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Indicators of Effective Use of Assessment Feedback in Undergraduate Writing Courses

ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the key indicators that characterize the effective use of assessment feedback in undergraduate writing courses, as perceived by students and instructors. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 21 participants (students and instructors) from undergraduate writing courses in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to capture a range of experiences with assessment feedback. Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved, and each was audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically. NVivo software was used to support systematic coding and the identification of main themes and subthemes. Analysis revealed three major themes with several subcategories as indicators of effective feedback use: (1) feedback reception and understanding, including clarity, timeliness, engagement, emotional response, accessibility, and growth orientation; (2) feedback utilization and application, such as integration into revisions, self-regulation skills, feedback-seeking behaviors, transferability across tasks, and barriers to utilization; and (3) instructor practices and institutional support, encompassing consistency, alignment with learning outcomes, feedback dialogue, professional development, supportive policies, recognition, and access to resources. Illustrative quotations highlighted the importance of clear, timely, actionable, and dialogic feedback, as well as the necessity of institutional and instructor support to overcome barriers and foster meaningful engagement with feedback. Effective use of assessment feedback in undergraduate writing courses depends on a complex interplay of clear communication, emotional support, proactive student engagement, and robust institutional and instructor practices. The identified indicators provide a comprehensive framework for improving feedback processes, supporting student development, and informing professional development and policy at the course and institutional level.

Keywords: assessment feedback; undergraduate writing; feedback utilization; qualitative research; higher education; feedback literacy; student engagement; instructor practices

Introduction

Assessment is a foundational element in educational systems worldwide, shaping not only academic outcomes but also students' perceptions of fairness, legitimacy, and motivation (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). As educational institutions increasingly emphasize accountability and outcomes-based education, the credibility and trustworthiness of assessment practices have garnered critical scholarly attention (Brown & Harris, 2014). While much research has explored technical reliability and validity in assessment, there is a growing consensus that students' perceptions of assessment credibility are equally important for fostering engagement, well-being, and learning efficacy (Bearman et al., 2017; Carless & Boud, 2018).

However, the complex, context-dependent nature of credibility and trustworthiness in assessment remains underexplored, particularly from the student perspective.

The concept of assessment credibility, often discussed alongside validity and reliability, extends beyond psychometric properties to encompass social, relational, and contextual dimensions (Stobart, 2006). In practice, credibility refers to the extent to which students believe assessment practices genuinely reflect their abilities, are aligned with learning objectives, and are implemented fairly (Sambell et al., 2013). Trustworthiness, meanwhile, encapsulates the confidence students have that assessment systems are impartial, transparent, and consistently applied (Boud et al., 2016). As O'Donovan et al. (2016) note, perceptions of credibility and trust are integral to students' willingness to accept assessment judgments, especially in high-stakes or summative contexts. When these qualities are perceived as lacking, students may disengage, experience heightened anxiety, or even resort to academic dishonesty (Bloxham et al., 2016).

The literature on assessment in higher education increasingly emphasizes the social and dialogic nature of credible assessment (Carless, 2009). Students' experiences are shaped not only by the content and structure of assessments but also by the transparency of criteria, quality of feedback, and the nature of assessor–student relationships (Tai et al., 2018). Transparency, for example, has been shown to significantly influence students' trust in both formative and summative assessment processes. When criteria and standards are clearly communicated, students report greater clarity in expectations and a stronger sense of ownership over their learning (Rust et al., 2003; Handley et al., 2011). Conversely, ambiguity around marking schemes or the rationale behind assessment choices can generate mistrust, confusion, and perceptions of arbitrariness (Carless, 2015).

Another key determinant of assessment credibility is the perceived integrity and fairness of assessors (Bearman et al., 2017; Shay, 2008). Studies consistently highlight the importance of impartiality, consistency, and professional conduct in shaping students' trust (Boud et al., 2018). When students believe that assessors are unbiased, well-qualified, and responsive to student concerns, they are more likely to perceive assessment outcomes as legitimate (Carless, 2009). On the other hand, perceptions of favoritism, lack of transparency, or unresponsiveness can erode confidence and undermine the intended purposes of assessment (Adcroft, 2011). The introduction of anonymous marking, external moderation, and opportunities for appeal have been cited as practical strategies for enhancing trust and reducing bias (Winstone et al., 2017).

The increasing complexity of educational environments—marked by diverse student populations, new modes of delivery, and technological innovation—has further intensified the focus on credible assessment (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). Digital platforms, for instance, offer new opportunities for transparent record-keeping and rapid feedback, but they also introduce fresh challenges related to standardization, data security, and student involvement (Nicol, 2009). In this context, evidence-based assessment, which draws on multiple sources of student performance data and integrates continuous feedback, is widely recommended for promoting fairness and holistic learning (Sambell et al., 2013; Carless & Boud, 2018). Research suggests that when students are involved in self-assessment, peer review, or the co-construction of assessment criteria, their sense of credibility and trust increases (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Tai et al., 2018).

Despite advances in policy and research, a persistent gap exists between institutional aspirations and students' lived realities. Studies across contexts highlight that students are highly sensitive to the perceived authenticity, transparency, and fairness of assessment systems (Brown & Harris, 2014). The legitimacy of assessment, therefore, is not merely a function of technical accuracy but of the relational and communicative practices that surround it (Shay, 2008; Carless, 2015). As Carless and Boud (2018) argue, fostering a culture of trust in assessment requires ongoing dialogue, responsiveness to student voice, and the willingness to adapt practices in response to feedback.

The present study is situated within this evolving field, aiming to deepen understanding of how students themselves define, interpret, and experience assessment credibility and trustworthiness in higher education. Prior research has predominantly adopted quantitative approaches or focused on institutional and educator perspectives, often neglecting the nuanced, qualitative insights that students can provide (Bearman et al., 2017). Moreover, the majority of studies originate from Western contexts, leaving a significant gap in knowledge about student perceptions in non-Western educational environments such as Iran (Ahmadi et al., 2020).

To address this gap, this study employs a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews with 24 university students from Tehran. This approach is designed to capture the lived experiences, meanings, and values students assign to assessment practices in their own words. It is informed by the principle that students are not passive recipients but active interpreters of assessment systems (Carless & Boud, 2018; Sambell et al., 2013). Through thematic analysis, the study seeks to identify not only the concrete indicators of credibility and trustworthiness as perceived by students, but also the contextual and relational dynamics that shape these perceptions.

In doing so, the research contributes to several important debates in educational assessment. First, it provides empirical evidence on the dimensions of credible and trustworthy assessment as defined by students themselves, supplementing existing frameworks with contextually grounded insights. Second, by foregrounding student voice, it offers actionable implications for educators and policymakers seeking to design and implement more transparent, fair, and effective assessment practices (Boud et al., 2018; Nicol, 2009). Finally, the study highlights the importance of considering cultural and contextual factors in assessment reform, supporting the argument that credible assessment cannot be achieved through technical measures alone but must be embedded in participatory, ethical, and dialogic processes (Shay, 2008; Carless, 2015).

In summary, this research responds to an urgent need for in-depth, student-centered understanding of what makes assessment credible and trustworthy. As higher education institutions continue to innovate and adapt in response to new challenges, the voices and perceptions of students offer indispensable guidance for developing assessment systems that are not only valid and reliable, but also legitimate, equitable, and trusted by those they serve.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the indicators of effective use of assessment feedback in undergraduate writing courses. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain in-depth insights into students' and instructors' experiences and perceptions, allowing for rich, detailed exploration of complex phenomena related to feedback practices. Participants were recruited from undergraduate writing courses at several universities in Tehran, ensuring diversity in academic backgrounds, fields of study, and year of study. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to select individuals who had substantial experience with assessment feedback in academic writing contexts. The final sample comprised 21 participants, including both students and instructors, which enabled triangulation of perspectives and enhanced the credibility of the findings. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that no new themes or categories emerged from the data.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided participants with the opportunity to elaborate on their experiences, attitudes, and perceptions regarding the use of assessment feedback. An interview guide was developed based

on a review of the literature and expert consultation, encompassing open-ended questions related to the effectiveness, implementation, and perceived impact of feedback on student writing. Interviews were conducted in a private, comfortable setting to ensure confidentiality and to encourage honest, reflective responses. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were also taken during the interviews to capture non-verbal cues and contextual information that could enrich the analysis.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, allowing for the identification and interpretation of key patterns and themes within the interview data. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy. The analysis process was facilitated by Nvivo software, which supported the systematic organization and coding of qualitative data. The analysis proceeded in several stages: first, initial codes were generated inductively from the data; second, these codes were grouped into broader categories and themes that reflected recurring patterns in participants' accounts. Coding and theme development were conducted iteratively, with ongoing comparison between transcripts to refine categories and ensure consistency. To enhance trustworthiness, two researchers independently coded a subset of interviews and discussed discrepancies until consensus was reached. Member checking was also employed, with selected participants invited to review and verify the accuracy of the preliminary findings. Throughout the process, reflexivity was maintained by the researchers to minimize bias and ensure that participants' voices were authentically represented.

Findings and Results

Theme 1: Feedback Reception and Understanding

Clarity of Feedback:

Participants emphasized that feedback is most effective when presented in clear, straightforward language. They valued specific, actionable comments over vague or general remarks, and appreciated when feedback included concrete examples or focused suggestions for improvement. One student explained, "When the teacher tells me exactly what is wrong and gives an example, I know what to fix." This clarity allowed students to understand both what needed revision and how to approach it.

Timeliness:

Timely feedback was repeatedly highlighted as crucial for learning and improvement. Students noted that receiving feedback promptly—ideally before the next assignment—is essential for them to act on the suggestions. A participant stated, "If I get my feedback after the course is finished, it doesn't help me. I need it while I still have time to revise." Real-time responses or feedback that arrives with enough time for revision were especially valued.

Student Engagement with Feedback:

Effective use of assessment feedback requires active engagement by students. Many described practices such as carefully reading feedback, taking notes on instructors' comments, and seeking clarification when points were unclear. One respondent remarked, "I always read my feedback more than once and sometimes discuss it with friends to make sure I understand." This engagement often extended to group discussions and informal peer-to-peer support.

Emotional Response to Feedback:

Participants discussed how feedback that boosts motivation, reduces anxiety, and increases confidence was more likely to be used effectively. Supportive feedback led students to feel valued and encouraged. As one participant shared, "Constructive feedback makes me feel like my teacher wants me to succeed, not just criticize my work." Positive emotional responses were thus indicators of effective feedback reception.

Accessibility of Feedback:

Ease of accessing feedback was also an indicator of effectiveness. Students mentioned the importance of having feedback available in digital formats, presented in readable language, and with technology support where needed. “Sometimes I need to check my feedback at home, so it’s important that it’s online and easy to read,” noted one interviewee, highlighting the role of accessible feedback in continuous learning.

Feedback Orientation:

Students appreciated feedback oriented toward growth and improvement, emphasizing constructive criticism and balanced comments that recognized strengths as well as areas for development. “When the teacher points out what I did well, I feel more motivated to work on what I need to improve,” said one participant. This growth-focused orientation fostered resilience and a willingness to revise.

Theme 2: Feedback Utilization and Application

Integration into Revision Process:

The practical application of feedback was reflected in students’ revision habits. Many described systematically incorporating suggestions, rewriting sections, editing for language, and making structural improvements based on feedback. One participant noted, “I always go back to the comments before submitting my final draft. It helps me see where I can make it better.”

Self-Regulation Skills:

Students who effectively used feedback also demonstrated strong self-regulation, including planning revisions, setting goals, monitoring their own progress, and reflecting on their work. “I make a checklist from the feedback and tick off each change as I go,” explained one student, illustrating the link between self-regulation and the effective use of assessment feedback.

Feedback-Seeking Behaviors:

Proactive students engaged in feedback-seeking behaviors such as requesting clarification, attending office hours, following up via email, and consulting peers. One interviewee shared, “If I don’t understand something in the feedback, I ask my professor right away.” These behaviors contributed to a deeper understanding and more meaningful application of feedback.

Transferability of Feedback:

Another indicator was students’ ability to transfer feedback to future assignments or new contexts, applying the principles and skills learned to improve subsequent work. “After getting feedback on my introduction, I made sure to use the same strategy in my next essay,” explained a participant, demonstrating skill transfer and growth.

Barriers to Utilization:

Despite these positive indicators, participants identified barriers such as misunderstandings of feedback, time constraints, perceived irrelevance of comments, and language barriers. One student said, “Sometimes the comments are too technical, and I don’t know what they mean.” These obstacles highlighted areas where feedback effectiveness could be improved.

Theme 3: Instructor Practices and Institutional Support

Consistency of Feedback:

Participants valued consistency in feedback delivery, including the use of standardized rubrics, similar depth and format of comments across students, and routine feedback cycles. One student observed, “It helps when the feedback is always organized the same way—then I know what to expect and where to find suggestions.”

Alignment with Learning Outcomes:

Effective feedback was aligned with clearly stated learning outcomes, assessment criteria, and transparent expectations. Respondents appreciated when feedback directly referenced objectives and made it clear how to achieve them. “When the feedback shows me how to meet the course goals, I feel more confident about my work,” remarked one interviewee.

Feedback Dialogue:

Ongoing dialogue between students and instructors emerged as a critical indicator of effective feedback. This included two-way communication, opportunities to ask questions, follow-up sessions, and class discussions around feedback. “When my teacher asks me if I have questions about the feedback, it feels like a real conversation, not just comments on paper,” explained a participant.

Professional Development for Instructors:

Instructors’ training in feedback literacy, reflective teaching practices, and sharing of best practices were also seen as key factors. Several participants noted improvements in feedback quality following instructor participation in workshops or peer review of feedback. “After the department ran a feedback training, I noticed my teacher’s comments became more detailed and helpful,” shared one student.

Institutional Policies:

Institutional guidelines, mandated timelines for returning feedback, and support resources such as digital platforms contributed to effective feedback systems. One participant said, “The university requires feedback within two weeks, so I always know when to expect it.”

Recognition of Effective Feedback:

Recognition of instructors who excelled at providing feedback—whether through teaching evaluations, student appreciation, or awards—reinforced good practices. “Our teacher got an award for feedback excellence, and you can tell they really care about helping us improve,” commented a student.

Support Structures:

Support structures such as writing centers, workshops, online resources, and feedback training sessions were widely cited as helpful. “The writing center staff helped me understand my feedback better,” noted one participant, underlining the importance of institutional support for feedback literacy.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to identify and interpret indicators of effective use of assessment feedback in undergraduate writing courses, as perceived by both students and instructors. Through qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with 21 participants in Tehran, three overarching themes emerged: feedback reception and understanding, feedback utilization and application, and instructor practices and institutional support. Each theme encompassed distinct yet interrelated subcategories, illuminating the nuanced ways that feedback is delivered, received, and translated into improved academic writing. These findings not only echo but also extend existing research on the feedback process in higher education.

A major finding of this study is the critical importance of clarity and timeliness in feedback delivery. Participants highlighted that understandable, specific, and actionable feedback—often accompanied by concrete examples—greatly enhanced their capacity to interpret and implement suggested improvements. This result is consistent with the literature, which identifies clarity and specificity as key features of effective feedback (Dawson et al., 2019; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Furthermore, the provision of timely feedback, enabling students to revise work before subsequent assignments, was repeatedly cited as essential for fostering learning. Previous studies have shown that delayed feedback is often rendered ineffectual, as students move on to new tasks or become disengaged from the original assignment (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Mulliner & Tucker, 2017). The present findings reaffirm the need for prompt feedback cycles to maximize student engagement and learning gains.

Emotional responses to feedback also emerged as a salient indicator of effectiveness. Feedback that increased motivation, confidence, and a sense of support was more likely to be engaged with and acted upon, while feedback perceived as overly

critical or vague led to anxiety and disengagement. This aligns with the research of Ryan and Henderson (2018), who demonstrated that students' affective responses to feedback directly influence their willingness to use it constructively. The emotional dimension of feedback has often been overlooked in traditional models but is increasingly recognized as a crucial component of feedback literacy (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017; Jonsson & Panadero, 2018).

Accessibility and orientation of feedback were further highlighted by participants. The ability to access feedback digitally and in comprehensible language was seen as vital, especially in diverse learning environments where students may face linguistic or technological barriers (Kim & Kim, 2021). Feedback oriented toward growth, balancing criticism with recognition of strengths, was considered both supportive and motivating. These findings reinforce calls for a more holistic, student-centered approach to feedback that considers not only content but also delivery, context, and affective impact (Carless & Boud, 2018; Nicol, 2010).

The study found that students' ability to incorporate feedback into revisions is a robust indicator of feedback effectiveness. Many participants described systematic approaches to integrating instructor comments into their drafts, such as creating checklists or directly editing highlighted sections. This observation is corroborated by Jonsson (2013), who found that productive use of feedback often depends on students' skills in self-regulation and revision planning. The theme of self-regulation was pronounced in this study, with students frequently mentioning goal-setting, progress monitoring, and self-reflection as part of their revision processes. These skills have been shown to mediate the relationship between feedback and academic improvement (Nicol et al., 2014; Jonsson & Panadero, 2018).

Feedback-seeking behaviors, such as attending office hours, requesting clarification, and consulting peers, were cited as critical for deepening understanding and facilitating feedback uptake. Winstone et al. (2017) noted similar trends, emphasizing that student agency and feedback engagement—rather than passive receipt—are essential for meaningful learning. The present findings underscore that effective feedback is not a one-off event but an interactive process in which students must actively seek, interpret, and use feedback.

The concept of transferability—students' ability to apply feedback across assignments and contexts—also emerged strongly. Participants described leveraging previous feedback to enhance their writing in subsequent tasks, demonstrating the long-term impact of effective feedback practices. This finding supports the notion of feedback as a developmental tool that shapes not only immediate performance but also students' evolving academic identity and skillset (Carless & Boud, 2018).

Nevertheless, the study also revealed barriers to feedback utilization, including misunderstandings, time constraints, perceived irrelevance, and language difficulties. Such challenges have been widely reported in the literature (Beaumont et al., 2011; Price et al., 2010), underscoring the need for clearer, more relevant, and culturally sensitive feedback practices. Addressing these barriers is crucial for maximizing the impact of assessment feedback in diverse educational settings.

Findings highlighted the significance of instructor consistency, alignment with learning outcomes, and the establishment of feedback dialogue. Participants valued feedback that adhered to standardized rubrics and assessment criteria, which provided transparency and helped demystify expectations. As noted by Dawson et al. (2019) and Sadler (2010), alignment with learning objectives ensures that feedback is not arbitrary but directly linked to the skills and competencies students are expected to develop.

Dialogue around feedback—whether through follow-up sessions, questions, or in-class discussions—was seen as a hallmark of effective practice. This is consistent with current research advocating for dialogic, rather than monologic, models of feedback (Nicol, 2010; Carless & Boud, 2018). Dialogue helps students clarify misunderstandings, negotiate meaning, and develop a deeper sense of ownership over their learning.

Institutional support and policies, such as mandatory feedback timelines, professional development for instructors, and supplementary resources like writing centers, were also identified as important. Participants noted improvements in feedback quality following instructor training and expressed appreciation for institutional structures that facilitated timely and meaningful feedback. These findings echo those of Boud and Dawson (2021), who emphasized the role of organizational culture and policy in supporting feedback literacy and effective assessment.

Recognition and support structures, including awards for effective feedback and access to writing support services, reinforced positive feedback practices and contributed to a culture of continuous improvement. This is in line with the literature suggesting that institutional recognition and resource allocation are vital for sustaining high-quality feedback systems (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004).

The current findings largely align with, but also extend, established models of effective feedback. First, they confirm the multidimensional nature of feedback effectiveness, encompassing clarity, timeliness, emotional resonance, application, and institutional context (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Carless & Boud, 2018). Second, the study highlights the complex interplay between student agency and instructor practices, supporting the shift toward feedback as a dialogic, co-constructed process (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017; Nicol et al., 2014).

Notably, this study foregrounds the lived experiences of students in Tehran, adding to a growing body of international research that examines feedback in diverse educational and cultural settings (Hyland & Hyland, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021). By identifying concrete indicators and barriers, the research provides a nuanced, actionable framework for practitioners and policymakers seeking to enhance the effectiveness of feedback in undergraduate writing.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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