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**Second Language International Postgraduate Students' Perceptions of
Assessment Feedback: An Analysis**

Saqib Mahmood

**A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

The University of Huddersfield

March 2018

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Dedicated

To my wife, *Attiya*

And my children, *Ayan* and *Shameer*,

They are all a source of inspiration for my life and my writing.

Because of my wife's support and care, I was able to work long hours and kept the home fires burning during the years I devoted to my writing. Thank you from the bottom of heart for being there for me.

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In the name of Allah, the most beneficent, and the most merciful.

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Saqib Mahmood

March 2018,

Abstract

This study seeks to investigate the attitudes, beliefs and experiences of second language (L2) international students regarding tutor written feedback and its impact upon their learning in a UK university. The present study uses qualitative interpretive research paradigm that synthesizes the academic literacies (AL) approach and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to investigate students' perceptions of feedback on their assessed work. The AL approach positions the students' feedback experiences as socially situated phenomena enmeshed within the wider socio-cultural context of academia. The data for this study came from two main sources: (1) semi-structured in-depth interviews with 26 students of varying nationalities and departments (2) teachers' feedback sheets. To collect appropriate qualitative data, the participants read aloud their tutor feedback comments, which were transcribed verbatim and analysed using CDA techniques. The data were divided into various themes such as functions of feedback, helpful and unhelpful feedback, feedback and its impact on self-esteem, motivation, confidence and the power-differentials of the student-teacher relationship. The findings of the study have shown that assessment feedback is a unique form of communication which takes place within the wider socio-cultural context of a UK university. The study highlights that the process of giving and receiving feedback involves a complex interplay of self-esteem, identity, motivation, emotion and the power relations. The study also highlights that the participants have had little or no experience of receiving such feedback in their countries of origin. Therefore, the move from one academic context to a UK university turned out to be challenging for L2 international students. The study sheds light on the question of how different linguistic, educational and cultural backgrounds of L2 international student presented them challenges while coming to terms with new assessment expectations, writing requirements and academic culture of a UK university. The CDA of tutor comments on students' assignments revealed that the amount of feedback varied from tutor to tutor. Moreover, the tone of comments indicated a lack of balance between praise, criticism and suggestions. By looking at the student perspective, the study has offered deep insights into the reasons why international students show dissatisfaction with feedback, what problems they encounter while making meaning of the feedback discourse situated in new educational and socio-cultural environment. In brief, to better understand assessment feedback as a socially situated practice, this research has addressed the questions of how the interplay of issues such as discourse, identity, power, control and social relationships mediated students' perceptions of feedback.

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List of Abbreviations

AL	Academic Literacies
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EU	European Union
HE	Higher Education
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
NNES	Non-native English Speakers
NSS	National Student Survey
PG	Post-graduate
PTSE	Post-graduate Taught Student Experience
UK	United Kingdom

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

First, this chapter starts with the explanation of the term L2 international students being used in this study. Second, this chapter discusses the significance of the L2 international students at postgraduate (PG) level in the context of UK higher education (HE). Despite a growing body of research on international students' experiences in the UK HE (Pelletier, 2004), a gap in the PG L2 international students' perceptions of tutor written feedback is identified. Third, the chapter situates the topic of feedback in relation to academic writing development and gives the rationale for further research in this area. Last, the chapter gives an overview the content and structure of the study.

1.2 The term, L2 international students

This is a qualitative study which investigates the feedback perceptions of a group of second language (L2) international students on their taught Master's programmes in a UK university. The research focuses on international students who do not have English as their first language (L1). In addition, such students do not have their educational experiences in English speaking countries such as America, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia. The terms L2 and L1, native and non-native English speakers (NNES) have attracted much attention recently, particularly with the interest in English as an International Language and World Englishes (Jenkins, 2003). In the context of the UK HE, some studies like Poverjuc (2011) employ the term English as an additional language (EAL). Since the term EAL is employed to refer to secondary school students in the UK (Soden, 2013), this study employs the term L2 international students. The reason why the term international is not used is that students coming from English speaking countries (America, Canada, Australia etc.) to the UK are classified as international students (Spack, 1997). Referring to international students as NNES may have some political and ideological

implications. Although the European Union (EU) students are also L2 learners, they were excluded from this study due to some socio-cultural reasons. The Education (Fees and Awards) England (2007) defines that international and home/EU students are differentiated because of their fees and visa status. As compared to home/EU students, international students pay double fees and they have limited permission to stay in the UK. In the recent context of marketization of UK HE, the imperative of paying higher fees tends to develop customer-oriented attitudes among international students towards education (Pokorny and Pickford, 2010) and this could have important implications regarding their interpretations of feedback.

1.3 Significance of PG international students in the UK HE

Recently, the UK has attracted growing numbers of L2 international students joining various programs. The Universities UK Report (2009) shows a 48% increase in the number of international students between the years 2002 and 2006; and this continues to grow. Particularly, the PG sector has seen a significant growth in the past ten years. The UKCISA (n.d.) reports that between 2008 and 2015, there were 69% full time international students in taught PG programs in the UK HE. On average 700-800 (source not cited because of anonymity of the university) international MA students enrol in different schools of the UK university where this research took place. The university at the centre of this study has several schools such as business, education, art and architecture, humanities, social sciences, applied sciences and engineering. Apart from home and EU students, the university hosts a large number of international students from almost every region of the world. Although the university provides quality education, it is keen to bring more educational improvements specifically in the areas of assessment feedback. In the context of this UK university, this research will be valuable to understand the L2 international students' perspective on assessment feedback.

Despite the expansion of PG international students in the UK universities, assessment feedback has been largely described as an over-looked area in terms of research (Robson, et., al. 2013; Tian & Lowe, 2013; Hyatt, 2005; Mutch, 2003; Walker, 2009; Weaver, 2006; Yelland, 2011). Although teaching and learning of L2 international students has attracted considerable attention, the main focus is at undergraduate level (De Vita & Case, 2003; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Robson &

Turner, 2007; Ryan, 2011; Ryan, 2005; Pokorny and Pickford, 2010). Although many studies (Soden, 2013; Poverjuc, 2011; Brown, 2008; Pelletier, 2004) have analysed the teaching and learning experiences of international students at master's level in the UK HE, little research has concentrated on L2 international PG students' perceptions of assessment feedback and its impact upon their writing (Tian and Lowe, 2013).

1.4 Feedback and academic writing

A fundamental requirement of PG study at university level in the UK is that of academic writing. Academic writing is described to contain an objective stance, logical and coherent structure, appropriate and precise word choice and evidence-based critical arguments (Harwood and Hadley, 2004). Hyland (2000) points out that academic writing cannot be described as a single literacy because of the amount of variations existing between different disciplines. Many researchers such as Pennycook (1997) and Ivanic et al. (2000) point out that although the notion what constitutes academic writing is a subject of much debate, it is characterized by traditional conventions such as referencing, criticality, argumentation and clarity of expression. Hyland and Hyland (2006, p. 39) suggest that students' success in HE institutes is characterized by familiarization with academic writing because learning is largely mediated through written language. Thus, academic writing competence is greatly valued and emphasized by academics in HE institutions because it is the main means through which students' achievement is demonstrated and measured.

In the context of L2 international students, academic writing tends to become even more challenging skill because students not only have to acquire the disciplinary knowledge but also develop required competency in English academic writing (Leki, 2006). Moreover, L2 international students do not possess native-like linguistic competence and this may cause the problems of constructing an academic work in line with the conventions of a specific discipline. Given the significance and complexity of academic writing at university level, it is no wonder that L2 international students may face considerable challenges. As Lea and Street (1998, p. 158) state:

Learning in higher education involves adapting to new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding, interpreting and organising knowledge. Academic literacy practices-- reading and writing within disciplines--constitute central

processes through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study.

The written assignments are the main medium by which students' academic writing is assessed in UK HE. As Lillis (2001) argues, student writing is at the heart of teaching and learning and assessment feedback is its integral part. It is generally emphasized that students need feedback on their academic writing in order to help them learn better (Gibbs, 2006). Brown et al. (1995) describe feedback as an engine that drives learning. Race (2001a, p. 86) goes so far as to suggest that feedback is the "lubricant that keeps the engine running".

The central role that assessment feedback plays in students' learning has been examined by Bellon *et al.*, (1991). These researchers hold that "academic feedback is more strongly and consistently related to achievement than any other teaching behavior...this relationship is consistent regardless of grade, socioeconomic status, race, or school setting" (ibid, p. 21). What Bellon *et al.*, suggest is that assessment feedback plays a vital role in terms of improving students' self-confidence, interest for learning and self-awareness. Brannon and Knoblauch (1982, p. 162) widen the significance of feedback as it "serves as a sounding board enabling the writer to see confusions in the text and encouraging the writer to explore alternatives that he or she may not have considered". Like Branon and Knoblauch, Mutch (2003) maintains that feedback allows tutors to communicate ideas, engage students in intellectual dialogues and provide coaching and modelling to inform their next piece of writing. According to Mutch (2003), the interaction during the feedback process allows tutors and students to clarify understandings and expectations which can help students develop required learning skills and, consequently, improve grades. Hounsell (2003) views feedback as one of the central elements of effective teaching. According to Hounsell (p. 67):

It has long been recognized, by researchers and practitioners alike, that feedback plays a decisive role in learning and development, within and beyond formal educational settings. We learn faster, and much more effectively, when we have a clear sense of how well we are doing and what we might need to do in order to improve.

1.5 The rationale for undertaking the current study

Given its fundamental significance for learning, the majority of students want and appreciate constructive and meaningful feedback (Hyland, 2000; Higgins *et al.*, 2002). However, the BBC (2007) highlights in its headline that most “students bemoan lack of feedback”. This is further noted by National Student Survey (NNS, 2015) and Post-graduation Taught Experience of Students (PTES, 2011) that most students of UK universities invariably demonstrate dissatisfaction with the helpfulness of tutor written feedback, to help them improve academically. This dissatisfaction appears to be a disturbing sign since the role of tutor feedback is widely seen as essential to consolidate student academic learning (Hyland and Hyland, 2006; Gibbs and Simpson, 2003). However, both L1 and L2 researchers (Knoblauch and Brannon, 1982; Leki, 2006; Ferris, 2003; Hounsel *et al.*, 2008; Gibbs and Simpson, 2003; Weaver, 2006; Crisp, 2007; Hyland and Hyland, 2006) tell a conflicting tale. Carless (2006, p. 220), for instance, drawing on Higgins *et al.*, (2001), Chanock (2000) and James (2000) remarks that “students are dissatisfied with the feedback they receive, in terms of lacking specific advice to improve, being difficult to understand, or having potentially negative impact on students’ self-perception and confidence”.

The findings of Falchikov’s (1995) study indicate that most students do not understand feedback, which, in return, impedes them from acting on it. In addition, this study suggests that some students do not consider written feedback worthy to be read. Duncan’s (2007) study also reveals that many students show less interest in feedback and pay more attention to grades. However, studies by Higgins *et al.* (2001, 2002), Orsmond *et al.* (2005), Weaver (2006) and Hounsell (2007) indicate that most students do read feedback. However, what these studies do not indicate is whether the students clearly understand the feedback and successfully use it for their academic improvement. Researchers like Nicol (2009), Crisp (2007) and Lillis and Turner (2001) claim that students often fail to perceive tutor feedback underpinning rules, conventions and standards of academic discourse. Lillis and Turner (2001, p. 55) go so far as to say that “terminology used by tutors and/or in guidelines to name academic writing conventions raised more questions than answers”. Crisp (2007, p. 578) argues that “blaming students” does not seem to be adequate explanation and, therefore, further research is needed to understand the complex process of feedback giving and receiving feedback.

In the context of above debates, it is important to understand the perspective of L2 international PG students as feedback might pose a real challenge to them. This is because L2 international students often carry the “burden of learning to write English, and learning English” (Hyland, 2015, p. 34). Connor (1996, cited in Hyland, 2002, p. 35) makes an important point that “linguistic and rhetorical conventions do not always transfer successfully across languages’ and, therefore, these may pose challenges to L2 international students. Ivanic *et al.* (2000) argue that most international students often fail to understand tutor assessment comments because they are “still learning to be the participants in the complex academic discourse within which tutor comments are located” (cited in Pokorny and Pickford, 2010, p. 22).

It is significant to note that key literature in the context of international students’ experiences of feedback (Leki, 1995; Connor, 1996; Canagrajah, 2001; Ferris, 2003; Zamel, 1995; Yang, 2006) observes that tutor analytical comments negatively impact on self-perceptions of students as learners. In this regard, Hyland (2006) warns tutors of the dangers of negative criticism as it may potentially damage students’ self-esteem and mutual relationship of trust with teachers. Negative feedback which is aimed at justification of the mark awarded may be termed as a traditional model of transmitting knowledge without any formative effect on students learning (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006). In this regard, Rae and Cochrane (2008, p. 218) notably observe that academics “may be constrained by their own individual disciplinary perspective on what constitutes appropriate feedback”.

In the backdrop of above discussion, it can be observed that most feedback-related literature in the context of international students (Leki, 1995; Connor, 1996; Canagrajah, 2001; Ferris, 2003; Zamel, 1995; Yang, 2006) gives thin descriptions of L2 international students’ experiences of feedback in the HE institutions. There are few studies which have analysed the samples of feedback in the UK context (Hyatt, 2005; Mutch, 2003; Walker, 2009; Weaver, 2006; Yelland, 2011). The findings of these studies suggest that assessment feedback, in practice, may not help students make significant improvement. Although these studies examined the feedback samples in the UK HE context, none of them was focused on L2 international students on Master’s taught programs. This offers a clear gap for the current research to address. What is evident in the key research literature on feedback in the

UK (Higgins et al. 2001; Rae and Cochrane, 2008; Weaver, 2006; Pokorny and Pickford, 2010; Lillis and Turner, 2001) is that these studies tend to focus on undergraduate, home students, with little or no focus on L2 international students at Master's level. This is one of the rationales why this study has been carried out.

Another rationale which lies behind this study is that there is a paucity of research which has specifically focused on the aspect of how the feedback perceptions of L2 international students at masters' level are influenced by particular socio-cultural context of a UK university (Lea and Street, 1998); and, moreover, how these perceptions are shaped by features of power, control, self-esteem and identity. Thus, the question of how L2 international students with their diverse linguistic, socio-cultural and educational backgrounds make meaning of assessment discourse and use it for their learning in the UK HE context is important one. Closely related to this question is the issue of how L2 international students' perceptions towards understanding the rules of assessment discourse may impact upon their self-confidence, identity and mutual relationship of trust with tutors (Higgins et al. 2002). In short, the review of literature in chapter 2 indicates that there is potential for further research to analyze what meanings L2 international students attach to assessment feedback; and what role they feel feedback plays in their learning. Therefore, the research questions this study seeks to answer are:

- What are L2 international PG students' perceptions of assessment feedback and its impact upon their learning in a UK university?
- What are L2 international students' perceptions of both helpful and unhelpful feedback?
- What problems do L2 international students face while interpreting the language of summative assessment?
- How do tutor written feedback impact upon the L2 international students' confidence, motivation, self-esteem, identity and the student-teacher relationship?

1.6 Overview of the conceptual framework

The current research is underpinned by academic literacies (AL) approach (Lea and Street, 1998; 2000). These authors carried out seminal research which examined

academic writing practices of students and staff in two different UK universities. In order to identify students' problems of academic writing and feedback, Lea and Street (1998) argue that students' failure to engage with academic writing practices is due to "the gaps between faculty expectations and student interpretation". Added to this, students' problems of assessment feedback can emerge from the institutional power relations within which learning and teaching are embedded. As researchers within AL approach view "institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as sites of discourse and power" (Lea and Street, 1998, p.3). That is, AL theorizes students' writing as a social practice implicated within a wider socio-cultural context of a university. It also argues that the interplay of the struggle for identity, self-esteem and the student-teacher power relations can shape students' perceptions of feedback comments given on their assignments.

The L2 international PG students' perspective on assessment feedback is central to the field of inquiry undertaken in this study. Adopting AL approach as a theoretical framework has offered a "powerful tool for understanding the experience of students ... in the wider context of higher education" (Lea & Street, 2000, p. 3). It is important to note that key researchers within AL approach (Lea & Street, 1998, Ivanic, 1998; Lillis and Scott, 2007) advocate that researching the feedback perceptions of students is inherently an ethnographic field. Although this study is not ethnographic in the truest sense of the term, it has adopted ethnographic oriented interviews the main source of data collection and critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a methodological tool to analyze the data (see chapter 4). Researching contextual features such as power relations, self-esteem and identity with the help of in-depth interviews and CDA (Fairclough, 1995) has helped this study illuminate the complex and multi-faceted phenomenon called assessment feedback. The present study draws upon Lea and Street (1998, p. 159) concepts of 'academic literacies' which views "student learning and writing as issues at the level of epistemology and identities rather than skill or socialisation". It is important to point out that analysing such social practices might involve a number of levels. According to Fairclough (1995), CDA can be used to examine the text, textual practices and social practices. Textual practices "involve the conditions of the production, distribution and reproduction of texts. The third is the way such production links to the broader context" (Mutch, 2003, p. 27).

Drawing on Fairclough's (1992) framework of the CDA in its simple terms, this research focused on how the student-teacher relationship, identity and knowledge were reflected by L2 students through their interpretations of feedback. As Sutton and Gill (2010) argue that the Fairclough's three dimensional model of CDA serves an effective means to:

1. Do the textual analysis of students' interviews texts to understand their interpretations of written feedback. This dimension includes "the study of the different processes, or types of verbs, involved in the interaction; study on the meanings of the social relations established between participants in the interaction; analysis of the mood (whether a sentence is a statement, question, or declaration) and modality (the degree of assertiveness in the exchange)". (Rogers et al., 2005, p. 371)
2. Explore the discursive practices of feedback which involve examining the production, interpretation and reproduction of feedback by students. This dimension of the CDA has helped this study to better understand how L2 international students' differences of language, culture and past education experiences may enable or impede them in their interpretations, consumptions or reproductions of feedback.
3. Understand feedback as a socially situated practice and its impact upon students' academic growth.

The aim of this study was to examine L2 international students' perceptions of feedback practice within the particular context of a UK university. Therefore, CDA was considered an appropriate choice within the theoretical framework of AL approach. Synthesizing the AL approach with CDA has offered useful insights to examine the L2 international students' perceptions as a situated phenomenon. This is because the wider socio-cultural particularities of the academic context heavily influenced students' perceptions of assessment feedback in this study. For the L2 international students who were settling into a new academic community, they needed to make meaning of the language and values underlying the discourse of feedback. However, if feedback is one-sided communication, they might not fully understand that their perceptions of feedback matched with that of the academic community. This study consolidates the AL approach that if feedback is as seen a fruitful activity, it should take the form of a dialogue. This study reflects that the

simple “receptive-transmission” model (Askew and Lodge, 2000, pp. 2-4) of feedback was not adequate for L2 international students because this model viewed feedback as one-way communication. In the receptive-transmission model, the tutor is assumed to adopt the role of an expert advisor who transmits knowledge to the students. The students are considered as passive recipients. Askew and Lodge (ibid, p. 5) remark that “receptive-transmission” approach is the dominant view of teaching and learning in the UK HE. On the other hand, the AL approach views feedback as a socially situated practice. The findings of this study have consolidated the viewpoint that feedback literacy is a situated phenomenon since the context within which students perform the assessment tasks shape their perceptions and practices.

This study has highlighted that the process of giving and receiving feedback involves a complex interplay of self-esteem, identity, motivation, emotion and the power relations. This study suggests that feedback is a form of judgement where tutor often use overly critical discourse. It is further highlighted in this study that tutors need to take great care while writing feedback because overly judgemental comments can bring about negative change in the self-esteem, motivation, emotion and confidence of L2 international students. In summary, instead of passing “judgement on good and bad writing” (Street, 2004, p. p. 15) and instead of attributing students’ feedback problems as deficiencies in study skills repertoire, this study suggests a more situated view of L2 international students’ feedback experiences. Therefore, feedback literacy is seen as a complex form of academic literacy in which students’ interpretations of the meaning of feedback differ from that of tutors.

1.7 Overview of the research methodology

As the research questions listed above reflect, the aim of the study is to examine the feedback perceptions of international students as a socially situated phenomenon which is influenced by elements of discourse, power, self-esteem and identity. In order to achieve these objectives, a qualitative research methodology has been adopted. Since the study aims to investigate the L2 international student perspective, the researchers such as Lincoln & Guba (1985), Silverman (2004) and Lee & Lings (2008) suggest that the qualitative research paradigm is the most useful method that can allow researchers to interpret and understand the meanings and perceptions of people in social situations. The decision of using qualitative interpretive research

paradigm was largely informed by AL approach (Lea and Street, 1998). Research within AL approach tends to employ qualitative research methods that can enable the researcher to delve deep into the subjective experiences of students. The present study focuses on understanding students' feedback literacy perceptions by placing their experiences at the heart of research design. The study employed in-depth semi-structured interviews as the main source of data generation. The interviews gave L2 international students the opportunity to speak about their perceptions of assessment feedback and what helped or impeded them in making sense of the feedback discourse. The use of interviews yielded rich qualitative data. The findings of the study have offered deep insights into the perspective of L2 international students. This study has also addressed the question of how the interplay of identity, self-esteem and power relations of teaching and learning mediated students' perceptions of feedback. The significance of ethical issues such as permission, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality are discussed and described in the chapter 4 on research methodology. The analysis of data was undertaken manually and is presented according to *a priori* and emergent themes in chapter 5. The seven stages proposed by Willott and Griffin (1997) were utilized during the process of data analysis. These seven stages are general enough to be applicable to any research using CDA, so they were applied to the present study (see chapter 4).

1.8 Structure of the thesis

This study consists of seven chapters. The following chapter (chapter 2) reviews feedback related literature. This chapter evaluates the definition and significance of summative and formative feedback. It also analyzes the relationship between assessment feedback and academic learning and the feedback perceptions of L2 international students in higher education. This chapter gives a detailed account of the literature analysing the questions of how feedback may have an impact upon students' self-esteem and identity and the teacher-student relationship. The studies reviewed in this chapter reflect that future research needs to focus on feedback as a social process influenced by elements of discourse, power, identity and emotion. What is missing in the literature on feedback is the question of how L2 international students at postgraduate level actually engage with feedback; and how feedback

shapes their learning processes, writing practices and their self-evaluation as learners in a UK university.

The third chapter gives a detailed critical analysis of the theoretical framework (academic literacies approach) used in this study. This chapter aims to substantiate how academic literacies (AL) approach has been used as a valuable analytical tool to conceptualize the international postgraduate students' phenomenon of assessment feedback as a socially situated practice. The chapter begins with a discussion about the significance of theoretical framework, in general, and for this study, in particular. Second part of the chapter deals with the critical analysis of the tenets fundamental to the AL research field. In the end, the rationale of how this study is strongly influenced by AL approach is provided.

The fourth chapter provides a thorough account of the processes involved in data generation and its analysis. This chapter indicates that the use of qualitative interpretive research paradigm to depict L2 international students' experiences of feedback is an appropriate choice. By making the use of qualitative research methods (i.e. semi-structured interviews), this study obtained rich data regarding L2 students' perceptions of tutor written feedback. In order to recruit potential participants, purposive sampling strategy was employed. To create the sample, questionnaires were utilized to gather demographic data. The data generated through semi-structured interviews was analysed with the help of CDA. This chapter shows that the CDA was applied to the corpus of interviews, to identify themes regarding the students' feedback perspective. This chapter also contains discussion on the notion of trustworthiness of qualitative research by explaining the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability and their relevance to this study. This chapter explains the significance of ethical issues such as access and acceptance, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality.

The fifth chapter provides analysis and discussion of the findings in relation to the themes L2 international general perceptions of the function of feedback, helpful and unhelpful feedback, summative assessment and its significance, feedback and issues of confidence, motivation, emotion, self-esteem and identity. It also includes evidence from the data and its interpretation. The interpretation and the discussion in this chapter are linked with the literature review and AL approach. Chapter six

presents the discussion of the findings. Seventh chapter gives conclusion by emphasizing some theoretical and practical implications of the study, followed by suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter gives a detailed rationale why the AL approach as a theoretical framework has been used in this study. This chapter aims to substantiate how the AL approach has been used as a valuable analytical tool to conceptualize the L2 international postgraduate students' phenomenon of assessment feedback as a socially situated practice. The chapter begins with a discussion about the significance of theoretical framework, in general, and for this study, in particular. Second part of the chapter deals with the critical analysis of the tenets fundamental to the AL research field and their significance for this study. In the end, the rationale of how this study is strongly influenced by the AL approach is provided.

2.2 Significance of the theoretical framework

The significance and role of a theoretical framework has been viewed as fundamental for a doctoral level research. As Weaver-Hart (1988 cited in Leshem and Trafford, 2007) argues, theoretical framework provides an analytical tool to conceptualize the nature of a research problem, its basis and the analysis employed to study that problem. First of all, it needs to be explained as what means by conceptual framework and its usefulness for empirical research. Although this question is beyond the scope of this study, a brief discussion will show the significance of a conceptual framework for this research. One of the most general definitions of theoretical framework is attributed to Miles and Huberman (1984). They define a conceptual framework as "the current version of the researcher's map of the territory being investigated" (p. 33). What Miles and Huberman imply is that conceptual framework is an evolutionary process which may continue to evolve with the evolution of research. Implicit in their notion is that it serves as a unifying force in terms of planning research, collecting data and its analysis. Maxwell (2010, p. 2) holds that no research can be considered "theory free". The issue is that in order to investigate any educational phenomenon, it is important to look at the larger, socio-cultural, historical and political contexts in which that phenomenon is rooted.

The above point presented by Miles and Huberman (1984) is relevant to the current study on two grounds. Firstly, by choosing the AL approach as a conceptual

framework, this study wants to offer a theoretical clarification of what it intends to investigate. Secondly, the discussion about theoretical framework can help the readers to understand what the present study seeks to achieve and how it will be achieved. This study intends to investigate the phenomenon of how L2 international postgraduate students' feedback perceptions are situated in a particular socio-cultural context of a UK university; and how these perceptions are shaped by features of power, control, self-esteem and identity. Sutton and Gill (2010) while referring to Lea and Street (1998) conclude that AL theorizes feedback literacy as a particular kind of literacy which is deeply embedded in the social, cultural and educational contexts of a particular institution. In other words, feedback literacy cannot be separated from the historical, social, and cultural contexts in which it takes place. In short, this study is based on AL approach, in the sense that feedback messages are socially situated within power relations of learning and teaching. This chapter will demonstrate how AL approach has been used critically to understand international PG students' perspective of assessment feedback as a socially situated practice in the UK higher education context.

Another rationale why a theoretical framework is critically used is that it helps clarify what this study intends to achieve and how it will be achieved (Leshem and Trafford, 2007). This particular aspect of theoretical framework merits discussion here. In the context of this study, AL approach as a theoretical framework has informed my understanding regarding data collection process and the analysis of data. In this study, by AL, it does not mean that if students want to learn the most from their tutor comments, they simply need to acquire the "required linguistic, rhetorical or cognitive structures" of academia (Lillis and Scott, 2007, p.6). However, AL approach has been viewed as a theoretical tool "with a specific epistemological and ideological stance" (Lillis and Scott, 2007, pp.7-9). The epistemological and ideological stance taken up in this study is as follows:

- L2 international postgraduate students' perceptions of assessment feedback are a socially situated phenomenon.
- Feedback messages are socially situated within power relations of learning and teaching and struggle for self-esteem and identity.

Thus, the PG international students' perspective on assessment feedback is central to the field of inquiry undertaken in this study. Adopting AL approach as a theoretical framework has offered a "powerful tool for understanding the experience of students... and for locating that experience in the wider context of higher education" (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 3). It is important to note that researchers within AL approach (Lea & Street, 1998, Ivanic, 1998; Lillis and Scott, 2007) advocate that researching the feedback perceptions of students is inherently an ethnographic field. Although this study is not ethnographic in the truest sense of the term, it has adopted ethnographic oriented interviews as main source of data collection and critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a methodological tool to analyse the data (see chapter 4 for detailed discussion). Researching contextual features such as power relations, self-esteem and identity with the help of in-depth interviews and CDA has helped this study illuminate the complex and multi-faceted phenomenon called assessment feedback.

2.3 Academic literacies approach and its tenets

As noted above, the current research is underpinned by "academic literacies", a term coined by Lea and Street (1998). These authors carried out a landmark study which examined academic writing practices of students and staff in two different UK universities. In order to identify students' problems of academic writing, Lea and Street interviewed both students and tutors. Their study concludes that students' failure to engage with academic writing practices is due to "the gaps between faculty expectations and student interpretation" (Street, 2004, p. 15). Added to this, students' problems of assessment feedback can emerge from the institutional power relations within which learning and teaching are embedded. The researchers within AL approach view "institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as sites of discourse and power" (Lea and Street, 1998, p.3). That is, AL theorizes students' writing as a social practice implicated within a wider socio-cultural context of a university. It also argues that the interplay of the struggle for identity, self-esteem and the student-teacher power relations shape students' perceptions of feedback comments given on their assignments.

While articulating academic literacies approach, Lea and Street (1998) indicate that there are three different approaches towards understanding student writing. These are as follows:

- Study skills model
- Academic socialization model
- Academic literacies model.

Before offering a contrastive analysis of study skills, academic socialization and academic literacies models, it is important to address one important question here. One might argue that since AL approach mainly deals with students' problems with academic writing so it might be a useful theoretical tool for researchers dealing with writing issues. What could be the relevance of AL to a research investigating assessment feedback perceptions of international postgraduate students? The answer to this question can be justified on the grounds that in the UK HE context, the written assignments are the main medium by which students' achievement is assessed. As Lillis (2001) argues, student writing is at the heart of teaching and learning. Writing is considered an integral part of assessment feedback which is generally seen as a point of worry by both students and academics. Arguably, the notion of AL has helped this study analyse the inherently the close relationship between international PG students' writing and tutor feedback their work. In other words, the AL approach with its wider focus has been helpful to investigate what problems international students faced while interpreting the discourse of feedback and how these problems can be addressed.

2.3.1 Study skills approach

The study skills approach views writing mainly at the level of transferable skills. It means that if students learn rules of grammar, spelling, punctuation and syntax, their academic competency will improve (Lea and Street, 1998). This model is based upon the assumption that linguistic features once learnt can be transferred to other disciplines and contexts. This model believes that if learners suffer from lexical and grammatical deficiencies, they can be fixed by study skills programs. An example in this regard might be sufficient to explain this model. Most international students, for example, in many UK universities are normally offered pre-sessional or in-sessional academic writing courses. Students from different disciplines join these courses. The

main aim of these courses is to teach core academic writing skills such as referencing, punctuation, note taking and critical thinking. Baynham (2000) observes that once students learn these skills, they are believed to imitate and manipulate them in their particular subjects. However, Lea and Street counter argue that the study skills approach has narrowed down the concept of academic literacy to “a set of atomised skills which students have to learn and which are then transferable to other contexts” (1998, p. 158).

The study skills model has attracted criticism on a number of grounds. First, as discussed above, this model seems to crystallize language as an uncomplicated and transparent medium through which academic writing can successfully be taught. However, Lillis (2006) claims that this model lays emphasis on mastery of surface features of language which does not always help students produce successful texts across various disciplines and modularized programs. What Lillis means is that such type of decontextualized learning may not adequately take into account different disciplinary needs of students. As Gee (2005, p. 178) contends, “such language and literacy classes construct pseudo-discourses of their own” and have little or no relevance to particular disciplinary knowledge. This point of view is reiterated by Zamel (1995) that each discipline has its own norms, traditions and requirements in relation to teaching academic writing.

Researchers within AL approach criticize study skills model that disciplines across universities do not form a homogenous group. Rather different disciplines practice different genres of academic writing (Ivanič, Clark and Rimmershaw 2000). Lea and Street (1998) and Baynham (2000) reveal that although some disciplines may share certain features of academic writing, there may exist subtle differences regarding disciplinary needs. In other words, the discourse community of each discipline follows a particular way of writing and meaning making of a text. For example, the notion of subjectivity and objectivity in education department may differ from that of engineering. Further differences may lie in the notion of organizing an essay and the use of particular academic register in different disciplines. As Baruthram and McKenna (2006, p. 497) emphasize, writing is not value free, which means it actively constructs knowledge. Academic programs in the context of a university have their own modes of discourse that are central to them. These researchers maintain that

the specific linguistic features of one subject may not be automatically transferred to another. This matter is further complicated when one tutor's idea of what constitutes an essay may differ from another even within one program community. Hence, Lea and Street (1998) use the term "literacies" in the plural, which means that students who study within modularized system experience problems while switching from one course and one tutor to another. In the context of this critique against study skills model, it can be argued that this model does not fulfill the aims of the current study because it views learning as a technical ability which can help students make meaning of tutor comments.

The findings of this study revealed that the academic discourse and academic literacy turned out to be an impediment for L2 international students to interpret feedback correctly. To understand the discourse of assessment feedback, these students need to familiarize themselves with the academic terminology. This study highlights that the participants experienced difficulty in interpreting the tutor feedback, not just because they were unfamiliar with the language, but the concepts and values underpinning the discourse of feedback were unfamiliar, too. In addition, feedback practices varied from discipline to discipline, further compounding the feedback literacy of L2 international students. This study seems to support the findings of the AL approach that feedback not only allows personal communication with the students but also communicates to them the academic values and beliefs and the teacher's authority which is used to judge their work. As Lea and Street (2000, p. 43) indicate, "there is a dynamic within the feedback genre which works to both construct academic knowledge and maintain relationships of power and authority between the novice student and the experienced academic".

2.3.2 Academic socialization approach

As compared to study skills model, academic socialization approach spells out the need for students to become familiar with cultural norms and conventions of academia (Lea and Street 1998; 2000). Inherent in academic socialization approach is the idea that if students are acculturated into discourse of academic writing, they can become successful members of communities of practice. It is important here to explain the terms 'acculturation' and 'communities of practice'. The understanding of these two terms is key to better understand the main principles of the academic

socialization model. The term acculturation refers to the academic culture in which students have to immerse. As Bartholomae's (1986, p. 403) states, "in order for a student to be initiated into the academic culture, he has to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community". The term 'communities of practice' in the context of this study refers to particular textual features of language which its members use for efficient communication purposes across different contexts (Johns, 1997). As Hyland and Hyland (2006, p. 19) hold, members within community of practice need to acculturate themselves into "the ways language forms and strategies work to construct and represent knowledge in particular fields". As compared to the study skills model, academic socialization model lays emphasis on inducting students to the conventions and norms of a university.

Although academic socialization model has made worthwhile contribution to research in terms of recognizing the cultural sensitivity of learning, this approach does not exist without its criticism. One of the criticisms this approach faces is that it tends to overlook the dynamic and changing nature of academic norms across disciplines or subject-based cultures and norms (Lea and Street, 2006). Apart from Lea and Street, Jones *et al.* (1999) contend that this model assumes academic practices are generally stable. Jones *et al.* (*ibid.*, p. xxi) remark that within this model, writing is seen as a "transparent medium of representation and so [this model] fails to address the deep language, literacy and discourse issues involved in the institutional production and representation of meaning". Implicit in their statement is the notion that acquired culture (linguistic, textual and rhetorical conventions of language) of one institute may not be applicable to the entire academic community. That is, this model tends to overlook the dynamic nature of disciplinary cultures and norms.

Although this model has interesting insights to offer, it makes little relevance to the current study. The shortcoming with this model is that academic practices are classified as homogenous. For example, if students learn the academic culture of one department, they can readily transfer it to other disciplines. However, this approach "fails to address the deep language, literacy and discourse issues" (Lea & Street, 2000, p. 35), which are central to understand the feedback perceptions of

international postgraduate students. As Hyland (2000, p. 11) points out succinctly “in humanities and social sciences, for example, analyzing and synthesizing multiple sources is important, while in science and technology, activity-based skills such as describing procedures, defining objects, and planning solutions are required” An AL perspective, while incorporating study skills and academic socialization models, views the dynamic nature of these cultures by seeing literacies as social practices. In short, analyzing feedback as a socially situated practice shaped by wider social, cultural and historical constraints will allow this current research to offer deep insights into what constitutes effective feedback.

2.3.3 Academic literacies approach

As compared to study skills and academic socialization model, AL approach focuses on the interplay of broader social practices influencing students’ academic learning. According Lea and Street (2000, p. 35), AL approach:

views student writing and learning as issues at the level of epistemology and identities rather than skill or socialization. An academic literacies approach views the institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as the sites of, discourse and power.

Lea and Street theorize students’ academic learning as a socially situated practice which is characterized by elements of discourse, identity and unequal power relations. The socially situatedness of learning refers to the variety of academic norms and conventions in which students are involved to learn and contest. These social aspects include the tensions between students’ subjectivity, institutional and academic demands of writing assignments and the purpose of assignments as a main source of assessment.

Another difference between the above mentioned two approaches and academic literacies approach is that AL does not see learning as passive practice. Rather active negotiation of psychosocial academic practices can help students become accomplished members of discourse community. AL regards learning as diverse and complex phenomenon across disciplines and genres. As in the words of Lea and Street (1998, p, 159), AL approach underlines the need for students to

switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes.

Researchers within AL approach argue that academic literacy involves more than what students learn through reading and writing (study skills) and through acculturating themselves with the norms of academia (academic socialization). Thus, AL views student learning at the level of epistemology and identity. What AL proponents imply is that the need has arisen to understand the tensions between student's subjective experiences of learning discipline-specific knowledge and their impact upon self-esteem and identity. Following example will be helpful to better understand this concept.

For example, according to Lea and Street (1998), some tutors do not find the use of first person problematic in students' assignments whereas other tutors might object to this notion. This tension can cause insecurity and confusion for students. In order to justify their viewpoint, Lea and Street gave a detailed example of a student who successfully passed her assignment in history. However, the same student could not pass her anthropology essay because of the difference of linguistic and epistemological requirements of that particular discipline. That is, her anthropology tutor could not recognize the rationale behind the structure of students' essay which was based on the constructs of a history essay. As Coffin *et al.*, (2003, p. 203) emphasize that "learning not only [involves] to communicate in particular ways, but...learning to 'be' particular kinds of people, thus emphasizing writing as involving personal and social identity". Several other studies by (e.g., Lillis and Scott, 2007; Ivanič *et al.* 2000; Lillis, 2003; Orell, 2006; Street, 2004; Nothedge, 2003; Sutton and Gill, 2010) confirm that Lea and Street's theoretical assumptions are reliable and well grounded.

What the above discussion exhibits is that the AL approach encompasses study skills and academic socialization models. Lea and Street (1998) contend that the study skills and academic socialization models are currently the most prevalent models of teaching academic writing within UK higher institutes. However, what is lacking in these two models is that they tend to take an inadequate account of the significance of issues of power and identity. As compared to these two models, AL approach views student writing at the level of epistemology and identities. This

means that AL approach lays emphasis on understanding the question of how the subjective experiences of students as learners impact upon their self-esteem and identity.

The rationale for using AL as a theoretical framework in this present study is that it has helped locate feedback perceptions of international PG students within a specific context, characterized by wider institutional academic demands and culture rather than considering it a problem of individual student. The adoption of AL approach in the context of this study is an appropriate choice as this approach not only lays emphasis on acquiring study skills such as reading and writing but also requires students to learn social and cultural values, norms and practices of academia (Lea and Street, 1998). Lea and Street imply that students' learning to read and write is a complex process since it requires students to come to terms with new social, cultural and institutional demands. Arguably, understanding the language of assessment discourse can be problematic for international students because of the "gaps between faculty expectations and student interpretations" and because of institutional power relationship within which feedback is located (Lea and Street, 1998, p. 3). Thus, power and authority are constituent features of assessment discourse (Higgins *et al*, 2001) and these elements, arguably, may impact upon international students' interpretations of feedback.

In short, the AL as a theoretical framework has helped this study to foreground important dimensions of feedback such as the elements of power relations of teaching-learning, identity, self-esteem and their impact on students' academic development. In the context of above discussion, the AL approach fits appropriately into the aims of this research since this framework views academic learning of students as situated and contextualized social practice, which stresses how novice learners acquire deeper understandings of academic discourse and disciplinary knowledge through the medium of feedback (Lea and Street, 2000). In short, the AL framework will not only provide analytical tools to better understand the feedback related literature but also guide the research design of the study.

2.4 The key concepts of the AL approach

Wilkinson (2008, pp.2-4), while citing researchers such as Ivanič, Clark and Rimmershaw (2000) and Lea and Street (1998, 2006) has outlined the salient concepts of AL approach as follows:

- Writing is a process, not a product. Attention should be paid to the intellectual and psychosocial processes that are involved while producing an end product of a course of instruction.
- Writing is not value free, which means it actively constructs knowledge.
- Academic programs in the context of a university have their own modes of discourse that are central to them.
- Specific linguistic features of one subject may not be automatically transferred to another. One tutor's idea of what constitutes an essay or structure may differ from another within one program community.
- Students studying within modularized system experience problems while switching from one course to another.
- Lecturers assume that their students understand the norms and conventions of academic writing, which the lecturers took a long time to somehow internalize. That is, lecturers need to help their students to "bridge the gap".

While drawing on Baruthram and McKenna (2006), Ivanič, Clark and Rimmershaw (2000), Lea and Street (1998), Wilkinson (2008) states that the AL seeks to focus on:

- Making explicit the discipline and subject-specific norms and conventions to the students.
- Recognizing the surface features of academic writing such as grammar and spelling as important as norms and conventions such as style and referencing.
- Examining identity, confidence and self-esteem as constituent features of academic writing; therefore, lecturers need to guide the students rather than to instruct them.
- Encouraging students to write.

- Avoiding the negative comments which demotivate the students.
- Designing assessment in such a way which promotes formative feedback.

According to Wilkinson (2008), the AL approach has various implications for the design and delivery of assessment feedback.

- Lecturers need to make plain the assessment criteria and grade descriptors.
- The terminology of the assessment tasks needs to be explicitly defined and stated.
- The feedback should be given in a timely manner and it should encourage students to reflect on it.
- The students should be encouraged to undertake short writing tasks for formative feedback.
- Tutors should say what they mean. Avoid ambiguous language.
- Sarcasm should be avoided.
- It is important to give positive formative feedback.
- Students should be offered an opportunity to reflect on feedback and talk about their progress. Emails and individual tutorials enable students to respond and ask for clarification if they face any issues or problems.
- Writing the comments in the first person is much more motivating.

The AL approach has offered useful insights to examine the L2 international students' perceptions as a situated phenomenon in this study. This is because the wider socio-cultural particularities of the academic context heavily influenced international students' perceptions in this study. For the L2 international students who are settling into a new academic community, they need to make meaning of the language and values underlying the discourse of feedback. However, if feedback is one-sided communication, they may not fully understand that their perceptions of feedback match with that of the academic community. This study consolidates the AL approach that if feedback is to be seen a fruitful activity, it should take the form of

a dialogue. This study reflects that the simple “receptive-transmission” model (Askew and Lodge, 2000, pp. 2-4) of feedback is not adequate because it views feedback as one-way communication. In the receptive-transmission model, the tutor is assumed to adopt the role of an expert advisor who transmits knowledge to the students. The students are considered as passive recipients. Askew and Lodge (ibid, p. 5) remark that the receptive-transmission approach is one of the dominant views of teaching and learning in the UK HE. On the other hand, the AL approach views feedback as a socially situated practice.

While drawing on the AL approach, this study suggests that feedback literacy is a situated phenomenon since the context within which students perform the assessment tasks shape their perceptions and practices. The study highlights that the process of giving and receiving feedback involves a complex interplay of self-esteem, identity, motivation, emotion and the power relations. This study suggests that feedback is a form of judgement where tutor often use overly critical discourse. It is further highlighted in this study that tutors need to take great care while writing feedback so that comments could bring about positive change in the self-esteem, motivation, emotion and confidence of L2 international students. In summary, instead of passing “judgement on good and bad writing” (Street, 2004, p. p. 15) and instead of attributing students’ feedback problems as deficiencies in study skills repertoire, this study suggests a more situated view of L2 international students’ feedback experiences. Therefore, feedback literacy is seen as a complex form of academic literacy in which students’ interpretations of the meaning of feedback differ from that of tutors.

2.5 Conclusion

The conclusion to draw is that the AL approach views assessment feedback as a dialogic process, which is deeply rooted in the culture, norms and traditions of academic community. A view of feedback as a social practice lays emphasis on bridging the gaps between students and lecturer expectations and to identify “the ways in which students are called upon-often implicitly-to switch between different genres and modes” (Russell, Lea, Parker, Street, & Donahue, 2009, p. 406). The research findings of the AL approach suggest that if students’ academic writing skills are to be improved, feedback on writing is all the more essential. However, there are

various literacies which students need to negotiate while benefitting from the feedback across subjects and disciplines. Since most of the students may not have had the opportunity to participate in the modularized literacy practices required at university level, it is essential to include such opportunities during the first year of any academic program. As a consequence, students will be able to acquire the skills and literacies required across modules; and, thus, the knowledge of these academic literacies might help them engage better with tutor feedback.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

This research aims to find out how international students at master's level perceive assessment feedback they receive on their written work and how useful it is for them in terms of academic improvement. In order to better understand key issues surrounding assessment feedback, this chapter reviews the role of feedback in terms of developing students' academic learning. Assessment feedback has been widely seen as central to students' academic development (Hyland, 2000; Lillis 2003; Ivanič, Clark and Rimmershaw 2000). The majority of students want and appreciate feedback which is constructive and meaningful (Higgins *et al.*, 2001). Carless (2006, p. 220) remarks that students show dissatisfaction towards the feedback which is "difficult to understand, or having potentially negative impact on students' self perception and confidence". Lillis and Turner (2001, p. 55) contend that "terminology used by tutors and/or in guidelines to name academic writing conventions [has] raised more questions than answers".

This chapter aims to present a critical analysis of the above debates around international PG students' perceptions of assessment feedback. First, this chapter evaluates the definition and significance of summative and formative feedback. Second, it analyzes the relationship between assessment feedback and academic learning. Third, it analyzes the feedback perceptions of international students in higher education. Fourth, it gives a detailed account of the literature analysing the questions of how feedback may have an impact upon students' self-esteem and identity and the teacher-student relationship. Finally, the focus of the research is discussed in relation to the literature reviewed here. It is important to review literature in these areas because analyzing assessment feedback is a broad and complex practice (Crisp, 2007). In short, the rationale for giving a review of these areas has helped inform the researcher's understanding of the research questions, methodological choices and findings of this study.

3.2 Scope of the literature review

This study analyses the feedback perceptions of international students who are studying at MA level in a UK university. Although the scope of the current study is

limited to the UK higher education context, references have been made in this chapter to a number of studies taking place in the Anglophone countries such as the USA, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and Australia. In order to better understand the international PG students' perspective, the review of literature presented in this chapter primarily draws on research taking place in the field of second language (L2) research. Apart from this, references have also been made to key native English researchers, to analyze the context within which international MA students' experiences of assessment feedback take place. The decision to include both L1 and L2 researchers in the current review is important because these researchers shed light on the complexity of feedback which is influenced by students' previous educational experiences and first language. Precisely, focusing on the literature conducted by L1 and L2 writers will help understand ongoing debates around the international PG students' phenomenon in a better way.

3.3 Defining assessment feedback

Before reviewing key literature on assessment feedback, it is essential to understand what is meant by the term "assessment feedback" and some other associated terms. Defining these terms would, arguably, help understand the focus of this study. Apart from this, it will set out context to better understand existing debates relating to assessment feedback.

Generally, researchers tend to vary in terms of defining assessment feedback. Ramaprasad (1983, p. 4) defines feedback as "information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way". As compared to this definition, Angelo (1995, p. 7) gives an exhaustive definition of assessment:

Assessment is an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. It involves making our expectations explicit and public; setting appropriate criteria and high standards for learning quality; systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well performance matches those expectations and standards; and using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve performance.

The above definitions imply that although assessment and feedback have been defined differently by researchers, they share common goal of improving students' learning. The above definitions also imply that assessment and feedback may have

multiple developmental purposes. That is, apart from giving judgment on students' performance, assessment feedback aims at explaining the gap between their current achievement and the desired performance.

In the UK HE context, the QAA (2012) states that assessment feedback consists of tutor commentary on student assessed work. As the QAA's (2012, p. 5) Code of Practice stipulates, "institutions should ensure that appropriate feedback is provided to students on assessed work in a way that promotes learning and facilitates improvement". The feedback commentary can usually be both summative and formative (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick, 2006). Summative feedback is defined to indicate judgements on the extent of a learner's success in a module or program; it also explains the mark awarded and informs students as why they lose marks and how they can do well (QAA, 2006: Chapter 6, Indicator 9).

On the other hand formative feedback is defined as to a way "to improve learning efficiently and expediently" (Sadler, 1989, p. 120). Sadler maintains that formative feedback has a developmental purpose as it is designed to guide students to reflect on their expected performance in academic practice in an efficient way. It helps students learn more effectively by giving them advice about what they did wrong and what they need to do different in future. According to Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2006) and Hounsell (2007), effective assessment feedback not only comprises of grades but also evaluative, constructive and meaningful comments which particularly help students see confusions in the text and inform them how to improve their next piece of writing. It also promotes self-esteem and self-regulated learning by telling learners as how to enhance their academic performance.

Since the focus of this research is on how international students learn from assessment feedback, therefore, the literature review will concentrate on the dual role of summative and formative feedback. This viewpoint is reinforced by Turner (2004, p. 29) who believes, "assessment and feedback are part of the learning process and that it is possible for feedback on summative assessment to also be used formatively". Like Turner (2004), this research will not deal with summative and formative feedback as two separate terms. Rather, it will view the dual role of assessment, in that "a summative assessment can provide formative feedback" Gedye (2010, p. 40). In brief, in this study the term 'assessment feedback' has been

viewed as tutor written commentary and grades given on international PG students' assignments and theses submitted in various disciplines.

There is a sound rationale behind focusing on both summative and formative feedback in this study together. In the UK higher education context, assessment may take many forms, from individual coursework to group presentations to laboratory assignments. Similarly, teachers give feedback in a variety of forms, from written feedback to oral to video feedback. The UK University where this study takes place follows the traditional format of giving assessment feedback. That is, assessment feedback is typically given by tutors on students' assignments and projects on a cover sheet. The cover sheet exhibits tutors' written comments relating to the quality of work and it is also used to indicate final grade. Although the question of researching oral feedback on students' presentations is interesting, this study is focused on written feedback on students' assignments and theses. There is a practical reason behind this decision. Since this study aims to analyze tutor written feedback by using critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a methodological tool, it will be easy to access evidence in the shape of tutor written comments. Therefore, it would not be appropriate to deal with these two terms (assessment and feedback) separately in this study.

Since this study deals with MA students who are studying in a UK university for one year, so it will be helpful to see how they learn from both summative and formative feedback. It is important to mention Bailey and Garner's (2010) point of view here. These writers argue that most of the studies taking place within the UK HE have over-emphasized the summative role of assessment. However, the present study seeks to contribute to feedback related literature by analyzing both the summative and formative roles of assessment. The premise taken up in this study is supported by a recent meta-analysis of feedback literature undertaken by Li and DeLuca (2012). These writers reviewed a wide range of empirical studies (37 studies, selected from 363 articles and 20 journals) written between 2000 and 2011. Li and DeLuca found out that "there has been little guidance for disciplinary teachers on how to achieve the dual goals of assessment feedback. Assessment feedback on written work of modular patterned courses within the disciplines has not been established as a branch of study for its own sake" (p.1).

In summary, the research questions posed in this study focus around the need to know how feedback discourse accompanied by grades may impact upon international students' learning, identity and the student-teacher relationship. A brief review of some definitions of assessment and feedback mentioned above has helped clarify various elements entrenched in the term 'assessment feedback'. Moreover, this section has helped clarify the definition of assessment feedback for the purpose of this study. Now this chapter will turn towards offering some useful insights on the role of assessment feedback for students' learning, in general and international PG students, in particular.

3.4 Significance of assessment feedback for academic development

In the HE sector, the process of giving written feedback has been viewed by both L1 and L2 researchers as a way of developing students' academic learning (Li and DeLuca, 2012; Duncan, 2007; Ferris, 2003; Hyland and Hyland, 2006). Some key researchers (Crisp, 2007; Duncan, 2007; Ferris, 2003, Carless, 2006) argue that tutors expend considerable time and effort on writing feedback in the belief that it is a useful activity in terms of helping students to improve their academic writing skills. According to these researchers, assessment feedback is central to the development of effective learning. The reason why feedback is considered essential is that it not only helps students understand the disciplinary knowledge but also gives them guidance about attaining better grades.

The central role that assessment feedback plays in students' learning has been examined by Bellon *et al.*, (1991). These researchers hold that "academic feedback is more strongly and consistently related to achievement than any other teaching behavior...this relationship is consistent regardless of grade, socioeconomic status, race, or school setting" (ibid, p. 21). What Bellon *et al.*, suggest is that assessment feedback plays a vital role in terms of improving students' self-confidence, interest for learning and self-awareness. The point of view held by Bellon *et al.*, is important in the context of this current study because effective tutor feedback can aid international postgraduate students make easy transition to the UK higher education. Brannon and Knoblauch (1982, p. 162) widen the significance of feedback as it "serves as a sounding board enabling the writer to see confusions in the text and encouraging the writer to explore alternatives that he or she may not have

considered". Like Branon and Knoblauch, Mutch (2003) maintains that feedback allows tutors to communicate ideas, engage students in intellectual dialogues and provide coaching and modelling to inform their next piece of writing. According to Mutch (2003), the interaction during the feedback process allows tutors and students to clarify understandings and expectations which can help students develop required learning skills and, consequently, improve grades. Hounsell (2003) views high quality feedback as one of the central elements of effective teaching. According to Hounsell (p. 67):

It has long been recognized, by researchers and practitioners alike, that feedback plays a decisive role in learning and development, within and beyond formal educational settings. We learn faster, and much more effectively, when we have a clear sense of how well we are doing and what we might need to do in order to improve.

Hounsell's (2003) argument is further reinforced by the findings of meta-analyses studies by Hattie (1987) and Black and Wiliam (1998). Hattie's (1987) meta-analysis of 87 studies reveals that feedback exerts the most powerful influence on students' learning. Similarly, Black and Wiliam (1998) point out that as compared to various particularities of teaching, feedback makes consistent positive impact on students' academic growth. A meta-analysis of 250 studies by Black and William reveals that feedback enhances students' capabilities in the areas of content, knowledge, education and skills. Although the data for Black's and William's analysis came from the school sector, their research presents convincing evidence about the potential significance of feedback for learning. By providing an overview of the seven papers on feedback, Hyland (2000) emphasizes a variety of purposes which feedback offers. These purposes include motivating students, assessing and grading their achievements and developing their skills of writing and revision. While emphasizing the significance of assessment feedback for learning, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) have proposed seven principles. These principles as listed below suggest that feedback directly impact upon the volume, focus and quality of the teaching-learning processes. According to Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (p. 205), feedback:

1. helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards);
2. facilitates the development of self-assessment (reflection) in learning;
3. delivers high quality information to students about their learning;

4. encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning;
5. encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem;
6. provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance;
7. provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.

A common viewpoint which can be traced in the studies of Hattie (1987), Black and William (1998), Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) and Hyland (2010) is that assessment feedback has its role to play for formative purposes. The formative role of assessment feedback has been extensively seen by some key studies such as Higgins *et al.*, (2002) and Orsmond *et al.*, (2005) in the UK context. These studies have investigated the formative impact of assessment feedback in different departments, mainly by qualitative methods of research. Higgins *et al.*, (2002) studied the perceptions of first year under-graduate students in the humanities and business schools in two UK universities. These studies reflect that students perceive assessment feedback vital for formative learning. Similarly, Orsmond *et al.*, (2005) explored the effectiveness of assessment for students' formative growth. These researchers collected their data from sixteen undergraduate biology students in a UK university. Orsmond *et al.*, (2005) highlight four aspects of assessment feedback which include: enhancing motivation, enhancing learning, encouraging reflection and clarifying information and expectations about assignment.

The studies undertaken by Higgins *et al.*, (2002) and Orsmond *et al.*, (2005) have made a significant contribution to feedback related literature in the UK HE context. Their studies have informed my own understanding of formative aspect of assessment feedback as "crucial for both encouraging and consolidating learning" (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p.1). Building on previous research cited in this section, the present study aims to further explore the international postgraduate students' perceptions of feedback on summative assessment. In the light of the review of literature in this section, this study aims to address the question of how international students value and use feedback given on summative assessments and how they consider feedback to the assessment task.

In summary, although feedback is one of the most important constituents of students' learning, yet relatively little research exists, particularly from international students'

point of view. In other words, what is absent in the studies quoted above is the perspective of international MA students studying in the UK. Moreover, what makes the present study different from that of the above mentioned researchers is that this study aims to analyze the feedback perceptions of international students not at one or two departments, rather across various departments in a UK university. As the above mentioned discussion indicates, most feedback related studies (Higgins *et al.*, 2002; Orsmond *et al.*, 2005) have taken place at either one or two departmental levels. However, this research aims to depict the significance of feedback from the perspective of international students at institutional level by encompassing a range of schools. As Carless' (2006) study reviewed in the following section indicates, although the practice of using feedback for learning has produced considerable body of research, more is needed to make it more useful, particularly from the perspective of L2 students.

3.5 Assessment feedback and L2 international students

International students form an important part of the UK higher education (HE). In recent years, the number of international students has considerably increased. As a result, this brings a wide range of challenges and opportunities for instructional practice – to develop the ways students are taught and supported (Lillis, 2006). As Hyland (2006, p 2) states:

Student populations have become increasingly diverse, particularly in terms of their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds and educational experiences, and this presents significant challenges to university academic staff.

In order to address these challenges, many different educational surveys, over the years, at national level have been conducted. These surveys focus on both home and international students' experiences of receiving quality education. One significant area included in the surveys is to check students' overall satisfaction with the meaning and impact of feedback. Surprisingly, the survey conducted by the BBC (2007) highlights that "students bemoan lack of feedback". This is further echoed by various National Student Survey (NNS, 2015, 2016) and Post-graduate Taught Experience of Students (PTES, 2011) that most home and international students express dissatisfaction with the feedback they receive. This dissatisfaction appears disturbing since the role of tutor feedback is widely seen as important to consolidate

students' academic learning. Given its significance for learning, both home and international students want and appreciate feedback which is constructive and meaningful. Various studies by both native (L1) and second language (L2) researchers (e.g., Knoblauch and Brannon, 1981; Leki, 1991; Ferris, 2003; Hounsell *et al.*, 2008; Weaver, 2006; Carless, 2006) have highlighted the feedback perspective of international students. Importantly, Carless' (2006, p. 220) study in the Hong Kong context reveals that most L2 "students are dissatisfied with the feedback they receive, in terms of lacking specific advice to improve, being difficult to understand, or having potentially negative impact on students' self-perception and confidence".

On the other hand, some important research findings (Duncan, 2007; Straub, 1997; Saito, 1994) indicate that tutor comments underpinning assessment criteria are easy to understand by students. These researchers also point out that students do not often collect their assessed work. Thus, ignoring the feedback provided makes them repeat the same mistakes again and again. As a result teachers are left in a perplexed situation since they invest their time and energy to provide detailed feedback on international students' writing (Duncan, 2007). As compared to these research findings, studies by (Nicol, 2009; Lea and Street, 2000; Lillis and Turner, 2001) report that students often fail to perceive feedback comments because these are underpinned by rules, conventions and standards of assessment discourse. Lillis and Turner (2001, p. 55) go so far as to state that "terminology used by tutors and/or in guidelines to name academic writing conventions [has] raised more questions than answers".

Lillis and Turner's (2001) above claim merits consideration specifically in the context of international students participating in this study. This is important because many international students consider the discourse of feedback difficult to understand as they often carry the "burden of learning to write English, and learning English" (Hyland, 2000, p. 34). This point of view is reiterated by Connor (1996, cited in Hyland, 2000, p. 35) that "linguistic and rhetorical conventions do not always transfer successfully across languages" and, therefore, these may pose challenges to international students. What can be inferred from Hyland's and Connor's insights is that academic writing difficulties are probably the most common issue faced by international students. This problem is further confounded when these students

experience problems in making sense of the subject-specific terminology and academic discourse conveyed through feedback. This point of view is clearly stated by Pokorny and Pickford (2010, p. 22) that international students often fail to understand tutor comments because they are “still learning to be the participants in the complex academic discourse within which tutor comments are located”.

A number of qualitative studies have looked at the question of why international students face difficulties in making meaning of feedback comments. Higgins (2000, p.1) reveals that “many students are simply unable to understand feedback comments and interpret them correctly” because they are encoded in specific academic discourse. The implication is that students may not have clear access to the discourse of feedback which is used by tutors to structure their comments. This problem may pose serious challenges to international postgraduate students as they are taking part in a different and unfamiliar game. As noted above, tutors assume that the language of feedback is easy and transparent and students can interpret their comments fairly easily. However, the theoretical framework of Lea and Street (1998, 2000) adopted in this study indicates that teachers’ assumptions might be based on wrong perceptions. Lea and Street (2000) hold that what is transparent to teachers may not be easily understandable to students.

The international students’ experiences of feedback discourse are often characterized by their previous linguistic, cultural and academic backgrounds. The key literature on L2 academic writing (Hyland 2003a; Goldstein, 2006) delineates individual differences such as language proficiency and prior educational experiences influence students’ interpretations and engagement with assessment feedback. For example, Hyland (2003a) suggests that inadequate language proficiency may hinder student’s engagement with tutor feedback. This is because appropriate language proficiency is required for L2 students to survive and function in a different academic setting.

Another dimension that can influence international students’ perceptions of feedback is the notion of cultural differences. Culture, according to Hyland (2003a) can influence the way students interpret and respond to disciplinary practices manifested through feedback. The reason why cultural differences affect these students is that they “cannot...leave behind their identities and interests” (Canagarajah 2002, p.15).

This researcher maintains that “the considerable hybridity and heterogeneity evident in each community” should not be overlooked (ibid, p. 35). What Canagarajah implies is that international students should not be considered a homogenous group due to their separate and unique culture. This researcher warns that some tutors tend to make inappropriate assumptions regarding L2 students. These assumptions include that all the L2 students are inclined to rote learning and unable to argue academically. However, Andrews’ (2007) study demonstrates that three Chinese students possess different characteristics of argumentation. It becomes clear from this discussion that international students should be considered as “individuals, not as members of a cultural group” (Spack 1997, p.772). Apart from cultural and educational differences, contextual factors may impact upon how international students utilize tutor feedback. These contextual factors include personal beliefs, previous writing experiences and the relationship with teacher (Conrad and Goldstein 1999; Hyland and Hyland 2006). As regards the previous writing experiences, most L2 students tend to base their academic writing on L1 writing knowledge and strategies, such as planning and organizing materials. A study by Riazi (1997) reveals that these students easily transfer their rhetoric and cognitive competencies to many L2 academic contexts. However, what happens is that their tutors criticize such approaches because they are inconsistent with new standards of Anglo-American discourse community.

Krase (2007) has investigated the challenges faced by L2 students at UK universities as they move from “peripheral participation’ to ‘full participation’ (Lave and Wenger 1991, p. 37). Krase emphasizes that it is essential to see the relationship between students and their tutors. Cultural differences and previous educational experiences can have impact upon international students’ relationship with tutors and consequently the uptake of feedback. This is because the relationship of trust between students and tutors is crucial enough to impact the success of feedback and students’ enculturation into a new discourse community.

Like above researchers, Silva’s (1993, p. 669) meta-analysis reveals that international students as being L2 learners are “strategically, rhetorically, and linguistically different” from native students. Silva implies that these differences may be a result of different linguistic proficiencies, academic and socio-cultural backgrounds. Silva’s observation seems vital for this research since the feedback

perceptions of international students as being L2 learners take place in a different socio-cultural context and may have been influenced by their prior experiences and new demands of academic discourse. As Lillis (2001, p. 40) argues, a student while interpreting feedback “participates in a discursive practice which is bound to a particular social institution, and in turn embedded with wider socio-cultural practices”.

3.6 Feedback and criticality in academic writing

Inculcating the skills of criticality is at the heart of assessment feedback criteria. According to Elander et al. (2006), developing critical thinking is central aspect of assessment criteria in the UK HE. Writing critically helps international students explore and consolidate their engagement with the subject knowledge. It is regarded as an effective means for tutors to evaluate students’ engagement and understanding with the topic of assessment. As Lillis (2001) reiterates, students, specifically, at postgraduate level are required to demonstrate critical writing as it is a “key assessment tool, with students passing or failing courses according to the ways in which they respond to, and engage in, academic writing tasks’ (Lillis, 2001, p. 20). Thus, writing critically can have serious implications for L2 international students who might not be well familiar with the UK criteria of assessment. This is because many L2 international postgraduate students may not have been exposed to the concept of 100% coursework assessment. Ryan and Carroll (2005) suggest that most international students may only have been assessed by exams in their previous education; and that they may not have experienced coursework. Scudamore (2013) argues that most international students might find hard to write critically in the UK due to their different linguistic background. Some recent studies such as (Turner, 2006; Arenas, 2009; Leask and Carroll, 2011; Scudamore, 2013) reveal that although many international students have skills of writing critically, they may be constrained to write it in English because of adequate vocabulary. On the other hand, the UK universities require students to show criticality but, according to Turner (2006), these requirements remain hidden to the students. One of the reasons is that critical writing-related expectations are taken for granted and not explicitly told to the students. Due to this, most L2 students may struggle to find appropriate words to express their critical ideas in academic English. Their problem is confounded when they are expected to create academic discourse in different language supported by relevant scholarly evidence. Scudamore (2013), for example, points out that

supporting their writing with appropriate references may be a challenge for international students during their course of study in the UK. This is through tutor feedback that students come to understand the expected referencing systems as why they need to reference and where. If the students become proficient in referencing area through immediate feedback, their confidence level is likely to increase. Carroll (2008b) lays emphasis on making explicit the referencing system through feedback, in order to help students write critically and improve their work. Carroll suggests that tutor feedback can draw students' attention towards desired behaviour rather than concentrating on what they have not done.

Furthermore, findings from research in various disciplines demonstrate that sufficient subject knowledge is an essential element of writing critically, which can help international students engage with tutor feedback effectively (Wingate 2011). According to Wingate et al. (2011), lack of disciplinary knowledge can influence students' understanding of tutor feedback. Andrews' study (1995) in the Chinese context reveals that adequate content knowledge is all the more important to aid students to demonstrate their position in their writing. Developing one's voice requires critical writing skills such as reviewing the literature, citing relevant sources and presenting ones' claims. McPeck (1990) claims that writing critically much rests on substantial content knowledge.

It is pertinent here to review debate whether critical writing skills should be taught through study skills courses or embedded into disciplinary courses. Reviewing this debate is important for this study because many participants felt frustrated when their tutors referred them to study skills courses. Lillis (2001, pp. 22-26) remarks that in the UK, the concept of "study-as-skill" predominates, which views student writing problems at the "textual" level. As a result, most tutor feedback concentrates on "surface language features such as spelling and grammar, and the most visible of academic conventions, such as simplified representations of text structure and citation practices". However, Wingate (2006, p. 462) contends that writing critically involves more than skills, which is "understanding the nature of knowledge and how it is constructed".

In order to help international students overcome the complexity associated with an unfamiliar discourse, Northedge (2003) views tutor's role as a specialist. That is, the

tutor not only helps students to enculturate into new academic community but also enable them to make meaning of an unfamiliar discourse. The academic literacies approach – the theoretical framework adopted in this study – challenges both study skills as well as academic socialization (Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001). Lea and Street claim that there are gaps between students and tutors of what constitutes knowledge. That is students and tutors tend to differ in the areas of “epistemology, authority and contestation over knowledge” (1998, p. 160). What academic literacies approach reveals is that tutor feedback fails to clearly explain the notion of “argument, structure, clarity and analysis” to students. This confuses students because they are not sure “how to write specific course-based knowledge for a particular tutor or field of study” (ibid. 164). The research findings by Lea and Street explicate that different subject tutors need to embed the skills of criticality within the contexts of their subjects. In this way, students’ understanding with subject-specific writing conventions can be developed. Wingate (2006, p. 464) summarizes the main concepts of academic literacies approach in the following way:

1. Address epistemological assumptions
2. Demonstrate how knowledge is constructed in the specific discipline.
3. Make it explicit that students are not recipients of, but active contributors to knowledge.
4. Demonstrate rhetorical processes in academic writing, for instance ways of integrating one’s own voice with existing knowledge.

3.7 Referencing

Closely related to criticality is the understanding of how references are cited by international students and counterweighed, questioned or supported through tutor feedback. In other words, the use of rhetorical devices in academic discourse is an important area, which is addressed by assessment criteria and tutor feedback. Although “a critical mass of knowledge in a certain field” (Hendricks & Quinn, 2000, p. 448) is important to synthesize information, the tutor feedback informs students how to use referencing techniques and bring coherence to different arguments. In general, the mechanism of referencing requires students to understand how to use “brackets for the names of authors, year of publication, and providing page numbers for direct quote” (Wingate, 2006, p. 463). However, the findings of Hendrick’s and

Quinn's (2000) study shows that most international students face problems in understanding how to select the appropriate sources and to know why and when to reference. Tutor feedback can make students understand how and why knowledge is "constructed, debated and contested" (Angelil-Carter, 1995, cited in Hendricks & Quinn, 2000, p. 448). In this regard Wingate (2006, p. 467) makes an important point that students' understanding of referencing technique

usually requires an epistemological shift, as students tend to see knowledge as uncontested facts that they have to absorb and then report in their writing. It is therefore necessary to teach students that knowledge is constantly developing, and that they are expected to question existing knowledge and contribute to its development, using evidence from previous contributors.

3.8 Assessment feedback as a complex phenomenon

The complex nature of feedback discourse has been explored by a growing number of studies (Pokorny and Pickford, 2010; Hounsell, 1987; Ecclestone, 1998; Chanock, 2000; Sutton and Gill, 2010; Carless, 2006; Higgins et al, 2001, 2002, Lea and Street, 1998; Ivanic et al., 2000; Hinett, 2002). The reason why assessment feedback is seen as a unique and complex form of communication is that it is largely characterized by "issues of discourse, identity, power, control and social relationships" Higgins et al., (2001, p. 271). Another reason which makes feedback as a complex phenomenon is that it is based on abstract concepts and implicit understandings by tutors (Hinett, 2002).

The complexity of the feedback process has been investigated by Carless' study (2006) within the context of higher education in Hong Kong. Carless examines differing perceptions of students and tutors towards the process of feedback comments, marking and assessment. The study uses questionnaires and interviews as means of data collection with students and tutors. Carless' (2006) study is valuable because of the L2 composition of the respondents in the survey. Both the staff and students are located in a variety of eight different universities. The study is conceptualized by the elements of discourse, power and emotion (Higgins, 2000). Carless (2006, p. 219) argues that the "feedback process is more complex than acknowledged" because of the contextual factors such as culture, previous education and the student-tutor relationship. Staff and students hold differing perceptions regarding the scope, role and aim of feedback because of their different

beliefs. The lecturers believe that their feedback is more useful than what students perceive. However, students believe that tutor comments are generally written in academic language which might not be easily accessible to them. This study makes an important point that academic “discourse is a means by which tutors wittingly or unwittingly exert power over students” (p. 221). While reinforcing the findings of earlier studies (Higgins, 2000; Baynham, 2000; Ivanic et al., 2000; Lea and Street 1998), Carless points out that what compounds the process of feedback as communication is “the fact that discourses may vary across disciplines, across subjects or across tutors”. Carless suggests that if an understanding of this communication process is to be gained, the aspect of emotional well-being of the students, issues of power and control need to be addressed. This is because, students make emotional investment in their work and this can “affect their self-image” (Hinnet, 2002, p. 178). In short, Carless’ study claims that,

Given the centrality of assessment to learning, students need to learn about assessment in the same way that they engage with subject content. Assessment dialogues can help students to clarify ‘the rules of the game’, the assumptions known to lecturers but less transparent to students.

The complexity of assessment feedback in relation to students’ learning has been further investigated by Pokorny and Pickford (2010). These researchers, basing their findings on four focus group interviews with eighteen home and international undergraduate and postgraduate students of Business school in a post 1992 UK university, indicate that some social and contextual factors influence students’ interpretations of feedback. Social issues include positive and congenial relationship between teachers and students. The congenial relationship with tutors can inspire international students to seek guidance on misperceived aspects of feedback. Pokorny and Pickford (2010) further suggest that feedback comments should be constructively written as it might have motivating impact on students’ attitudes towards learning. In other words, feedback should not contain negative or categorical statements because of its impact on the student-teacher relationship of trust. Rather it should be delivered in an engaging language so that students can become an integral part of assessment process. The study by Pokorny and Pickford (2010) has made worthwhile contribution to feedback debate by emphasizing the element of feedback literacy among students. The study reflects the need for future research which could analyze the international and home students’ perceptions separately

from a range of disciplines. This approach might identify the question of how the interplay of linguistic, cultural and educational variables might add to the complexity of feedback process.

Another feature which might add to the complexity of assessment process is the question of ideal time for giving feedback. The feedback related literature indicates that most researchers are split over the question of when to give feedback. Jones' (2011) study underscores an important point that students generally view feedback beneficial when it is given on early drafts of their work. On the other hand, "feedback on final draft is often ignored or forgotten before the next essay" (ibid, p. 120). Gibbs and Simpson (2004) make a similar claim that if tutors want to make their feedback useful, it should be given during the writing stages of students' work rather than after the performance. Added to this, students may ignore the feedback given at the end of semester because "they do not necessarily see how comments on one assignment might help them with an assignment on a different topic" (Carless, 2006; cited in Jones, 2011, p. 121).

In order to investigate the timeliness of assessment feedback, Freeman (1985) conducted a large scale survey. Freeman's (1985) analysis indicates that students usually prefer feedback during the stages of drafting their work, while teachers in the UK context tend to give feedback at the end of semester. Nicol (2009) notes that, largely due to mass higher education, tutor feedback is being squeezed from dialogue to a monologue. This means that the opportunities to give regular feedback on students' drafts seem to have become inadequate due to time constraints. Ferris (2003) suggests that if teachers want to make assessment feedback a developmental exercise, students should be given regular feedback throughout the process of their writing.

Some studies (Ecclestone, 1998; Chanock, 2000; Sutton and Gill, 2010; Carless, 2006; Higgins, 2000) contend that students' interpretations of grades tend to make the feedback a complex process. Grades are considered a powerful form of feedback to students because they offer "initial source of meaning, and the first point of engagement with feedback: the prism through which feedback is read" (Sutton and Gill, 2010, p. 7) One of the areas highlighted by these researchers is that most students do not pay attention to tutor advice or comments since they are more

concerned about their grades. Chanock's (2000) study explains the possible reasons why most students might fail to utilize feedback for future assignments. One of the reasons, according to Chanock (2000, p. 96) is that in the face of negative comments "students look at grades" and ignore feedback. What Chanock's study reveals is that assessment feedback, which justifies the grade, is difficult to understand and, therefore, it is likely to be ignored by students.

The reason why most students may ignore feedback given under the shadow of grade is identified by Ecclestone (1998). According to Ecclestone (1998), students ignore feedback comments because they find grade "simple unambiguous, meaningful in terms of achievement and progress" (cited in Pokorny and Pickford, 2010, p. 24). Similarly, Moxley (1989, p. 4) argues that "as much as we may hope that students truly want to improve their writing, grades are their life". Awarding grades in the shadow of feedback, as researched by Black and William (1998), is a complex process. The underlying suggestion is that if tutors want to make feedback a useful activity, feedback and grades should not be given hand in hand. This point of view is further expanded by Sutton and Gill (2010, p. 7) as they argue "within academia it is perhaps commonly held that students are primarily interested in the grade, with written feedback being of secondary consideration". The study by Sutton and Gill (2010) analyses the students' experiences and understandings of feedback discourse within the particular context of two universities in the UK. The data analysed was comprised of 21 semi-structured interviews with full-time undergraduate students (years 1, 2, 3, and 4). The study is valuable because it portrays "the complexity of feedback as a genre of academic communication", which is "characterized by diversity and difference" (p. 3). What adds to the complexity of feedback process is the power/knowledge relations of learning and teaching; the socially situated meaning of feedback; and feedback and self-identity. The findings of the study reflect that this is crucial area for future studies. That is, rather than seeing students as passive recipients of feedback, they need to be seen as active agents, negotiating the terms and conditions of their own learning and responding and adapting their writing to the feedback comments they receive.

In the context of above debates the premise adopted in the current study is that grades are seen as meaningful and formative in terms of signifying success or failure to students; and that they can motivate students for better learning. Higgins *et al.*,

(2002, p. 53) contends that students pay heed to grades because grades motivate them intrinsically to “seek feedback which will help them to engage with their subject in a deep way”. Higgins *et al.*, while drawing on Dweck (2001) and Black and William (1998) suggest that individual differences of students may help or impede them in their interpretation of grades and feedback. That is, some students due to their fixed notions of intelligence are less likely to act on feedback; however, some students who see learning as an ongoing malleable process respond positively to feedback. In other words, self-motivated students believe that acting on feedback may not only help them improve their academic skills but also improve their grades.

The studies by Higgins *et al.*, (2002) and Weaver (2006) suggest the complexity of the relationship between feedback and students’ beliefs. Higgins *et al.*, (2002) based their study on semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with students of business and humanities schools. A number of issues were addressed in this study such as how students perceived feedback in terms of its effectiveness. Higgins *et al.* emphasize that the relationship between feedback and students’ expectations is complex because students adopt consumer oriented approach to “get a good degree” (p. 53). That is, they tend to “act like consumers, driven by the extrinsic motivation of the mark and adopt a surface approach to learning (Higgins *et al.*, 2001, p. 270). Weaver (2006) underscores the same point of recognizing the complexity of feedback as a unique form of communication. By employing qualitative and quantitative research methods, Weaver collected data from business and design students. Students were asked questions on their understanding and perceptions of feedback and its usefulness for learning. The respondents of the study identified feedback as complex activity because it contained implicit and irrelevant comments. In sum, these studies reveal that

new models of communication are required to understand students’ responses to the language of tutors’ comments, and that issues of discourse, identity, power, control and social relationships should be central to any understanding of assessment feedback as a communication process (Higgins *et al.*, 2001, p. 269).

3.9 Feedback and issues of discourse, power and identity

What can be extrapolated from the above review of literature is that the notions of discourse, power, emotion and identity are central to the understanding of

international students' (both positive and negative) perceptions of tutor written feedback comments. The following discussion exhibits how the process of giving and receiving feedback is influenced by the interplay of power differentials, competing discourses, emotion and identity.

3.9.1 Discourse

Discourse, according to Higgins (2000) “refers to different sets of ideas and beliefs about what can be said about a topic area and how it may be said”. For example, the feedback discourse might reflect tutor’s role as a guide and critic. It also conveys messages about students’ academic learning, identity and character. However, students might experience difficulties while making meaning of the assessment discourse. Hounsell (1987) points out that the reason why students fail to make sense of the feedback discourse is differences between students and tutors conceptions of knowledge. That is, students “do not have a grasp of the assumptions about the nature of academic discourse underlying what is being conveyed to them” (ibid, p. 114). Hounsell maintains that the present efforts to guide the students have failed

because of the exigencies of communication ... Such characteristic comments as 'you do not make your points clearly enough', 'this essay lacks structure' or 'too much irrelevant detail', do not have a meaning which is self evident' (p. 118).

Higgins (2000, p. 3) problematizes the notion of implicit academic discourse and argues that “there is not likely to be one such discourse but many”. What this researcher implies is that discourse underpinning feedback comments may vary from discipline to discipline. Moreover, feedback is encoded in an academic discourse, which might pose challenges to L2 international students. The findings of Turner’s (2004, p. 32) research suggest that feedback should be given in a discourse which is “clear, direct, understandable, precise, and specific”. This type of explicit discourse helps break down power barriers and enable students and teachers to engage in meaningful dialogue. It is important to mention here that academic literacies approach (Lea and Street, 2000) lays emphasis on providing explicit feedback. This is because “a 'good' structure in one assignment, one module or for one tutor is not necessarily perceived as 'good' in or for another” (Turner, 2004, p. 32). What Turner implies is that tutors within the same department may have contradictory advice. If

feedback discourse does not clearly explain what is right or wrong with the structure, such discourse may not be able to feed forward. The notion of varying discourses is supported by Ivanic *et al's* study, in which tutor written comments vary extensively in terms of tone, quantity and type. Drawing on (Barnett, 1990; Hyland, 1998; Lea and Street, 2000), Higgins (2000, p. 4) argues that the

way feedback is provided and the nature of that feedback is predominantly underpinned by a dominant, subject specific discourse, personal and individual values and beliefs, and the employment of other discourses play a mediating role.

Apart from tutor personal and individual values and beliefs, students' own beliefs may impact upon their interpretations of feedback. This is because, L2 international students, being a heterogeneous body, bring with them a wide variety of learning experiences (McCune, 1999). It can be argued that "different students will inevitably interpret tutors' comments differently and that no matter what feedback is provided, a number of students will misunderstand comments and fail to connect with them" (Higgins, 2000, pp. 4-5). In the light of above discussion, it can be argued that tutor feedback is largely influenced by tacit and subject-related discourses. These discourses are further mediated by implicit values and beliefs upheld by tutors. L2 international students at MA level are likely to misconceive the feedback messages because of their limited knowledge of these implicit discourses.

3.9.2 Feedback and the student-teacher power relation

The present study examines feedback process as a complex and problematic form of communication, which is influenced by various social and contextual factors. It is argued that if feedback is seen as a socially situated phenomenon, the role of power needs to be considered. As the chief advocates of AL approach (Lea and Street, 2000, p. 45) remark, the feedback process should be understood "through implicit assumptions about what constitutes valid knowledge ... and the relationships of authority that exist around the communication of these assumptions". What Lea and Street suggest is that "the process of giving and receiving feedback needs to be understood within the context of a particular tutor-student relationship based on an unequal distribution of power where the tutor is accepted by students as an authority figure and expert" (cited in Higgins, 2000, p. 6) That is, tutors exercise their power over students through their academic knowledge and control. However, Higgins (*ibid*,

p. 6) warns that the power exerted “by tutors is not directed to sinister ends, but to help students learn successfully”. Of key significance here is the relationship between power and knowledge. Importantly, Foucault (1985) views that power and knowledge are inextricably interwoven. This means that teachers may have the power to impart or withhold knowledge and one of the means that they can exercise this is through their feedback. The notion of power can have implications for the L2 international students, coming from a different linguistic and cultural background. The central point to make is that international students’ interpretations need to be examined within the context of an unequal student-tutor power relationship. As Boud (1995, p. 43) summarizes: “we judge too much and too powerfully, not realising the extent to which students experience our power over them”. In brief, power is synonymous with discourse and this might be problematic for L2 students who are not familiar with the different discourse-power relationship in a UK university.

In order to better understand the power-differential dimension of feedback in the context of L2 international students, it is important to review the study by Robson *et al.*, (2013) here. These researchers investigated the perceptions of 45 international students at MA level in a UK university. Their study raised an important point that international students considered their tutor feedback more valuable than peer feedback or the notion of self-regulated learning. This study suggests that although tutor feedback laid emphasis on self-regulated learning, students preferred their tutors to take more charge of their learning. The reason behind this tension is that students’ perceptions of feedback are largely influenced by the element of teacher-student power relationships. What these researchers imply is that these students’ views of power-differentials are rooted in the educational values of home country. However, their perceptions of power relationships are challenged by new UK academic environment in which they find norms different from their country of origin. Robson *et al.* observe that formative dialogue through feedback can address cultural issues, to help students respond to feedback better. The findings of this study have significance for the present research, since it seeks to understand the power-relationship facet of feedback as perceived by L2 international students.

The above discussion in this section shows that feedback should be viewed within the context of an implicit understanding of the student-teacher power relationship (Hyland, 2000; Mutch, 2003). Hyatt (2005) claims that this power relationship is less

equal in which teacher holds commanding role. It can be argued that giving and receiving feedback involves complex issues. L2 international students with their diverse culture and learning backgrounds may experience challenges in the feedback process. Several studies demonstrate that international students may face challenges in a new multicultural academic environment because they might not be “prepared for the demands of academic writing” (Wingate *et al.*, 2011, p. 70). The aspect of how culture mediates the power-distance dimension has been examined by Ryan and Viète (2009). According to these researchers, students belonging to the culture of high power-distance value such as China, India and Pakistan, teachers are held in high esteem, which means they are not criticized or contradicted. These students largely view education as teacher-driven, with the teacher initiating communication. On the other hand, in cultures with a low power-differential value such as the UK, the student-teacher relationship is more equal. In these cultures, students can raise questions and their debating initiative is accepted and encouraged (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005).

3.9.3 Feedback and emotion

The process of giving and receiving feedback is largely seen as an emotional one. For instance, Hyland (1998, p. 279) asserts that “writing is an intensely personal activity, and students’ motivation and confidence in themselves as writers may be adversely affected by the feedback they receive”. Higgins *et al.* (2001, p. 272), argue that “the student makes an emotional investment in an assignment and expects some “return” on that investment”. Adopting the view of McCune (1999), Higgins (2000, p. 6) argues that “the effects of feedback - where they are a change in students’ conceptions of learning - can be linked to notions of confusion, anxiety and crisis of confidence”. Hyland’s (1998) and Higgins’ (2000) assertions seem central to the understanding of L2 international students in this study. For these students, interpreting feedback might be more emotional and anxiety-provoking business because they struggle to understand the new rules of discourse. In addition, this particular group of international students has to write in L2 and, thus, combat with some other social and cultural issues. The emotional aspect of feedback can, perhaps, be best understood in the light of Hounsell’s (1987, p. 117) words. This researcher reveals that students may become

locked into a cycle of deprivation as far as constructive feedback is concerned. Since feedback fails to connect, it comes to be viewed as insignificant or invalid, and so is not given considered attention. At the same time the activity within which it is offered is seen increasingly as unrewarding, and so it is approached perfunctorily, thus rather lessening the likelihood that a more appropriate conception might be apprehended.

What the above quote suggests is that discouraging feedback can negatively impact upon students' emotional well-being, affecting their self-esteem, confidence and whole approach to learning. Higgins (2000, p. 7) illustrates the emotional dimension of feedback by considering the following example:

A student misunderstands assessment criteria...and produces work deemed by the tutor to be poor. The consequent feedback is perceived by the student to constitute a negative criticism or even rejection of both his work and even his character... The student considers himself to have been judged as inadequate and...as a result, feels embarrassment, humiliation and guilt...Following this experience, he is less willing to engage with the tutor and the discipline and partly 'withdraws' from the learning situation in an attempt to avoid emotional experiences of a similar nature.

The above example shows that emotion plays central role in the feedback practice and it is closely related to the notions of power and discourse. If the emotional aspect of feedback is not considered adequately in the process of giving and receiving feedback, the gap, in the words of Higgins (*ibid*, p. 7) "between tutor and student in terms of access to discourse, power and authority is widened".

Apart from Higgins (2000), Hattie and Timperley (2007) reveal that feedback might be an upsetting experience. These researchers, therefore, suggest that feedback should be directed at students' work, rather than judging them as persons. If feedback does not meet well the emotional needs of students, it might lead to disappointment and anxiety. According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), a dialogic feedback is likely to address the emotional needs of students since it guarantees reassurance and follow-up questions. Feedback, which is anxiety-provoking, may leave students emotional and, thus, chances of acting on feedback are compromised. In brief, the review of literature in this section shows that feedback is a social process and discourse, power and emotion are its constituent elements. These elements largely impact upon how feedback messages are received and interpreted by students.

3.9.4 Feedback, self-esteem, motivation and confidence

The literature (Gibbs and Simpson, 2002; Young, 2000; Carless, 2006) on formative assessment indicates that feedback can potentially be misinterpreted by students and this can negatively impact upon their ability to learn from it. The literature also suggests that if feedback tends to judge students as people instead of their work, it might seriously be misperceived. Gibbs and Simpson (2002) advise that the main focus of feedback should be students' performance and learning not their characteristics as persons. If critical feedback is directed at personal characteristics of students, it can demotivate them and negatively impact upon their self-esteem, motivation and confidence. Gibbs and Simpson point out that feedback focused on students' work might provide them with opportunities for action and, thus, it is less likely to affect their self-esteem and ego. Young's (2000) study, mainly includes mature L2 students as participants, is relevant to the current research, where all participants are mature. Young reveals that, while giving feedback, teachers should not overlook the emotional impact of feedback on students' self-esteem, motivation and academic confidence. It is interesting to see the way Young examines the level of self-esteem and its relationship with feedback interpretation. Students with low self-esteem might interpret feedback comments as a judgement of their competence; and on the other hand, students with higher levels tend to take up feedback positively. The influence of individual characteristics on the interpretation of feedback has been examined by Carless (2006). What Carless reveals is that students vary in their interpretations of the same feedback comment. For example, "better students are more receptive to feedback, because of their greater confidence and better understanding of what good performance entails; for the weaker student feedback carries more risk of being discouraging and/or misunderstood" (ibid, p230). Carless' (2006) study concludes that students' individual characteristics and the emotional impact of feedback on students' self-esteem are closely interconnected.

Researchers like Hyland and Hyland (2001) and Caffarella & Barnett (2000) have seen the impact of critical feedback on students' self-esteem and identity. Hyland and Hyland (2001) reveal that in some cases, analytical feedback may have a damaging impact upon students' self-esteem and thus may not promote desired learning. Hyland (2006) warns tutors of the dangers of un-hedged criticism, as it may potentially affect students' relationship of trust with teachers. As Young (2000, p.

414) argues, “one of the most powerful and potentially dangerous dimensions of students’ feelings about feedback is the extent it impacts on themselves as people.” The implication is that hedging (the use of may, might etc) may temper tutor critical comments and imply a possibility for further clarification and negotiation. Hyland (2006) also notes that in order to make feedback meaningful activity for international students, tutors should be aware of students’ past linguistic, educational and cultural backgrounds. In brief, a meaningful and communicative assessment language is of central importance to students’ self-esteem. There are several recent qualitative studies such as (McGinty, 2011; Glover and Brown 2006, cited in Yorke, 2011, p. 19) which have examined the impact of vague comments on students’ self-esteem and identity. A few examples from these studies can be used here to illustrate this point adequately.

They are writing all over my work and it is like mangled up and most of the lecturers use red pen and I don’t know it kind of gets to me if I open it up and it’s covered with red crosses and marks and it’s horrible. It’s like my work is bleeding. (‘Josie’, interview, in McGinty 2011.)

Some of my lecturers - it’s just like, ‘this is wrong’ and just squish the whole thing with red pen, it’s like ‘where did I go wrong’ and it doesn’t help me really. (‘Student 10’, in Glover and Brown 2006, no pagination)

The above quotations imply that if feedback is not worded carefully, it might affect students’ self-esteem and may become counterproductive to their learning. Although the above mentioned researchers in this section have explored the relationship between feedback and self-esteem, what is missing in their studies is the perspective of international postgraduate students in the UK context.

In the light of above discussion, it can be argued that feedback is “a key element of the scaffolding provided by the teacher to build learner confidence and the literacy resources to participate in target communities” (Hyland and Hyland, 2006, p. 83). These researchers imply that teacher written feedback can have powerful influence to motivate students in the writing process. Brookhart (2010) argues that cognitive and motivational factors are two important constituent features of feedback. The cognitive element informs students the gaps between their current and desired performance. Whereas motivational factors help students develop sense of well-being and, thus, they can have regulation over their own learning. Weaver (2006)

suggests that teachers should not only focus on form and meaning in their feedback but also include comments of praise and encouragement. This is because positive comments can enhance the self-esteem and confidence level of students. Brookhart (2010, p. 11) holds that students see positive feedback as “positive reinforcement”, whereas negative comments are seen as “punishment”. Adopting Van-Dijk and Kluger (2000, 2001) views, Hattie and Timperley (2007) comment that “positive feedback increases motivation relative to negative feedback for a task that people “want to do” and decreases motivation relative to negative feedback for a task that people “have to do.” Thus, mitigation in overtly judgemental comments is found to enhance the confidence and self-esteem of students and lead them to become responsible learners.

The motivational aspect of feedback can better be understood in the light of Turner’s (2004) qualitative study, conducted in a UK university. This study examined the feedback perceptions of fourteen international students enrolled in a pre-sessional course. The findings of the study emphasize that students may not be engaged with the tutor feedback if it is demotivating. Turner (*ibid*, p.32) remarks,

It seems necessary, therefore, to think about balancing negative and positive comments as well as engaging in some kind of ongoing dialogue with the student to show that this is not necessarily a final judgement but part of a formative process. This may help to break down the power barriers between tutor and student, thereby reducing anxiety and promoting learning, questioning and a willingness to 'try things out' during the process.

It is important to note that academic literacies approach (Lea & Street 2000; Lillis (2001) stress using comments which are non-judgmental and non-categorical. Judgmental comments, according to Lea and Street (1998; 2000) might constrain students from entering into dialogue with the teacher and, thus, such comments are likely to be misunderstood. Mutch (2003, p. 32) also finds that teachers should not use categorical comments (e.g., 'Evidence of using some good basic sources') because these can be interpreted as closed comment by students, which require no further action. Thus, academic literacies approach lays emphasis on “the importance of welcoming the student into the academic community in...[the] spirit of collaborative learning, rather than excluding them” (Turner, p. 32).

3.9.5 Feedback and voice and identity

The presence of the writer's voice is considered an important feature of effective English academic style. Voice is defined by Ivancic (2005, p. 400) as the writer's distinctive presence, which is characterized by "the strength with which the writer comes over as the author of the text". Wingate (2011) argues that although the manifestation of authorial voice is emphasized through tutor feedback, many students become frustrated over its understanding. Hyland (2002b) draws attention towards the reasons behind this common perception amongst students. These reasons, according to Hyland, are textbooks and teacher written feedback. These two sources commonly lay emphasis on students avoiding the use of the first person pronoun. On other hand, some studies (Hyland, 2002a; Ivancic 1998; Lillis 2001) demonstrate that disciplines such as humanities and social sciences do not require students to devoid their writing of subjectivity. Rather, the use of the first person pronoun is regarded as a convincing rhetorical device, which can help students make their position explicit.

It can be argued that L2 international students, due to their different language and cultural background, might struggle to strike a balance between their own voices and the voices of more recognized authors (Hyland 2002a). For example, students belonging to the Confucian-heritage cultures might refrain from using the first person pronoun "I". The reason might be that "I" is associated with assertiveness and individual identity; however, their culture might prefer indirectness and collectivity.

The literature on voice as cited above suggests that it is important for teacher feedback to explicitly tell students about the usefulness of the writer's presence in their writing. Feedback also needs to clearly inform students about the significance of different rhetorical options associated with presenting a voice and other writers. What the above discussion implies is that students need to be explicitly informed that the conventions of academic writing such as voice are part of a western culture and that they are not indisputable, rather open to negotiation.

One of the objectives of assessment feedback is to urge students to manifest their identity in their writing (Hyland, 2002). Hyland seeks to explore in detail how assessment feedback is of central importance to students' identity. According to Hyland (2002, p. 65),

Identity represents writer's affiliation to different cultures, communities and 'their responses to the power relations inscribed in them. Modern notions of identity see it as a plural concept, socially defined and negotiated through the choices writers make in their discourses.

What can be inferred from Hyland's (2002) above quote is that the conventions of academic writing appear ambiguous and confusing. Study conducted by Lea & Street (1998) also underlines the same that identity related issues arise due to the gap between faculty expectations and students understanding. As Lillis and Turner (2001, p. 58) argue, "students may be aware of what they are expected to write within the configuration of these rules, they struggle to find what these rules are".

Ivanic (1998) makes an important point about the debate around feedback and identity. Ivanic (1998, p. 9) argues that due to the tacit conventions of academic discourse, most students in find their identities "suppressed and alienated; their identities are threatened either by attempting to accommodate the established values or more radically by questioning them". Ivanic (1998, cited in Parkin, 2009, p. 31) reveals that "students' writing is the product of their developing sense of what it means to be a member of a specific academic community, of who they are and how they want to appear to be". What Ivanic means is that a tension may crop up when students' self-expression of identity runs counter to the viewpoints of academics or requirements of academic discourse. In brief, such demands of assessment discourse may negatively impact upon learners' voices and identities.

There is a growing body of research which has identified that assessment feedback which is difficult to understand can bring about "a loss of self-esteem", and, thus, students "identity as a capable learner becomes threatened" (Sutton and Gill, 2010, p. 9). This can be even more problematic for those students who may fail to perform well in their assignments and may not be sure what and where went wrong. Such type of students, according to Sutton and Gill (2010, p. 9) feel "doubly disempowered" and alienated. In the light of this discussion, it can be argued that the potential of feedback to impact upon students' academic and social well-being is an important area which needs to be explored further. In other words, this discussion underlines the need to understand how the interplay of self-esteem and identity may have an impact upon international students' experiences of feedback.

3.10 Gaps found in the literature

The studies reviewed in this chapter suggest that feedback is a complex process in which issues of discourse, power and emotion can impact on how messages are interpreted. Feedback is emotional process because student “makes an emotional investment in an assignment and expects some “return” on that investment” in the form of feedback or grade (Higgins *et al.*, 2001, p. 272). Grades can have confounding impact on students’ engagement with feedback because of individual difference and fixed notions of learning. The papers imply that when feedback causes confusion and complexity, it may be ignored and may become a missed opportunity for both tutors and students. In order to realize the potential value of feedback, teachers need to demystify the discourse of feedback; and, moreover, they need to employ feed-forward approach, to make it more beneficial exercise. The feed-forward approach lays greater emphasis on giving feedback in such a way which promotes dialogue between students and tutors (Nicol and Macfarlain-Dick, 2006). The dialogic approach allows students to actively engage with tutor feedback and, hence, chances of confusion and misperception may be reduced. This feed-forward approach further allows students to take charge of their own learning which, indeed, is one of the important roles of feedback.

The studies reviewed in this chapter also reflect that future research needs to focus on feedback as a social process influenced by elements of discourse, power, identity and emotion. What is missing in the above mentioned studies is the question of how international students at postgraduate level actually engage with feedback; and how feedback shapes their learning processes, writing practices and their self-evaluation as learners in a UK university. The papers by Carless (2006), Pokorny and Pickford (2010) and Higgins *et al.*, (2002) reflect the need for future work to be undertaken in this area, especially by employing qualitative research methods. That is, future work needs to focus on how students engage with feedback in naturalistic settings. These papers also reflect that future studies can adopt socio-cultural theoretical frameworks to explore the role of feedback in more depth. In sum, it is in the light of gaps identified within the literature here, this study is anchored conceptually within the framework of academic literacies (Lea and Street, 1998, 2000) approach. In addition, this study, by employing qualitative research methods, aims to investigate the perspective of international students in terms of their perceptions and understandings of feedback.

3.11 Conclusion

With the rise of culturally, socially and linguistically diverse students at post-graduation level in HE institutions, the challenges they face in perceiving tutor written feedback have also become more complex. Although the role of feedback in facilitating student learning has received substantial attention, most of the research on feedback has concentrated on experiences of undergraduate home students or mixture of home and international students (Hounsell et al., 2008; Mutch, 2003; Race, 2010; Rae and Cochrane, 2008). In other words, there is paucity of research into the feedback perceptions of international students at postgraduate level. In the context of recent rising numbers of international students at master's level in UK universities, some contemporary studies (Gibbs and Simpson, 2003; Nicol and Macfarlain-Dick, 2006; Pokorny and Pickford, 2010) call for the need to examine how different linguistic, educational and cultural backgrounds of international students may present them with challenges while coming to terms with new assessment expectations, writing requirements and academic culture of universities.

In order to make a contribution to the existing debate on assessment feedback, this doctoral level study will analyse how international postgraduate students perceive feedback in new academic environment. That is, by looking at the student perspective, the study will offer deep insights into the reasons why international students show dissatisfaction with feedback, what problems they encounter while making meaning of the feedback discourse situated in new educational and socio-cultural environment. In order to better understand assessment feedback as a useful communication process, this research will address how the interplay of issues such as discourse, identity, power, control and social relationships may mediate students' perceptions of feedback.

Chapter 4: Research methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with the methodological principles and values underpinning this research and it also explains the decisions why a qualitative research paradigm has been adopted to achieve the objectives of this study. This chapter is divided into seven sections. The first section sets out the background of the study and explains the rationale why this research is being undertaken. The second section discusses the qualitative research methodology and explains the theoretical and pragmatic reasons why a qualitative research paradigm is adopted to answer the research questions. The third section deals with the research design and it also presents the setting of this study. The fourth section explains the reasons why questionnaires and semi-structured interviews are employed to generate data. This section also contains the rationale behind conducting CD analysis of tutor comments given on students' assignments. The seventh section gives an account of the data analysis procedures adopted and the final section discusses the ethical issues and their significance for this research.

4.2 Research Questions

The literature review chapter indicates that the research question 'What are international postgraduate students' perceptions of assessment feedback?' is an important question which needs further investigation. Key literature on feedback concentrates on experiences of undergraduate home students (Hounsell et al., 2008; Mutch, 2003; Race, 2010; Rae and Cochrane, 2008) or mixture of home and international students (Pokorny and Pickford, 2010; Leki, 1995; Canagrajah, 2001; Ferris, 2003; Young, 2006). However, there is a paucity of research which has specifically focused on the aspect of how the feedback perceptions of L2 international students at masters' level are influenced by particular socio-cultural context of a UK university; and, moreover, how these perceptions are shaped by features of power, control, self-esteem and identity. Thus, the question of how international students with their diverse linguistic, socio-cultural and educational backgrounds make meaning of assessment discourse and use it for their learning in the UK HE context is important one. Closely related to this question is the issue of how international postgraduate students' perceptions towards understanding the

rules of assessment discourse may impact upon their self-confidence, identity and mutual relationship of trust with tutors. In short, the review of literature in chapter 2 indicates that there is potential for further research to analyse what meanings L2 international postgraduate students attach to assessment feedback; and what role they feel feedback plays in their learning. Therefore, the research questions this study seeks to answer are:

- What are L2 international PG students' perceptions of assessment feedback and its impact upon their learning in a UK university?
- What are L2 international students' perceptions of both helpful and unhelpful feedback?
- What problems do L2 international students face while interpreting the language of summative assessment?
- How does tutor written feedback impact upon the L2 international students' confidence, motivation, self-esteem, identity and the student-teacher relationship?

4.3 Qualitative research paradigm

As the research questions listed above reflect, the aim of the study is to examine the feedback perceptions of international students as a socially situated phenomenon which is influenced by elements of discourse, power, self-esteem and identity. In order to achieve these objectives, qualitative research methodology has been adopted. There are both theoretical and pragmatic reasons why qualitative research paradigm is adopted in this study. Since the study investigates the L2 international student perspective, researchers like Lincoln & Guba (1985), Silverman (2004) and Lee & Lings (2008) suggest that the qualitative research paradigm is the most useful method that can allow researchers to interpret and understand the meanings and perceptions of people in social situations. Before justifying the pragmatic decision to choose qualitative research as a preferred methodology, it is important to discuss the theoretical rationale.

4.3.1 Theoretical rationale

Theoretically, the present study is based within interpretive research paradigm. Paradigms, according to Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p.105) "are set of beliefs which

have particular epistemological and ontological values". Patton (2002, p. 203) describes paradigm as "world view, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world", which "tells the researcher what is important, legitimate, and reasonable". Thus, paradigm is a "framework of beliefs, values and methods within which research takes place". The concept of paradigm is explained by Bassey (1990, p. 13) in its simplest terms: it is

a network of coherent ideas about the nature of the world and the functions of researchers, which adhered to by a group of researchers conditions the patterns of their thinking and underpins their research actions.

Bassey implies that paradigm is a framework which not only lays foundation for the formation and generation of knowledge about the social world but also opens the avenues for researchers to understand it. The reason why this study is set within the interpretive paradigm is that it aims to examine the L2 international students' perspective of feedback as a lived experience. As Lee and Lings (2008) argue, the interpretive paradigm takes a sociological perspective and it helps to interpret the participants' perceptions, problems and needs in an effective manner. The ontological position adopted in this study is that it assumes that the international postgraduate students' perceptions of feedback may have been influenced by their lived experiences such as power differentials, self-esteem and identity. The qualitative interpretive research paradigm, thus, provides an overarching framework within which all decisions related to the research are taken. This framework provides coherence and consistency between various parts of the research processes.

The research methodology related literature (Robso and McCartan, 2016, Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, Ponterotto, 2005, Richards, 2009) identifies two main research paradigms, namely, "positivist/post-positivist" and "constructivist-interpretive" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 22). According to these researchers, these two paradigms differ regarding:

- the nature of knowledge or reality (ontology)
- how this reality can be investigated (epistemology), and
- the relationship between the participant and the researcher.

In order to better understand why qualitative interpretive paradigm is adopted in this study, it is important to discuss the differences between positivism and

interpretivism. According to positivist school of thought, an objective and value-free reality is “out there to be studied, captured, and understood” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 9).

There is a consensus within the proponents of interpretive paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Bassey, 1990) that people construct and perceive the reality in different ways. Bassey (1990, p. 42) states that “because of differences in perception, interpretation and in language it is not surprising that people have different views of what is real”. What Bassey implies is that since people see the world differently, so there can be difference of interpretations of reality. Bassey maintains that it is through their language that people convey their differences of meanings about what is real. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) hold that the purpose of interpretive research is not only to provide explanation and interpretation of people’s different perceptions but also to identify their shared meanings. Denzin and Lincoln maintain that these meanings are important to understand the perspective of participants. Bassey (1990, p. 16) also suggests that “interpretative researchers seek systematically, critically and self-critically to describe and interpret phenomena, which they take to be in the same world which they inhabit.” What Bassey means is that interpretive research is often qualitative as it involves fieldworks, observations and verbal conversations to generate data.

The present study is located with interpretive paradigm because it is deemed the most appropriate choice to achieve the research aims. According to Mason (2002), the interpretivist researchers seek to understand how people perceive and interpret their issues within their contextual constraints. The study is interpretive because it seeks to investigate L2 international students’ perceptions of feedback within the socio-cultural constraints of a UK university. The title of this thesis recognizes the existence of multiple realities of international students by using the plural word, ‘perceptions’ instead of singular word. This underscores the existence of subjective and multiple experiences of students towards feedback.

The above discussion on interpretive research paradigm reveals that the data collected through this paradigm may not well be suitable for statistical or quantitative analysis. The research dealing with statistical analysis is often categorized as positivist (Eisner, 1993). It is important to mention a brief comparison between the

characteristics of qualitative and quantitative research as it will help justify the choice of qualitative methodology for this study. The quantitative research assumes that the social reality is objectively given which can be measured and described quantitatively (Walsham, 2006). Like Walshman, Bassey (1990, p. 12) also holds that the quantitative researchers often describe, interpret and explain the social phenomenon objectively without making “evaluative judgments”. In contrast, interpretive researchers “describe, interpret and explain events so that they or others can make evaluative judgments about them”. In short, the quantitative research mainly deals with statistical data in order to contribute to the existing knowledge or to prove a particular hypothesis.

The above comparison indicates that the selection of qualitative methodology for this study is not compelled due to the researchers’ own personal convictions or viewpoints. In this regard, Stenhouse (1975) holds that sometimes educational researchers adhere to their paradigms so strongly that they tend to overlook the value of other approaches. In brief, the choice of interpretive paradigm lends itself to the objectives of the study as it aims to better understand the L2 international students’ interpretations of feedback which may not be well analysed statistically. In other words, the positivist research paradigm will not satisfy the particular aims of this study as it is not concerned with proving or disproving particular hypotheses about assessment feedback such as ‘do students prefer grades to formative feedback.

4.3.2 Practical rationale

Although the rationale for choosing qualitative research methodology has its roots in the interpretive paradigm, there are some practical reasons behind this decision which merit consideration here. The discussion about practical reasons will demonstrate that the choice of qualitative approach has not been necessitated by the researchers’ own subjective opinion or preferences. Rather it has been driven by the focus of the research topic itself. As mentioned above, this study aims to offer insights into the understanding of the international students’ perspective of feedback as a socially situated practice in a UK university. Moreover, the study will also examine the socio-cultural context of the university within which the students’ perceptions are located. It will also take into account the issues of discourse, power,

self-esteem and identity and their role in shaping students' perceptions of feedback. Researching such contextual factors and their influence on students' perceptions tend to make feedback process a multifaceted phenomenon (Higgins *et al.*, 2001). Such complex issues, as McMillan and Schumacher (2006) suggest, can be best analyzed with the help of qualitative research approach. According to these researchers qualitative research "describes and analyses peoples' individual and collective social action, beliefs, thoughts, development, improvement of educational practice, contributions to policy, social actions and so on" (ibid, p. 316). McMillan and Schumacher's point of view lends plausibility to the decision of choosing qualitative research paradigm in this study since it requires rich data which is less concerned with statistics, rather more concerned with the information to delineate students' perceptions and uses of feedback.

It is important to understand the main tenets of qualitative approach and their appropriateness for the present study. Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p. 10) explain the purpose of qualitative research by remarking

qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relation between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasise the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress *how* social experience is created and given meaning.

Adopting the views of (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Eisner, 1991; Hatch, 2002; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Marshall & Rossman, 2006) Cresswell (2009, pp. 175-176) enumerates nine key tenets of qualitative research. These are presented in table 4.1. A detailed discussion of these characteristics is useful to better understand the legitimacy of qualitative research design for the present study.

Table 4.1: Characteristics of qualitative research (Cresswell, 2009, pp. 175-176)

Characteristic	Definition
Natural setting	Qualitative researchers tend to collect data in the field at the site where participants experience the issue or the problem under study
Researcher as key	Qualitative researchers collect data themselves

instrument	through examining documents, observing behaviour, or interviewing participants
Multiple sources of data	Qualitative researchers typically gather multiple forms of data, such as interviews, observations, and documents, rather than rely on a single data source
Inductive data analysis	Qualitative researchers build their own patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up, by organising the data into increasingly more abstract units of information
Participants' meaning	In the entire qualitative research process, the researcher keeps focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or the issue, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research or writers express in the literature
Emergent design	this means that the initial plan for research cannot be tightly prescribed, and all phases of the process may change or shift after the researcher enters the field and begins to collect data
Theoretical lens	Qualitative researchers often use lens to view their studies. Sometimes the study may be organised around identifying the social, political, or historical context of the problem under study.
Interpretive	Qualitative research is a form of interpretive inquiry in which researchers make an interpretation of what they see, hear and understand
Holistic account	Qualitative researchers try to develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study. This involves reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and

	generally
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1. Natural setting: This study takes place in a UK university and, thus, the L2 international students' perceptions of assessment feedback are investigated in its natural setting.
2. Researcher as key instrument: The main instrument for data generation is the researcher himself in the current study, rather than using experimental tools as data collection instruments.
3. Multiple sources of data: Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with international students and CDA analysis of tutor written commentary on students' work.
4. Inductive data analysis: The researcher built patterns and themes with the help of coding system. After the interviews' transcription, the researcher went through the transcriptions several times and assigned codes to different parts of the dataset. The general themes emerging from the data were represented by assigned codes, which subsequently helped discussion of the research findings in this study.
5. Participants meaning: This study portrays L2 international students' perceptions of feedback. Thus, it depicts their subjective interpretations of feedback and examines the feedback phenomenon through their perspective.
6. Emergent design: During the data generation stage, the focus of the study changed twice. Originally, the study sought to investigate international students' perceptions via semi-structured interviews. Later on, the design was changed to include CDA of tutor written feedback comments on students' assignments and theses. Initially, this study aimed to generate data from one school of a UK university. However, during the actual data collection stage, the design was expanded to include a range of schools.
7. Theoretical lens: This study is conceptualized within the AL (Lea and Street, 1998; 2000; Sutton and Gill, 2010) approach. AL theorizes the students' feedback literacy as a particular kind of literacy which is deeply rooted in the social, cultural and educational contexts of a particular institution. This theoretical lens is vital for this research as L2 international students while interpreting the language of feedback or trying to decode new rhetorical styles

operate within a different cultural, social and educational system. AL further theorizes that assessment discourse can be problematic for students because of the “gaps between faculty expectations and student interpretations” and because of institutional power relationship within which tutor comments are located (Lea and Street, 1998, p. 3).

8. Interpretive: In the present study, the researcher analyzed the data based on his understanding of the feedback phenomenon. With the help of CDA as data analysis tool, the researcher interpreted the emerging themes and depicted the international students’ perspective of feedback.
9. Holistic account: Giving and receiving feedback has been widely seen as a complex form of communication within the literature on assessment. Therefore, this study seeks to give a holistic account by shedding light on the complexities attached to feedback practice within the context of a UK university.

There is another practical reason why qualitative approach will be employed in this study. An in-depth analysis of feedback related literature indicates that one of the main causes behind students’ problems to engage with feedback is the gap between tutor expectations and students’ interpretations (Higgins et al, 2001; Carless, 2006; Lea and Street, 1998). Researchers like Gilbert (2001, p.35) suggest that qualitative research “often makes it easier to follow cause and effect, since one can track people through their lives or ask them to tell their experiences” about a particular issue. Another reason why qualitative approach will be appropriate for this study is that it will help better analyze educational, cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students and their impact upon their feedback perceptions. Arguably, qualitative inquiry has helped this study to depict the subjective experiences of L2 international students at MA level. As McMillan and Schumacher (2006, p. 315) suggest, a qualitative inquiry can be used to understand the “social phenomena from participants’ perspectives, which is achieved by analyzing the many contexts of participants”. In summary, the qualitative research methodology has been adopted to examine a range of social, cultural and educational factors that may have an impact on international students’ interpretations of feedback. That is, the choice of the interpretive paradigm allowed the researcher to generate rich data specific to the international students’ perspective of assessment feedback in a UK university.

4.4 Research Design

The research design typically revolves around the questions of how data is collected and what instruments are adopted to analyse the collected data. Denzin & Lincoln (2005, p.p., 3-4) argue that “qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study; persona; experiences; introspection; artefacts; cultural texts and productions; observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individual lives”. What Denzin and Lincoln suggest is that although there are a wide range of choices available to qualitative researchers to collect data, the intended choice of instruments needs to fulfil the aims of a research. To recap, the aims of this research are to gain an understanding of how postgraduate international students perceive assessment feedback and what problems they face while interpreting the language of feedback discourse. In order to collect rich data as a means to gain understanding of the international students’ perspective, the study will make the use of demographic questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and critical discourse analysis (CDA) of tutor written feedback given on students’ assignments.

The rationale behind employing these instruments as appropriate data collection tools is that this research design is not intended to generate data which will deal with facts and figures such as whether international students use feedback for their learning or not. Rather, it is aimed to offer deep insights into the question of how the interplay of identity, self-esteem and power relations of teaching and learning may shape students’ perceptions of feedback. In short, the primary objective for choosing this particular research design is that it will help the researcher to contribute to feedback related literature towards understanding the international students’ perspective of feedback as a socially situated phenomenon in a better way. At the same time, this research design will also help collect insightful data to delineate the international students’ perspective of feedback which may have resonance with other researchers identified in the literature review chapter.

4.4.1 Research setting

The qualitative researchers “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). The natural setting where this study will take place is

a UK university. The university has several schools such as business, education, art and architecture, humanities, social sciences, applied sciences and engineering. Apart from home and EU students, the university hosts a large number of international students from almost every region of the world. Although the university provides quality education, it is keen to bring more educational improvements specifically in the areas of assessment feedback. In the context of this university, this research will be valuable to understand the international postgraduate perspective of assessment feedback. The first reason for choosing this university is practical one as it is the university where I studied and this provided me the familiarity with the context and ease of access to the required data. As I spent considerable time in the university so I became familiar with many international students taking up master's level courses. This helped me gain an easy access to the required data to carry out the research. In terms of choosing the research site, Burgess (1984) holds that in order to carry out the research successfully, researchers should be aware of key factors such as sampling, the willingness of participants to cooperate and the convenient access to the site.

4.4.2 Sampling strategy

In qualitative research, several sampling techniques are used to select a sample or a subset of a population because it is not possible for researchers to study the entire target population (Punch, 2005). Mason (2002, p. 120) defines sampling as “principles and procedures used to identify, choose, and gain access to relevant data sources from which you will generate data using your chosen methods”. In the context of this study, the purposeful sampling has been chosen as a preferred technique. Purposeful sampling is a non-random method of sampling where the researcher selects “information-rich” cases for study in depth (Patton, 2002). What Patton implies is that the purposeful sampling strategy helps researchers select the sample that best meets the purpose of the study, and that provides rich information to answer the research questions.

There are both theoretical and practical reasons why this type of sampling strategy was adopted in this study. As regards the theoretical reasons,

the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can

learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (Patton, 1990, p. 169).

The central issue in this study is the international postgraduate students’ lived experiences of assessment feedback. That is, the study is aimed to learn about the international students’ perspective by focusing on their perceptions and attitudes towards understanding the discourse of assessment feedback. Thus, the study carefully selected a sample of international students which could depict their different perspectives of feedback. That is, instead of collecting information from all postgraduate international students of the university, the study included only those students who were in the second or final semesters of their programs and students from a variety of geographical backgrounds. This decision might have some important implications for data collection and the trustworthiness of its findings. For instance, as compared to MA students in their first semester, the final term students could have rich experiences of feedback such as how they received feedback and engaged with it. Their responses, arguably, were seen as instances that helped produce the most valuable data to answer the research questions. As Creswell (2007, p. 75) argues, an important aspect of purposeful sampling is that it helps researchers “to select cases that show different perspectives on the problem, process or event”.

The decision to choose purposeful sampling was driven by the following practical aims of this study. First, the primary aim was to choose those international students whose English was second language (L2). It is important to briefly discuss the rationale behind this decision here. Although European Union (EU) students are also L2 learners, they were excluded from the sample due to some socio-cultural reasons. The Education (Fees and Awards) England (2007) defines that international and home/EU students are differentiated because of their fees and visa status. As compared to home/EU students, international students pay double fees and they have limited permission to stay in the UK. In the recent context of marketization of UK HE, the imperative of paying higher fees tends to develop customer-oriented attitudes among international students towards education (Pokorny and Pickford, 2010) and this could have important implications regarding their interpretations of feedback. As regards cultural differences, as compared to EU students, international Asian students of Confucius backgrounds tend to view tutor as supreme authority

(Wang, 2008). However, in Western cultures, the student-teacher relationship is of less hierarchical nature (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997). Arguably, this brief comparison shows why EU students, though L2 learners, were not included in the sample since their egalitarian learning attitudes could have influenced their perceptions of power relationship of feedback. The second practical aim to adopt purposeful sampling technique in this study was that the researcher intended to choose a number of international postgraduate students coming from a range of countries. Choosing participants of different nationalities may indicate that the sample needs to be varied and diverse.

The rationale for selecting a varied and culturally diverse group was that it would be helpful in understanding a variety of feedback problems faced by international students coming from different academic and socio-cultural backgrounds. Dornyei (2007, p. 126) explains that the main goal of purposeful sampling is to “find individuals who can provide rich and varied insights into the phenomenon under investigation so as to maximize what we can learn”. In brief, this diverse sample not only represented the regions of the world from where a large number of international students come to study in this university but it also delineated the differing feedback perceptions of students as an international community. It can be argued that if the research had resorted to non-probability technique of sampling, it might have missed to recruit students from a range of countries studying in different departments at masters’ level.

Third, there is another reason why purposeful sampling was employed in this study. The objectives of this study require the researcher to carefully select a number of international students belonging to different schools of the UK University. The decision to select international students from a range of schools has been moved by the debate within feedback related literature. The key studies examined in the literature review chapter reflect that students’ learning in different schools engage them into different ways of acquiring knowledge, values and beliefs (Hyland and Hyland, 2000). Lea and Street (1998) argue that students acquire knowledge through specialist concepts, theories, rules and conventions of academic discourse specific to their disciplines. Conducting the research in different schools fits into the objectives of the study since it seeks to offer an in-depth insight into how discipline specific knowledge is created and assessed. Hyland (2000) contends that the

academic writing tasks students have to undertake at university are specific to discipline and therefore they may impact upon tutors' approach towards delivering feedback. Hyland (*ibid*) maintains that "in humanities and social sciences, for example, analysing and synthesising multiple sources is important, while in science and technology, activity-based skills such as describing procedures, defining objects, and planning solutions are required" (2000, p. 11). In short, analysing feedback as a socially situated practice shaped by wider departmental and institutional constraints allowed this particular research design to offer deep insights into what constitutes effective feedback at departmental and institutional level.

4.4.3 Sample size

The question of how many people make up the size of sample has been widely discussed by researchers like Cresswell (2007), Mason (2002) and Miles and Huberman (1994). Mason (2002, p. 134), for example, argues that "whether or not the sample is big enough to be statistically representative of a total population is not" the major concern of a qualitative researcher. For a qualitative research, Adler and Adler (2012, p. 10) suggest that "our best bet is to advise in the broad range of between a dozen and 60, with 30 being the mean". The point of views of Alder and Alder (*ibid*) and Mason (2002) are important for this study. Instead of representing a cross-section of all international students of master's level in a UK university, the study concentrated only on L2, non-EU international students from a range of departments of different nationalities. The inclusion of such information-rich instances helped illuminate the research questions. That is, this research was less concerned about the number of participants as quantity; rather it concentrated on variety of selected students who may display wide range of experiences of feedback. In this regard, Mason (2002, p. 134) argues that the main concern of qualitative researchers should revolve around the question of whether their "sample provides access to enough data, and with the right focus", to enable them to address their research questions. In fact, Mason indicates that the strength of a purposeful sample lies in its focused approach as it allows the researcher to select the participants whose experiences can serve as a valuable means to understand the phenomenon in question. Thus, aligning with qualitative interpretive paradigm, this sample offered in-depth interpretations of the meaning that L2 international students attributed to the phenomenon of assessment feedback. As Burgess *et al.*, (2006) suggest that as

compared to sampling based on quantitative inquiry, qualitative research methods do not deal with certainties and undisputed facts. Therefore, the present study did not aim to deal with absolutes; rather it depicted fluid social constructions of the feedback phenomenon in line with interpretive paradigm.

The above discussion indicates that although the issue regarding the size of sample in qualitative research is difficult to decide, this study focused on a sample of 26 (see table 3 for full profile and demographic information of the participants) L2 international students. Concurring with Alder and Alder (2012) and Mason (2002), I argue that the inclusion of 26 is generally large enough to assure that the international students' perceptions central to the research questions are delineated. However, researchers (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006) suggest that if the sample is too large, data becomes repetitive. In order to overcome the issues of repetition, this study followed the concept of saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967 cited in Mason, 2010) in terms of its sample size. Saturation means that if new data does not yield further results or casts no light on issues under investigation, it becomes superfluous (Mason, 2010). Since Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the process of sampling in qualitative research as emergent, so the question about the sample size was decided in the light of notions of sufficiency and appropriateness. For example, the analysis of the corpus of data was carried out contemporaneously with the data generation phase. This phase of the research process helped address the issue of saturation and sufficiency. When the same information was seen to emerge from the latest interview, it was thought then that sufficient and adequate data had been generated.

4.5 My positionality as a researcher

In the context of above discussion, it is important to understand my positionality as a researcher within this study. In qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (2003) describe the role of researchers as instrument of data collection. "This means that data are mediated through this human instrument, rather than through inventories, questionnaires, or machines" Simon (2011, p.3) In this regard, Hockey (1993) suggests that a researcher should question her position (insider vs. outsider) in terms of having any perceived advantage or disadvantage to the study as a whole. As far as my positionality within this research is concerned, I view myself both insider

and outsider and this may have important implications for the collection of data, its analysis and trustworthiness.

First, I position myself as an insider within this study. This is because as a PhD researcher within a UK University, I am familiar with the context of L2 international postgraduate students. My position as an insider could be advantageous for this study in several ways. Merton (1972) defines that insider researchers, due to their past and existing association with a community, have close understanding of both the individuals and context studied. Merton's observation is important for this study as being the student of the same university where this research took place enabled the researcher to gain an easy access to the participants and facilitated the process of data collection. Miles & Huberman (1994) observe that one of the main objectives of an insider researcher is to "provide rich narratives or descriptions" (cited in Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle, 2006, p. 268). Moreover, my insider position as an international student with English as L2 within the same university enabled me to build "enhanced rapport" (Hockey, 1993, p.119) with participants. That is, the participants saw the researcher as being L2 learner, empathetic to their experiences of receiving and interpreting feedback in the present study. Since the aims of this study are to learn about international students' feedback perceptions as a socially situated phenomenon, it might be important for the researcher to immerse himself in the participants' world. Seeing students' problems and issues through their eyes helped add an 'emic' dimension to the study (Spradley and McCurdy, 1988 and Atkinson, 1994).

However, there are certain disadvantages attached to an insider research which a researcher, according to Hockey (1993) should be aware of. In this regard, Hellawell (2006) contends that an outsider's research is more credible than that of insiders' because as an outsider perspective allows the study to be objective. That is, greater familiarity with the participants can lead to a loss of objectivity. Although I have explained above my insider role as being L2 student within the same university, it does not mean that I am completely familiar with the socio-cultural and educational backgrounds of the participants. This point of view is supported by Ryan (2005) as he argues that international students do not form a homogeneous group because of their differences of culture, language and race. In order to improve their assessment feedback experiences, Ryan suggests that the research needs to disregard the

notions of socio-cultural stereotypes attached to international students. In brief, this discussion signals that the researcher (Pakistani national) will have an outsider perspective within this study as well in terms of racial and socio-cultural differences. These differences might allow this study to keep distance between the lived experiences of the participants and that of the researcher's in terms of collecting and analysing data.

Although the inside-outsider debate has attracted long and lively debate in qualitative research, Hellowell (2006, p. 489) indicates that there are "subtly varying shades of 'insiderism' and 'outsiderism' which a researcher experiences during the research process. Hellowell argues that there could be certain variations within the researchers' roles as they sometimes start an insider and then become outsider and then vice versa. This may well be apparent in my role as a researcher. For example, in the start there could be a considerable element of insiderness. However, when conducted interviews with participants other than Pakistani nationals, there might have been certain elements of outsidership. For example, I might have appeared to be an insider to participants belonging to Pakistan or school of education but I could be an outsider to students of other nationalities and schools. My positionality within this study is supported by Hockey (1993) who suggests that effective qualitative researchers keep asking such probing questions and collect information from a variety of sources to offer deeper levels of understanding to the data. In short, my position as a qualitative researcher is closely aligned to the interpretive paradigm which seeks to describe and interpret international students' perspective of feedback to identify shared meanings. These meanings, as Denzin and Lincoln (1994) suggest, are fundamental in understanding the participants' perspective.

4.6 Research tools

In order to generate rich data regarding the international postgraduate students' experiences of assessment feedback, questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and critical discourse analysis of tutor feedback sheets have been used as research instruments in this study. The rationale of using questionnaires survey as an initial data collection instrument is that it enabled the researcher to identify potential participants for semi-structured interviews. Burgess et al. (2006) suggest that if the research aims to collect rich, comparable and systematic data from a large sample,

then surveying is an appropriate method. However, Opie (2004) observes that questionnaires can be employed to gather quantitative as well as qualitative data. By using questionnaire as an initial survey tool, this study does not claim that it will collect quantitative data regarding the students' perceptions. Rather the main objective of using questionnaires was to obtain an overview of the target population, identify their demographic backgrounds and invite them for their voluntary participation in this study.

4.6.1 Questionnaires

As mentioned above, initially, questionnaires were used as one of the research tools to elicit demographic information about international students' backgrounds such as age, gender, country of origin and first language. In order to collect background information, the close-ended questions were used. Such questionnaires gave information relating to students' program of study, gender and nationality and semester of study. In this connection, research indicates that questionnaires are not only used to collect information about participants' background, ethnicity, gender, age, and cultural backgrounds but their participation in a study (Kumar, 1996). Similarly, Bryman (2008) holds that questionnaires serve as a feasible means of selecting the case studies to be examined in depth at a later stage. Apart from close-ended questions aimed to collect demographic information, the questionnaires requested the prospective participants to leave their email contacts if they would like to participate and share their experiences of feedback in the in-depth interviews to be held at later stages.

On average 700-800 (source not cited because of anonymity of the university) international MA students enroll in different schools of this UK university every year. Initially, with the consent of the international office, questionnaires were sent via email to all international postgraduate students to obtain their voluntary willingness to participate in this study. However, students gave very disappointing response through email. This might be because students are not always very particular of reading their university emails. Then I approached them in the classrooms, library, student union office, requesting them to fill in the questionnaire.

Although the general population of L2 international students was thought to be relevant to the study, the target population for the purposes of this study included 26

students. As the table 4.2 shows, the participants were of different genders, varying ages and levels of studies and nationalities. Eleven participants were females and fifteen males. All the participants were selected from their second semester of studies and thesis writing stage. This was an important decision because such students were thought to have enough exposure to tutor feedback; and, therefore, they could offer rich information.

Table 4.2: The profile of the L2 international students

Serial No	Name	Nationality	Stage of Studies	School
1	Duy	Vietnam	Second	Business
2	Bharratti	India	Second	Business
3	Nishat	India	Thesis writing	Education
4	Aslam	Pakistan	Second	Humanities
5	Akram	Pakistan	Thesis writing	Humanities
6	Fen	China	Second	Education
7	Tian	China	Second	Education
8	Sasikarn	Thailand	Second	Education
9	Pattama	Thailand	Second	Humanities
10	Shah	Tajikistan	Thesis writing	Health sciences
11	Noor	Tajikistan	Second	Business
12	Ahmed	Libya	Second	Education
13	Nasira	Bahrain	Thesis writing	Business
14	Adil	Libya	Second	Education
15	Peter	Nigeria	Thesis writing	Health sciences
16	Bumni	Nigeria	Second	Business
17	Nasir	Kuwait	Second	Computing and engineering
18	Majeed	Qatar	Second	Computing and engineering
19	Viviane	Brazil	Second	Business
20	Khalid	Saudi Arab	Thesis writing	Education

21	Mansoor	Oman	Second	Humanities
22	Ali	Iraq	Second	Humanities
23	Shiny	China	Second	Education
24	Le	Vietnam	Thesis writing	Health sciences
25	Reo	Japan	Second	Business
26	Mira	UAE	Second	Education

As mentioned above, questionnaires were administered to 117 international students, with the purpose of selecting diverse participants for an in-depth investigation. Questionnaires (see appendix 1) sought information on students' age, stage of studies, nationality and school. Out of 117 students, only 37 showed their willingness to participate in the semi-structured interviews. Out of 37 students, 8 were dropped because they were in the first semester of studies. Such students were not of interest to the present study because they might not have had enough exposure to receiving tutor written feedback. Out of these 31 students, 26 were selected on the basis of their gender, nationality, school and stage of studies. Thus, 26 participants out of 31 were selected in terms of various characteristics and maximum variation. This strategy helped "cover some of the main dimensions of suspected heterogeneity in the population" of L2 international students (Hammersley 1992: 90), to which the findings can be transferred. The reason why 26 students were chosen from four different schools was to ascertain if their perceptions were distinctive and varied across these schools. The rationale why students from different countries were included was to learn if there were any significant differences in emerging themes across various nationalities. One can argue that the sample size in the present study is small and it cannot be representative of the entire L2 international students in a UK university. As indicated above (see section 4.3), this is an exploratory study based on qualitative interpretive paradigm. Therefore, the sample of 26 students is sufficient enough to offer in-depth insights about the international students' phenomenon of feedback. Such sample can allow broad conclusions to be drawn with regard to emerging themes about students' perceptions of feedback. It is recognized that future quantitative studies may then analyze themes presented in this study from a more functionalist perspective.

After obtaining their responses to take part in this study, purposeful sampling was applied to select students for the in-depth interviews as a major source of data collection. As mentioned in the sampling section (see section 4.4.2), the general population of interest to this study includes those international MA students who are from different schools of the university; who come from different regions of the world; and who are non-EU with English as their second language. Arguably, the use of demographic questionnaires survey enabled the researcher to recruit those international students who are diverse in respect of their gender, ethnicity and cultural background, reflecting the university's international MA student population as a whole. The rationale behind applying this particular sampling approach is that it might help the selection of cases which would generate findings with potentially wider resonance beyond a particular country or culture.

Research (Gray, 2004) indicates that one of the drawbacks of such types of questionnaires is that the response rates tend to be low. In order to maximize the participants' response rate, the researcher administered the questionnaires after the students had obtained their marked assignments from their respective schools. The rationale behind conducting the questionnaires survey after the announcement of results is that the participants may have fresh experiences of receiving assessment feedback and this might prompt them to share their perceptions with the researcher. There are a number of notable studies such as Turner (2004) and Mutch (2003) which attach great importance to collecting assessment feedback related data soon after students receive their results.

Another problem that might affect the high response rate to the questionnaires is the question of confidentiality and anonymity. In this regard Burton et al. (2008, p.51) caution that participants might feel reluctant to respond due to the issues of "anonymity and confidentiality and informed consent". To overcome this problem, all the participants were explained the nature of the research, issues of confidentiality and their voluntary participation. The researcher explained to the participants that their responses would be kept confidential and, moreover, under no circumstances their names or identities would be revealed at any stage of the research (see section 4.11 for detailed ethical issues).

4.6.2 Semi-structured interviews

During the second phase of data collection semi-structured interviews were conducted as the main research tool. The rationale behind conducting interviews was that they would help generate informative data concerning students' feedback perspective. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p. 2) hold:

Interview is based on the conversations of daily life and is a professional conversation; it is an inter-view, where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee. An interview is literally an *inter view*, an inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest.

Apart from Kvale and Brinkmann, Saunders *et al.* (2004, p.245) argue that, "the use of interviews can help you to gather valid and reliable data that are relevant to your research question(s) and objectives". Similarly Anderson & Arsenault (1998, p. 202) observe that interviews are "probably the most widely used method of data-collection; interviews can be conducted on all subjects". Since the objectives of this study are to analyze the students' views and understanding of tutor feedback, the use of interviews was considered compatible to the research aims. Thus, interviews offered opportunity to students to discuss issues of particular concern to them. What the above researchers imply is that interview offers flexible tool to collect data which can be used to answer the research questions. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p. 116) state:

Interviews are particularly well-suited for studying people's understanding of the meanings in their lived world, describing their experiences and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their own perspectives on their lived world

Interviews have three types: structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Robson (2002) makes distinctions between these three types of interviews.

- Structured interviews follow predetermined pattern, with fixed questions. These allow the interviewer to produce standardized responses (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).
- Although the semi-structured interviews also follow pre-planned pattern of questions, the order could be changed keeping in view the issues of necessity and appropriateness. Thus, these allow researchers to explore broad issues with relatively flexible approach

- Unstructured interviews are loosely constructed to explore general topic of concern.

In this study, the semi-structured interview technique was employed to collect required data regarding the student's experiences of feedback in a UK university. Robson (2002) defines semi-structured interviews as having predetermined questions in which the order can be modified based on the interviewer's perception of what seems the most appropriate. Like Robson, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p. 124) recognize the significance of semi-structured interviews as:

An interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena; it will have a sequence of themes to be covered, as well as some suggested questions. At the same time there is openness to changes of sequence and forms of questions in order to follow up the specific answers given and the stories told by the subjects.

The above quote implies that the most suitable qualitative interview is semi-structured as it can allow flexibility to participants to raise their voices. This quote also suggests that although the semi-structured interview contains open-ended questions that are focused on particular themes, they allow the researcher to ask new questions about the unexpected phenomena. Kvale and Brinkmann's viewpoint is important for this study as the use of this type of interview technique helped generate interesting insights regarding several issues such as the student-teacher relationship, issues of voice, self-esteem, motivation and identity. Anderson and Arsenault (1998, p.202) conclude that one of the advantages of using semi-structured interview is that "participants can easily be engaged in an interview and in-depth probing is possible regarding their perspective". The use of semi-structured interviews are appropriate to the researcher's ontological stance that the "participants' knowledge, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions are meaningful properties of the social reality" which this study aims to explore (Mason, 2002, p. 63).

The questions (see appendix 2) in interview sessions emphasized on students' experiences of receiving and interpreting assessment feedback, their major concerns or difficulties they faced while comprehending tutor comments and their approaches towards incorporating feedback into their learning. Moreover, researchers' own

experience of facing some of these problems as an international student in the same context and discussions with peers also facilitated in terms of constructing these questions/prompts. For example, the anxiety faced by learners in comprehending assessment discourse, adjusting to a new academic environment and understanding the conventions of academic writing such as voice and referencing were some of the common issues faced by international students.

The interviews were conducted between November 2014 and November 2015. Prior the interviews, participants were sent an outline of the topics to be covered. They were also informed about ethical matters, seeking their approval to record interviews. Before the start of each interview, the purpose of the study was clarified to the participants. In addition, each interview started with some general discussion, to create rapport and clarify ethical issues. Initially, most of the participants thought that these interviews were meant to gauge their experiences of good and bad feedback they received on their assignments and theses. Although this was one of the significant areas of their perceptions of feedback, these interviews aimed to gather information about their overall experiences of feedback. Thus, the questions posed revolved around students' thoughts and understanding of receiving written feedback; their thoughts on interpreting encouraging or discouraging feedback; and their perceptions of motivating feedback. Moreover, these questions raised issues about what students had learnt from feedback, and what academic challenges they experienced while understanding the discourse of feedback. As the interviews were conducted a few weeks after the final assessment of the coursework, several participants were found to be happy to talk about their experiences. During the middle of each interview, students were encouraged to discuss their experiences in the light of tutor feedback sheets they had brought with them.

The method of conducting interviews in the context of texts was enlightened by the AL approach (Lea and Street, 1998, 2000; Ivanic, 1998; Lillis, 2001). Thus, tutor written feedback sheets offered a common reference point around which the interview talk revolved. As Ivanic (1998, p. 115) suggests, making direct references to feedback sheets (by both the interviewer and interviewee) help generate rich data:

However interesting and complex the writing process may appear in theory, the observations of writers themselves are even more interesting and reveal even greater complexity.

Thus, international students drew largely on tutor written comments to support and illustrate their experiences. The participants were asked to read aloud their comments and they were quite pleased to do this. For example, when Tian (a participant) read aloud tutor comments, she felt perplexed by finding the contradiction between her tutor comments and the grade awarded.

I got very positive comments, very lovely and I felt good. But I got shocked to see my mark which was 57%. As you could see here (student read aloud) "It is clear that you have read and engaged with key literature and debates around corpus linguistics and you also reflect on the ways in which this could be applied in your context. Your ideas are expressed clearly. It is apparent that you have fully understood some of the concepts that you discuss and your writing meets the requirement for the work at this level". Yet I got 57%.

It can be argued that Tian's direct reading of tutor feedback provided a common reference point to both the interviewer and interviewee. By reading aloud, Tian provided an in-depth insight into her perceptions of tutor feedback. Thus, talking around texts enabled the researcher to provide evidence and genuine data regarding students' experiences. This method is supported by Lillis (2001, p. 6), who refers to "talk around texts" as an important data collection tool:

Participant-observer of their [the students'] experience of engaging in academic writing alongside the collection and analysis of numerous kinds of texts related to their writing (course guidance on essay writing, departmental feedback and advice sheets, tutors written comments)...the emphasis is on exploring literacy in real-world settings.

Thus, students' interviews, along with tutor feedback comments contributed to creating a context through which students' perceptions were explored. Throughout interviews, students were kept reminded that their interpretations in the light of feedback comments were important for the present study. Although some participants felt hesitation to read aloud literal words of criticism and recommendations, they were encouraged to do so to help me generate genuine data. This is reinforced by Mason (2002, p. 64) that effective interviews depend on "people's capacities to verbalize, interact, conceptualize and remember".

The interview sessions were held soon after participants had collected their marked assignments of second, third or final semesters of their study programs. That is, because the interviews with final semester students enabled the researcher to

capture several aspects of students' academic writing experiences such as their approach to assignments in a UK university and the role of tutor feedback in their academic development. Although the length of interview session with each participant varied, it generally took 45 to 60 minutes to complete. On average, the interview sessions with each participant at one time lasted for 40-45 minutes.

The researcher used audio recording to record interviews in this study. Seidman (1991) suggests that the audio recording of interviews is the most useful method in a qualitative research as it can allow the interviewer to concentrate on the process of listening, interpreting and modifying the interview questions. Seidman further argues that tape-recording together with transcribed texts is useful means to interpret the meaning of data. However, Oppenheim (2005) warns that the interviews should not be recorded without the permission of participants. In this regard, the researcher obtained the informed consent of participants in accordance with research ethics (see section 4.11).

4.7 Transcription

The data generated through semi-structured interviews was transcribed into written format so that thematic analysis could be undertaken. The transcription process involved a number of decisions and judgements which need to be explained here. It is important to explain these judgements because after transcription, it is the transcripts, not recordings, which are considered "solid empirical data" for the research (Kvale, 1996, p. 163). The corpus of interview data was transcribed manually by using my personal computer. Although, many researchers use online software tools to deal with transcripts, I did the transcription myself. I must confess here that I am very particular when it comes to transcription. Kvale (1988, p. 97) warns researchers to "beware of transcripts" as they are not transparent. There are dangers that while transcribing, the assistants might lose few things and that is why I preferred to transcribe manually. The transcription process lasted over a year from November 2014 to November 2015 as it was undertaken along with data collection phase.

Kvale (1996) warns that transcript is a change of medium from oral to written expression and it may raise issues of reliability and validity. Since I did the transcription alone, I undertook an intra-transcriber check by transcribing the same

parts two times. Although it was tedious strategy, it helped insert missing words and grammar. Self-transcription is believed to have several benefits (Braun and Clarke, 2006). One of the benefits of self-transcription was that it helped me to listen every detail several times and make meaning from the data. Lapdat and Lindsay (1999) suggest that transcription is more than mechanical act of representing sounds on paper. That is, transcription is considered an important aspect of data analysis. Keeping in view this observation, at this initial stage of data analysis, I kept memos as the ideas came to mind during transcription and these ideas informed and deepened my understanding of analysis later.

During transcription, several choices and decisions were made. One of them was to decide whether the interviews needed to be transcribed verbatim, or whether written into a more formal style excluding 'ers', 'umm', pauses and silences. Keeping in mind Kvale's (1996, p. 166) suggestion, I considered "what was useful" for purposes of present study. I decided that I was not undertaking a fine-grained linguistic analysis of interview texts, so verbatim description was inappropriate. For the purposes of this study, I wanted to address the broader "text structure" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 75) of L2 international students' interviews, therefore, pauses, repetitions and intonation were also considered inappropriate. The decision about punctuation needed some consideration, too as its use can modify the meaning of data. For example, according to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 88), "I hate it, you know. I do" versus "I hate it. You know I do" can alter the meaning. Keeping this in view, an effort was made to keep the punctuation to minimum so the meanings of data are not modified and distorted.

4.8 Data analysis

This section deals with the procedures employed by the present researcher to gain insights into the feedback perspective of L2 international students. In this study, semi-structured interviews yielded rich data, and CDA was used to analyze, interpret and explain it. Research indicates that qualitative data analysis involves a range of procedures to explain and interpret data. Cohen & Manion (2007, p. 461) argue that the analysis of qualitative research data involves "organizing, accounting for, and explaining the data; in short, making sense of data, in terms of patterns, themes, and categories." Cresswell (2007, p. 148) states that the analysis of qualitative data

requires researchers to prepare and organize data and then reduce “the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion”. What Cresswell suggests is that qualitative data analysis is not a straightforward process since it involves researchers going through the original data time and again to establish codes. By “condensing codes” Cresswell implies that the role of researchers is to recognize emerging patterns and themes of data and interpret these themes in line with the research aims.

In the light of above discussion, the researcher read the interview data several times to identify themes. Cresswell (2008) suggests that qualitative researchers analyze their data by going back and forth since “each time you read database, you develop a deeper understanding of the information supplied by the participants” (p. 245). Since this study followed the principle of saturation in terms of its sample size as mentioned in the research design (see section 4.4.3), it made data analysis as an integral part of the research. In other words, data analysis was not dealt with as a separate phase; rather the researcher undertook the analysis of data contemporaneously with data collection phase.

4.8.1 CDA analysis of the corpus of interviews

The literature on CDA has attracted considerable debate on the critical aspect of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003; Paltridge, 2006). Paltridge (2006, p.9) argues that CDA deals with a “view of language at the level of text and a view of language in use”. What Paltridge implies is that CDA is a textually oriented analysis. In addition, its main focus is the form and content of the discourse, which means the lexical and grammatical features of language. Paltridge (2006, p. 9) maintains that the CDA focuses on “how, through the use of language, people achieve certain communicative goals, perform certain communicative acts, participate in certain communicative events and present themselves to others’ and what ‘ideas and beliefs they communicate as they use language”. Fairclough (2003) argues that the analysis of discourse should entail both textual and socio-cultural aspects. Thus, CDA is “an approach to the analysis of language that looks at patterns of language across texts as well as the social and cultural contexts in which the texts occur” (Fairclough, 2006, p. 1). This means that CDA offers “some kind of explanation of why a text is as

it is and what it is aiming to do' but it also looks at 'the relationship between discourse and society and aims to describe, interpret and explain the relationship" (Rogers, 2004, p.2).

What can be extrapolated from the above discussion is that CDA can be used to analyse how language is used to construct versions of experiences. Moreover, it is used to examine how different people draw on linguistic and cultural means to build their accounts in specific ways to have specific effects. This study aims to examine how the accounts of L2 international students are created and what insights could be gained from these accounts. Within the CDA approach (Fairclough, 1995; 2003; Wodak, 1996) to discourse analysis, textual analysis represents the analysis of the language of a particular discursive event. However, Fairclough (2003) suggests that textual analysis could only be understood in combination of the investigation of the socio-cultural and discourse practice levels.

Threadgold, while giving interview to Kalmer (1997, p. 437-8), suggests that text analysis can be either fine-grained at semantic level, or conducted at a more thematic level, keeping in view the research aims. The data analysis in the present study is conducted at thematic level because this study does not aim to provide highly detailed linguistic analysis of interview texts. Rather this study aims to focus on general themes which emerged in the corpus of interviews in relation to the students' experiences of feedback as a whole. Thematic analysis is described to locate meaningful categories or themes in a body of data (Fulcher 2010, p. 5). Howitt and Cramer (2010, p. 211) argue that the role of the researcher is to identify a limited number of themes which could give adequate picture of the textual data. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) suggest that thematic analysis is used to identify, analyze and report patterns of themes. A theme consists of corresponding categories, representing similar meanings and it is generated through the use of inductive analytic process. In order to make meaning of the data and generate themes, a simplified version of Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model of CDA was used. According to Sutton and Gill (2010, p. 5), this model consists of:

- understanding the meaning of the international students' views about feedback within interview texts

- Exploring how the discursive practices that produce feedback both enable and constrain the ways in which it is communicated to, and consumed (interpreted) by students; and
- Socially situated analysis of feedback as a form of communication, largely shaped by wider social structures such as discourse, the student-teacher power differentials, self-esteem and identity

What can be gathered from the above discussion is that CDA can be used as a multidisciplinary method to identify themes, views and roles of a written or spoken text in a persuasive way (Fairclough, 1992). In this connection Fairclough (ibid, p.72) maintains that “there is no set procedure for doing discourse analysis”. Fairclough implies that the scope of CDA as a research tool is wide since it can help researchers to make meaning of the language in use in social situations. The data analysis in the present study included various detailed steps (see section 4.8.2) as suggested by the advocates of CDA. These steps involved the repeated review of the corpus of participants’ data for explicit “clusters of themes, statements, ideas, and ideologies” (Luke, 2000, p. 456). Thus, CDA helped analyse and interpret data in an effective way by constructing meaning of purposeful dialogues between the researcher and participants.

Although some researchers (Sutton and Gill, 2010) within the AL paradigm have made the use of CDA as a methodological tool to understand the students’ perceptions of feedback yet what is missing in their research is the international postgraduate students’ perspective. In brief, apart from adding knowledge to the feedback related literature, this study will make methodological contribution as well in terms of synthesizing CDA with AL approach to offer deep understanding of the international postgraduate students’ perceptions of feedback in the UK HE context.

4.8.2 The process of data analysis

Potter and Wetherell (1987) have proposed two stages of data analysis which are widely employed by researchers working within a CDA approach. The first stage focuses on “differences in either the content or form of accounts and on identification of features shared by accounts”. The second stage is focused on “formulating hypotheses about functions and effects of people’s talk and searching for linguistic evidence” (p. 168). Expanding on Potter and Wetherell’s (1987) model, Willott and

Griffin (1997) have put forth seven stages. Since the following stages are general enough to be applicable to any research using CDA, so they were applied to the present study.

1. Break the transcribed interviews into 'chunks': a chunk is a series of interactions ending with an interjection from the interviewer or a topic shift is introduced.
2. Code each chunk using one or more 'themes.'
3. Select all the chunks coded under a single theme.
4. Identify the different ways in which this theme is talked about.
5. Use these ways to develop theoretical accounts of recurrent discourse patterns (reference to existing literature, the researcher's understanding, etc.).
6. Select all the chunks coded under another theme.
7. If the patterns of discourse identified in 5 do not describe this new theme – repeat stages from 4 to 7.

In this study, I followed the seven phases of data analysis suggested by Willot and Griffin (1997) in the following manner. The rationale behind incorporating these seven phases is that they offered flexible and productive means of generating themes around international students' perceptions of feedback.

4.8.3 Creating chunks

The first stage of data analysis involved reading and re-reading the data, to create chunks. While breaking the transcribed data (Willot and Griffin (1997) into chunks, it provided me a chance to familiarize myself with the data. In order to create chunks, each transcribed interview was read several times in order to immerse myself in the data. This phase allowed me to develop a better understanding of each participant's narrative and to identify codes, sub-codes and themes. During this stage, an informal analysis of the data was carried out. Breaking down the interviews into smaller chunks allowed me to analyze the text in smaller segments and summarize what the participants were saying in a specific chunk. As Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) suggest that in qualitative research chunking is usually based on distinctive meaningful segments which contain an issue of interest to the researcher. As Table 4.3 shows, this was done by writing general notes and comments about initial thoughts and fascinating issues which arose out of the data in the margins.

4.8.4 Coding each chunk using one or more themes

The next step towards data analysis was creating codes for each chunk labelling them as themes. Boyatzis (1998, p. 63) refers to codes as “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon”. Gibbs (2007, p. 38) describes coding as a “way of indexing or categorizing the text in order to establish framework of thematic ideas that capture something of interest and importance in relation to research questions”. Thus, codes were ascribed to the chunks to make them manageable and meaningful in relation to students’ perceptions of feedback. After reviewing the chunks several times in an iterative way, codes were created. The following example shows how codes were attached to a smaller chunk of data.

Table 4.3 Data Extract

Data extract	Coded for
<p><u>Basically, I think every tutor gives different feedback. Usually the feedback I have got is positive. And sometimes tutors have got little quirks like font size etc. and one tutor particularly gave 65 and she said that your sentences were too long. But tutor should focus more on the material, references, structure than on sentences. I think long sentences are good for academic writing but she said that your sentences are too long and in the second term I put short sentences. It was very weird feedback because sentence structure is not something that should be focused. I felt strange because she cut down my marks due to sentences. For example, if she was going to cut my marks she could have said that your references were not good, your structure was not right or you didn't put relevant information. But instead she said that your sentences are way too long.</u></p>	<p>1. Varying nature of feedback 2. Gaps between students and teachers 3. Misconceptions about feedback 4. Feedback as a socially situated phenomenon 5. Effects on self-esteem</p>
<p>(Bharratti's interview)</p>	

By drawing on Denscombe's (2010) suggestion, constant comparative strategy was employed to generate and refine codes. As Denscombe (ibid, p. 116) holds that "comparing and contrasting new codes, categories and concepts as they emerge- constantly seeking to check out against existing versions". It can be argued that by employing this strategy, the researcher is highly unlikely to lose sight of the data or budge away from the main focus of the research. In order to highlight the similarities and differences in the interviews, the data and codes were read repeatedly. Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 10) regard the process of generating codes as "data reduction" technique. The data was reduced significantly in the present study by selecting things and leaving out others based on my analytical judgements with the data.

4.8.5 Select all the chunks coded under a single theme

In this stage, I selected all the coded chunks under themes. This stage required me to identify and sort out already coded chunks into a potential theme. As the following example shows, I analyzed coded chunks and combined them together to develop an overarching theme. Grouping related codes under a resultant theme gave broader picture of the data. As a result of this exercise, I had "a collection of candidate themes, and sub-themes, and all extracts of data that have been coded in relation to them" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 89).

Table 4.4 List of themes and sub-themes

❖	Perceptions of the functions of assessment feedback
○	As a learning tool
○	Justification of the grade awarded
○	Surface and deep approach towards learning
❖	Perceptions of helpful feedback
○	Improved self-esteem and confidence
○	Constructive aspects
❖	Perceptions of unhelpful feedback
○	Effect on self-esteem and identity
○	Assessment criteria and tacit conventions

- ❖ Varying and inconsistent feedback and its negative impact
 - ‘What do they exactly want from us’
- ❖ Cultural and linguistic differences and their effect on feedback perceptions
 - Criticality
 - ‘Where is your voice’
 - Identity
 - ‘Add more references’
 - The student-teacher relationship
 - Reluctance in seeking help
- ❖ Coping strategies
 - Working hard
 - Online sources

Ryan and Bernard (2003, p. 88) hold that there are two types of themes such as emergent and *a priori* themes. According to Stemler (2001), *a priori* coding approach deals with the categories which are established prior to the analysis of data. These *a priori* codes, Stemler argues, are based upon some theory which researchers intend to operationalize in a particular study. It is important to briefly mention here that the researcher used AL as a theoretical framework in this study which guided the analysis of its data. The AL approach theorizes students’ academic literacy as situated and contextualized social practice which stresses on novice learners to acquire deeper understandings of academic discourse and disciplinary knowledge through the medium of feedback (Lea and Street, 2000). Lea and Street imply that the international students’ learning to read and write in a university is a complex process since it requires them to come to terms with new social, cultural and institutional demands. Moreover, the AL approach views that understanding the language of assessment discourse can be problematic for most students because of the “gaps between faculty expectations and student interpretations” and because of institutional power relationship within which feedback is located (Lea and Street, 1998, p. 3). In short, the AL framework informed the researcher to investigate *a priori* codes from the data such as (i) the role of assessment feedback for international students’ academic development (ii) assessment feedback and its impact upon

students' self-esteem and identity (iii) linguistic and cultural differences and their impact on international students' interpretations of the discourse of feedback.

Seidman (1991) warns researchers of the danger that their own experiences might influence them to force the data into categories or themes (*a priori* themes) they may have already in mind instead of allowing them develop from the data. Since the aims of this research are to analyze the international students' perceptions and understanding of assessment discourse within a particular institutional context, so care was taken to allow themes to emerge that reflected the student voice.

4.8.6 Identify the different ways in which this theme is talked about

This section deals with the different ways to identify themes. One of the ways was the analysis of the broader "text structure" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 75). Within the CDA approach, an analysis of the formal features of language was undertaken. These features included vocabulary, grammar and structure of participants and interactions. Moreover, the experiential, relational, expressive and connective values of these features were explored. As Fairclough (2001, p. 92) suggests that "in order to interpret the features which are actually present in a text, it is generally necessary to take account of what other choices might have been made, i.e. of the systems of options in the discourse types which actual features come from". It must be acknowledged that the present researcher used the advice of Fairclough as possible directions, guiding the data analysis. Another strategy was to write a detailed analysis of each individual theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

As well as identifying the 'story' that each theme tells, it is important to consider how it fits into the broader overall 'story' that you are telling about your data, in relation to your research question or questions, to ensure there is not too much overlap between themes. So you need to consider the themes themselves, and each theme in relation to the others (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 93).

4.8.7 Use these ways to develop theoretical accounts of recurrent discourse patterns

According to Willott and Griffin (1997), this stage refers to generating "a set of fully worked-out themes" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 94). Following this instruction, I generated discursive patterns in the form of themes. In order for the thematic

account to develop, I referred to the existing literature. Braun and Clarke (2006, p.94) suggest that the analysis should be presented in “concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting” way. The analysis was supported with adequate evidence of the themes within the data. That is, sufficient data extracts were chosen to show the prevalence of a particular theme. Braun and Clarke (ibid, p. 94) advise choosing “particularly vivid examples, or extracts which capture the essence of the point” being demonstrated. It is important to point out that the entire data analysis in the present study goes beyond the description of the data. Rather, the chosen extracts were interspersed with analytic narrative, to depict the holistic picture of the L2 international students. The next two stages (stages 6-7) involved me in selecting another theme and repeating the same process of steps 1 to 4.

4.9 Analysis of students’ feedback sheets

The aims of the research are to find out how international students perceive the assessment feedback they receive on their assignments and how useful it is for them in terms of learning and improvement. Moreover, the research aims to address the questions of the tutor-student relationship, self-esteem and identity associated with feedback. In order to answer the research questions, a simplified model of Fairclough’s (1992) critical discourse analysis (CDA) was applied to the tutor feedback comments read aloud by students during the interview. Before discussing how the CDA was operationalized in this study, it is important to know what feedback sheets mean and how they were analyzed as a second source of data. Before the interview sessions, the participants were asked to bring with them their tutor feedback sheets. By feedback sheets it means that in a UK university, students’ assignments are handed back with a covering feedback sheet on which the students receive grades and written commentary. The written comments explain whether the student has done well or not, and how she could improve the grade. During interview sessions, the students were encouraged to interpret their tutors’ feedback and reflect on their experiences in terms of having any perceived value, benefit or problem to them. To encourage them to reflect on the discourse of feedback, students were asked to identify strengths, points to improve, areas with which they would need to ask for help, and ways in which the feedback might be useful in the future. The students’ interpretations of tutor’s written comments were tape recorded and

analyzed at later stages of data analysis by applying Fairclough's (1992) model of CDA.

The idea of analyzing feedback sheets arose from my understanding of the literature on assessment. The literature reviewed in chapter 3 indicates that the tutor comments which are authoritative and difficult to interpret can bring about loss of self-esteem and identity among students (Higgins *et al.*, 2001). Hyland (2002) contends that the power differentials between tutors and students are heavily characterized by the way feedback is given and interpreted. Arguably, the literature suggests that the assessment feedback practices can be a form of power and control operating within the wider socio-cultural contexts of a university. Fairclough (1992) locates power within dominant social and institutional groups which determine the rules of discourse (cited in Lillis, 2001). Similarly, Foucault (1980) argues that institutions and societies often exercise their control on individuals through the rules of discourse. CDA as a "methodological toolbox" (Sutton and Gill, 2010, p.4) has the potential to help this study analyze the language of feedback as interpreted by students. Drawing on Fairclough's (1992) framework of the CDA in its simple terms, this research focused on how the student-teacher relationship, identity and knowledge are reflected by students through their interpretations of feedback. As Sutton and Gill (2010) argue that the Fairclough's three dimensional model of CDA serves an effective means to:

1. Do the textual analysis of students' interviews texts to understand their interpretations of written feedback. This dimension includes "the study of the different processes, or types of verbs, involved in the interaction; study on the meanings of the social relations established between participants in the interaction; analysis of the mood (whether a sentence is a statement, question, or declaration) and modality (the degree of assertiveness in the exchange)". (Rogers *et al.*, 2005, p. 371)
2. Explore the discursive practices of feedback which involve examining the production, interpretation and reproduction of feedback by students. This dimension is concerned with how international students' differences of language, culture and past education experiences may enable or impede them in their interpretations, consumptions or reproductions of feedback

3. Understand feedback as a socially situated practice and its impact upon students' academic growth

Like Sutton and Gill and Rogers *et al*, Huckin (2002) argues that CDA can help researchers to demonstrate how discourse often serves the interests of the powerful. For example, the CDA was used to show how tutor contextual meanings are expressed through the discourse of feedback as language consists of a series of choices to express intended messages and ideas (Gonzales, 2008). Luke (1995-96, p.15) notes that every "text is a kind of institutional speech act, a social action with language with a particular shape and features, force, audience, and consequences". In short, the above discussion indicates that the use of discourse analysis of tutor written feedback helped produce insights into the ways teachers convey their messages to students and how these comments were interpreted by students.

The discourse analysis of students' marked assignments not only served as an effective tool to collect data but also was used to analyze/verify the trustworthiness of issues raised by the participants regarding assessment feedback. In other words, the use of CDA helped the researcher to analyze students' perceptions of feedback during the first half of interviews which might involve the issues of power and authority, identity and self-esteem. As Lillis (2001, p. 36) argues, "in the context of higher education, there is a need to explore the ways in which the existing institutional discursive practices are ideologically motivated, by exploring, for example the ways in which they serve to exclude and include individuals from particular social groups". Thus, the discourse analysis of students' interpretations of tutor comments is an interesting aspect to look into as it enabled the researcher to identify shared meanings of feedback and offer deep insights into the students' perspective. For the purposes of this research, the content analysis of students' interview texts may not be appropriate as the researcher is not interested to analyze how language simply constructs students' perspective; rather he is interested to examine how language reflects students' voices (Fairclough, 1992).

In the context of above discussion it is important to note that a few participants were reluctant to divulge their tutors' feedback sheets because of personal reasons or issues of confidentiality. To counteract this problem and observe the issues of confidentiality, the participants were clearly told before the interviews that they had

the full rights to cover the names of their tutors and modules mentioned on feedback sheets.

4.10 Trustworthiness of the research

The notion of trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the quality of research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). To evaluate the quality or trustworthiness of qualitative research, four principles - credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability – are used. On the other hand, the principles of validity, reliability and objectivity are generally employed by quantitative researchers. As Creswell and Miller (2000, pp. 125-126) state

Constructivists believe in pluralistic, interpretive, open-ended, and contextualised (e.g. sensitive to place and situation) perspectives towards reality. The validity procedures reflected in this thinking present criteria with labels distinct from quantitative approaches, such as trustworthiness (i.e. credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability).

The rationale for why I have given the detailed account of the issues of trustworthiness in this section is that this has helped me maintain openness and transparency for data collection and analysis purposes. The following sub-sections discuss the concept of trustworthiness in relation to design and procedures of the present research.

4.10.1 Credibility

Credibility generally helps researchers to determine the focus of the study, select the site, participants and data collection methods. As Graneheim and Lundman (2004, p. 109) suggest, credibility “refers to confidence in how well the data and the processes of analysis address the intended focus”. One way of determining the credibility of the study is the use of corroboration notion. Creswell and Miller (2000, p 126) refer to corroboration as looking “for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study”. Thus, instead of relying on a single source of evidence, corroboration helps provide “evidence collected through multiple methods...to locate major and minor themes” (ibid: 127). Corroboration in the present study was carried out at the level of data collection methods. For example, the data was generated from two different sources, semi-structured interviews and CDA analysis of students’ feedback sheets. The use of feedback

sheets were used to make comparisons with data generated through semi-structured interviews. Generating data from multiple sources (i.e. interviews and feedback sheets) helped lend credibility in the findings of this study. That is, the data was seen from two different angles and, therefore, helped me depict the broader picture of the L2 students' interpretations of feedback. As Crowe et al. (2011, p. 6) suggest that

The use of multiple sources of data (data triangulation) has been advocated as a way of increasing the internal validity of a study (i.e. the extent to which the method is appropriate to answer the research question). An underlying assumption is that data collected in different ways should lead to similar conclusions, and approaching the same issue from different angles can help develop a holistic picture of the phenomenon.

Another way to determine credibility is the notion of prolonged engagement in the field. Creswell and Miller (2000, p. 128) suggest that “the longer (the constructivists) stay in the field, the more the pluralistic perspective will be heard from participants and the better the understanding of the context of participant views” would be portrayed. In line with Creswell and Miller’s observation, I dedicated one year to collect data in a UK university. My prolonged stay in the field can be considered an appropriate step towards establishing the credibility for data collection purposes.

4.10.2 Transferability

The notion of transferability is applied to determine the relevance of the research findings to other contexts. Generalisability is another term, which is used to judge the relevance of research findings from one context to another context. However, Thomas (2010) warns that generalisability criteria should not be the concern of qualitative researchers. This is because, “as a general rule, qualitative researchers are reluctant to generalise from one case to another because the contexts of the cases differ” (Creswell, 2007, p. 74). Generalizability has two types – external and internal (Robson, 2000). External generalizability is utilized to transfer the results of a study to other settings; whereas internal generalizability refers to generalizing the findings within the situation of a particular study. The findings of the present study can be considered within the second category of generalizability. In the UK HE context, this study will offer in-depth insights into the feedback phenomenon of L2 international postgraduate students. It is important to note that the qualitative

researchers “can give suggestions about transferability, but it is the reader’s decision whether or not the findings are transferable to another context” (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004, p. 110).

4.10.3 Dependability

The notion of dependability refers to the overall research procedures which are used to generate and analyze the data. As Richards (2009, p. 159) holds, dependability “involves an interrogation of the context and the methods used to derive the data”. According to Creswell and Miller (2000, p. 128), dependability offers detailed account of the researcher process. In return, this helps readers make informed judgements about the significance and relevance of the findings of a study to their own contexts. Following this parameter of trustworthiness, I provided a thorough description of the research process in this study. I gave a detailed account of the context of L2 international postgraduate students in the previous chapters. Moreover, I have given a convincing rationale why AL approach was employed as a theoretical framework, to conceptualize the students’ feedback phenomenon. Particularly, this chapter provides both the theoretical and practical reasons why qualitative interpretive research paradigm was adopted in the present study. In order to enhance the dependability element, I discussed the qualitative research methods and their appropriateness for the data generation; and the previous section elaborates on the CDA analysis of interview feedback sheets data. The rationale why I have made clear the issues related to context, data generation and analysis is that this would allow the readers to better understand the research procedures and their appropriateness for this study.

4.10.4 Confirmability

The principle of confirmability plays an important role in enhancing the overall trustworthiness of qualitative research. As Richards (2009, p. 160) suggests, “confirmability in qualitative research depends on making the data available to the reader and this in turn depends on the transparency of representation”. Richards maintains that confirmability of a study can be ensured by giving “richer representations, with participants’ voices and perspectives emerging clearly”. In order to ensure confirmability in the present study, CDA analysis was used to allow the various perspectives of L2 students to emerge. The depiction of L2 international

students' voices is central to this study and it provides a unifying theme to feed and bleed all the arguments.

4.11 Ethical Issues

Access and acceptance, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality are the main principles attached to ethical considerations. This section discusses the processes of how ethical issues were addressed in the present study. First, in order to gain access to a UK university, the researcher wrote to its concerned authorities for their official permission. In this connection, I submitted an official form to the dean of relevant school, describing the nature of research and its significance. Before, the start of data generation stage, I was given official approval by the ethics committee of the department. Secondly, through informed consent, researchers seek to gain participants' formal agreement to participate in the study. In this study I obtained informed consent of the participants by providing them information about the purpose of the study. Patton (2002) attaches great significance to the element of informed consent in a study as it provides clear information to participants about the purposes for which data will be collected and used. In this connection, the participants were ensured that the purpose of research was not to scrutinize their feedback interpretations. Rather, this study aims to shed light on the international postgraduate students' experiences of tutor written feedback. They were clearly told that the main aim of the study was to find out how tutor assessment feedback helps students improve academically. In order to ensure consent, the participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study anytime, without giving any reasons. The participants were provided with the contact details of the researcher in case they wished to seek further details.

Thirdly, during the data collection phases of this study, the anonymity of the participants was ensured and all participants ensured strict confidentiality as per BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011). All the participants were ensured that the names used in the data analysis chapter would not be real names; moreover no cross references would be made to the courses they are studying or the schools they belong to. The students had full rights during interview sessions to cover the names of their tutors and modules mentioned on feedback sheets. In addition to this, the students were clearly told that it was voluntary to bring their

tutors' feedback sheets in the interviews. The participants were informed before and during interviews that the researcher did not want to collect their tutors' feedback sheets for his study; rather, their reflections on tutor comments would be tape recorded and then would be analysed at later stages of data analysis.

4.12 Conclusion

This chapter provides a thorough account of the processes involved in data generation and its analysis. This chapter indicates that qualitative interpretive research paradigm to depict L2 international students' experiences of feedback. By making the use of qualitative research methods (i.e. semi-structured interviews), this study obtained rich data regarding students' perceptions of tutor written feedback. In order to recruit potential participants, purposive sampling strategy was employed. To create the sample, questionnaires were utilized to gather demographic data. The data generated through semi-structured interviews was analysed with the help of CDA. This chapter shows that the CDA was applied to the corpus of interviews, to identify themes regarding the students' feedback perspective. This chapter also contains discussion on the notion of trustworthiness of qualitative research by explaining the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability and their relevance to this study. Lastly, this chapter explains the significance of ethical issues such as access and acceptance, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Chapter 5: L2 International Students' Perceptions of the General Role and Function of Feedback

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings regarding the perceptions of L2 international PG students about the general role and purpose of tutor written feedback. In order to engage them in an in-depth reflection, participants were asked general questions about the functions of feedback. The data analyzed in this chapter was gleaned by asking open-ended questions about the overall role of feedback. As the excerpts below indicate, the participants generally gave clear, short and succinct accounts. The participants acknowledged various functions of feedback, to help them sharpen their critical thinking and academic writing skills. Apart from this, their narratives indicate that they see the role of feedback in broader terms, as a social process which may not only help them improve their learning but also give them emotional and moral support.

Three sub-themes of great salience emerged from the main theme about the role and purpose of feedback. These three sub-themes include:

- Assessment feedback 'as a learning tool'
- A way to 'instill motivation and confidence as capable learners'
- A way to 'give them justification of why they scored a particular mark'

5.2 Assessment feedback as a 'learning tool'

Most participants of the study perceived assessment feedback as an effective tool to gain better understanding about their strengths and weaknesses as international PG learners. That is, most participants recognized the formative role of feedback that helped them make a difference in their academic progress. The following excerpt epitomizes the wider view of feedback held by most of the participants:

Well, feedback shows me, like it tells me that my tutor cares about me. I think that may be its' main role is to make us find what we do wrong and what we do right. It is a sort of special chance to get help like how we international students can improve, and do better in future. (Duy, Business)

Duy clearly expresses the constructive role of feedback in a succinct way. Notably, 'special chance' is a key phrase in Duy's narrative which indicates his serious attitude towards feedback. This means that he considers feedback a special opportunity to engage with his tutor for current as well as future learning. The expression 'tutor cares about you' needs to be unpicked here. Feedback as a sign of care indicates that Duy sees the tutor in a parental role. This interpretation can be linked to the fact that Duy is an international student and he is likely to experience feelings of loneliness. Caring feedback is perceived to give him an opportunity to develop personal contact with his tutor. In order to typify the general role of feedback for his international comrades, Duy shifts from personal 'I' to a plural pronoun 'we'. Unlike Duy, Pattama sees the role of feedback as a highly valued resource which facilitates learning at deeper level by improving the content as well as form of writing.

I think its main function is to inform us what teacher needs. I am a student with no background of critical writing and I want details the way I should write. Like, when we were given a task in last semester, she commented with examples what I have written and what should not have been written. Her feedback enlightened and solved 75-80% of my problems. It is for me one and only option that tells me what phrases and words I can use in my writing. (Pattama, Humanities)

In the above quotation, the function of feedback is portrayed as an opportunity (option) which can offer solution to Pattama's problems related to academic writing. Pattama makes the use of conditional sentence (what should not have been written) to assert her viewpoint about the general function of feedback. By 'phrases and words', Pattama means to say that feedback may function to help her improve the linguistic and syntactic aspects of her academic writing. Similarly, the role of feedback is constructed as an opportunity which might help stretch (enlightened) the respondent's subject knowledge. Significantly, this quotation highlights that most respondents, like Pattama, are generally aware of their shortcomings as learners. They tend to pin their hopes to the phenomenon of feedback to help them overcome their deficiencies. For example, Pattama portrays herself as a student coming from different culture where there was little or no exposure to the concept of critical writing. She considers her tutors knowledgeable who can guide her how to write critically. Thus, Pattama's discourse demonstrates that as being L2 international student she does not tend to adopt indifferent approach towards tutor written

feedback. Rather, she seems to be aware of the diagnostic role of feedback at deeper level which can help her improve both the subject knowledge and structural aspects of writing. The following extract provides further evidence for understanding the pivotal role of assessment feedback as perceived by international PG students.

Its main function is that you do what they want from you. You learn faster. Next I'm going to do an essay, and I am trying to be more to get on that way and to do things they want me to do. I view its role as something very, very important. It tells me where I did well, so I think feedback is very, very important in this university. (Shah, Health Sciences)

Unlike Pattama's and Duy's narratives, Shah's narrative seems easy to understand. According to the above mentioned response, the most significant function of written feedback is to help Shah see whether he is on the right track or not. This participant also emphasizes the developmental role of feedback which not only helps him in his current studies but also assists him make future progress.

In the above three excerpts, the interviewees use various lexical and grammatical means to express their perceptions about the developmental role of feedback. For example, Pattama's makes an assertion that tutor feedback 'solved 75-80%' her problems'. In Pattama's words, feedback is seen as an opportunity to learn better and faster by engaging with knowledgeable tutors. She seems to attribute her academic improvement to the help she received from her tutor. Moreover, Pattama's use of adjective 'amazing' signifies how these students view feedback as one of the powerful learning tools. Similarly, Shah makes the use of a series of adverbs (very) to specify the significance of feedback. Some participants recognized the significance and role of feedback in terms of offering them constructive criticism. On the whole, the four extracts presented below demonstrate that students attach great significance to receiving and reading critical feedback.

I work on the feedback and I take it as very important part of learning. I think the purpose of feedback is to point out good things and highlight the flaws. When it points out problems I find it positive. (Noor, Business)

The common emphasis which could be traced through Noor's narratives is that for her feedback seems to have formative, developmental and affective role. Another participant reported:

I find it a learning tool. Its role is to help me improve my skills and knowledge. But I think it is more than that. It is communication. It shows me what my teachers expect from. What I can say is that, through comments, it gives me chance to think on the quality of my work. (Khalid, Education).

It is clear from Khalid's narrative that he attaches great significance to the role of feedback as a medium of communication. Feedback is seen as "a process of providing some commentary on student work in which a teacher reacts to the ideas in print, assesses a student's strengths and weaknesses, and suggests directions for improvement" (Macdonald 1991, p. 3). There is a key phrase in Khalid's discourse 'it gives me chance to think on the quality of my work' which needs to be explained here. Thorpe (2000) suggests that the main role of feedback is to promote students' ability to reflect upon their own learning. Khalid's narrative epitomizes that most L2 international students in this study seem to be aware of the aspect of how feedback can facilitate the development of self-reflection. As compared to Khalid, Le seems to give holistic view about the role and purpose of feedback.

Don't you think Saqib that the purpose of feedback is dialogic? What I mean to say is that feedback should inform our learning. I have spent one year here and now I'm in the write-up of my thesis writing so I would say in general that feedback gives high quality information to students about their learning (Le, Health Sciences)

Le's comment represents that the participants of this study are aware of the dialogic role of feedback which could help them diagnose, extend and encourage their learning. As such, dialogic feedback is considered central to inform students to not only learn but also to become reflective and autonomous learners (Alexander, 2006). Le's narrative raises an important point that the main purpose of feedback is to prepare students to enter into a dialogic relationship with their tutors. The dialogic feedback can help Le compare his own performance with that of an ideal, and it can enable him to identify his own strengths and weaknesses. An important phrase in Le's discourse is 'high quality information' which needs to be interpreted here. According to Juway et al. (2004, p. 11), the feedback which delivers high quality information has three characteristics. Firstly, it focuses on the task, rather than the producer. Secondly, it is related to the learning outcomes and, thirdly, it is understandable. However, Sutton (2009) one of the advocates of AL approach argues that due to increase in student population in the context of UK HE, it may be

challenging to maintain high quality information through feedback. In short, this excerpt highlights that although the participants of this study perceive the purpose of feedback as high quality information. However, Juway et al. (2004) suggest that a significant proportion of feedback is not of a high standard because of the massification of the HE. In a similar vein, Reo views that the function of feedback is to offer in-depth information which can help him improve his assignments:

As far as the purpose of feedback is, I think that it should point out limitations, and point out where my assignment has gone wrong, but it just should not focus on wrongs. It should consider my good points and tell me where my work is good.

The above excerpts quoted in this section indicate that generally the most important function of feedback is to help participants to prepare their academic assignments. They tend to see the function of feedback to help them apply their skills from one module to another. Some participants emphasized its social role, whereas some perceive it as a means of delivering high quality information. By highlighting their strengths and weaknesses, feedback tends to enable these students to attain higher marks.

5.3 'A way to instill motivation and confidence as capable learners'

This section indicates that most participants view feedback role in relationship to learning as a motivating force which may engender elements of self-esteem and identity. As compared to the previous section, a significant number of students hold that the role of feedback is not merely restricted to fulfilling their educational needs; rather they perceive their tutor as someone who may address their social needs by giving encouraging and inspirational feedback. It can be noted in the following excerpts that 'motivation', 'encouragement' and 'inspiration' were some of the words commonly used by students while talking about the general role of feedback.

According to me, it should tell you what you are doing is important. I want that if my work is having problems, I should be told how to improve it. But I think feedback should tell you that you are not a random number. We make mistakes but our teachers should care about us. They can motivate us through this communication. (Vivane, Business)

In the above extract, the role of feedback has been seen as constructive and supportive, which can make Vivane feel encouraged and motivated to improve her

learning. Vivane's narrative indicates that tutor feedback works as a communication bridge between students and tutors. As a communicative practice, feedback can show her that her work is important and that tutors are aware of her position as an L2 international PG student. The expression like 'you are not a random number' indicates that Vivane sees her teachers' role as guardians who may fulfill her educational, social and emotional needs. This phrase seems to illustrate the point that tutors in a UK university must have an understanding about her position or needs as an international student. However, Young (2000) argues that it may not be realistic in the face of modularized programs and increasing mass of international students. When asked what she means by motivating feedback, Vivane remarked:

I mean I am international student. My English is not perfect. I have come to the UK to learn. I respect when my professor give comments. But when I do mistakes, my professor should motivate me. So I think its main role is to motivate you. (Vivane, Business)

For this participant, feedback seems to go beyond providing information on how to improve grades. She sees effective function of feedback as that which provides emotional support and which can facilitate integration into the academic community. Vivane's discourse confirms literature, which indicates that feedback may have multiple functions according to the specific learning environment in which it is produced (Mory 2004). Another student from Oman explicitly connects the function of written feedback with encouragement and sense self-esteem.

In my country, we don't receive feedback like here. Teachers give us marks there only. But here, I think feedback is important. In my opinion, the role of feedback here is to encourage us in our writing problems. I think, feedback should tell us yes we can do it. Teachers should know that we aren't from UK. English is not our mother language but they can give us message, I mean the message of confidence. (Mansoor, Humanities)

Mansoor emphasizes that the role of assessment feedback mainly lies in inculcating a spirit of positive self-esteem which can lead him to better academic achievements. By comparing the phenomenon of feedback with his home country, the interviewee presents feedback practice in a UK university as different and better learning opportunity. Through comparison, the interviewee links the role of feedback with self-esteem which can make him feel good about himself as capable learner. Another important idea this narrative suggests is the idea of the non-English speaking

student as the other. Mansoor makes the use of personal pronouns such as “us” and “we” to make the value of assessment feedback seem more important and general to the listener. This narrative wants to get across an important idea of the other. One likely interpretation of why Mansoor wants to be viewed as other or special is that international students spend massive amount of money on their education as compared to home or EU students (Pokorny and Pickford, 2010). Mansoor’s narrative tends to persuade the researcher that motivation, self-esteem and identity are the constituent features of assessment discourse which his tutors need to be concerned with. The data indicated that for some participants, the role of feedback motivated them to improve their performance. For example, Nasira views the role of feedback as motivating and encouraging:

Well, I think the feedback’s main role is to recognize that I’ve put a lot of effort. It should be considerate when pointing out negatives or where I had gone wrong. (Nasira, Business)

Nasira’s comment illustrates that in her view the main function of feedback is to provide balanced commentary on her work. That is, feedback is seen to instil “positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem” (Juway et al. 2004, p. 12). The utterance ‘it should be considerate’ indicates that feedback, probably, needs to validate Nasira’s work, thereby generating positive emotions, sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem. The analysis of data reveals that many participants of this study see the role of feedback as constructive. For example, Nishat, an Indian student seems to have a broader view of feedback function. Nishat employs a more neutral and detached approach than Nasira when talking about her perception of assessment feedback. As the following excerpt indicates, she talks about the function of feedback as ‘a way to instil motivation and confidence’ developed by tutors (they) amongst L2 international students (us).

It has strong relationship with academic writing skills. As it tells us where we are wrong and where right and we come to know our problems and personally. It lets us know if we have missed anything or if I have got any issues with the writing. So I think it is extremely important. They should give us constructive which can be a way to instill motivation and confidence as capable learners. (Nishat, Education)

Nishat’s discourse suggests that constructive feedback helps her understand whether she has done well or not; its aim is to help her learn and improve. It is

interesting to note that Nishat seeks to adopt a deep approach to learning. Deep approach to learning refers to the notion that students are positively responsive to comments which explain mistakes and concentrate on the depth of argument and critical analysis (Higgins et al. 2002, p. 59) The reason why she wants motivating feedback is that she is, to some extent, intrinsically motivated to learn. Nishat's discourse underscores the point that the main role of feedback is to help her gain qualifications and make her enjoy learning.

5.4 A way to 'give us justification of why we scored a particular mark'

Many participants in the sample such as Peter, Nasir, Akram and Shiny reported that assessment feedback served as an evaluative tool which not only facilitated their learning but also gave them reasoning behind getting a particular mark. As the following excerpt indicates:

Of course, its main function is to help students to focus on specific areas what teacher demands. I think that its basic role is to let the students know the reasons behind grades. I think this is important and I can believe this kind of feedback is important for learning. (Peter, Health Sciences)

Like Peter, Nasir views the dual role of feedback to offer him summative as well as formative help:

Its role, as far as I believe, is to help me sort of know which section of the assignment I've fallen down and what I can improve on. In this way, it can show me why I got 50%, why didn't I get 60% or so on. I feel that's what I'm here in this uni to do, is to learn. Written feedback is sort of dialogue as this can help to me what I know and what I need to know as always, I want to improve my knowledge and grades. (Nasir, Computing and Engineering)

Nasir's narrative indicates that the main role of feedback is to give a clear justification of why a particular mark is awarded. Moreover, Nasir's determination (I want to improve my knowledge and grades) refers to the idea that he sees grades as a powerful form of feedback. He considers feedback essential to help him stretch the disciplinary knowledge and attain better grades. Nasir's perception could lend support to the viewpoint held by AL researchers that "assessment and feedback are part of the learning process and that it is possible for feedback on summative assessment to also be used formatively" (Turner, 2004, p. 29). The most interesting word in this excerpt is 'dialogue' which indicates the broader view of feedback held

by Nasir. Dialogic feedback has been defined by Blair and McGinty (2012, pp. 1-2) as “a collaborative discussion about feedback (between lecturer and student or student and student) which enables shared understandings and subsequently provides opportunities for further development based on the exchange”. Thus, for Nasir, dialogic feedback seems as a transformative process which can help him not only improve his grades but also learn the subject matter better. Another Chinese student, Fen recognizes the ability of feedback to enhance her learning and grades.

I would say in general, role of feedback is to help my critical thinking and grades. I see the role of feedback to help me know why I have got this grade but more important for me is the improvement as I have come here to learn. (Fen, Education)

Fen’s comment indicates that grade is not all what she wants to obtain with the help of feedback. In fact, for her, the most important objective is achievement. It is interesting to note that some key literature (Carless, 2006; Chanock, 2000; Hounsell, 2007) reviewed in this study reveals that grade is all what most students want to know. That is, most students are fascinated by grades, rather than gaining knowledge. However, the data analysed in this study demonstrates that Fen pays greater attention to feedback to help him in ‘critical thinking’ at the expense of grades. Fen’s point of view is further elaborated by another student, Adil.

I think in general they want us to do well, and to get better grades because in masters level we have one year and they give us feedback to improve and do well in future as well. So, mainly its function is to help us to alter and to avoid and give us sufficient advice why I got that grade. I mean to explain to me because we don’t have time because we need to move to another term. (Adil, Education)

From this response, it is apparent that Adil is aware of the perceived value of assessment and feedback. A significant phrase in Adil’s comment is ‘sufficient advice’ which refers to the notion of adequate feedback to help him find out the ‘reasons’ behind a particular grade. In the words of Higgins et al. (2002, p. 61), Adil is a “conscientious consumer” of the higher education service. He seems to see the function of assessment feedback as part of a service he can expect. That is, Adil, probably, wants to know what is expected of him in the assignment, what he is being assessed against and where he has fallen short. The point of view held by Adil is important in the context of this current study because effective tutor feedback can aid

L2 international MA students to make easy transition to the academic environment of a UK university. This finding of the study could lend support to Bellon et al's (1991, p. 21) study that "feedback is more strongly and consistently related to achievement than any other teaching behaviour...this relationship is consistent regardless of grade, socioeconomic status, race, or school setting".

In summary, one of the aims of this study was to find out how participants perceived the general function of feedback they received on their assessed work and how useful they thought it in terms of learning and improvement. The data analysed in this chapter reveals that L2 international students in this study generally welcome assessment feedback and they hold it as a highly valued resource for learning. The data also suggests that the participants seemed to have positive attitude towards the function of feedback, to make valuable contribution to their current and subsequent learning. It is notable in the above responses that the participants are quite strategic in their attitude towards feedback. They seem to apply the feedback from one semester to help with work on other modules in the next semester. Moreover, feedback seems to motivate these students to pursue learning in a more independent way. That is, they tend to see the role of feedback to explain mistakes, help them present the argument clearly and engage them in critical analysis. In brief, the data analysed suggests that the respondents seek to adopt deep approach to learning and they link the role of feedback to enhanced motivation, confidence and self-esteem.

Chapter 6: L2 International Students' Perceptions of Helpful Feedback

During semi-structured interviews, the participants were asked to explain their perceptions of helpful versus unhelpful feedback comments. The participants were asked to discuss their perceptions in the context of samples of written feedback they had received. This approach of text-oriented interviewing, influenced by the AL approach (Lea and Street, 1998; Ivanic, 1998; Lillis, 2001) enabled this study to offer rich data. That is, talking in the context of written feedback provided a common reference point around which discussion took place. As the following analysis of the data shows, the L2 international students used the samples of written comments to support and illustrate their perspectives. The following questions extracted from the interview guide indicate that the participants were asked fairly open questions in order to allow them to reflect on their experiences of helpful feedback

- *Could you tell me about your experiences of written feedback which you found helpful for your learning?*
- **Prompts**
 - *What sort of things do you find useful in feedback comments?*
 - *What kind of feedback do you use for current and future improvement?*
 - *What kind of tutor feedback do you find less helpful?*

It can be noted that these interview questions/prompts reflect the concerns of academic literacies approach (see chapter 2) which lays emphasis on students' perceptions of the utility of feedback practices (Lea and Street, 2000; Higgins et al., 2002). I was interested in finding out whether the participants would mention what they did with feedback comments and thus they were asked generic questions about their thoughts on key determinants of a useful feedback. Although the participants were asked the above mentioned questions in a chronological order, there was considerable overlap in their responses. The extracts included in this chapter have been presented in a coherent way to offer a cross-section of the participants' views.

When asked to provide examples of helpful feedback, the majority of students mentioned this as feedback that contains advice for further improvement. As the following narrative reveals, most students seemed to attach great importance to receiving and reading feedback comments which they found helpful to improve their academic writing skills.

Well, when I came here, for me it was kind of challenging to learn academic writing like learning totally new language. I found feedback supporting. I mean learned more from feedback. It has given me exposure. Like I remember one example in my first semester when tutor, what you say, asked me to modify my work. He wrote very detailed and clear comments and then his feedback helped me to improve my work. (Bharatti)

While discussing the experiences of learning academic writing in a UK university, Bharratti says that tutor written feedback helped her learn how to write in a 'new' discourse. A key sentence in her narrative is, 'tutor has given me exposure' which indicates that she found feedback helpful in terms of stretching her subject knowledge and improving academic writing skills. Another student, Pattama, commented that she found the feedback helpful when it guided her how to bring in argumentation in her writing. She outlines her perspective as follows:

To be honest, I had problems in putting argument in my writing. Our teacher started writing workshops and I received continuous feedback and it really solved my problem. (Pattama, Humanities)

Pattama seems to acknowledge that she had problems in presenting arguments convincingly. However, her tutor written feedback shaped her understanding of how to write arguments specific to her discipline. Overall, she seems to attach great significance to "continuous" feedback which helped her in the area of argumentation in her writing. The following account further indicates that the participants of this study consider feedback chiefly helpful which gives them constructive criticism:

For me, the useful feedback is that feedback which points out my writing problems and errors. When the teacher criticizes my essay, I take it very positive and useful. (Shah, Tajikistan)

In the above example, useful feedback is linked to tangible improvements such as highlighting 'problems and errors'. On the whole, Shah's narrative indicates that he is willing to take notice of the feedback which gives him constructive advice. A common response from almost all the participants of the study was that they perceived helpful feedback to have included positive criticism. For example, the following narratives indicate that containing a balance between positive and negative comments on students' assessed work was considered constructive and helpful:

Well I would like to say that I find feedback effective when it says that Ali this is good but you need to think x. You know for a student like me even a tiny positive comment is good (Ali, Humanities)

When asked to provide the feedback sample to support his viewpoint, Ali read aloud the following comment.

[Ali reads aloud] “You do comment on interaction, learner autonomy and a lot of different areas, which is a good start, but you don’t comment much on these how they may trigger learning”. (Ali, Humanities)

The proponents of AL approach (Sutton and Gill, 2010; Sutton, 2009, Lillis, 2001) suggest that feedback which begins with positive comment help enhance students’ self-esteem and overall engagement with the feedback. It can be seen in Ali’s account that he becomes more receptive to negative criticism when combined with positive comments. A CDA (Fairclough, 2003) analysis of the feedback artefact indicates that “combining positive and negative elements; usually conjunctive in form” (Yelland, 2011, p. 221) can direct students towards suggesting improvement. While drawing on (Lea and Street, 1998; Fairclough, 1995), Mutch (2003, p. 31), indicates that the “dualism of positive and negative” advice can point students to the vital importance of implied development. It can be traced in Ali’s remark that he finds the juxtaposition of positive and negative commentary particularly useful for both diagnosis and future guidance. Apart from Ali, Mansoor recognized helpful feedback which focused on her efforts and provided suggestions in soft tone. As Mansoor expressed:

It was in the second term, in my leadership module I got the highest mark. My tutor gave me very good feedback, like he said everything was fine and my writing was on point and then he said that in the class as well. So that was quite encouraging and in the next term I did even better because his words encouraged me that I can make it even better. However, he still pointed out that my structure wasn’t right but in the next one I worked more on my structure. (Mansoor, Humanities)

Some participants of the study said that they perceived feedback useful when it conveyed a clear message, which could be understood and followed.

As you know I’m in the thesis writing stage so I can give you one of my examples of helpful feedback here. Like one of my teachers clearly told me what is wrong with my literature review section.

I: Can you please read this example of helpful feedback for me?

Naisra: Sure, why not [Nasira reads aloud] “Try to link your ideas into coherent paragraphs and check your literature review for citation. I noticed also that many of the sources cited in the text did not appear in the reference list. This suggests that they are texts that have been cited by other authors and you have simply followed the suit – you need to acknowledge that or consult that original source and add it to your reference list accordingly” You know what? I took this message seriously and searched further and used the feedback. It really has helped me to make my chapter a lot better. (Nasira, Buisness)

As compared to Nasira, Akram identified helpful feedback which gave him clear message how to acquire the discipline related conventions and develop his writing skills.

I find the written feedback helpful when my tutor points out weaknesses in my assignment. I remember one of my teachers gave a lot of comments on structure and ideas. She corrected my grammar and you can see here how she noticed these things.

[Akram reads aloud] “To improve your work: work on your paragraph structure (one paragraph, one theme). Proofread your work more for typos. Make explicit premises between your premises and conclusion. Please ensure that quotes are accurate. Perhaps ‘Walsh (2006) discusses four approaches’ might be better here. The wording here is dangerously close to the original – you should either paraphrase or follow the convention for quoted material”. You see, this keeps me keen on progress. (Akram, Humanities)

The above excerpt indicates that Akram found the feedback helpful which directed him how to gain disciplinary knowledge and improve his academic writing skills. It can be inferred from the above excerpt that how the participants of this study learned to enhance their current competence while responding to more knowledgeable teachers. This aspect of the data was interpreted with the help of AL approach. Lea and Street (1998) hold that teachers as more knowledgeable experts need to create sufficient space to make visible the academic writing conventions and values to novice students like Akram. Furthermore, another student from UAE remarked that she finds the feedback helpful which she uses to feed-forward for her subsequent assignment.

I think written feedback is more helpful when it inspires me how to write effectively and respond to a key problem. This kind of feedback can help me to make my other assignments better. (Mira, Education)

As compared to the above mentioned responses, some students like Peter seem to identify useful feedback which not only gives them clear message but also welcomes them into the discourse community of a UK university (Lave and Wenger 1991).

I say oh my God everything is gonna be in English and I never did biology and chemistry in English. We didn't have such practice in Nigeria so being able to receive an open and welcoming feedback makes you motivated a lot because you are not so scared anymore. (Peter, Health Sciences)

In the eyes of Peter, it seems that helpful feedback is the one which might reduce anxiety (scared anymore) and promotes learning by 'welcoming' him into the academic community. It seems obvious from Peter's narrative that he was not familiar with the practice of receiving formative feedback before coming to the UK. However, he seems to attach great importance to receiving constructive comments (open and welcoming) which he finds useful. The AL approach (Lea and Street, 2000; Clark et al. 2000) has allowed me to conceptualize useful feedback as collaborative feedback which can engage students in an ongoing dialogue. In the words of Turner (2004, p. 32), AL approach lays emphasis on the "the importance of welcoming the student into the academic community in this spirit of collaborative learning, rather than excluding them". As compared to Peter, Khalid revealed that the effectiveness and utility of assessment much depended on the depth of feedback because it engaged him in dialogic learning. As the following quote demonstrates:

I think effective feedback highlights my good points. And on the other hand, if I write something unclear, my tutor asks me questions. I have got one example for you because you asked me to bring one. You can see in this feedback, how my teacher has highlighted such stuff.

[Khalid reads feedback aloud] "You bring in a good number of key people in your discussion of TBLT, and cover some relevant areas e.g., interaction, recasts and Focus on Form. You also bring in some relevant arguments on the case for TBL. However, what about drawing on some more empirical studies (e.g., Mackey, 1999, Prabhu, 1987)? What about building these writers in the future essays? To be honest, this type of feedback makes me feel really good and keeps me with the pace. (Khalid, Education)

In the eyes of Khalid, effective feedback not only triggers him to enter into a dialogic relationship with himself but also with his tutor. From CDA (Fairclough, 2003) point of view, the dominant tone of the teacher in the above written feedback is dialogic, with commentary containing reflective words such as 'what about'. Adopting Mirador's (2000, p. 54) point of view, Yelland suggests that feedback "in the form of questions...lead the student to develop a point" in a better way. Much literature on AL approach (Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001; Sutton and Gill, 2010; Sutton, 2009) views helpful feedback that feedback which creates a constructive dialogue, encouraging students to compare their own competence with that of an ideal. It can be inferred from the above quote that constructive dialogue prompts Khalid to diagnose his own strengths and weaknesses. The AL approach theorizes that in order to

enable self-reflection, feedback must be intelligible to students, and structured in such a way that they know how they can improve their performance. If feedback indicates to students that they have done something wrong, but does not equip them with how to address their work's shortcomings, then such feedback is useless. Moreover, in such cases, students are in a worse position than they were before they received feedback as their self-esteem has been damaged" (Sutton, 2009, p. 5).

It can be seen in Khalid's account that constructive feedback makes him 'feel really good' in terms of overall academic improvement. Like Khalid, another student, Adil reports his perspective as follows:

When they give me specific comments, I really find them useful. For example, if they point out it to me like change this, you can get better marks. When they say like "could be useful", "maybe good point", "what about linking theory to practice" Being a student with another mother tongue, I don't find them useful, honestly. (Adil, Libya)

Notably, Adil seems to value clear, direct and specific comments. On the whole, it can be inferred from Adil's experience that he may not find comments helpful which are indirect in nature. The reason why he attaches great importance to direct and explicit guidance is probably he comes of a different culture. Hyland and Hyland (2001) observe that some L2 students may not understand their tutor's constructive criticism based on indirect language due to cultural differences. It seems that cultural factors are at play here which may have influenced Adil's perceptions of useful

feedback. Although his teacher seemed to have given him softened criticism by employing suggestive language (what about linking theory to practice), Adil tends to misperceive this feedback as unhelpful. One of the interpretations of Adil's difficulty to perceive tutor comments as useful feedback is that he might be unfamiliar with the hedged style of commenting (being a student with another mother tongue). Like Adil, another student from Brazil indicates that she perceives feedback helpful which engages her in a dialogic and reflective learning.

I think helpful feedback is that feedback which makes sure that we don't lose our direction for final assessment. One teacher gave me specific direction, specific explanation and asked me questions and made me think critically about my work. This is my thinking about your question of useful feedback. Is that okay? (Vivane, Business)

Vivane's perception of useful feedback seems to highlight the fundamental concept of the AL approach as developed by Street (1995) and Lea and Street (2004). The AL approach lays greater emphasis on making feedback more dialogic so that it can be effectively used by students. Vivane's narrative implies that the usefulness of feedback lies in making students critical and reflective learners by engaging them in a continuous dialogue. On the whole, Vivane's perception of useful feedback reflects the concerns of AL approach which views a "simple receptive-transmission model of feedback" as "inadequate" (Sutton, 2009, p. 3). That is, an effective feedback not only simply points out the strengths and weaknesses of students' writing but also involves them into constructive dialogue. This aspect of the data is further reinforced by another student's account in a succinct manner.

I think final feedback can be useful if it helps me to do practical things. I remember one of teachers told in language awareness module to me what I've done wrong and how I can make it better. So I think it's kind of, I don't know how to say, two way traffic. (Aslam, Humanities)

Interestingly, Aslam's perception of useful feedback refers to promoting dialogue around learning. A key word in Aslam's narrative is "two way traffic" which needs to be explained here. In order to understand and explain Aslam's account, it is important to draw upon the concept of AL approach. Lea and Street (2004, cited in Sutton, 2009, p. 6) theorize that "feedback is enmeshed within power/knowledge relations". In other words, "giving and receiving feedback occurs within complex contexts, and so is mediated by power relationships and the nature of the

predominant discourse” (Higgins et al, 2001, p. 271). Within the AL framework, Aslam’s phrases, “two way traffic” and “I don’t know how to approach some tutors” suggest that Aslam tends to see feedback as an opportunity to engage in dialogue with his tutors. In the eyes of Aslam, useful feedback is the one which can shift the relationship boundaries between him and tutor. On the whole, Aslam’s discourse suggests that he wants a dialogue with tutor where he might be able to challenge what is said in feedback. As compared to the above excerpts, some students linked helpful feedback with guiding them in their structural and stylistic aspects of academic writing. As the following excerpts reflect:

I had lots of problems in structure. And yes in another one, in grammar but I got feedback, I got very useful corrections and I think I’m lot better in these areas now. (Majeed, Computing and Engineering)

I think, writing in English is a big problem for me. I sent two drafts to my tutor and I got very useful feedback. My tutor edited my sentences and I felt very happy that I’m learning here. She is very inspiring teacher. (Bumni, Buisness)

The above two excerpts indicate that Bumni and Majeed perceive useful feedback as helping them improve their content (structure) and form (grammar) of writing. Hyland and Hyland (2001) refer ‘content’ category to subject knowledge and ‘form’ to linguistic aspects of writing. Both participants’ accounts suggest that tutor feedback helped them develop their writing skills and subject knowledge by receiving ‘useful’ suggestions from tutors. Like Bumni and Majeed, the following two students also connect the relationship of helpful feedback with improving their technical writing skills.

I can just remember one example. Sometime my teacher helps me to re-establish my sentences, to make my sentences more clear. Sasikarn, your sentence is too long, Sasikarn, you stop here. You can use the linking words here. This helps me a lot. (Sasikarn, Education)

Yes, yes, I think the feedback is really very helpful. For example, I had referencing style mistakes in my previous assignment and I got feedback that I did it wrongly but now I have overcome this problem. You know the referencing techniques. I had issues in putting dates and writer names wrongly. Those techniques I learn. I have also got feedback from my teachers about the context that I am using inappropriate context. So yes by not including irrelevant information in next assignment I got better grades from same teacher like 60%. (Fen, Education)

The above two extracts show that the participants of this study seem to read tutor feedback and they place great significance to the general as well deep learning advice offered by tutors. Fen's narrative indicates her strong faith in the potential of feedback to be formative. By double nodding, (yes, yes), Fen seeks to affirm emphatically that she does 'use' feedback advice to 'overcome' her problems in the areas of style (referencing) and content (inappropriate context). Exemplification of what she has learnt from feedback is salient feature of Fen's discourse. She owes her academic improvement and better results (60%) to the constructive advice she got from her tutor. Fen's response seems to demystify the mythical question of what students do with feedback (Weaver, 2006). Fen had problems in writing references, especially their technical features. She paid heed to what her tutor advised and she owed her current improvement to the developmental role of feedback. Her extract shows that she deems tutor comments worthy to be read in so far as to direct her how to improve. Like Sasikarn and Fen, another student from India gave her perspective of how she perceives feedback helpful.

Yeah, I found it more helpful when it pointed out my spelling mistakes and the references. We have the APA style that we need to use and one needs to be good in, this is what my teacher commented and I still take his advice seriously. (Nishat, Education)

What can be inferred from Nishat's account ("APA style") is that tutor feedback has enabled her acquire the conventions of referencing at technical level by giving the year of publication, using brackets for the names of authors and providing correct page numbers of sources cited. While responding to the question of helpful feedback, most participants of the study identified effective feedback as timely. The following excerpts exhibit a perennial concern for students over the timeliness of feedback:

I think feedback is more helpful when it is given on time. (Shiny, Education)

It takes us more than four weeks to wait for the final assessment. This doesn't help, you know. (Peter, Health Sciences)

I did two assignments in the last semester but the feedback I got was very slow. I think this is not fair on us. If they wanna make feedback more helpful that should be done quickly. (Noor, Business)

It's been already three weeks since I sent my research methodology chapter to my professor but still I have not got any message. What is this? I'm literally left with couple of weeks to submit my full thesis. (Akram, Humanities)

The above quotes indicate how helpful it can be for participants to receive timely feedback. It can be inferred from the above quotes that well-timed feedback helped Shiny, Noor and Akram take full benefit of this learning opportunity. It is interesting to note that although these participants use the words 'on time' and 'slow', they do not mention what exactly they mean by the term timely. The key literature on assessment feedback (Brown and Knight, 1994; Gibbs, 1999; Gibbs 1998; Race, 2001; Falchikov, 1995) identifies two aspects of timeliness: within a short time and at an appropriate time. That is to say, the idea of timely feedback is predominantly interpreted as being prompt, which means given within a short time. The promptness of feedback is suggested by Race (2001b, p. 87) as "within a day or two day or straight away, if possible". Although the terms promptly and quickly are open to various interpretations, in the context of this study feedback within one or two weeks can be considered prompt. This notion of timeliness can be traced in Akram's utterance that 'it's been already three weeks' but he has not got his work back. Akram seems anxious because such delay can affect his final mark in the thesis. The above quoted narratives echo the views of AL approach (Lea and Street, 1998), which questions the purpose of assessment feedback, if it is not timely at all. For example, Lea and Street (ibid, cited in Sutton, 2009, p. 7) argue that "feedback received beyond the two week threshold is likely to be ignored, especially by weaker students, and it is unlikely that students will attempt to enter into a further dialogue with tutors about it".

In summary, this chapter shows that the participants of this study perceive feedback useful when it engages them into critical reflection upon their learning. The students' voices depicted in this chapter also show that tutors can engage these participants into dialogic relationship through meaningful, relevant and prompt feedback. Furthermore, the findings of the study reveal that the participants want to internalize helpful feedback so that it can become a part of their learner identity as L2 international students in a UK university. Unlike some of the previous studies (Duncan 2007; Falchikove, 1995), this study clearly shows that students take notice of the feedback which they find positive and meaningful. It is important to mention

that some previous studies portray a conflicting picture about the question of what students do with assessment feedback in the UK HE context. Duncan (2007), for example, argues that many students do not understand feedback and, therefore, they pay little attention to it for formative purposes. Similarly, a study by Falchikov (1995) underscores the same that significant numbers of students simply look at their mark and ignore tutor written comments. Falchikove (1995) also claims that some students do not even consider tutor feedback worthy enough to be read

It is important to note that the AL approach provides a useful framework for analysing different dimensions of helpful feedback held by the participants in this study. For example, in order to understand the significance of helpful feedback, AL approach lays emphasis on addressing the questions of:

how meaning is constructed, interpreted and contested by tutors and learners, the relationship of feedback to learner identities, and the way in which both micro and macro relations of power and authority shape the context and practice of feedback. (Sutton, 2009, p. 8).

Chapter 7: L2 International Students' Perceptions of Unhelpful Feedback

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings with regard to the L2 international PG students' attitudes and responses to unhelpful feedback. The participants were urged to describe and explain what they found unhelpful about the feedback they received on their assessed work. They were asked fairly open-ended questions in order to allow them to reflect on their experiences. As the following interview questions indicate, the main emphasis was on an open and exploratory talk:

- *What do you find less useful about written feedback?*
- **Prompts:**
 - *Its relationship with academic progress?*
 - *Its impact upon your motivation and self-esteem?*

The narratives presented in this chapter exhibit that this is an area about which most students gave clear opinions and their responses were short and succinct. In the course of the discussion, participants made several references to the form and delivery of feedback. Many students interviewed were able to produce samples of tutor feedback sheets and assessment guides, to illustrate their experiences.

This chapter is organized in five sections. The first section focuses on how students perceive insufficient feedback as unhelpful for their learning. The second section analyses students' experiences of receiving variable feedback and its negative impact upon their learning. The next three sections depict that most students perceived feedback as ineffective which could not make visible to them what the notions of referencing, criticality and authorial voice entailed

7.2 Insufficient detail

There can be seen a common concern among students' responses given below that they tend to experience difficulties while making the use of assessment feedback. Although there can be traced a variety of reasons for this, the most significant one is that they found feedback too general and lacking in detail and specificity. The following excerpts from the interview data pithily depict the difficulties experienced by

the participants when understanding feedback comments. For example, Reo identified unhelpful feedback as that which contained insufficient detail:

Can't tell you how upset I got. You know in my management module, I got maybe hardly two lines and the pity is that I couldn't understand what she means. (Reo, Business)

I: Have you got that feedback with you?

Reo: Yes, let me show you oh sorry let me read it for you [Reo reads aloud] "On the whole, though, this work does not draw on an appropriate range of sources and does not provide adequate coverage of the requirements of this assignment" (Reo, Business)

The above quote indicates that Reo longs for detailed feedback that could have offered him a clear sense of tutor's expectations. Moreover, the lengthier feedback could have given him adequate information about assignment requirements, writing standards and pointed him where his work fell short and where he performed adequately. It can be inferred that Reo found his tutor feedback vague which did not contribute to his writing development and which might not prevent him from making the same mistakes again. The application of CDA analysis (Fairclough, 1992) to the artefact of feedback comment above suggests that tutor seems to have written her comment in categorical terms, using assertive language. The AL approach (Lea and Street, 1998, p. 169) contends that tutor comments on students' assessed work "frequently take the form of what we call categorical modality, using imperatives and assertions, with little mitigation or qualification". Lea and Street suggest that the use of more "mitigated" form of modality might create a different relationship between tutor and student. In the face of Reo's predicament, Mutch (2003, p. 31), one of the advocates of CDA and AL approach, suggests that "given mass higher education, it is perhaps unsurprising that feedback is often terse; perhaps a solution here is not the 'reform' of direct feedback, but the use of alternative methods". The next example indicates how Shiny found the register of feedback distant and vague:

My tutor always uses very big words like "syntactic inconsistencies" and "infelicities of expression" and some more as you can see my work here. I always think why my tutors don't talk in common terms? To be honest, I feel down as I'm already facing problems in my practice of language module. I don't know why they use such big words. Maybe they feel comfortable with using such expressions. (Shiny, Education)

The above quote exemplifies how distant the register of academic language sounds to Shiny. It seems clear from her narrative that there is a clear dissonance between what the teacher writes and intends and what Shiny knows and understands. The AL approach has informed my understanding that feedback which cannot be easily interpreted and understood by students tends to produce a loss of self-esteem (Ivanic et al. 2000). That is to say, in the face of difficult comments, students' identity as capable learners and persons tend to be shaken. The way Shiny remarks 'I feel down' indicates that her self-esteem and identity as a capable learner is at stake. According to Ivanic et al. (2000), a student like Shiny might feel doubly disempowered because she is 'already facing problems' in her assessment and because she feels incapable of what to do with her tutor feedback. Shiny seems to have a very personal reaction to unhelpful feedback and she interprets it not simply as a commentary upon the failing of her work, but upon her failing as a human being. Unhelpful feedback seems to compromise her ontological security. The following excerpt from a student in humanities discipline area further echoes some of the concerns raised by Shiny.

I will talk about the second term as I have received feedback with [tutor name] and feedback was very short, maybe a short paragraph. Few grammar and typing corrections, few recommendations. I was not sure what to do with that. I was hurt. I failed that module, just got 45%. I didn't mind failing but the thing hurt me feedback not clear and my tutor said go and get in touch with international office to improve your writing.

I: Oh I'm sorry for that. Have you got that feedback with you?

Akram: *Yes, its here. [Akram reads aloud] "Your ideas are not always expressed clearly, it is not apparent that you have fully understood some of the concepts that you discuss and you writing does not meet the requirement for work at M level. If you are going to continue with the course then I think you would benefit from some writing support offered by the academic writing program here. (Akram, Humanities)*

It can be noted in the above excerpt that Akram identified unhelpful feedback as that was brief, categorical and did not give specific suggestions for improvements. Akram seems to have strong expectations of receiving detailed guidance which he was not met. What seemed to have produced a loss of self-esteem and identity (I was hurt) in Akram was the comment, which referred him to the 'academic writing program' within the university. The reason why Akram feels anguished is that perhaps he pins his

hopes to the subject tutor support for improving his academic writing skills; and perhaps he finds it demoralizing to be prescribed for academic support out of the department. The theorists from AL approach (Lillis, 2003, Lillis and Scott; Ivanic and Lea, 2006; Wingate, 2006) support Akram's perspective that academic writing is highly discipline-specific and it can be better promoted when embedded with the students' specific department. Wingate (2010, p. 519) describes students like Akram as a "deficit model of writing support, in which at risk students...are sent to central study skills units to receive extracurricular, generic writing advice (Lea and Street 1998; Lillis 2006)". Wingate and Dreiss (2006) criticise Akram's tutor advice because

writing cannot be divorced from subject content and knowledge (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2006). When writing is taught outside the discipline, students have little opportunity to understand what their discipline requires and what their tutors expect. This creates an "institutional practice of mystery" (Lillis, 1999, p. 128) which can severely affect students' progress. (Wingate and Dreiss, 2006, p. A 15)

What can be inferred from the above narrative is that Akram wants his disciplinary tutors to instruct him how to improve the form and content of writing. If a problem occurred in his assignments, students like Akram did not want to be referred to the study skills teachers to fix the problem. Rather, he seems to long for an embedded approach within which subject teachers deal with specific type of writing required for a particular discipline. Akram's discourse divulges that feedback practices vary from discipline to discipline and therefore teacher of a particular subject can better guide the participants to acquire the norms and traditions of academic writing specific to their subjects.

The next two examples further illustrate various issues which international students confront while comprehending the language of feedback. These examples indicate that sometimes international PG students of this study find the discourse of feedback difficult to understand and this might prevent them from acting on tutor advice. The following two extracts suggest that students in this study only act on feedback which is clear, direct and written in understandable and specific language.

In this feedback, professor says that, well, you know you can see in here, in these comments that [student reads] "your argument is badly structured at different stages of your writing". They haven't explained this thing to me. If the lecturers tell me here what bad structure looks like, I'll follow her advice.

Believe me, in my country we think structure means to start with introduction, body and conclusion. Am I wrong? But it maybe different here but she can explain. (Peter, Health Sciences)

Well, I've got this feedback for you. You asked me, right, to bring some. [Student reads] "Generally your essay is not based on solid critical analysis which can mislead the readers". She wants me to be critical but I don't know how to be more critical. I've written critically. (Mansoor, Humanities)

I: May be she wants you to find out the positive and negative aspects add you own viewpoint?

***Mansoor:** May be, but I don't know what she exactly wants me to do and I'm still doing assignments on my own way. (Mansoor, Humanities)*

It seems apparent from Peter's and Mansoor's above accounts that these participants had a clear sense of the need to use feedback for learning. However, in their approach to capitalize on feedback, they seem to confront generic comments (badly structured, critically analyze) about writing which they find less helpful. Both participants mention that they are confused what well-structured essay and criticality entail. However, when prompted specifically on their understanding of 'structure' and 'criticality' and their implementation in writing, the participants revealed their uncertainty about what these terms mean.

From their responses, it seems evident that both Peter and Mansoor are aware of the perceived requirement to present their arguments in a well-structured and critical way; however, they look uncertain how they can perform better in these areas. It can be deciphered from both interviewees' expressions such as (but I still don't know, but I don't know how to be critical), (but I'm still not sure) that they tend to suffer from confusion and uncertainty in comprehending the discourse of feedback. Lea and Street (1998) and Turner (2004) theorize that the uncertainty which students encounter might be due to the fact that they are not explicitly told about the concept of criticality and structure and what these terms mean and look like in an academic text. Despite Peter seems to give an appropriate interpretation of what good structure (introduction, body and conclusion) entails, he still mentions doubt whether he understood this term correctly or not. Peter's uncertainty can be seen the way he sought reassurance by using the question tag (am I right?) at the end of his statement. Moreover, Mansoor's uncertain expression (I'm still doing assignments in this module on my own way) suggests that the reason why he is still following his

own strategy is probably due to the absence of clear guidance from tutor. In the context of these interviewees' predicament, the AL approach suggests that generic comments such as good structure or bad structure about writing are not easily understandable and "may not be very useful because a good structure in one assignment, one module or for one tutor is not necessarily perceived as good in or for another" (Lea and Street, 2000, cited in Turner, 2004, p. 32).

The above narrative reveals that assessment feedback needs to be non-confusion-provoking for L2 international students who might be struggling to understand the new rules of discourse. In line with the tenets of CDA, Mutch (2003), for example, observes that such comments (your argument is badly structured at different stages of your writing) could be interpreted as categorical in tone or closed comments which are highly unlikely to prompt further action. As Mansoor's expression (she should tell me where and how) suggests that unless he is specifically explained what is wrong with his critical analysis and structure, he is highly unlikely to use these kinds of comments for future learning.

The following account of Vivane further indicates that sometimes the gap between tutor expectations and students' interpretations might compound international PG students' perceptions of feedback comments. Vivane's narrative depicts that one of the reasons why some participants may fail to use feedback is their unfamiliarity with the academic terminology surrounding feedback discourse.

To be honest, all tutors were good in my first semester. They helped me a lot, so, I improved many things like my writing. But in one module [module name] I thought I wrote my assignment in good way. I read many articles and I put their references in my assignment. But I got very brief feedback. I didn't know what to do with that comment. (Vivane, Business)

I: What was that comment?

***Vivane:** I didn't engage with a wide range of sources to illustrate my argument on reading by second language learners in Brazil. She asked me to be careful about this next time. (Vivane, Business)*

Vivane's extract depicts that her tutor assumes statements like (a wide range of sources) is shared knowledge and that student will know what might mean by this comment. However, the problem arises when Vivane's interpretation comes into direct conflict with the tutor expectation. The tutor exhortation (be careful about this

next time) implies that the student understands this comment but Vivane could not comprehend what constituted a wide range of references. Rather, reflecting on her experience, Vivane believes that her tutor comment was 'brief' which she found ineffective. The mismatch between the student and teacher is apparent in Vivane's account when she said that she read and cited 'many articles' to support her argument. For example, the concern for Vivane was that her tutor's comment was vague and too general. Moreover, her tutor seemed to have employed the academic language used to express assessment criteria, which Vivane was unable to fully comprehend. On the whole, Vivane's account represents that although the participants of this study encountered several problems when trying to use feedback, they still have faith in its potential value.

7.3 Variable feedback and issues of self-esteem and identity

The analysis of data indicated that most students believed that a significant variation in their tutors' comments made the feedback unhelpful for them. The following three excerpts indicate that the participants felt that their tutor gave contradictory feedback on the use of particular vocabulary and on the structure of assignments. This in return created frustration and confusion, which eventually constrained the usefulness of feedback. For example, the following three excerpts encapsulate several aspects of the student experience in this study:

Basically, I think every tutor gives different feedback. One of my tutors wrote that I need to write paragraphs long which look academic. I did the same thing but another tutor told me that academic paragraphs are short. I mean he wrote that one paragraph on theme...he wrote like theme and rhyme. So I don't know how to write and which one I should follow. (Noor, Business)

I think tutors have got their own peculiar style of giving feedback here. Some pick up even the tiny things like spellings and some ignore. Some penalize for grammatical errors but some don't, so I think it varies from teacher to teacher. But sometimes I get confused which to listen. (Ali, Humanities)

Like I said before, you know I got two different feedbacks in my last term. One teacher really cut my marks for structure thing but the other one, she was kind for the structure but she focused on what I was arguing. (Selina, Education)

The above three quotations clearly show that the participants seemed to be aware of how feedback comments can vary, depending on the tutor. The variance in tutors'

feedback can cause frustration and confusion over the utility of feedback. These findings are consistent with other AL studies (Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Creme & Lea, 1997; Higgins *et al.*, 2000; Ivaničič *et al.*, 2000) that tutors' comments vary in terms of both quality and quantity. Accordingly, the students like Noor, Ali and Selina have to learn how to respond to each tutor and write for each module. The above narratives indicate that these participants experience confusion because they are not yet familiar with disciplinary writing requirements which they need to acquire while learning the subject.

One of the compelling examples is quoted below to illustrate how sometimes inconsistent and variable comments can compromise the helpfulness of feedback:

About the thing I want to say is two sorts of feedbacks I got from two teachers in my first semester. One teacher asked me to be impersonal. She says like using "I" and "we" isn't good academic writing style. Let me show you her feedback, [Aslam reads aloud] "I'm afraid that you are not writing at masters' level here. Your argument is bland. You need to avoid using personal pronouns e.g. I. Instead you need to construct an argument which explains how it changes the setting of your study". (Aslam, Humanities)

I: And what did the other teacher require you to write?

***Aslam:** Exactly opposite. He said to me like I need to put my voice, like I should use active. Let me show you his comment here [student reads] "Why do you write in passive voice? Your argument does not demonstrate your own voice required for masters' level essay". (Aslam, Humanities)*

As can be seen from the above quote, the contradictory feedback from two tutors seemed to have caused confusion for Aslam around the issue of when and how to reveal his authorial voice through the use of first person pronoun. Ivaničič (1998) argues that tutor feedback needs to highlight it to the students that personal pronoun is an acceptable rhetorical feature which can allow them to make their position and identity clear. The two kinds of feedback referring to personal and impersonal voice, or active or passive structures appeared problematic to Aslam, leading to a lack of confidence in expressing his identity.

7.4 Feedback and issues of voice

As is evident in this chapter, the discourse of feedback is an issue for most participants and a source of consternation over its effectiveness. The next excerpt adds another dimension to the issue of voice and students' sense of uncertainty.

I just got feedback on Friday this week on my literature review chapter. You know what, my teacher gave good feedback but the thing worries me is that he kind of wrote "Don't write I argue, I contend". I got lost because in the second term I wrote the same expressions but my teacher wasn't bothered. (Le, Humanities)

The main message that emerges from Le's narrative is that he seems to be caught in a clash as how to strike between two tutors' demands and his own opinion. Lea and Street (2000, p. 45) contend that the process of giving and receiving feedback is a complex and problematic form of communication, which takes place within tutors' "assumptions about what constitutes valid knowledge". Lea and Street (1998, p. 162) further disclose that "academic staff have their own fairly well-defined views regarding what constitutes the elements of a good piece of student writing in the areas in which they teach". Le's narrative suggests that one of his tutors accepted the use of the first person in his essays, however the other did not, and this seems to have caused confusion and loss of self-esteem (I got lost) for him.

One of the most powerful ways students can make their voice clear is through the use of first person pronoun (Hyland, 2002; Ivanic, 1998). It is apparent from the interview data analysed in this chapter that the tutor feedback could not help many participants whether the use of first person pronoun in academic writing is appropriate or not. Most participants of the study revealed that they could not gain confidence even after spending one year in a UK university. As the following two excerpts offer a cross-section of the student voices how they seem to be caught between what they want to say and their tutors' emphasis to write objectively:

My professors always write me back that Shah you need to be objective in your assignments. When I follow my professors' feedback I think it's not my voice, it's not me. I am literally stuck and I then question myself, Shah is it you or someone else? (Shah, Health Sciences)

My lecturers feedback, how can I say, make my work look very abstract. I remember one of my teachers said that you need to be objective. Don't use 'I'. I thought it was reflection on my language teaching experience in the class so I need to be creative and express myself. (Nishat, Education)

The above quotes clearly demonstrate that Shah and Nishat think that in a UK university they may have the freedom to commit to their claims by using first person pronoun. However, while doing so, their writing seems to be constrained by the pressing demands of their tutors. The key issue revealed by Nishat's account is that her tutor employs imperative modality (Don't use 'I') which seems to establish her tutor's authority rather than encouraging learning. Yelland (2011, p. 225) warns that "writing a negative comment about a piece of work which someone has invested time and self into is a serious face-threatening act", which in return may not help students understand where and how they can improve. One of the advocates of CDA (Halliday, 1994, p. 392) describes such feedback as texts that "have to achieve quite a lot in . . . very limited space' and so "tend to have their own grammar". Seen from this perspective, the above mentioned artefact of tutor feedback contains grammar that appears to be assertive and categorical. The findings of Lea and Street (1998; 2000) also suggest that vague, truncated and overly critical comments on students' work can produce a loss of self-esteem and identity. The most likely reason why Shah questions himself (I then question myself) is that his identity as an L2 international student becomes threatened. The proponents of AL approach (Ivanic et al, 2000, p. 64) lay emphasis on guiding the student writers rather than instructing them. Their studies found that this approach may have the best results because confidence and esteem are important constituents of student development. The reason why Shah seems to be 'stuck' is that he did not perceive the feedback helpful in terms of encouraging him how to present his authorial voice in his writing. Rather, he seems demoralized in the face of overly judgemental comments. Like Shah and Nishat, another student from computing and engineering remarked that the demands of feedback discourse largely stifled his voice:

Well, I don't know what to say. On the one hand my tutor asks me to give me voice. You know what, I expressed my opinions and ideas while doing SWOT analysis of the electric device I wanted to make. But when I got the feedback I read that though my work was good but I lost marks due to subjective arguments. (Nasir, Computing and Engineering)

It seems clear that Nasir's authorial self is challenged by the norms of academic writing underpinning feedback discourse. In the words of Lea and Street (2000, p. 35) "learner's identity is challenged by the use of impersonal and passive forms as opposed to first person and active forms, and he/she feels 'this isn't me". The

response of Nasir indicates that he might have to compromise and stifle his voice because he does not want to lose marks. In the context of Nasir's dilemma, Rae and Cochrane (2008) warn that:

Lecturers who do not listen to the student voice may be following a traditional model of providing written assessment feedback that could be described as a transmission process and considered to be justifying the mark awarded. (Rae and Cochrane, 2008, p. 218)

7.5 'Where are your references?'

The analysis of interview data and feedback sheets revealed that there was a common concern amongst almost all the participants that referencing was one of the most difficult challenges which compromised the usefulness of feedback. The data presented in this section exhibits that the syntax of referencing appeared to be quite complex and challenging. The narratives reported below indicate that most students seemed to have vague idea about referencing which negatively affected their engagement with feedback. For example, the following two participants remarked:

The first feedback I received was a big blow. It was all about references. You see here so many times the word reference [the student read aloud] "For example...reference? Where is reference? You need to cite here. This is very close to the original, so you need to give reference". I got so terrified and I said to myself, Mira, you have to read and reference a lot here. (Mira, Education)

In my country, we don't have to use references for everything. But here it's so tough. Its not easy here as I have remember when to put commas and full stops. Let me tell you that I lost marks in last term and I got feedback and that was my referencing was not up to the mark. (Duy, Business)

The above two quotations suggest that the helpfulness of feedback depends not only the ways in which it is given but students' individual cultural and linguistic differences can negatively impact upon their interpretations of feedback. Both Mira and Duy seem to have limited experience of using references in academic writing. Moreover, they tend to perceive the role of feedback on referencing as negative. Mutch (2003, p. 30) argues that "for many tutors, of course, referencing has an intimate relationship with structuring and argument and is far from being a 'technical' issue". On the other hand, Mira and Duy seem to consider referencing as a purely technical issue. The mismatch between these students' beliefs and tutor expectations not only

present problems to students but also to their tutors. What can be inferred from the above two accounts is that the students' lack of training and experience constituted as potential barrier to engage with tutor feedback. The above two narratives suggest that in order to encourage international students like Mira and Duy to adapt to the norms of British academic culture, tutors might have to consider the linguistic and sociocultural background of students. Another student, Fen, expressed her ambiguity while responding to her tutor feedback in the area of referencing:

I: That's good that you've learnt the art of referencing.

Fen: Oh, well, I wish I can master this art.

I: What do you mean you wish? Do you still have problems in this area, Fen

Fen: I don't know how to say. When I finish the sentence he wants me to put the reference in every single sentence like reference here, reference there. You see this comment [Fen reads] "the analysis looks fine, however, the problem is lack of references". (Fen, Education)

Fen's sudden exclamation (oh... I wish) suggests that her tutor's generic advice could not enable her to understand the deeper role of references such as how to select the relevant sources and how or when to cite them. Fen directly shows her helplessness in the face of tutor comments on (reference here and reference there). The data shows that respondents like Fen generally find the syntax of referencing quite complex and vague and such vague interpretations of feedback might prevent them from engaging with it. Fen's direct reading from her tutor comment gives evidence about her struggle to understand what means by 'lack of references'. Researchers within AL approach (Lillis and Turner, 2001) theorize that comments such as 'lack of references' may appear understandable to tutors familiar with the rhetorical conventions of assessment feedback. However, they may appear confusing to HE students who are not familiar with such conventions. Fen's discourse indicates that one of the reasons why she finds referencing difficult is that she may not be fully familiar with this concept in a UK university. Fen's utterance (I wish I can master this art) indicates her latent desire to receive detailed comments on her essay explaining specifically the referencing issue. Overall, her narrative suggests an important point that feedback comments can only be effective if students make sense of them.

The data presented in this section indicates that one of the reasons why most participants tend to find referencing difficult is that they might not be well familiar with this concept in a UK university. Data also suggests that students want their tutors to make explicit the function and significance of referencing in academic writing. This practice may tell learners like Mira, Fen and Duy that citation is used by students to help them add plausibility to their writing.

7.6 Feedback and critical analysis

The data presented in this section reveals that many participants could not find tutor feedback helpful in the area of critical analysis. The analysis of data suggested that most students pinned their expectations to the tutor feedback to help them how to engage critically with the literature they read. As the following excerpts indicate, these participants were expected to be creative and critical in their writing; however it posed challenges to the students to assimilate the required conventions of academic writing.

Actually I'm confused when they write me back that my writing lacks criticality. You can see in my assignments that I write critically. (Aslam, Humanities)

You should be critical but I don't know what they exactly mean by criticality. Let me show you show you one comment [the student reads aloud] "although you draw on a wide and appropriate range of resources, you do not critically evaluate them to reach your own measured conclusion" (Bumni, Business)

Both students seem to experience uncertainty and confusion in interpreting the notion of critical analysis. Bumni's narrative reflects that she experienced lack of certainty due to her tutor not explicitly informing her how to put her argument critically. Wingate (2010), one of the advocates of AL approach, argues that the reason why most students confront uncertainty in critical evaluation is that they are not clearly shown what this notion implies and how it looks like in an academic text. This feeling of uncertainty can produce a loss of confidence and identity, as revealed by another participant:

To be honest no...I could not understand the meaning of critical what they mean by critical. What she needs exactly...I thought critical means three or four authors agree with some and disagree with some and in the end put your position or opinion like in my opinion this point will be better or this idea of author will be better so this means critical. But even then I got final comment

that [student reads aloud] “at times, too much description and not enough critical analysis”. I repeatedly get such comment from her and I don’t know what she means by this. (Adil, Education)

From the above quote, it is apparent that Adil is aware of the perceived conventions of critical analysis. However, he perceives his tutor feedback as unhelpful in making him explicit what criticality entails. Lillis and Turner (2001, p. 61) highlight that the understanding of terms such as ‘critical analysis’ and ‘analysis and description’ are taken for granted by most tutors, but are not easily understandable to students. Elton (2010) argues that critical analysis as a convention of academic writing is constituted of tacit knowledge which cannot be made explicit in words. There can be seen a communication breakdown over the question of criticality between Adil and his tutor. According to Higgins et al. (2001, p. 273), everyday communication usually becomes successful because it depends on shared understandings. “However, as Hounsell (1997) and McCune (1999) have suggested, HE students may struggle to access the particular discourses underpinning tutors’ comments”.

In summary, the data analysed in this chapter indicates that the participants attach great significance to receiving tutor written feedback. The majority of the students interviewed reported that they valued feedback and made efforts to make sense of their tutors’ comments. However, most respondents experienced a number of problems when trying to use feedback. There were a variety of reasons why students perceived feedback comments as unhelpful. For example, most students found feedback as ineffective when it was (1) too general, too impersonal and vague (2) lacked specific guidance and details (3) focused on the negatives with assertive and categorical language (4) was variable and inconsistent (5) could not make visible what the notions of referencing, criticality and authorial voice entailed. The findings reported in this chapter suggest that the practice of giving and receiving feedback is complex form of communication, which takes place within the wider socio-cultural norms of a UK university. The application of CDA analysis to the artefact of tutor comments revealed that most comments were deemed to be written in judgemental tone which allowed little or no room for students’ further learning. Such critical and dismissive comments were largely seen by students as unhelpful, causing a loss of self-esteem, confidence and identity. I found the AL approach quite insightful to interpret the data that comments written in unmitigated and assertive language can

cause difficulty for students to interpret them correctly. Lea and Street (1998) contend that in the face of confusing and upsetting comments, the opportunity for learning can be lost. This chapter also highlights that in order to offer students with better opportunity for improvement, it is important that tutors become aware of the cultural and linguistic differences of the participants.

Chapter 8: L2 International PG Students' Perceptions about the Significance and Role of Summative Assessment

8.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of the data regarding L2 international students' perceptions of summative assessment. Students' voices depicted in this chapter were produced in response to the questions about the significance of summative assessment for learning. The need to explore this question was felt in the light of literature which supports the idea of separating grades from formative feedback. As Gibbs (2006b, p.34) contends, "if students receive feedback without marks or grades, they are more likely to read the feedback". It has also been noted in the literature review chapter (see chapter 3) that most students look at the grade and pay less heed to feedback comments (e.g., Bailey & Garner, 2010; Carless, 2006). In the context of these debates, it was deemed important to offer insights into the PG international students' perceptions of summative feedback and its significance.

International students in this study were asked about their experiences of written comments on their assessed work and their perceptions of the utility of summative assessment overall. These questions were asked to tease out some of the tensions these L2 international PG students might experience with assessment practices in a UK university. One of the underlying objectives in asking these questions was to know what significance the participants of this study attached to summative assessment on their learning and whether they wanted the grades to be separated from feedback. This chapter presents the findings emerging from the analysis of data, reflecting the summative assessment perceptions of the L2 international students in this study. These findings have been presented in the following sections:

- Summative assessment and its significance for learning
- Summative assessment and its role for the justification of the grade
- The influence of assessment criteria on student's interpretations of feedback

8.2 Summative assessment and its significance for learning

The students' voices presented in this chapter indicate that they pay close attention to both tutor comments and grades. The data analysed in this chapter reflects that

most participants found grades as an initial prism through which they make meaning of the feedback. As the following extract exhibits:

Well, I think feedback and grades represent the same thing. I will look at the grade first and then I read the feedback. If the grade is good I read the feedback to see what I should do to keep it the same. If the grade is bad, I feel guilty and I read feedback again. I try to find why the grade was good or bad. So, I mean grades are like a tonic for me, you know what I mean, Saqib. (Selina, Education)

Selina's thoughts about summative assessment suggest that the tutor response to her assignments gives her an indication of her progress. It can be inferred from Selina's experience that grades may serve her as an important means to engage with her tutor comments. She reiterates that comments accompanying grades, no matter 'good or bad' help her understand her progress. The use of simile (grades are like a tonic) reveals Selina's thirst for knowledge and formative role of grades. Overall, Selina's conviction is based on the belief that summative assessment is an integral part of learning process and that "it is possible for feedback on summative assessment to also be used formatively" (Turner, 2004, p. 29). It is largely acknowledged within feedback literature that assessment is like an engine that drives learning (Cowan, 1998; Brown et al. 1995). Race (2001a, p. 86) goes so far as to describe assessment "as the lubricant that keeps the engine running". Thus, for Selina, summative assessment sends a message about what she should be learning and how she should go about it. Overall, feedback and grades serve an incentive for Selina to learn and improve. Selina's experience of assessment and feedback is further illustrated by the following participant whose narrative suggests that grades can offer an initial gateway through which feedback is read and understood.

In the first semester, I remember in one module I got like distinction level grades and I like felt very happy inside. So, I was happy and I read feedback many times. In the second one, I mean module, I got only passing grade. I'm telling you honestly, I wasn't expecting that passing marks and then I read my assignment and feedback many times and in a deep way, like reading feedback to know why I couldn't do the same like the first module I told (Bharratti, Business)

Bharratti's experience of summative assessment reveals that she actively constructs the meaning of summative feedback. The repeated use of expression 'I read feedback many times' demonstrates how actively she responded to feedback

justifying the grade. For Bharratti, grade serves an initial point of interpreting and understanding feedback and vice versa. In order to illustrate her experience, she juxtaposes good grade with low grade (to know why I couldn't do the same like the first module). By emphasizing the contrast between her good and bad performance, she seems to stress that she always constructively uses summative assessment for learning and better performance.

When prompted whether she sought her tutor help to understand why she obtained 'passing marks', Bharatti said:

No, not really. I didn't want to ask because it's a kind of challenging him.

Bharatti's reluctance to communicate with her tutor may have been influenced by her cultural background or learning experiences as being an Indian student. The reason why she could not request her tutor for further clarification is that she might have viewed her tutor as final authority and showed high respect to her. The practical implications of AL approach (Lea and Street, 1998; 2000) can be traced in Bharatti's narrative which suggests that the students' experiences of feedback should not be seen as a simple phenomenon of transmission of knowledge. Rather participants' cultural and educational differences might compromise the utility of summative assessment in a UK university. The aspect of the data how participants of this study pay close attention to both feedback and grade is further illustrated by the following example.

I think that was kind of bad. I really wasn't happy with my grade and I really looked back my grade and my tutor comments on assignment. When I went home I read [tutor name] comments again and again. I don't know how to say but I really tried to know why I got 50%. I don't know; I don't know really. (Ahmed, Libya)

Ahmed's narrative indicates that he was unhappy with the mark awarded, relating this unhappiness to his futile efforts to decode the given marks (50%). Overall, the way Ahmed constructs his experience of assessment feedback reveals an important issue with the quality and quantity of summative comments justifying the mark awarded. The expressions (I really tried to know why I got 50%) and the repeated use of (I don't know) exhibit his disappointment with the quality and quantity of feedback on assessed work. Brown and Knight (1994, p. 17) suggest that if feedback on assessed work is not of sufficient quantity, it might not be useful for learners.

What can be inferred from Ahmed's emotional response is that he, perhaps, wanted more feedback which might have helped him to better interpret the grade awarded. Ahmed's predicament is echoed by advocates of AL approach that students make an "emotional investment in an assignment" and expect a "return" on that investment in the form of clear and specific feedback (Higgins et al. 2001, p. 272). As compared to Selina, Bharrati and Ahmed, some participants said that summative feedback, apart from indicating progress, signified elements of identity and self-esteem to them. In other words, summative assessment was interpreted as one of the powerful constituents of educational identity as capable learners by participants. This aspect of the data is epitomized in the following narrative.

Yes, you're right. Both are important here. Yes, because you know why? In Nigeria, I used to get grades. But here I get comments and grades. Because I wanna get good grades so I work hard. But maybe they can decide my future. so I don't want to go back Nigeria with a kind of losing face or something like that. (Bumni, Business)

Overall, Bumni perceives summative assessment as a positive practice helping her to maintain her educational identity as a competent learner who does not want to go back with a 'losing face'. Significantly, Bumni's experience of assessment feedback can better be understood from AL approach perspective which sees feedback literacy "as a complex set of social practices powerfully shaped by wider social structures, cultural processes and biographical factor" (Sutton 2009, p.1). A key point in her response is that she was used to receiving only grades in Nigeria with no feedback. It can be clearly seen in Bumni's discourse that her interpretation of summative assessment in a UK university is influenced by her past educational experience where grades were of cardinal significance. This could be one of the reasons why she values grades and links her performance to attaining better grades.

8.3 Summative assessment and justification of mark

This section revolves around international PG students perceptions about tutor comments justifying the mark awarded. The analysis of data reveals students' dissatisfaction with regard to comments justifying the grade. The following selected extracts from the data are analyzed in an illustrative manner, to delineate students' perceptions. These extracts highlight that students mostly found tutor summative

remarks arbitrary and that they liked a detailed explanation for the rationale behind a grade or mark. As the following extract indicates:

Well, in the last semester in one module I got surprisingly low grade. I couldn't really find out, I couldn't understand what and where I did the assignment wrong. So, I'm not sure, it was difficult for me why I got so low marks. I'm still having sort of confusion why I could not understand the reasons. (Majeed, Computing and Engineering)

Majeed's experience of interpreting summative feedback indicates lack of consistency between the grade awarded and feedback given. The use of adverb 'surprisingly' refers to the dissatisfaction which Majeed experienced while interpreting summative comments. The utterance, 'I'm still having sort of confusion' tends to foreground his discontentment and anxiety in the absence of detailed feedback which could have drawn his attention to the rationale behind attaining low grade. On the whole, the theorization of AL approach (Lea and Street, 1998) helps this study to interpret Majeed's predicament. According to AL approach, summative assessment is a "complex academic literacy practice, the acquisition of which can challenge students on a number of levels. On the level of meaning, tutors and students may interpret feedback in different ways" (Sutton 2009, p. 2). According to Lea (1994, p. 225), tutors somehow internalize the discourse of feedback on which their summative assessment is based. On the other hand, students struggle to learn these academic discourses. Thus, sometimes this type of summative assessment appear vague to students, which does not help them understand where and how they lost mark. According to AL approach, summative assessment written in the academic register that the students have yet to acquire may impact upon negatively on their learning and motivation (Lillis, 2003; Ivanic et al. 2000).

Unlike Majeed, some participants reported that receiving summative feedback justifying the grade can be an emotional process. While expressing their emotions, these international PG students expressed their heartfelt needs and desires openly. Following is an example which typifies most of the participants' perspective.

I had a terrible experience. In most cases, the grades and feedback don't match. However sometimes I don't agree with comments and I feel like my grades should be higher for example the assignment in which I got 45% due to vague writing style I was not convinced. I believed my essay had better discussion that I could have got more than 60% marks.

I: Ok, you seem to have very strong conviction about your abilities. Can you tell me then what would you like your tutor to do?

Duy: Well, he could at least have told me in the margins that my this part is vague or introduction or conclusion isn't clear. (Duy, Business)

As compared to Majeed, Duy's narrative seems clear and easy to understand. Although Duy repeats the same concerns as raised by Majeed, he refers to an important issue of receiving comments in the margins. What is significant in this participant's comment is that he wants his tutor to guide him through academic writing process instead of telling him indirectly what to do. Unlike Majeed and Sasikarn, Duy seems to take a proactive and reflective attitude towards summative assessment. He longs for specific comments on improving his writing style. The hidden message of Duy's emotional reaction is that if the teacher had given annotated comments on his assessed work, the chances of mismatch between him and tutor feedback might have not been so intense. As pointed above, the AL approach (Lea and Street, 1998; 2000) lays emphasis on clarifying the assessment criteria and grade descriptors to students so that they exactly know what is required of them in an assessment. Another student, Aslam commented that although his tutor's summative assessment was solely focused on justifying the mark, he could not understand the rationale why he got 'low marks'. The following extract shows his concerns:

Disappointment and I felt harm inside due to brief feedback and it didn't help me to act on. For example, in the [module name] module, I was shocked to get very low marks with maybe two or three lines. [Aslam reads feedback] "There is little depth in the analysis and the criteria used is not clear, although there has been some attempt at presenting analysis". That's all I got, no suggestions in the sides. I couldn't understand what he meant by little depth and so on. I was lost and I found this feedback like not for me. (Aslam, Humanities)

The above extract reveals a number of issues that seemed to have compromised the effectiveness of summative assessment for Aslam. First, Aslam believes that he received feedback which was 'brief' in quantity and quality. Second, he shows his apprehension about the discourse of feedback which he found impersonal, general and vague. This can be seen in his interpretation of feedback which is categorized as 'two or three lines'. Aslam's phrase, 'I couldn't understand what he meant by little

depth' reveals that the brevity of summative feedback could not offer him a clear sense of expectations about where his analysis fell short and where he performed adequately. The overall impression which Aslam's narrative demonstrates is that he wants detailed feedback in the margin (suggestions in the sides) which, apart from justifying the mark, could have provided him enough information about his writing. It can be inferred from Aslam's experience that he views comments given in the margins particularly useful than general end comments on assessment sheet. The utterance 'this feedback like not for me' seems to endorse the notion that "feedback is written for the file, to justify a mark given and to keep some official record of each student's progress" (Pitts 2005, p. 226). Randal and Mirador (2003) point out that tutors write formative and summative feedback for two different purposes. The target audiences of formative feedback are directly students whereas much of the content of summative assessment is aimed to meet wider institutional requirements.

Another student's perception of summative assessment offers a deeper understanding of the issue raised by Aslam. This participant held a distinct belief about the role of summative assessment, which prevented him from establishing an efficient communication with his tutor.

For me, very difficult to understand what he means to say. How I'll improve my assignments and grades. His comments didn't tell me clearly what I did badly in the assignment. I just got marks and this brief feedback on my [module name] assignment, [student reads] "The work is weak and unfocused with no clear evidence of understanding demonstrated with regard to the analysis of TBL". I couldn't find any solution and I guess that the doctor wasn't speaking to me. (Mansoor, Humanities)

What can be interpreted from Mansoor's perception is that maybe the feedback he received was written for tutor's own reference or second examiner. A close CDA (Fairclough, 1992) analysis of tutor comment shows that it does not contain possessive pronoun (you, your) which might have constructed Mansoor as an agent or owner of assignment. This is why the interviewee complains that his tutor did not address him directly by saying, "if you do this or that you will improve". Consequently, he felt dissatisfied with this impersonal style of summative comments. It can be derived from Mansoor's expression that he wanted personalized feedback which could fit into his individual and personal academic needs. It is important to

note that AL approach (Lea and Street, 1998) lays emphasis on tutors to carefully compose their comments. For example, Lea and Street (2000) advise to “

use the first person. Comments should be couched in subjective terminology so that the student does not associate the voice of the tutor as an ‘authority’: ‘I find this hard to understand’ is much more motivating than just: ‘Hard to understand’ or simply ‘?’” (cited in Wilkinson, p. 4).

In this regard, AL approach points out that the “place and role of the conventions in the teaching and learning of academic writing are currently located in parameters which foreclose discussion and edit out individual meaning-making” (Scott, 1999, p.175). The empirical justification of this concept can be traced into Mansoor’s experience. As he found it confusing to interpret the discourse of assessment on which tutor comments were based, this confusion foreclosed him from entering into a dialogue with his tutor. Mansoor’s confusion is manifested through his reading of tutor feedback which he found too ‘brief’ to be of any use for ‘future’. Mansoor’s interpretation of summative feedback reveals that he found tutor comments short and vague, offering no specific advice or recommendations how to improve his assignment. The findings drawn from the above analysis of participants’ discourses reflect the concerns of academic literacies approach (Lea and Street 1998 and Ivanič, Clark and Rimmershaw 2000) which theorizes that the challenges learners face while coming to terms with feedback literacy are construed as emerging from the gaps between tutor’s and student’s expectations and interpretations of assessment discourse on which feedback is based. In a similar vein, another student, Sasikarn from Thailand, could not understand the rationale behind getting a specific mark. The following extract suggests how she grappled with brief summative assessment.

Well, I kind of got a headache, you know, when I got feedback in my first semester. You know, I felt confused and yes stressed. My tutor [tutor name] gave me very brief feedback which didn’t explain to me why I lost marks. Not very good grade though.

I: Have you got that feedback with you?

Sasikarn: *Yes, I’ve. It’s here. [She reads] “The analysis shows that there is a clear attempt to answer the question. It also shows an evidence of engaging with relevant and appropriate literature. However, there remains little*

*substance to what has been analyzed". I didn't know what to do, Saqib.
(Sasikarn, Education)*

It is quite evident in Sasikarn's experience that a tension seems to exist between her expectations and tutor feedback justifying the grades. She complained that she was baffled to have received 'brief' comments which could not help her decode the grade awarded. A string of phrases 'got a headache' and 'felt confused and yes stressed' seem to encapsulate her dilemma. The underlying message which can be drawn from Sasikarn's discourse is that the participants of this study expected consistent and explicit feedback on their summative assessment. Receiving brief and vague feedback seems to have a negative effect on Sasikarn's self-confidence as learner. When prompted whether she consulted her tutor to help her interpret the meaning of this feedback, Sasikarn commented:

I wish I could meet and explain what I wrote in my assignment but it was difficult for me and I got no chance.

A strong desire to communicate directly with her marker can be seen in Sasikarn's response. The phrase, 'I got no chance' is open to several interpretations. Maybe, she belongs to an Asian culture and held her tutor in high esteem and therefore felt nervous to seek clarification. Another reason maybe that she thought that the module had finished and it might be needless to contact her tutor. In short, Sasikarn's contemplation seems to underscore the need of an "engagement model of feedback" as advocated by the proponents of academic literacies approach (Light & Cox 2001, cited in Sutton, 2009, p. 3). This model is "oriented to creating a dialogic learning and teaching relationship which enables students to understand the meaning, and internalise and act on the information constructed by tutors" (Sutton, p. 3). Nicol (2010) observes that the message conveyed through feedback on assessed work often assumes the form of a transmission or monologue. That is, information is transmitted about performance, with little regard for how students receive and understand that message. The reason why Sasikarn could not interpret summative assessment might be that feedback was not written in dialogic way and she was not required to respond.

8.4 Assessment criteria and its influence on students' perceptions of feedback

Although the interview questions did not specifically ask about the relationship between assessment criteria and feedback, many students mentioned that their understanding of assessment criteria seemed to present a barrier to engage with feedback. It is apparent from the following analysis of student's voices that international PG student's perceptions of summative assessment go beyond the immediate context of writing assignment. It needs to be mentioned here that AL approach as a theoretical framework has informed my understanding of this aspect of data. AL approach (Lea and Street, 2000 p. 35) theorizes students' feedback learning as a socially situated practice which is subject to range of factors such as assessment criteria and the student-teacher relationship. The socially situatedness of learning refers to the variety of academic norms and conventions which students are involved to learn and contest. These social aspects include the tensions between students' subjectivity, institutional and assessment demands of writing assignments. It emerged from the CD analysis (Fairclough, 1998) of data that many participants interviewed stated that they had limited understanding of what the assessment criteria symbolized and how it was converted into the grade awarded. One of the students outlines her perspective which is as follows:

One teacher said that module handbook is good source to compare what we get. It says 15% for this. I don't know how to say. Anyway I've got this, so let me show you [student reads from her module guide] "structure of report, logical in approach, 15%. Range of source materials 15%. Content of assignment – logical discussion and evaluation 70%." It seems to me, for us, it's not detailed enough. We're Arab students and if they don't give us clear instructions, I think we may do it wrong. (Mira, Education)

This narrative reveals that Mira experienced considerable difficulty to unpack the discourse of assessment criteria on which tutor feedback was based. This narrative also reflects that the discourse of assessment presented a barrier to Mira in terms of understanding the required parameters. She exemplifies her predicament by directly reading several parts of grade descriptors. The expression, "its not detailed enough" indicates subtle tension for Mira to clearly understand how assessment criteria had been used. It can be inferred from the above quote that Mira found assessment criteria confusing which might have caused dismay for her. The phrase, (they don't give us clear instructions) seems to signify that the discourse of assessment criteria might have presented a potential barrier for the participants of this study to interpret

summative feedback clearly. In order to assert her viewpoint, Mira shifts from a personal (I) to a general perspective (we). By doing so, she seems to claim that what she perceives has the status of truth. As the use of CDA as methodological toolbox indicates that through the use of language “people achieve certain communicative goals, perform certain communicative acts, participate in certain communicative events and present themselves to others” (Paltridge, 2006, p.9). Another student from China her experience of interpreting assessment criteria as follows:

I got feedback and grades in first semester. We got module handbooks and that's it. I heard my teacher in the class to take the criteria as roadmap. But I was not shown like if you do this you will get 50 and if you do that you will get 60 or more. Assessment criteria and learning outcomes, I try you know but these things are like really very hard, very difficult. (Fen, Education)

The above extract represents that understanding the discourse of assessment criteria posed significant challenges for the participants of this study. There is a suggestion in Fen's narrative that she wants clear instructions (we get module handbooks and that's it) about how to use assessment criteria to obtain better mark. Her expression 'take the criteria as roadmap' suggests that she could not make a clear relationship between the assessment criteria and learning outcomes as demonstrated in the module handbook. What may be inferred from her experience is that there seems to be a difference of understanding between Fen and her teacher. Fen's teacher might have given module handbooks in good faith that students will understand what is written. However, assessment criteria and unpacking of its discourse seemed to have presented an impediment to Fen. It is important to mention that tutors interviewed in Carless' study (2006, p. 227) believe that students often do not understand clearly the assessment criteria. For example, Carless reveals the teachers' perspective in the following excerpt:

I don't think the students really understand the assessment criteria. I don't have time to explain criteria in class, but I often give them one or two samples of good student work related to the module content so that they have an idea of the standards required. (Carless, 2006, p. 227)

Apart from Fen, another student, Ali from Iraq outlined his perspective as follows:

Believe me, mostly I don't find assessment criteria detailed enough, so I am not pretty sure how to link this one to doing assignment as well as to connect it to the summative assessment question you asked. I just find my professor

mentioning this thing in the class so I try to guess what my teacher is looking for. (Ali, Humanities)

The above quote indicates that Ali finds it difficult to clearly interpret assessment criteria and its practical significance to understand feedback on assessment. There seems to be a considerable danger of misinterpretation of criteria by Ali since he confesses that he has a limited understanding of what the criteria represent and how this is converted into a grade. On the whole, the above quote reflects that assessment criteria turned out to be another form of discourse which posed challenges for the students of this study. When asked about the significance of summative assessment, Le commented as follows:

They pick the same words from module guides. I got comments like this is a fair discussion or this is a fair work, this is reasonable work. I think they shouldn't use the format language. I think just make it more like personal. It is to make students make closer to the feedback. Or more how can I say? It is easier to accept the feedback. Because if you make just the format feedback and then that is like a machine. I want my teacher to give me something like personal support. If you give me more personal I will think this is more close to your feeling, to closer to you. I don't know how to express this point, to make more reliable. Just to more touch your heart. (Le, Health Sciences)

The above excerpt indicates that maybe Le wants his teacher to take departure from the formulaic language of assessment criteria while writing feedback. Implicit in his narrative is the idea that he may not see comments based on assessment discourse helpful. Le seems to believe that the formal language (format) of feedback turned out to be a source of consternation for him. In this extract, personalized (personal) comments have been seen as an effective practice which can help Le to engage with feedback better. While narrating his experience, Le seems to have become emotional. Through her emotions, (close to your feeling, touch your heart) he seems to stress that feedback based on assessment criteria lacks human warmth and does not seem to make direct reference to him as an individual.

Notably, Le seems to be concerned that tutor comments based on formulaic language of the criteria might rule out his individuality as an international student. From an AL perspective (Lea and Street, 1998) if tutors want to engage their students into meaningful learning through feedback, they need to make assessment standards and grade descriptors transparent to them. The AL approach suggests

that the reason why most students cannot connect with the discourse of assessment criteria is that these standards are based on tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge, according to Higgins et al (2002) is that knowledge which tutors hold but cannot express it easily to students. In the face of Le's dilemma, Yorke (2003, p. 480) suggests that through dialogue tutors can make the tacit discourse of assessment criteria visible to students. It is through dialogue that students like Le can develop the understanding of learning outcomes and assessment criteria. As Brown and Knight (1994, p. 114) suggest,

students come to understand criteria through experience, through trying themselves out against a criterion and getting feedback ... students will be most receptive to feedback related to given criteria if they have already had experience of working with those criteria.

Chapter 9: Feedback and Issues of Emotion, Self-esteem and Confidence

9.1 Introduction

Chapter 7 indicates that most participants perceived their tutors' feedback as unhelpful which was vague, lacking specificity and conflicting. This was also analysed by the CDA analysis of tutors' feedback comments on students' assignments. This chapter focuses on students' experiences of receiving negative comments which seemed to have damaging impact on their confidence, self-esteem and emotional well-being. The narratives reported in this chapter demonstrate that most participants perceived un-hedged criticism and overly judgemental feedback as negative. This in return seemed to have detrimental impact upon their self-perceptions as L2 international learners, leading them to interpret feedback personally instead of a criticism on their work.

The data analysed in this chapter also exhibits that in the face of tutor intended or unintended negative feedback, the most students developed a tendency to undervalue their previous educational experiences. This chapter also presents findings with regard to various coping strategies employed by the participants to overcome their feedback problems. These strategies include incorporating tutors' comments into assignments, developing know-how of feedback and using Google books for referencing. The following questions extracted from the interview guide indicate that the participants were asked fairly open questions in order to allow them to reflect on their experiences of negative feedback and its impact:

- *Could you tell me any experience of getting discouraging/negative feedback?*
- *What was your reaction?*
- *Its relationship to academic progress?*
- *Its impact upon your motivation and confidence?*
- *Its effect on your relationship with the tutor?*

9.2 Feedback and issues of emotion, self-esteem and confidence

The above listed questions indicate that one of the aims of this study was to gain understanding of the meaning and impact of negative feedback. This chapter deals with the theme that emerged from the receipt of discouraging feedback. The data

analysed in this chapter indicate that most students viewed feedback largely as social process in which elements of power, emotion and discourse seemed to have great impact upon their interpretations of feedback. The excerpts presented in this chapter show that although the participants wanted to learn from feedback, they often found critical feedback difficult to interpret. As the following narrative demonstrates, evaluative feedback seems to have negative impact on the self-confidence and emotional well-being of Nasira:

Let me give you example, very recent one. You know I'm writing my thesis in this term and I maybe a week before sent my tutor [tutor name] the literature review chapter. The reply I got in my email, I can't tell you. The feedback was like "your writing is a style thing" and "your references look like a shopping list". I said what? What does this mean? I'm still in shock. I really cried. Why so? I did my level best but I got this negative comment. Now I'm scared to send her my methodology chapter. But she should think that I'm not native so I can be not good in references (Nasira, Business)

The above excerpt clearly shows how Nasira seems 'shocked' upon receiving unclear and unfavourable comments. The tutor feedback seems overwhelmingly daunting (your references look like a shopping list), which had a negative impact upon Nasira's confidence, self-esteem and emotions. When describing her feelings, Nasira makes the use of expressions such as 'cried', 'scared', 'why so'. According to Higgins (2000, p. 6), "receiving feedback is an emotional business". Hyland (1998, p. 279) also contends that "writing is an intensely personal activity, and students' motivation and confidence in themselves as writers may be adversely affected by the feedback they receive". In the face of receiving negative comments, Nasira's confidence tends to become threatened as she is less willing to send future work to her tutor. The utterance (I'm scared to send her...chapter) suggests that Nasira tends to form a relationship of distrust with her tutor. Lea and Street (1998) imply that tutor's incautious feedback might put students in a negative frame of mind and impact upon the student-teacher relationship. It seems that Nasira wants her tutor to appreciate that she had different academic background and was not, probably, familiar with the academic writing demands in a UK university. On the whole Nasira's narrative suggests that it is particularly important for teachers to make feedback non-anxiety-provoking process for L2 international students who are struggling to understand the new rules of discourse. This particular group of students is also

required to write assignments in an additional language. In addition, students like Naisra might have to deal with some other socio-cultural issues such as being an international student.

Another student from Tajikistan reported that receiving tutor written feedback can be highly emotional process. As the following excerpt indicates, this participant seems to adopt a relatively reactive attitude towards feedback:

Example of discouraging feedback? Yes I can give you one. The one I failed the module, I just got 35%. [Student reads aloud] "I can see from your work that you have clearly given some thought and have read some of the literature relating to the teaching and learning of speaking skills. However, there is no clear demonstration that you have fully understood the approaches that you discuss and the points you make are not clear. You also at times make some sweeping statements without support, and at times are vague".

I: How was your reaction then to this feedback?

Selina: *Yes I feel pain, guilt and shame. I know my problems but when I get too much negative feedback. I couldn't understand whether [tutor name] likes my work or not. So my mind was not convinced so I was not sure what he wanted. This was very stressful times. I was in first term and I felt I can't exist in this academic culture. (Selina, Education)*

It seems apparent that Selina tends to misinterpret her tutor feedback due to the generic nature of the academic discourse. Her narrative indicates that she seems to perceive negative feedback as a rejection of both her work and even her character. One of the likely reasons why she feels 'pain, guilt and shame' is that she considers her tutor as a judge who regards her as inadequate. Selina's narrative further illustrates that she responds emotionally to her tutor feedback. In order to avoid another emotional experience of similar nature, Selina reacts that she cannot survive 'in this academic culture'. Higgins (2000, p. 6) argues that "the 'gap' between tutor and student in terms of access to discourse, power and authority is widened by a somewhat 'hidden' emotional dimension". In the context of Selina's dilemma, findings from AL approach (Turner, 2004, Lea and Street, 2000; Clark et al. 2000) lay emphasis on balancing negative and positive comments. This kind of strategy can help students engage in an ongoing dialogue with the tutors. This can also help students like Selina understand that tutor remarks are not necessarily a final verdict on her work, rather part of a formative process. Overall, it can be inferred from

Selina's narrative that combining positive and negative comments may help break down the power differences between tutor and student. In this way such feedback might reduce elements of anxiety and trigger learning by involving Selina into the process of feedback.

Another striking feature which emerged through the analysis of data is that tutors' categorical and dismissive comments on students work may demoralize them. For example, the following narrative suggests:

For that one I got feedback like "your work is vague, be more critical, be more coherent, show more evidence". In this module I got low marks. I didn't consider marks but I was bit angry with myself and the teacher as well, as I couldn't know what he wanted. I got angry, stressed and disappointed unable to gather strength to continue studies. I was in a deadlock. Then I resumed to make my future better. (Noor, Business)

The above narrative indicates that categorical and un-hedged feedback may not imply the opportunity for further negotiation. Hyland (2002) also cautions tutors of the dangers of writing comments in an un-hedged language because one of the central roles of feedback is to encourage and motivate students. Most studies on L2 writing (Ferris, 1995; Straub, 1997) reveal that tutor feedback which is vague and authoritarian is highly unlikely to be perceived positively by students. In brief, Noor's narrative indicates that tutor's comments written as an ultimate truth may not be helpful for L2 international students in this study. What can be deduced from Noor's experience is that feedback which is less authoritarian may place her at the heart of learning and engage in an ongoing dialogue. The phrase, 'I was in a deadlock' can be analysed that discouraging feedback negatively impacted upon Noor's self-esteem, confidence and whole approach to the course. Since tutor feedback seems to fail to engage Noor, so she largely views it as insignificant or invalid. She does not seem to pay considered attention to such feedback, leaving her feel demoralized and anxious.

9.3 Students' tendency to self-undervalue their past learning experiences

The analysis of data revealed that most participants tended to self-undervalue their past educational experiences in the face of tutors' evaluative and negative comments. The data presented in this section indicates that most students seemed to find that their past learning was often irrelevant in the eyes of some tutors. As the

following three narratives show that most students felt that their prior academic achievements have little or no value in a UK university:

Believe me, its my second MA. I had thesis in my country. I got very good band in IELTS before coming here. But believe me when I get too many negative comments then I think that my tutors perhaps think that I don't have any know-how of academic writing skills. (Adil, Education)

In my country I did MA with really very good percentage. I know what critical engagement is. I have clear sense of how to reference, when to reference and what to reference. But all these things I find useless when my professor says that my work lacks criticality and at times it is closer to the original. (Le, Health Sciences)

I did my BS honours in English literature and language before coming here. I used to do critical appreciation of literary writings. I know what it is that we don't follow the ideas of other researchers blindly. Trust me I do the same practice here but I get discouraged when my teacher says that I don't engage critically. Then I question myself that my past degree is not of any value here. (Aslam, Humanities)

The above three excerpts suggest that Adil, Le and Aslam seem to undervalue their prior learning experiences and they feel that these appear to have limited significance in the face of receiving tutors' analytical comments. It can be seen in the above narratives that tutor evaluative comments negatively impacted upon these students' self-perceptions as capable learners. Consequently, this seems to lead them to undervalue their past learning experiences. It is important to mention Leki's (1995) viewpoint that previous academic learning plays an important role to help L2 international students cope with their HE educational challenges. However, the way the participants of this study seem to undervalue their prior educational experiences appears to be a disturbing sign. Like the above participants, another student from computing and engineering department made the following comment:

You know I want to add one thing more here. I got feedback in manufacturing module and that really made me upset. My tutor wrote one day that this is the level of master and therefore I have to be more critical. You writing is always descriptive and don't say in my opinion like you used to do in your country. I said what? This means my BS has no importance here (Majeed, Computing and Engineering)

The above quote indicates that tutor's evaluative comments tended to make Majeed undervalue his past learning efforts. It is important to emphasize here that some key

researchers on L2 writing (Leki, 1995; Connor, 1996; Canagrajah, 2001; Ferris, 2003) indicate that most international students view their prior learning experiences were of great value to them when dealing with new challenges in overseas universities. For example, Leki's study (1995) reveals that although L2 students' prior experiences were different in a USA university, they did not have the tendency to undervalue them. However, the present study indicates that in the face of tutors' negative comments, most participants like Majeed, Adil, Aslam and Le appear to attach limited value to their prior educational qualifications. This might be because most international students tend to find assessment feedback as an academic shock while adjusting to a different academic milieu (Ryan, 2005)

9.4 Students' strategies

The data suggests that most students employed several coping strategies while interpreting negative feedback. As the following excerpt indicates, the participants appear to be strategic in their use of assessment feedback.

I want to say another thing that when I get too much criticism on my assignments, I try different ways to deal with this. For example, in the last term in international marketing module, I got a lot of comments on argument and structure. And in this term, we have got the same professor so I keep that comments in front of me so I don't organize my structure the way he required. (Vivane, Business)

It seems clear in the above excerpt that Vivane becomes strategic in taking feedback from one tutor and using it again when doing work for that particular tutor, though at a different level of her studies. One of the interpretations of Vivane's experience could be that the modularized system seems to encourage this strategy. Another interpretation might be that the participants pay heed to feedback that a specific tutor wants instead of simply developing their ability to demonstrate learning in a specific task or assignment. The data further indicates that some participants try to follow what their tutor want and convert these instructions into their strategies. As the following three excerpts show:

I got very low marks in one module in the first term. I got disappointed but luckily I got the same tutor in the second term and I got 60%. What I did was I did what she wanted. In the second term I added so many references. Even if

I wrote that the sun sets in the West I gave reference. (Peter, Health Sciences)

I got bad feedback in the first term but now I always try to do what they want. I follow their advice very seriously. Before writing any assignment now I just go and see my tutor and read what he wants to read. I am using the theory in my thesis which my teacher likes. (Khalid, Education)

I was disappointed to see so many comments on references in my first draft but to defeat this problem I find google books the most handy thing. You can find the pages you want and reference easily without reading so many books. (Pattama, Humanities)

The above three narratives exhibit various strategies employed by the participants to overcome the problem of receiving negative feedback comments. Most students seem to follow their tutors' feedback advice religiously at the expense of their originality. These strategies are substantiated by the fact that these participants passed their modules with better mark in the second term. The findings from Young (2006) and Leki (1995) indicate that most international students in various overseas HE contexts devise some mechanism to please themselves and their tutors.

In summary, the findings presented in this chapter indicate the language used to compose feedback can have both positive and negative impact upon students' emotional well-being, confidence and self-esteem. For example, judgemental comments were perceived as negative by most of the participants. The chapter also shows that particularly, if the comments are too negative or dismissive, they might result in loss of confidence and motivation. Lea and Street (2000) suggest that the comments composed with unmitigated discourse and imperatives can pose difficulties for learners and, thus, they tend to become unresponsive to the feedback. The chapter also suggests that a received feedback message may potentially be misinterpreted by the participants. The students' narratives suggest that they might take the poorly written feedback personally which might cause loss of self-esteem and confidence. As Boud (1995, p. 43) argues, we judge too much and too powerfully, not realising the extent to which students experience our power over them". In brief, this chapter highlights that emotion, self-esteem and confidence are some of the important constituents of feedback discourse, and giving encouraging and motivating feedback is a complex process (Higgins 2001, p. 272; Falchikov and Boud 2007)

Chapter 10: Discussion

The previous chapters (chapters 5-9) delineated the unique perspective and perceptions of L2 international PG students which they brought to a UK university. This chapter presents a synthesis and discussion of the findings by using research questions and conceptual framework. The main objective of this chapter is to discuss some major issues and concerns which appeared during the data analysis process. The purpose here is to discuss how the findings of this study support or differ with that of found in the feedback related literature.

To reiterate, most research on the topic of assessment feedback has focused on differing perceptions of teachers and students. Moreover, the majority of studies have focused on perspectives of teachers or the analysis of written feedback artefacts. Limited numbers of studies (Burns and Foo, 2014) have focused on the feedback perspective of the L2 international students in the UK HE institutions. The focus of this research has been to investigate the attitudes, beliefs and experiences of L2 international students regarding tutor written feedback. This study was conducted using qualitative interpretive research paradigm. In-depth semi-structured interviews were the main source of data generation. During interviews, participants read aloud their tutor feedback comments, which were transcribed verbatim and analysed using CDA techniques.

R.Q. 1: What are L2 international PG students' perceptions of assessment feedback and its impact upon their learning in a UK university?

The first question of this research aimed to answer L2 international students' perceptions of assessment feedback and its impact upon their learning. The findings suggest that most students wholeheartedly recognized the significance of feedback in terms of improving their academic learning. Most participants of the study perceived assessment feedback as an effective tool to gain better understanding about their strengths and weaknesses as international PG learners. That is, they see the formative role of feedback to help them achieve better academic results.

This study uses AL approach (Lea and Street, 1998, 2000) to better understand the feedback perceptions of L2 international PG students. Within the AL approach, researchers such as Lea and Street (1998, 2000), Turner (2004), Sutton and Gill (2010) contend that assessment feedback can be most effective if it is part of the whole teaching and learning process. The AL approach highlights that feedback needs to rise above the notion of one-way transmission of a message. Rather it should be interactive and dialogic between students and teachers. The AL approach sees the role of feedback in motivating students and enhancing their self-esteem, confidence and identity. Sutton and Gill (2010, p. 3) conclude that feedback may mean different things to different students; that there are various levels of how students engage with feedback; and that there is no “universal formula for producing effective feedback”.

The data analysed in this study reveals that feedback has various functions according to L2 international students. That is it not only helps them develop their critical thinking and academic writing skills but also the syntactic aspects of writing. For example, the participants such as Pattama, Shah, Noor and Khalid convey their messages that feedback functions to help them improve the linguistic and syntactic aspects of their academic writing. Similarly, the role of feedback is constructed as an opportunity which helps these students stretch their subject knowledge.

What was surprising to find out during the data analysis process was that most international students attributed a variety of personal and emotional functions to feedback. For example, Le and Vivane saw a strong connection between tutor feedback and their emotional and social needs. What can be deduced from these students' responses presented in chapter 6 is that feedback was perceived to play an important role in their general emotional well-being. While analysing the data, the AL approach has helped me understand that feedback literacy is a particular form of literacy which “involves a complex set of psychosocial processes” (cited in Sutton, 2009, p. 2). Seen from this perspective, this study shows that feedback has a wide variety of functions in the lives of L2 international students. Some participants of this study mentioned feedback as an indication of ‘care’. It seems likely that these students referred to the personal dimension of feedback which serves as a means to form contact with their tutors. For instance, Mansoor and

Nishat highlight that this relationship is not limited to seeing teacher merely a mentor but as a guardian, someone with concerns for the general well-being of these L2 students. It seems very likely that the participants like Mansoor and Nishat are away from their families and countries; and, therefore, they could be seeking the relationship of guardian with their teachers. The analysis of data presented in chapter 6 suggests that for these L2 international students, personal contact with their teachers might take on a function which is more than formal in nature. The most likely reason why Le expects his tutor to adopt a parental role is that he is especially in the dissertation stage of health sciences program. As being international student, Le's supervisor might be the only contact he has within the UK University and that is why he wants tutors to assume the role of a guardian.

The findings of this study reveal that assessment feedback has a wide variety of purposes and these are not merely confined to its implications for academic improvement. Rather these functions can range from a number of other psychosocial factors influencing L2 international students' academic and emotional well-being. For example, Lea and Street (2000), Clark et al. (2000) and Lillis (2001) contend that feedback literacy is powerfully shaped by a complex set of social practices, wider social structures, cultural processes and biographical factors. Thus AL approach has helped the researcher to look beyond the transactional nature of feedback to its emotive elements.

According to Sutton (2009, p. 1), acquiring feedback literacy is similar to other forms of literacies, which "means that students acquire a new way of knowing the world and making sense of their experience and themselves. Thus, academic literacy has epistemological and ontological dimensions". Ivanic et al (2000, p. 47) argues that feedback serves as a means of communication which carries messages about "university values and beliefs, about the role of writing in learning, about their identity as a student, and about their own competence and even character". Applying the tenets of the AL approach has allowed this study to reveal that L2 international students' feelings and socio-cultural factors need to be recognized as playing a significant role in shaping their perceptions of feedback. For example, Nasira and Peter's voices highlight that it is important to consider that L2 international students are not merely learners but social agents in particular. They are likely to perform best

in an academic milieu where their psychosocial needs are met. As Crossman (2007, p. 325) has suggested

Higher education institutions would do well to consider further how teaching and learning occurs in a particular human context in which individuals interact, conduct relationships and experience feelings about those relationships.

Most L2 international students of this study emphasized the participatory and dialogic functions of feedback. As discussed in Chapter 6, these participants seem to acknowledge feedback as a form of communication which offers an opportunity to enter into an intellectual dialogue with their teachers. The students emphasized that a simple “receptive-transmission” (Askew and Lodge, 2000) model may not be helpful where students passively assimilate information. For example the participants like Duy and Pattama reflect that through feedback, they seem to aspire for a more interactive relationship with their teachers. It seems likely that these participants might be having different perceptions of feedback because of their past educational and socio-cultural experiences. It is important to mention here that the AL approach (Lea and Street, 1998) has offered a useful framework to understand that most L2 international students like Duy and Pattama are aware of the nature and purpose of feedback in HE and how to utilize it for academic purposes. These participants seem to believe in an engagement model of feedback “through which knowledge is constantly being constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed” (Wegerif 2006, p. 60). The findings of this study reveal that most of the L2 international students long for a direct relationship with their teachers whereby they could be seen individuals rather than merely a member of a group. What can be inferred from the analysis of the data is that these L2 international students see feedback, like classroom interaction, as a social phenomenon and that is why they seemed to desire for more social interaction with the teachers through feedback. This aspect of the data was inferred by using the AL approach which emphasizes that “if students are to successfully feed forward feedback, it must have relevance to, and be meaningful for, individual students. It must be oriented to their particular hopes and desires as learners” (Sutton, 2009, p. 8).

The L2 international students like Vivane, Mansoor and Nishat stressed the motivational dimension of assessment feedback and viewed good feedback as a way of inculcating encouragement. The element of encouragement can be

interpreted as intellectual motivation, which not only increases these participants' confidence in their own academic competence but also builds up their eagerness for the subject. The AL approach provides a useful framework to understand the dimension of motivational beliefs. Juway et al. (2004, p. 12) suggest that feedback should be given in constructive manner so as to make students "feel encouraged and motivated to improve their practice", and thereby supportive of learning, so that students have clear guidance on how to enhance their performance. The data analysed in chapter 5 suggests most L2 international students like Vivane, Mansoor and Nishat tend to adopt a deep approach to learning. Deep approach to learning refers to the notion that students are positively responsive to comments which explain mistakes and concentrate on the depth of argument and critical analysis (Higgins et al. 2002, p. 59). The reason why these participants want motivating feedback is that they seem, to some extent, intrinsically motivated to learn through constructive feedback. For example, Mansoor's narrative analysed in chapter 5 underscores that the main role of feedback is not only to provide formative assistance to him but also to make him enjoy learning.

Unlike some studies by (Brown et al. 1996), (Hounsell, 1987) and (Weaver, 2006) the findings of this study reveal that the L2 international students perceive the main role of feedback is to give a clear justification of why a particular mark is awarded. For example, Peter, Nasir, Akram and Shiny reveal that they saw the role of feedback as part of a service they could expect. These international students, in the words of Higgins et al. (2002, p. 61), are "conscientious consumers" of the higher education service. The findings suggest that some of the above mentioned international students utilized the feedback when they were clearly shown what they were being assessed against and where they had fallen short. For the participants like Akram and Shiny, the grade was not all they intended to know. In fact, for them it served as a prism to interpret feedback and improve learning. Unlike Wojtas' (1998) and Wiliam and Black's (2002) studies, this study revealed that most students were interested not only in grades but also in acquiring knowledge. For example, Wiliam and Black (2002) contend that when students are given feedback along with mark, they hardly pay attention to feedback comments. If some students dislike grades, they tend to throw away the feedback. However, in this study, the situation appears to be different. Most L2 international students seem to pay equal attention to both

grades and feedback. They tend to see the role of summative assessment for formative purposes. The reason why L2 students like Peter, Nasir and Shiny read their feedback is that they want to know the rationale and justification behind getting a particular mark. Thus, unlike Mutch's (2004) study, the findings of this study indicate that most of the participants collected their assignments to discover the reasons behind the mark awarded. This aspect of the data about why some L2 international students want dialogic feedback justifying the grade was understood through the lens of the AL approach (Lea and Street, 2000). The AL approach suggests that in order to effectively feed forward summative assessment, tutors need to develop a constructive dialogue. This dialogic feedback helps students compare their own learning with that of an ideal and this helps them diagnose the reasons behind a particular mark. Rogers (1989, p. 62), for example, argues that assessment feedback encourages students to self-reflect and re-think both the summative and formative purposes of written assessments. Adopting Lea and Street's (1998) viewpoint, Brown (2007, p. 36) suggests that feedback justifying the grade should be structured in a way that develops self-reflection among students. The data analysed in this study indicates if feedback does not clearly inform students like Peter, Nasir and Shiny where they had done wrong or right, such feedback might not help them understand the justification of grade. The findings of this study reveal that the most L2 international students of this study seem to possess the ability to reflect upon their own learning through summative assessment. Most participants like Nasira and Peter seem to reflect on their learning through the practice of understanding and utilizing feedback. These participants hold that the role of effective summative assessment is to facilitate dialogic relationship with their tutors.

R. Q. 2: What are L2 international students' perceptions of both helpful and unhelpful feedback?

The second question of this study sought to find out L2 international students' perceptions of both helpful and unhelpful feedback. The findings of the study revealed that different participants from different countries viewed helpful feedback as that which was clearly understandable, timely, and relevant to their current and future needs as students. Moreover, they perceived feedback as useful if it engaged them into critical reflection upon their learning. The voices of Sasikarn, Sha, Nasir and Akram depicted in chapter 6 demonstrated that these participants wanted

feedback which was balanced in terms of its tone and composition and which developed their future learning. The findings revealed that these participants recognized helpful feedback as that focused on the content and form of their writing. Hyland and Hyland (2001) refer 'content' category to subject knowledge and 'form' to linguistic aspects of writing. For example, Bumni from China and Majeed from Qatar indicated that they found the feedback effective when it helped them improve their subject knowledge and linguistic aspects of assignments. Some students like Aslam and Fen valued feedback which also focused on their English language issues.

The analysis of these participants' narratives revealed that since English was not their L1, feedback comments on language would help them improve the content and form of their writings. What can be deduced from the narratives of Bumni and Majeed is that they pinned their hopes on their Business and Computing and Engineering tutors respectively to support them in improving not only the subject knowledge but also English academic writing skills. Implicit in their narratives is the idea that these students did not want to be referred to the study skills courses for the improvement of their academic English. Rather, they wanted their subject tutors to support them with their academic writing skills. The use of the AL approach as a theoretical framework has helped this study to foreground this aspect of the data analysis. Lea and Street (1998) and Wingate et al. (2011) regard academic writing as social practice which is deeply rooted within the institutional and disciplinary context. These researchers lay emphasis on embedding the teaching features of academic writing in the subject areas. Researchers within AL approach criticize the study skills model because disciplines across universities do not form a homogenous group. Rather different disciplines practice different genres of academic writing (Ivanič, Clark and Rimmershaw 2000). Lea and Street (1998) and Baynham (2000) reveal that although some disciplines may share certain features of academic writing, there exist subtle differences regarding disciplinary needs. In other words, the discourse community of each discipline follows a particular way of writing and meaning making of a text. For example, the notion of subjectivity and objectivity in education department differed from that of computing and engineering as enunciated by the accounts of Selina, Sasikarn, Nasir and Le. The narratives of these participants revealed that there existed further differences in the notion of organizing an academic assignment and the use of particular academic register in different

disciplines. What can be inferred from the findings of this study is that the subject teachers need to address the writing issues of participants of this study. This is because, teachers “as insiders of the discourse community, are in the best position to induct students into relevant literacy practices” (Wingate et al. 2011, p. 70).

A number of students also perceived effective feedback as that which helped promote dialogue around learning. For example, Vivane and Aslam viewed helpful feedback as that which engaged them in a continuous dialogue with their teachers. A key phrase in Aslam’s narrative was “two way traffic” which he used to explain the significance of dialogic feedback. I drew on the concept of the AL approach to better understand the feedback perspective of students like Aslam. Lea and Street (2004, cited in Sutton, 2009, p. 6) theorize that “feedback is enmeshed within power/knowledge relations”. In other words, “giving and receiving feedback occurs within complex contexts, and so is mediated by power relationships and the nature of the predominant discourse” (Higgins et al, 2001, p. 271). Within the AL framework, Aslam’s phrase, “two way traffic” suggests that he viewed feedback as an opportunity to engage in dialogue with his tutors. In the eyes of these L2 international students, useful feedback was the one which could shift the relationship boundaries between them and their tutors. On the whole, what can be deduced from the findings of the study is that most participants wanted dialogue with tutors where they might be able to challenge what was said in feedback.

The findings of the study revealed that most participants in the current study valued clear and detailed remarks more than marks or grades. For example, the narratives of Akram, Peter and Majeed from different disciplines indicated that they found feedback more helpful when it contained comprehensive commentary, as compared to the feedback which merely focused on the justification of the grade awarded. The findings of this study suggest that the participants at PG level were more concerned with the quality of assessment feedback.

The findings of the current study revealed that most L2 international students perceived helpful feedback as that which gave them constructive criticism composed with a balance of praise and suggestions. For example, Ali, Mansoor and Reo appreciated that feedback beginning with some positive comments helped these students enhance their self-esteem and overall engagement with feedback. The AL

approach offered a useful framework to better understand the meanings attached to the narratives of these L2 international students. Lea and Street (2000), Clark et al. (2000) and Turner (2004) all lay emphasis on balancing negative and positive comments because the “dualism of positive and negative” advice (Mutch, 2003, p. 31) can be instrumental in welcoming the student into the discourse community with a spirit of shared learning. Turner (2004) emphasizes that balancing positive and negative comments can help engage students in an ongoing dialogue by showing them that the criticism is not necessarily a final judgement but part of learning process. The reason why Ali, Mansoor and Reo perceived critical feedback as constructive was that this kind of feedback seemed to break down the power barriers between these participants and their tutors.

Most participants in this study welcomed constructive criticism when it was couched with praise and suggestions. Most participants Duy, Bharratti and Nishat wished to receive evaluative feedback in softer tones. Hyland and Hyland (2001) suggest that teachers may use certain hedging devices to mitigate the force of their criticism, such as balancing negative comment with praise or a suggestion. The findings of the current study revealed that most students like Nishat and Duy did not perceive feedback as helpful when issues in their assignments were pointed out directly. The CDA (Fairclough, 2003) analysis of the feedback artefact in this study also indicated that “combining positive and negative elements; usually conjunctive in form” (Yelland, 2011, p. 221) directed Ali towards implied improvement. Adopting Lea and Street’s (1998) suggestion, Mutch (2003, p. 31) pointed out that the “dualism of positive and negative” advice can point students to the vital importance of implied development.

The findings of the study revealed that most students welcomed the use of reflective questions as an important feature of helpful feedback. As the data analyzed in chapter 7 indicates, Khalid, Adil, Mira and some more participants remarked that reflective questions made the feedback for them more of a dialogue, which lead them to become involved in learning. The use of reflective questions offers an opportunity to students to seek clarification about the given feedback (Carless, 2006; Higgins et al., 2001, Nicol, 2010). Although not highlighted in the AL approach, several socio-cultural and educational factors influenced most participants of this study to seek further clarification of the feedback. For example, Shah, Noor and

Shiny reported that due to their shyness, lack of confidence and socio-cultural differences, they did not approach their teachers for further negotiation of feedback. Shah reported that if he approached his tutors to clarify their feedback, it might portray him as low performing student in the eyes of his tutors. For Noor, it was equivalent to challenging the authority of her teachers or doubting their judgement.

The findings of the study indicated that most L2 international students stressed the need for timely feedback. In the views of Shiny, Noor and Akram, delayed feedback was of little use because they could not benefit from the advice in their subsequent academic essays. The aspect of timeliness is well recognized in the feedback related literature (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Brown and Knight, 1994; Gibbs, 1999; Gibbs 1998; Race, 2001; Falchikov, 1995). For example, most participants like Shiny, Noor and Akram remarked that once they had moved to another term, they found untimely feedback irrelevant and less useful. The concept of timeliness can best be understood by applying the AL approach. For example, Lea and Street (cited in Sutton, 2009, p. 7) argue that “feedback received beyond the two week threshold is likely to be ignored, especially by weaker students, and it is unlikely that students will attempt to enter into a further dialogue with tutors about it”.

One of the major issues that emerged from the findings of this study was the L2 international students’ belief that mostly they received feedback which was too vague or general to be of use. This belief of the participants was corroborated by the CDA of tutor feedback artefacts. The findings of the current study suggest that most participants like Reo, Akram, Mansoor and Mira complained that the feedback was not given in plain, detailed and understandable language. These participants longed for detailed feedback that could have offered them a clear sense of their tutors’ expectations. Moreover, the lengthier feedback could have given them adequate information about assignment requirements, writing standards and pointed them where their work fell short and where they performed adequately. The data analysed in chapter 7 section 7.2 revealed that Reo found his tutor feedback vague which did not contribute to his writing development. The application of CDA analysis (Fairclough, 1992) to the artefact of feedback comment given on Reo’s assignment suggested that tutor seemed to have written her comment in categorical terms, using assertive language (e.g., Don’t use I). The AL approach (Lea and Street, 1998, p. 169) contends that tutor comments on students’ assessed work “frequently take the

form of what we call categorical modality, using imperatives and assertions, with little mitigation or qualification". Lea and Street suggest the use of more "mitigated" form of modality which might create a different relationship between tutor and student.

The findings of the current study also revealed that most participants like Fen, Mira and Duy remarked that the general advice presented through feedback could not enable them to understand the deeper function of references such as how to select the relevant sources and how or when to cite them. For example, Fen directly showed her helplessness in the face of tutor comments on (references here and references there). In addition, the data revealed that L2 international students like Fen in this study generally found the syntax of referencing quite complex and vague and such vague interpretations of feedback might have prevented them from engaging with it. Researchers within AL approach (Lillis and Turner, 2001) theorize that comments such as 'lack of references' may appear understandable to tutors familiar with the rhetorical conventions of assessment feedback. However, they may appear confusing to HE students who are not familiar with such conventions. The narratives of Mira, Duy and Fen indicated that one of the reasons why they found referencing difficult was that they might not be fully familiar with this concept in a UK university. The analysis of data also suggested that these participants wanted their tutors to make explicit the role and significance of referencing in academic writing through their feedback. What can be deduced from the accounts of these students is that tutor feedback could not help them understand that referencing is used in an academic text to add plausibility to the argument.

Moreover, the findings of the study suggested that assessment feedback which was much too critical was perceived as unhelpful by most L2 international students. Some students like Peter and Vivane appeared to disregard such feedback altogether. Likewise, as shown in section 7.2, the CDA analysis of tutor feedback comments revealed that most of the feedback was composed in categorical and assertive language, offering little or no opportunity for further negotiation and clarification. For example, the narratives of Selina and Khalid indicated that they found feedback more effective when it focused on good points, rather than criticising on the shortcomings in the essays of these students. It is important to note that the AL approach views assessment feedback as two-sided communication and, thus, lays emphasis on the composition of feedback, particularly its tone. The findings

suggest that most participants of the study wanted to receive feedback composed in supportive and constructive manner. Participants like Selina and Khalid wished that their tutors could recognize the significance of praise and used a balanced approach while marking their assignments.

One aspect of unhelpful feedback that seemed to disturb the participants of the study was the variations in the feedback comments of their tutors. Some participants like Aslam, Ali, Noor and Selina reported that their tutors gave contradictory feedback on the use of particular vocabulary and on the structure of assignments. This in return created frustration and confusion, which eventually constrained the usefulness of feedback. In order to understand the aspect of variable feedback and its ineffectiveness within the data, the AL approach was applied. Lea and Street (2000, p. 45) contend that the process of giving and receiving feedback is a complex and problematic form of communication, which takes place within tutors' "assumptions about what constitutes valid knowledge". Lea and Street (1998, p. 162) further disclose that "academic staff have their own fairly well-defined views regarding what constitutes the elements of a good piece of student writing in the areas in which they teach". For example Le's narrative analysed in chapter 8 revealed that one of his tutors accepted the use of the first person in his essays, however the other did not, and this caused confusion and loss of self-esteem for him. In order to better understand this aspect of the data I found the AL approach particularly illuminating. For example, according to Lea and Street (1998), some tutors do not find the use of first person problematic in students' assignments whereas other tutors might object to this notion. This tension can cause insecurity and confusion for students. In order to justify their viewpoint, Lea and Street gave a detailed example of a student who successfully passed her assignment in history. However, the same student could not pass her anthropology essay because of the difference of linguistic and epistemological requirements of that particular discipline. That is, her anthropology tutor could not recognize the rationale behind the structure of students' essay which was based on the constructs of a history essay. The findings of the current study revealed that the tutor feedback could not help many participants like Le, Aslam, Ali, Noor and Selina whether the use of first person pronoun in academic writing is appropriate or not. The analysis of these participants' narratives indicated that they

could not gain confidence even after spending one year in a UK university due to variable and contradictory feedback.

This study revealed that most L2 international students were motivated to engage with the assessment feedback when it was provided in a constructive manner. A large majority of students such as Ahmed, Nasir, Adil and Peter perceived positive feedback to be very important as it helped increase their self-esteem, confidence and motivation. These participants clearly recognized the need for more of a balance between negative and positive feedback as this kind of feedback, instead of discouraging them, can motivate them to improve. The analysis of data provided an evidence to support the view that negative feedback can have damaging impact upon most L2 international students' self-esteem. It is important here to draw on the AL approach to further describe this aspect of the data. Lea and Street (2000) lay emphasis on making non-judgemental comments which can help students enter into a dialogue with their tutors. On the other hand, categorical comments and symbols are likely to be misunderstood by students. These researchers advocate the significance of being explicit because clear, direct and understandable feedback can help break down the power barriers between students and tutors and engage them in a more meaningful dialogue. The data analysed in this study indicated that students like Ahmed, Nasir, Adil and Peter valued feedback which allowed them how to improve, not just what to improve. According to these participants, if no explanation is given on what was wrong with the use of "I" and "we" in their writing, they were unable to utilize this comment take it forward.

Overall, the findings of the current study revealed that most L2 international students seemed relatively sophisticated in their approach towards utilizing feedback. The inference from this study is that students claimed to read and act on assessment feedback. As the analysis of data demonstrated that some students kept copies of specific feedback as a reference point for their learning. However, some students found brief and general comments such as 'explain', 'justify' and 'reference' difficult to interpret. For example, participants like Bharratti, Sasikarn and Shah found feedback comments as negative and ineffective when they were too general, too impersonal and vague or lacked specific guidance and details. These students also found feedback as ineffective when it focused too much on negatives composed in assertive and categorical language. In order to understand the voices of these

students, the AL approach as a theoretical framework was applied which interprets this form of tutor feedback as categorical modality (Lea and Street, 2000). The AL approach contends that comments written in unmitigated and assertive language can cause difficulty for students to interpret them correctly. The CDA of Bharratti, Sasikarn, Shah and some more participants revealed that most tutor comments were written in overly categorical tone which allowed little or no room to these students for further learning. Such critical and dismissive comments were largely seen by these participants as unhelpful, causing a loss of self-esteem, confidence and identity.

R.Q. 3: What problems do L2 international students face while interpreting the language of summative assessment?

The findings of the study revealed that L2 international students attached great significance to summative assessment for their academic learning. Different participants coming from different nationalities and disciplines wished to receive grades and feedback together. They found the grades an initial prism through which meaning of the assessment discourse was made. Unlike some previous key studies (Gibbs, 2006b; Bailey & Garner, 2010; Carless, 2006) on feedback, the participants of this study paid equal attention to feedback comments and grades. For example, the findings of Gibbs' (2006b, p.34) study indicate that "if students receive feedback without marks or grades, they are more likely to read the feedback". Bailey and Garner (2010) and Carless (2006) also argue that most students look at the grade and pay less heed to feedback comments. However, the L2 international students like Ali, Ahmed and Selina found summative assessment as an initial gateway to understand and interpret tutor feedback. The narratives of these participants indicated that they took serious account of their good and bad grades and, thus, actively constructed the usefulness of summative assessment for better learning and future performance. The findings suggested that most participants viewed summative assessment as an integral part of their learning and used it for formative purposes.

Despite L2 international students' quest for summative assessment, most participants like Bharratti, Majeed and Aslam complained against the quality and quantity of summative commentary justifying the mark awarded. In order to better discuss the L2 international students' perspective of summative assessment, I drew

on the AL approach. For example, the AL approach theorises that if feedback on assessed work is not of sufficient quantity, it might not be useful for learners (Brown and Knight, 1994, p. 17). The reason why students like Bharratti, Majeed and Aslam experienced this predicament in interpreting the grade was that they found feedback terse and vague. What can be inferred from Ahmed, Aslam and Majeed's emotional responses is that they, perhaps, wanted more feedback which might have helped them to better interpret the grade awarded. The AL approach contends that students make an "emotional investment in an assignment" and expect a "return" on that investment in the form of clear and specific feedback (Higgins et al. 2001, p. 272). This clear feedback might help them better interpret the grade awarded.

While investigating L2 international students' perceptions of summative assessment, this present study found that most participants were dissatisfied with regard to comments justifying the grade. I found the AL approach very illuminating to understand this aspect of the data. For example, Lea (2004, p. 225) theorizes that tutors somehow internalize the discourse of summative assessment on which their comments are based. On the other hand, students experience problems in learning these academic discourses as reported in chapter 8. Thus, sometimes this type of summative discourse appears vague to students, which does not help them understand where and how they lost marks. According to the AL approach, summative assessment written in the academic register that the students have yet to acquire may impact upon negatively upon their learning and motivation (Lillis, 2003; Ivanic et al. 2000). Seen from this angle, the reasons why Duy, Fen, Shah's narratives reported in chapter 8 reveal that the reason why they could not decode the feedback was that they were unfamiliar with the discourse of assessment underpinning tutor written comments. The narratives of these participants seemed to lay emphasis on explicitly showing them through summative assessment the rationale behind getting certain grades.

The overall impression that arose out of the analysis of data in this study is that L2 international students wanted their tutors to justify the grades through personalized, specific and clear discourse. The findings of the study indicated that students like Mansoor, Sasikarn, Nasira and Mira wanted their tutors to depart from the style of giving feedback in formulaic discourse. Rather they wanted detailed feedback in the margins or on text, showing them clear rationale behind attaining particular grades.

Aslam's remarks 'this feedback like not for me' seems to endorse the notion that feedback is written to not only justify the mark given but also it is used and to maintain the official record of student's progress. What can be deduced from Akram's narrative is that tutors write formative and summative feedback for two different purposes. The target audiences of formative feedback are directly students whereas much of the content of summative assessment is aimed to meet wider institutional requirements. Drawing on the AL approach has helped me foreground the reasons why participants like Aslam, Mansoor, Sasikarn, Nasira and Mira felt dissatisfied with this impersonal style of summative comments. For example Lea and Street (1998) advise that the summative comments should be "couched in subjective terminology so that the student does not associate the voice of the tutor as an 'authority': 'I find this hard to understand' is much more motivating than just: 'Hard to understand' or simply '?'" (cited in Wilkinson, p. 4). Seen from this perspective, most students like Mansoor and Sasikarn found it confusing to interpret the discourse of assessment on which their tutor comments were based. Consequently, this confusion foreclosed them from entering into a dialogue with their tutors.

The findings of this study revealed that most L2 international students often experienced problems in comprehending assessment discourse underpinning feedback. A common concern for many of the participants was that tutor feedback reflecting assessment criteria appeared to be either vague or too general. For example, the participants like Le and Ali from Vietnam and Iraq respectively complained that their tutor feedback employed the academic register used to express assessment criteria. These students complained that they did not comprehend fully what these criteria of Business and Health Sciences disciplines implied. The inability to fully understand the meaning of assessment criteria negatively impacted upon these students' perceptions of feedback. It is important to mention here that I found the AL approach particularly insightful to understand this aspect of the data. For example, Crème and Lea (1997) theorize that assessment criteria are based on abstract constructs which may be difficult for students to fully grasp. These researchers argue that although teachers may recognize good essay, yet they may struggle to explicitly articulate what a good essay entails. Therefore, the very discourse of assessment criteria is based on tacit knowledge and can be a source of consternation for students. The reason why students like Le and Ali in

chapter 8, section 8.4 failed to perceive summative feedback was that tutors comments were based on taken-for-granted academic discourses which underpin assessment criteria and the language of feedback.

The findings of the study indicated that L2 international student's perceptions of summative assessment go beyond the immediate context of writing assignment. It emerged from the analysis of data that many participants like Reo, Pattama and Shiny stated that they had limited understanding of what the assessment criteria symbolized and how it was converted into the grade awarded. It needs to be mentioned here that AL approach as a theoretical framework has informed my understanding of this aspect of data. Lea and Street (2000 p. 35) theorize students' feedback learning as a socially situated practice which is subject to range of factors such as assessment criteria and the student-teacher relationship. The socially situatedness of learning refers to the variety of academic norms and conventions which students are involved in learning and contesting. Lea and Street (1998) dispute the notion that language is a transparent medium and that messages are uncomplicatedly conveyed from tutors to students through feedback interactions. For example, Reo, Pattama and Shiny revealed that they often could not clearly understand the assessment criteria. For these participants, assessment criteria represented another form of discourse which posed challenges to interpret the feedback. These students also complained that their tutors did not seem to have time to explain the criteria in the classroom. They were given a sample of good student's work. The teachers did not explain to them the required standards and, therefore, these participants had a vague understanding of what the criteria represented and how these were converted into grades.

The evidence of this study revealed that most L2 international students found the discourse of feedback inconsistent and they were perplexed about the underlying meanings of assessment criteria. For example, students like Shah, who performed well in their coursework, found that general comments (e.g., too much description, little analysis) seemed to lack substance. These participants wanted more detail for formative purposes.

R.Q. 4: How do tutor written feedback impact upon the L2 international students' confidence, motivation, self-esteem, identity and the student-teacher relationship?

The findings of the study revealed that L2 international students' experiences of receiving negative comments had damaging impact on their confidence, self-esteem and emotional well-being. The findings also indicate that most participants perceived un-hedged criticism and overly judgemental feedback as negative. This in return had a deleterious impact upon their self-perceptions as L2 international learners, leading them to interpret feedback personally instead of a criticism on their work. The AL approach sees feedback a social process in which elements of power, emotion and discourse seemed to have an impact upon students' interpretations of feedback. According to Higgins (2000, p. 6), "receiving feedback is an emotional business". Hyland (1998, p. 279) also contends that "writing is an intensely personal activity, and students' motivation and confidence in themselves as writers may be adversely affected by the feedback they receive". The findings of the current study indicate that most participants like Nasira, Selina and Noor were shocked upon receiving unclear and unfavourable comments. For example, the tutor feedback (your references look like a shopping list) turned out to be daunting for Nasira, which had a negative impact upon her confidence, self-esteem and emotions. The narratives of these participants revealed that they tended to develop a relationship of distrust with their tutors. Students like Selina and Noor wished that their tutors could have recognized that they came from a different academic background and were not, probably, well familiar with the academic writing demands in a UK university.

The data analysed in chapter 9 revealed that students like Reo, Shiny, Mira and Le were struggling to understand the new rules of critical writing, referencing and voice. These particular international students were writing in English which was an additional language. They seemed to grapple with some other socio-cultural issues of academia as being international students. Therefore, they wanted to receive feedback which was less anxiety-provoking. I found the AL approach particularly insightful to understand this aspect of the data. For example, Lea and Street (1998) suggest that incautious tutor feedback might put students in a negative frame of mind and impact upon the student-teacher relationship. In the face of receiving

negative comments, participants like Nasira's confidence became threatened as she seemed unwilling to send her future work to the tutor.

The findings of the study revealed that tutor feedback is underpinned by tacit and subject specific discourses. Many L2 international students like Ali, Shiny and Vivane interpreted the tutors' comments incorrectly because they were struggling to understand these discourse due to their tacit nature. Higgins (2000, p. 6) argues that "the 'gap' between tutor and student in terms of access to discourse, power and authority is widened by a somewhat 'hidden' emotional dimension". Seen from this perspective, the reason why most participants misinterpreted their tutor feedback was due to the generic nature of the academic discourse. The narrative of these participants revealed that they perceived tacit feedback as negative. Consequently they viewed such feedback as a rejection of both their work and even characters. For example, Selina's narrative illustrates that she responds emotionally to her tutor feedback. In order to avoid another emotional experience of similar nature, Selina reacts that she cannot survive 'in this academic culture'. The findings of the study indicate that these L2 international students wanted their teachers to break down the power differentials and promote learning through balanced feedback. It is important to note that the findings from AL approach (Turner, 2004, Lea and Street, 2000; Clark et al. 2000) lay emphasis on balancing negative and positive comments. This kind of strategy can help L2 international students of this study engage in an ongoing dialogue with their tutors. This can also help students like Selina, Ali, Shiny and Vivane to understand that tutor remarks are not necessarily a final verdict, rather part of a formative process.

A number of participants of the study complained that they received categorical and un-hedged feedback which did not imply the opportunity for further clarification and negotiation. The analysis of Majeed, Adil and Duy's narratives revealed that tutors gave them authoritarian and vague feedback which negatively told upon the motivation, self-esteem and identity of these students. For example, the reason why Majeed failed to connect with his tutor feedback was that it was written in general, vague and categorical tone. Some other students also viewed such feedback as insignificant and invalid and did not pay attention to it. The findings suggest that such discouraging feedback negatively impacted upon these students' self-esteem, confidence and the whole approach to the course. It can be deduced from the

analysis of the data that tutor evaluative comments negatively impacted upon students' self-perceptions as capable learners. Consequently, this led these participants to self-undervalue their past educational experiences. The findings also suggest that in the face of tutors' negative comments, most participants like Majeed, Adil, Aslam and Le appeared to attach limited value to their prior educational qualifications. This might be because most international students tended to find assessment feedback as an academic shock while adjusting to a different academic milieu.

The findings of the study reveal that emotion, self-esteem and confidence are some of the important constituents of feedback discourse, and giving encouraging and motivating feedback is a complex process. The findings presented in chapter 9 indicate the language used to compose feedback can have an impact upon students' emotional well-being, confidence and self-esteem. For example, judgemental comments were perceived as negative by most participants like Bharratti, Nishat and Aslam. The findings also revealed that, if the comments are too negative or dismissive, they could result in loss of confidence and motivation for these participants. In order to interpret these findings, I found the AL approach illuminating. For example, Lea and Street (2000) suggest that the comments composed with unmitigated discourse and imperatives can pose difficulties for learners and, thus, they tend to become unresponsive to such feedback. The findings of this study also suggest that a received feedback message may potentially be misinterpreted by the participants. The L2 international students' narratives presented in chapter 9 suggest that they might take the poorly written feedback personally which can cause loss of self-esteem, emotion, identity and confidence.

Chapter 11: Conclusion

This study was undertaken to examine the L2 international PG students' perceptions of assessment feedback in terms of its impact upon their academic learning. Of particular interest, this study was conducted to explore the contextual factors such as meaning, identity and the student-teacher power relationship and their influence on L2 international students' perceptions of feedback. The present study used qualitative interpretive research paradigm that synthesized the AL approach and CDA to investigate students' perceptions of feedback on their assignments in a UK university. The data came from two main sources: (1) semi-structured in-depth interviews with students of varying nationalities and departments (2) students' interpretations of teacher written feedback comments which they read aloud and reflected during interviews.

The findings of the study have shown that assessment feedback is a unique form of communication which takes place within the wider socio-cultural context of a UK university. The study highlights that the process of giving and receiving feedback involves a complex interplay of self-esteem, identity, motivation, emotion and the power relations. The study also highlights that the participants have had little or no experience of receiving such feedback in their countries of origin. Therefore, the move from one academic context to a UK university turned out to be challenging for L2 international students. The study sheds light on the question of how different linguistic, educational and cultural backgrounds of L2 international student presented them challenges while coming to terms with new assessment expectations, writing requirements and academic culture of a UK university. By looking at the student perspective, the study has offered deep insights into the reasons why international students show dissatisfaction with feedback, what problems they encounter while making meaning of the feedback discourse situated in new educational and socio-cultural environment. In brief, to better understand assessment feedback as a socially situated practice, this research has addressed the questions of how the interplay of issues such as discourse, identity, power, control and social relationships mediated students' perceptions of feedback.

One of the aims of this study was to find out how L2 international students perceived the function of feedback they received on their assessed work and how useful they

thought it in terms of learning and improvement. Unlike previous studies (Falchikov, 1995; Duncan, 2007; Crisp 2007), the findings of the study revealed that L2 international students generally welcome assessment feedback and they hold it as a highly valued resource for learning. The data also suggests that the participants had positive attitudes towards the function of feedback, to make valuable contribution to their current and subsequent learning. It is notable in the study that the participants are quite strategic in their approach towards assessment feedback. They had the tendency to utilize feedback from one semester to help with work on other modules in the subsequent semesters. Moreover, feedback served as a motivating force for these students by helping them to pursue learning in a more independent way. In general, they viewed the role of feedback in terms of pointing out weaknesses and helping them present the argument clearly and in critical way. The findings reveal that the respondents seek to adopt deep approach to learning and they link the role of feedback to enhanced motivation, confidence and self-esteem and identity as L2 international students. The participants viewed feedback as a unique form of communication which offered them an opportunity to enter into an intellectual dialogue with their teachers. The students emphasized that a simple “receptive-transmission” (Askew and Lodge, 2000) was not greatly sufficient where feedback is largely seen as a one-way transmission of message. Rather, this study lays emphasis on dialogic and interactive feedback which can help strengthen the student-teacher relationship.

Unlike some previous studies by Brown et al. (1996), Hounsell (1987) and Weaver (2006) the findings of this study reveal that the L2 international students perceive the main role of feedback is to give a clear justification of why a particular mark is awarded. For example, the study shows that most participants viewed the role of feedback as part of a service they could expect. These L2 international students, in the words of Higgins et al. (2002, p. 61), are “conscientious consumers” of the higher education service. The findings suggest that L2 international students utilized the feedback when they were clearly shown what they were being assessed against and where they had fallen short. For most of the participants the grade was not all they interested to know. In fact, for them it served as a prism to interpret feedback and improve learning. Unlike Wojtas’ (1998) and William and Black’s (2002) studies, this study revealed that most students were interested not only in grades but also in

acquiring knowledge. For example, Wiliam and Black (2002) contend that when students are given feedback along with mark, they hardly pay attention to feedback comments. If some students dislike grades, they tend to throw away the feedback. However, in this study, the situation appears to be different. Most participants of this study pay equal attention to both grades and feedback.

The findings of the study revealed L2 international students valued clear and detailed remarks more than marks or grades. The students' narratives from different disciplines indicated that they found feedback more helpful when it contained comprehensive commentary, as compared to the feedback which merely focused on the justification of the grade awarded. The findings of this study suggest that the participants at PG level were more concerned with the quality of assessment feedback. Most L2 international students perceived helpful feedback as that which gave them constructive criticism composed of a balance of praise and suggestions. The study further shows that the participants welcomed the use of reflective questions as an important feature of helpful feedback. Some participants remarked that reflective questions made the feedback for them more of a dialogue, which led them to become involved in learning. The use of reflective questions offers an opportunity to students to seek clarification about the given feedback.

The study has offered deep insights into various complex challenges L2 international students experienced while understanding assessment feedback in a UK university. One of the most important issues that students faced was they found the discourse of feedback quite vague, direct, lacking specificity, formulaic and difficult to interpret. This was also supported by the CDA of tutor feedback comments on students' academic essays. The study further suggests that the tutor formulaic and overly critical and categorical comments had a negative influence on students' self-esteem, identity, confidence and the student-teacher relationship. Overly negative and un-hedged criticism had a negative impact upon L2 students' perceptions as capable learners, leading them to perceive feedback personally rather than a criticism on their assignments. In the face of negative tutor criticism, most students seemed to undervalue their past academic achievements. Some students went so far as to say that their previous academic qualifications seemed to have little or no value in a UK university.

This study highlights that L2 international students received inconsistent and conflicting tutor feedback. The students found the discourse of feedback underpinned by assessment criteria confusing and less accessible. Their narratives revealed that they generally believed that the rules of conventions of assessment criteria were considerably difficult to comprehend. The study highlights that due to teachers' objections on the use of "I" and "We", they found feedback difficult to understand. In the face of teacher's emphasis on objectivity, students experienced issues in expressing their opinions and most believed that they had lost their voices. In this regard, students wanted their disciplinary tutors to instruct them how to improve their form and content of writing. If a problem occurred in their assignments, these students did not want to be referred to the study skills teachers to fix the problem. Rather, this study emphasizes the need for an embedded approach (Street, 2004; Wingate et al. 2011) within which subject teachers deal with specific type of writing required for a particular discipline. The study divulges that feedback practices varied from discipline to discipline and therefore teacher of a particular subject can better guide the students to acquire the norms and traditions of academic writing specific to their subjects.

The study further reveals that the L2 international students found the syntax of referencing quite complex and difficult to understand. The CDA analysis of the artefact of tutor written feedback comments also shows that feedback could not clarify to students as how many references they needed in an assignment. This brought about enormous concern to most participants. While writing their assignments, students' main concern was to cite as many references as possible. The study highlights that students generally wished that their tutors could be aware of their different needs as L2 international students. They also felt the need that their tutors might have given them additional support in overcoming the challenges of interpreting feedback correctly. It is further observed in this study that the participants wanted their tutor to tailor their feedback, keeping in view their different socio-cultural and academic needs. The students also wanted their tutors to take departure from the formalized and formulaic style of written feedback, to make it more accessible for L2 international students. The students' narratives underscore the need to have informal, regular and personalized feedback. The study suggests

that taking departure from the formalized style of writing feedback may be a helpful idea. This study sheds lights on the reason why L2 international students fail to engage with feedback is that the students and teachers have different conceptions of knowledge. The students did not seem to have a clear understanding of the assumptions about the nature of academic language underpinning feedback. In the context of these findings, this study suggests that it is important for teachers to consider that the discourse underlying assessment criteria may not be as clear and meaningful as it appears to be.

This study has identified several issues such as tone, depth, focus and clarity which might compromise the effectiveness of assessment feedback. The study shows that L2 international students wanted comprehensive feedback, focusing upon their linguistic and content of assignments. Such feedback, as students' voices revealed, enhanced their conceptual clarity and overall engagement with the subject knowledge. The participants of this study wanted constructive feedback comments composed in softer tones which could allow them room for further negotiation and clarification. In addition, they valued regular feedback on their drafts which they could use for subsequent learning. It is important to note that the participants of this study were wholeheartedly interested to utilize assessment feedback, especially when they believed that doing so would help them improve their subsequent work. The findings of the study shed light on the aspect of how L2 international students, at times, need help to seek clarification on the given feedback. In this regard, several socio-cultural and previous academic factors such as fear of tutors' disrespect, lack of motivation and shyness can impede their efforts to seek further negotiation and clarification of feedback.

In the light of above findings, this study suggests that if feedback is to be seen as an effective opportunity, teachers need to enter into a dialogic relationship with their students. This might help teachers discover L2 international students' individual needs. In addition, feedback written in constructive and dialogic way can contribute to the encouragement, self-esteem, motivation and confidence of students. Consequently, enhanced level of self-esteem may enable students to interpret feedback more objectively instead of seeing it as a criticism on their personalities or abilities. The study further identifies that if teachers want to feed forward feedback, it needs to be relevant to, and be meaningful for, individual students. It needs to be

oriented to the particular wants and hopes as L2 international students. Furthermore, teachers should encourage L2 international students to engage with feedback, so that it might become part of their learning identity in a UK university. In order to achieve this goal, feedback needs to be written in a dialogic manner. This study identifies that clear and specific feedback may foster autonomy among L2 international students. Such an approach may enable these students to learn how to learn and improve their academic performance.

11.1 Implications for the AL approach

The AL approach provides an appropriate framework to understand the L2 international students' perceptions of feedback in a UK university. This approach views feedback literacy as a particular form of literacy, which takes place within the particular socio-cultural contexts of a university (Street, 1995; Lea and Street, 1998; Lea 2004; Street, 2004). Developing feedback literacy, like any other form of academic literacy, implies that students inculcate a new way of knowing the academia and making sense of their experiences and themselves. Thus, ontological and epistemological dimensions are central to feedback literacy. Learning to read and write within the HE context involves a complex interplay of psychosocial elements. According to Lea and Street (1998), the problems faced by students while acquiring feedback literacy are not simply understood as a skills deficit or a failure to acculturate sufficiently to the norms and practices of academia. Rather, such problems are understood as emerging from "the gaps between faculty expectations and student interpretation" (Street 2004, p. 15), and from the student-teacher power relations within which feedback is implicated. As Lea & Street (1998: 3) contend, the Academic Literacies approach "views the institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as sites of discourse and power".

The findings of this study revealed that the academic discourse and academic literacy turned out to be an impediment for L2 international students to interpret feedback correctly. To understand the discourse of assessment feedback, these students need to familiarize themselves with the academic terminology. This study highlights that the participants experienced difficulty in interpreting the tutor feedback, not just because they were unfamiliar with the language, but the concepts and values underpinning the discourse of feedback were unfamiliar, too. In addition,

feedback practices varied from discipline to discipline, further compounding the feedback literacy of L2 international students. This study seems to support the findings of the AL approach that feedback not only allows personal communication with the students but also communicates to them the academic values and beliefs and the teacher's authority which is used to judge their work. As Lea and Street (2000, p. 43) indicate, "there is a dynamic within the feedback genre which works to both construct academic knowledge and maintain relationships of power and authority between the novice student and the experienced academic".

The AL approach has offered useful insights to examine the L2 international students' perceptions as a situated phenomenon. This is because the wider socio-cultural particularities of the academic context influence students' perceptions and practices in this study. For the L2 international students who are settling into a new academic community, they need to make meaning of the language and values underlying the discourse of feedback. However, if feedback is one-sided communication, they may not fully understand that their perceptions of feedback match with that of the academic community. This study consolidates the AL approach that if feedback is to be seen a fruitful activity, it should take the form of a dialogue. This reflects that the simple "receptive-transmission" model (Askew and Lodge, 2000, pp. 2-4) of feedback is not adequate because it views feedback as one-way communication. In the receptive-transmission model, the tutor is assumed to adopt the role of an expert advisor who transmits knowledge to the students. The students are considered as passive recipients. Askew and Lodge (*ibid*, p. 5) remark that is the dominant view of teaching and learning in the UK HE. On the other hand, the AL approach views feedback as a socially situated practice. The findings of this study have consolidated the viewpoint that feedback literacy is a situated phenomenon since the context within which students perform the assessment tasks shape their perceptions and practices. The study highlights that the process of giving and receiving feedback involves a complex interplay of self-esteem, identity, motivation, emotion and the power relations. This study suggests that feedback is a form of judgement where tutor often use overly critical discourse. It is further highlighted in this study that tutors need to take great care while writing feedback so that comments could bring about positive change in the self-esteem, motivation, emotion and confidence of L2 international students. In summary, instead of passing

“judgement on good and bad writing” (Street, 2004, p. 15) and instead of attributing students’ feedback problems as deficiencies in study skills repertoire, this study suggests a more situated view of L2 international students’ feedback experiences. Therefore, feedback literacy is seen as a complex form of academic literacy in which students’ interpretations of the meaning of feedback differ from that of tutors.

11.2 Limitations of the study

This study has provided insights into the feedback phenomenon of L2 international PG students in a UK university. This study indicates that international students on Master’s taught programs are required to make quick adjustments to new academic culture and to produce their work in L2 with higher degree of critical engagement. This study has attempted to provide better insights into the question of how feedback should be integrated effectively with teaching to make such group of students’ transition easier. However, there are several limitations of the study which are listed below:

- Since this is qualitative study taking place within the particular context of a UK university, so the findings are not easily generalizable to other contexts. Although the study comprised of participants from a range of departments in one institution, the findings may not be representative of their other cohorts. This is because, as it is maintained throughout the thesis, the context plays a pivotal role in shaping students’ interpretations of feedback.
- The main source of data generation in the study is semi-structured interviews. The data collected from such research methods is described as self-reported and this can raise issues regarding the data reliability. There might be issues of recall during this kind of data generation tools. However, it was countered by asking students to discuss their perceptions in the light of written feedback given on their assessed work.
- The data generated for this study was based on one-off inquiry into the perceptions of L2 international students. Such type of research may not portray holistic picture of the given phenomenon. Research on the role of feedback for academic learning arguably invites longitudinal studies that might yield more rich insights.

11.3 Suggestions for future research

- Future study, especially on the disparity between tutor beliefs and international students' interpretation of assessment feedback is suggested. Such a study may focus on gathering data from a larger sample from a range of schools, incorporating both tutors and international students pursuing postgraduate studies on taught and research programs.
- Similar research can be undertaken in other parts of the UK so as to portray a holistic picture of various groups of students' experiences of assessment feedback.
- This study suggests that acquiring feedback literacy is a lengthy process since students are required to develop academic knowledge and practices specific to each discipline at university level over a period of time. Therefore, more longitudinal studies can be carried out to illuminate the feedback experiences of students over a certain period of time. In this type of study, the use of extensive textual in the form of assignments, student diaries, electronic and verbal feedback might add more to the reliability of the findings.
- A larger study can be undertaken to validate the findings of this study. This study might employ multi-method approach as a main source of data collection. This approach might enhance the validity of the study.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Covering Letter/ Email accompanying Questionnaire

Thesis title: International postgraduate students' perceptions of assessment feedback: An analysis

The purpose of this questionnaire is to collect data from international students at MA level for my PhD research. I am an international student and I am looking at international postgraduate students' experiences of tutor written feedback. My research deals with the question of how tutor assessment feedback helps students improve academically. The purpose of this questionnaire is to collect background information about international students so that I get better idea how many international MA students are studying in this university, what are their nationalities and what course they are studying. The participation is optional and any information given here will remain strictly confidential as per university ethics rules.

Best wishes

PhD Researcher

Saqib Mahmood

Questionnaire

This questionnaire should take about 5 minutes to complete. Please tick the appropriate options. On a few occasions, you are asked to provide written answer.

1. What school you are studying in
 - a) Education
 - b) Business
 - c) Health sciences
 - d) Arts and humanities

2. Which course are you currently enrolled now?

3. Are you studying as

- a) Full time
- b) Part time

4. Are you currently studying in semester/term:

- a) I
- b) II
- c) III

5. What country are you from?

6. Is English your native language?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) If no, what is your native language?

7. What is your gender?

- a) Male
- b) Female

The data I collect from this questionnaire will form part of the background data for my PhD thesis. I am also intending to collect data through interviews. If you are willing to be interviewed, please give your email below. The interviews would take place between May and June (2014). The interview will be about 40-50 minutes long at a time convenient to you. I will contact you via email and your participation will be voluntary. With your permission, I would record the interview so that I can transcribe it afterwards. Your name will not be recorded. The interviews will be anonymised and

no personal information will be revealed to any third party. You can decide to withdraw at any time. If you are happy for an interview, please leave your email address below and I will contact you.

Email contact:

Appendix 2: Questions/prompts/probes for Individual Interviews

Background Information

1. Could you briefly tell me about yourself?

Prompts

- Why did you decide to choose this UK university?
 - What subject are you studying?
 - Your educational background?
2. Could you tell me about your educational experiences prior to coming to this UK university?

Prompts

- Qualification?
 - Differences between experience of studying in your home country university and UK?
 - How did you adjust to a new academic environment in the UK?
3. Could you tell me about your experiences of receiving tutor feedback on your assignments?

Prompts

- Both positive and negative?
 - Quality and quantity of feedback?
 - Can you give me examples of good and bad feedback that you may have received?
4. How important do you think is tutor feedback in terms of making academic progress?
 - Does it help you improve your assignments?
 - Does it help you get better grades?
 - Whether it helps you achieve your personal aims?

5. Could you tell me about your experiences of interpreting the feedback comments on your assignments?

- **Prompts**

- Do you think that your tutor's comments were easy to understand?
- Your major problems while understanding the language of feedback?
- To what extent did you find these comments helpful for academic improvement?

6. Could you tell me any experience of receiving encouraging feedback?

- What was your reaction?
- What was its impact on you as a learner?
- How did it help promote your motivation and self-esteem?

7. Could you tell me any experience of getting discouraging feedback?

- What was your reaction?
- Whether it helped you make academic progress or not?
- Whether it had any impact upon your motivation or not?
- Whether it affected your self-esteem or not?
- Whether it affected your relationship with the tutor or not?

8. Could you think of the most encouraging feedback you received from your tutor and do you think tutors are generally sympathetic to your problems and the challenges you are facing in academic writing or they ask you to find your own way out, as you are university students?

9. Is there anything else you want to say about your experiences of feedback?

Appendix 3: Sample of Interview Data

Interview 3

Interviewer: Could you tell me about your experiences of receiving tutor feedback on your assignments?

Interviewee: The feedbacks I have got in my first semester were helpful actually but I couldn't follow them properly in my current assignments because I am using feedback only as much as I remember. However I think the feedback is really very helpful for example, I had referencing style mistakes in my previous assignment and I got feedback that I did it wrongly but now I have overcome this problem. I have also got feedback from several teachers about the context that I am using inappropriate text what I quote from different authors. Even if I don't try to do so it happens all the time.

Interviewer: What do you understand by the word inappropriate context?

Interviewee: Well I understand it this way for instance that I include irrelevant information which does not fit to my topic of International Strategy in Turkey. Sometimes they give feedback in detail like in this part you have given inappropriate information and your writing style is vague or not acceptable.

Interviewer: What do you understand when they say that your writing style is vague? Does it make any sense to you?

Interviewee: When I got this feedback saying my writing style is vague, I couldn't understand it honestly. I disagreed with my teacher and requested him to reconsider it. I think my writing is understandable and I don't have great issues with English language writing. The teacher asked me to wait for some time and when I received his email; my marks remained the same 48% with the comments that your writing is vague and there is no discussion in your essay he added. When we talk about social sciences for example we say that the world is developing and support our point with different experts' opinion. That's how the discussion goes on and my essay was based on such stuff. However I am second learner of English language and I can commit mistakes but I couldn't completely follow that feedback stating my writing a vague style. I don't know what part was vague, the whole assignment was vague,

how it was vague and what was the mistake specifically. My teacher didn't tell my mistake in detail. Then I said that it's okay at least I have passed.

Interviewer: You have given both positive and negative examples of feedback you have got in your 5 assignments as you said. Did the feedback help you improve academic writing and academic learning? Did you improve your writing and discussion style after getting that specific feedback about your vague style of writing?

Interviewee: Not actually. Because I have prepared a lot for IELTS exams and my writing style is acceptable. And after coming here I started using APA referencing style which I was not used to do before in my country as we have different teaching system. I have also learned critical writing, reading and thinking like stuff. Those feedbacks I can say have partly helped me defeating critical reading, writing, thinking and referencing issues because my writing style is the same. I got 70% in my first assignment and my teacher appreciated my writing. This is in my second assignment I got feedback from the teacher my writing is vague. I spent one month in my first assignment but I could not spare the same amount of time for the second assignment which affected its quality and I guess that's why I got lower marks.

So the feedback varies from teacher to teacher and the student has to know or guess how the teacher is thinking about the given topic for example international strategy because he evaluates you according to his mind. Only then we can get better feedback and better marks as well.

Interviewer: That's the good suggestion. Can you remember some more examples of written feedback given by your tutors? What was your first experience of getting feedback? Did you face any difficulty in understanding the language of feedback?

Interviewee: I understood everything well. As once in second part of my assignment the tutor identified some irrelevant material which I intentionally added and I was surprised to know that the teacher read whole assignment and the feedback was what I expected. However the sentences like 'your writing style is vague' do not reveal the exact meaning.

Interviewer: What would you like to suggest the teachers to use language instead of telling that it's vague?

Interviewee: They should comment like that your referencing style is incorrect or your writing style is not academic or you have used irrelevant material in this part of the essay. This kind of feedback helps the student instead of giving comments in general because the student can't find out which part is irrelevant or wrong academic style through in general feedback. Everything seems perfect as far as it is understandable.

Interviewer: Did the feedback help you to improve your grades for example did you improve your writing style according to the feedback given about your precious assignment?

Interviewee: Not so much because grades don't depend only on feedback. It requires so much time and reading lot of relevant articles. The feedback is the part of getting better grades in the way that I corrected my referencing style but I got lower grades owing to the insufficient amount of time I spent on drafting the assignment.

Interviewer: How often do you get feedback before submitting your final draft of assignment?

Interviewee: I have never submitted initial drafts of my assignments and may be that could be the reason of getting lower grades in assignments. Though my fellows submit various drafts before submitting final assignment and some teachers accept it and some teachers don't so it totally depends upon teachers if they have time.

Interviewer: Which one you think is better?

Interviewee: I think sending drafts before submitting final assignment is better because the student can realise which part is weaker and needs improvements.

Interviewer: Do you give enough time to read and understand feedback given on your assignments?

Interviewee: Yes I do.

Interviewer: Do you try to relate it to your grade? I would like to know more about how the feedback justifies the given grade.

Interviewee: Yes. In most cases, the grades and feedback represents the same thing. However sometimes I don't agree with comments and I feel like my grades

should be higher for example the assignment in which I got 48% due to vague writing style I was not convinced. I believed my essay had better discussion that I could have got more than 60% marks.

Interviewer: What was your reaction when you got nice feedback and scored 70% in your first assignment?

Interviewee: It was my first feedback because I never had it in my country before. It was surprising and I was very happy to get nice comments and good marks. I felt proud.

Interviewer: What do you mean by proud?

Interviewee: It means that I got 70% marks even if I am not from English speaking country and so many students whose first language is English couldn't get 60%. So I felt happy and a sense of achievement as getting good feedback from English people.

Interviewer: Did feedback help you improve your motivation and self-esteem?

Interviewee: It helps absolutely and boosts your energy to write assignments better. It gives inspiration and encouragement to do your tasks meritoriously.

Interviewer: Do you have any extract of the feedback?

Interviewee: Yes I have got one in which I scored 67%.

Interviewer: Let me read it. "A reasonable introduction to the essay but I would like to have seen more background on the global retail context. Your discussion of the risk did focus on the retail and highlighted the key issues related to global supply chains and in particular sourcing from local cost countries. It would have been useful to have seen more categorization of the risk at this start of the section. Some successful support from examples and strategic..." Do you understand this paragraph what does it convey?

Interviewee: Yes I understand because I know the topic which is not given here. The teacher is talking about global supply chain "some good academic support for the risk mitigation section, some further detail for example " is about supply chain and risks start affecting it and next section "like how can you mitigate those risks"

says like some good academic support for the risk mitigation section. So I have got some very good support for risk mitigation.

Interviewer: What do you understand when they say a broad range of reference but you are not referencing?

Interviewee: The broad range of referencing means that I have used so many sources and articles but I have got no appropriate referencing style in the text.

Interviewer: “Overall a good piece of work some further global retail examples could have been useful” Do you understand the use of words like would have been what do they mean to you?

Interviewee: Yes it means that I did good work but I didn't use examples from retailers and if I had used examples from sainsburys, tesco, walmart or other retailers I would have got better marks. I've got 67% marks in it which is a little lesser but it's enough for me.

Interviewer: On the other hand, you got 48% and you requested the tutor to reconsider it so what was your first reaction when you received poor feedback?

Interviewee: For that one I felt disappointed and I was a bit angry with myself and the teacher as well. Actually we got two topics of which I chose the difficult one so that I could learn more about it. And the teacher said all students who wrote essay about the second topic have got low marks. I thought this is unfair. But I learned a lot. If I don't consider marks, I am satisfied with the knowledge I have got. But lower marks made me disappointed and stressed and I couldn't find strength for study which was very demotivating.

Interviewer: Do you think negative feedback affect your performance in next semester?

Interviewee: I forgot it and moved on.

Interviewer: As a researcher I put my self-esteem and identity in my writings which I want to be respected. Do you think as an individual your self-esteem was damaged as you put a lot of struggle and you could have got more?

Interviewee: I can't say that my personal identity was damaged but I was angry, stressed and disappointed unable to gather strength to continue studies. I stopped for a while and resumed to make my future better. I am trying to get at least merit so that I can go back something good in my hand to show.

Interviewer: Did negative feedback affect your relationship with the teacher?

Interviewee: No. I was angry but I controlled myself facing him because teacher is respectable. I am attending his class and learning and trying to do better in my future assignments.

Interviewer: Do you look grade first or feedback?

Interviewee: I look marks first. Sometimes I'm afraid of looking my marks first so I look feedback first to make a guess how many marks I have got because negative comments mirror poor grade.

Interviewer: As you said that it's important that your classmates send their draft to teachers for comments before submitting final draft so are you doing it or not?

Interviewee: I am going to do it now. I have to submit my thesis proposal this week and an assignment i following week which would be graded by the same teacher who gave me 48%. I am anxious and nervous but more serious putting more effort and trying to do my best actually.

Interviewer: What's your condition when you submit the draft of your assignment?

Interviewee: I feel relieved; getting free after working hard on assignment. If I get good marks its brilliant. Because if you get good feedback you feel happy and more energetic for next semester. If you get poor feedback, you get depressed as happened with me in the assignment I scored 48%.

Interviewer: Do you remember any incident comparing your reaction on feedback with home students?

Interviewee: Overall, what makes me surprise is that the home students who do not actively participate in class discussions get better grades than me and even if they write assignment on last day, still they get better grade.

Interviewer: Do you remember any other student getting demotivated after receiving negative feedback?

Interviewee: yes it's easy to judge because when students get negative feedback they seem stressed and don't show any interest in knowing other's grade.

Interviewer: How would you like to give advice on feedback in general?

Interviewee: If teacher gives specific feedback then it's helpful. The feedback stating your writing style is vague doesn't make any sense because the student can identify which part is vague.

Interviewer: When you say specific what does it mean?

Interviewee: it means that they can highlight the incorrect or irrelevant sentence instead of saying that your second part is vague. It might have some good sentences as well. And the student can also get a direction to do better in next assignment like what discussion to include and what should be avoided.

Interviewer: Would you like to add anything more in general being an international student whose first language is not English?

Interviewee: I can't remember actually. But besides teacher feedback giving guidelines (as we get module guidelines) with the assignments can be very helpful. It will help students to focus on specific area what teacher demands.

Interviewer: Do you think feedback should be given on time and was it given on time?

Interviewee: Yes it should be on time and it was given with much delay.