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Beyond Grades and Red Ink: Transforming Vocational English Learning through Process-Oriented Feedback for SDG 4

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To investigate how vocational high school students in Indonesia perceive teacher feedback during project-based English learning and what this implies for formative assessment practices that support Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) and, by extension, learners' readiness for decent work (SDG 8). **Method:** A qualitative descriptive design was used. Data were collected through a closed-ended questionnaire administered to 35 eleventh-grade Visual Communication Design students at a vocational high school in Sidoarjo, East Java, and semi-structured interviews with 10 purposively selected participants; interview data were analyzed thematically. **Results:** Students perceived teacher feedback as clear, specific, and aligned with project goals (97.1% agreement); feedback functioned as a cognitive scaffold for critical thinking and self-regulated learning; continuous feedback strengthened speaking, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation; and feedback quality shaped students' emotional engagement and motivation. **Novelty:** By documenting process-oriented, goal-aligned feedback as a mechanism that simultaneously builds language competence and career-relevant self-regulation, the study offers vocational-education stakeholders an evidence-based, generalizable feedback framework that links classroom formative assessment directly to inclusive quality education and workforce-readiness targets under the SDGs.

INTRODUCTION

Global education policy increasingly frames English language teaching as a vehicle for advancing Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), which calls for inclusive, equitable access to technical and vocational education that equips learners with skills relevant to decent work (United Nations General Assembly, 2015; Yaccob et al., 2022). Because vocational education is explicitly positioned as a bridge between quality education (SDG 4) and productive, decent employment (SDG 8), the way feedback is designed and delivered in vocational English classrooms has direct bearing on whether learners leave school able to communicate competently in professional settings (McGrath & Yamada, 2023). However, empirical accounts of how feedback actually functions inside vocational, project-based English classrooms in the Global South remain scarce, leaving a gap between the policy rhetoric of SDG-aligned vocational education and classroom-level evidence of what supports it.

Feedback has long been recognized as one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement. In its most effective form, feedback reduces the gap between current performance and desired learning goals, enabling students to monitor their progress, identify areas for improvement, and take corrective action (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In English language education, teacher feedback plays a particularly critical role: it guides students in developing linguistic accuracy, communicative competence, and the metacognitive awareness necessary for sustained language development (Brandmo &

Gamlem, 2025). Despite substantial theoretical support for the importance of feedback, its classroom implementation remains inconsistent, and the specific mechanisms by which feedback operates across instructional contexts are not fully understood.

The growing adoption of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in vocational education has created new demands on feedback practices. PjBL is a student-centered instructional approach grounded in social constructivist principles, in which learners develop knowledge and skills through engagement with authentic, real-world projects (Shen, 2024). Unlike traditional instruction, where feedback is typically delivered at the conclusion of discrete tasks, PjBL requires continuous, process-oriented feedback that scaffolds student learning across multiple project phases, including planning, drafting, revision, and production (Maharma & Abusa'aleek, 2022). This distinction is particularly significant in vocational education contexts, where students must develop both English language proficiency and career-relevant competencies simultaneously, and where assessment practices must document growth trajectories that are relevant to professional certification and licensure.

Research on teacher feedback in language education has expanded considerably in recent years, with studies documenting its effects on writing performance, speaking accuracy, self-regulation, and learner motivation (Brandmo & Gamlem, 2025; Gan et al., 2021; Ponomariovienė et al., 2025). Similarly, a growing body of literature has examined the benefits of PjBL for language learning, including enhanced engagement, deeper content knowledge, and improved communicative skills (Amalia et al., 2024; Ferdaus & Novita, 2023). However, the intersection of these two domains, specifically how teacher feedback functions within PjBL implementation, remains underexplored. Most existing studies examine either feedback or PjBL in isolation, without investigating how feedback practices are embedded within the iterative, process-oriented structure of project-based instruction.

This gap is particularly acute in vocational education settings. Vocational high school students often come from diverse academic and socioeconomic backgrounds, which influence how they perceive, interpret, and respond to feedback (Linuwih et al., 2024). Moreover, some students with limited experience of constructive feedback may interpret critical comments as personal criticism rather than guidance, potentially leading to disengagement (Mafulah & Basthomi, 2023). Understanding how vocational high school students perceive and respond to teacher feedback during PjBL is therefore essential for developing assessment practices that are both pedagogically effective and responsive to learner needs.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating vocational high school students' perceptions of teacher feedback during project-based English learning. Specifically, the study examines how students perceive feedback quality, how feedback supports learning performance and behavior, how feedback contributes to English language competency development, and how feedback influences emotional and motivational engagement. The study is guided by one overarching research question: How do vocational high school students perceive teacher feedback during project-based English learning? By centering the analysis on student perceptions within an authentic PjBL context and explicitly linking it to SDG 4 and SDG 8, the study seeks to generate findings with clear, generalizable implications for formative assessment practice in education, certification, licensure, and sustainable development contexts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Feedback as formative assessment

This study's theoretical foundation draws on Hattie and Timperley's (2007) model of effective feedback, which conceptualizes feedback as information an agent provides about one's performance or understanding. Effective feedback operates at four levels: task, process, self-regulation, and self. Feedback is most productive when it addresses the task and process levels, providing specific information about what was done well, what needs improvement, and what strategies can be used, rather than directing attention to the self level through general praise or criticism. This framework is particularly relevant to PjBL contexts, where feedback must guide students through iterative cycles of production and revision across multiple project phases.

Additionally, the study draws on Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory, which posits that learning results from the triadic interaction among personal factors (cognition and emotion), behavioral factors (actions and responses), and environmental factors (including teacher feedback). Within this framework, teacher feedback serves as a critical environmental stimulus that shapes students' self-efficacy beliefs, which, in turn, influence their motivation, engagement, and persistence in learning tasks (Monteiro et al., 2021). When students perceive feedback as constructive and supportive, they are more likely to develop confidence in their abilities and take the initiative to improve their performance.

Integrating these theoretical perspectives provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how teacher feedback operates in PjBL contexts. At the task level, feedback provides students with specific information about language accuracy, content quality, and project requirements. At the process level, feedback guides students in developing effective strategies for revision, error correction, and quality improvement. At the self-regulation level, feedback scaffolds the development of metacognitive capabilities, including self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and strategic planning; at the affective level, it influences students' self-efficacy beliefs, emotional responses, and motivational orientations toward learning. This multi-level framework suggests that effective feedback in PjBL contexts must address the cognitive, metacognitive, and affective dimensions of learning simultaneously.

Project-based learning in vocational education

Project-based learning is a student-centered instructional approach in which learners develop knowledge and skills by engaging in authentic projects that require sustained inquiry, collaboration, and artifact production (Markham, 2012). Grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism, PjBL positions learning as a collaborative process in which students construct knowledge through interaction with peers and teachers within their zone of proximal development. In vocational education contexts, PjBL aligns with curricular goals of developing problem-solving skills, critical thinking, creativity, and interpersonal competence skills essential for professional certification and workforce readiness and maps directly onto SDG 8's emphasis on skills for decent work (Megayanti et al., 2020).

Implementing PjBL in vocational education creates conditions that shape the nature and function of teacher feedback. Unlike academic education settings where language learning is often the primary curricular objective, vocational education requires the simultaneous development of language proficiency, technical knowledge, and career-relevant competencies. Within PjBL, teacher feedback serves as the primary mechanism

for monitoring student progress, providing direction, and scaffolding the development of both content knowledge and language skills. Research suggests feedback is most effective when embedded throughout the project process rather than delivered only at summative evaluation (Charalampous & Darra, 2024). This process-oriented approach aligns with formative assessment principles and creates opportunities for students to develop self-regulated learning capabilities transferable across educational and professional contexts.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to investigate vocational high school students' perceptions of teacher feedback during project-based English learning. The qualitative descriptive design was selected because it enables rich, naturalistic interpretation of participants' experiences while preserving the contextual nuances of their perspectives (Creswell, 2014). The design is particularly suitable for investigating how students perceive and interpret feedback practices, as it captures the complexity and depth of subjective experience that quantitative measures alone cannot reveal.

Participants and setting

The study took place at a vocational high school in Sidoarjo, East Java, Indonesia, where the English teacher used project-based learning as the primary instructional approach. Thirty-five eleventh-grade students from the Visual Communication Design program completed the questionnaire, and 10 students were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews based on their willingness to participate and their varied responses. The project task involved creating a procedure text video related to students' vocational background and daily experiences, during which the teacher provided continuous verbal and written feedback on language accuracy, content development, and project quality.

Data collection

Data were collected through two instruments. First, researchers administered a closed-ended questionnaire with 20 items organized around four thematic dimensions: feedback quality, learning performance and behavior, English competency development, and emotional and motivational responses to all 35 participants. The questionnaire used a yes/no response format to establish baseline patterns in students' perceptions. Second, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 participants using 15 open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed accounts of students' experiences with teacher feedback during the project process. The researchers audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated the interviews from Indonesian to English for analysis.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis followed the six-phase framework described by Braun and Clarke (2006, as cited in Liebenberg et al., 2020). The analysis proceeded through familiarization with the data, initial code generation, theme identification, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report production. Codes were generated both deductively from the questionnaire dimensions and inductively from patterns that emerged in the interview data. Trustworthiness was established through data triangulation between

questionnaire and interview findings, rich description of participant responses, and systematic documentation of analytical decisions.

The analytical framework captured both the cognitive and affective dimensions of students' perceptions. Cognitive perceptions included students' evaluations of feedback clarity, specificity, and usefulness in identifying errors and improving projects. Affective perceptions encompassed students' emotional responses to feedback, motivational effects, and perceptions of the teacher-student relationship within the feedback process. The combination of questionnaire and interview data provided complementary perspectives: the questionnaire established the prevalence and distribution of specific perceptions across the participant group, while the interviews provided the detailed, contextualized accounts necessary to understand the mechanisms and meanings underlying those perceptions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Questionnaire results indicated strong positive perceptions of feedback quality and usefulness across all four dimensions surveyed (Table 1). Interview data added depth by revealing the mechanisms behind students' perceptions, organized into four themes below.

Table 1. Summary of selected questionnaire findings on students' perceptions of teacher feedback (n = 35)

Feedback dimension (selected questionnaire items, n = 35)	n	%
Feedback provided continuously throughout the project, not only at its conclusion	34/35	97.1
Feedback included specific suggestions rather than general comments	31/35	88.6
Feedback helped students understand what to improve	34/35	97.1
Feedback was explicitly related to project goals	34/35	97.1
Feedback helped students recognize their strengths in using English	34/35	97.1
Feedback helped students stay motivated during project work	34/35	97.1
Students felt respected by how feedback was delivered	32/35	91.4

Students' perceptions of feedback quality

Interview data revealed that students perceived feedback quality along two primary dimensions: clarity and alignment with project goals, and support for project progress. Regarding clarity, students consistently described feedback as easy to understand, detailed, and communicated in accessible language. Participants reported that the teacher provided specific explanations of vocabulary and pronunciation errors and offered ideas for project development. One participant noted that the teacher's explanations were detailed enough to identify what needed improvement while remaining accessible and free of unnecessarily complex language.

Students also perceived feedback as directly supporting project progress by providing clear guidance throughout the production process and offering solutions when problems arose. Students particularly valued the continuous nature of feedback provision: unlike conventional assessment contexts where feedback is delivered after task completion, the

PjBL context enabled the teacher to provide feedback at multiple stages of the project process, including planning, scriptwriting, rehearsal, recording, and revision. Students reported that this continuous feedback loop was essential for maintaining project quality and preventing the accumulation of errors that would have required extensive rework.

Feedback supporting learning performance and behavior

Interview data elaborated three mechanisms through which feedback supported learning performance. First, feedback promoted critical thinking: students reported that they did not automatically apply feedback but instead reflected on its meaning, relevance, and applicability before making revisions. This reflective process indicates that feedback functioned as a cognitive scaffold, prompting students to evaluate their work and make informed decisions about revision strategies.

The development of self-regulated learning through feedback emerged as a particularly significant finding. Students described a process in which they received feedback, reflected on its implications, considered alternative approaches, and then selected the most appropriate revision strategy. Second, students perceived feedback as learning guidance that helped them identify mistakes, enhance project quality, and overcome challenges. Third, feedback helped build confidence in using English: students reported that after receiving clear guidance on pronunciation, vocabulary, and speaking strategies, they felt more certain about their English abilities.

Feedback and English competency development

Interview data showed that feedback supported four specific competency areas. In speaking development, students reported that feedback on script delivery and pronunciation modeling helped them speak more fluently and confidently. In vocabulary improvement, students emphasized that teacher-provided vocabulary explanations were clearer and more dependable than automated translation tools, as the teacher offered contextualized explanations and appropriate word choices. In grammar accuracy, students described how the teacher checked their scripts for grammatical errors and provided corrections before video recording, enabling them to produce more accurate language. In pronunciation awareness, students reported that the teacher modeled correct pronunciation during script review, improving pronunciation accuracy and increasing confidence during introductions and script reading.

Emotional and motivational responses to feedback

Interview data revealed nuanced emotional responses to both positive and critical feedback. Students consistently reported positive emotional reactions to affirmative feedback, describing feelings of happiness and validation that their efforts were recognized and not in vain. Positive feedback also served as a motivational stimulus, encouraging students to work harder toward their learning targets.

Students' responses to critical feedback were more complex but ultimately constructive. Several participants described initial feelings of disappointment or sadness upon receiving critical feedback, but reported that these feelings quickly transformed into motivation to revise and improve their work. Students emphasized that critical feedback was acceptable when it was fair, focused on specific errors rather than personal characteristics, and delivered respectfully. Multiple students also reported feeling appreciated by teacher feedback, describing how the teacher's consistent attention to

project details and provision of solutions fostered a sense of being valued and supported in their learning.

Discussion

The contribution of feedback to multiple English language competencies speaking, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation shows that well-designed feedback in PjBL contexts can address multiple learning objectives at once. This multi-competency impact is particularly relevant to vocational education, where instructional time is limited, and learning activities must efficiently develop both language skills and career-relevant competencies. The finding that feedback was most effective when contextualized within the authentic communicative demands of the project task rather than delivered as decontextualized language instruction aligns with contemporary understanding of situated learning theory.

The temporal dimension of feedback effectiveness documented in this study specifically, the finding that initial negative emotional responses to critical feedback transformed into motivation for improvement has important implications for assessment timing and follow-up. This emotional trajectory suggests that the impact of critical feedback should not be evaluated solely at the point of delivery but assessed over time as learners process, reflect on, and respond to the feedback received. This finding supports assessment frameworks that include iterative feedback-revision cycles, enabling learners to demonstrate growth in response to feedback rather than being evaluated on a single performance snapshot.

The findings of this study converge on a central conclusion: teacher feedback in project-based English learning functions as a multi-dimensional pedagogical tool that simultaneously supports language development, cognitive growth, self-regulated learning, and emotional engagement. This conclusion extends the existing literature by demonstrating that feedback in PjBL contexts operates not as an isolated evaluative event but as an integrated instructional mechanism embedded throughout the learning process.

The finding that students perceived feedback as clear, specific, and aligned with project goals aligns with Brandmo and Gamlem's (2025) systematic review, which found that students rate feedback quality higher when it reduces confusion and helps them understand their tasks accurately. The process-oriented nature of the feedback provided continuously throughout project phases rather than only at the conclusion aligns with formative assessment principles described by Charalampous and Darra (2024), who showed that formative feedback is most powerful when provided consistently during task performance to enable real-time adjustments. The finding that students engaged in reflective processing of feedback before applying it is consistent with Maharma and Abusa'aleek's (2022) conclusion that regular feedback stimulates active engagement with feedback interpretation rather than passive compliance, and with Putri et al.'s (2021) finding that teacher feedback plays an important role in integrating self-reflection, decision-making, and independent learning development.

The differential emotional responses to positive and critical feedback underscore how feedback delivery shapes its effectiveness. Students' acceptance of critical feedback when it was fair, task-focused, and respectfully delivered is consistent with Gan et al.'s (2021) finding that feedback emphasizing improvement rather than judgment enhances confidence and motivation. Conversely, the finding that rude or personal feedback can produce negative emotional responses confirms Akolgo et al.'s (2025) documentation of

the emotional costs of poorly delivered feedback and Mafulah and Basthomi's (2023) observation that threatening feedback can lead to fear and disengagement.

These findings also resonate with recent Indonesian scholarship on feedback and assessment literacy in EFL contexts: Wardana et al. (2025) similarly found that teacher feedback shapes writing self-efficacy and self-regulation among Indonesian EFL learners, while Munasih et al. (2024) documented that vocational-school EFL teachers' writing-assessment practices directly shape the quality and usefulness of the feedback students receive, underscoring the need for assessment-literacy support in vocational settings such as the one examined here.

Implications for practice in education, certification, and licensure

The findings generate several generalizable implications for assessment practice, several of which connect directly to SDG 4 target 4.4 (relevant skills for employment) and SDG 8's emphasis on decent work. First, feedback systems should be designed as process-embedded rather than outcome-appended practices; certification and licensure frameworks should incorporate formative feedback mechanisms at multiple checkpoints rather than relying exclusively on terminal examinations. Second, feedback quality depends critically on specificity, clarity, and goal alignment; scoring rubrics and feedback protocols should generate specific, criterion-referenced information learners can act on. Third, feedback tone and delivery significantly influence effectiveness independent of informational content, with direct implications for assessor training. Fourth, feedback should be explicitly designed to scaffold self-regulated learning through reflection prompts or action-planning requirements. Fifth, assessment-literacy professional development should prepare educators to implement feedback as an integrated instructional practice one that, in vocational settings, also builds the workforce-ready competencies that SDG 4 and SDG 8 jointly target.

Limitations and future directions

Several limitations qualify the generalizability of these findings. The study was conducted in a single vocational high school with a specific population of visual communication design students, which limits transferability to other school types, subjects, and cultural contexts. Reliance on self-reported data introduces potential social desirability bias, and the cross-sectional design does not capture changes in perceptions over time. Additionally, the study did not examine the teacher's perspective on feedback practices, which would provide a complementary lens on implementation.

Future research should extend this investigation through multi-site studies across diverse educational contexts, longitudinal designs tracking perception changes over time, and mixed-methods approaches incorporating classroom observation and document analysis. Comparative studies that track how feedback-rich vocational English instruction contributes to measurable SDG 4 and SDG 8 indicators (e.g., graduate employability, certification pass rates) would extend the practical and policy relevance of the current findings.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: This study demonstrates that teacher feedback in Project-Based English Learning (PjBL) functions as a multidimensional pedagogical tool that supports language competency, cognitive development, and emotional engagement. The findings identify five key properties of effective feedback: continuity, specificity, alignment,

accessibility, and scaffolding. Together, these properties provide a practical framework for designing feedback that supports learners throughout the project process rather than relying solely on summative evaluation. **Implication:** The findings suggest integrating feedback systematically into PjBL as an ongoing process that connects learners' performance with project goals and assessment criteria. In vocational English education, such feedback practices can strengthen communicative competence and self-regulated learning, which align with the broader goals of SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). **Limitation:** This study is limited by its contextual focus on teacher feedback in project-based English learning. Therefore, the identified feedback properties may not fully represent feedback practices across different educational levels, vocational fields, institutional settings, or learner populations. **Future Research:** Future studies could examine the effectiveness of these five feedback properties across different educational and vocational contexts using larger, more diverse samples. Further research could also investigate how digital feedback tools, peer feedback, and self-assessment can complement teacher feedback to strengthen learners' reflection, self-regulation, and preparation for workplace communication.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Rahayu Kuswardani and **Nur Fauzia** contributed to the conceptual framework, research design, and validation process; **Prianka Ratu Masitho** contributed to methodology development, data analysis, reference sourcing, and manuscript drafting; and **Trishna Nanda Barianty** managed data, coordinated the project, and contributed to manuscript drafting. All listed authors have reviewed and approved the final version of this submission.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors confirm that there are no conflicts of interest, either financial or personal, that may have influenced the content or outcome of this study.

ETHICAL COMPLIANCE STATEMENT

This manuscript complies with research and publication ethics. The authors affirm that the work is original, conducted with academic integrity, and free from any unethical practices, including plagiarism.

STATEMENT ON THE USE OF AI OR DIGITAL TOOLS IN WRITING

The authors acknowledge using digital tools, including AI-based technologies, to support the research and writing stages of this article. Specifically, Copilot supported data design, Mendeley assisted with references, and Grammarly corrected grammar and improved sentence cohesion. The authors critically evaluated and revised all digitally assisted outputs to ensure academic rigor and uphold ethical standards. The authors retain full responsibility for the manuscript.

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