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**Exploring Students' Perception of and Reaction to
Feedback in School-based Assessment**

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Abstract

School-based Assessment (SBA) in English Language is a new core component recently included in the Hong Kong university entrance public examination. It goes together with the promotion of an assessment for learning culture, in which enhancing students' learning is the major concern. This initiative marks an important and ambitious change in examination policy and school practice. Besides its assessment function, feedback forms a prominent tool in facilitating student progress in learning. It is important to understand students' perspectives towards feedback as students' ability to learn from feedback

relates to their capacity to make sense of and apply feedback to further their learning. This study looks at students' perceptions of feedback in SBA and whether students react to feedback as a means to 'feed-forward'. The data were gathered from forty-five Form 5 (Grade 11) students in 3 schools through student focus groups and semi-structured interview with teachers. Findings suggest that students did not react in the same way to assessment feedback. Not all students had the strategies to effectively collect, organize and use feedback. The findings suggest that it is through mutual construction of achievement and improvement that students can become active participants in the process of classroom assessment and feedback.

KEYWORDS: school-based assessment, students' perceptions, assessment feedback, reactions to feedback

Introduction

Learning, from a constructivist perspective, is the active building of knowledge by the learner (Morris & Adamson, 2010). The adoption of constructivist learning theories in educational practice has favoured the integration of assessment, teaching and learning in a process that stresses the formative functions of assessment. Students are involved as active and informal participants, while feedback from assessments is viewed as forming an important tool in facilitating student progress in learning. The trend towards *assessment for learning* (AfL) (Birenbaum, 1996) encourages educators to focus on the process as well as the products of learning, and move away from a reliance on single-test scores towards assessment that seeks to capture a variety of abilities and outcomes (Sambell, McDowell & Brown, 1997). One of the early pioneer studies in the area of AfL carried out by Black and William (1998) concludes that formative assessment that provides students with clear goals, appropriate learning tasks and helpful feedback improves learning, particularly for low achievers.

The adoption of school-based assessment (SBA) in Hong Kong during the past decade as one of the reforms of public examinations can be considered to be a manifestation of AfL. Previously, public examinations predominantly served the purpose of assessment *of* learning, which is considered “the process of summing up or checking what has been

learned at the end of a particular stage of learning” (Weeden, Winter & Broadfoot, 2002, p. 13). Despite the almost total reliance on examinations for determining progress through the education system and the exit qualifications achieved by students, there has long been controversy over such summative assessments since educators are sceptical whether sufficient evidence to inform such high-stakes decisions can be generated by a single test carried out in an often sterile and pressurized environment (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2006). The introduction of AfL components into core subjects in the curriculum such as English Language is linked to the use of SBA, and forms part of a strategy by the Hong Kong government to reduce the reliance on the examination-oriented, elitist tradition in order to create a culture which leads to improved learning outcomes among all students (Education Commission, 2003).

Away from Hong Kong, SBA has been in the assessment canon for more than fifty years. For example, there is a long tradition of teacher-based assessment in Queensland, Australia (Klenowski, 2011). In recent times, SBA has appeared in schools in some US states as part of the response to the *No Child Left Behind* policy and as a means of identifying students that put the school at risk of failing to meet its Annual Yearly Progress targets, while schools in a few states such as Michigan, Vermont and Nebraska have employed SBA with a less policy-oriented agenda (Flaitz, 2011). In other parts of Asia, countries, including Bangladesh, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore, have encouraged SBA with mixed success because of prevailing beliefs and practices that privilege uniform testing for summative purposes (Berry, 2011). In the context of Hong

Kong, a competitive city infamous for its overwhelmingly summative, examination-oriented culture, my purpose in conducting the present study was to investigate how students perceive assessment feedback and thus provide feedback to policy-makers on the efficacy of the initiative, and to show teachers ways to improve their use of assessment as a tool for enhancing student learning.

Typically students have little chance to influence the way assessment is accomplished; the teacher's voice dominates the classroom and predominates in the research literature. However, the shift to a focus on how classroom assessment might inform, rather than simply measure learning means that it is no longer sufficient to position students as consumers of assessment (Sadler, 1989). Students are in a unique position to comment on how classroom assessment is accomplished and what counts as 'good' (Lincoln, 1995). While teachers and parents hope and, sometimes, even intend that students will improve their learning through assessment and feedback, these are adult hopes and intentions; what are those of students? Attention to student perspectives and experiences of classroom assessment is crucial to any understanding of how AfL is and might be accomplished in practice. Students' perceptions of any educational innovation can influence their motivation to embrace and engage with the reform, and thus, in turn, can impact upon the benefits that they might derive from it. Lincoln (1995) argues that student-centredness can only be achieved when the views and reactions of students are taken into consideration in the learning process. However, students' perceptions of the nature of assessment feedback and how they respond to it remain under-researched. The

studies so far specifically related to SBA in Hong Kong English Language are scarce and have not been informative in furthering our understanding of students' perceptions and use of feedback. This present study fills some of the research gaps by examine students' perspectives towards oral feedback in English Language in the SBA context.

Assessment and Assessment Feedback

As both assessment and assessment feedback play a fundamental role in driving student learning, they should be incorporated into teaching and learning strategies (Brown & Hirschfeld, 2008). According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), feedback comprises information “provided by an agent (e.g. teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one’s performance or understanding” (p. 81). For instructional purposes, feedback needs to provide information that bridges the void between what is understood and what is intended to be understood (Sadler, 1989). To be effective, feedback needs to address a specific task or process of learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Positive impacts of feedback might be manifested in the form of increased motivation or student engagement in their learning, while explicit support provided by the teacher through the feedback process can help students to restructure their understandings, inform

them whether they are correct or incorrect, show them what extra information could be included, and indicate other possible avenues for them to explore (Winne & Butler, 1994). If feedback is carefully targeted, especially with less efficient learners, it can enable students to acquire and utilise appropriate strategies to process the objects of learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Vygotsky, 19).

Negative feedback is potentially more powerful than positive feedback (Brunit, Huguet & Monteil, 2000). However, to be effective, negative feedback needs to be complemented by supportive information indicating how the student should respond to it. In addition, Howie, Sy, Ford and Vicente (2000) found that poorly presented or uninformative feedback was responsible for its low efficacy as a learning tool, rather than inadequacy of knowledge on the part of students.

Winne and Butler (1994) stress that, whether students can learn from feedback relates to their capacity to make sense of and apply feedback in order to further their learning. Brown and Hirschfeld (2008) conclude that secondary students who conceived of assessment as useful for the improvement of their own learning were more likely to exhibit high achievements in mathematics and reading. In language classrooms, the study conducted by Lyster and Mori (2006) shows that “oral feedback has a significant effect on L2 development in a variety of instructional settings that range from university level foreign language classrooms to elementary classrooms” (p. 275).

Students' Perception of Assessment Feedback

Studies of students' perspectives of assessment and their reactions to it are remarkably lacking, especially in the primary and secondary school context (see Struyven, Dochy & Janssens, 2005). For instance, Brown, McInerney and Liem (2009) note that Harlen and Winter's (2004) report of the Assessment Reform Group's study in the UK merely devotes one and a half pages to how students view assessment. Similarly, Davison's (2007) study of SBA in Hong Kong only allocates half a page out of 19 pages in total to students' perceptions. An exception is Hargreaves' (2011) study, which supplemented data collection of written comments by 88 teachers by interviewing seven primary school pupils in south-east England on how they responded to feedback on their work. She concluded that the students find feedback to be effective when it is uncritical of their personality and does not hurt their feelings; when it is fair; and when the students realize that the feedback is intended to help their learning. Insights such as these serve to remind us that students' opinions ought to be of the same significance as the adults', given that students' emotional response is a determinant factor of success in learning (Stiggins, 2007).

Research into feedback from students' perspective in language learning has mainly focused on students' views of the teachers' written (rather than oral) feedback on their assignments. Much of the research in this area focuses on tertiary students and on their concerns with the feedback they receive in formative assessment (Rowe & Wood, 2008). Lizzio and Wilson (2007) found that students particularly value informative written feedback, but prefer that evaluative and informative feedback should be balanced. Weaver (2006) also found that students want feedback which can give them guidance and is related to assessment criteria, but which is not too general or too vague, or does not only dwell on the negative aspects of their work. Little research concerning secondary students, whose language proficiency is much lower, has been carried out. One study on students' perspectives of SBA in English Language in Hong Kong by Gao (2009, p. 116) shows that a majority of students in one school hold a positive outlook on SBA, as their participation in oral discussions is described as "active and relaxed" and therefore allows them to demonstrate their actual abilities better.

School-based Assessment in English Language

The current trend of assessment reform in Hong Kong can be traced back to September 2000 when the Education Commission put forward the *Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong*. To enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning,

one of the aims was to “improve the assessment mechanism to supplement learning and teaching” (Education Commission, 2000, p. 6). The Proposals state that “the quality and credibility of SBA will inevitably be a major subject in the education reform” (Education Commission, 2000, p. 119). SBA, as a complement to other modes of assessment, including external examinations, is to be embedded in the teaching and learning process. It involves the teacher throughout the process, from the planning developing and delivery of appropriate assessment tasks, through to the assessment judgments. SBA is designed so that student work can be collected over an extended period of time and, in order to be effective, feedback from the teachers should be timely and constructive (Davidson, 2007; Hong Kong Examination and Assessment Authority (HKEAA), 2009a). It also provides opportunities for on-going monitoring, evaluation and adjustment of the programme of teaching and learning.

The introduction of SBA as a core component in public examinations in Hong Kong represents an important change in examination policy as well as in practice. For all its faults, the one-off common examination was generally viewed by teachers, parents and other stakeholders, such as the universities and prospective employers, as providing a standard and fair system for a society in which education is viewed as a major facilitator of social mobility, and competition is valued as encouraging students to work hard (Adamson, 2011).

SBA was first introduced in the subject of English Language by the HKEAA in 2007 in the oral component and accounted for 15% weighting of the total marks in the high-stakes public examination, the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE), an examination which, at that time, creamed off 20% of the students for further study at the matriculation level. With the implementation of the New Senior Secondary Curriculum framework in 2009 as part of a new 3-3-4 academic structure (i.e., three years junior secondary, three years senior secondary and four years tertiary education), SBA has been built into a new matriculation examination, the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE), to be implemented from 2012 onwards. One part is the assessment of individual presentations and group discussions, based on three texts read or viewed over the course of two years, making up 10% of the total marks. Another section, also based on students' oral performance, either individually or discussion in groups, focuses on students' ability to reflect on and talk about the experience gained in the Elective Module and accounts for 5% of the marks (HKEAA, 2009b). Students' oral performance in the SBA tasks is mapped onto a seven-level scale (0-6) in which competence in four key areas is assessed and graded: pronunciation and delivery, communication strategies, vocabulary and language patterns, and ideas and organization. According to a study carried out by HKEAA, statistically, the SBA component is as reliable as the oral assessment in the previous public examination and also correlated with the rest of the public examination papers a little better than the previous oral component (Lee, 2009).

The Study

This research study explores the perceptions of students of Secondary 5 (Grade 11) of assessment feedback in three secondary schools in Hong Kong, and examines how students receive and react to feedback. In this study, oral feedback in the SBA context refers to the feedback provided by teachers directed to students verbally as the consequences of students' performance, and which reveals their competence in the four key areas in speaking, as mentioned earlier. Students' perceptions of the nature and focus of the feedback, methods of providing feedback and the effectiveness of the feedback, and their reaction to feedback form the analytical framework of this study, within which the English Language SBA criteria set out by the HKEAA, i.e. pronunciation and delivery, communication strategies, vocabulary and language patterns, and ideas and organization, provide the specific aspects for discussion.

This study is directed to how students view and experience reality. Qualitative methods are used to explore this second-order perspective. The analysis of data allows the combination of different data sources, perspectives, settings, times and methods, so that both convergent and divergent messages can be revealed.

The three schools chosen are schools where I have worked on school-based teacher professional development programmes. Altogether nine semi-structured interviews (see Appendix for interview questions) of around 30 minutes each were conducted with nine groups (three groups from each school) of five students (altogether 45 students). They were selected by their English teachers as representing different learning abilities within each class. Semi-structured interviews with three groups of three teachers in each school were also carried out to provide a broader context for understanding the students' perceptions and reactions. The teachers are all bachelor's degree holders and their experience ranged from four to 12 years at the time of the interviews. All informants were invited to participate in the project on a voluntary basis. The interviews were carried out through the medium of Cantonese, as the preferred language of the participants, and were then fully transcribed and translated. The responses were analysed through thematic content analysis, so that a list of categories was generated from the data to form the frame for analysis. (These categories are shown in Tables 1-4 in the following sections.) To ensure accuracy in translation, 20% of the translated transcripts were proofread by an accredited translator. To ensure reliability, 10% of the interview transcripts were randomly selected as coding samples and were coded independently by a research assistant. We compared the coded items and resolved discrepancies in coding.

Findings and Discussion

Students' perception of assessment feedback*Nature and focus*

Six students reported that they appreciated assessment feedback that stimulated deep-level thinking and critical thinking, and that provided strategies that allowed them to work on learning tasks in groups. However 20 students commented that sometimes the feedback was not specially related to one task, e.g. “You need to present your standpoints systematically with some discourse markers” and there was no specific way suggested to help them record the feedback—instead, they just wrote down some notes anywhere that was convenient. Nine students added that very often the feedback was too general to be useful, but sometimes too specific to be able to be generalized for use on other tasks on a different topic. At times feedback related to text organization was offered, but again it depended on the particular task or topic and was not necessarily relevant to future tasks, as the text structure could be different. The feedback on the pronunciation and syllable stress of English words was seen as useful, but again the correct utterance of some words did not seem to have helped them to do other tasks better, according to six of the students. A central concern was the belief that in some instances assessment feedback was only specific to a single piece of work and could not be applied in future tasks.

Twelve students said that the teachers' comments were often lopsided, focusing on a single aspect of students' performance, e.g. pronunciation of certain syllables or appropriate word choice. Individual needs were rarely addressed. Their teachers seemed to have devoted a larger proportion of feedback to matters concerning vocabulary and language patterns rather than discourse. The students were told by the teachers that it was important to get these patterns right first. One student quoted his teacher as saying, *"Once you have all the language patterns correct, the ideas will come through smoothly"*. They added that the teachers had also given them some formulaic expressions for turn-taking, e.g. "This is my view", "How about yours?" and some discourse markers, e.g. first, second, then, in conclusion, last but not least, to express the relationship of ideas: the students found them useful, but they were given no idea how to apply them appropriately when the purpose and context of discussion and presentation were different.

In general, most of the students (28) found the feedback brief and piece-meal. They could not see how it could contribute to improved performance in SBA or their overall English language learning. Two students reckoned that sometimes the teacher just gave feedback for the sake of fulfilling the SBA requirements instead of turning it into a learning opportunity to enhance their overall English development. One added, *"It is a waste of time and energy."*

Table 1 summarises the students' perceptions of the nature and focus of feedback that they had received.

Table 1. Students' perceptions of the nature and focus of feedback

Perception	Number of students	Examples of excerpts from transcripts
Feedback was often brief and piece-meal.	28	<i>"The teacher gave me comments on different areas at different times. Sometimes, pronunciation, sometimes, use of words. But I don't know how they are connected to improve my oral performance."</i>
Feedback was sometimes not specially related to the task.	20	<i>"Sometimes we were given some discourse markers and expressions to learn, but they are not related to a particular discussion topic. I don't know whether it is right or wrong to use those expressions."</i>
Feedback was often	12	<i>"My teacher's comments often focus on</i>

<p>lopsided, focusing on a single aspect of performance.</p>		<p><i>grammar, e.g. tenses, subject-verb agreement. No much has been given other than how we can express ideas appropriately, the organization of content, etc. I guess getting the grammar correct is very important.”</i></p>
<p>Feedback was sometimes too specific to be generalizable for use on other tasks.</p>	9	<p><i>“For example in a task about my favorite character, the teacher told me to use some more adjectives to describe the character and my feelings towards that character. But next time the task requirement is different. How can I apply what I got from the teacher to doing other tasks?”</i></p>
<p>Feedback that stimulated deep-level thinking, learning and critical thinking was appreciated</p>	6	<p><i>“Some feedback give me clearer directions to think further about my presentation, both in terms of the content and language use”</i></p>
<p>Feedback was given just for the sake of fulfilling the SA</p>	2	<p><i>“Sometimes, we received feedback but sometimes not, Maybe because we did not</i></p>

requirements.		<i>have enough time. I think the teacher focuses more on the actual assessment of our performance. Feedback is not seen as an important part. ”</i>
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Methods

The students' perceptions of the methods used to provide feedback are shown in Table 2. Quite a few students commented that very often the teachers recorded all the weaknesses and wrote up a list of language items that were common errors for them to practise and memorize on their own. No particular activities were devised to support development based on this formative assessment feedback. Moreover, negative feedback given to the whole class, with reference to errors made by some students, made the individuals feel embarrassed and 'lose face' in front of the class. This negatively impacted on their motivation to do better. Thirteen students reported that their teachers often picked up some common errors when they were supervising students' work individually and corrected them in front of the class. Nine students reported that their teachers talked to one or two groups in turns after each oral task about their performance, though they wanted more frequent feedback from the teacher. Feedback statements such as "That's not right" and "Do it this way" made these students feel belittled and useless. Such

feedback was described as rude and as a put-down by four students and, therefore, could be seen to undermine the student-teacher relationships that are essential for open dialogue.

The 29 students interviewed in the focus groups suggested that they would find a personal one-to-one feedback session with the teacher very useful as a means of providing a more personal element as well as an opportunity to explain any difficult terms or ideas and to show how the feedback could be used to improve future assignments. Most of them asserted that talking with a teacher individually or in a small group minimized the negative affective, social and cognitive factors they experienced with many other assessment strategies. In terms of actual language enhancement, they added that they would have chances to practise certain suggested expressions and pronunciations in such a setting. They welcomed the chance to try out new ideas based on the feedback in front of the teacher so that further feedback could be given immediately.

In addition, in the classroom context, teachers' use of English to communicate expectations influenced students' perceptions of feedback. Twelve students valued feedback in language they could understand and did not appreciate the use of general or vague English, e.g. "Say more about this", "The use of tense is not correct". One student reported, *"Some of the feedback I found almost impossible to use. Like I once got a comment saying 'I wish you had clarified this.'"* Another student argued, *"Sometimes it is a bit pointless when the teacher gives us feedback and we don't understand what they are*

saying. For example, once my teacher asked me to use more embedded clauses to expand on the ideas to further enhance the content in the presentation.... If it is really general, we are not too sure where we went wrong.” The implications were that more personalized feedback was not only useful but also had the added benefits of communicating teacher concerns for students and for their understanding

Table 2. Students' perceptions of the methods of providing feedback

Method/perception	Number of students	Examples of excerpts from transcripts
Students preferred one-to-one feedback sessions.	29	
The teacher picked up some common errors made by individual students and corrected them in front of the class .	13	<i>“I remember once I pronounced a sound incorrectly when the teacher was there listening to my group. She then turned to the whole class and told them how the word should be sounded out. I don't like that.”</i>
The teacher produced a list of language items for	12	<i>“After a few practices of group discussion and individual presentations,</i>

students to practise and memorize.		<i>the teacher will print out a list of words/phrases and expressions and ask us to recite them. But there are no specific exercises for us to actually use them”</i>
Students did not appreciate general or vague feedback.	12	<i>“Some of the feedback I found almost impossible to use. Like I once got a comment saying ‘I wish you had clarified this.’”</i>
Students received feedback from the teacher in groups.	9	<i>Each time, only one or two groups received feedback from the teacher. We have to wait for our turn next time.”</i>
Feedback statements made students feel ashamed.	4	<i>“I don't like the way errors were treated. The teacher always said “That's not right”, Do it this way”. I felt I had done something very wrong.”</i>

Effectiveness

Table 3 provides a summary of students' perceptions of the effectiveness of feedback. Six students manifested a positive attitude towards supportive feedback that helped them in

developing the self-regulation of their learning. Four students reckoned that effective feedback played an important role in building their self-confidence and helped them evaluate themselves; therefore they wanted more of it. One student stated, *“The teacher gives me useful feedback, to let me know what I need to improve. I can now finish the SBA with other students. I could be seen as somebody useful in contributing to the discussion.”*

Six students thought that SBA could really differentiate between strong and weaker students, especially if the tasks were appropriately set. Five students acknowledged the effects of the feedback on their oral performance on their learning of other skills (for example, writing), as they could apply the suggestions to the way they organize the structure of their presentations, the learning of vocabulary and improving their expression of ideas.

Fourteen students commented that teacher's feedback was short-sighted in focusing on individual tasks at hand instead of providing more comprehensive strategies for longer-term improvement. Two students, who admitted that they were weak in vocabulary, said that they had received some suggestions on the words that they could use for that particular topic but no suggestions as to how they could actually extend their vocabulary repertoire. Very often, practising more was the main suggestion the teachers gave. Seventeen students suggested that teachers should also carry out deliberate interventions

in the form of teaching technical aspects, such as word pronunciation and sentence stress and intonation, and more exercises for explicit rehearsal of these aspects are also necessary.

Sixteen students thought that teachers fell short of giving clearly communicated expectations in the assessment feedback. One student even complained, *"We do not want a teacher who does not know what we need and what should be taught."* Two students felt that some teachers did not have a deep understanding of SBA and how to give feedback to students. They commented, *"Some teachers do not completely understand the SBA assessment criteria. Students are not clear about the intention and value of SBA. Teachers' comments to students are just average; not so useful to students."* One specific view received was, *"I really hate impression grading!!!... The teacher has not provided relevant and practical comments on our work. Too bad. It's not fair on students with weak English!!"*

It was clear that students do value feedback for guidance, countering a concern voiced at teacher focus-group interviews that their feedback was not being read by students. In fact most of the students cared about feedback and wanted to benefit from it to make further improvements. However, in reality, it was reported that the feedback most of the students received did not enhance their academic advancement. Six students commented that sometimes teachers were very encouraging and focused on positive affect and motivation.

However, they expected a teacher's feedback to be more critical and constructive. They wanted more honest and comprehensible feedback to allow them to generalize their learning to other contexts. Suggestions were preferred, reported by 21 students, because they could be added into students' own ideas to construct a new conceptualization. *"Suggestions are still making us think,"* a student commented, *"and they also allow us to decide for ourselves how we should proceed."* Seven students who could see assessment as a process for promoting learning hoped the teacher could also comment on the way they plan their task, not just on the actual performance. This comment reflects the importance that students attach to the learning process and their expectation that teachers should make more formative use of the SBA rather than treating it just as an assessment of learning. *"SBA will be truly meaningful only when it helps students to learn,"* one student stressed.

Table 3. Students' perceptions of the effectiveness of feedback

Aspect	Number of students	Excerpts from transcripts
Feedback should include suggestions for improvement.	21	<i>"Suggestions are still making us think," and they also allow us to decide for ourselves how we should proceed."</i>
Follow-up activities allow	17	<i>"I think we need more useful activities</i>

them to practise problematic aspects.		<i>to allow us to try out the suggestions given by the teachers. At the moment, we just have the feedback and sometimes we don't know how to use it."</i>
Teachers were not able to provide clear expectations in the feedback.	16	<i>"Sometime, the teacher asked us to use more clauses or phrase to enrich the content of our presentations, but we don't know when and how many we need to use to meet her requirement."</i>
Feedback failed to provide them with effective strategies for further improvement.	14	<i>"Yes, the feedback may be useful, but we don't know how we can use in future learning in an appropriate manner."</i>
Feedback should focus on the process instead of just the outcomes.	7	<i>"If the teacher can comment on the process of preparing for SBA, that could really help us to do better."</i>
Feedback should be critical and constructive.	6	<i>"It is good that our teacher gave us feedback, but I hope that feedback could be a bit more critical so that we can have a better understanding of the</i>

		<i>causes of errors and be able an and make better use of the ideas suggested.”</i>
Feedback helped with their self-regulation development.	6	<i>“Based on the feedback I’ve got, I am more alert to some of the areas that I am weak in and I will try to locate different ways to make improvement.”</i>
Feedback enhanced their learning of other skills.	5	<i>“I can apply the language and ideas that I learn from the feedback to my writing. For example, I know now how I can organize ideas in my essay .better”</i>
Feedback helped them to gain more self-confidence and to evaluate their own performance.	4	<i>“The teacher gives me useful feedback, to let me know what I need to improve. I can now finish the SBA with other students. I could be seen as somebody useful in contributing to the discussion.”</i>

Students' reaction to feedback

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Although most students were motivated to receive feedback and were willing to try out some of the suggestions given, thirty-two were not certain whether the strategies or changes they adopted could really demonstrate their understanding of the feedback. The potential of feedback to sustain effective learning was very much in doubt, as teachers did not seem to monitor the students' progress in applying the feedback. Students' overall responses to feedback are summarized in Table 4.

Students' interpretation of teachers' use of feedback also impacts upon their distribution of effort in improving their learning. Interestingly the five students whose answers showed they perceived a pedagogical intention in teachers' use of feedback were also the only students who showed some willingness to use assessment feedback for their own improvement. They were also more capable of describing ways in which they use feedback. For example, one of them recalled, *"I put some of the useful expressions into a note book under headings, e.g. contrastive argument, and from time to time, I will revise them and sometimes I can use them in a discussion where I disagree with other people's view."* In contrast, ten students who either attributed an accrediting or summative intention or did not interpret any particular intention behind the teacher's assessment behaviour were also less capable of describing ways in which they could use the teacher feedback to promote their learning. They were able to retain some bits and pieces of linguistic advice, e.g. vary the intonation, give more stress to important words, sound out the final consonant of a word, but they were unable to make use of it for higher level discursal or textual practice. The assumption of neatly defined roles in the teaching and

learning process as a result of the routine practice of giving feedback and then corrections influenced how students perceived the roles of the teacher and students. Eight students argued that it was the duty of the teacher to tell them what they had to do to improve and devise concrete exercises for them. They did not see it as their own responsibility to identify strategies to make improvements, and as a consequence took no particular action with the feedback given.

Seven students did not value and react to the feedback on instrumental grounds, as the amount of effort they would have to put in for improvement would not match the minor portion of the score of the whole English Language assessment score. They added that, since the course grade only constitutes 15% of the total subject grade, they did not make special efforts to improve. Perhaps not surprisingly, there was evidence of 5 students in the study gravitating towards a preference for feedback on the formal assessment tasks rather than on practice tasks. The study also highlighted that 6 of the students stated that they only put effort into topics which were being formally assessed; 3 of them stated they were not motivated to dwell on the feedback they received. *"I don't use feedback at all. I just go on to the next task,"* one student said. Another student added, *"Sometimes I sort of ignore the feedback because I am so focused on the mark that I've got."*

On top of that, those students who claimed that their teachers do not have a good understanding of SBA claimed that they have not received any feedback about the SBA

assessment tasks on which to base their learning strategies. The students in general admitted that, as a result, they have not developed effective error detection skills or self-regulated strategies, which may lead to improvement in their performance.

Table 4. Students' reactions to feedback

Reaction	Number of students	Excerpts from transcripts
Unsure if the changes they made showed understanding of the feedback	32	<i>I am not sure whether we use the feedback correctly. Nobody is helping and monitoring us on this”</i>
Able to retain some discrete linguistic advice but were unable to use it at a higher textual level	10	<i>“I have learnt some words or phrases, but the teacher hasn't told use why they are useful and when we can use them.”</i>
Rely on teachers to identify strategies to make improvements based on the feedback given	8	<i>“The teacher should tell us what we have to do with the feedback. It is their job to do so. How do they expect us to find other ways to improve our work?”</i>

Do not value and react to the feedback on instrumental grounds	7	<i>"SBA takes up only 15% of the total score. I prefer to spend more time and effort on other component and other subjects"</i>
Only put effort into topics which were being formally assessed	6	<i>"I don't want to waste time on the practice tasks and its feedback. I'd rather spend more time working on the formal task to get higher grades."</i>
Prefer feedback on the formal assessment tasks rather than on practice tasks	5	<i>"I would like to concentrate on the formal assessment, so I will only pay attention to that type of feedback."</i>
Need to see the pedagogical intentions in teacher's feedback	5	<i>"The teacher is very clear with what she wanted us to do, e.g. once she focused on teaching us the use of examples to illustrate our stand points and we tried to follow her suggestions and find more examples to substantiate our ideas."</i>
Do not have the personal motivation to react to	3	<i>"I don't use feedback at all. I just go</i>

feedback		<i>on to the next task,”</i>
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Conclusion and Recommendations

The study shows that students have multifaceted conceptions of assessment and approach assessment situations with their own purposes and intentions. Assessment and feedback could be seen by some of the students as a strong motivator for learning, while, on the other hand, a few students do not value informal feedback, but only consider summative evaluations as worthwhile; some others totally disregard feedback. The study also suggests that assessment interactions are not simply a source of feedback: they influence student perceptions of themselves and others as knowledgeable or not, and they influence students' sense of self-efficacy; however, communication gaps can arise between teachers and students. This study argues that it is imperative that teachers appreciate that providing and responding to feedback is a complex and social act that requires sensitivity to the individual needs of the students.

Students felt that feedback worked best when they were provided from the outset with a detailed brief and assessment criteria as to the teacher's expectations. They preferred receiving feedback through one-to-one tutorials. They wanted focused and systematic

feedback, and appreciated it when learning support was embedded. Some students identified suggestions as useful, which resonates with the notion that effective feedback comprises a form of dialogue (Smith & Higgins, 2006). Suggestions provide space for students to generate possibilities and make choices, thereby supporting their sense of autonomy and competence. Also, some students expected more substantial evaluation about their performance and more specific suggestions of language improvement. Therefore, most students' observed that, to be effective, feedback needs to be precise, given in a timely fashion, constructive and, where possible, written. The findings echo similar proposals by several educational experts (e.g. Black & Wiliam, 1998; Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2004), who advocate, for example, more attention to the quality and quantity of feedback and the specificity and clarity of feedback.

Students' perceptions and reactions to assessment are not necessarily in line with those of their teachers or schools. Hence, there is potentially a misalignment between the AfL environment as perceived by HKEAA and the actual assessment environments as perceived by the students. It is important to explore this misalignment as student perceptions of the assessment environment influence their learning strategies. Moreover, their perceptions and reactions offer important insights to teachers who wish to find ways to improve their use of AfL (Segers & Dochy, 2001).

In general, the nature of the feedback that the students in this study reported receiving tended to be narrow in range, focusing only on aspects such as volume, pronunciation, gestures, grammar points and choice of vocabulary. Specific strategies on the handling of ideas and organization were rare. The descriptions, advice and evaluations of performance were mostly characterized by brevity, lack of clarity, misconceptions and information paucity. The students found they did not have sufficient feedback to direct them to learn better.

Teachers' behaviour affects the way students perceived assessment feedback. Some students found teacher assessment practices which involved disclosure of individual students' ignorance or confusion in front of peers to be especially negative. If most of the assessing effort is oriented to pointing out students' mistakes, the students did not show any particular active self-regulatory attitude towards assessment and learning. In general, teachers' formative intention in practice was perceived as being accreditation-oriented and disempowering to students. SBA can be threatened if the learning conditions are not supportive.

Another factor to be considered is that not all students in this study had the same social and intellectual goals as each other or as the teacher. Feedback may at times be appropriately targeted and expressed, but the students may not have learning as their goal at that time. Some students rejected the learning-oriented priorities of SBA because their

personal conception of assessment prioritized accountability purposes. As a result, their perception of associated feedback was pessimistic and this affected the way they reacted to it. This lends support to Kane's (2008) distinction between a validation argument and validity, where validation refers to the intention to improve learning and validity to whether this is achieved. By focusing on assessment consequences as different from assessment purposes and interpretations, this distinction explains why students may not value the learning experience through feedback. This also explains why students and teachers might experience the same event differently (Moss, 2003; Perrenoud, 1998).

The study informs us that there are considerable variations of what constitutes good and effective feedback. However, what some students value, others may reject. There is not and cannot be one model of so-called 'appropriate feedback'. Offering diverse methods of assessment and feedback may benefit all students. What students like should not dictate the nature and form of feedback and teachers must be prepared to defend unpopular but effective feedback. The contrasting levels of awareness of the students interviewed suggest there may be some value in having assessment feedback that is informative but also explicit and structured. It seems possible that the more the rules and goals are shared, the better the students will be able to interpret feedback and perform. This possibility needs to be considered carefully if the goals of assessment and the use of assessment feedback are to carry out the functions of AfL. Teachers need to be aware of how a student might view the feedback, and they need to be proactive in fostering the student's ability to benefit from feedback by providing appropriate strategies and

opportunities for students to negotiate and integrate feedback into their learning. In order to develop this awareness and sensitivity, teachers need to learn from the feedback they garner from students. At the moment, the benefits of feedback appear to be one-way and limited.

The results support the idea that SBA and its feedback are a complex socially-constructed phenomenon. They contradict de Luque and Sommer's (2000) conclusions about the different preferences of feedback of students from different cultures and that students from collectivist cultures (e.g. Confucian-based Asia, South Pacific nations) favour feedback that is indirect and implicit, and oriented towards the group rather than individuals, when compared with their counterparts from individualist cultures. Students in this study who support feedback in fact prefer direct feedback and more individual-focused feedback.

This study shows that student experience of teacher actions is not always as a teacher intends. Nevertheless, considering student subjective experiences allows us to review aspects of the learning context and teacher assessment actions to consider how they might better support the formative function of SBA. Students' goal orientation could be altered by the ways teacher feedback is given (Martin & Dowson, 2009). In addition, students can develop a positive social identity and maintain positive interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers. The findings also reinforce the need for more professional

development of teachers. As pointed out by Davidson (2007), some local teachers lack experience, expertise and confidence in implementing SBA on the grounds that it is a relatively new concept in the local education system. Many of those interviewed admitted that they had not given much thought about the strategic use of feedback. Teachers may have to consider refining the strategy of providing feedback to the class based on information from individuals. Some teachers' actions may require only subtle modification to become more sensitive to and productive for the emotional, social, and intellectual impacts of classroom assessment.

Feedback has the potential to be an extremely powerful influence on learning. However, this small-scale study has suggested that too often feedback is couched and delivered in ineffective ways, and more extensive work needs to be done on the crucial issue of how feedback can be made to work in the classroom and in the learning process.

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Appendix

Semi-focused Interview Questions

Students' perception of assessment feedback in the SBA context

What is your general attitude towards feedback?

Annie, T. (2011). *Malaysian Journal of ELT Research*, Vol. 7(2), p. 104-147. www.melta.org.my

Is feedback a useful component in SBA?

What does the SBA feedback usually consist of?

Do you understand the intention of the teacher giving feedback to students?

What area(s) of feedback do you receive most? (Pronunciation and delivery, communication strategies, vocabulary and language patterns, and ideas and organization.)

What type of feedback do you want to receive most?

What type of feedback do you find most useful?

Can the feedback help to promote your learning?

How often is feedback given? Do you think it is sufficient?

How is feedback given? How would you like to receive feedback?

How would you like to qualify the feedback given? Timely? Constructive?

To what extent is the feedback evaluative and informative?

Does the teacher provide suggestions on how your learning could be improved?

Is there any follow-up by the teacher on the feedback provided?

Students' reactions to feedback

How do you keep record of feedback?

How do you react to feedback?

How do you use the feedback you get from assessment?

To what extent do you integrate feedback into your learning?

How do you integrate feedback into your learning?

What strategies do you adopt to turn feedback into a tool for learning? Can you give some examples? Are they effective? Would you like to get help in this area?

What interferes your reaction to assessment feedback?

Do you see any improvement in your learning because of receiving and reacting to feedback?