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## Formative feedback in a multicultural classroom: a review

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### ABSTRACT

The increase in student mobility world-wide and the globalization of teaching and learning practices has resulted in the prevalence of multicultural classrooms. However, knowledge on how cultural differences interact with increasingly student-centered practices is scarce. This is especially relevant for the provision of effective formative feedback, which as any form of dialogue, is bound to be affected by cultural customs and expectations. This rigorous literature review aims to examine the current knowledge on the role of culture in the provision of formative feedback in higher education: cultural differences, potential conflicts, and mitigation strategies. The results highlight three main themes of variation: perception of formative feedback, feedback as communication, and the affective/interpersonal domain. Three strategies to address potential clashes derived from these cultural differences are provided, and their applicability discussed. Finally, some issues and concerns are raised about current practices on studying cultural differences in the provision of formative feedback.

### RESUMEN


El aumento mundial de la movilidad estudiantil y la globalización de las prácticas educativas han propiciado el predominio de las aulas multiculturales. Sin embargo, tenemos escaso conocimiento sobre las posibles interacciones entre las diferencias culturales y unas prácticas educativas cada vez más centradas en el alumnado. Esto es especialmente importante en el caso de la provisión eficaz de feedback formativo, la cual, como toda forma de diálogo, se ve afectada por una serie de costumbres y expectativas culturales. El objetivo de esta revisión bibliográfica es examinar el estado actual de nuestros conocimientos respecto al papel que juega la cultura en la provisión de feedback formativo: diferencias culturales, conflictos potenciales y estrategias de mitigación. Este análisis reveló tres temas principales de variación cultural: la percepción del feedback formativo, el feedback como forma de comunicación y el dominio afectivo/interpersonal. Se presentan tres estrategias para afrontar conflictos potenciales fruto de estas diferencias culturales, con notas sobre su aplicabilidad. Por último, se discuten algunas cuestiones problemáticas del enfoque actual de los estudios sobre las diferencias culturales en la provisión de feedback formativo.

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## Introduction

The importance of formative feedback in higher education has been increasing in the last two decades (e.g. Yorke 2003; Juwah et al. 2004), as we moved away from lectures and summative assessment and towards flipped classrooms, assessment *for* learning, and self-regulated student learners. As such, a plethora of studies have described and analyzed how it enhances the learning experience, the processes and factors regulating this, several dos, don'ts and how-tos on providing effective formative feedback, etc. (for excellent literature reviews on those topics see, Burns and Foo 2014; Dunworth and Sanchez 2016; Cookson 2017). However, most of these studies are either carried out within 'bubbles' ranging from classrooms to universities, or compare the findings of several 'bubbles' to provide a wider perspective, and as such they often neglect that student diversity is more than gender and ethnicity.

One of such components of student diversity typically neglected by the literature is their culture, which is usually confounded with ethnicity or socioeconomic status, or diluted as 'international students' or 'not having X as first language'. In the particular topic of formative feedback, both the culture in which students were raised and, if different, the culture in which they received their education, will play a part in the development of a series of attitudes and expectations towards feedback (Tian and Lowe 2013). This culture on feedback<sup>1</sup> will determine a preferred set of feedback customs, practices and expectations, whose effects should line up with the literature on effective formative feedback. However, as with any cultural phenomenon, encountering a different culture on feedback could potentially result in unexpectedly adverse effects (i.e. a form of culture shock or, better yet, acculturation stress; Berry 1997). Thus, it is important to understand the variation of these cultures on feedback to make sure that students are not negatively affected, and/or inadvertently discriminated against, while presented with formative feedback. Note that, as most concepts in teaching and learning, culture on feedback also applies to the teacher, and this realization in the context of my own practice was the primary motivation for the present study. Coming from a culture on feedback relying on clear and direct constructive feedback, after moving to a different country I had to learn that my students expected polite and indirect positive feedback instead, which resulted in some acculturation stress on both ends.

Thus, the aim of this study is to investigate the role of culture in the provision of formative feedback in education. In particular, this literature review focuses on addressing the following research questions:

- (1) How does formative feedback differ across cultures?
- (2) Which potential clashes might arise in a multicultural classroom due to these differences?
- (3) What strategies can be employed to mitigate these clashes?

## Methods

A rigorous literature search up to 16 December 2021 was carried out following the recommendations of Campos-Asensio (2018) and Mdege (2019). The following online journal databases were searched: Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC (via EBSCO) and

PsycINFO (via Ovid). The final search consisted of the following terms: formative feedback (as exact phrase) AND ethnic or culture (see Table 1 for a full list of the search queries used and their results). Note that, although the terms education, teaching, and learning, were used in early queries, they were not included in the final search, as they removed certain *a priori* relevant papers from the searches.

The titles and abstracts were used to filter and select relevant papers, books and chapters. After reading both, an item was considered relevant if its abstract included information regarding either of the research questions. Note that items whose abstract only suggested that they could be tangentially related to the research questions were not selected. These tangentially related items fell into one of the following categories, and did not include either formative feedback or culture in their titles and abstracts:

- (A) Studies on ‘diverse students’ or ‘inclusive education practices’, or those mentioning ‘sociocultural differences’ broadly in their abstracts. These studies usually grouped ‘race’, age, socioeconomic status, culture, neurodiversity, etc., under the same umbrella, and thus separating the effect of culture from other factors might not be possible.
- (B) Studies analyzing the effect of individual characteristics (e.g. identity, creativity) on formative feedback.
- (C) Articles on ‘assessment culture’, ‘learning culture’ or ‘feedback culture’, which could provide insight on the role of culture in the provision of formative feedback, but only if the culture of the participating students and teachers can be somehow identified.
- (D) Reports on ‘cultural competency training’ or ‘culturally responsive practices’, heavily reliant on providing formative feedback.
- (E) Studies on cultural differences in other topics (e.g. plagiarism, time management, formative assessment practices).
- (F) Articles analyzing components and characteristics of feedback (e.g. politeness, written vs oral, constructiveness) could contribute to our general knowledge on differences in culture on feedback if they report different results in different cultures.

**Table 1.** Search queries used and hits for each database. Note that the queries are presented in a generalized format, as the syntax required by each database was slightly different from the rest. Search results are available upon request from the author.

Search query	Scopus	Web of Science	ERIC	PsycINFO	Total
1. <b>feedback</b>	697,586	586,029	38,556	187,979	<b>1.51M</b>
2. <b>formative AND feedback</b>	5422	4163	762	5465	15,812
3. <b>#2 AND cultur*</b>	313	301	59	1869	2542
4. <b>#2 AND (cultur* OR ethnic*) AND educat*</b>	231	220	61	1895	2407
5. <b>#2 AND (cultur* OR ethnic*) AND teach*</b>	142	141	39	1622	1944
6. <b>#2 AND (cultur* OR ethnic*) AND learn*</b>	216	185	45	1807	2253
7. <b>#4 AND #5 AND #6</b>	83	100	1	1582	1766
8. <b>‘formative feedback’</b>	2288	1013	409	1547	5257
9. <b>#8 AND cultur*</b>	111	51	31	444	637
10. <b>#8 AND ethnic*</b>	3	6	2	79	90
11. <b>#8 AND educat*</b>	1494	787	388	1449	4118
12. <b>#11 AND (cultur* OR ethnic*)</b>	90	42	31	463	626
13. <b>#8 AND (cultur* OR ethnic*)</b>	122	56	31	476	<b>685</b>

Thus, these tangentially related items were not included in this literature review. The selected items were read in detail to produce annotated summaries of each one, which were then used to compare themes across items, organize them relative to the research questions, and outline the discussion of their implications. Additionally, when reading these items marked as relevant, particular attention was placed on the references listed therein. This allowed the identification of additional items that were not flagged during the rigorous search.

## Results

The final search produced a total of 608 unique items (685 including repeats) (Table 1). In the end, a total of 29 items were considered relevant for the present study (Appendix 1), with 42 different items flagged as tangentially related (by category: A, 13; B, 2; C, 6; D, 3; E, 5; F, 13). While the low percentage (4.7%) of items selected might raise concern about the selection criteria, the following arguments might provide some context on the search results. First, using wildcard operators proved to be a double-edged sword since it both allowed flexibility in the searches (e.g. culture, intercultural, acculturation, ethnic, ethnicity) and introduced several unrelated terms (e.g. agriculture, horticulture, ethnomethodological). Second, the word culture is not used exclusively to designate the customs, practices, etc., of a particular people or society, but also those of social groups (e.g. workplace culture, organizational culture), and those relative to a particular phenomenon (e.g. feedback culture, assessment culture). As discussed in the Methods section, only the first use is relevant for the present study, with other uses being tangentially related (category C). Additionally, it might also refer to the cultivation of virus, bacteria and plants, which is not relevant for the present study. Third, formative feedback was mentioned in several studies looking into the effect of cultural differences on other topics, such as student motivation or assessment practices, and were thus flagged as tangentially related (categories B and D). Finally, formative feedback was assigned somewhat loosely as 'key identifier' in Ovid (i.e. indexing term exclusive to the database), resulting in inflated search results for that database (Table 1).

Browsing the references listed in the relevant items highlighted 28 additional items that seemed relevant to the present study and had not been flagged by the rigorous search (Appendix 2). They were analyzed following the same approach employed with the relevant items, and any relevant findings were discussed together with those of the relevant items.

### ***Cultural differences in formative feedback***

#### ***Comparative frameworks***

In education, as in many other disciplines, most studies exploring the influence of cultural differences on a particular phenomenon use Hofstede's cultural dimensions as a framework for comparison. The literature on formative feedback is no different. Even though Hofstede has updated the framework over the years by adding additional dimensions (Hofstede 1980, 2001, 2011), cultural differences in formative feedback are explained by two dimensions from his seminal work (1980): power distance index (PDI) and individualism vs collectivism (IvC). The former describes the degree of

conformity and expectations towards power being distributed unequally in a society, while the latter describes a gradient between societies built around loosely knit family groups and those where the feeling of belonging vastly extends beyond the family unit. A secondary trait of the IvC dimension is that people from individualist cultures tend to define themselves based on how they stand out of the crowd, while in collectivist cultures individuals define themselves in relation to other people (e.g. ‘I am a brother’, ‘I am a good student’).

Interestingly, none of the items examined used either of the alternatives to Hofstede’s framework of cultural dimensions, like Trompenaars’ model (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 2000) or the GLOBE project (House et al. 2004).

An alternative framework is Holliday’s small and large cultures (1999). While large cultures represent the ‘ethnic’ or ‘national’ definition of culture that is associated with the customs, practices, etc., of a particular people or society; small cultures represent any cohesive social group and thus go across ethnic or national boundaries. In this framework, the studies compare the activities and processes of the target small cultures (for instance, a group of international students and the university where they study), instead of trying to explain observed differences based on generalizations derived from the large cultures to which their members belong. This framework is better suited for studying acculturation processes.

Finally, note that some of the findings presented in this study were derived from studies which don’t rely on either of the described comparative frameworks, but instead include ethnicity or country in their analyses (e.g. Dunworth and Sanchez 2016), which can be interpreted as a proxy for culture. Findings from this kind of studies were used to describe general trends or to add onto the findings of framework-based studies from that culture.

### **Themes of variation**

*Perception of formative feedback:* In the literature this theme is usually intertwined with student motivation, and/or with the perception of teacher behavior. An early hypothesis stated that formative feedback should be affected by cultural differences in student motivation because the interpretation of that feedback was based on student needs, which vary with ethnicity (e.g. Dekker and Fischer 2008). This hypothesis was disproved by Pat-El and colleagues (Pat-El, Tillema, and van Koppen 2012), who found no differences in how Dutch, Turkish and Moroccan students associated formative feedback with their learning needs. However, Pat-El, Tillema, and van Koppen (2012) did find significant cultural differences in how students perceived formative feedback. For instance, in their study, both Moroccan and Turkish students had a stronger perception of scaffolding formative feedback (i.e. how-to’s) as an indicator of teacher proximity than Dutch students. Cultural differences in the perception of formative feedback can also be found for different feedback types. In the UK, for example, positive feedback is associated with increased student motivation and Weaver (2006) stated that most of the students she interviewed thought that more positive feedback should be given. On the other hand, Harrison et al. (2016) reported that US and Dutch students became frustrated when they received excessive positive feedback and a lack of constructive critical feedback, and similar arguments have been brought to my attention by Spanish students (Gálvez-López, pers. obs.). Suhoyo and colleagues (Suhoyo et al. 2017, 2018) found

that praise (a form of positive feedback) did not influence the perceived learning value of formative feedback in Indonesian students, and that those students perceived group feedback as more valuable than individual feedback. Similarly, perceived feedback quality also differs culturally, as Suhoyo and colleagues (Suhoyo et al. 2014a) reported while comparing perceptions of feedback between Indonesian and Dutch medical students. In their study, they found that, while the literature described high quality feedback as that provided by specialists, based on observing students and initiated by the student, those characteristics did not match the feedback perceived as most instructive in either studied country.

*Feedback as communication:* Tian and Lowe (2013) argued that, as any instance of communication, each feedback message must pass through two filters, those of the transmitter and the receiver, and both will include cultural expectations about its content, the role of both participants (i.e. the teacher–student relationship), and their relative position of authority (which can be related to each culture’s PDI). In their study, they describe how the filter of Chinese students changed during their acculturation to the small culture of a UK university. Dunworth and Sanchez (2016) also found evidence of this phenomenon, as when discussing factors in the transformational domain<sup>2</sup> associated to quality of feedback by British students, they noted that different students had different reactions to similar feedback items. For instance, one of the students reported taking no action on feedback when it was presented as a question because she was unsure on whether it represented advice on issues to address or was just a suggestion. This particular example stayed with me because, as a Spanish learner in the UK, I had a similar reaction due to my expectations of feedback consisting of direct, clear, constructive critical messages, with questions reserved to denote confusion or, rarely, to propose alternatives. Note that this example also links to the cultural differences on perception of formative feedback mentioned above.

*Affective/interpersonal domain:* From the three dimensions of factors associated with quality of feedback described by Dunworth and Sanchez (2016)<sup>2</sup>, cultural differences seem to arise mostly from the affective/interpersonal dimension (see examples below). However, an affective factor which seems prevalent regardless of culture is the fact that feedback is more effective when it makes the student feel cared by their teacher, with similar observations stemming from China, Australia, and the UK (Chen, Chou, and Cowan 2014; Cookson 2017). On the other hand, factors in the orientational and transformational dimensions seem to be applicable to all cultures, as are the concepts of timeliness, specificity and personalization of feedback (Ambrose et al. 2010). Other authors have arrived at similar conclusions even if their terminology is different. For instance, Suhoyo et al. (2017) showed that feedback characteristics such as feedback provider, feeling observed, and praise, seemed to differ among cultures, but other feedback characteristics were associated to high quality feedback regardless of culture (namely mentioning things to improve, comparing performance to a standard, explaining the correct performance, and helping the student to create a development plan). Similarly, Cookson’s (2017) analysis of attitudes towards feedback showed that, independently of their culture, students placed more value into feedback being specific and informative on how to improve than into praise or indicators of performance in isolation. Note, however, that while the factors *per se* may apply to all cultures, as it has been already stated, students’ perceptions on the value of those might differ.



*East vs West:* Most of the literature investigating the role of culture in the provision of formative feedback is focused on comparing ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ education. While the use of quotations in those terms is addressed in the Discussion, the observed differences are presented in the next section together with their potential explanation, as they provide an answer to this study’s second research question.

### **Potential clashes in the multicultural classroom**

#### ***‘Eastern’ students in a ‘Western’ setting***

Cookson (2017) provides a thorough analysis in the history and characteristics of the Chinese Higher Education system and their consequences on teaching and learning in similar cultures. While not strictly necessary for understanding this section, I would encourage any reader eager for a deeper context to consult that paper.

Most of the cultural differences in the provision of formative feedback between ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ students have been explained using Hofstede’s cultural dimensions (Suhoyo et al. 2014a, 2014b, 2017; Beinart and Clohessy 2017). ‘Eastern’ cultures are usually characterized by a high power distance between teachers and students (high PDI values) and are considered collectivist cultures (low IvC values), while ‘Western’ cultures tend to have low PDI values and be considered individualist cultures (high IvC values). High PDI has been associated with a correlation of the perceived value of formative feedback and the status of the person providing the feedback. For instance, the feedback provided by a lecturer would be perceived as more valuable than that provided by their teaching assistant. Additionally, this high PDI may impede the discussion of feedback between teacher and student, nullifying its dialogic component and decreasing its effectiveness (Yang and Carless 2013); or even negating the process altogether if the teacher does not initiate the conversation (Suhoyo et al. 2014b). The consequences of low individualism are discussed further below. Finally, differences in PDI and IvC values have also been related to the varying frequency of the feedback characteristics described in the previous section (praise, feeling observed, perceived instructiveness, etc.; Suhoyo et al. 2014a, 2017).

It has been reported that Chinese students have very limited experience with formative feedback and that the nature of the messages they receive is either positive feedback or ‘do better’ variations (Tian and Lowe 2013). As discussed in Pratt, Kelly, and Wong (1999), for Chinese teachers the purpose of feedback is to point out errors or weaknesses, so it needs to be specific and critical, and students expect very little praise. Similarly, in her comparison of medical education in Thailand and Canada, Wong (2011) reported that Thai faculty believed that feedback should be used to correct behavior, while their Canadian counterparts would often avoid giving (negative) feedback out of concern for emotional consequences. Thus, when ‘Eastern’ students first encounter formative feedback (for instance, when immersed in a ‘Western’ education system) it tends to be a negative and discouraging experience, particularly because they interpret the high number of comments on their work as a high number of mistakes. This requires an acculturation period (documented by Tian and Lowe 2013), after which they readily and successfully engage with formative feedback.<sup>3</sup>

Receiving oral feedback in front of their peers is another contentious topic, as it has a particularly severe negative effect on ‘Eastern’ students due to it being perceived as a loss



of face (i.e. public shaming) (Tian and Lowe 2013). This also interferes with peer feedback as on one hand they don't want to risk losing face by making mistakes in front of their peers (Suhoyo et al. 2014a,b), and on the other they don't want to offend other students or make them uncomfortable if they are shy (Chen, Chou, and Cowan 2014). Suhoyo and colleagues (Suhoyo et al. 2014b, 2017) explain this by means of Hofstede's IvC: in collectivist countries group feedback is preferred as it avoids both any loss of face (if the message is negative) and singling out individuals from the crowd (if the message is positive). The latter relates to IvC because low values for that cultural dimension are associated with increased modesty (Markus and Kitayama 1991).

Cultural differences are also expected in feedback-seeking behavior (Sully de Luque and Sommers 2000), and Morrison, Chen, and Salgado (2004) showed that some of them were related to PDI and self-assertiveness (one of the many aspects of IvC). In their study, the authors analyzed the relationship between directly seeking performance feedback and several cultural variables, and their results showed that individuals with high PDI and low self-assertiveness (common in 'Eastern' cultures) were less likely to request feedback. Thus, feedback provision strategies such as relying on students asking for feedback whenever they need it, or reminding students that they can request personalized feedback during a teacher's contact hours, would be detrimental to 'Eastern' students.

Another potential clash arises when formative feedback is used to promote critical thinking or note a lack thereof. Three important principles for education in Confucian-heritage cultures (CHC) are (1) not questioning the authorities (in this context, teachers); (2) avoiding conflict; and (3) respecting textbooks, which must be memorized and reproduced verbatim because they are 'correct and unchangeable' (Tian and Lowe 2013). These principles conflict with the concept of critical thinking as, while students from CHC are capable of identifying challengeable arguments and providing reasoned counterarguments to them, they won't express them publicly in fear of the consequences of disagreeing with their teachers, doubting the veracity of the written word, and/or creating conflicts of opinion with their classmates (Chen, Chou, and Cowan 2014). Thus, formative feedback requesting critical thinking is both confusing for students from CHC and against their cultural values. On a similar note, CHC principle 3 has been associated with plagiarism issues, as CHC have a different perception of what plagiarism represents (Shang 2019).

Cultural differences in writing style can also lead to confusion when interpreting formative feedback. In 'Western' cultures, the transmitter is responsible for making the communication succeed, while in 'Eastern' cultures the receiver gets that responsibility (Hinds 1987). Mirzaee and Hasrati (2014) relate this to the prevalence of short and cryptic messages in the provision of formative feedback in 'Eastern' cultures, which 'Western' students would find confusing. On the other hand, formative feedback messages about an essay being unclear or convoluted might confuse students of 'Eastern' cultures.

### **Other settings**

Information on the potential clashes between other sets of cultures was anecdotal at best, virtually nonexistent at worst. A remarkable observation was provided by Rule et al. (2017) who described their experience as US medical teachers in an East African rural

setting. They found that their learners had a lack of exposure to the concept of debriefing and giving (formative) feedback, while stating that in honor-shame-based cultures feedback can be challenging to implement (especially for people outside the community) as it can be perceived as shaming or blaming. Finally, they added that learners described both discomfort with peer feedback and reported significant variation in the quality of the peer feedback received. However, no further explanation is provided to ground these comments other than referencing similar observations in the literature.

### **Mitigation strategies**

Three main strategies for addressing potential clashes due to cultural differences in the provision of formative feedback were found.

Burns and Foo (2012, 2014) present the guidelines for introducing an intervention early on in a module which, by providing formative feedback on a short exploratory essay, would help acculturate international students into the local culture on feedback, marking criteria, etc. This intervention is followed up by one-on-one sessions to increase the perception of affective value and mitigate potential negative effects of cultural differences. This strategy is supported by Evans and Waring (2011), which include a similar intervention within their personal learning styles pedagogy approach (Evans and Waring 2009).

Suhoyo et al. (2014b) translate a formative-feedback-intensive ‘Western’ practice to an ‘Eastern’ culture by carefully managing the implementation process while considering the characteristics of the local culture at every step. Paraphrasing their own words, the practical implication of their study is that culture is not necessarily an obstacle when implementing educational practices designed in different cultural settings.

Hailu et al. (2017) and, to some extent, Beinart and Clohessy (2017) deliver theoretical guidelines to develop culturally responsive pedagogy, which represents a paradigm shift from students having to acculturate to the institution by creating an inclusive learning environment. This model is based in Intercultural Communication Competence practice, so it heavily draws into the theme of feedback as communication. In a way, culturally responsive pedagogy is an extension of Carless’ contextually grounded approaches to formative assessment (Carless 2011), a framework for adapting ‘Western’ practices and findings in formative assessment (including formative feedback) to CHC. It focuses on a formative use of summative tests (prevalent in the Chinese education system; Cookson 2017) coupled with peer-cooperation and feedback (drawing on the collectivist nature of CHCs).

Besides these three strategies, some notes on best practice can be derived from the literature, especially for the East–West setting. Regarding critical thinking, a good strategy to provide formative feedback on that topic would be clarifying the source of the problem first (Chen, Chou, and Cowan 2014). Thus, instead of commenting ‘this lacks critical thinking’, it would be more helpful to address it with a more culturally sensitive message, such as ‘instead of listing the arguments in favor or against this topic, we are interested in your thoughts on the topic after reading those arguments and the reasoning behind your thoughts’. Chen, Chou, and Cowan (2014) also found that referring to critical thinking as ‘reasoned thinking’ decreased the negative perception of the concept for students from CHC. Similarly, when potential plagiarism is detected (in the sense that

book or journal fragments are copied verbatim), it would be recommended to explain what the expected citation format is (e.g. use quotations for verbatim phrases, respect the authors by attributing the phrase to them, etc.).

## Discussion

This literature review highlights the major themes of variation regarding cultural differences in the provision of formative feedback in education, and provides an overview of methodological approaches to their study and strategies that can be adapted to mitigate potential clashes associated with those cultural differences. However, this review also reveals how little we know about those topics when we deviate from a ‘Eastern’ in the ‘West’ setting (or vice versa), and how problematic that dichotomy is.

For one, most ‘East vs West’ studies are laced with prejudice and otherization, relying on terms such as ‘Eastern’ vs ‘Western’, ‘East Asian students’, ‘non-native speakers’ or ‘students from Confucian-heritage cultures’ (further detailed in Tian and Lowe 2013; Chen, Chou, and Cowan 2014; and Matsuyama et al. 2019). Throughout this paper, the terms have been used in quotations (and their use stressed on first appearance) to bring attention to this issue, while CHC has only been used to highlight findings common to China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Singapore, in opposition to other ‘Eastern’ cultures (hence no quotation). The term ‘Western’ is not free of prejudice either, as it actually assumes that the ‘Western’ world consists only of the core anglophone countries plus, to some extent, some of Western Europe (Carless 2011; Cookson 2017; André et al. 2020). Some numbers to emphasize and illustrate how problematic these assumptions are: (1) the final search query produced 29 items relevant to the research questions of this review; (2) they provided information on formative feedback practices for 19 countries; (3) 47% of those countries belong to the ‘Eastern’ or ‘Western’ generalization; (4) only ca. 25% of the items discuss cultures outside the dichotomy. Thus, we severely lack information on the feedback practices of most cultures, which leaves us unprepared to understand, let alone mitigate, a multitude of potential clashes with formative feedback in our classrooms. Another layer of this ‘East vs West’ problematic is the fact that some of these studies seem to pursue a neocolonialist agenda which disseminates, as Bleakley and colleagues deftly put it, ‘conceptual frameworks and practices which assume that “metropolitan West is best”’ (Bleakley, Brice, and Bligh 2008, 266). Probably because the evidence from which their conclusions have been drawn derives from WEIRD subjects in the first place (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010).

Beyond the ‘East vs West’ dichotomy, many studies analyzing cultural differences in the provision of formative feedback, and in education in general, walk dangerously close to a neoracist framework in which ethnicity, or even culture, is determined by skin color (e.g. Schutte 2016; Schmulian and Coetzee 2019). And, while I don’t think that any of those studies intend to push a neoracist agenda (i.e. cultural racism), their data is presented in a way that could be misused by such people. Besides the ethical considerations, however, this oversimplification of ethnicity into skin color also has methodological problems, as studies incorporating several ethnic variables (e.g. self-assigned ethnicity, language spoken at home, country of birth, parents’ birthplace) have revealed that language spoken at home and parents’ birthplace tend to have a

larger effect on the studied variables than self-assigned ethnicity (den Brok et al. 2003; Pat-El, Tillema, and van Koppen 2012).

In relation to the topics discussed above, however, it is worth noting that one of the limitations of the present study is that the search was probably restricted to items written in English, as none of the titles/abstract filtered noted that it was translated from a different language. Since Cookson (2017) states that most of the literature on formative feedback in China is published in Chinese, it would be expected that other countries published their studies in their native language as well. Thus, a potential next step in understanding cultural differences in formative feedback would be repeating the search in local databases indexing studies in other languages. Complementarily, hints on feedback practices could be drawn from studies looking into other topics, such as plagiarism or summative assessment (e.g. items flagged as tangentially related in the present study), so the selection step for subsequent reviews should be less strict. Finally, one of the selected items (Gabelica and Popov 2020) revealed that similar research has been carried out in the literature on business and management, exploring how cultural differences affect team feedback in organizations and workplaces. The findings on this field could probably be analyzed and translated into the field of education.

Another topic that should be discussed is the prevalent use of Hofstede's cultural dimensions to understand cultural differences. While the success and applicability of this framework is undeniable, as it is widely recognized and has inspired research on the role of culture across a range of academic disciplines, the main flaw in the system is also undeniable: the values assigned to each country have not changed since Hofstede's seminal work, which were obtained from surveys carried out prior to its publication (Hofstede 1980). To contextualize with an example, when the surveys were taken Spain was under a dictatorship, so it comes as no surprise that Hofstede's dimensions describe the country as a collectivist culture with high power distance, where direct or negative feedback is frowned upon, confrontation is avoided, and everyone accepts their place on the strict social hierarchy. Anyone who has lived in Spain after the publication of that seminal work would know how inaccurate that depiction is. Gerlach and Eriksson (2021) provide a thorough analysis on the lack of consistency through time of some of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, showing a lack of correlation between the original values and recalculated values based on Hofstede's updated surveys. While the authors attribute this to cultural values changing over time, they provide no hypothesis on the causes of those changes. Globalization (Kluver and Fu 2008; Wani 2011) and neo-colonialism (Altbach 2004; Bleakley, Brice, and Bligh 2008), technological advances (Signorini, Wiesemes, and Murphy 2009; Hansen et al. 2014) and social media (McKenzie et al. 2019), all seem good candidates for that.

A number of other factors add additional layers to the complexity of interpreting Hofstede's dimensions (McSweeney 2002; Signorini, Wiesemes, and Murphy 2009). First, each country is characterized by a single set of dimensions, which can be interpreted as either 'the country is monocultural' or 'the values represent a weighted average of the different cultures in one country'. Even if applied very broadly, the former is only valid for a handful of countries, while the second can lead to disregarding cultural minorities or providing misleading values by averaging (e.g. if different cultures within a country have extreme and opposite values on any dimension, the average would present a picture of midrange values for the country). Second, at a smaller scale,

within each culture there is bound to be enormous diversity of principles and behaviors between individuals, and thus the broad generalization that country-wide cultural dimensions pose may not correctly represent individual perceptions (den Brok et al. 2003). Third, external variables that correlate with cultural dimensions (such as gender or socioeconomic status; Triandis 1989) can also correlate with the variable being explained using those dimensions. For instance, in the current topic of culture on feedback, both PDI and IvC are widely used to characterize cultural differences in the provision of formative feedback. However, as shown by Sortkær (2019), differences in socioeconomic status (SES) can also be related to differences in the perception of formative feedback.

In summary, all these issues arising from Hofstede's cultural dimensions not only question the validity of their association with observed differences in culture on feedback, but also make any inference on the potential culture on feedback of cultures for which no observations are available unreliable at best if it is based on Hofstede's dimensions. However, I am not as critical of this framework as McSweeney (2002), since the literature has statistically quantified the relationship between certain cultural dimensions and different aspects of feedback provision and perception (e.g. Hwang and Francesco 2010; André et al. 2020). Going further, I would recommend any researchers employing Hofstede's framework to first calculate the values of any relevant cultural dimensions for each of the individuals in their study (see Hwang and Francesco 2010 for an example of application), as doing this allows for a more thorough analysis and deeper understanding of any potential relationship between those factors.

## Recommendations for practice

I hope that this review has provided enough evidence to emphasize the importance of taking into account cultural differences when providing formative feedback, as cultural adaptations might be necessary to guarantee its effectiveness in a multicultural classroom. Thus, to end this review, I would like to reflect on the applicability of the mitigating strategies presented above.

While developing culturally responsive pedagogy seems on paper the best approach, it should be stressed that it is indeed a theoretical approach, and its guidelines are far from providing best practice suggestions. In fact, one of the guidelines is an expanded use of formative feedback, which this study has shown to be culturally variable. Suhojo's approach seems the best solution when exporting already designed practices to other cultures. For instance, this approach would be useful to ensure that modules brought to overseas campuses are adapted to the local cultures instead of trying to impose the characteristics of the culture they were designed in. However, in a day-to-day practice, and especially for new teachers inheriting modules from previous staff, Burns and Foo's intervention-style approach is ideal, as it does not rely on any particular culture on feedback. Its only requirement is that the teacher is well aware of its own culture on feedback and is able to present it to the students during the mock assessment. Additionally, the one-on-one interviews provide an additional step to identify any potential clashes and make adjustments to the system to better suit the students' needs. Note, however, that this step also limits the applicability of this approach, as one-on-one interviews with all students are not realistically possible in modules with high student

numbers. For those cases, the solution might be to create a questionnaire which identifies the different cultures on feedback of the student pool. Then, either the one-on-one interviews could be reserved for students deviating from the local culture on feedback (e.g. international students in a UK module) or, if the majority of students presented a culture on feedback different from that of the teacher (e.g. teaching in a country with a different culture on feedback), the mock assessment should be tailored instead to adapt the teacher to that culture on feedback.

## Notes

1. As opposed to ‘feedback culture’, a culture ‘where individuals continuously receive, solicit, and use formal and informal feedback to improve their job performance’ (London and Smither 2002).
2. Dunworth and Sanchez (2016) grouped factors associated with quality of feedback in three interconnected dimensions: affective/interpersonal, orientational and transformational. The first relates to promoting student confidence and increasing motivation, and to the teacher–student relationship. The orientational dimension is similar to Pat-El’s monitoring formative feedback (Pat-El, Tillema, and van Koppen 2012) and relates to identifying where the student stands academically and where is headed, while the transformational dimension corresponds to Pat-El’s scaffolding formative feedback and deals with promoting student self-reflection, autonomy and performance.
3. Note that acculturation does not mean culture substitution, but rather adapting to the activities and processes of the new culture, in this case the use of formative feedback. Other cultural values are retained after acculturation (e.g. the sense of personal duty and hard work attributed to ‘Eastern’ cultures).

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1

List of the papers, chapters and books selected as relevant for this study (from the 608 items produced by the final search query).

- André, S., R. Maulana, M. Helms-Lorenz, S. Telli, S. Chun, C.-M. Fernández-García, T. de Jager, Y. Irnidayanti, M. Inda-Caro, O. Lee, R. Safrina, T. Coetzee, and M. Jeon. 2020. Student Perceptions in Measuring Teaching Behavior across Six Countries: A Multi-Group Confirmatory Factor Analysis Approach to Measurement Invariance. *Frontiers in Psychology* 11: e273. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00273.
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## Appendix 2

List of the papers, chapters and books referenced by the items listed in Appendix 1 that were also considered relevant for this study.

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