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To feed back or to feed forward? Students' experiences of and responses to feedback in a Finnish EFL classroom

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Good feedback is a powerful element in learning. Ultimately, however, the impact feedback has on learning depends on how the learner responds to that feedback. So far, foreign or second language studies on feedback have mainly concentrated on different methods of error correction, not on students' responses to feedback in general. This study aims to find out what students thought of the feedback they had received in their EFL studies. Furthermore, the study seeks to discover students' different responses to that feedback. The data was gathered using a web-based questionnaire filled out by 140 students. The students, aged 17–19, were all from a single Finnish upper secondary school. The data was analysed mainly quantitatively. The results show that although students were primarily content with their feedback, they wanted more guiding feedback, i.e. more feed forward. They also wanted more personalised feedback as well as feedback that takes place during the learning process, and not only after it. In addition, the varimax-rotated principal component analysis brought out four different responses to feedback. The results indicate that feedback should be more differentiated to support and empower students in their EFL learning better.

Keywords: feedback, students' responses to feedback, EFL teaching, empowerment

1 Introduction

Feedback can have a strong influence on learning (e.g. Hattie, 2009, 2012; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Wiggins, 2012) and, thus, good feedback lies at the heart of good pedagogy (see e.g. Black & Wiliam, 1998; Sadler, 1998). Accordingly, feedback is considered a vital element of *formative assessment*, or *assessment for learning* (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003; Black & Wiliam, 1998, 2012; Taras, 2005). However, even if feedback itself is good, informative and balanced, it does not always work since its impact on learning depends on the response which the feedback triggers in the learner (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Wiliam, 2012). For instance some students pay little attention to received comments (e.g. Black et al., 2003), or do not notice feedback at all. Also, several studies show that comments and corrections in students' foreign or second language (FL/L2) writing do not improve their writing or its grammatical

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accuracy significantly (see e.g. Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Ferris, 2012; Guénette, 2007; Semke, 1984; Truscott, 1996, 2007). Why not? Do students not find the feedback they receive beneficial?

This study seeks to find out whether students think the feedback they receive during their upper secondary school studies of English as a foreign language (EFL) is good enough to guide and facilitate their learning. Moreover, it aims to discover what students' responses to feedback are. The data was gathered using a web-based questionnaire answered by 146 students (aged 17–19) in one Finnish upper secondary school.

This teacher-research study focuses on an under-researched but practically very relevant topic and context. Although it is widely accepted that feedback impacts learning greatly, there still is not much detailed classroom research on *how* feedback actually works (Murtagh, 2014). Therefore, several researchers have called for more feedback research, for instance teacher-research, in "naturalistic classroom contexts to explore the real needs of teachers and students" (Lee, 2014, p. 1; see also Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Hyland, 2010; Jakobson 2015). Furthermore, most L2/FL feedback research has been conducted in ESL and/or college contexts, with EFL school contexts clearly under-presented (Lee, 2014; see also Guénette & Lyster 2013; Üstünbaş & Çimen, 2016). Also, only a few L2/FL studies have investigated students' own views or experiences of feedback (Lee, 2005, 2008; Üstünbaş & Çimen, 2016). Most importantly, the bulk of FL/L2 feedback research has primarily been concerned with *corrective* feedback (CF), i.e. oral or written error correction only (Alderson, Haapakangas, Huhta, Nieminen, & Ullakonoja, 2015; Jang & Wagner, 2013). Yet, classroom research on students' experiences of and responses to feedback in general, and not just to CF, would be important in order to further develop foreign language assessment practices that facilitate and foster learning (see also Hyland, 2010).

I will first present the concept of feedback as defined in educational sciences. Feedback in FL/L2 research will also be discussed briefly, but as FL/L2 research has regarded feedback predominantly as corrective feedback, and this study does not, the main theoretical emphasis lies in education. Next, I will introduce the present study, its methodology and findings. Finally, the findings, limitations and practical implications of this study will be discussed.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Feedback, its functions and features in education

Hattie's syntheses (2009, 2012) of more than 900 meta-analyses, with over 200 million students at different ages and in different subjects, indicate that feedback has a powerful impact on student learning. However, not all feedback is good feedback, and sometimes feedback can have negative effects on learning (e.g. Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Shute, 2008).

What *is* feedback, then? Because feedback is a term used in so many different fields, it is variously defined. Sometimes all actions or comments involving an element of assessment or evaluation, such as advice, praise, grades or even a nod from the teacher in the classroom, are considered feedback. According to many scholars, this should not be the case, though (see e.g. Askew & Lodge,

2000; Burke & Pieterick, 2010; Wiggins, 2012). Feedback should not only state or describe how things are at any given moment, but it should also aim at improving future performance (e.g. Black & Wiliam 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Wiggins, 2012). Actually, there may be a gap between what teachers see as feedback and what students would expect. According to Hattie (2012, pp. 19–20), teachers describe feedback as "constructive comments, criticisms, corrections, content, and elaboration," whereas students would like to get feedback that would help them to know "where they're supposed to go".

Like several other scholars (e.g. Brookhart, 2012; Burke & Pieterick, 2010; Shute, 2008), Wiggins (2012) opens up the two functions by providing a list of key factors of effective feedback. Firstly, effective feedback is *goal-referenced*, which "requires that a person has a goal, takes action to achieve the goal, and receives goal-related information about his or her actions" (Wiggins, 2012, p. 13). Feedback has to focus on the task at hand, not, for instance, on students' personalities or on comparing students with one another (Brookhart, 2012; Shute, 2008; Wiliam, 2012). In a school environment, the problem sometimes is that the students do not have a clear goal, or they do not know what the goal is. Yet, there cannot be effective feedback without a goal (Brookhart, 2012; Wiggins, 2012).

Secondly, feedback has to be *tangible*, *transparent* and *user-friendly* as well as *actionable*, i.e. so clear, concrete and specific that the learners can easily understand it, accept it and also act upon it in order to reach their goals (Wiggins, 2012). Feedback should not be too complicated, long or technical, nor should it be so short, cryptic or vague that students do not know what it really means, which, according to various studies, often seems to be the case (e.g. Burke & Pieterick, 2010; Cohen, 1987; Leki, 1990). Also, phatic feedback, for example a nod from the teacher, or a short evaluative comment such as *Good!* may encourage students but they do not help them any further (Murtagh, 2014). As Hattie (2012, p. 20) puts it, students need to know "where to put their effort and attention". Brookhart (2012) also adds *differentiated*, i.e. meeting each student's own learning needs, as a criterion for good feedback. Effective feedback should also be *consistent* and *ongoing* as well as *timely*. Sometimes students get feedback so late that they cannot act upon it anymore. However, students need the opportunity to use the feedback to further their learning, not only to receive and understand it (Brookhart, 2012).

Researchers also emphasize the importance of getting positive feedback in order to encourage further learning (Brookhart, 2012; Burke & Pieterick, 2010). However, Hattie (2012, p. 22), among others, warns against mixing too much praise "with other feedback because praise dilutes the power of that information" and may also turn the focus of the attention from the task to the individual. Similarly, feedback comments given in addition to a grade or score may go unnoticed as students shift their attention from the learning task to the grade, and also onto themselves when comparing grades with their peers (Black et al., 2003; Butler, 1987).

Often, and rather too often according to Hattie and Timperley (2007, p. 101), students “view feedback as the responsibility of someone else, usually teachers, whose job it is to provide feedback information by deciding for the students how well they are going, what the goals are, and what to do next”. Thus, one aspect of effective feedback is that it enables and *empowers* learners to take charge of their own learning, that it promotes and fosters self-regulated learning, self-

assessment and student autonomy (e.g. Burke & Pieterick, 2010). Accordingly, Askew and Lodge (2000) criticise the traditional view of feedback as a *gift*, i.e. the notion that feedback is something that the teacher gives to the student. They do not subscribe to the constructivist view of feedback as *ping-pong*, going back and forth between the teacher and the student, either. They prefer feedback as *loops*, as reciprocal dialogue and information where "nothing is ever influenced in just one direction" and both the teacher and the student share the responsibility for learning (Askew & Lodge, 2000, p. 13).

Wiggins (2012), however, notes that feedback can exist without a teacher, too. Not only can students give feedback to one another, but students themselves can take note of the effects of their actions as related to the goal, and thus get feedback in the situation, without the feedback being explicitly given by anybody. For instance, students can note if their homework is correct, or whether other students understand what they are saying in an oral exercise in a foreign language class. If self-regulated, autonomous, life-long learning is the ultimate goal of education, then so is successful self-assessment and self-feedback (Earl, 2003, p. 101).

Nevertheless, even if feedback should meet all the requirements for effective feedback mentioned above, it still may not work. Wiliam (2012, p. 32) believes that we actually focus on the wrong thing when trying to determine effective feedback: "What matters is what response the feedback triggers in the recipient."

There are, according to Wiliam (2012), altogether eight alternative ways the recipient may respond to feedback. First of all, the feedback given to a student may either indicate that the student's performance has fallen short of the goal, or that the performance has reached or even exceeded the goal. In either case, the student can respond to feedback in four different ways: by changing behaviour (in terms of effort), by modifying the goal, by abandoning the goal or by rejecting the feedback. Out of these eight responses, only two are desirable. These are: increasing effort, i.e. changing behaviour when the goal has not been reached, and increasing aspiration, i.e. modifying the goal when the goal has already been reached. And, as Wiliam (2012, p. 33) concludes, the response does not necessarily depend on the feedback itself:

> Feedback given by a teacher to one student might motivate that student to strive harder to reach a goal, whereas exactly the same feedback given by the same teacher to another student might cause the student to give up.

2.2 Studies on feedback in foreign or second language education

Previous research on students' views or experiences of FL/L2 feedback has shown that students appreciate and trust teacher feedback – and more so than other forms of feedback, such as self-assessment or peer feedback (e.g. Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Lee, 2008; Leki, 1991; Tarnanen & Huhta, 2011; see also Jakobson, 2015). Most students also want teachers to treat all their errors (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Leki, 1991; Lee, 2005; McMartin-Miller, 2014). And they do: recent studies on teacher feedback on L2/FL writing have found that teachers primarily correct all student errors but they – secondary school L2/FL teachers, in particular – give rather little any additional feedback (e.g. Furneaux, Paran, & Fairfax, 2007; Guénette & Lyster, 2013; Lee, 2004).

However, although students say they value teacher feedback, prior studies have also shown that a significant number of students do not actually pay much attention to teacher feedback. For instance, in a study by Cohen (1987), approximately 20% of the surveyed L1, L2 or FL students did not give much attention to teachers' comments or corrections, and those students who did mainly just made a mental note of the feedback. Is this because much of teacher feedback seems to focus on errors, and may thus be considered negative (e.g. Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Lee, 2008), or because of the possible discrepancy between what kind of feedback teachers provide and what students would like to get (e.g. Black & Nanni, 2016; Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990)? There also appears to be a gap between what feedback teachers report giving and what students report getting (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990). For instance, some recent studies such as Tarnanen and Huhta (2011), Hildén and Rautopuro (2014) and Härmälä, Huhtanen and Puukko (2014) found that Finnish FL teachers reported giving much more feedback than students (aged 15–16) reported receiving; Tarnanen and Huhta (2011) also noted that boys reported receiving individual feedback significantly more than girls.

Although there is some recent FL/L2 literature that examines feedback in a broader sense, such as *diagnostic feedback* focusing on both learners' strengths and weaknesses (e.g. Alderson et al., 2015; Jang & Wagner 2013), much of the FL/L2 literature appears to regard informing students "of the accuracy of their response" as the primary purpose of feedback (see e.g. Leontjev, 2016, p. 18). Accordingly, most FL/L2 feedback research focuses on *corrective* feedback, i.e. correcting language errors (Alderson et al, 2015; Jang & Wagner, 2013). There has been a lively debate about the efficacy of corrective feedback in L2 writing and acquisition literature over the past couple of decades (see e.g. Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Ferris, 2012; Guénette, 2007). Despite numerous studies and analyses, no consensus on which corrective feedback method is the most effective – or even whether corrective feedback is beneficial for future writing and grammatical accuracy – has been found (e.g. Guénette, 2007; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Lee, 2005, 2008, 2014; see also Bitchener & Storch, 2016).

Lee (2008) points out that not many studies among this wealth of CF research have asked the students themselves what kind of feedback they would like to have. Quite recently, however, there have been some such studies. For instance, the studies by Amrhein and Nassaji (2010) as well as Black and Nanni (2016) compared teachers' and students' perceptions and preferences over different methods of written CF. The results of both these studies indicated that students' and teachers' preferences as well as their justifications differed somewhat (Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Black & Nanni, 2016).

Yet, Sayyar and Zamanian (2015) did not find much difference between the teachers' and students' views. Nonetheless, these studies have concentrated on error correction and not on feedback in a broader sense. Furthermore, few of these studies take into consideration the fact that individual students may have different learning needs, wishes and strategies and thus may respond differently to different forms of corrective feedback (Sheen, 2007; see also Jang & Wagner, 2014). However, recent literature on dynamic assessment has discussed *adaptive* corrective feedback (e.g. Leontjev, 2014, 2016; Poehner, 2008; see also Bitchener & Storch, 2016). Although not necessarily based on students' different feedback preferences or responses, CF is adapted according to the learners' Zone of Proximal Development, i.e. the level where the learners are able to perform

when mediated by the tutor, or a computer, but not yet unassisted (e.g. Leontjev, 2014, 2016; Poehner, 2008; see also Vygotsky, 1978). Also, some studies have explored the connection between students' proficiency and educational context with their feedback preferences (e.g. Chen, Nassaji, & Liu, 2016). Yet, these studies focus on corrective feedback.

3 The present study

3.1 Aims

The present article is part of a larger study, the purpose of which was to discover what the students at our school think of assessment received during their upper secondary English studies. One topic area of the study was the feedback that they had received, which is the focus of this article.

This article has two broader research questions:

1) What are our students' experiences of feedback?
   - Do they feel they get enough feedback?
   - Does the feedback facilitate and guide their learning, i.e. does it serve its purpose as a tool for formative assessment/assessment for learning?
   - If students are not happy with the quality and/or quantity of the feedback, what kind of feedback would they like to have, and why?
2) As the efficiency of feedback is believed to depend on students' different reactions to it, what kinds of responses to feedback did the students have in this data?
   - Were there any differences in the responses to feedback in regard to background factors such as gender, previous grade or year?
   - Were there any other factors that might have a connection with the responses?

3.2 Educational setting

Practically all participating students had started studying English in Year 3 in primary school. Thus far, they had studied EFL for nearly nine or ten years, totalling around 700 or 800 lessons.

Finnish upper secondary school studies are divided into courses, each with approximately 35 lessons. At the time of this study, there were six compulsory and two advanced courses of Advanced English, and their general guidelines and syllabi were defined by the *National core curriculum for upper secondary schools 2003*. Each school could also offer additional school-based courses. Each course was assessed as an independent entity with a numerical grade (4–10, 10 being the best). According to the *Core curriculum 2003*, the primary purposes of assessment were to provide students with feedback on their progress and learning results as well as to guide and encourage them in their studies (p. 224). In addition to the grade, the student could also be given more detailed assessment and feedback either in writing or orally. (For further information, see *National core curriculum for upper secondary schools 2003*).

All course assessment is teacher-based assessment. The only national high-stake test in Finland is the Matriculation Examination, which the students sit towards the end of their upper secondary school studies.

3.3 Participants

The second- and third-year students of our upper secondary school were invited to participate in this study. Out of 199 students, 146 answered the questionnaire (response rate 73.4%), and 140 of them answered all the questions regarding feedback. Out of those 140 students, 76 were second-year students (54.3% of the respondents), who answered the questionnaire during one of their English lessons. Third-year, i.e. final-year, students answered in their own time (64 students, 45.7% of the respondents). Eighty-four respondents were female (60%), 56 male (40%). The average of the students' self-reported previous English grade was 8.6 (range 6–10). So far in upper secondary school, they had studied, on average, 6.7 English courses (range 4–11) and had 3.7 different English teachers (range 2–7). The respondents represent the total student population in our school at the time of the study well, regarding both gender and grades.

3.4 Methods

The data of this study was gathered through a comprehensive web-based questionnaire, specifically designed for the study, with altogether more than 100 statements and questions (see Pollari, forthcoming). They cover the following topic areas: students' goal orientation, the assessment methodology and criteria used in English courses, students' views on their usefulness, their personal experiences and views on the accuracy, fairness, guidance and agency of assessment, as well as feedback. The data explored in this article comes primarily from the feedback section of the questionnaire.

Principally, the data of this article was analysed quantitatively. There were 15 Likert-scale items dealing with feedback (see Table 1 in the Findings section). There was also one open-ended question whose answers offered additional, illuminative data in original student voices. Students' gender, year and previous English grade were used as independent variables. Furthermore, several sets of data from the other topic areas of the questionnaire were used as variables. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to analyse the correlations between variables. Independent samples T-tests were also conducted to test the statistical significance of the differences of means of gender and year. Varimax-rotated principal component analyses were also run to summarise the variables of different topic areas into sum variables.

4 Findings

As this study has two broader research questions, the results are also reported in two sections. The students' experiences of feedback in general are discussed first. Then, in order to see different responses to feedback, the four different response types extracted by the varimax-rotated principal component analysis are reported.

4.1 Students' experiences of EFL feedback

First, to show students' overall experiences of the feedback, their answers to the 15 Likert-scale statements are introduced in percentages. To give the students' personal experiences a voice, the percentages are illuminated with students' answers to the open-ended question "If you haven't received enough feedback, how and what kind of feedback would you like to get?" Each comment is first shown in its original wording in Finnish and then translated in English. The comments are identified by a student code indicating the student's year, gender and data number.

Consistent with earlier research (e.g. Lee, 2008; Leki, 1991), this study also found that students appreciated and craved teacher feedback. Nearly 70% of them wanted to have more feedback on their skills and even more, 75%, wanted to have more feedback on how to improve their studying (see Table 1).

Teacher feedback was also considered effective as roughly two-thirds of the students said that the feedback had both helped them to improve their language skills (68.5%) and also helped and guided their studying (64.2%). Furthermore, over half of the students felt assessment and feedback had motivated them. Over 50% of the students thought that the course grade they had received had guided their studies during the next English course. However, one in five, i.e. 20%, disagreed on both of these counts. Peer feedback, on the other hand, was not regarded quite as efficient as teacher feedback. Yet, over half of the students would welcome more peer feedback.

Table 1. Student answers (*n*=140) to feedback statements in percentages, with means and standard deviations (I strongly agree=5, I strongly disagree=1).

	I strongly agree	I agree	I do not know	I disagree	I strongly disagree	M	SD
I would like to have more teacher feedback on my skills.	17.7	51.1	20.6	9.2	1.4	3.74	.906
I would like to have more teacher feedback on how to develop my studying.	31.9	43.3	14,2	8.5	2.1	3.94	.998
Teacher feedback has helped me to improve my language skills	7.1	61.4	17.9	12.1	1.4	3.61	.846
The assessment and feedback I have got have helped and guided my studies	7.1	57.1	23.6	8.6	3.6	3.56	.884
Assessment and feedback I have got have motivated me	13.6	42.9	23.6	17.1	2.9	3.47	1.021
The course grade I receive guides my studies on the next course	3.6	50.7	20.7	19.3	5.7	3.27	1.002
Feedback I have got	6.4	36.9	30.5	19.9	6.4	3.17	1.028

from other students is useful.							
I get enough feedback from other students.	1.4	28.4	25.5	30.5	14.2	2.72	1.070
I do not know what my strengths and /or weaknesses in English are.	1.4	15.6	8.5	44.7	29.8	2.14	1.060
I assess my knowledge and skills myself when we check (homework) exercises in class.	8.6	55.7	14.3	17.9	3.6	3.48	1.000
I get enough information about my knowledge and skills through doing and checking exercises, for instance.	5.7	37.9	34.3	20.0	2.1	3.25	.915
My teacher writes enough feedback at the end of the essay, for instance.	12.8	49.6	7.1	28.4	2.1	3.43	1.097
I get enough feedback about my knowledge and skills during the course so that I can influence or adjust my studies during the given course.	7.1	48.9	13.5	27.0	3.5	3.29	1.052
The test grade interests me more than the teacher's comments or corrections.	6.4	31.4	17.9	35.0	9.3	2.91	1.137
I always check my mistakes and corrections carefully when I get my tests or essays back.	13.5	49.6	9.2	22.7	5.0	3.44	1.130

Do students feel able to assess their own skills? Nearly 75% felt that they know their strengths and weaknesses in English; yet 17% did not think so. Moreover, over 60% of the students said they assessed their skills when checking exercises or homework in class. About 30% did not think they had received enough feedback during the course so that they could have changed their studying during that particular course. Overall, approximately a third of the students would probably have hoped for additional feedback, specifically *during* the course, not only afterwards.

Nevertheless, even though many students seemed to want additional feedback, nearly 40% of the students said that the test score or grade interested them more than the teacher's comments or corrections on the test paper. Furthermore, nearly 30% admitted that they did not necessarily read the feedback or corrections that carefully.

The open-ended question "If you haven't received enough feedback, how and what kind of feedback would you like to get?" produced 65 answers (out of 140

respondents), of which 46 answers were written by female students. The guiding *feed-forward* dimension of feedback was mentioned in 15 answers:

> *Toivoisin, että opettaja voisi kertoa miten pitäisi kehittyä että oppisin paremmin. 2F62*
> I wish the teacher could tell me how to progress so that I would learn better.

> *No esim. kokeitten ja kirjoitelmien loppuun voisi ihan selkeästi laittaa, että mitkä asiat onnistuvat jo hyvin ja mitkä kaipaisivat lisäharjoitusta. 2F99*
> Well, teachers could clearly write the things I already master and those that need more work at the end of tests and essays, for example.

> *Opettaja voisi osoittaa tarkasti osa-alueet, joita kannattaisi kehittää, eikä yksittäisiä virheitä sieltä täältä. 3F30*
> The teacher could clearly indicate the areas that should be developed and not just odd mistakes here and there.

> *Palautetta on tullut määrällisesti riittävästi, mutta siinä pitäisi kertoa aina mahdollisimman tarkkaan, millä tavalla oppilas voisi parantaa taitojaan. Näin ei aina käy. 3F38*
> The amount of feedback has been quite adequate but teachers should always tell the students as precisely as possible how they could improve their skills. That doesn't always happen.

> *Toivoisin, että opettajat voisivat kertoa kurssin aikana esim. tehtävien yhteydessä asioista mitä pitäisi vielä harjoitella. 2F61*
> I wish teachers could tell us during the course, for example when checking or doing exercises, what things should be practised more.

All in all, students wanted feedback that is personalised (18 mentions), actionable and tangible (15), on-going and timely (5) as well as constructive and balanced (5).

The results above indicate that although feedback seems to guide and facilitate our students' learning quite adequately, we teachers should pay more attention to feedback in EFL teaching. However, as Hattie and Timperley (2007, p. 101) put it: "Simply providing more feedback is not the answer, because it is necessary to consider the nature of the feedback, the timing, and how a student "receives" this feedback". But how could a teacher know how individual students react to feedback? Is there a way to discover what factors might correlate with students' different needs and reactions?

4.2 Four different responses to feedback

To analyse the feedback data more closely, the varimax-rotated principal component analysis was conducted to summarise the covariance of the 15 variables into a few principal components, i.e. variable clusters, in order to discover the main components of the feedback response. The principal component analysis does not explicitly assume normal distribution (Chatfield & Collins, 1980, p. 58). However, as the components were used in a further statistical analysis, it is worth mentioning that most variables used in the PCA were slightly skewed to the right. The SPPS software was used for the statistical analyses.

The analysis extracted four components of intercorrelating variables (Eigenvalue >1, in total explaining 57.8% of variance). The amount of variance explained by the last two components was somewhat lower (16.2%) than by the

first two components (41.6%). Nonetheless, since the four component solution was pedagogically logical and relevant and the loadings were high enough (Metsämuuronen, 2008, p. 31), this solution was accepted.

Next, on the basis of these four components, four sum variables were formed by selecting the variables with the strongest loadings in each component. The original scale (1–5) of the variables was retained. Thus, the minimum value of each sum variable is 1 and maximum 5. The statements and their loadings in each sum variable are shown in Figure 1. Cronbach's alpha, which indicates the internal consistency of the sum variable, ranged from .72 to .49 (see Figure 1). Although two sum variables did not reach .60, which often is considered the adequate value for Cronbach's alpha (e.g. Jokivuori & Hietala, 2007, p. 104), they were included because they are pedagogically informative and easily interpretable. The most crucial reason for including or excluding some sum variable was the relevance of its content (e.g. Metsämuuronen, 2008).

The following four sum variables are thus clusters of the items that deal with students' wishes, views and experiences regarding feedback. Each student has a value (1-5) for each sum variable. Inspired by Wiliam (2012), I will call the resulting sum variables *responses to feedback*.

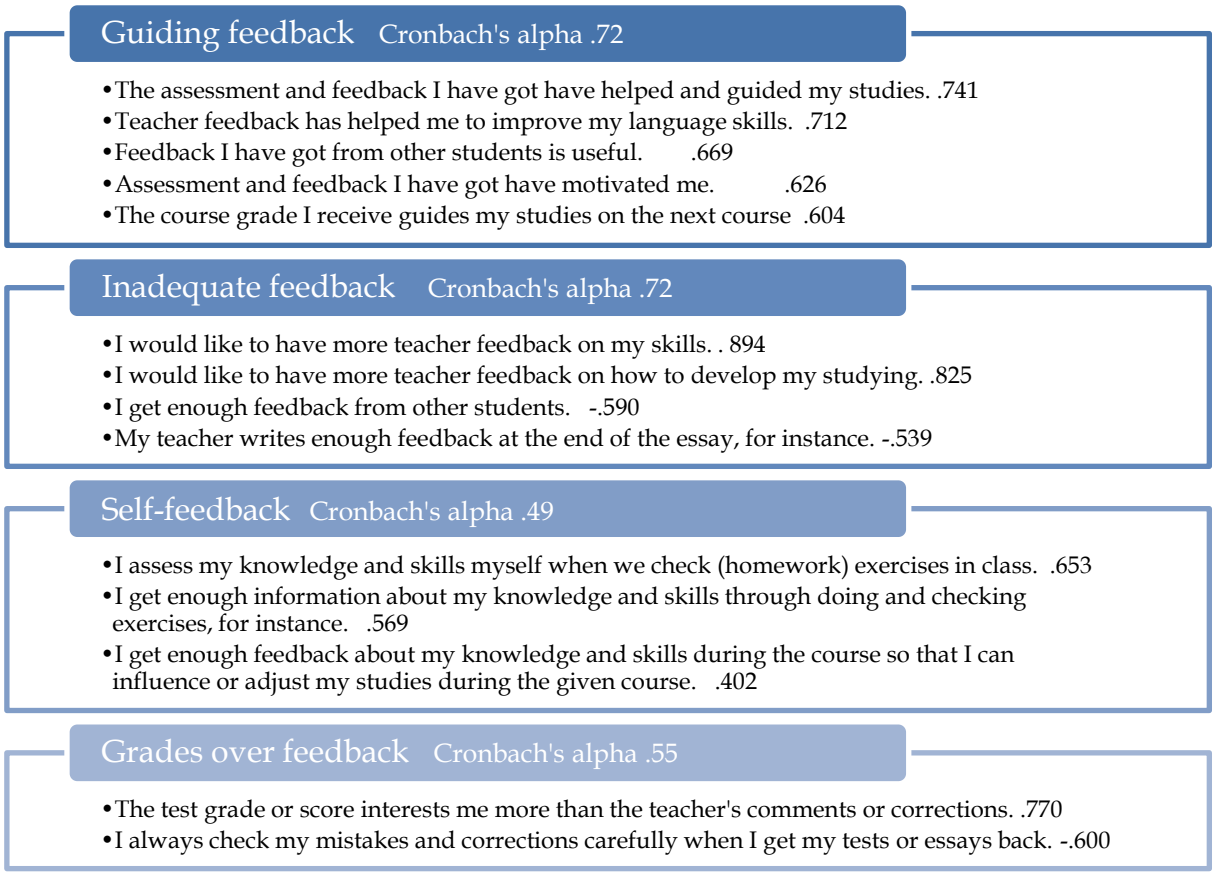

Figure 1. The four sum variables with the items and their loadings.

Similarly, with the same principles and methods as the sum variables in Figure 1, several sets of data from the other topic areas of the questionnaire were transformed into sum variables, one topic area at a time. The varimax-rotated principal component analyses resulted into altogether over 20 sum variables that

deal with different aspects of fairness, accuracy and versatility of assessment, as well as students' personal experiences of power, agency and anxiety related to assessment (see Appendix 1).

4.2.1 Guiding feedback

Undoubtedly, every teacher giving feedback hopes that the feedback is beneficial and that their students make good use of it. The first sum variable, or response type, epitomises that. For instance, the assessment and given feedback have helped and guided students' studies but also helped students to improve their language skills. Furthermore, the grades given may have guided their studies on the next course and both assessment and feedback are considered motivating. Also peer feedback is regarded as useful.

There is no statistically significant difference between genders in this sum variable (girls M = 3.42, SD = .648; boys M = 3.41, SD = .683), $t(138)$ = .021, p = n.s, d = .00. The third-year students had a slightly higher average (M = 3.57, SD = 559) than second-year students (M = 3.29, SD = .712). The difference is statistically significant, $t(138)$ = -2.57, p <.01, d = .43, and the effect size nearly medium. However, no significant correlation between previous grades and *Guiding feedback* was found (r =-.072, p = n.s).

Looking at the data from other parts of the questionnaire, *Guiding feedback* correlates with the experience that assessment and its methods have been varied and good (r = .364, p <.01). Furthermore, experienced empowerment over assessment, i.e. students' experience that they have had a chance to influence the assessment methods and criteria themselves as well, correlates significantly with this sum variable (r =.393, p <.01), as does the experience of not being defeated, disillusioned or disempowered by assessment (r =-.419, p <.01). Furthermore, self-assessment skills and the usefulness of received feedback seem to go hand in hand: there is quite a strong correlation between this sum variable and that of self-feedback (r =.456, p <.01).

When tracing this sum variable back to the individual students' answers in the questionnaire, there were 31 students (out of 140) whose value for this sum variable was 4 or more. Thus, they could be considered as having experienced feedback as beneficial and also as having made good use of it. Even though these students appeared to be quite happy with both feedback and assessment in general, they made some suggestions on how to improve feedback in their open answers:

> *Opettajat voisivat opastaa, millä keinoin voisin parantaa kielitaitoani ja antaa palautetta osaamisestani pitkin kurssia. 3F45*
> Teachers could show me in which ways I could improve my language skills and give feedback all along the course.

> *Just kirjoitelmissa suullinen ja kirjallinen palaute mikä meni pieleen mikä jo hyvää. Mitä voisi tehdä paremmin. Mikä unohtui? Myös yhteisesti on hyvä saada palautetta vaikka yleisistä virheistä ryhmän kesken. 3F122*
> In essays in particular both oral and written feedback, what went wrong, what is good already. What could be done better. What was forgotten? It's also good to get general feedback on common mistakes in class, for instance.

> *Toivoisin etenkin juuri, että kerrottaisiin, mitä pitäisi kehittää ja miten, eikä vain todeta, että tuo kohta meni väärin. 3M128*

> Especially I'd hope that teachers would tell us what to improve and how and not just state that that went wrong.

Out of those 31 students, 18 were female (58.1%) and 13 male (41.9%). As the female/male ratio in all the respondents was 60/40%, this also indicates that there is no link between the gender and *Guiding feedback*. However, the distribution of second-year and third-year students (13 and 18 students respectively, i.e. approximately 42/58%) shows an overrepresentation of third-year students when compared to all respondents (54.3/45.7%).

4.2.2 Inadequate feedback

In turn, the second sum variable focuses on feedback that does not work well, because, even though feedback is seen as important and valuable, there has not been enough of it. Thus, more feedback is called for on both language and studying skills. Furthermore, more peer feedback as well as more comments at the end of essays are needed.

Female students (M = 3.52, SD = .726) seemed to experience inadequacy of feedback a little more than male students (M = 3.18, SD = .750). The difference is statistically significant, $t(139) = 2.644$, $p < .01$, $d = .45$. The effect size is nearly medium. The previous grade may play a minor role as well: the lower the grade, the bigger the feedback inadequacy on average. However, the correlation is rather low ($r = .190$, $p < .05$). There is no statistically significant difference between second- and third-year students in this sum variable, (second-year students M = 3.40, SD = .751; third-year students M = 3.36, SD = .757), $t(139) = .338$, p = n.s, $d = .06$.

Again, when looking at the data from other parts of the questionnaire, *Inadequate feedback* correlates with insecurity of one's own skills ($r = .378$, $p < .01$) as well as the experience of being defeated, disillusioned or disempowered by assessment ($r = .355$, $p < .01$). The view that assessment methods have *not* been good and varied, as well as the wish to have more power to influence the assessment, correlate with *Inadequate feedback* ($r = -.323$, $p < .01$ and $r = .313$, $p < .01$ respectively). Also, there is a preference for softer, lower-stake assessment: a wish to have more formative assessment ($r = .320$, $p < .01$) and less weight on the course exam ($r = .370$, $p < .01$) correlate with this sum variable. Furthermore, the fear of the Matriculation Examination (=high-stake final examination) and the inadequacy of feedback correlate quite strongly ($r = .460$, $p < .01$).

In this data, there were 39 students whose value for this sum variable was 4 or more. Out of those 39 students, 27 were female (69%) and 12 male (31%) students. The female-male ratio in all respondents being 60/40%, this also demonstrates that there seems to be a link between gender and the need for more feedback. The ratio of second-year and third-year students (21 and 18 students respectively, i.e.54/46%) is the same as in all the respondents.

In the open answers of these 39 students, 16 students (out of 26 who volunteered comments) hoped for personal oral feedback from the teacher, usually in addition to written feedback. In a way, the students sound rather dependent on external feedback and do not view feedback as their own task.

> *Henkilökohtainen suullinen palaute. 3F120*
> Individual oral feedback.

Haluaisin saada opettajalta suoraan suullista palautetta, usein!! 2M111
I'd like to get oral feedback directly from the teacher, often!!

Kirjallisesti ja suullisesti mahdollisimman usein. 2F108
Orally and in writing, as often as possible.

4.2.3 Self-feedback

Whereas the previous sum variable demonstrated a need for ample teacher feedback, this sum variable is quite the opposite. *Self-feedback* refers to utilising different learning situations, such as checking homework or other exercises, for gauging one's learning and skills in a quite self-directed manner. In Wiggins' (2012, p. 13) words, "feedback is just there to be grasped", it does not need to be given to them by a teacher or a peer. The experience of having received enough feedback during the course in order to monitor their progress and possibly adjust studying strategies is part of this sum variable as well. As could be expected, there is a negative correlation between the sum variables of *Self-feedback* and *Inadequate feedback* (r = -.309, p <.01).

As mentioned above, the sum variables of *Self-feedback* and *Guiding feedback* share a strong correlation and, accordingly, are similar in many respects. For instance, there is a negative correlation between *Self-feedback* and the experience of being defeated or disempowered by assessment as well (r = -.307, p <.01). Furthermore, regarding assessment as good and many-sided (r = .357, p <.01) and having felt able to influence assessment and its methodology (r = .406, p <.01) correlate positively with this sum variable.

As was the case with *Guiding feedback*, there was no statistically significant difference between genders (girls M = 3.30, SD = .684; boys M = 3.34, SD = .718), t(138) = -.808, p = n.s, d = .14. The previous grade do not correlate with this sum variable (r = .055, p = n.s), but, once again, third-year students score higher here (M = 3.48, SD = .642) than second-year students (M =3.22, SD = .723), t(138) = -2.191, p <.05, d = 37, the effect size being between small and medium.

Even though Cronbach's alpha was not very high, and this group shares a rather strong correlation with *Guiding feedback*, *Self-feedback* has features of its own, and thus these two sum variables were kept separate. For instance, *Self-feedback* correlates more positively with the awareness of assessment criteria and goals (r = .337, p <.01) than any other of the four feedback sum variables. This is not surprising: in order to be able to assess their learning and skills, students need to know, and also understand, the goals and criteria of their learning tasks (e.g. Black & Wiliam, 1998; Earl, 2003; Sadler, 1998).

A total of 37 students had the value of 4 or more in this sum variable. The number of male students was 16 (43.2%) and female students 21 (56.8%), as it was with second-year and third-year students, i.e. 16 and 21 respectively. This again indicates an overrepresentation of third-year students when compared to all respondents. Even though these 37 students seem quite self-directed, some of them welcomed more detailed and personalised feedback.

Sanallista arviointia, ei pelkkiä erittäin hyvä, kiitettävä, hyvä jne. -asteikkoa.3F144
Verbal assessment, not just mere scales like excellent, very good, good, etc.

Olen saanut riittävästi, joskus toivoisin kuitenkin kirjoitelmien palautteiden olevan hieman pidempiä. 3F139
I've got enough but anyways, sometimes I'd like to get a bit longer feedback for essays.

Välipalautetta. 2F54
In-between feedback

4.2.4 Grades over feedback

In the final sum variable, the students' interest in their grades is bigger than in the teacher's feedback or corrections, which are not necessarily even checked so carefully.

Unlike in Cohen's (1987) study, where students who did not attend to teacher comments very carefully tended to rank themselves as poorer students, no correlation between different previous grades and this sum variable was found in this data (r = -.011, p = n.s). Furthermore, there was no statistically significant difference between genders (girls M = 2.70, SD = .945; boys M = 2.78, SD = .943), $t(138)$ = -.457, p = n.s, d = .08. Then again, second-year students seemed more grade-oriented (M = 2.94, SD = .945) than third-year students (M = 2.48, SD = .882), $t(138)$ = 2.935, p <.01, d = .48, the effect size nearly medium.

Surprisingly, grade orientation does not correlate with success orientation either (r = .069, p = n.s.). There is, yet again, a positive correlation between this sum variable and the feeling of defeat or disempowerment caused by assessment (r = .337, p <.01). Yet, and contrary to *Inadequate feedback*, *Grades over feedback* does not correlate with the wish to have more power to influence the assessment used (r = .074, p = n.s). Also, there are negative correlations between *Grades over feedback* and the wishes to have formative assessment or self-assessment (r = -.245, p <.01 and r = -.235, p <.01 respectively). Finally, quite expectedly, this sum variable correlates negatively with *Guiding feedback* (r = -.294, p <.01) and *Self-feedback* (r = -.299, p <.01).

There were 25 students whose value for this sum variable was 4 or more. Twelve of them were female (48%) and 13 male (52%); furthermore, 17 of them were second-year students (68%) and eight third-year students (32%). In other words, both male students and second-year students were overrepresented in this group. In their open comments some of these students hoped for more personal, guiding and also encouraging feedback, and some sounded slightly disappointed with their feedback:

> *Enemmän saisi kertoa sitä, mitä voi kehittää ja parannella. Liikaa keskitytään yksittäisiin, pienempiin virheisiin ja unohdetaan kokonaisuus sekä se, mistä virheiden tekeminen johtuu. 3F136*
> More could be said about what to develop and improve. Too much focus on separate, smaller mistakes and the whole is forgotten, as well as the reason why these mistakes are made.

> *Olen saanut tarpeeksi palautetta, niin hyvässä kuin pahassa. 2M4*
> I've got enough feedback, both in good and in bad.

4.2.5 Empowerment and the wish for external feedback

In general, background factors such as gender, year or previous grades did not appear to explain all the four different feedback responses effectively. However, as the analyses above reveal, there were other factors that seemed to be related to the feedback responses more clearly.

Both in *Guiding feedback* and in *Self-feedback*, assessment in general could be seen as *empowering*. First of all, assessment had been beneficial for the students' learning and studies. It had also allowed these students agency, i.e. the students felt that they had had a chance to influence the assessment methods and criteria themselves. Furthermore, assessment was regarded as fair, accurate and versatile. In other words, assessment was considered to serve students well.

In contrast, assessment was considered a *disempowering* element in *Inadequate feedback* and *Grades over feedback*. It had not facilitated students' learning adequately, nor had it been versatile enough to allow students to show their real skills. Students felt discouraged, even defeated, by assessment. In short, assessment had not worked well and instead of giving students more power or resources, it had impacted negatively on them. Therefore, on the basis of empowerment – or disempowerment – related to assessment, the four sum variables can be divided into two groups: the empowered and the disempowered (Figure 2).

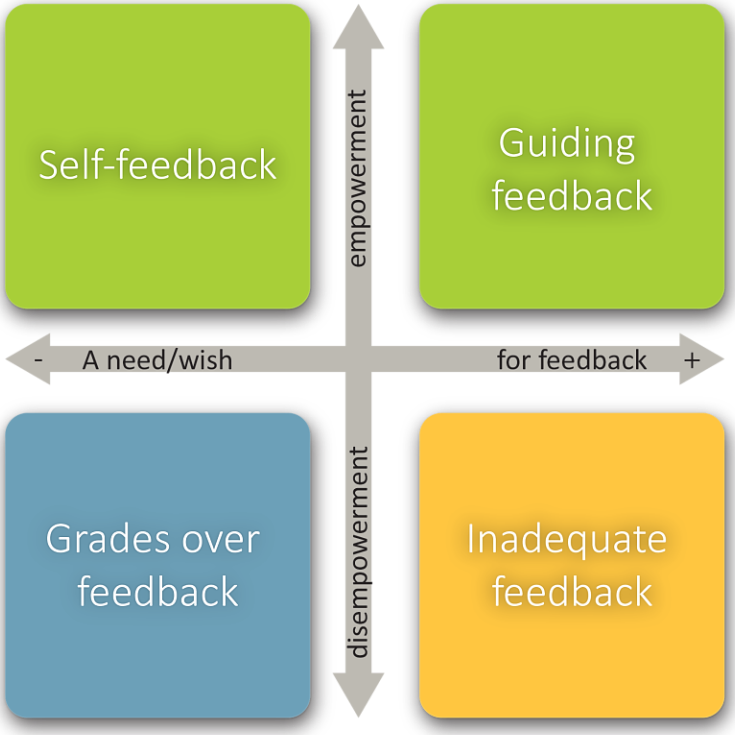

Figure 2. Different responses to feedback in relation to assessment empowerment or disempowerment and a wish or a need to receive feedback.

However, whereas students in *Inadequate feedback* wanted more feedback, in the category *Grades over feedback,* students tended to focus on grades and more or less rejected the teacher's comments or corrections. This resembles Wiliam's (2012) classification, where rejecting feedback is one of the unsuccessful responses to feedback. Therefore, a wish or a need for teacher feedback is another dimension on the basis of which these four sum variables can be divided into two groups: those needing or wanting external feedback, and those not. In the categories *Guiding feedback* and *Inadequate feedback*, students clearly welcomed feedback because they found it beneficial for their learning. *Self-*

feedback, on the other hand, did not seem to require feedback from teachers or peers since students could infer feedback from different learning situations themselves.

5 Discussion

Primarily, the aim of this teacher research was to evaluate and develop EFL assessment and feedback practices in our school. This study had therefore a very practical starting point: Do our students feel they get enough feedback? Does the feedback they receive facilitate and guide their learning, in other words, does it help to 'fill the gap' between their performance and the goal (Sadler, 1989)? If they are not happy with the quality and/or quantity of the existing feedback, what kind of feedback would they like to have, and why?

The findings proved that a vast majority of students wanted *more feedback* on their language skills and, moreover, on their learning and studying skills. At the same time, most of our students seemed content with the feedback they had received and found it helpful and motivating. There were, nonetheless, also a considerable number of students who were not completely happy with the existing feedback and gave several suggestions on how to improve feedback.

Several researchers, such as Black and Wiliam (1998), Sadler (1989, 1998), Taras (2005), Hattie (2009, 2012) and Wiggins (2012) to name but a few, have maintained that the quality of feedback is important. The students of this study agreed with them. Firstly, feedback should not only refer to the present state but feed forward: just as Hattie has suggested (2012), we teachers appeared to have concentrated more on the students' current performance while the students craved feedback that would improve their future performance and learning. Secondly, the students wanted feedback that is individual and personalised, and so clear, concrete and specific that they know what it means and what they should do (see e.g. Sadler, 1998; Wiggins, 2012). Furthermore, they wished to have more feedback during the course, not only at the end of it, so that they could act upon it. They also aspired to constructive and balanced feedback, not just error correction, and they wanted more varied methods of giving feedback. Hence, in the light of the results of this study, it seems that the traditional FL/L2 approach to feedback as corrective feedback does not satisfy the needs and wishes of all students. However, not one student mentioned *goals* in their comments. Yet, being goal-referenced is considered paramount not only in efficient feedback but in learning. Do we not make the goals of different exercises, assignments or learning in general clear enough to our students? However, as Sadler (1989, p. 119) phrases it, "for students to be able to improve, they must develop the capacity to monitor the quality of their own work during actual production" – for that end, they need to understand the goals as well as the criteria for good work (see also e.g. Black & Wiliam, 1998, 2012; Taras, 2005).

As pointed out in earlier research, (e.g. Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Wiliam, 2012), the efficiency of feedback does not seem to depend only on its quality or quantity, but also on students' different responses to it. Thus, another aim of this study was to discover what kinds of responses to feedback our students had. The principal component analysis extracted four sum variables, which showcased that students differed greatly in their responses to the feedback they had received. Feedback could be highly appreciated and work well, as was the

case in *Guiding feedback*. Or feedback could work well, but feedback given by teachers or peers was not necessary because of the students' good self-assessment skills, as seen in *Self-feedback*. In a way, this is the ultimate goal of feedback: external feedback has worked so well that it has made itself redundant. Feedback could, for one reason or another, also fail. *Inadequate feedback* did not meet all students' needs for external feedback, which they valued and craved for. Or, as was the case with *Grades over feedback*, feedback in the form of teacher comments or corrections was not much valued or welcomed.

In addition to differences in the appreciation of, or need for, teacher feedback, there were also clear differences in the experiences of empowerment and disempowerment related to assessment. With *Guiding feedback* and *Self-feedback*, assessment in general could be considered empowering. Assessment was seen as versatile, appropriate and just, and it seemed to serve students well. Therefore, assessment empowered students in their learning process: it gave them power and useful resources to conduct their studies. By contrast, with *Inadequate feedback* and *Grades over feedback* assessment was experienced as a disempowering factor that had not succeeded in motivating, guiding and helping students in their learning, nor had it given them a chance to show all their English skills.

Whereas the previous success in English studies did not correlate with any of these four feedback responses, gender may have an influence on *Inadequate feedback* and *Grades over feedback*, which both also correlated with experienced assessment disempowerment. Female students manifested a stronger tendency towards *Inadequate feedback*. One explanation for this may be test anxiety: earlier research has shown that female students experience more stress over testing, and in particular over high-stake tests (e.g. Hembree, 1988). To some extent, that seemed to be the case also in this data.

Male students, on the other hand, showed a stronger preference for *Grades over feedback* than female students, as also did second-year students. Do younger male students thus focus more on themselves, and on comparing their grades with their peers, than on the learning tasks (cf. Butler, 1987)? Third-year students, then again, seemed to be more capable or willing for *Self-feedback* and also experienced *Guiding feedback* more than second-year students. Do feedback, its importance and usefulness gain momentum as the stakes get higher with the nearing final examinations? Is this because students at that phase pay more attention to feedback and make better use of it, or do we teachers give more and better feedback for third-year students? Are their self-assessment and self-feedback skills also that much better at the point? Or is *learning* simply more important for them?

6 Conclusion

This study was limited to one Finnish upper secondary school only, and thus the findings cannot be generalised as such to other schools or contexts. Furthermore, the academic achievement of the student population in our school is above the national average. Thus, this data does not include many views or experiences of students who really struggle with their studies. With larger and more varied student samples, the feedback experiences and responses might look different. Furthermore, had there been more questions dealing with feedback, or different

questions, it might have changed the findings. Different data might have enabled the use of other data analysis methods as well. For instance, with more varied data, cluster analysis could have revealed different student types and their responses to feedback. There is plenty of room for further research on students' views on and experiences of feedback in foreign language education. Yet, to my knowledge, this study is the first attempt to analyse students' *responses to feedback in general*, and not only to corrective feedback, in FL education. And even if the descriptive statistics or the categories of feedback responses might not be similar in other schools or contexts, the pedagogical implications of this study could well be applicable to other FL education contexts as well.

What are the practical and pedagogical implications of this study? First, on the basis of this study, EFL feedback in our school works quite well in most respects. However, instead of feeling complacent, we should pay more attention to the quality of our feedback. Our feedback should aim at improving future performance, not just stating or describing how things are at that moment. Neither should we focus on error correction only. We should also strive to give more feedback during the learning process and not only after it. In short, more balanced and personalised feed-forward during the upper secondary courses is in order.

Building self-assessment skills needs to be addressed more, since self-feedback skills will be vital for our students' future studies and life-long learning (e.g. Hyland, 2010). Yet, a significant number of students do not engage in assessing their own skills or learning, in other words, they do not grasp feedback from the learning situations but depend on external feedback. One reason might be that they consider feedback "the responsibility of someone else" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 101). Another reason might be that they do not recognise their own strengths and weaknesses, or perhaps they do not know what the goals or criteria are. Hence, we should pay more attention to explaining the goals and criteria for good work to our students (e.g. Sadler, 1989; Black & Wiliam, 1998). More empowering assessment methodology and formative assessment – *assessment for learning* – is clearly required in our assessment practices. Further professional training for us teachers in how to give feedback which could foster future learning and not only focus on current errors would be welcomed.

In order to meet the different needs of our students better, feedback should be more differentiated. Dynamic assessment and adaptive (corrective) feedback may well be *one* tool towards this end. However, feedback should not be based only on students' skills, but also on their responses to feedback. This is a tall order since, at least according to this data, students' responses to feedback cannot be directly inferred from their gender, year or previous grades. Although the year and gender gave some clues in this data, there were many other factors that affected students' experiences of and responses to feedback more. For instance, feelings of empowerment or disempowerment linked with assessment turned out to play a significant role. This is an area that definitely calls for more research. I also urge for more FL/L2 research studying feedback in a broader sense and not only concentrating on correcting errors. Foreign language skills encompass much more than just correct language form and, accordingly, many students want, and deserve, more than error correction:

> *Kirjotelmissa voisi olla enemmän palautetta, sillä joskus pelkät punakynäkorjaukset eivät kauheasti motivoi:) 2F11*

> There could be more feedback on essays since sometimes the mere corrections with the red pen don't motivate you that much :)

I hope that future research and innovative classroom work will discover new ways to differentiate FL/L2 feedback so that it would be more beneficial for individual students – but not overburden the teachers at the same time. Then, feedback may truly achieve its real potential and feed learning forward.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.

The 28 sum variables based on a varimax-rotated principal component analysis of each topic area of the questionnaire (each topic area is mentioned at the beginning of the name of the sum variable) as well as two additional variables (in italics) that were used in the analyses.

GOAL: empowerment as goal
Goal: self-expression as goal
Goal: success-oriented goals
Goal: education and knowledge as goal

EMPOWERMENT: experienced empowerment
Empowerment: given empowerment
Empowerment: self-grade empowerment
Empowerment: test empowerment

ASSESSMENT: badly assessed
Assessment: good and versatile assessment
Assessment: course test too weighted
Assessment: stressful and discouraging assessment
Assessment: personality affects assessment

USEFUL METHODS: oral
Useful: diagnostic and formative
Useful: no high-stakes tests at all
Useful: self-assessment
Useful: versatile and soft

VIEW: disempowerment
View: want more power
View: don't care
View: no to self-assessment
View: Assessment anxiety: "Assessment causes me anxiety and stress"

MATRICULATION EXAM: fear
Matriculation exam: English for life, not for the exam

FEEDBACK: guiding feedback
Feedback: inadequate feedback
Feedback: self-feedback
Feedback: grade over feedback
Feedback: "I don't know my strengths or weaknesses in English"

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