Exploring peer feedback on behaviour in the international classroom: a case study on students' experiences and perceptions

Ingrid Van Rompay-Bartels and Jannemieke Geessink
International School of Business, HAN University of Applied Sciences, Arnhem, The Netherlands

Abstract

Purpose – In spite of the potential of peer feedback, research related to the international classroom and the development of intercultural competences remains limited. This paper aims to further explore this combination and associated gaps by presenting students' perceptions of peer feedback on individual behaviour in group work.

Design/methodology/approach – Several studies have shown that peer feedback can be a powerful instrument in higher education. For this reason, this instrument is increasingly being deployed in the international classroom of a Dutch Business School (DBS), which has a student population of about 60 different nationalities. The present paper adopts an embedded case-study design in studying peer feedback within the international classroom.

Findings – The primary results of this study are twofold. First, they show that before joining DBS, the vast majority of international students have never been exposed to group work peer feedback. And second, they reveal that cultural background (bias) is a critical factor in how students provide and perceive peer feedback. Students from high-context cultures struggle with direct feedback provided by students from low-context cultures. Furthermore, the results show that domestic cultural values "lack consideration" when dealing with the contrasts in cultural values of non-domestic (international) students.

Originality/value – This study indicates that several aspects of the students' cultural background have a direct impact on how they provide and perceive individual peer feedback on their behaviour in group work. Furthermore, it argues that peer feedback, when used as an instrument, requires specific training and guidance of students with regard to cultural differences, values and perceptions.

Keywords Higher education, Intercultural competence, Peer feedback, Intercultural learning, International classroom

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Peer feedback shows potential benefits in enhancing the students' learning process because of its valuable contribution to the students' analysis and reflection capacity

Journal of International Education in Business
Vol. 16 No. 1, 2023
pp. 1-17
Emerald Publishing Limited
2046-469X
DOI 10.1108/JIEB-07-2020-0063

(Falchikov, 1995), and to their self-regulation learner autonomy (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Hattie and Timperley, 2007; O'Connell *et al.*, 2010). Recently, the focus on feedback practices has shifted from the receiver to the provider (McConlogue, 2015). Providing peer feedback makes an appeal to a variety of cognitive processes and higher order thinking in the learning activity (Van Popta *et al.*, 2017). Various studies indicate that students perceive giving feedback as more useful than receiving it (Falchikov, 1995; Liu and Carless, 2006; Lundstrom and Baker, 2009; Gaynor, 2020). Students also associate peer feedback with difficulties, when collaborating with international students from diverse cultural backgrounds, with different preferences and needs (Warwick, 2007; McLeay and Wesson, 2014; Yu and Lee, 2016). So far, most studies with international students tend to focus on peer feedback on language acquisition and assessment.

In the international classroom of a Dutch Business School (DBS), peer feedback also plays an important role in group work. Part of the learning process consists in providing peer feedback for each group member during a group meeting. The peer feedback focuses on behavioural aspects during group work.

Regardless of the benefits of peer feedback, little research has been devoted to exploring students' experiences and perceptions and to the question as to how their cultural background impacts the peer feedback process (McLeay and Wesson, 2014; Yu and Lee, 2016). The impact of peer feedback on the behavioural aspect during group work in an international classroom has often been neglected in scholarly literature.

The present study contributes to this nascent interest in peer feedback and its impact on students' learning experiences in the international classroom, using an analysis of students' narratives based on case study. The analysis will address the students' perceptions of providing peer feedback on individual behaviour within an international context; the way this affects students' self-awareness; and the possible benefits for intercultural learning. It appears that non-domestic students and domestic students with a migration background respond to peer feedback differently from domestic students. This study argues that cultural diversity in the international classroom cannot be ignored as a factor (Chavan *et al.*, 2014) when a curriculum is being developed. Cultural background turns out to be a critical factor influencing student behaviour when they provide and receive feedback in the international classroom. This study starts with a brief culture framework and proceeds with a review of the current literature on peer feedback. This is followed by the methodology and findings. Finally, the needs and challenges for further adaptations in the curriculum and research are identified.

Literature review
Culture framework and peer feedback
Hofstede's (2001) national culture framework consists of cultural dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism vs collectivism, masculinity vs femininity and long-/short-term orientation. These dimensions based on cultural values are extensively applied and recognised in international business (Beugelsdijk *et al.*, 2017; Sivakumar and Nakata, 2001), social sciences (Kirkman *et al.*, 2006) and educational studies (Cronjé, 2011; McLeay and Wesson, 2014). Even though Hofstede's work has not escaped criticism (House *et al.*, 2004; McSweeney, 2002), it still provides a valuable framework for explaining cultural differences. According to Beugelsdijk *et al.* (2017, p. 31), Hofstede's (2001) framework "[. . .] determines social norms and expectations, ultimately shaping the behavior of individuals and organizations". This framework also provides support to explore and to explain the differences in the perceptions of students in the use of peer feedback on behaviour in the international classroom. In the present study, the use of Hofstede's dimensions (2001)

primarily focuses on power distance and individualism (vs collectivism), in addition to the question of how these values and beliefs may influence the student's perceptions on behaviour in group work. First, the dimension "power distance" may lead to students' perceptions of status and relationships (Adair *et al.*, 2009, p. 174) in relation to the role of the provider of peer feedback on behaviour. Second, the dimension "individualism" (vs "collectivism") may lead to differences in work styles (Chavan, 2011; Woods *et al.*, 2010), communication styles (Hall, 1976; Adair *et al.*, 2009) and different expectations of the group work process (Woods *et al.*, 2010). Hofstede's other dimensions remain outside the scope of this study.

Hall's high–low context concept (1976) remains one of the most significant current frameworks for explaining intercultural communication (Gesteland, 1999; Bailey *et al.*, 1997; Adair *et al.*, 2009). Hall (1976) distinguishes between cultures that are characterized by communication with high-context (HC)/implicit messages, on the one hand, and low-context (LC)/explicit messages, on the other. In other words, people may perceive the messages in different ways. In HC cultures, the communication occurs indirectly through different channels and sources of non-verbal information (e.g. silence, status, body language). In contrast, in LC cultures, people communicate more directly with unambiguous language. In this study, the context is the international classroom in The Netherlands, which is considered a LC culture in Hall's conceptualization.

Taken together, these frameworks can be helpful in studying students' perceptions on peer feedback in the international classroom.

Peer feedback and its benefits for the provider

Feedback is widely considered one of the major influences in learning (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Because of its significance, it is an instrument that has been used increasingly in higher education (Sluijmans and Segers, 2018; Shute, 2008). Narciss (2012) refers to feedback as "all post-response information that informs learners about their actual state of learning or performance in order to regulate the further process of learning in the direction of the learning standards strived for". Feedback can be provided by different sources, including, but not limited to, parents, teachers or peers (Hattie and Timperley, 2007).

Peer feedback is provided amongst equals (Gielen *et al.*, 2010), that is, in educational situations, from one student to another. Van Gennip *et al.* (2010) describe peer feedback as a more informal process in which students learn from each other by means of giving and receiving feedback. This feedback is not linked to a grade (Liu and Carless, 2006). Peer feedback can thus be considered a formative activity (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), whereby the learning process of students is central (Shute, 2008). Peer feedback is distinct from peer assessment (Falchikov, 1995; Topping, 1998) in that students do not rate or grade each other's work.

More recently, attention has focused on peer feedback research in which the role of the provider and the related learning benefits become more prominent (Falchikov, 1995; McConlogue, 2015; Berggren, 2015; Yu and Lee, 2016; Van Popta *et al.*, 2017; Gaynor, 2020). Nicol (2011, p. 4) emphasises in her research how the process of reviewing and providing feedback on the work of their peers enables students to develop their critical judgment and to build up their understanding. The process of composing peer feedback can itself be a powerful learning instrument for the students (McConlogue, 2015), as it stimulates different components of the cognitive process, such as "evaluative judgement, a suggestion for improvement and an explanation" (Van Popta *et al.*, 2017, p. 32). Although there is still little literature on studies investigating the benefits with the focus on the provider (Yu and Lee, 2016), those that are available are mainly in the field of language learning (ESL/EFL). Some

of those studies do not show positive results for the provider (Trautmann, 2006; Rosalia, 2010). In contrast, a few more recent studies demonstrate the benefits for the provider of peer feedback (Lundstrom and Baker, 2009; Berggren, 2015).

Admittedly, it is not easy to understand how the perceived benefits of peer feedback are linked to the provider and to the cognitive process more broadly. Much of the available literature – focusing on the effectiveness of feedback in learning a Second Language (L2) in writing classes – appears to show inconsistency in the findings regarding the benefits for the feedback provider. Above all, these findings show that more research is needed to better understand whether and how peer feedback, with the focus on the provider, contributes to the student's development and competences.

Peer feedback in international classroom

In an international classroom, students from different nationalities and cultures learn together. One of the specific goals of the international classroom is to enable domestic and international students to enhance their intercultural competence (Teekens, 2000, p. 30). Deardorff (2010, p. 87), basing herself on her previous studies in the USA, defines intercultural competence as "effective and appropriate behavior and communication in intercultural situations" . The international competence learning process is characterised as a "dynamic, on-going, interactive, self-reflective learning process that transforms attitudes, skills and knowledge for effective communication and interaction across a range of cultures and contexts" (Freeman *et al.*, 2009, p. 13). Multicultural group work is one of the pedagogical tools used to stimulate interaction between students (Strauss and U, 2007) and to prepare them for an international professional environment (McLeay and Wesson, 2014, p. 143). However, multicultural group work can also be a challenge in international tertiary education. Woods *et al.* (2010, p. 67) point, in their study, to challenges, such as language barriers and differences in learning styles, which are linked to the students' cultural and educational background, as well as to differences in students' expectations of what they interpret as group work. Moreover, negative attitudes to cultural differences and some negative personality attributes are also part of the challenges involved in multicultural group work.

It is commonly recognised that in an international learning environment culture is likely to have an impact on peer feedback effectiveness. Most studies on peer feedback within an international learning environment focus on writing skills in language learning (Allaei and Connor, 1990; Warwick, 2007; Yu and Lee, 2016).

Peer feedback is a tool that is used in a socio-cultural encounter, in which cultural issues have a fundamental role (Goldstein, 2006; Hyland and Hyland, 2006). As Atkinson (1999, p. 642) points out, "individuals are individuals-in-context", and it should be taken into account that their socio-cultural background shapes them. This suggests that in an international educational environment, cultural diversity may influence and challenge the communication among peers in each form of peer feedback. Not only the command of a language, in most cases English, is a possible complication (Hyland and Hyland, 2006, Yu *et al.*, 2016); but, also different learning styles (Chavan, 2011), communication styles (Hall, 1976; Allaei and Connor, 1990; Warwick, 2007) and cultural norms and values (Hofstede, 2001; Mcleay and Wesson, 2014) may play a role.

Mcleay and Wesson (2014, p. 143) suggest that, within tertiary education, there appears to be limited literature that explores culture and makes comparisons between non-domestic and domestic students' perceptions on peer feedback. To date, the possible combination between peer feedback on behaviour in an international classroom and the development of intercultural competences has not yet been explored in educational research.

Methods

This exploratory study adopts as its methodology an embedded case study design (Scholz and Tietje, 2002), in which the students are the multiple units of analysis within the main international classroom unit (Yin, 2012, p. 8). In such design, the purpose is to investigate "a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in-depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (Yin, 2012, p. 4). The design allows a synthesis of knowledge integration using two or more sources of evidence.

The primary data consists of interviews with domestic and non-domestic students at DBS. Students' narratives are examined in an attempt to identify and understand socio-cultural differences in how peer feedback on behaviour impacted their experiences in the international classroom. The data gathered in in-depth semi-structured interviews was transcribed. The full narratives were coded by identified themes. Additionally, one brief questionnaire was used to determine which students were acquainted with peer feedback.

Interviews

Within the community of the international classroom, the authors of this study designated two collaborators for the student purposive sampling (Bernard, 2002): one personal and professional development coach and one senior study career coach. The collaborators have followed these students since their first year at DBS (Yin, 2009, pp. 91–92). They selected a group of students, with different nationalities and backgrounds, from a second-year and a fourth-year class.

The criteria for selection were based on a balance between diversity in nationality, gender, age, and cultural background. The group included students from collectivistic vs individualistic cultures. Based on the criteria, a list was prepared. In total, 13 undergraduate students representing 9 different nationalities were selected and were willing to collaborate in the study. Seven participants were from the fourth year ($N = 24$) class, which was less diverse regarding nationalities. Additionally, six eligible candidates from different nationalities were selected from a second year ($N = 21$) business class, to increase the balance in nationalities and the diversity in the group. These students were selected on the basis of their substantial experience and insights (Yin, 2009, p. 108) into the process of peer feedback. Participating students were from China, Egypt, Germany, Hungary, Japan, Norway, The Netherlands, Ukraine and Vietnam. In total, seven women and six men were represented in the sampling.

Prior to the study, ethical approval was sought from the students. In an informed consent process, they were apprised of the origin of the research project, its purpose, nature, potential benefits, risks and timeline. The consent process enabled students to understand the nature of the research and to make the choice whether to collaborate or not. Additionally, confidentiality, privacy and anonymity, if so desired, were guaranteed to all participants.

The selected students were approached in May and June 2019 for an individual in-depth qualitative interview of approximately 60 min. The following questions were asked:

RQ1. Do you have a word for (peer) feedback in your language?

RQ2. Were you familiar with the concept of giving feedback before starting at DBS?

RQ2. What is, in general, your experience with peer feedback?

RQ2. What is your experience with giving peer feedback on behaviour at DBS?

The conversations also extended to what could be improved in the process of peer feedback regarding behaviour in group work. For all questions, concrete examples were asked. At

the end of the interview, the authors checked with the students if they clearly understood the information. Transcripts were made and were shared with the students. Following the interview, where necessary, there was follow-up exchange (over e-mail or orally) to clarify specific aspects of the data.

Survey

In addition, a short survey questionnaire was distributed among first-year students to verify who was familiar with peer feedback before studying at DBS.

The researchers prepared the short survey, including only three questions measuring acquaintance with peer feedback in open-ended response categories, and one open-question category regarding the student's nationality. The survey questionnaire was self-administered and randomly distributed in hard copies among students in the first year in one of the first weeks of the academic year. A total of $N = 148$ first-year students completed the survey in October 2019. These data collected were used to measure the familiarity, or lack thereof, with the peer feedback tool in general and in group work. These findings provided further validity to the interviews.

Process of interviews

To distil the information based on the experiences of the students, the researchers identified key themes for each question. The final key themes (familiarity with the concept, hierarchy, criticism, communication style and relationship) were generated during the analysis from the code categories based on words or patterns. The codes were as follows: translation of peer feedback in mother language, lack of previous experience; experience with peer feedback on behaviour in group work; chronological experience and behaviour; status and feedback; values vs relationship; values in group work and peer feedback; and values vs communication styles and their descriptions. The sources for the codes were based *a priori* on the theoretical framework (deductively) with four code categories: individualistic culture, collectivistic culture, high context and low context. Later, they were matched with the features described by participants' terminology (inductively). During this process, participant feedback (Johnson, 1997, p. 283) was used with students, collaborators and a senior researcher for the verification and insight of the interpretation of the data.

The data was coded using a combination of qualitative content analysis approach (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009, p. 309), which underwent an iterative process of systematic coding by the two researchers. The collected data provided consistent descriptions ensuring the analysis codes and themes saturation (Brod *et al.*, 2009).

Research questions

This case study aims to present a detailed narrative analysis answering the two main questions of this research:

RQ1. What is the perception of the students in providing peer feedback on individual behaviour in group work in the international classroom at DBS?

RQ2. How do students with different cultural backgrounds reflect on their experience of providing peer feedback on individual behaviour in group work in the international classroom at DBS?

Findings and discussion

Student reflections on the phrase "peer feedback"

Students interviewed in May and June 2019 explained their experiences with, and perceptions of, the peer feedback instrument. The interviews started with the question whether they had a word for peer feedback in their own language. Few students struggled with this question. English is the common language at DBS, but it became clear that "peer feedback" was used with different underlying world views. Searching for a more in-depth understanding, the researchers asked the students to write down the word "peer feedback" in their own language. The key objective was to understand how students translated in their mother tongue the meaning of this phrase in the context of group work. Most students were able to provide an equivalent in their mother tongue. Nonetheless, they too expressed that they preferred to use the term in English. Students mentioned, e.g. "tilbakemeldinger" (Norwegian), explained by the student as "message back" and "visszafelzés" (Hungarian), explained by the student as "giving back a sign". Dutch students had difficulty providing a Dutch equivalent "[. . .] we always use 'feedback', also in Dutch" or the word "terugkoppeling". Van Dale's Dutch Dictionary lists the English term "feedback" as a lemma and mentions "terugkoppeling" as a synonym, the latter word itself being a Dutch loan translation from English (Van Dale, 2015, p. 1134).

The Chinese and Japanese students could not provide an equivalent in their own language. The Japanese student Y.:

> [. . .] but I'm afraid that there is no official term in Japanese for "peer feedback", because peers do not do it in the class in Japan [. . .] only teachers give feedback [. . .] at work you will learn it, [. . .] but it is still different [. . .] but, 'yes' we do have a term for "feedback" in Japanese. It is フィードバク (feedback) or 振り返り(furikaeri)、反省(hansei) [. . .] but it is not the same.

The term "feedback" is an English loanword in Japanese and is transcribed into the phonetic *Katakana* alphabet. The other two terms in *kanji* (Chinese characters) mean "look back" and "critical reflection". The Japanese student linked "feedback" in the Japanese setting with other values and cultural practices that are different from what she experienced in the international classroom.

Chinese student L.Y. provided an alternative explanation to cover the meaning of peer feedback:

> [. . .] it is hard to translate it, because we do not give peer feedback in our culture. I would translate it with 'discussing and negotiating' then I would be more close to what we do here. But, it is [. . .] still different [. . .] In China, we do not give feedback and [. . .] we do not give compliments.

Language is an important tool to reify a culture and to provide insights (DeCapua and Wintergerst, 2016). The whole process of discussing how to translate and validate the lexical equivalent for "peer feedback" in Mandarin and Japanese did not yield a satisfactory result. A variety of possible translations were given, and according to the interviewees, there was a sense of loss of meaning. This is because of the fact that the concept of providing peer feedback on behaviour is absent from educational settings among peers in their culture.

Here, it is important to understand that in their view, this experience was not supported in their culture because "peers" do not provide each other feedback on behaviour, only teachers do.

Hierarchical relationships

As the aforementioned excerpts indicate, it is the relationship between the provider and the receiver of feedback that students find problematic. This is confirmed by student T. from Vietnam. Her viewpoint about (peer) feedback became clear when she stressed what she saw as the values of feedback:

> In our culture we do not usually give feedback. The elderly can give feedback to the younger, not the other way around [. . .] we work and give feedback in a very wordy way to avoid losing face [. . .]. We are always afraid that people might hate us. Yes, we do have a word, but we do not give feedback to others. Higher people give feedback to us, we care more about the person than about feedback.

Furthermore, the Japanese and Chinese students also clearly linked the emphasis on the role of a superior-subordinate relationship to their Confucianist ethic and values. Student K. from China specifically highlighted his shock, when he had to cope with a situation that in his Chinese culture was linked to behavioural values of superiors:

> [. . .] in Chinese universities we would not give 'good' peer feedback, actually, I did not know how to do that, I convinced myself that I had to learn how to do it. Peer feedback is experienced as criticism in China [. . .] when I came here, it was new for me [. . .] it was scary, [. . .]. You never know how others will judge you [. . .]. It was a confrontation for me [. . .] because I have never done it before [. . .] we perceive peer feedback differently [. . .] for me feedback is best when it is done from teacher to students.

Similarly, the students from Ukraine and Norway highlighted in their interviews that they felt estranged when they had to learn how to provide peer feedback at DBS, as in their countries of origin, feedback was not ascribed to peers. It was also part of the reason why some students were reluctant to accept the peer feedback in their teams, especially if it was on behaviour. In justifying it, the student M. from Egypt openly pointed out why she did not feel compelled to follow this unexpected way of working in the Dutch culture:

> [. . .] in Egypt I would receive feedback from a superior, not from a peer [. . .]. So, I was not prepared when I came here [. . .] but they were my peers, so I could choose in the first semester if I wanted to follow it or not [. . .] after in the second semester they became my friends, so I decided that I also want to listen to it.

The majority stressed that in their views, they directly associated feedback with hierarchy, which focuses on unequal distribution of power (Hofstede, 2001). As the international students frequently acknowledged, they were not familiar with the use of peer feedback on behaviour.

Verifying who is familiar with the use of peer feedback

According to the results, only Dutch and German students gave positive answers to the question whether they were familiar with the concept of peer feedback. Still, there were differences and nuances in their experiences of providing peer feedback.

Dutch student E., who grew up in The Netherlands and who is a descendant from an Indonesian immigrant, explained:

> [. . .] in the Netherlands it is common to give peer feedback [. . .] spontaneously [. . .] for example I had experience with peer feedback in my work and also with soccer. With soccer it is common to give feedback, like [. . .] "if you don't do it differently [. . .], it will never work out". But at DBS it is a little bit different, it is more formal, professional [. . .] here I had to give peer feedback with more structure.

German student S. stated:

> [. . .] in high school, I experienced peer feedback but only on products and presentations of other students, not on group work [. . .] when I had to give peer feedback here most people were quite shy, [. . .] I would not want to hurt their feelings, so I would rather be positive. Asian peers are even nicer when they give peer feedback [. . .] Europeans are straight forward, especially Germans and Dutch students [. . .] because the way they were raised at school.

While the Dutch student said that he had no previous experience with peer feedback at school, evidence still shows that in daily life, peer feedback on behaviour is widespread and informal, especially in team activities such as team sports. In class at DBS, when the researcher asked whether they were familiar with peer feedback, Dutch students answered "sure, we give feedback all the time".

The outcomes of the in-depth interviews of May and June 2019 raised the question whether students were familiar with the tool of providing peer feedback before they arrived at DBS. To verify this, a study was carried out in October 2019 in a representative and random sample of first-year students. A total of $N = 148$ respondents completed the survey. This total represents 93% of the sample. A total of 48% of the respondents stated that they were familiar with peer feedback before they came to DBS. On the subsequent question, "Where did you use peer feedback?" 67% of this group ($N = 71$) indicated that they used peer feedback in high school. The most frequent answer (given by 43% of the respondents) was that they provided feedback on presentations. Providing peer feedback during group work was mentioned by 36% of the respondents. All respondents with experience in providing peer feedback in group work went to high school in either Germany or The Netherlands.

Peer feedback and the Dutch culture
The Dutch student E., of Indonesian descent, made a clear comment that in his view, peer feedback is associated with a daily activity in The Netherlands:

> [. . .] giving feedback is typically Dutch, and [. . .] Dutch focus on what is not good.

Interestingly, this was a frequent acknowledgment among the Dutch students observed in the classroom by both researchers. Implicitly, therefore, feedback seems to be perceived as "normal" in The Netherlands. Hofstede (2001, p. 229) points out that in individualistic cultures "[. . .] adult individuals are expected to have learned to take direct feedback constructively". Student E. also made the basic behavioural standards clear, when explaining what is normal:

> You know, [. . .] children in the Netherlands learn that they always have to ask 'why', but in other cultures it is not so [. . .] you take what your parents say.

Thus, it is also important to be conscious of the fact that Dutch students represent the majority culture, when one studies peer feedback in the international classroom at DBS in The Netherlands. This majority group also influences the natural tendency in the international classroom regarding behavioural standards, norms and values. About this, Chinese student W.Y said:

> [. . .] eastern students feel more confident to be critical towards each-other [eastern students] [. . .] Chinese students interpret peer feedback as "I tell you what you are not good at"[. . .] It might also be harder to give negative peer feedback to Western students since we [Chinese students] are a minority.

Again, these comments connote the impact that the majority culture may have on the process of providing peer feedback on behaviour for students from different cultures.

Peer feedback on individual behaviour in group work

Some students clearly mentioned that there was a lack of instruction or training on how they should provide peer feedback. Student Z. from Hungary pointed out his experience:

> [. . .] we did not get a training or explanation from the teacher. So we asked what was expected about how the student performed, or acted [. . .] should it be about behaviour or about what the student contributed to the project? [. . .] we combined both [. . .] it's a good thing but I had to get used to it.

Instructors at DBS seem to have assumed that international students had some experience with providing peer feedback, at least for products (e.g. presentations and reports). However, it is clear that all students, even those who had experience, were looking for additional instructions. Some of them mentioned during the interview that they preferred to ask advice from other students with the same cultural background, or from fellow students with whom they felt more comfortable to discuss it.

Still, a main finding in this research is that the students, without exception, felt that it was significantly more challenging to provide peer feedback on behaviour than on the product.

It is notable how many students mentioned it. In particular, student S. from Norway:

> I feel uncomfortable in both giving and receiving. It still feels weird to give peer feedback. In giving I pursue it carefully, mostly about things that I'm sure of [. . .] like [. . .] products, grammar. Only in the business plan project (BSP) we had to give peer feedback on behaviour. That is definitely much harder. If you know people well it is easier [. . .] but student-to-student is not easy.

Perception of criticism

On several occasions, the providers indicated they were touched by the reactions of the receivers of their feedback. Student D. from Ukraine argued that peer feedback on behaviour can be a sensitive issue for their social relations as peers:

> [. . .] once [. . .] I had to give negative feedback to my group in the first year. [. . .] I appreciate people when they show efforts, but if I felt the opposite I express myself and say it [. . .] for me, giving personal peer feedback is harder than giving peer feedback on a product. You need to work with people in BSP for a longer time. If you give negative peer feedback it might give stress in the group. Your peers might feel hurt and you want your peers to improve [. . .]. I tried to be not so direct when I was giving peer feedback to other students from Chinese and Vietnamese countries [. . .] and at the end [. . .] our result was better, but my performance was less according to my peers.

Similarly, Student A. from Germany described how peer feedback on behaviour may be taken personally. Both students reflected that for some students, it is difficult to separate the "personal" sphere:

> [. . .] the first time that we had to work together was in BSP, but then 'everything' was new to us: the city, the uni, the students, the project work and team [. . .] there was a lot to process [. . .] but, giving feedback is for me the best way to improve [. . .] but there is a difference [. . .] giving feedback on product is easier than giving feedback on behaviour, because people have to adjust, so when you give feedback to people they can get hurt [. . .] and do not accept it or just can't understand it.

Some students experienced much more uncertainty and anxiety when they had to comprehend how to provide peer feedback on behaviour. Japanese student Y. explained that for her, to say the things that she had to say was considered offensive and disrespectful. She justified that she could not provide negative peer feedback on behaviour to others in her first year, and that even now it remained difficult. Likewise, students from Vietnam, and China highlighted that they associated peer feedback on individual behaviour with criticism, and that it was hard for them to express it.

Chinese student L.Y.:

> [. . .] to give feedback is uncomfortable, especially on behaviour [. . .] because you are dealing with people [. . .] and sometimes it is painful, [. . .] sometimes it is personal, [. . .] for example when someone in the group does not work properly [. . .] when we agreed to do something, but the person does not do it as agreed, then it is hard to say it [. . .] In China, we do not give feedback and [. . .] we do not give compliments.

Communication styles and relationships

Several students, mainly from Indonesia, Vietnam, China and Japan, perceived individual peer feedback on behaviour in group work as criticism and as a threat to the harmony in the group. In their view, peer feedback on individual behaviour in group work is a typical Western concept. Hofstede (2001, p. 225) describes the relationship between individual and group in the dimension individualism and collectivism as follows:

> Individualism stands for a society in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him/herself and her/his immediate family only. Collectivism stands for a society in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.

This cultural dimension stresses differences in attitudes and values between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. This dimension led to the researchers' observations that explicit individual peer feedback on behaviour in the group seems to be a concept of individualistic societies, such as the Dutch.

In several comments, the students' frustrations were particularly directed at the perceived rudeness and directness with which students from LC cultures communicated. On the other hand, because of the differences they experienced with regard to cultural values and norms, many international students started to accept that they had to develop new forms of behaviour.

Fourth-year Chinese student L.Y. provided a good illustration of the cultural shock she experienced in the international classroom. In her view, time is needed to enable students to reject stereotypes and to acquire new skills allowing them to operate outside their own comfort zone:

> In the beginning it was so hard [. . .] that I did not want to work with a Dutch student anymore in my group, because he was so direct. Now, I see that he is 'okay'. I experienced that I had to adapt to this way of working here, but this adaptation costs time.

Talking about this issue, and in considerable contrast to the other Dutch students observed in the international classroom, the Dutch-Indonesian student E. reflected on how he initially provided peer feedback on individual behaviour; and how he realised with the years that he had to do it differently:

I do not like giving peer feedback [. . .]. It's easier when you know the person, then you know better how to deal with the person, you can estimate what the best approach is [. . .] in the BSP project [. . .] in the first instance I didn't take differences in consideration. At that time, we had a group with two Dutch students, one Chinese student and two students from Aruba. Now I would do that more [. . .] like [. . .] take people 1 by 1 or formulate more carefully. I think most students do not like giving peer feedback in a group, 1 by 1 would be better [. . .] now [end of his third year] I work in a group with Chinese students [. . .]. I talk with them often apart from the others [. . .] it is better if I approach them separately [. . .] because people perceive things differently.

During the in-depth interview, student E. acknowledged the unconscious influence of his Indonesian father in how he started to adapt his own approach to the different peers in his team, when dealing with students from HC and LC cultures.

For other Dutch students observed in the classroom, the necessity to develop new forms of behaviour more acceptable to the international students is less present, as they still experience their natural environment in and outside the international classroom. Many comments from Dutch students reflect that they are not triggered to adapt their approach in their interactions with the other students. That is, they see themselves as the normative majority in the learning environment in The Netherlands. For example, Dutch Student B.:

According to my colleagues I am too hard and direct in my way of giving peer feedback. I prefer to give peer feedback to students that I do not know. Then I can be more objective [. . .]. It is also not so difficult to give peer feedback when somebody in the group is performing poorly [. . .]. I do not feel comfortable to give feedback to my friends. I prefer peers that I don't know rather than my own friends. [. . .] with my friends it is more personal [. . .] a time ago I received feedback that I was too hard when I expelled a student from the group. That's not a compliment [. . .] When I said something, my friends noticed I was annoyed. I tend to honestly say what I think.

For him, peer feedback on behaviour felt also uneasy, but in his justification, peer feedback is less biased if it concerns unfamiliar peers rather than friends. Moreover, in countless statements regarding values, Dutch students, in general, frequently choose "honesty" as the most important value in their culture. According to Hofstede (2001, p. 228) "[. . .] in individualistic cultures [. . .] speaking one's mind is a virtue".

As the above excerpts indicate, some international students indirectly recognised the necessity to apply intercultural skills when providing peer feedback. They all understood the characteristics of peer feedback as well as the conditions under which they could use it successfully. It appears that the judgmental component of peer feedback is linked to the relational patterns among the students and their individual preferences.

Conclusions, limitations and future research

In scholarly literature on peer feedback, the ways in which international students experience and perceive peer feedback on individual behaviour in group work are largely ignored. Peer feedback focusing on the provider is an educational instrument that is mainly used to develop reflective and critical thinking skills (Falchikov, 1995; Van Popta et al., 2017). In addition, in the international classroom, it also stimulates the ethnic and cultural encounter of students and may serve as an indicator of their intercultural competences.

To understand the impact of peer feedback in the international classroom at DBS, the perceptions of a diverse group of students from different cultural backgrounds have been studied. At the outset, it was noted that the students' experience with peer feedback in their first-year BSP project had an important role. In this project, the wider cultural and relational impact of this instrument is highlighted. The cultural dimensions of collectivism, individualism and power distance (Hofstede, 2001), as well as the high–low context of Hall

(1976), are helpful to further understand and explore the impact of cultural differences, and the ways in which students in an international context interpret these experiences and respond to them.

The present results indicate that in several cultures, peers do not provide each other feedback on behaviour, only teachers are expected to do so. At the same time, the comparison of the results reveals that only Dutch and German students demonstrated some previous experience with peer feedback in an educational setting in group work. Still, it is important to understand that peer feedback on behaviour is implied and labelled among the Dutch students as "normal" in their daily lives in The Netherlands.

A common view among all students was that they found it significantly more challenging to provide peer feedback on individual behaviour than on a product. The results show that this instrument pushed the students out of their comfort zones. It caused discomfort and several students experienced a cultural shock and stress, especially among peers coming from HC and collectivistic cultures. Several students from Asia, but also from the Middle East, frequently disclosed that it would be unthinkable to apply peer feedback on behaviour in their countries of origin. First, for these students, peer feedback on behaviour is an instrument foreign to their culture, as it supports peers' personal judgment. Second, it is considered offensive and scary, especially when in front of all team members, peers express their judgment that someone should improve inside the group. Third, in many cultures, such judgment is perceived as a personal attack and may, therefore, even affect their relations and future decisions for a while.

The results also show that several aspects of the students' cultural background have a direct impact on how they provide individual peer feedback on behaviour. In contrast to HC cultures, in LC cultures, such as The Netherlands, students rely on explicit verbal skills. Their personal relationship to the receiver of feedback is usually not seen as an obstacle to frank speech. This is often witnessed in the direct way in which Dutch students express their feedback on behaviour to their peers. It is evident from the comments of students from HC and collectivistic cultures that they often feel shocked. Yet over time, following the initial discomfort, several students felt compelled to acquire new behavioural attitudes to adapt to the majority Dutch culture. It is here that non-Dutch and Dutch students with a migration background feel the paradox of being part of an international classroom that is located in a specifically Western environment. It appears that several Dutch students no longer experience the necessity to observe, listen, and adapt to new behavioural attitudes of their peers. These findings support previous studies in language learning (Goldstein, 2006; Hyland and Hyland, 2006; Yu and Lee, 2016; Yu et al., 2016) peer assessment in group work (McLeay and Wesson, 2014), which pointed to difficulties when peer feedback is used as a tool in a socio-cultural encounter in which cultural issues have a fundamental role.

The results of this study need to be interpreted in light of its limitations. First, caution must be used, as the findings may not be transferable to all students in the international classroom. Second, this study has a small sample of students from different nationalities and is by no means representative of all international and Dutch national students at DBS. However, several issues were identified that have influenced and constrained the socio-cultural experiences of students in the international classroom. Together, these results provide important insights into the impact of the cultural background of the students, i.e. how peer feedback on behaviour is perceived differently in the international classroom.

Understanding how peer feedback may be perceived in specific ways by students from different cultural backgrounds is a prerequisite for developing the tool of feedback as a learning strategy in group work in higher education. The practice of peer feedback with a focus on the provider enables students to enhance their understanding and critical judgment (Nicol, 2011). As a formative activity (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) in multicultural

group work (Strauss and U, 2007; McLeay and Wesson, 2014), it may also prepare students to understand the challenges of a culturally diverse future workplace well beyond higher education.

This implies that peer feedback as an instrument in an international classroom requires an inclusive approach, with proper training and guidance of students related to cultural values, differences and understanding. Crucial steps include a redesign (substantiated by further research) of the peer feedback process, involving the lack of familiarity with the phenomenon and the cultural values of the student population in the international classroom. More specifically, this will require:

- training of the teachers and pedagogical counsellors working within the international classroom to build awareness of the socio-cultural challenges experienced by students;
- a stepwise introduction of the peer feedback tool to students, along with the necessary instructions; and
- a more tailored approach to peer feedback that takes into account values from different cultures.

Furthermore, this study should be repeated with a new student cohort after a new peer feedback tool is developed, to compare the students' perceptions and results. Additionally, the follow-up research would benefit from a quantitative approach to enable generalisation of the results.

References

Adair, W., Buchan, N. and Chen, X. (2009), "Conceptualizing culture as communication in management and marketing research", in Nakata, C. (Ed.), *Beyond Hofstede*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Allaei, S. and Connor, U. (1990), "Exploring the dynamics of cross-cultural collaboration in writing classrooms", *The Writing Instructor*, Vol. 10, pp. 19-28.

Atkinson, D. (1999), "TESOL and culture", *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 33 No. 4, pp. 625-654.

Bailey, J., Chen, C. and Dou, S. (1997), "Conceptions of self and performance related feedback in the US, Japan and China", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 28 No. 3, pp. 605-625.

Berggren, J. (2015), "Learning from giving feedback: a study of secondary-level students", *ELT Journal*, Vol. 69 No. 1, pp. 58-70.

Bernard, H. (2002), *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Methods*, AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek, CA.

Beugelsdijk, S., Kostova, T. and Roth, K. (2017), "An overview of Hofstede-inspired country-level culture research in international business since 2006", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 48 No. 1, available at: https://doi.org/10.1057/s41267-016-0038-8

Brod, M., Tesler, L. and Christensen, T. (2009), "Qualitative research and content validity: developing best practices based on science and experience", *Quality of Life Research*, Vol. 18 No. 9, p. 1263, available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11136-009-9540-9

Cronjé, J. (2011), "Using Hofstede's cultural dimensions to interpret cross-cultural blended teaching and learning", *Computers and Education*, Vol. 56, pp. 596-603.

Chavan, M., Bowden, J., Lundmark, E. and Zwar, J. (2014), "Exploring the drivers of service quality perceptions in the tertiary education sector: comparing domestic Australian and international Asian students", *Journal of International Education in Business*, Vol. 7 No. 2, pp. 150-180, doi: 10.1108/JIEB-02-2014-0004.

Chavan, M. (2011), "Higher education students' attitudes towards experiential learning in international business", *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, Vol. 22 No. 2, pp. 126-143.

Deardorff, D. (2010), "Intercultural competence in higher education and intercultural dialogue", in Bergan, S. and Van 't Land, H. (Eds), *Speaking across Borders: The Role of Higher Education in Furthering Intercultural Dialogue*, Council of Europe Publishing.

DeCapua, A. and Wintergerst, A. (2016), *Crossing Cultures in the Language Classroom*, University of MI Press Ann Arbor.

Falchikov, N. (1995), "Peer feedback marking: developing peer assessment", *Innovations in Education and Training International*, Vol. 32 No. 2, pp. 175-187.

Freeman, M., Treleaven, L., Ramburuth, P., Leask, B., Caulfield, N., Simpson, L., Ridings, S. and Sykes, C. (2009), "Embedding the development of intercultural competence in business education", Final Report to the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

Gaynor, J.W. (2020), "Peer review in the classroom: Student perceptions, peer feedback quality and the role of assessment", *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol. 45 No. 5, pp. 758-775.

Gesteland, R. (1999), *Cross-Cultural Business Behavior: Marketing, Negotiating and Managing across Cultures*, Copenhagen Business School Press, Copenhagen.

Gielen, S., Peeters, E., Dochy, F., Onghena, P. and Struyven, K. (2010), "Improving the effectiveness of peer feedback for learning", *Learning and Instruction*, Vol. 20 No. 4, pp. 304-315.

Goldstein, L. (2006), "Feedback and revision in second language writing: contextual teacher, and student variables", in Hyland, K. and Hyland, F. (Eds), *Feedback in Second Language Writing: Context and Issues*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 185-205.

Hall, E.T. (1976), *Beyond Culture*, Random House, New York, NY.

Hattie, J. and Timperley, H. (2007), "The power of feedback", *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 77 No. 1, pp. 81-112.

Hofstede, G. (2001), *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations across Nations*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

House, R., Hanges, P., Javidan, M., Dorfman, P. and Gupta, V. (2004), *Culture, Leadership, and Organizations: The GLOBE Study of 62 Societies*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Johnson, B.R. (1997), "Examining the validity structure of qualitative research", *Education*, Vol. 118 No. 3, pp. 282-292.

Kirkman, B., Lowe, K. and Gibson, C. (2006), "A quarter century of culture's consequences: a review of empirical research incorporating Hofstede's cultural values framework", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 37 No. 3, pp. 285-320.

Liu, N. and Carless, D. (2006), "Peer feedback: the learning element of peer assessment", *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol. 11 No. 3, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510600680582

Lundstrom, K. and Baker, W. (2009), "To give is better than to receive: the benefits of peer review to the reviewer's own writing", *Journal of Second Language Writing*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 30-43.

McConlogue, T. (2015), "Making judgements: investigating the process of composing and receiving peer feedback", *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 40 No. 9, pp. 1495-1506. No

McLeay, F. and Wesson, D. (2014), "Chinese versus UK marketing students' perceptions of peer feedback and peer assessment", *The International Journal of Management Education*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 142-150.

McSweeney, B. (2002), "Hofstede's model of national cultural differences and their consequences: a triumph of faith–a failure of analysis", *Human Relations*, Vol. 55 No. 1, pp. 89-118.

Narciss, S. (2012), "Feedback strategies", in Seel, N.M. (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning*, Springer, Boston, MA, available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-1428-6_283

Nicol, D. and Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006), "Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice", *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 31 No. 2, available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070600572090

O'Connell, B., Ferguson, C., De Lange, P., Howieson, B., Watty, K., Carr, R., Jacobson, B., Campitelli, L., Gora, Y. and Milton, A. (2010), "Enhancing assessment feedback practices in accounting education: issues, obstacles and reforms", Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd, Strawberry Hills, available at: https://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/17533/ (accessed 23 January 2021).

Rosalia, C. (2010), "EFL students as peer advisors in an online writing center", PhD dissertation, New York, NY University.

Scholz, R. and Tietje, O. (2002), *Embedded Case Study Methods: Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Knowledge*, Sage Publications In, London.

Sivakumar, K. and Nakata, C. (2001), "The stampede toward hofstede's framework: avoiding the sample design pit in cross-cultural research", *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 32 No. 3, pp. 555-574.

Shute, V. (2008), "Focus on formative feedback", *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 78 No. 1, pp. 153-189.

Sluijmans, D. and Segers, M. (2018), *De Toetsrevolutie*, Phronese, Baarn.

Strauss, P. and U, A. (2007), "Group assessments: dilemmas facing lecturers in multicultural tertiary classrooms", *Higher Education Research and Development*, doi: 10.1080/07294360701310789.

Teekens, H. (2000), "Teaching and learning in the international classroom", in Crowther, P., Joris, M., Otten, M., Nilsson, B., Teekens, H. and Wächter, B. (Eds), *Internationalisation at Home. A Position Paper*, European Association of International Education (EAIE), Amsterdam, pp. 29-34.

Topping, K. (1998), "Peer assessment between students in colleges and universities", *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 68 No. 3, pp. 249-276.

Trautmann, N. (2006), "Is it better to give or receive? Insights into collaborative learning through web-mediated peer review", Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University.

Van Dale (2015), "Groot woordenboek van de Nederlandse taal", 15th, revised edition, Comp. 3952, p. 1134.

Van Gennip, N., Segers, M. and Tillema, H. (2010), "Peer assessment as a collaborative learning activity: the role of interpersonal variables and conceptions", *Learning and Instruction*, Vol. 20 No. 4, available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2009.08.010

Van Popta, E., Kral, M., Camp, G., Martens, R. and Simons, P. (2017), "Exploring the value of peer feedback in noline learning for the provider", *Educational Research Review*, Vol. 20, doi: 10.1016/j.edurev.2016.10.003.

Warwick, P. (2007), "Well meant but misguided: a case study of an English for academic purposes programme developed to support international learners", *International Journal of Management Education*, Vol. 6 No. 2, pp. 1-7.

Woods, P., Barker, M. and Hibbins, R. (2010), "Tapping the benefits of multicultural group work: an exploratory study of postgraduate management studies", *International Journal of Management Education*, Vol. 9 No. 2, pp. 59-70.

Yin, R.K. (2012), *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Yin, R.K. (2009), *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Yu, S. and Lee, I. (2016), "Peer feedback in second language writing (2005–2014)", *Language Teaching*, Vol. 49 No. 4, pp. 461-493.

Yu, S., Lee, I. and Mak, P. (2016), "Revisiting Chinese cultural issues in peer feedback in EFL writing: insights from a multiple case study", *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, Vol. 25 No. 2, pp. 295-304.

Zhang, Y. and Wildemuth, B.M. (2009), "Qualitative analysis of content", in Wildemuth, B.M. (Ed.), *Applications of Social Research Methods to Questions in Information and Library Science*, Libraries Unlimited, Westport, CT, pp. 308-319.

Further reading

Goldstein, L. (2004), "Questions and answers about teacher written commentary and student revision: teachers and students working together", *Journal of Second Language Writing*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 63-80.

Hu, G. and Lam, S. (2010), "Issues of cultural appropriateness and pedagogical efficacy: exploring peer review in a second language writing class", *Instructional Science*, Vol. 38 No. 4, pp. 371-394.

Marshall, C. and Rossman, G. (2006), *Designing Qualitative Research*, Sage, Thousand Oaks.

Corresponding author

Ingrid Van Rompay-Bartels can be contacted at: Ingrid.Bartels@han.nl