The A-B-C of Engaging Students With Feedback to Build Resilient Learners

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Abstract
Resilience was once thought of as a stable personality trait. However, it is now argued that resilience is malleable, subject to environmental factors such as assessment feedback (ahmed Shafi, Hatley, Middleton, Millican & Templeton, 2017). This paper presents a longitudinal study on how learners experienced and were affected by feedback to their written essays. Participants comprised 45 students (aged 14-15) from 5 secondary schools. Qualitative data was collected from examination of their written work, classroom activities as well as student interviews. Bandura's (2001) model of triadic reciprocity was used as a guiding framework to analyse how the teachers' feedback practices influenced their students' self-efficacy and behaviour. The findings fleshed out how students engaged with their teachers' feedback on various levels: affectively (referring to students' emotions towards teachers' comments), behaviourally (seen in their uptake of feedback), and cognitively (in terms of their processing, attention, recall and understanding of feedback). Further analysis revealed two themes of will (as in motivation to take action and volition to persist) and skill (as in strategies and knowledge) to follow up on the feedback. The implications of these findings will then be discussed in relation to strengthening teachers' feedback practices as a whole and with particular focus on how these practices are important in building resilient learners.

Keywords: Formative Feedback, Academic Buoyancy, Engagement, Resilience

Introduction

Schools have always aspired to develop learners' social emotional competencies. One such desired competency is resilience, a quality recently singled out for schools' attention by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Agasisti, Avvisati, Borgonovi, Longobardi, 2018). This emphasis is not surprising given the uncertainties of growing up in the challenging times of COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, schools may also face pressures to deliver on academic results because of accountability defined as "the monitoring and use of student performance data to make judgements about school and teacher effectiveness" (Jerrim & Sims, 2021, p.1).

This paper presents the view that focusing on academic performance does not have to come at the expense of the learner's social emotional development. Drawing upon a longitudinal study of 45 students (aged 14-15) from 5 secondary schools, the paper proposes how teachers' feedback practices can influence their students' self-efficacy and behaviour for the better. These recommendations have been arrived at after analysing qualitative data that was collected from examination of their written essays, classroom activities as well as student interviews.

The following sections will start with defining the two key constructs: resilience and student engagement with feedback in three aspects: the affective (referring to students' emotions towards teachers' comments), behaviour (seen in their uptake of feedback), and cognitive (in terms of their processing, attention, recall and understanding of feedback). It will also elaborate on how Bandura's (2001) model of triadic reciprocity was used as a guiding framework to analyse how students engaged with their teaches' feedback on various levels. These findings and their implications contribute to an under-explored area of how teachers' practices can help nurture resilience among students at a formative stage in their lives.

Literature Review

Resilience

Resilience has been variously described as "the capacity of individuals to prosper despite encountering adverse circumstances" (Agasisti et al., 2018, p.4), "maintenance of positive adaptation by individuals despite experiences of significant adversity" (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000, p. 543). or "a dynamic process that involves positive adaptation in the intense adversity situation or the ability of people to resist in the face of adversity and adapt to their setting" (Zhang, 2022, p.2). What is common is that resilience is no longer thought of as a stable personality trait but rather a multi-dimensional quality influenced by many factors including context (Connor & Davidson, 2002). As such, it is malleable, subject to environmental factors such as assessment feedback (ahmed Shafi, Hatley, Middleton, Millican & Templeton, 2017). One study found that when teachers gave duty-comforting feedback (that it is OK as long as student has tried) helped students to persist despite failure. In contrast, ability-comforting feedback (that math failure is OK because not everyone is a 'math person") resulted in students giving up and changing course (Fwu, Yang, Chen & Chen, 2022).

For the purposes of this paper, resilience is scoped to refer to capacity to overcome minor setbacks in school such as a low grade. Martin, 2013, refers to this as academic buoyancy defined "as a capacity to overcome setbacks, challenges, and difficulties that are part of

everyday academic life" (p. 488). It is distinct from adaptive coping (Putwain, Connors, Symes & Douglas-Osborn, 2012) and predicts positive academic outcomes, specifically enjoyment of school, class participation, and general self-esteem (Martin & Marsh, 2006). It is in turn is predicted by factors such as self-efficacy, planning and persistence (Martin, Colmar, Davey & Marsh, 2010). As such, interventions include planning lessons that "maximize opportunities for success" and enhancing students' planning and persistence through goal setting (Martin et al., 2010, p. 489).

Feedback

As in the case of resilience, our understanding of feedback has evolved over the years. It was once thought to "information given to individuals or groups about their own performance" (Wiliam, 2018, p. 5). It was didactic in nature, with little consideration of the student on the receiving end. In contrast, the current focus is on dialogic feedback with the emphasis that the feedback is for learning and that the learners need to take more of an action-orientated stance to responding to feedback (Dawson, Henderson, Mahoney, Phillips, Ryan, Boud, & Molloy, 2019). This active involvement of the student is encapsulated in the definition of feedback adopted for this paper: "Any information about a performance that a learner can use to improve that performance or grow in the general domain of the performance" (Smith & Lipnevich, 2018, p. 593).

Like resilience, students' engagement with feedback is complex and multi-dimensional (Beaumont, O'Doherty & Shannon, 2011; Dann, 2018; Esterhazy and Damsa, 2019; Nicol, 2010). Afterall, students "differ in their capacity and willingness to use feedback" (Jonsson & Panadero, 2018, p. 549). A good starting point to understanding the phenomenon is to define the various aspects of students' engagement with feedback: the affective which refers to how teachers' comments affect student emotions, the behavioural which refers to students' actions upon receiving feedback (e.g. taking steps to correct or seek help) and the cognitive which refers to how students process the feedback (Winstone & Lipnevich, 2020).

The extant literature on the effect of feedback on students largely focusses on the type of teacher feedback on student behaviour and output (Ferris, Liu, Sinha, & Senna, 2013; Nicolás–Conesa, Manchón, & Cerezo, 2019; Shintani & Ellis, 2013). The affective and cognitive aspects of student engagement with feedback are under-explored. One study that explored this gap was Millican, ahmed Shafi, Templeton and Middleton (2020) which examined undergraduate students' reactions to changes in tutor practices (e.g., feedback sheets with explicit comments on strengths and recommendations, and opportunities for dialogue with the tutor). It concluded that to help students cope with disappointing grades, students needed assessment literacy which involves an "understanding the grade to include interpreting assessment and feedback within the context of its purpose, the assessment criteria and the grading" (p.142).

However, like many others in current literature of the effect of feedback, the above-mentioned studies used student self-reports (Beaumont et al., 2011; Dann, 2018). The limitation of such an approach is that there is no complementary data to verify what students said.

Framework to link student engagement with feedback to resilience

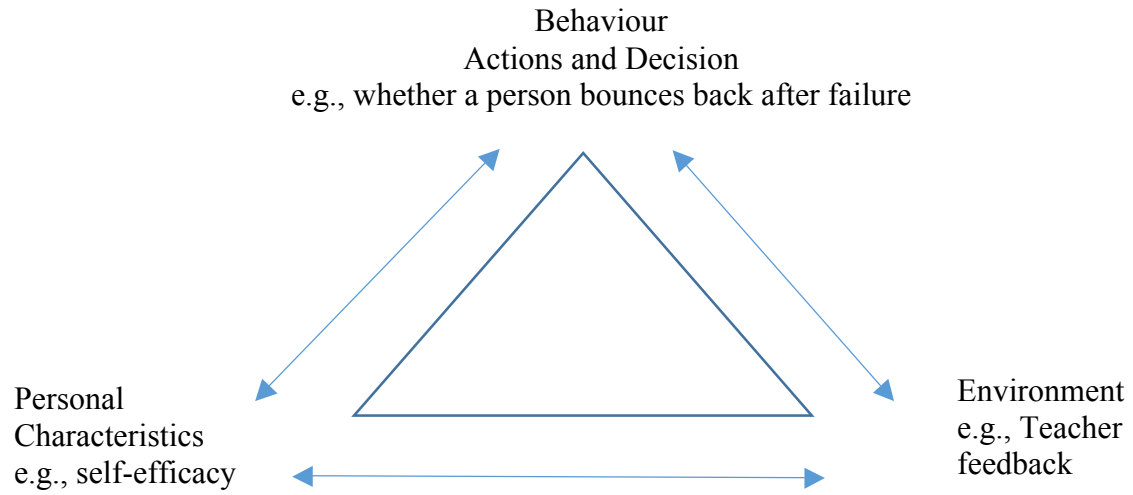
In the study of undergraduate students cited earlier, the researchers concluded that effective feedback that helps students cope with academic disappointments would have the following characteristics:

(a) Clearly recognises effort and achievement and encourages the student to take responsibility for the work and the grade given, rather than look for external reasons and excuses;
(b) Provides a clear indication of why the grade was given against explicit criteria and grade descriptors;
(c) Makes reference to the assessment not standing alone, but being part of a larger project;
(d) Provides concrete suggestions as to things that could be developed and improved in future assessments;
(e) Makes suggestions as to actions that could be taken to assist these developments and improvements (ahmed Shafi, Hatley, Middleton, Millican, & Templeton, 2017, p. 424).

However, it is not clear if these apply to younger learners who may lack the wherewithal to act on the given feedback. Also, the writers did not make make clear the theory that undergirded their interpretation of effective feedback and how that latter is linked to resilience.

This paper proposes adopting Bandura's triadic reciprocity theory (2001) which posits that our behaviour is influenced by and in turn influences the environment and personal factors. As applied to the link between teacher feedback and students' resilience, this theory can help examine the interaction among students' behaviour (e.g., act on feedback or give up), personal factor (e.g., feel efficacious or hopeless), and environment (teachers' feedback practices) as shown in Fig. 1. The bi-directional arrows show the complex interaction among the three factors involved.

Figure 1: *Applying Bandura's Triadic Reciprocity Theory to Link Resilience to Student Engagement with Feedback*



Significance of study

In summary, research so far suggests that teacher feedback can help learners overcome minor setbacks in school. However, it is not clear from the literature what sort of teacher feedback will affectively, behaviourally and cognitively help students especially those in the vulnerable teenage years. Hence, the aim of this current study was to answer the research question: What are the characteristics of teacher feedback that will encourage resilience through the way it engages students' engagement? The findings will offer practical steps teachers can take on an everyday basis to help students deal with academic setback.

Method

The study is part of a larger one that sought to identify different teacher feedback practices and examine how students respond affectively, cognitively and behaviourally to them (Tay & Lam, 2021). This latter study was a longitudinal in nature, spanning across one school semester (five months). It took an ecological approach with the teachers following through the English Language scheme of work already planned by the department. The class assignments which generated the feedback to be studied involved three consecutive writing tasks (short texts or full essays). These were submitted to teachers for their feedback before being returned. The students' actions in subsequent writing tasks were analysed and discussed during the group interviews. Because the study adopted Bandura's (2001) triadic reciprocity theory which highlights not just behaviour and personal affect, but also the environment, the researchers took field notes of what happened before and after the feedback was given. For the purposes of the present study, the data was analysed for evidence related to students' resilience.

As required by the ethics protocol set by the researcher's affiliated institution, consent was sought from all who participated in the study. These consent forms detailed matters regarding consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. The students' names referred to all reports, including this, are pseudonyms.

Participants

In total, data was gleaned from 45 students, coming from five different secondary schools chosen to reflect a range of school types. From each school, three Secondary 3 classes (comprising about 40 students) were involved in the study and taught by different teachers. However, the data for this study is drawn from the artefacts and group interview data of the three students per class nominated by their teachers who chose them for their willingness to contribute during interviews. Subsequent analysis of the artefacts suggested that these participants were of various ability and motivational levels.

The group interviews were conducted via Zoom because the COVID-19 restrictions then prevented in-person interviews. They began with the students sharing their prior experience of feedback in English Language lessons, before narrowing to discuss the three writing tasks involved in the study. The students were asked on their responses to the feedback given and where applicable, the discussion centred on their actual artefacts collected from the three tasks.

Data Analysis

The recorded interview data, involving the 15 focus group discussions (comprising 3 students each), were transcribed and recorded sentence by sentence in a Microsoft Office Excel sheet. Guided by an *a priori* coding template with categories involving the affective, behavioural and cognitive perspective adopted for this study, parts of sentences were tagged with the appropriate codes linked to these categories. Any observations from the students' artefact that were related to his/her comments were also recorded in the same row. For example, the students' comments on follow-up were confirmed / disconfirmed against their subsequent artefacts.

Findings

This section will be organised round the students' affective, behavioural and cognitive engagement with their teachers' feedback, based on what the students said and did as evidenced in the artefacts. These findings highlight what aspects of the teachers' practices helped them manage a disappointing performance.

Affective Engagement

It was clear that feedback triggers various emotions in students. Some are nonchalant upon receiving the feedback ("you ponder it for like a few minutes…(then) it's not important…any more"); but some are more extreme ("just screaming in (his) head the whole time" because the mark was lower than the usual). A few students commented how they were discouraged by the many comments e.g., "At first, when I saw the feedback, I thought it'll be like terrible because there's a lot of like, red marks everywhere" (Charlie); "feeling really dejected, because she really has a lot of comments" (Ariel).

So one would have thought that comments like "Good job!" or "Keep it up!" would be welcome by students. However, it does not appear to be the case as suggested by these comments:

> 'Good effort' … doesn't really benefit me. It doesn't pull up my self-esteem. It doesn't make me feel good about my writing. No. It also isn't helping me to improve anything. (Rita)

> When I read the 'decent attempt, keep it up' …I didn't feel motivated…I felt great about my work, but it didn't push me to further continue it. (Alice)

However, Ella's answer helps shed some light:

> So, if I don't do well enough according to my expectations, honestly I will feel really like, dejected and really sad because I did not live up to a certain expectation. But if like, at the bottom, it states what you are good at, or it says maybe you can try this or just some small encouragement, like 'Good try' or 'Good job', that kind of thing, then I think I'll feel more… encouraged to do better. (Ella)

It appears that students found it helpful when teachers highlight the specific areas where they had done well:

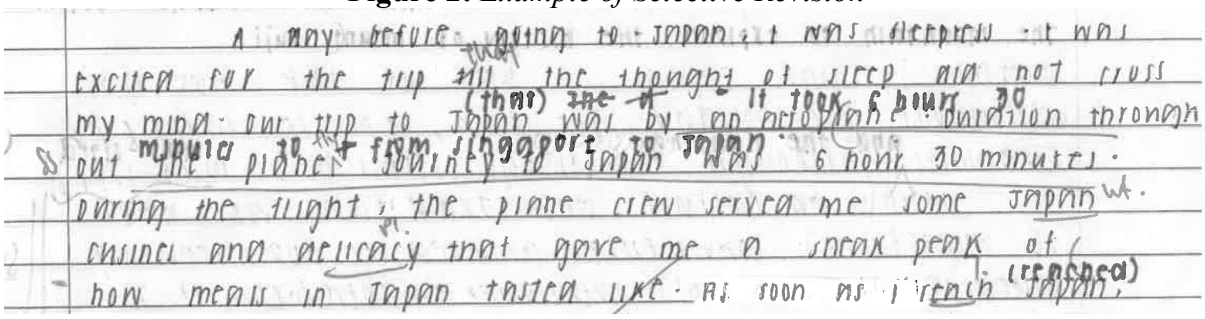
> If I am feeling really dejected, because she really has a lot of comments, then I'll look at the end to see if she has any good points to say about my essay, for example, 'Oh you've elaborated well.' Then, I'll actually feel quite proud and work on improving that part. (Ariel)

Students' self-efficacy was also raised when teachers affirmed their improvement in subsequent tasks. For example, Jocelyn said a remark like "Good improvement from the last time" made her want to continue to improve in that area and "receiving that affirmation from the teacher."

Behavioural Engagement

The students' artefacts proved to be invaluable in checking for their follow-up to their teachers' feedback. Firstly, it was observed that students tended to be selective, choosing to correct some areas while ignoring others. In the example below (Fig. 1), the student edited "that" and "reached" but did not follow up on others.

Figure 2: *Example of Selective Revision*



The reason appears to be as Alethea says "I only know how to correct the ones I understand. The rest I don't know" and so ignored them. This is especially when teachers use annotations which they may or may not understand. Cody remarks, "It's …important for the teachers to realise that students aren't in their heads. So they don't know what the teacher might mean in certain ways."

The many comments made on their scripts can also be too overwhelming for students to take action on all. They commented that "it takes time … to actually absorb the feedback" and seek clarification from peers or their teachers. They also shared that rather than "look at everything from each paragraph", they preferred to read the summary statements written by the teachers at the end of the scripts because they highlighted the key points they needed to attend to.

Certain lesson routines also encouraged student to take action. One particularly helpful one was follow-up tasks such as a redraft or a similar assignment. Given a chance, the students also preferred to be given a choice on which part they wanted to revise. This gave students a sense of autonomy and self-efficacy:

> It's like, you take the original and you improve it, but sometimes I'll just do a rework, because sometimes I feel like the original was so bad that I could not see any way on how to improve it. (Jerry)

In contrast, they feel it is pointless in writing the whole essay again:

> Because in the context if you think, "Oh, rewrite the whole essay or writing," then it'll be like, "Argh!" You know? Need to write some more paragraphs and all that. But if she said, "Oh, write the one that you are interested in," and then, you know, try to improve on that, I think it's much better. (Messi)

Cognitive Engagement

To help students understand the feedback and take follow-up action, some teachers often led class level discussions after returning the graded writing tasks. This proved to be helpful to students:

> Because after every written assignment, the teacher will prepare slides for us, and she will go through the general feedback on what the class has done well and what the class hasn't done well. And I think the general feedback is useful because it does apply for every student. But the specified feedback she gives us, I think it's the most helpful because it is specialized for us. (Emily)

Some students also preferred such verbal and elaborated explanations "because sometimes (with) writing, you don't understand" (Felix). Another advantage is that with such in-person interactions, students could raise questions and teachers can "explain … on the spot" (Dan). Teachers sometimes designed worksheets to accompany such class discussions. These worksheets helped students focus on the common mistakes made and how to correct them.

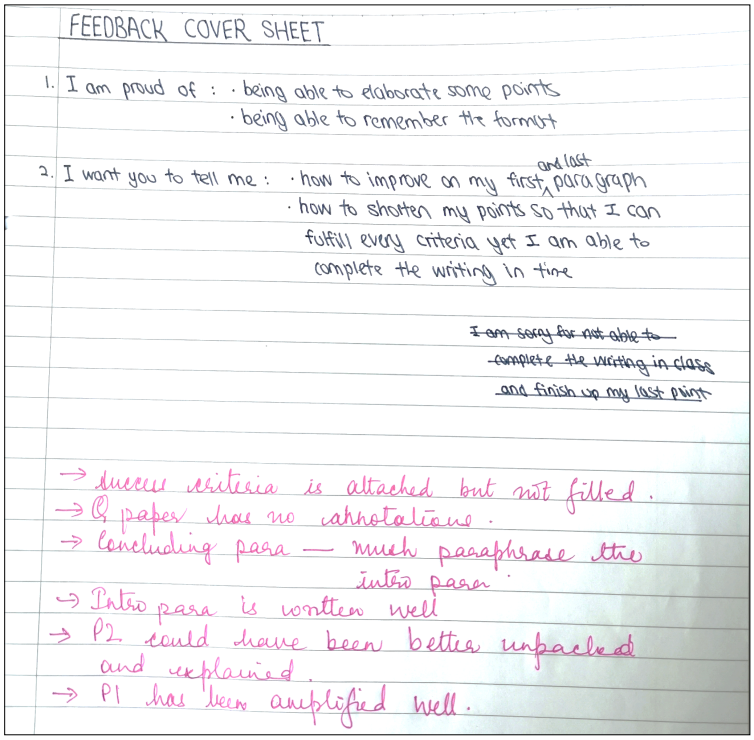
In addition to post-writing routines, some pre-writing routines highlighted to students what the teachers were looking for and hence helped prepare them for the subsequent feedback when their work was returned. This is done through issuing a success criteria checklist prior to the writing task (See Fig 3). Students found helpful when because it helped them know what teachers were looking out for and hence "get … good marks" (Sophie).

Figure 3: *Example of Success Criteria Checklist*

What are the features of **an effective situational writing**?	**Self-reflection**
Knowledge: What you write **Including text form, elements, etc.** □ My writing is organized and with a clear dominant objective with supporting details and conclusion. □ My writing conveys my thoughts in a clear manner. □ I know how to use the apt tone: persuasive or objective tone. **Thinking: What you say** **Including ideas, logic in writing, etc** □ I plan my essay well and write using many well-defined and developed ideas □ I ANALYSE the question for Purpose, Audience and Context accurately …	Two things I did well: □ _____ □ _____ Something to think about for next writing piece (to make it better) _____ Teacher feedback Using the success criteria, provide student with feedback about two things done well, and one suggestion for improvement _____

Fig 4 shows another strategy used to help students improve on their previous performance. For the new assignment, students were required to submit feedback cover sheet (in which students needed to report on areas done well and ask for specific feedback from teachers).

Figure 4: *Example of Feedback Cover Sheet*


FEEDBACK COVER SHEET

1. I am proud of : · being able to elaborate some points
· being able to remember the formula

2. I want you to tell me : · how to improve on my first and last paragraph
· how to shorten my points so that I can fulfill every criteria yet I am able to complete the writing in time

~~I am sorry for not able to complete the writing in class and finish up my last point~~

→ success criteria is attached but not filled.
→ Q paper has no annotations.
→ Concluding para — much paraphrase like intro para.
→ Intro para is written well
→ P2 could have been better unpacked and explained.
→ P1 has been amplified well.

The requirement to submit such self-assessment helped students focus on learning from their previous work and improving in their new submissions:

> Yes, it can help you…you can tell yourself two things you did well, like maintain it in the next essay and then, you can add another two things that you did well again. So, you can keep adding to it and … (Finally) it becomes like a perfect essay. (Tom)

> I think analyzing our work before handing it up is really helpful, because it helps us to reflect on our work and it allows us to see what we did well and what we are missing. I don't think she made us do it for the later ones, but for this first piece, she made us do it and I find it really helpful. (Ariel)

In summary, suggest some aspects of teacher feedback practices are more helpful in nurturing resilience than others. It is clear that students are generally anxious upon receiving their graded work. Some practices exacerbated this anxiety (e.g., overwhelming number of comments) while some alleviated through comments that affirmed areas they had done well in. Students indicated that they could bounce back from a disappointing performance if teachers told them specific areas to improve on and how. Lastly, teachers can help students be better prepared to receive feedback (good or bad) with pre-writing activities such as self-assessing on a success criteria checklist. The feedback cover sheet also helped students reflect on previous work and set goals for the next piece. These findings are consistent with studies reported earlier (ahmed Shafi et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2010).

Discussion

The present study sought to answer the research question: What are the characteristics of teacher feedback that engages students in a way that would encourage resilience? The findings were arrived at after examining how forty-five students responded to their teacher feedback over three rounds of writing tasks, both through the group interview data and artefacts.

Further analysis of the findings suggest that resilience is contingent on will (as in motivation to take action and volition to persist) and skill (as in strategies and knowledge) to overcome the setback. Motivation and persistence were also identified as important related constructs in previous studies on resilience (Kim & Kim, 2017; Mahesar & Jokhio, 2021). What this study showed are the specific teacher moves that can help students remove positive despite setbacks. Consistent with the findings in Hattie and Timperley's meta-study (2007), personal level statements like "Good effort" were not helpful unless accompanied with specific areas to improve. Students were also more motivated to act to improve if there had a choice on which areas to work on. Such opportunities for students to exercise agency will not only nurture resilience (Li, 2017) but also self-efficacy which plays "a major role in (adolescents') transition from childhood dependency to adulthood self-sufficiency" (Zimmerman and Cleary, 2006, p. 65).

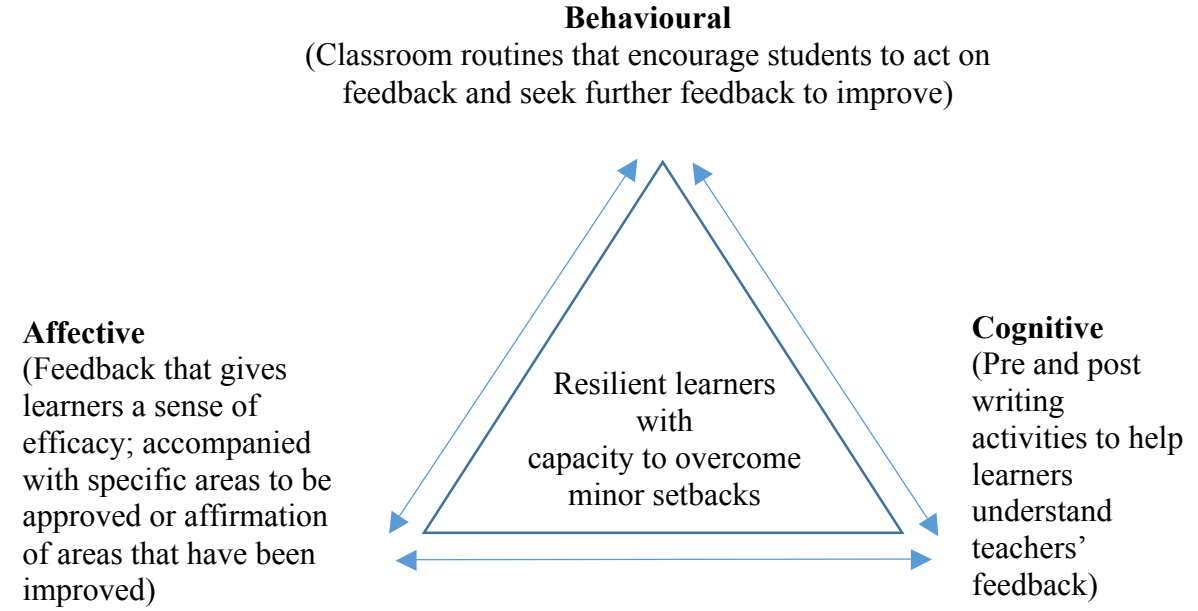
However, the will to improve must also be accompanied by appropriate skills to address the gap between the present and desired performance. The findings suggest that teachers walk a fine line between giving enough specific comments and overwhelming the students with too many. Besides, to help students remain "buoyant in the 'sea of assessments'", student need assessment literacy which involves "interpreting assessment and feedback within the context of its purpose, the assessment criteria and the grading" (Millican et al., 2020, p. 142). To this end, students should have repeated opportunities to self-assess against success criteria checklist, reflect on past performance and set goals for the next. Such practices help support students beyond the present context to preparing them to meet their own future needs (Boud, & Soler, 2015).

Recommendations

For Practice

The study has shown that students, far from being passive at the receiving end of feedback, react on an emotional level, particularly after a disappointing performance. It behoves us to acknowledge their feelings as a first step towards ensuring their well-being. But beyond this, teachers need to help students reframe the current assessment as part of a learning journey through certain practices that build on their self-efficacy and agency. These practices are summarised in Fig 5, which builds on Bandura's framework (Fig 1) to help show the relation among the three aspects.

Figure 5: *Feedback Practices that Nurture Resilient Learners*



For Further Research

The present report draws relevant data from a larger study on student engagement with feedback. To validate the findings, it is recommended that another study be replicated but specifically focussing on tracking students who have met with academic setback. The findings of this study may also be limited by possible selection bias in the sampling: the participants here were volunteered by their teachers based on their willingness to speak up and not on their resilience.

The study can also be extended to other contexts beyond English Language and the present age-group. This will help generalise the findings. Better yet, greater insights may come from an intervention study using these approaches and comparing pre-post data from a resilience scale validated for this age-group e.g., Adolescent Resilience Questionnaire (Anderson, Killian, Hughes, Rush & Trivedi, 2020).

Conclusion

The theme for IAFOR 2021-2022 is resilience. It is a timely choice given the circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, Russian-Ukraine war and negative global financial outlook. To teenagers, these stressors add to an already challenging time of growing up and forming their own identity.

So what can teachers do to help them build resilience, especially among those not performing as well as they had hoped? Given teachers' already heavy responsibilities especially in an age of accountability pressures, this study suggests strategies that are as simple as A-B-C and can be easily built into lesson routines. Yet, these efforts will greatly help learners weather the storms that inevitably come along on their learning journey.

Acknowledgements

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