
Questioning the Promise of Dialogic Feedback: Engagement Challenges Across Proficiency Levels in EFL Writing

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Abstract

Background:

Although dialogic feedback has received increasing attention in EFL writing research, little is known about whether students with different proficiency levels experience similar engagement challenges during dialogic feedback. This study aims to explore the engagement challenges experienced by low-proficiency and intermediate-proficiency EFL students.

Methodology:

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design involving six undergraduate EFL students at an Indonesian public university. Participants were purposively selected based on their proficiency levels from an in-house essay diagnostic test assessed using the IELTS Writing Task 2 band scale (1–9). Students scoring below Band 3 were classified as A1 (low proficiency), while those scoring Band 4–5 were classified as B1 (intermediate proficiency). Three students from each group were selected to form two contrasting cases. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically using within-case and cross-case comparisons.

Findings:

The findings revealed both shared and proficiency-specific engagement challenges among the six participants. Both low-proficiency and intermediate-proficiency students experienced unclear feedback, revisions limited to lecturer corrections, and low self-confidence. However, low-proficiency students also faced dependence on lecturer authority, difficulty transferring feedback to future writing tasks, limited clarification-seeking, inadequate preparation, and greater fear and anxiety during feedback interactions. In contrast, intermediate-proficiency students mainly experienced inconsistent clarification-seeking, anxiety related to extensive revisions, and sensitivity to lecturers' attitudes and appreciation.

Conclusion:

The findings suggest that engagement challenges during dialogic feedback vary across proficiency levels. Common challenges were evident in both groups, whereas proficiency-specific challenges reflected differences in students' experiences and support needs. Therefore, dialogic feedback should be adapted to accommodate these differences in order to promote more effective student engagement.

Originality:

This study contributes to the dialogic feedback literature by providing insights into engagement challenges during dialogic feedback interactions among low- and intermediate-proficiency EFL students in an Indonesian higher education context. It extends previous proficiency-based research by highlighting how students at different proficiency levels experience and navigate challenges in dialogic feedback.

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INTRODUCTION

Developing proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing remains one of the greatest challenges for language learners because successful writing requires linguistic knowledge, rhetorical awareness, critical thinking, and self-regulatory abilities ([Vysotska, 2022](#); [Alsariera & Alsaraireh, 2024](#)). Writers must continuously generate ideas, organize arguments, evaluate language choices, and revise their texts while responding to communicative purposes and audience expectations ([Alzahrani, 2025](#)). Such cognitive complexity makes writing not merely a process of language production but a sustained process of meaning construction and problem solving.

To support this complex process, feedback has long been regarded as one of the most influential pedagogical practices for improving students' writing ([Hattie & Timperley, 2007](#); [Cheng & Zhang, 2021](#)). However, contemporary feedback research argues that feedback contributes little to learning when students merely receive comments without actively interpreting, questioning, and applying them ([Nicol, 2010](#); [Zhang & Hyland, 2018](#); [Carless, 2020](#)). Consequently, feedback has increasingly been reconceptualised as a dialogic process in which lecturers and students collaboratively negotiate meaning, clarify misunderstandings, justify revisions, and co-construct knowledge ([Ajjawi & Boud, 2017](#); [Liu et al., 2021](#)), shifting the emphasis from feedback transmission to student participation.

Dialogic feedback is an interactive feedback process in which the lecturer and students engage in two-way exchanges to discuss, clarify, negotiate, and co-construct understanding of

writing performance and improvement strategies, rather than a one-directional transmission of judgments from an expert to a passive recipient ([Yang & Carless, 2013](#)). A feedback interaction was considered dialogic when it involved a cyclical process of feedback, feedback-on-feedback, and re-feedback ([Zhao et al., 2024](#)). In the feedback phase, the lecturer provided comments, questions, and suggestions on students' writing. In the feedback-on-feedback phase, students responded by seeking clarification, explaining their writing intentions, expressing agreement or disagreement, and discussing possible revisions. In the re-feedback phase, the lecturer responded to students' concerns by clarifying, confirming, elaborating, or refining previous feedback.

Within this dialogic perspective, student engagement is no longer viewed as an outcome of feedback but as a prerequisite for feedback to become meaningful. Dialogue alone does not improve writing unless students actively engage with feedback cognitively by interpreting and evaluating comments, behaviourally by participating in feedback interactions and implementing revisions, and affectively by developing confidence, motivation, and willingness to act upon feedback. Accordingly, the educational value of dialogic feedback depends largely on students' active engagement throughout the feedback process ([Spies et al., 2023](#)).

Despite its recognised importance, meaningful engagement is often difficult to achieve. Students frequently encounter challenges during dialogic feedback that hinder their ability to engage with feedback productively. Previous studies have identified various challenges, including limited feedback literacy, difficulties interpreting feedback, reluctance to seek clarification, low confidence in responding to lecturers, and insufficient uptake of feedback in subsequent revisions ([Winstone et al., 2017](#); [Carless & Winstone, 2020](#); [Er et al., 2020](#); [Williams, 2024](#)). These challenges may constrain students' cognitive engagement by limiting their understanding of feedback, weaken behavioural engagement by reducing active participation in feedback dialogue, and undermine affective engagement through uncertainty, anxiety, or diminished confidence. Understanding these challenges is therefore essential for explaining why dialogic feedback does not always generate the meaningful engagement anticipated by dialogic feedback theory.

Research has also indicated that students' engagement with feedback may vary according to proficiency level. For example, Hentasmaka and Cahyono ([2021](#)) found significant differences in behavioural engagement between high- and low-proficiency EFL students, with low-proficiency students producing more revisions, as well as more attempted and unsuccessful revisions, than their high-proficiency peers. More recently, Liu ([2025](#))

reported that language proficiency was the strongest predictor of students' engagement, particularly in feedback-giving activities, while peer familiarity selectively enhanced the affective and behavioural engagement of low-proficiency learners. These findings indicate that learner proficiency influences how students engage with feedback. However, previous studies have primarily examined differences in revision outcomes, feedback-giving, or overall engagement, rather than the specific cognitive, behavioural, and affective challenges students experience during dialogic feedback interactions.

Although previous research has compared feedback engagement and outcomes across learners with different proficiency levels, less attention has been given to the challenges students experience during live dialogic feedback interactions. In particular, it remains unclear how such challenges are experienced by learners with different proficiency profiles. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the challenges experienced by low- and intermediate-proficiency EFL writers in their cognitive, behavioural, and affective engagement during dialogic feedback interactions. Through within-case and cross-case analyses, the study identifies challenges shared across the two groups and patterns that differ between them.

Research Questions

1. What engagement challenges do low-proficiency and intermediate-proficiency students experience during dialogic feedback interactions in EFL Writing?
2. How do engagement challenges converge and diverge across low-proficiency and intermediate-proficiency EFL students?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design comprising two bounded cases defined by students' proficiency levels. Case 1 consisted of three low-proficiency (A1) students, and Case 2 consisted of three intermediate-proficiency (B1) students. The six students were treated as participants nested within their respective cases rather than as individual cases. The unit of analysis was the cognitive, behavioural, and affective engagement challenges experienced during dialogic feedback in EFL writing. Within-case analysis was first conducted separately for each proficiency case to identify patterns of engagement challenges. Cross-case analysis then compared the two cases to identify challenges shared across the groups and patterns that differed between them. This design enabled an in-depth understanding of engagement challenges within each case while facilitating systematic comparison across proficiency-defined cases.

Participants

The participants were six undergraduate students enrolled in a Paragraph Writing course at a public university in Western Sulawesi, Indonesia. They were purposively selected based on their English proficiency, which was determined through an in-house essay diagnostic test administered before the course. The essay was assessed using the IELTS Writing Task 2 band scale, ranging from Band 1 to 9, and the resulting scores were interpreted using the IELTS–CEFR correspondence framework. In this framework, Band 3 corresponds to A1, while Band 4–5 corresponds to B1. Based on these criteria, three A1-level students were selected to constitute the low-proficiency case, and three B1-level students were selected to constitute the intermediate-proficiency case. These two groups represented the lowest and highest proficiency levels identified in the class.

Table 1. Participants' Proficiency Classification

No	Students' Initials	IELTS Band	CEFR Level	Case
1.	HU	3.0	A1	Low-Proficiency
2.	NA	3.0	A1	
3.	DM	3.0	A1	
4.	MA	4.5	B1	Intermediate-Proficiency
5.	RA	5.0	B1	
6.	RE	5.0	B1	

No participant in the class demonstrated C1-level proficiency; therefore, the B1 group represented the highest proficiency level identified among the students and was classified as the intermediate-proficiency case. The six selected students participated in the same Paragraph Writing course and received dialogic feedback from the same lecturer throughout the semester.

The study was conducted over one semester, with observations undertaken during six course meetings. At each observed meeting, students completed a paragraph-writing task, representing their early formal writing experiences as university students. Each completed paragraph was subsequently discussed through an individual oral dialogic feedback session with the lecturer. Individual sessions were conducted because of the small class size, allowing the lecturer to provide feedback to each participant directly. The duration of each session varied depending on the quality and complexity of the student's writing and the issues discussed, with sessions lasting approximately 15 minutes per student on average. When the scheduled class time was insufficient to provide feedback to all students, the lecturer continued the remaining sessions outside the regular class schedule.

The same lecturer provided feedback to all participants under the same general instructional conditions. Each feedback interaction followed the three-phase dialogic process

proposed by Zhao et al. (2024), involving lecturer feedback, student feedback-on-feedback, and lecturer re-feedback. Specifically, the lecturer first responded to the student's writing, after which the student responded to, questioned, clarified, or commented on the feedback. The lecturer then responded to the student's feedback, and the exchange continued as needed until the issue under discussion was sufficiently clarified.

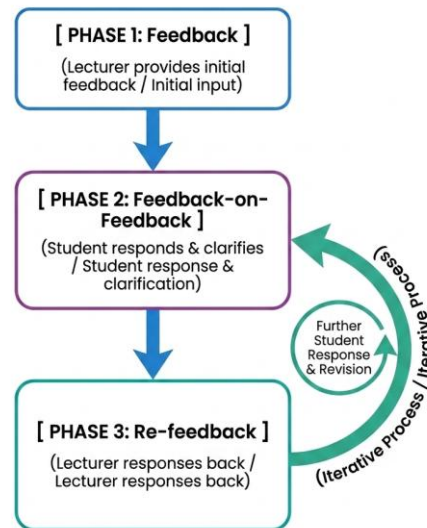


Figure 1. A dialogic three-phase process by (Zhao et al., 2024)

Research Instruments

Data were collected through multiple sources, including semi-structured interviews, observations of dialogic feedback sessions, and students' written work. Semi-structured interviews were guided by the dimensions of cognitive, behavioural, and affective engagement. The interview questions explored the challenges students experienced in understanding and using feedback (cognitive engagement), participating in feedback interactions and revision activities (behavioural engagement), and managing their emotional responses to feedback (affective engagement). Each participant was interviewed on three separate occasions to obtain rich and comprehensive accounts of their experiences. The multiple interviews also enabled the researcher to revisit emerging issues, clarify participants' responses, and examine the consistency of their accounts across different points in time.

The interviews were complemented by observations of the individual dialogic feedback sessions between each student and the lecturer. The feedback sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to provide observational evidence of students' cognitive engagement during feedback interactions, particularly their questions, explanations, responses, and attempts to understand or evaluate the feedback. In addition, students' written work, including the paragraphs that received lecturer feedback and their subsequent revisions, was collected to

examine how students responded to and acted upon the feedback. These written artefacts provided additional evidence for identifying behavioural engagement challenges and were used to cross-check students' interview accounts. Thus, students' reported experiences were interpreted alongside evidence from their actual participation in feedback interactions and their written responses to feedback, strengthening the credibility of the findings through data triangulation.

Procedure

All interviews and dialogic feedback sessions were audio-recorded using a mobile phone and subsequently transcribed verbatim using GoodTape.io. The transcripts were then reviewed repeatedly by the researcher against the audio recordings to check and correct transcription errors before analysis. Because the researchers were not the participants' course lecturers, they did not have a direct teaching, grading, or assessment relationship with the participants. This separation helped minimise potential power asymmetries and allowed participants to discuss their experiences of feedback and lecturer behaviour without concerns that their responses would directly affect their academic assessment.

Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw, and the measures taken to protect the confidentiality of their data. Participants' names and other identifying information were removed from the transcripts and replaced with initials. The audio recordings, transcripts, and students' written work were stored securely and were accessible only to the research team. Given that the interview and feedback data included potentially sensitive comments about lecturers and feedback experiences, particular care was taken to ensure that individual responses could not be traced back to identifiable participants.

GoodTape.io was used solely as a transcription aid rather than as an analytic platform. The original audio recordings were retained in secure storage and were deleted from the transcription platform after transcription.

The data were analysed using a hybrid deductive–inductive approach informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. The analysis was theoretically informed because the dimensions of cognitive, behavioural, and affective engagement provided an initial organising framework for examining students' engagement challenges. However, the analysis was not restricted to predetermined codes. Within these broad dimensions, more specific codes and themes were developed inductively from participants' accounts, feedback-session interactions, and written work.

The analysis proceeded through six phases. First, the researcher familiarised themselves with the interview transcripts, feedback-session transcripts, and students' written work by reading and rereading the data. Second, initial codes were generated, with the cognitive, behavioural, and affective dimensions providing a broad deductive framework while allowing data-driven codes to emerge within each dimension. Third, related codes were examined and clustered into candidate themes. Fourth, candidate themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the broader dataset to assess their internal coherence and distinctiveness. Fifth, the themes were defined and named to capture the central pattern represented by the data. Finally, the themes were synthesized into the findings.

Within-case analysis was conducted first for each participant to develop a detailed account of their engagement challenges across the different data sources. The researcher then compared the themes across participants within each achievement-level case to identify recurring patterns, variations, and case-specific features. Cross-case analysis subsequently involved comparing the low-achieving and high-achieving cases to identify shared and achievement-specific themes. Where contradictory or deviant instances were identified, they were retained and examined rather than excluded, and the cross-case interpretation was based on the overall pattern of evidence while acknowledging meaningful variations across participants.

Atlas.ti was used to organise the coded data, facilitate retrieval and comparison of coded excerpts, and generate thematic network visualisations presented in the findings. The software supported data organisation and visualisation but did not determine the coding or thematic decisions, which remained the responsibility of the researchers.

FINDINGS

Students' challenges in engaging with dialogic feedback in EFL writing were reflected in how they experienced and responded to feedback interactions throughout the writing process. These challenges were evident in the factors that shaped their cognitive, behavioral, and affective engagement with dialogic feedback.

Challenges Experienced by Low-Proficiency and Intermediate- Proficiency Students

Low- Proficiency Students

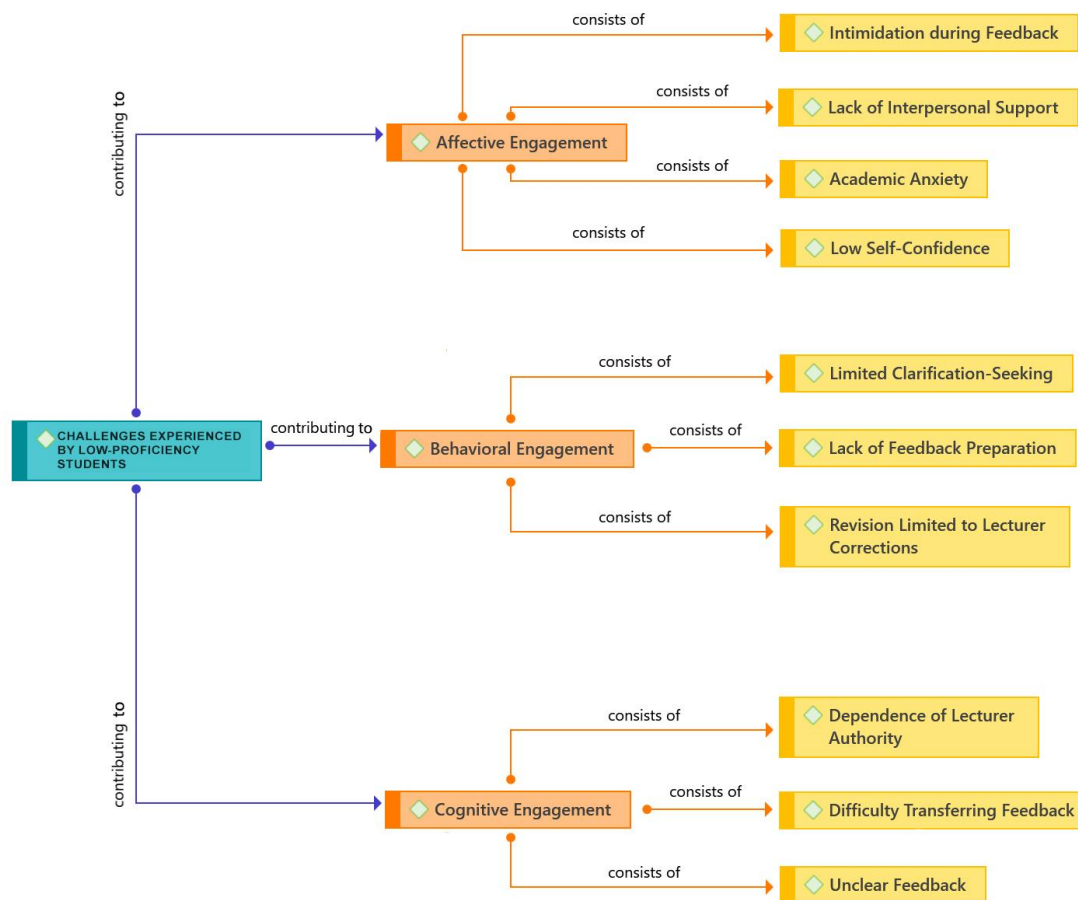


Figure 2. Challenges to Cognitive, Behavioural, and Affective Engagement among Low-Proficiency EFL Students during Dialogic Feedback (generated by Atlas.ti)

Figure 2 shows interconnected challenges experienced by low-proficiency students during dialogic feedback that shape their cognitive, behavioral, and affective engagement.

In terms of cognitive engagement, one of the most prominent challenges was unclear feedback. Students had considerable difficulty understanding feedback when the lecturer's comments lacked sufficient explanation, explicitness, or contextual elaboration. Instead of helping students identify what needed to be improved and how to revise it, such feedback often left them uncertain about both the existence of a problem and the appropriate way to address it. This difficulty was evident in the following interaction with NA:

RM: *Secara umum, ada yang salah?*

NA: *Ndak tau mi, Ma'am*

RM: *Ndak tau? Nah! Kira-kira kalo ini bagaimana?*

RM: Overall, is there anything wrong?

NA: I don't know, Ma'am.

RM: You don't know? Well, what about this one then?

(Observed in October 29th 2025)

In this exchange, NA was unable to identify whether her writing contained problems when asked to evaluate it generally. Her difficulty was further clarified in the interview:

"When the lecturer asked a question like, 'Are there any mistakes in your paper?' I was confused and thought that if I had known which parts were wrong, I probably would have corrected them from the start" (NA, interview, January 24, 2026).

The observation and interview data suggest that the general question did not provide NA with sufficient information to identify the problem or determine what she was expected to revise. For a low-proficiency student, therefore, feedback that required substantial inference could become a barrier to cognitive engagement, as the student needed to interpret the problem before being able to consider an appropriate revision. Rather than immediately supporting reflection and problem-solving, the lack of explicit guidance appeared to leave NA uncertain about how to engage with the feedback.

A second challenge concerned students' dependence on lecturer authority. Rather than evaluating or negotiating the lecturer's comments, students tended to regard the lecturer as the sole authority on what constituted correct writing. Consequently, revisions were driven primarily by compliance instead of informed judgement. As reflected in NA's statement:

"Honestly, when I agreed with the lecturer, it was because I did not know what the correct answer actually was. I did not have any other preferences, so I just followed what the lecturer said, and then I looked it up later" (NA, interview, January 24, 2026).

Such dependence restricted students' opportunities to develop independent evaluative judgement during feedback interactions.

Students also demonstrated difficulty transferring feedback beyond the immediate revision task. Although they were generally able to apply feedback to the sections explicitly discussed during the feedback session, they frequently struggled to generalise the underlying principles to subsequent writing tasks. As HU noted:

"I use feedback to help me revise the corrected sections, but I do not always consistently apply it to future writing tasks because I still feel doubtful at times" (HU, interview, February 1, 2026).

This suggests that feedback functioned primarily as task-specific guidance rather than as knowledge that could be transferred to support broader writing development.

In terms of behavioural engagement, students' revision practices were largely limited to corrections explicitly identified by the lecturer. Rather than reviewing their texts more broadly to identify other areas that might require improvement, students tended to focus on the specific errors addressed during the feedback session. This pattern is evident in HU's draft and subsequent revision (Figure 3).

Draft

I like jisoo blackpink with many reasons, her tiny lips make her so cute. I'm completely in love her melodious voice. The combination of her stunning visual from her sparkling eyes to warn smile and her incredible talent is why i became fan her. Also she has 3 songs and drama, so intresting for watch.

Revision

Jisoo Blackpink is the famous celebrity. I like her because she is beautiful and talented. Her tiny lips make her so cute. I'm completely in love her melodious voice. The combination of her stunning visual from her sparkling eyes to warn smile and her incredible talent is why i became fan her. Also she has 3 songs they are flower..... and drama, so intresting for watch. The combination of her stunning visual from her sparkling eyes to warn smile and her incredible talent is why i became fan her.

Figure 3. HU's draft and revision (File documented on September 24th, 2026)

The following excerpt from HU's dialogic feedback session illustrates how this revision practice unfolded:

RM: *Nama orang berarti harus menggunakan huruf.....*

HU: *Besar*

RM: *Yes, pakai huruf kapital*

RM: A person's name means it should start with a...

HU: Capital letter.

RM: Yes, it uses a capital letter.

(Observed on September 24th, 2025)

In this exchange, HU was able to respond to the lecturer's prompt and identify the required correction. However, the interaction focused specifically on the capitalisation error identified by the lecturer, rather than prompting HU to examine the text more broadly for similar or other errors. This pattern was also reflected in students' interview accounts. NA, for example, explained,

"I only focus on the parts that are most clearly corrected" (NA, interview, January 24, 2026).

Although this account came from a different participant, it illustrates a similar revision orientation observed among the low-proficiency students, whereby attention was directed primarily toward explicitly identified corrections.

Another recurring challenge in behavioural engagement was limited clarification-seeking during feedback interactions. When students encountered feedback they did not understand, they rarely initiated questions or requested further explanation. Instead, uncertainty often remained unresolved as students tended to remain silent and wait for the lecturer to provide further guidance. NA explicitly acknowledged this difficulty:

“I don't clarify if there is something I don't understand. Maybe it's because I'm afraid of getting scolded and afraid of making mistakes” (NA, interview, November 28, 2025).

This reluctance was also evident in the observed feedback interaction with NA:

RM: *Secara umum, ada yang salah?*

NA: *Ndak tau mi, Ma'am*

RM: *Ndak tau? Nah kira-kira kalo ini bagaimana?*

RM: Overall, is there anything wrong?

NA: I don't know, Ma'am.

RM: You don't know? Well, what do you think about this one then?

(Observed on October 29th, 2026)

Rather than asking what was wrong or requesting clarification about how to identify the problem, NA simply responded that she did not know. The lecturer subsequently redirected the discussion by pointing to a specific part of the text. The interview and observation data therefore converge in showing that students' uncertainty did not necessarily lead to clarification-seeking. Instead, concerns about making mistakes or receiving a negative response appeared to discourage students from initiating further dialogue. This limited their opportunities to participate actively in the negotiation of meaning during feedback.

A related challenge was lack of preparation for feedback sessions. Students generally entered feedback discussions without systematically identifying areas of difficulty, preparing questions, or critically reflecting on their drafts beforehand. HU described this pattern as follows:

“Usually I only reread my writing, but I rarely prepare specific questions because I feel nervous and lack confidence” (HU, interview, February 1, 2026).

Thus, although students sometimes reviewed their writing before the session, their preparation did not necessarily involve identifying specific learning needs or formulating questions for discussion. As a result, their participation tended to remain reactive: they

responded primarily to issues raised by the lecturer rather than using the feedback session to raise concerns, seek clarification, or direct the dialogue towards areas they found difficult.

In terms of affective engagement, students reported several emotional challenges during dialogic feedback, including low self-confidence, academic anxiety, feelings of intimidation when feedback was delivered harshly, and a strong need for supportive interpersonal communication. These challenges were particularly evident in students' descriptions of the emotional consequences of repeated criticism and direct feedback interactions. DM, for example, described feeling emotionally overwhelmed by repeated criticism:

"My mental state becomes exhausted when I continuously receive criticism, and it makes me overwhelmed" (DM, interview, January 28, 2026).

Similarly, HU reported experiencing anxiety and tension during face-to-face feedback sessions:

"I often feel anxious and tense, especially when feedback sessions are conducted directly. Afterward, I sometimes feel emotionally exhausted" (HU, interview, February 1, 2026)

HU further indicated that harsh feedback delivery could reduce her motivation to engage with the feedback. In contrast, NA highlighted the positive emotional effect of supportive interpersonal communication. She explained:

"I feel supported when the lecturer says my writing is already good but still needs some corrections... But when the tone becomes loud or harsh, it makes me feel pressured" (NA, interview, January 24, 2026).

These findings demonstrate that students' emotional experiences were shaped not only by the content of feedback but also by the lecturer's interpersonal approach, suggesting that emotional safety constituted an important condition for sustaining productive dialogic feedback.

Intermediate-Proficiency Students

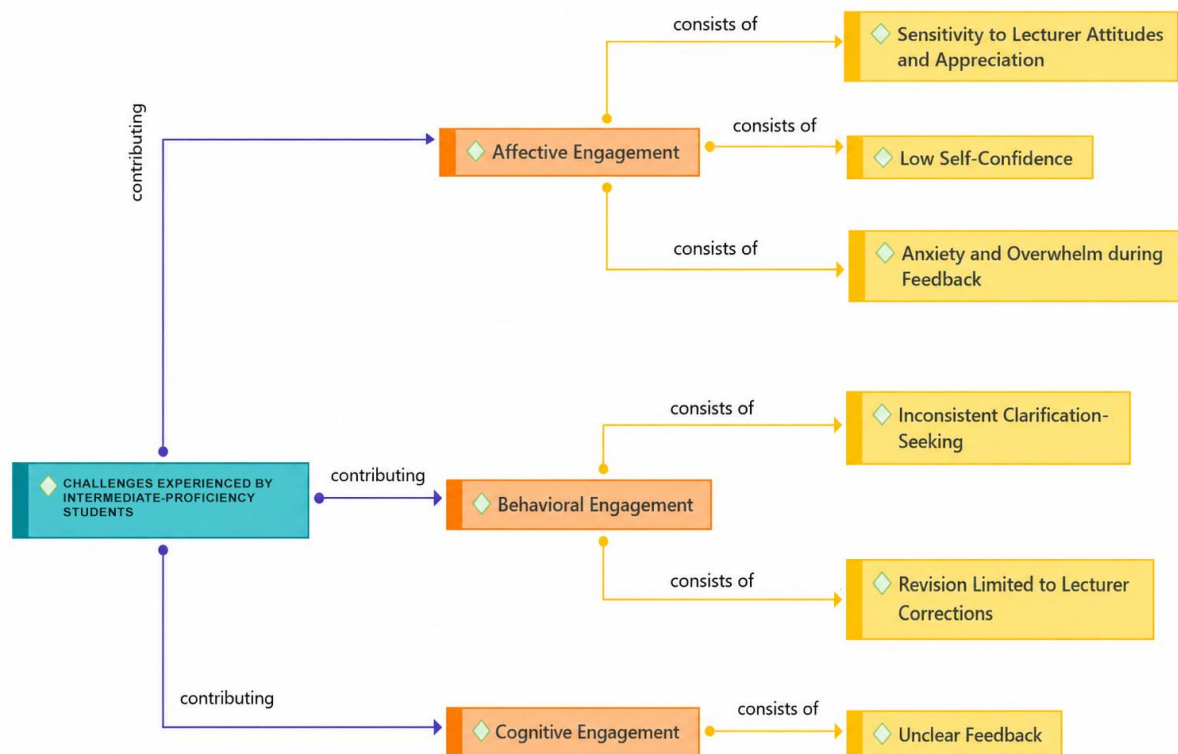


Figure 4. Challenges to Cognitive, Behavioural, and Affective Engagement among Intermediate-Proficiency EFL Students during Dialogic Feedback (generated by Atlas.ti)

Figure 4 illustrates the interconnected challenges that shaped intermediate-proficiency students' cognitive, behavioural, and affective engagement during dialogic feedback.

Although intermediate-proficiency students generally demonstrated a stronger understanding of feedback, they still encountered cognitive challenges during dialogic feedback interactions. Unclear feedback emerged as the primary cognitive challenge. Students experienced difficulty interpreting the lecturer's intended meaning when feedback was delivered through indirect questioning or when the expected revision was not explicitly explained. Rather than immediately identifying the underlying writing problem, students sometimes became uncertain about which aspects of their texts required further improvement. RE described this experience as follows:

"I get confused when asked about mistakes in my writing, especially when I feel there are none left... I felt confused and hesitant because, in my opinion, everything was fine, but since the lecturer kept asking, I was at a loss as to where the other mistakes could be" (RE, interview, January 25, 2026).

RE's account indicates that uncertainty could arise when students were expected to infer the problem underlying the lecturer's questions, even when they initially believed that their writing was satisfactory. Thus, although intermediate-proficiency students generally had

greater confidence in understanding feedback, feedback that relied heavily on inference could still hinder their ability to identify the lecturer's intended meaning.

The findings also revealed several challenges in students' behavioural engagement, particularly in how they responded to feedback through revision and clarification-seeking. One recurring pattern was that students tended to revise the sections explicitly addressed during the feedback session rather than systematically reviewing the entire text for further improvements. RA explained:

"Upon returning to my seat, I revise my writing based on the feedback provided by the lecturer" (RA, interview, November 28, 2025).

This account suggests that revision was primarily initiated in response to the lecturer's comments. Although students acted upon the feedback they received, there was limited evidence that they consistently extended the revision process by independently evaluating other aspects of their texts that had not been discussed during the feedback session.

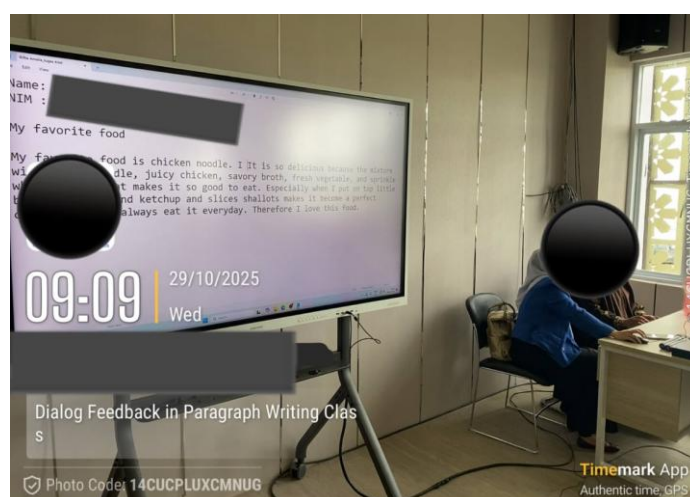


Figure 5. Dialogic Feedback Session (Observed in October 29th, 2026)

A further behavioural challenge concerned inconsistent clarification-seeking. Unlike the more uniform reluctance observed among low-proficiency students, intermediate-proficiency students varied in whether and when they sought clarification. Some preferred to resolve uncertainties independently rather than asking the lecturer or their peers. MA explained:.

"I usually look for it on my own instead of asking the lecturer or my friends. So, when it comes to seeking clarification or support from the lecturer, I don't think I've ever done it because I'm afraid of them" (MA, interview, January 26, 2026).

Other students, however, actively sought clarification when they believed that the lecturer had misunderstood the intended meaning of their writing. RE described one such interaction:

“When encountering ambiguous feedback, I typically seek clarification from the lecturer because if I remain silent, the lecturer will not understand the intended meaning of my writing. For instance, I once wrote ‘I usually eat it with rice’ when describing a food item. However, the lecturer noted that I should have used ‘rice cake’ instead of ‘rice.’ Perplexed by this suggestion, I sought clarification from the lecturer, who then inquired whether I actually eat meatballs with rice. Once I confirmed that I did, the lecturer understood my rationale and accepted why I used the word ‘rice.’” (RE, Interview January 26th, 2026).

These findings indicate that clarification-seeking among intermediate-proficiency students was selective and context-dependent rather than consistently demonstrated throughout dialogic feedback.

Beyond the cognitive and behavioural challenges discussed above, the findings also revealed affective challenges that shaped intermediate-proficiency students' engagement during dialogic feedback. Despite their relatively strong academic performance, these students frequently experienced low self-confidence when evaluating their writing. Rather than expressing confidence in the quality of their work, they often questioned the adequacy of their ideas, language choices, and overall writing performance. As RA reflected,

“I always get this feeling that my writing is not quite right, or that some of my word choices will definitely be off” (RA, interview, January 26, 2026).

Such persistent self-doubt suggests that confidence in writing did not necessarily accompany higher proficiency in English writing.

Furthermore, students experienced anxiety and feelings of overwhelm during feedback interactions. These emotional responses became particularly evident when lecturers employed continuous questioning, which occasionally caused students to feel mentally blocked and emotionally pressured. RA stated,

“During the feedback session, I occasionally feel tense and my mind goes somewhat blank, particularly when being continuously questioned. Afterward, I feel slightly relieved, yet I remain anxious because I am instructed to work on the next task independently” (RA, interview, January 26, 2026).

This finding indicates that intensive dialogic exchanges may increase emotional pressure even when students possess relatively strong writing abilities.

Finally, the findings revealed sensitivity to lecturers' attitudes and appreciation. Students perceived lecturers' tone of voice, emotional expressions, and supportive behaviours as important factors shaping their motivation during feedback sessions. As MA explained,

“When feedback is accompanied by motivation and a supportive environment, when the lecturer does not get angry, uses a low intonation, and even smiles during the session, I feel it could really encourage and motivate us to write. But the fact is, the lecturer often gets angry, which lowers my motivation” (MA, interview, January 26, 2026).

This finding suggests that students' experiences of dialogic feedback were influenced not only by the content of the feedback but also by the interpersonal climate created throughout the interaction.

Cross-Case Analysis of Challenges Across Academic Achievement Groups

The findings reveal that both low-proficiency and intermediate-proficiency students encountered various challenges when engaging in dialogic feedback during EFL writing practices. To capture the similarities and differences in students' engagement experiences, the cross-case analysis identified challenges that were shared across proficiency groups as well as challenges that were unique to particular groups. These patterns are synthesized and presented as follow:

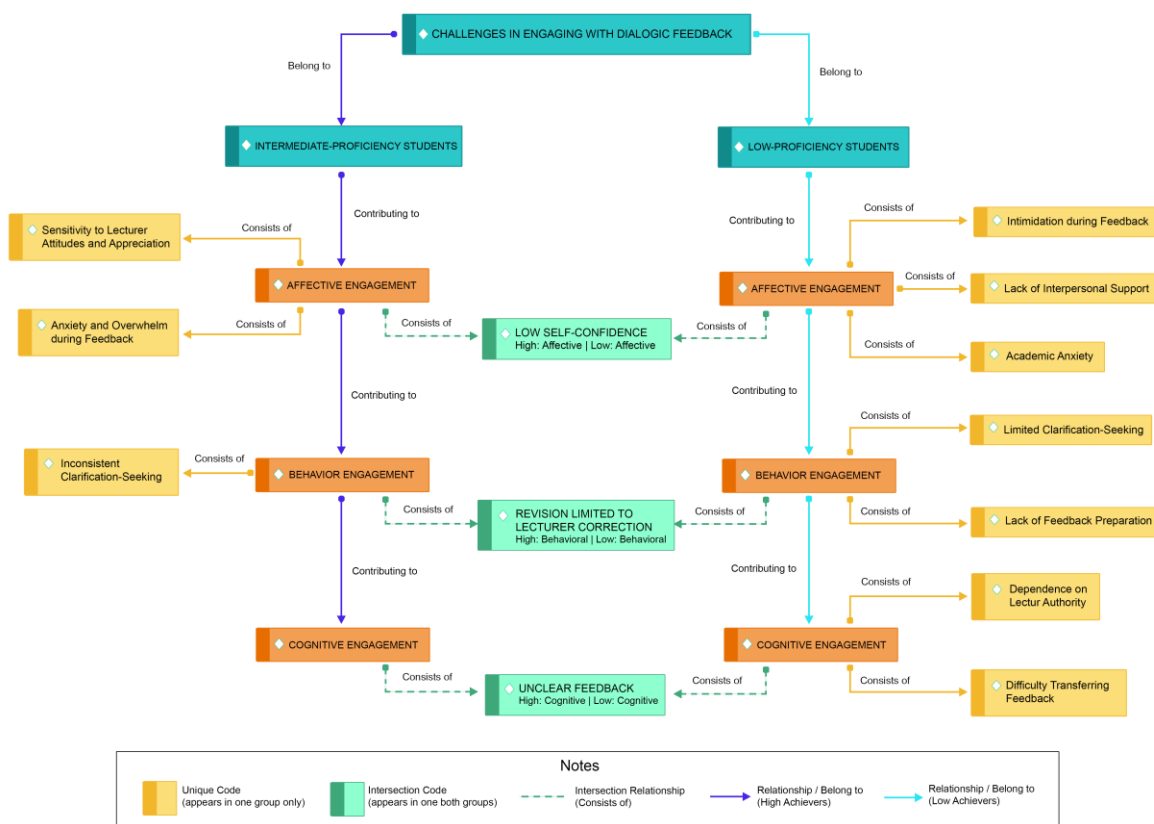


Figure 6. Common and contrasting patterns of engagement challenges among the groups

Figure 6 depicts the common and contrasting patterns of engagement challenges identified across the two proficiency groups. A challenge was classified as shared when it was experienced by a majority of participants in both groups. A challenge was classified as group-specific when it was experienced by participants in one proficiency group but was not identified among any participants in the other group. This criterion was applied consistently in the cross-case analysis to distinguish challenges that were common across proficiency levels from those that were specific to one group.

From the perspective of cognitive engagement, the cross-case analysis identified unclear feedback as the only challenge shared by both low-proficiency and intermediate-proficiency students. Participants from both groups reported difficulties understanding feedback when lecturers' comments were ambiguous, insufficiently detailed, or lacked explicit guidance regarding revision expectations. Despite this shared challenge, important differences emerged between the two groups. For intermediate-proficiency students, unclear feedback represented the sole cognitive challenge identified in the data. In contrast, low-proficiency students experienced additional cognitive difficulties, including dependence on lecturer authority and difficulty in transferring feedback. These students frequently relied on lecturers as the primary source of knowledge and validation, often accepting feedback without critically evaluating it. Furthermore, they struggled to apply feedback beyond the immediate writing task, limiting their ability to transfer learning to future writing situations. These findings suggest that cognitive engagement challenges were considerably more complex among low-proficiency students than among their intermediate-proficiency peers.

In terms of behavioral engagement, the findings reveal one challenge that was common to both proficiency groups, namely revision limited to lecturer corrections. Students from both groups tended to focus primarily on revising the specific issues explicitly identified by lecturers rather than independently examining and improving other aspects of their writing. Nevertheless, each group also demonstrated distinctive behavioral challenges. Low-proficiency students experienced limited clarification-seeking and lack of feedback preparation. They were often reluctant to ask questions, seek further explanation, or actively participate when feedback was unclear. Additionally, many entered feedback sessions without adequately preparing their work before. In contrast, intermediate-proficiency students demonstrated inconsistent clarification-seeking, indicating that they did not always pursue clarification despite recognizing areas of uncertainty.

Regarding affective engagement, the analysis identified low self-confidence as the only challenge shared by both groups. Students across proficiency levels expressed uncertainty about their writing abilities and questioned their capacity to meet lecturers' expectations. Beyond this common challenge, the affective experiences of the two groups differed substantially. Low-proficiency students reported academic anxiety, intimidation during feedback, and lack of interpersonal support as major emotional barriers. They frequently felt anxious about their academic performance and intimidated by interactions with lecturers, while the perceived lack of interpersonal support made it more difficult for them to feel comfortable, encouraged, and emotionally secure during feedback discussions. Meanwhile, intermediate-proficiency students experienced anxiety and overwhelm during feedback, particularly when faced with extensive revisions or multiple feedback points. They also demonstrated sensitivity to lecturer attitudes and appreciation, indicating that their emotional engagement was strongly influenced by lecturers' interpersonal behaviors, including expressions of support, recognition, and encouragement.

In general, low-proficiency students experienced a broader range of challenges across multiple dimensions of engagement, whereas intermediate-proficiency students tended to encounter fewer and more specific obstacles. This variation indicates that students with different proficiency levels may require different forms of support to engage effectively in feedback dialogues.

DISCUSSION

Shared and Case-Specific Challenges to Engagement with Dialogic Feedback

The cross-case analysis revealed both shared and case-specific challenges to students' engagement with dialogic feedback. Although the two cases represented different levels of English proficiency, the findings do not indicate a simple proficiency-based divide in which one case was consistently more or less engaged than the other. Rather, the cases converged on several challenges that constrained engagement, while also exhibiting challenges that were more salient within one case. These challenges were evident across the cognitive, behavioural, and affective dimensions of engagement, suggesting that students' participation in dialogic feedback was shaped by multiple and interconnected conditions rather than by proficiency alone. This multidimensional view is consistent with conceptualizations of feedback engagement that recognize students' cognitive, behavioural, and affective responses as interrelated aspects of how learners participate in feedback processes ([Reeve & Tseng, 2011](#)).

Challenges to Cognitive Engagement

The two cases shared difficulty in interpreting the lecturer's intended meaning and determining what specifically needed to be revised. Unclear feedback therefore emerged as a shared challenge to cognitive engagement. When students could not readily determine what the lecturer meant or what action was expected, their ability to process, evaluate, and respond to the feedback was constrained. This finding is consistent with Ryoo (2023), who argues that ambiguous feedback can weaken its formative function when learners are unable to translate comments into actionable revisions. Similarly, Ryan et al. (2022) emphasize that interpreting feedback is an important condition for using it productively. The occurrence of unclear feedback in both cases therefore suggests that this challenge was not exclusively associated with lower proficiency but could arise from the interactional conditions under which feedback was provided.

Alongside this shared challenge, two additional challenges to cognitive engagement were particularly evident in the low-proficiency case: dependence on lecturer authority and difficulty transferring feedback to subsequent writing. These patterns suggest that students had difficulty moving beyond understanding an immediate correction toward evaluating feedback and determining how it could be applied independently in another context. This interpretation can be related to the "making judgments" dimension of feedback literacy proposed by Carless and Boud (2018), which involves learners' capacity to evaluate feedback and make informed decisions about its use. The finding also resonates with Murtisari et al. (2026), who found that higher-proficiency learners tended to engage with feedback more selectively and reflectively, whereas lower-proficiency learners demonstrated more reactive and surface-oriented patterns of engagement. In the present study, dependence on lecturer authority and difficulty transferring feedback may similarly indicate constraints on students' ability to evaluate feedback independently and recognize how a particular correction could be generalized beyond the immediate task. Such constraints may be related to the linguistic knowledge available to support learners' noticing and processing of feedback (Schmidt, 2001).

Challenges to Behavioral Engagement

In terms of behavioural engagement, both groups tended to limit revision to corrections explicitly identified by the lecturer. Although they acted on feedback by making revisions, their actions were often restricted to corrections already pointed out by the lecturer rather than extending to problems they independently identified. This pattern suggests that behavioural

engagement was sometimes confined to responding to externally identified revision needs rather than initiating further action.

The fact that lecturer-directed revision occurred across both cases is particularly noteworthy. The intermediate-proficiency case, despite involving students with greater linguistic resources, also showed reliance on the lecturer to identify what needed to be revised. This finding complicates an assumption that greater proficiency necessarily corresponds to stronger self-initiated behavioural engagement. Feedback literacy involves not only receiving or implementing feedback but also developing the capacity to make judgments and take responsibility for how feedback is used ([Carless & Boud, 2018](#)). The present cases therefore suggest that opportunities to participate in dialogic feedback do not automatically translate into independent behavioural engagement, even when students possess sufficient proficiency to understand much of the feedback.

Despite this shared challenge, the two cases displayed different patterns of clarification-seeking. This distinction indicates that behavioural engagement was not simply characterized by active versus passive participation. Wu ([2019](#)), for example, reported that lower-proficiency learners tended to make more clarification requests in response to content feedback. The present cross-case pattern differs from this finding because clarification-seeking did not follow the same pattern across the two cases. One possible explanation lies in the interactional context of dialogic feedback. In the present study, clarification-seeking occurred within individual lecturer–student feedback conversations and formed part of students’ attempts to understand, respond to, and make sense of feedback. From a dialogic perspective, clarification therefore represents more than a request for additional information; it can function as a means through which students participate in the ongoing negotiation of meaning ([Tam, 2020](#)). That contrast finding consequently suggests that patterns of clarification-seeking may be shaped by the interaction between learner characteristics, feedback focus, and the opportunities provided for dialogic participation.

Challenges to Affective Engagement

The affective dimension also revealed a shared challenge across the two cases. Low self-confidence emerged as a recurring difficulty, indicating that students could experience emotional vulnerability during feedback regardless of their proficiency level. This finding challenges a straightforward assumption that greater proficiency necessarily provides greater emotional security during evaluative interactions. It is consistent with Ryan et al. ([2022](#)), who emphasize that emotional responses influence how learners interpret and use feedback, and

with Mary et al. (2026), whose findings suggest that students' confidence does not necessarily correspond directly with their academic achievement. Thus, proficiency or achievement alone may not be sufficient to explain students' affective engagement during dialogic feedback.

Although low self-confidence was shared, the conditions and manifestations of this challenge differed across the two cases. In the low-proficiency case, challenges to affective engagement more frequently involved academic anxiety, intimidation, and a need for interpersonal support. In the intermediate-proficiency case, students were more likely to experience anxiety or feel overwhelmed by extensive revision demands and to respond sensitively to the lecturer's expressions of recognition or criticism. This pattern is consistent with the view that students' emotional responses to feedback can be shaped by both the demands of the feedback task and their perceptions of the feedback provider (Hill et al., 2021). Thus, while emotional vulnerability was evident across both cases, the conditions that appeared to undermine affective engagement were case-specific.

These affective challenges are particularly important because they can extend beyond the affective dimension and constrain cognitive and behavioural engagement as well. Dong et al. (2020) note that processing feedback while managing negative emotions can increase the cognitive demands placed on learners. Similarly, Hill et al. (2021) suggest that emotional concerns combined with cognitive uncertainty can influence subsequent behavioural engagement. In the present cases, students who experienced anxiety, intimidation, or feeling overwhelmed may therefore have had fewer cognitive and emotional resources available to process feedback, ask questions, evaluate suggestions, or initiate revisions. Affective challenges thus appear to have functioned not as isolated emotional states but as potential constraints on students' broader participation in the dialogic feedback process.

The interpersonal delivery of feedback was particularly relevant to the challenges to affective engagement observed in the low-proficiency case. For students who already felt academically vulnerable, feedback accompanied by a raised tone of voice, prolonged direct eye contact, or stern facial expressions could be experienced as intimidating regardless of the lecturer's intention (Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017; Zhang et al., 2025). Such verbal and non-verbal cues may shift students' attention away from understanding and responding to feedback toward managing their emotional reactions. Within dialogic feedback, this shift is consequential because students' emotional withdrawal may reduce their willingness to ask questions, seek clarification, or negotiate meaning with the lecturer, thereby limiting opportunities for collaborative meaning-making (Tam, 2020). The interpersonal quality of

feedback can therefore function as an important condition either supporting or constraining students' affective and behavioural participation in the dialogue.

Conversely, supportive interpersonal conditions can facilitate students' willingness to participate actively in feedback interactions. Monteiro et al. (2021) argue that supportive learning environments encourage students to participate, ask questions, and use feedback productively. This perspective is particularly relevant to the present cases because the challenges to affective engagement were not solely located within students; they were also related to how students experienced the lecturer's manner of delivering feedback. From a dialogic perspective, a supportive interactional environment may provide the psychological conditions necessary for students to remain involved in the dialogue, particularly when they encounter uncertainty or difficulty in processing feedback

Cross-Case Interpretation

The two cases cannot be characterized simply according to a more-engaged versus less-engaged distinction. Instead, each case involved a particular configuration of challenges that constrained students' engagement with dialogic feedback. Some challenges were shared, indicating that they may be associated with the demands of participating in dialogic feedback itself, while others were more salient within a particular case and may reflect differences in students' linguistic resources, experiences, and responses to the feedback interaction. This interpretation is consistent with research conceptualizing feedback engagement as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction between learner characteristics, feedback processes, and contextual conditions (Ajjawi & Boud, 2017). Accordingly, proficiency may be considered a relevant contextual characteristic of the cases, but it should not be treated as a categorical explanation for students' engagement challenges.

The cross-case findings therefore highlight that supporting engagement with dialogic feedback requires attention to the specific barriers operating within each dimension of engagement. At the cognitive level, students need sufficiently clear and interpretable feedback to make sense of what is expected; at the behavioural level, they need opportunities to move beyond lecturer-directed revision and participate more actively in the feedback exchange; and at the affective level, they need interpersonal conditions that allow them to participate without feeling threatened, overwhelmed, or excessively vulnerable. Such support is consistent with the broader understanding of dialogic feedback as an interactive process in which students' opportunities to interpret, respond to, and act upon feedback depend not only on the information provided but also on the quality of the interaction in which feedback is negotiated.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the engagement challenges experienced by low-proficiency and intermediate-proficiency EFL writers during dialogic feedback. The findings revealed that both groups shared several challenges, including unclear feedback, revisions limited to lecturer corrections, and low self-confidence. However, low-proficiency students experienced a broader range of cognitive, behavioural, and affective challenges than their intermediate-proficiency peers, indicating that students' proficiency levels shape how they engage with dialogic feedback.

These findings suggest that dialogic feedback should move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach. Lecturers need to provide differentiated support by offering clearer guidance and greater cognitive and emotional scaffolding for low-proficiency students, while encouraging greater autonomy and reflective engagement among intermediate-proficiency students. Such an approach is more promising to promote meaningful engagement with feedback and support students' writing development.

Future research could involve larger, more diverse samples and examine dialogic feedback across various educational settings to better understand how student characteristics influence feedback engagement. Additionally, future studies could incorporate tools such as facial expression analysis to measure students' emotional responses during dialogic feedback sessions.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI

The authors would like to declare the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools during the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, ChatGPT was utilized for brainstorming initial concepts and improving the clarity, grammar, and overall language of the text. All final content was reviewed and approved by the authors, who take full responsibility for the integrity of the work.

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