants**

Participants were 129 student volunteers enrolled in six language classes taught by the respective PRs. The languages were Spanish, French, Chinese and Japanese, and levels ranged from CEFR Levels A1 to C1 (these levels for Chinese and Japanese are an approximation only) (Table 1.). The CEFR or Common European Framework of Reference for Languages describes six ability levels from beginner to proficient (A1/2, B1/2, C1/2). The project was initiated in Europe by Brian North an Australian applied linguist.

**Table 1.** Participants.

| Class | CEFR* | Students | Teachers |
|---|---|---|---|
| Spanish 3 | A2 | 34 | 1 |
| Japanese 3 | A1/A2 | 30 | 1 |
| Japanese 7 | B1/B2 | 11 | 1 |
| Chinese 3 | A2 /B1 | 28 | 1 |
| Chinese 7 | B2/C1 | 13 | 1 |
| French 7 | B2/C1 | 13 | 1 |
| **Total** | | **129** | **6** |

**Data collection**
The data comprised:

- PR audits of the number of students in their respective classes who:
  - self-assessed and submitted drafts for specific feedback
  - noted action on previous feedback
  - uploaded feedback to the e-portfolio
- online student questionnaires (n=38)
- notes from student interviews (n=4)
- notes from team discussions
- individual PR reflections

Student participation in the online survey and interviews was voluntary. The institutionally approved ethics clearance and information about the project was included on the landing page of the survey, where students were advised that the aim of the project was to investigate the use of technology in providing feedback on their written work. By proceeding to take the survey, students provided consent. At the end of the survey, students were invited to enter a draw for a $100 gift voucher and/or to participate in a brief interview and receive a $20 gift voucher.

The online questionnaire (Appendix 1.) comprised eight questions, reflecting the goals of the feedback loop activity, and a five-point Likert-scale with space for comments under each.

The response rate was 20-44 percent of students in each class except Chinese 7, where only two students participated (Table 2.). All but two of the respondents to the online survey indicated that they had submitted drafts for feedback during the process.

**Table 2.** Questionnaire data.

| Class | n | % of class cohort |
|---|---|---|
| Spanish 3 | 15 | 44% |
| Japanese 3 | 6 | 20% |
| Japanese 7 | 4 | 36% |
| Chinese 3 | 6 | 21% |
| Chinese 7 | 2 | 16% |
| French 7 | 4 | 30% |
| Not indicated | 1 | - |
| **Total** | 38 | |

Students volunteered to participate in interviews via the online survey. In line with ethics requirements, interviews could not be scheduled until after the exams had been completed, by which time only four of the ten students who volunteered could be contacted for interview - three from Spanish 3 and one from Japanese 3.

Semi-structured phone interviews (Appendix 2.) were conducted by the ER rather than the students' teachers. Students were asked about their experiences in relation to the goals of the feedback loop activity as well as how they thought the process could be improved.

**Analysis**

Quantitative data (PR audits of engagement indicators and questionnaire (Likert scale) responses) were analysed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data (questionnaire comments, interview responses, notes from team discussions, and individual PR reflections) were analysed recursively using thematic content analysis to illuminate the results of the quantitative analysis. Initial themes identified for learner engagement (RQ 1) included 'self-assessment' 'submission', 'action on feedback', and 'use of the e-portfolio'. Further themes were then identified based on patterns emerging from the data and revised and refined through ongoing discussion. Contextual influences (RQ 2) were explored using Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework (1977, 1993).

**Results and discussion**

*RQ1. Were there any differences in learner engagement with feedback across the four languages?*

The level of learner engagement for each language was investigated by looking at the number of students who:

- self-assessed and submitted drafts for specific feedback;
- noted action on previous feedback, and
- uploaded feedback to their e-portfolio.

The number of set written tasks in each of the six classes ranged from two (Chinese 3 and 5, Japanese 7) to six (Spanish 3) (Table 3). There were marked differences in the number of students who self-assessed and requested specific feedback on drafts for each language and level. For example, all twelve Chinese 7 students and thirty-four Spanish 3 students submitted work for the first task compared to only one student in Chinese 3. Three students (one in Japanese 3 and two in Spanish 3) submitted multiple drafts of the same task for feedback.

**Table 3.** No. of students who self-assessed and requested feedback.

| | **Students (n)** | **Task 1** | **Task 2** | **Task 3** | **Task 4** | **Task 5** | **Task 6** | **Multiple drafts** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Chinese 3** | 13 | 1 | 1 | | | | | |
| **Chinese 7** | 12 | 12 | 12 | | | | | |
| **Japanese 7** | 11 | 2 | 2 | | | | | |
| **Japanese 3** | 30 | 18 | 2 | 5 | 6 | | | 1 |
| **French 7** | 13 | 1 | 6 | 8 | 6 | | | |
| **Spanish 3** | 34 | 34 | 32 | 30 | 28 | 17 | 31 | 2 |

Pleasingly, the questionnaire data showed that the overwhelming majority (90%) of respondents felt they had a better understanding of the purpose of self-assessment following the feedback loop activity (Figure 3).

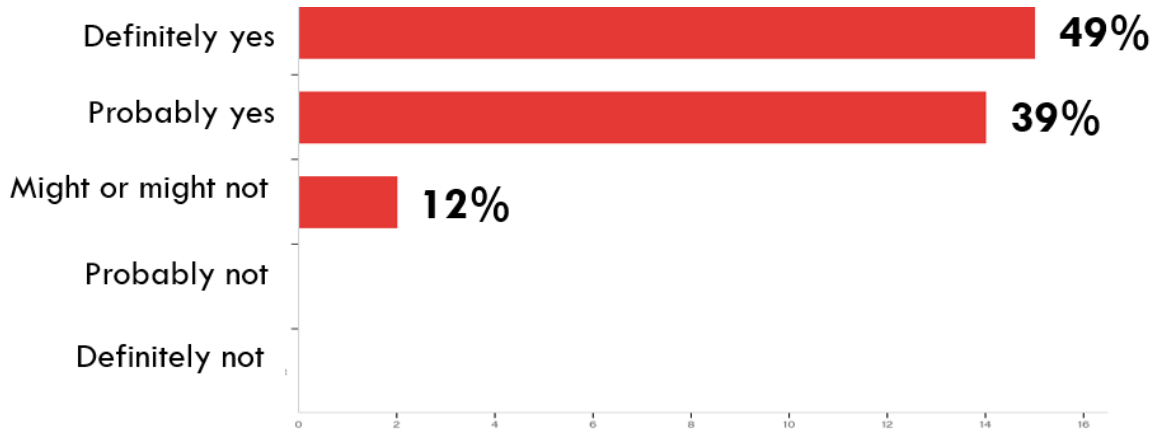


**Figure 3.** I have a better understanding of the purpose of self-assessment *(n= 36).*

Comments like the following support this:

> self-assess[ing] my own work… made me really think about what aspects I am not 100% sure of and therefore realise what I needed to work on. Getting feedback that confirmed or disconfirmed these things was great in helping me find my strengths and weaknesses and gave motivation for continually handing in work to be assessed while trying to improve each subsequent time
>
> (Student, Japanese 3).

Table 4. shows that, except for Spanish 3 and Chinese 7, relatively few of the students who submitted work for feedback indicated that they had acted on previous feedback.

**Table 4.** No. of students who noted action on requested feedback.

| | | **Acted on feedback** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Students (n)** | | **Task 1** | **Task 2** | **Task 3** | **Task 4** | **Task 5** | **Task 6** |
| **Chinese 3** | 13 | 1 | 1 | | | | |
| **Chinese 7** | 12 | 12 | 12 | | | | |
| **Japanese 7** | 11 | 2 | 2 | | | | |
| **Japanese 3** | 30 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 4 | | |
| **French 7** | 13 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 1 | | |
| **Spanish 3** | 34 | 12 | 9 | 22 | 13 | 17 | 19 |

Nonetheless, most questionnaire respondents reported that they were more likely to act on feedback (84%) and took more responsibility for their learning (89%) as a result of the feedback loop (Figures 4. and 5).

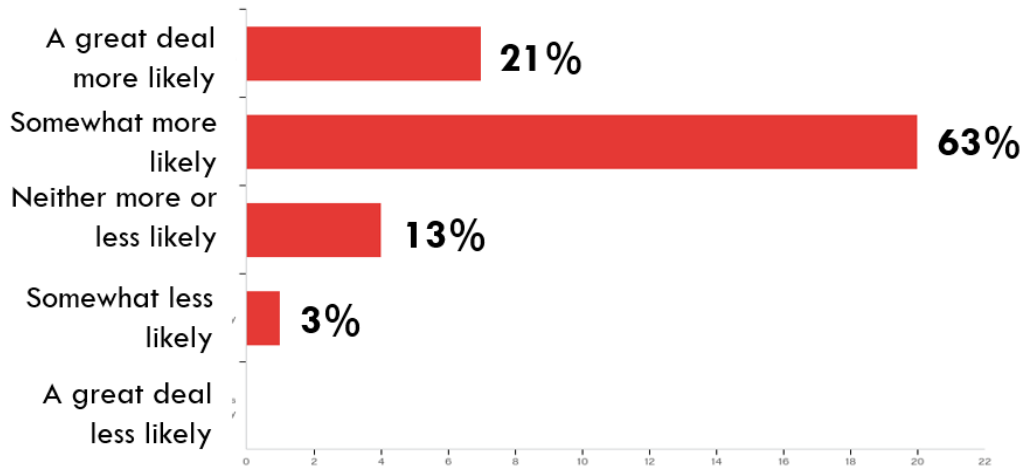


**Figure 4.** I'm more likely to act on feedback than before (n=38).

One student demonstrated a real understanding of the objective of the feedback loop activity and undertook to take more responsibility for their learning:

> Now I see that I should act as a teacher myself first, by pulling apart each sentence and scrutinising it for meaning and why I have chosen to use specific grammar or words (checking if I have used correct particles for instances, and then questioning why I have thought to use particular ones in the case where I have gotten it wrong). [now] I want to use the teacher as a final editor rather than a first or second editor, so I can take a more engaged role in reflecting on my learning
>
> (Student, Japanese 3).

This is an excellent example of a student becoming an active agent and transforming the feedback into "something that is self-generated" (Rovagnati and Pitt, 2022, p. 1068) where students are studying for themselves through formative assessment (Nieminen and Tuohilampi 2020 p.).

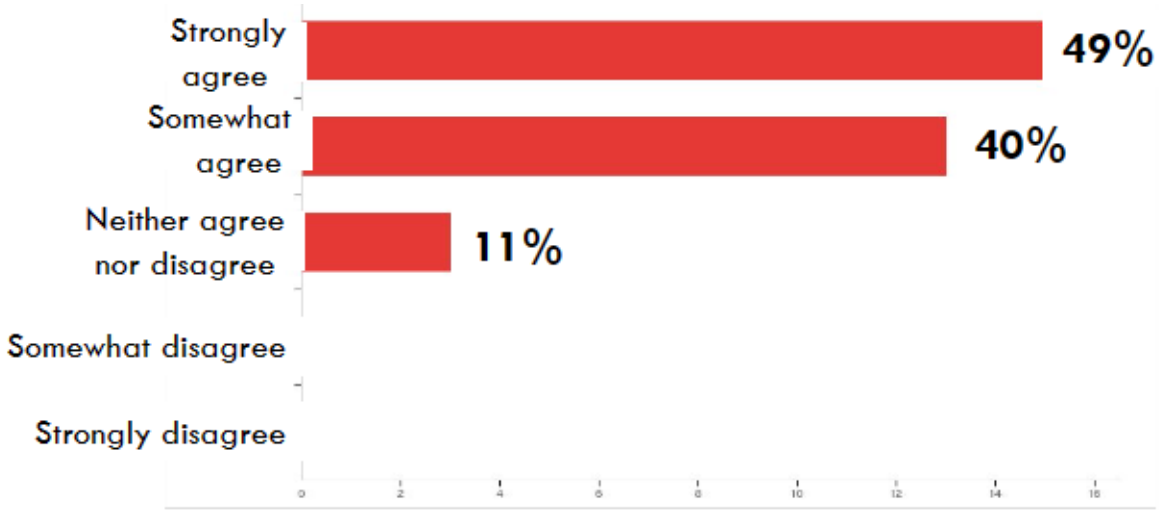


**Figure 5.** I take more responsibility for my learning than before (n= 38).

As can be seen from Table 5., except for Chinese 7, very few students who submitted work for feedback took the further step of uploading corrected work to their e-portfolio. There are several possible reasons for this, including students' proficiency with the e-portfolio (see Figure 6. below). However, the main reason for this difference is perhaps that the Chinese 7 PR used WeChat (a messaging and social media application popular with Chinese students) rather than the e-portfolio, for the reasons outlined below.

**Table 5**. Students who uploaded work to e-portfolio (or alternative).

| | Task 1 | Task 2 | Task 3 | Task 4 | Task 5 | Task 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Chinese 3** | 1 | 1 | | | | |
| **Chinese 7** | 12 | 12 | | | | |
| **Japanese 7** | 2 | 1 | | | | |
| **Japanese 3** | 6 | 1 | 2 | 3 | | |
| **French 7** | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | | |
| **Spanish 3** | 2 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 5 | 5 |

This may be at least partly explained by the questionnaire data showing students varied widely in their level of proficiency with using the e-portfolio (Figure 6).

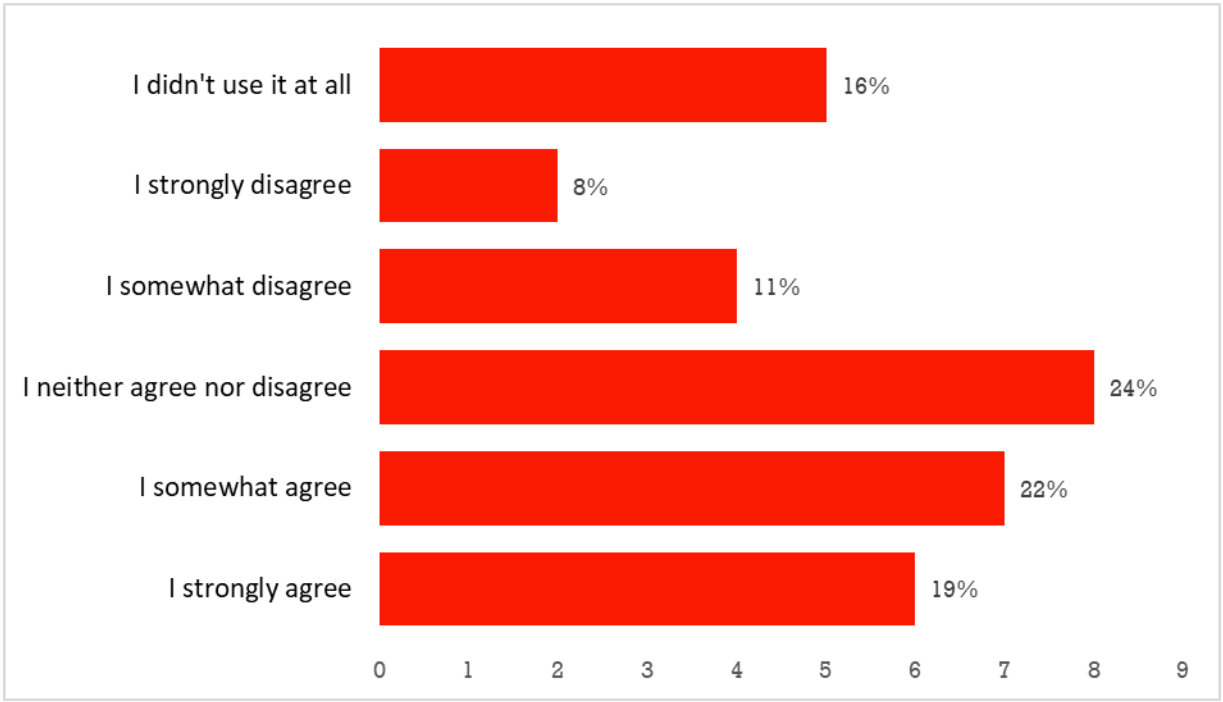


**Figure 6.** The technology was easy to use (n= 32).

In summary, the results show that the Spanish 3 and Chinese 7 classes demonstrated the highest level of engagement, and Chinese 3 and Japanese 7 the lowest level of engagement with the feedback loop. No noticeable pattern was detected amongst the responses except for one respondent from Chinese 3, whose questionnaire responses were consistently negative. The following comment suggests that this student viewed feedback as the teacher's responsibility:

> I would rather spend more time actually discussing these points with my teacher than getting feedback on online tasks that we did.

*RQ 2. Which contextual factors might account for these differences?*
Some unexpected differences emerged in the way the feedback loop activity was implemented across the six language classrooms. This section will use Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework (1977, 1993) to explore factors which might help to account for these differences as well as for differences in levels of learner engagement.

**Differences in Implementation**
Table 6. summarises some key differences in the way the feedback loop was implemented in each class. These included:

- whether learner participation was optional;
- whether there were incentives for participating (e.g., participation marks);
- whether learners were given class time for the tasks;
- whether the writing tasks were curriculum-embedded or additional to the planned curriculum;
- whether tasks were linked to assessment;
- when the activity was explained to learners; and
- whether the e-portfolio or an alternative technology was used.

These differences, conceived as the 'tangle' in the feedback loop, appeared to have been influenced by aspects of the microsystems, macrosystems and chronosystems occupied by each of the PRs.

In particular, differences appeared to reflect different levels of teacher feedback literacy (chronosystem). Specifically, as the project progressed it became clear that some of the PRs had not properly understood the key principles underlying the feedback loop activity until the second team meeting in Week 5.

These differences can be accounted for by the PRs' differing levels of experience, training and expertise in the area of feedback and assessment. While the Spanish teacher had previously collaborated in three feedback-focused studies - including the original feedback loop activity - and has formal training and a track record of research and publication in language assessment, this was not the case for the other members of the team.

**Table 6.** Differences in implementation.

| | **High engagement <----------> Low engagement** | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Ch 7** | **Sp 3** | **Jp 3** | **Fr 7** | **Jp 7** | **Ch 3** |
| **Optional** | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| **Marks** | Yes | Yes | No | No | No | No |
| **Class time** | Yes | Yes | Yes | No/Yes | No | No |
| **Explanation** | Wk6 | Wk3 | Wk3 | Wk5 | Wk5 | Wk3 |
| **Embedded** | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | No | No |
| **Assessment** | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| **Technology** | WeChat | e-folio | e-folio | e-folio | e-folio | e-folio |

Another important factor was an assumption about the suitability of the respective language programs for the activity. For example, several weeks into the project it emerged that French 7 placed an emphasis on oral skills, so that the written tasks provided were not part of the planned curriculum and represented additional work for students (and teacher). For this reason, no class time was initially allocated for these tasks. Nor was class time provided in Chinese 3 but for different reasons; it takes longer to achieve written and spoken proficiency in Chinese than French; according to the teacher, Chinese 3 students can read and only write about 350-450 words. Hence, extended writing tasks were not normally a feature of classes at this level and were not considered a good use of class time:

> Writing a short essay in class seems not to be an ideal method for students of Chinese 3, who only have learned quite limited Chinese characters and sentence structures
>
> (Chinese 3 PR).

Hence, while in both classes the differences resulted from features of the respective language curricula (microsystem), in Chinese 3 they could also be attributed to the nature of the discipline itself (macrosystem).

Another way feedback literacy impacted implementation was timing, or when the activity was explained to learners relative to when the tasks were to be completed. For example, the Japanese 7 and French 7 PRs did not explain the purpose of the feedback loop activity to their students until after the second team meeting in week 5, when they felt they had a better understanding of the project themselves. In contrast, the Chinese 7 PR deliberately chose to delay the explanation of the activity until just before the tasks were to be introduced (week 6). However, she later reflected:

> I could have introduced the project earlier than Week 6, in which case students would have time to complete more loops. I feel like they have just become familiar with the loop process, and there came the end of the semester (Chinese 7 PR).

Finally, the Chinese 7 PR decided to use WeChat (a messaging and social media application), rather than the e-portfolio, because it represented a culturally authentic tool for Chinese language speakers (macrosystem) and had more comprehensive functionality than the e-portfolio in Canvas. While this represents a more significant departure from the other programs and could be seen as possibly reducing the validity of the findings, given the relatively low number of participants overall and the multiple different contexts described here, it should instead be considered as simply another difference in implementation. On the contrary, its inclusion served to highlight the lack of engagement with the e-portfolio when compared to a more socio-culturally appropriate tool.

**Table 7.** Context and implementation.

| **System** | **Factor** | **Influence** |
|---|---|---|
| Microsystem | Curriculum focus | embedded, link to assessment, class time |
| Macrosystem | Socio-cultural practices | use of social media (WeChat) |
| Chronosystem | Teacher feedback literacy | embedded, link to assessment,<br>timing of explanation |

In summary, students appeared less motivated to complete writing tasks if these were additional to the planned curriculum (microsystem) and not linked to assessment. These problems suggest there were shortcomings in how the feedback loop activity was explained in the first instance as well as a failure to consider the suitability of the PRs' respective programs. At the same time, the misunderstanding may also have reflected differing levels of feedback literacy (chronosystem) amongst the PRs. Teacher feedback literacy also appeared to be a factor in differences in when the activity was explained to students (timing) for two of the PRs. Finally, differences in whether class time was provided appeared to reflect language-specific (macrosystem) as well as curricular (microsystem) differences.

**Differences in learner engagement**

Learner engagement was assessed by the number of students who self-assessed and submitted drafts for specific feedback, noted action on previous feedback, and uploaded feedback to their e-portfolio. Differences in learner engagement appeared to be influenced by aspects of the microsystems, exosystems and chronosystems they occupied.

Not surprisingly, teacher feedback literacy (chronosystem), in addition to curricular differences (microsystem), also appeared to impact learner engagement. That is, the better the understanding of the feedback loop, the higher the level of learner engagement. In Chinese 7 and Spanish 3, which experienced the highest levels of engagement, tasks were embedded in the curriculum as well as linked to assessment, the explanation was timed to coincide with task completion, marks were awarded for participation, and class time was provided for initial drafts.

Furthermore, in Chinese 7 participation was compulsory, there was follow-up discussion of aspects that still needed improvement, re-submission was required if feedback had not been properly addressed, and

the PR conducted one-on-one conversations based on the written feedback, where students were encouraged to clarify their intentions and make plans for revision. In other words, as well as demonstrating a good understanding of the nature and purpose of the feedback loop, the Chinese 7 PR clearly signalled its importance to learners.

By contrast, in Japanese 7 and Chinese 3, which experienced the lowest levels of engagement, the written tasks were additional to the planned curriculum, participation was voluntary, and neither incentives (e.g., participation marks) nor class time were provided. The importance of providing class time for participation was highlighted by this student who indicated on the questionnaire that they had *not* submitted drafts for feedback:

> I had every intention of writing up drafts but when you have multiple other assignments due that are compulsory, you prioritise. I would probably have done it if we had started a draft in class
>
> (Student, Japanese 7).

However, while participation in French 7 improved once class-time was provided, the PR acknowledged that this factor alone appeared to have a limited impact on learners' motivation:

> [the students] only participated because eventually I brought the activity into the classroom because they weren't doing it at all when it was only optional, but it wasn't assessed, so [there was] no real incentive to do it properly
>
> (French 7 PR).

There was evidence the PR's understanding of the purpose of the e-portfolio may also have influenced students' motivation to use it:

> I actually never used the e-portfolio function and am unsure of its function
>
> (Student, French 7).

Equally, this may have also reflected the PR's own level of comfort with the technology, a problem shared with many of their students:

> The e-portfolio was often confusing and because I struggled with the technology, I was hesitant to submit more work through it
>
> (Student, Japanese 3).

However, it was also clear that the limitations of the technology (exosystem) itself presented a significant barrier to its use. For example, students' e-portfolios could not be accessed on tablets, resulting in the need to scan and return corrected work by email for students to retrieve and upload to their portfolio. Both students and PRs expressed frustration for a process requiring multiple steps.

The Chinese 7 PR avoided these problems by using WeChat, where all interactions (submission and return, storage and retrieval) could be easily managed within the one application. The popular social media application was also likely to be more appealing to students than the e-portfolio.
These findings are summarised in Table 8.

**Table 8.** Context and engagement.

| System | Factor | Influence |
|---|---|---|
| Microsystem | Curriculum focus | embedded, link to assessment, class time |
| Exosystem | Institutional technology<br>Popular culture | use of e-portfolio<br>use of social media (WeChat) |
| Chronosystem | Teacher feedback literacy<br>Digital literacy | embedded, link to assessment, timing of explanation<br>use of e-portfolio |

**Conclusion**

This paper investigated the implementation of a previously successful feedback loop activity in additional language programs in the same university department. The activity was designed to improve learner engagement and agency by requiring them to take responsibility for requesting and acting on feedback. While the success of the activity varied across the six language classes there was evidence of increased student engagement with feedback, as well as "cognitive and/or affective reframing" (Ajjawi and Boud 2018, p.10) in terms of learners' understanding of their role in the feedback process.

Unexpected differences emerged in the way the feedback loop activity was implemented in the respective classrooms. The reasons for these differences as well as for differences in levels of learner engagement were explored using Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1993) ecological framework, demonstrating its usefulness as a model for understanding feedback practices in university language programs. The importance of understanding contextual influences is underscored by this comment by the Japanese 7 PR:

> I coordinated Japanese 2 this semester …and was surprised to see how differently the students responded to a similar task. We had four optional writing tasks to be completed outside of the classroom, and more than one-third of the students (out of 100) constantly submitted the task every time... Through joining the research project and coordinating different levels at [this university], I was able to see students' different motivations/attitudes/engagement across different levels and languages. (They are different from what I saw/felt at other institutions as well).

It is important to note that not all of the PRs had control over the curriculum they were teaching. Hence, not surprisingly, one of the PRs commented that the workload implications of linking tasks to assessment when they were not already part of the planned curriculum reduced the incentive to implement this sort of activity in future.

However, it was generally agreed that, when well-integrated into the course structure, the feedback loop approach offers a systematic, student-centred pedagogy to teaching language. In particular, PRs reported that the activity provided them with a more nuanced understanding of differences in:

- students' proficiency levels
- how students engage with feedback
- students' motivation to engage with feedback not linked to assessment
- students' ability to self-assess, and
- levels of comfort with, and motivation to use, available technology.

The use of e-portfolios appeared to be beneficial for the students who used them although, for the reasons outlined, it did not result in a reduction in teacher workload.

Based on our findings we would offer the following recommendations for teachers considering introducing this type of feedback loop:

- introduce the approach early in the teaching and learning cycle;
- make the benefits of participating, and of using particular technology, clear to students;
- embed feedback tasks in the curriculum;
- create a clear link between feedback and assessment tasks;
- allow class time to complete, or at least start, feedback tasks;
- make no assumptions about students' digital literacy and consider more user-friendly options (e.g., social media) if necessary, and
- provide incentives (e.g., marks) for participation and/or for evidence of uptake in revised or subsequent work.

Additional suggestions from individual PRs include:

- creating a template for students to report action taken on feedback
- scheduling brief, individual follow-up discussions with students in class time;
- discussing strategies for improving text, including appropriate use of digital editing tools, and
- continuing the approach beyond a single semester so it becomes 'business as usual' for students.

It is important to acknowledge several limitations to this study. Firstly, the low participation rates in some classes and limited data from students who chose not to participate in the activity limits our ability to generalise our interpretations.

Furthermore, despite the stated aim of encouraging learners to take greater agency in their learning, the process was still essentially teacher controlled. Hence, suggestions for future such activities include involving students in discussions about the effectiveness of the feedback loop process as well as how to design and/or improve it, including the use of a particular technology. These discussions should be held before implementing the activity, not only to improve uptake but to encourage and support learner agency in the whole process from the outset.

The study did not investigate evidence of learning from feedback as a result of the activity. However, future studies might investigate the longitudinal effects of activities such as this on longer term learning. Digital modes are increasingly being used for providing and tracking feedback on assessment (Ryan, Henderson and Phillips, 2019) and, while the technology used in this study proved problematic, activities using more up-to-date and user-friendly technologies may well have greater success. The mesosystem element of Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework of human development fell beyond the scope of this study i.e., students receiving feedback across classes in different disciplines or teachers providing

feedback differently across different classrooms. Future research which makes explicit discrete feedback differences across classrooms could help consolidate and develop practitioner engagement with feedback.

Finally, this study represented the first time that the teachers from the different language programs within the department had shared their practice, which all agreed had been valuable in and of itself and was something they would like to continue.

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**Appendix 1.** Online questionnaire.

1. The written feedback I received was more useful than before
2. I am more likely to act on written feedback than before
3. I am more likely to learn from written feedback than before. Please provide an example
4. I have a better understanding of the purpose of self-assessment (e.g., reflecting on what feedback I require)
5. I take more responsibility for my learning than before
6. It's easier to keep track of my progress on written tasks than before
7. The technology (e.g., the e-portfolio) was easy to use
8. This approach (self-assessing and requesting specific feedback on your work) should be continued.

**Appendix 2.** Interview questions.

1. How do you feel about the approach to providing feedback used in your class this semester?
2. What was your experience of using technology (CANVAS (e-portfolio)/WeChat) to access your feedback?
3. Which aspects of the approach were most helpful for you?
4. What could be improved? How?
5. Has this approach changed your perceptions about your role in the feedback process?