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How university EFL learners construct academic identity through feedback practices

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Abstract

Feedback plays a pivotal role in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university education, but it is often regarded as a technical process of correcting mistakes in language learning, as opposed to conceptualising it as an activity that defines and shapes learners' educational identities. This qualitative research study investigates university EFL learners' construction of their educational identities by exploring academic identity formation through practices of feedback at one public university in South America. The study employed research methods of semi-structured interviews, reflective writing, and the discussion of research participants' artefacts of feedback, conducted with 15 university EFL learners undertaking undergraduate study at the public university in South America. The thematic findings of the research study disclosed how the activity of feedback was an important location of educational identity construction, as it influenced university EFL learners' perceptions of their educational competence, educational voices, and feelings of educational membership. Feedback which legitimises meaning-making through dialogical interactions influenced educational confidence, but monological forms of educational feedback influenced feelings of anxiety, strategic engagement, as well as limited educational positioning. Learners' engagement with educational feedback was influenced by their subjective experiences of their educational emotional journeys, power, trust, educational time, and constraints of educational assessment.

Introduction

Feedback is an integral part of university education in teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language, and this is particularly the case in academic writing and critical discussion classes. In the context of higher education, feedback is believed to mediate learners' progress and assist in academic writing. But for EFL learners, feedback may hold meaning that goes beyond the act of guiding progress in an academic setting. Feedback can signal whose voices count in the academic community and how competence is framed in an academic community conducted in the English language. Feedback thus becomes an important location for constructing academic identities rather than simply correcting language.

Historically, feedback scholarship in second and foreign language writing research has focused on questions of effectiveness, especially on the function of written corrective feedback in improving grammatical correctness. Key investigations have challenged whether, how, and under what circumstances feedback contributes to second language development, often using experimental and quasi-experimental designs (e.g., Truscott, 1996; Ferris, 1999, 2006; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009, 2010). Though such research has contributed significantly to our understanding of learning outcomes, especially on second language performance, these studies have been criticised for conceptualising second language learners merely as passive recipients of feedback and for downplaying the social, affective, and contextual aspects of feedback processes in second language learning environments (Ferris, 2010; Storch, 2018). These practice studies may overlook learners' experience of feedback as part of a larger educational context. More recent work has turned attention back to learner engagement with feedback, and engagement has been characterised as a multi-dimensional construct which includes cognitive, behavioural, and affective elements (Ellis, 2010). This view takes account of the fact that feedback does not always serve the same purposes and effects, and that learners' engagement is conditioned by their informing beliefs, emotion, past experiences, and learning context. Research conducted in this framework has found that learners can comply with their feedback without fully understanding and appreciating it, or find the latter while lacking the motivation or ability to respond to it, for linguistic, emotional, or contextual reasons (Han & Hyland, 2015). Significantly, engagement research draws attention to the close connections between feedback, authority, trust, and agency, especially in an educational context where there are strong traditions of teacher-centeredness.

In addition to concerns about engagement, identity-focused approaches highlight the importance of feedback in constructing learners' perceptions of themselves as academic writers and English users. Academic identity is better understood as an ongoing process that is socially and dynamically constructed through interactions with texts, tutors, peers, and academic normativity. From this point of view, feedback becomes something that positions learners in certain subject positions that either

reify or subvert notions of learners' legitimacy, competence, and membership in academic contexts. Various studies show that right ideas and meaning-making-related feedback has numerous benefits in terms of confidence and learner participation, while idea-narrow feedback that focuses on mistake correction has potentially deficit-driving effects (Han & Hyland, 2019; Lea & Street, 2006). However, despite these significant developments, there still exists a considerable research gap. Whereas studies on engagement and its concepts of beliefs, feelings, and practices are relatively common, the number of studies that focus on how individuals construct and negotiate feedback and academic self-construction, in academic identity development, specifically under the domain of English as a Foreign Language and the corresponding academic settings, remains relatively minimal. In turn, it becomes imperative to emphasise and highlight the significance of understanding and studying the engagement practices of students, specifically under the construct of academic self-construction, regarding the interpretation and negotiation of feedback to shape academic identity. Moreover, recent sociomaterial and academic literacies theories add to the complexity of understandings surrounding the nature of feedback by pointing to the ways in which a desire to engage can be equally affected by material, as well as social, factors such as the nature of the format, digital tools, and the timing associated with feedback. In light of such understandings, it can be argued that the giving and receiving of feedback are necessarily located within systems of power, such that who speaks, who seeks to respond to, or who seeks to contest academic judgement, is itself governed by such systems. With this challenge in mind, this study explores how university-based EFL learners negotiate their academic identity through experiences of feedback at a public university in South America. Using a qualitative research approach that focuses on exploring learners' experiences of validation, authority, dialogue, emotion, and strategic engagement with feedback through written, oral, and digital communication, this research hopes to move beyond measures of outcomes related to feedback to gain insight into how experiences of feedback influence feelings of competence, voice, and membership in English-medium academic environments.

Through the placement of feedback research within the nexus of engagement, identity, and institutions, this research responds to a call for a more contextualised and learner-focused agenda in research on feedback in the context of EFL higher education. It thus joins a discussion on the function of feedback in relation to implications of feedback not only in texts but in relation to learners as developing participants.

Literature review

Feedback has long been recognised as a central pedagogical practice in second and foreign language writing, particularly in higher education contexts. Early research on written corrective feedback (WCF) largely focused on its effectiveness in improving linguistic accuracy, often through quasi-experimental designs comparing feedback types (e.g., Truscott, 1996; Ferris, 1999, 2006; Bitchener & Knoch, 2009, 2010; Shintani & Ellis, 2013). While this body of research has demonstrated that feedback can contribute to improved writing accuracy, it has been increasingly criticised for its narrow focus on outcomes and error correction, offering limited insight into how learners experience, interpret, and respond to feedback as social and emotional beings within academic institutions (Ferris, 2010; Bitchener & Storch, 2016; Storch, 2018). In reaction to these limitations and imperatives, there has been a shift in recent scholarship towards problems of learner involvement with feedback and the processing of feedback in the learning of English as a foreign language in the tertiary education environment and the role of academic feedback in the creation of academic identity. Feedback is an important site where power and voice intersect.

One of the key strands of this body of research defines the engagement of learners in the feedback process as a complex phenomenon, which involves cognitive, behavioural, as well as affective aspects (Ellis, 2010). This conceptual underpinning of research informed, in turn, the qualitative study of Han and Hyland (2015) in the tertiary EFL environment, whose findings showed significant disparities in terms of the engagement of learners with teacher-written corrective feedback depending on how well such corrective feedback aligned with the learners' views, ideas, and attitudes. Moreover, this study showed the crucial point that engagement with corrective feedback and corrective feedback uptake are not one and the same thing, as learners may cognitively, behaviourally, or affectively disengage, even as they mechanically correct their texts (Han & Hyland, 2015). Extending this line of research, Han (2017) analysed the role of learner beliefs in shaping reception of written corrective feedback, revealing that feedback was not simply received as learning input but was filtered through learners' belief systems of teacher authority, self-efficacy, and learning experiences. These findings demonstrate that where learners believed that teachers' authority was absolute, feedback was submitted to in a non-reflected manner, whereas when learners believed in learner-oriented values of autonomy and agency, feedback was received in a manner of evaluating, negotiating, or selecting. These studies indicate that feedback is a place where power is exercised in shaping academic identity by submitting, resisting, or complying. Aside from teacher feedback, peer review has also been considered in regards to the context of constructing identities and participation. Zhang et al. (2023) in the Journal of English for Academic Purposes conducted a study on how EFL students participated in peer review. The study has found an indication that learners' participation in peer review activities

has developed their identities as knowledgeable participants, rather than merely receivers, in the sector. The learners developed more authoritative identities when they continually participated in the activity, reflecting their heightened confidence, sense of responsibility, and appropriateness in relation to discipline, following an extended engagement in dialogic discourse in peer review activities. A comprehensive review of this growing body of research is offered by Shen and Chong (2023), who carried out a qualitative research synthesis of 14 studies into learner engagement with written corrective feedback in ESL and EFL settings. Based on ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Neal & Neal, 2013) and perception-based theory, the authors frame learner engagement as being determined by an interplay between individual-level and context-level factors at various ecological system levels. At an individual level, these factors include language proficiency, metalinguistic knowledge, perception, goals, motivation, self-regulation, and previous experiences with feedback (Han, 2017, 2019; Han & Xu, 2019; Kim & Bowles, 2019). At the context level, these include micro-classroom level factors such as level of clarity, error type, level of instructional support, and social relationships (sociocultural factors). Indeed, synthesis work indicates that engagement-behaviour is most prominent in terms of frequency, but that cognitive and affective engagement are also highly salient in terms of understanding processes for feedback. Students tended to revise their work with little comprehension and/or little belief in the relevance/value of comprehension, while others tended to invest much cognitive effort but felt emotionally discouraged by correction processes (as cited in Zheng and Yu, 2018; Han & Hyland, 2019). However, according to Shen and Chong (2023), deep engagement can occur only where learner factors are well-aligned with contextual support, rather than surface engagement, selective engagement, and/or disengagement occurring where incongruence exists.

From an academic identity perspective, these findings suggest that feedback functions as a powerful social practice through which learners negotiate their legitimacy as academic English users. Feedback that acknowledges ideas, invites dialogue, and supports understanding enables learners to position themselves as developing scholars with a voice. Conversely, feedback that is overly corrective, opaque, or authoritarian reinforces unequal power relations and constrains learners' academic identities, particularly in EFL contexts where linguistic insecurity is already salient. Despite these advances, Shen and Chong (2023) note that much of the existing research remains focused on engagement as an individual process, with limited attention to how learners narrate and make sense of feedback experiences in relation to their broader academic identities. While emotions, beliefs, and strategies are discussed, fewer studies explicitly examine how learners come to see themselves as insiders or outsiders within academic communities through feedback interactions. This gap is particularly evident in contexts where English functions as a foreign language and academic norms are strongly teacher-centred.

The present study addresses this gap by examining how university EFL learners construct academic identity through feedback practices, focusing on learners' narratives of validation, power, dialogue, emotion, and strategic engagement. By adopting a qualitative, identity-oriented lens, the study builds on engagement-focused research while shifting the analytical focus towards learners' sense of competence, voice, and belonging. In doing so, it responds directly to calls for more contextualised, learner-centred accounts of feedback that move beyond efficacy and uptake to consider feedback as a formative force in academic identity construction.

Extending feedback research through a sociomaterial and identity-oriented lens

While engagement-focused research has substantially advanced understanding of how learners cognitively, behaviourally, and affectively respond to feedback (Ellis, 2010; Han & Hyland, 2015; Shen & Chong, 2023), recent scholarship has argued that such perspectives remain limited if they foreground feedback primarily as a human-to-human, dialogic interaction. Gravett (2022) challenges this assumption by reconceptualising feedback literacies as sociomaterial practices, arguing that engagement with feedback is produced through entanglements of social relations, material artefacts, spatial arrangements, temporal constraints, and institutional power structures. Drawing on academic literacies theory (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006), Gravett (2022) positions feedback not as a neutral pedagogical tool but as an ideologically shaped practice embedded in relations of power, authority, and legitimacy. It is from this critical point of view, therefore, that the function of feedback exists in influencing academic identity, wherein students are placed within particular discursive positions according to the execution and reception of feedback practices. Findings from previous studies (Lea & Street, 2006; Taras, 2008; Sutton, 2012) indicate, however, that the provision of feedback has the potential to act as an instrument of gate-keeping in academic settings, which maintains discourses of imbalance in relations between academics and students.

A major strength of Gravett (2022) is in contesting humanistic notions of learner agency with the implied equal potential of students to respond to feedback, so long as they have adequate motivation or feedback literacy skills (Carless & Boud, 2018; Winstone et al., 2017). These notions tend to result in deficit model Bi-narratives if students do not act in the expected manner. Agency in this discussion is assumed to be an emergent process within the interaction of individualistic, resource-driven efforts, and context (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Charteris, 2016). This is well-supported within ecological perspectives of feedback engagement, with an implied interaction of individual learner characteristics with affordances (Chong, 2020; Shen & Chong, 2023). As a sociomaterial practice, feedback participation is mediated not just by belief or emotions but also by non-human entities such as feedback documents, online platforms, grading criteria, learning environments, and time constraints

(Ajjawi & Boud, 2017; Gourlay & Oliver, 2018). Gravett (2022) illustrates that learning spaces such as offices, libraries, or online learning platforms might either support or hinder students' participation in seeking clarification, disputing feedback, and engaging in dialogue. These material and discursive aspects are particularly important for EFL students in whose case limited linguistic confidence may combine with organisational power to limit voice even further. It is evident that time is another key sociomaterial consideration. Overall institutional values concerning timely response and interaction with feedback may disregard students' disparities in time usage due to work commitments or care responsibilities and travel constraints (Bennett & Burke, 2017; Clegg, 2010). Students undertaking strategic or instrumental responses to feedback, which point towards grades rather than being directive, should be understood in contexts that go beyond being simply disengaged or lackadaisical but are in fact sound decisions in view of time constraints (Bailey & Garner, 2010; Sutton, 2012). This strategic response to feedback has already been supported in studies on feedback in English as a Foreign Language context in which students respond selectively to feedback to contend with workload and well-being (Han, 2017; Shen & Chong, 2023).

Gravett (2022) proposes a sociomaterial approach that offers a more nuanced conceptualisation of feedback as identity work. Feedback encounters are represented as emotionally invested, with fear, anxiety, and confidence entwined with power dynamics embedded in assessment processes (Raaper, 2016; Han & Hyland, 2019). Feedback encounters that are felt as judged encounters, rather than dialogue, could lead learners to take on identities of lack or mute their voice in the academy. Conversely, feedback encounters that foreground care, trust, and a support focus might lead learners towards taking up identities of themselves as legitimate actors in academic communities (Sutton, 2012; Gravett & Winstone, 2019a).

Taken together, sociomaterial perspectives extend engagement-based models by foregrounding the conditions under which engagement becomes possible or constrained, rather than locating responsibility solely within the learner. For studies examining academic identity construction through feedback, this perspective is particularly valuable, as it allows identity to be understood as emerging through everyday feedback encounters entangled with material, social, and institutional forces. By integrating engagement research (Han & Hyland, 2015; Shen & Chong, 2023) with sociomaterial and academic literacies frameworks (Lea & Street, 2006; Gravett, 2022), the present study positions feedback as a central site where EFL learners negotiate competence, authority, emotion, and belonging within the university context.

Research questions

RQ1. How do university EFL learners interpret and negotiate written, oral, and digital feedback in relation to their construction of academic identity in English-medium coursework?

RQ2. How do feedback practices shape learners' sense of competence, voice, and legitimacy as academic English users within university contexts?

Hypothesis

Although this study adopts an exploratory qualitative design and does not seek to test hypotheses in a statistical sense, it is guided by the expectation that feedback functions as a socially and institutionally situated practice that actively shapes learners' academic identities. It is anticipated that feedback experienced as dialogic, supportive, and focused on meaning-making will be associated with stronger senses of academic legitimacy, confidence, and voice, whereas feedback perceived as monologic, heavily corrective, or authority-driven will be linked to anxiety, strategic compliance, and constrained identity positioning. Furthermore, learners are expected to engage with feedback as a voluntary act, drawing on trust, emotional responses, and contextual constraints when they negotiate their academic identities in English.

Methodology

Participants

The participants were university students studying English under a South American setting where English is not the main medium of communication. The institution provides academic tuition in reading and writing with the aim of encouraging students to engage with academic study. It is within this academic setting that teachers set written exercises and offer feedback that is supposed to guide students' development. Offering feedback is an important aspect of English language learning at the university setting. It is thus an appropriate setting that can be utilised to investigate the role of feedback practices and their impact on the development of academic identities of students.

The participants were sampled purposely because of their high engagement with feedback practice. The study involved fifteen university students, which was an adequate sample for this qualitative study to gain depth, richness, and data saturation. The study involved students from diverse disciplines, ranging from humanities to social sciences, business, to engineering. The study took advantage of this diversity to explore the effects of diverse academic cultures on constructing an aca-

demic identity using feedback. All participants were non-native speakers of English who were enrolled in mandatory or elective English courses where their main focus was on academic writing, reading, and argumentation. The proficiency level of participants varied from upper-intermediate to advanced levels, which was established through language placement tests conducted in the institution. This is important in understanding how perceptions of language ability play a role in how individuals interpret language use.

Variation was noted among participants regarding their year of study, previous experiences of disciplinary knowledge presented in English, and their educational backgrounds. Many of these participants have been subjected to teaching practices of a more teacher-centred nature typical of South American education environments. These variables are not viewed as distinct categories of comparison but rather as conditions of context influencing participants' processes of meaning-making of feedback. Recruitment of participants took place voluntarily within English classes. The researcher did not have any teaching or assessment roles regarding participants to eliminate possible power differentials. Voluntary participation was assured in all respects, and respondents were made aware of their right to withdraw at any stage without facing any negative repercussions. To ensure anonymity, respondents were allotted pseudonyms (e.g., P1, P2). The findings are presented using these pseudonyms to ensure anonymity is maintained. The data collection process continued until saturation is attained regarding themes of validation, authority, affect, and strategic engagement with feedback.

Materials

The study made use of qualitative research data that was designed to provide insightful accounts from learners' experiences with feedback and the shaping of their academic identity. The primary method for data gathering was the design of a semi-structured interview schedule specifically for this study. The design was based on the uses of feedback and academic writing from sociocultural and identity-based theories. The guide for carrying out interviews included open questions categorised into four main themes: experiencing feedback in English-language classes, emotional responses to feedback, views about power and voice in the interaction for feedback, and strategies for responding to or resisting feedback. Example questions were concerned with the perceptions the participants have received after receiving positive and critical feedback, the sense of entitlement and ability to respond to and challenge feedback, and the effects on their confidence to use academic English. Follow-up questions were used to facilitate elaboration and to explore themes identified by the participants. In addition to the interviews, the feedback artifacts were used. The participants were asked to contribute examples of feedback they received about their written assignments. These include

essays that were marked, rubrics, comments, or even computer feedback from learning management systems. Such artefacts were not regarded as independent texts but rather for the purpose of elicitation in interviewing. Examination of concrete examples of feedback helped to articulate the way specific utterances had impacted upon the perceived competence, sense of belonging and/or feelings of marginalisation experienced by members in the scholarly community. The task involved writing a reflection task. A writing reflection task was used as supplementary material. After conducting the interviews, the participants were requested to write a reflection task concerning how feedback affected motivation, self-confidence, and self-perception for university students using English language skills. This written component allowed participants additional time and space for introspection, mainly for emotional or sensitive reflections that might not fully emerge during spoken interaction.

These interviews were recorded using a digital sound recorder or a secured online platform and were later transcribed. The pause points and emphasising expressions were considered for transcription since pause points and emphasising expressions can be considered as revelatory expressions for evaluation and identification. The collection of data through the interview guide, feedback artefact, reflective writing task, and interviews can be considered for methodological triangulation.

Procedure

The data was gathered using a staged and reflexive approach to ensure the critical elements of ethical integrity, comfort, and depth. Having gained institutional ethics approval, participants had an information sheet outlining the purposes and nature of participation and participants' rights and gave written, fully informed consent to carry out the data collection procedure.

Semi-structured interviews were the primary part of conducting data. All interviews took 40 to 60 minutes, and interviews were held either at a quiet campus location or online, depending on what participants preferred. Scheduling interviews at a time outside of classes aimed to avoid disruption and prevent any evaluation association. In view of the language and affective work involved in formulating feedback and identity, participants were encouraged to use one of the options of expressing themselves in English, Spanish, or Portuguese, or practice translanguaging. This also became relevant in the South American context because the topic of academic authority or critique may be considered culturally nuanced. The option to use the full linguistic repertoire made way for more authentic meaning-making. Interviewees were asked to talk about personal experiences with feedback, as opposed to giving their view. An ethical approach has been adopted, allowing participants to

reflect upon personal experiences through feedback and placed particular emphasis on their experiences in learning and academic settings. Personal reflection of experience and personal construction of identity were taken into account.

All interviews were transcribed and processed using thematic analysis. The process began with familiarisation, which was conducted through reading the transcripts and writing reflexive memos. Open coding resulted in the development of preliminary codes that were based on themes such as validation, authority, trajectories, and methods of handling feedback. These codes were iteratively refined and organised into broader themes and subthemes, which resulted in the analytical structure presented in the qualitative data Table 1. In this case, an audit trail process was followed throughout the analysis to ensure documentation of coding, theme development, and reflexive insights. This process improved the credibility of the results obtained.

Ethical considerations

In regard to ethical considerations, ethical clearance for this research was acquired from the Research Ethics Committee of the public university in South America (Approval Reference: HUS-REC-2024-017), which hosted the study. This study reflects ethical practices in regard to qualitative research involving human subjects. The participation in this study is voluntary. All participants were given an information sheet that described participation in the study. The information sheet included information regarding participation in this study. The participants were also free to withdraw their participation without any further explanations or academic repercussions. Strict anonymity and confidentiality were maintained. All participants were given pseudonyms. Traces of identification related to lecturers or subjects were excised from interview transcripts. Feedback artifacts used in conducting interviews were anonymised and not analysed as artifacts; they were used for elicitation.

To limit the impact of the balance of power, the researcher did not have any teaching or evaluation role for the participants. Considering the fact that the themes of the interviews may raise controversial issues for the interviewees, conducting the interviews in a constructive way while giving the interviewee the right to stop the process of the interview whenever they want was considered. Data were stored securely and used exclusively for research purposes. Participant extracts were reported respectfully, with care taken to represent learners' experiences accurately while avoiding deficit or evaluative framing.

Table 1

Themes, subthemes, and participant extracts for academic identity construction through feedback

Theme	Subtheme	Illustrative participant extract
Feedback as validation of academic self	Recognition of competence	"When my teacher wrote that my argument was strong, I felt like I was actually an academic writer, not just a student learning English" (P3)
	Sense of belonging	"Positive comments made me feel I belong in university, not like an outsider because of my English" (P11)
Feedback as a site of power and authority	Teacher dominance	"I don't argue with feedback even if I disagree because the teacher has the final word" (P6)
	Unequal voice	"Sometimes I feel my ideas are ignored, and only the language mistakes matter" (P14)
Feedback as dialogic or monologic practice	Feedback as conversation	"When the teacher asked me to respond to comments, it felt like a discussion, not judgement" (P2)
	Feedback as final verdict	"I just fix what is marked and move on; there is no space to talk back" (P9)
Emotional trajectories triggered by feedback	Motivation and encouragement	"Detailed feedback motivates me to improve because I know exactly what to do" (P5)
	Anxiety and discouragement	"Too many red marks make me feel I am not improving at all" (P12)
Strategic engagement with feedback	Selective uptake	"I focus on content comments more than grammar because I don't have time for everything" (P1)
	Trust-based decisions	"If I trust the teacher, I follow the feedback carefully; otherwise, I just skim it" (P15)

Results

The findings show that university EFL students construct their academic selves via complex social practices of feedback. Feedback is not just seen as a tool for correcting language use; it is a significant discursive practice for constructing voice and a sense of belonging to the academic community. Across participants' accounts, feedback shaped how learners understood themselves not only as English users but as emerging academic writers and thinkers.

Validation appeared in several ways as a source of affirmation for participants. The acknowledgement of participants' strengths in terms of ideas, arguments, and organisational abilities was done in several ways and showed participants that their academic as well as linguistic abilities were recognised. The process showed participants that they were part of the university community as students and

were using English for academic purposes. On the other hand, feedback centred on errors, particularly grammatical errors, was considered problematic and harmful. When intellectual participation was not given consideration, students felt they were viewed as inadequate language users rather than new academics. Feedback was generally regarded to be contextually encoded within hierarchical modes of power. Learners often considered teacher comments to be authoritative and non-negotiable, even if it was made on a message that disagreed with it. This view helped to limit students' willingness to question and accommodate feedback. Many of the participants expressed that meeting the teacher's expectations was of primary concern over expressing their academic voice. In a feedback context where linguistic accuracy was highlighted over content, learners felt their voice was relegated to the margins of academic discourse, thus maintaining their position of subquality. There is a differentiation made between the dialogic nature of feedback and the monologic type of feedback. The dialogic type of feedback is viewed as having a propensity for response or involving guidance offered in the form of a question. Feedback described as either supportive or developmental allowed the clarification of intentions and the process of writing. Monologic feedback, however, functioned as a terminal evaluation resulting in surface level revisions and limited chances for reflection or the development of writer identity. The experience of emotions is a relevant issue in the effects of the feedback on the academic identity. Positive feedback had a positive effect on motivation, while getting too much feedback could cause the feelings of anxiety. These emotional reactions were cumulative, shaping learners' expectations of feedback over time and influencing their willingness to engage with it meaningfully.

The participants used engagement strategies involving feedback, where the comments were differentiated depending on the value for money, the constraints of time, and the credibility of the source of the comment. The more the comments were viewed as fair and honest, the more the learners would respond to them; on the other hand, the lack of understanding coupled with dismissal would result in minimal engagement.

Discussion

This study set out to understand how university EFL learners construct academic identity through feedback practices in a South American public university context. The findings support and extend the shift in the feedback literature from narrow debates about error correction efficacy to a broader, socially grounded understanding of feedback as a practice through which learners negotiate competence, voice, and belonging (Ferris, 2010; Bitchener & Storch, 2016; Storch, 2018). Across participants' narratives, feedback was not experienced as a technical corrective tool, but as a meaning-laden interaction that positioned learners in relation to academic norms and institutional authority. In this

sense, the study responds directly to calls noted by Shen and Chong (2023) for more learner-centred accounts that capture how students make sense of feedback as part of their broader academic identities rather than as isolated episodes of uptake.

A central contribution of the study lies in showing how feedback operates as validation of academic self. Participants' accounts indicate that comments recognising argument strength, clarity of ideas, or rhetorical effectiveness were interpreted as indicators of legitimacy as academic writers, not merely as language learners. This pattern aligns with the argument that feedback engagement is deeply mediated by affective and cognitive processes, and that "successful" engagement cannot be inferred from revision behaviour alone (Ellis, 2010; Han & Hyland, 2015). In other words, the same feedback practice can support or constrain identity depending on how it signals recognition. Whereas learners reported feelings of increased competency and feelings of being part of the group through commentary that supported meaning-making, they reported feelings of linguistic deficiency upon commentary that focused on mistake-making. This correlates with Ferris (2010) observation that feedback can reduce intellectual contribution and limit the learner's identity to accuracy. The findings suggest that identity development is supported when feedback constructs learners as capable academic contributors and undermined when feedback indirectly positions them as perpetual novices.

The second major theme relates to the power dynamics implicit within the given comments. The participants described comments given by teachers as authoritative and irrevocable, irrespective of whether they agreed with the comment or felt misunderstood by it. This finding corresponds fully to Han's (2017) views about learner beliefs and teacher authority, which mediate and sometimes result in compliance rather than an effort to negotiate. This study makes it clear that the quality of feedback as a 'final word' shapes and restricts students' academic identity. It is crucial to recognise that it is not a matter of confidence and individual identity for students and is instead a factor of institutional culture. These findings correspond with research carried out from the framework of academic literacies, which focuses on writing and response from the perspective of being practices informed through and from ideology (Lea and Street, 1998, 2006). From such a perspective, learner passivity might be better understood as a response to conditions attached to responses where the 'costs of non-conformity seem high'.

A comparison drawn from the dialogic and monologic nature of the feedback further elucidated the effects of feedback on identity creation. The participants were able to describe the dialogic feedback as a "conversation", which aided in the process of responding, understanding, and developing ideas, as opposed to the monologic feedback, which came across as a "verdict". This differentiation mirrors the trend in the treatment of feedback as a dialogic activity in higher education (Ajjawi & Boud,

2017) and verifies the observation that participation in feedback practice grows when it involves participation rather than compliance (Shen & Chong, 2023). These results confirm the observation of Zhang et al. (2023) in their longitudinal comparison of peer feedback in higher education to indicate that feedback procedures identify the role of authoritative participation. Even though the present research does not involve longitudinal monitoring, the personal accounts of the participants reveal that the identity space established through dialogic feedback enables learners to consider themselves as "meaning makers" with an authentic voice in higher education. On the contrary, monologic feedback limits the identity space by encouraging surface-level identity conformity and reducing writing to correction. This bears out Bulté's (2020) argument about how practices in giving feedback shape not only changes in text, but also how learners come to perceive their dispositions and identities as authors.

English Medium of Teaching (EMOT) drafts played a crucial role in acting as a mechanism for the impact of feedback on identity development. Participants were motivated and confidence was increased as a result of specific, supportive, and understandable feedback. However, anxiety and discouragement were developed through dense, highly marked, and evaluative feedback. The findings are in line when considering the study conducted by Han and Hyland (2019), which indicated the findings concerning academic emotions within a feedback situ. By contrast, for the purposes of this research, emotional response cannot be distinguished from identity but must be seen as integral to it, as learners' feelings of progression or lack thereof have a direct impact on their notion of legitimacy and willingness to engage with academic writing. This supports Shen and Chong's (2023) synthesis, where it is highlighted that merely behavioural engagement with feedback is insufficient as a means to understand outcomes without taking affective and cognitive engagement into account. Within this research, it would seem that learners' emotions have a significant impact on both their responses and their own notion of themselves as users of academic English.

A strategic engagement with feedback also represents an important further channel in connecting the empirical results with the existing literature. In fact, the selective use of feedback reported for differing aspects or for areas likely to impact grades also represents an activity common to the subjects and often described in the literature with time constraints as an explanation for the observed selective treatment of feedback. Instead, the results show that selective engagement is better understood as a rational reaction to circumstances, in line with the scholarship of higher education in making time and the role it plays in shaping engagement (Bennett & Burke, 2017; Clegg, 2010). It is also in line with the ecological perspective on engagement by Shen and Chong (2023), in which engagement results from the fit between the learner and context factors. Where perceptions of feedback quality were characterised by clarity and trustworthiness, there was strategic engagement, while

if feedback was perceived as being unclear, very corrective, and delivered in a hierarchal setting, there was strategic engagement for protection through techniques such as skimming and superficial revision. It is thus safe to conclude that strategic engagement is a form of agency.

The sociomaterial perspective outlined by Gravett (2022) situates these results in a context that transcends the individualised understanding of feedback. The implications from the participants show that the construction of identity via feedback practice is not only a function of interpersonal transaction; rather, it's informed by the material conditions that shape feedback practice. Online platforms, rubric-assisted marking feedback, as well as rapid turnaround times for feedback receipt, can shape learners' effectiveness in dealing with feedback, hence validating the idea proposed by Gravett that feedback literacies are acts of practice situated in specific material conditions (Gourlay & Oliver, 2018). In the same way, the lack of willingness to "speak back" to the feedback may be considered the effect of conditions that privilege one-way communication and the process of summative evaluation instead of a real conversation. This corresponds to the literature that has found the distribution of feedback to have the tendency to widen the gap by presuming that all students have the same opportunities to process the feedback (Carless & Boud, 2018; Winstone et al., 2017). These results imply that the development of academic identities may require more than improved quality of the messages related to the feedback process.

On the whole, the research has made three contributions to existing literature. Firstly, it has placed a great emphasis on the issue of academic identity as an important result of the implementation of feedback practices. It has thereby complemented existing engagement research by providing evidence of how the themes of validation, voice, and being a valued part of the community are constantly being reconceived within individual episodes of feedback (Han & Hyland, 2015; Shen and Chong, 2023). Secondly, it has proved that power relations are not a secondary issue. Instead, they are an essential tool that is used to position students in a particular way and to influence students' displays of being agents, being compliant, or being withdrawn (Lea and Street, 2006; Taras, 2008; Sutton, 2012). Thirdly, it further develops sociomaterial claims concerning the idea that feedback engagement is subject to certain institutional and material conditions in particular; these are largely represented by the pressures of time (Gravett, 2022; Bennett & Burke, 2017; Bailey & Garner, 2010). Findings from this research have implications for feedback practices at English as a Foreign Language institutions in post-secondary settings. Feedback practices which address meaning-making and accuracy might be more effective at promoting learners' academic identities. Additionally, feedback practices which involve dialogue opportunities such as response statements, feedback conferences, and peer feedback might be more effective at promoting voice and agency among learners when working in settings where teachers' power is culturally established. At the same time, this research cautions

against over-reading learners' selective practice as a sign of deficit and instead highlights potential misalignments between learners' and teachers' expectations and resources available to them.

Finally, although the current research has much to offer, it is necessarily circumscribed by the qualitative paradigm. The participants are limited to the context of a single institution in South America, and the data is reflective of the views of the learners at a given moment in time. However, the current study contributes definitively to the literature by asserting the following conclusion: feedback is far from merely improving text, but is instead the central site at which university-level EFL learners either stop or are reminded of their existence as outsiders in the academy.

Study limitations

This research has a number of limitations which must be considered in the process of interpretation of research findings. Firstly, this research was conducted in a single public university in South America. This means that this research has limited applicability to other contexts. While this context was appropriate for research on EFL feedback practices, it may have different impacts on construction of academic identity in different contexts. Second, the fact that the qualitative study had a sample size of 15 participants allowed for a detailed analysis of the experiences of the learners but also necessarily captures a limited scope of views. Despite the fact that participants came from a number of faculties, the study did not seek to uncover any variations according to discipline that might exist in the use of feedback, which could also have an effect on voice, authority, or legitimacy.

Third, this research relied almost exclusively on self-reporting in the form of interviews and written reflection. While such approaches are excellent at analysing identity formation and meaning-making, there is always potential for errors in memory and subjective interpretation. Further, this research did not utilise observation or analyse feedback text discourse in order to provide more information about the way in which meanings of identity are constructed through language use. Finally, this research has managed to capture the experiences of learners at one particular point in time. The development of academic identity is a process which occurs through multiple experiences with feedback, and a longitudinal piece of research would be beneficial to see how students develop their response to feedback and feelings of belonging over time.

Conclusion

This research examines how university-level EFL students constitute their academic identity with respect to feedback practices, moving beyond the focus on error correction and exploring the students' subjective experience of feedback as social, emotional, and institutional practices. The findings of this research show that feedback is an integral part of how students constitute their self-perception as academic English users and their voice and sense of belonging within the academic context of the university. Instead of being an objective teaching tool, feedback is an effective mechanism by which students are recognised, positioned, and even regulated as participants of academic discourse. Feedback that validated ideas, argumentation, and construction of meaning helped to promote more positive views of self as academics, while feedback that focused on surface level or was viewed as authoritative and non-negotiable helped to consolidate feelings of marginalisation and linguistic ineptness. These findings support views presented within literature that studying feedback engagement solely through uptake or revisions is not adequate, but rather should be viewed through considerations of emotions, beliefs, and positioning of self. Feedback practices should not only focus on enhancing student understanding but also aim to promote positive views of self.

The importance of power relations as the core of feedback discourse is emphasised by the study. The learners' reserve in questioning or negotiating the feedback is indicative of the institutionalised conventions of assessment and power, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language, where linguistic insecurity meets the dominant educational culture of the institution. On the contrary, the dialogical nature of feedback allows for participation and, therefore, the promotion of the learners' voice in the academy. More specifically, the engagement in feedback was strategic, as opposed to passive. Selective uptake, trust judgments, and instrumental feedback reactions were shaped by experiences, time constraints, and judgments of fairness and utility. Such phenomena should not be interpreted as disengagement but as a way in which individuals cope with contextual constraints. When considering a sociomaterial and ecological approach, the engagement in feedback can be understood as an interaction between individual capabilities and contextual features, such as assessment structures, feedback modalities, and dialogic opportunities.

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Conflict of interest

The researcher confirms that there is no conflict of interest associated with this study.

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