AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY INTO CHINESE EFL TEACHERS' COMMENTARY PRACTICES IN ORAL PRESENTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has revealed that teacher feedback encourages students' learning of a second language and improves task performance. While former quasi-experimental studies emphasized the positive effects of formative assessment and feedback by teachers on developing oral presentation competence, it remains unclear about the processes during which teachers provide feedback in the form of verbal comments on oral presentations. Therefore, this paper describes an exploratory case study that examines the nature and processes of three experienced EFL teachers' commentary on students' classroom oral presentations in a Chinese university. Data for this study were obtained from the teachers' self-reported accounts of commentary experiences during semi-structured interviews. Findings showed that the three teachers' comments on oral presentations were feedback-focused in nature; however, they diversified their comments in terms of delivery mode, function and focus. The study has implications for future teacher feedback research and EFL classroom practice with regard to the ways in which teachers provide feedback on oral presentation tasks.

Key Words: commentary practice, teacher feedback, EFL oral presentation tasks

INTRODUCTION

The idea that teacher feedback is beneficial to successful language learning is well established in the literature on oral second language acquisition (SLA) and second language writing (L2) (e.g., Ferris, 2010; Lyster, Saito & Sato, 2013). For instance, teacher feedback can facilitate

the acquisition of language forms such as articles and the simple past tense (e.g., Ellis, Loewen, & Erlam, 2006; Shintani & Ellis, 2013) and bring about improvements in text revisions (e.g., Ferris, 2006; Frear & Chiu, 2015). However, the benefits documented in the literature on feedback are mostly concerned with the instruction of linguistic competence and grammatical accuracy in L2 writing (Bruton, 2009), and scant attention has been paid to the role of teacher feedback on the development of students' academic literacy in terms of communicative spoken discourses such as oral presentations.

Oral presentation, as a regular and highly routinised part of classroom life in higher education institutions, is characterised by the significant functions of fostering oral communicative competence, increasing students' active participation and enhancing learning motivation and autonomy (King, 2002; Morita, 2000). Previous studies (e.g., Cheng & Warren, 2005; Murillo-Zamorano & Montanero, 2017; Saito, 2008; Shimura, 2006; Van Ginkel, Gulikers, Biemans, & Mulder, 2015) mostly adopted experimental and quasi-experimental designs to examine differential effectiveness of the provision of teacher feedback, peer assessment and self-assessment on students' presentation performance. While these studies indicated that teacher feedback in general proved to outperform feedback from other sources, they did not reveal insights into the nature and processes of teacher feedback. A recently published quasi-experimental study by Van Ginkel, Gulikers, Biemans, and Mulder (2017) made in-depth analyses of feedback processes of teachers, peers and peers guided by tutors; the study results reveal that teacher feedback corresponds to the highest extent with pre-established rubrics of feedback quality criteria. Nonetheless, little effort was made in terms of qualitatively investigating teachers' commentary practices in oral presentations, and it remains unclear how teachers provide their feedback in naturalistic classroom settings. How do teachers provide comments as a form of feedback, what aspects do they focus on in their comments, and what functions do their comments attempt to achieve? Thus, more information is needed about the underlying processes during which teachers provide comments on students' oral presentations in real-life language classrooms.

This paper reports on an exploratory case study on three experienced teachers' commentary practices in oral presentations in Chinese tertiary-level EFL classrooms. Through self-reports, the study explores how the teachers provide comments on oral presentations and

investigates the nature of their provided comments. This study can provide insights into the processes through which EFL teachers comment on tasks of oral presentations. By focusing on experienced teachers, we attempt to highlight the mentoring and modelling roles that teachers play in the development of feedback strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study examined three Chinese EFL university teachers' commentary practices and the rationales behind their practices, addressing issues related to both the "how" and "why" of teacher feedback in oral presentations. Teacher comments, being "little texts that are intended to convey a great deal in a few words" (Mutch, 2003, as cited in Walker, 2009, p. 68) are regarded as one specific form of teacher feedback. Since purely focusing on teacher comments and oral presentations barely yielded any empirical studies, the review of literature was widened into the broad category of teacher feedback. This section is in two parts. Part one reviews the literature on form-related and content-related characteristics of teacher feedback in three main aspects: feedback mode, focus and function. Part two deals with the nature of teacher feedback in respect to formative and summative assessment on oral presentations.

Teacher Feedback Characteristics: Delivery Mode, Focus and Function

Research on teacher feedback has yielded valuable insights on different forms and content choices of feedback teachers can use in classroom teaching. When responding to student work, L2 teachers can provide feedback in a variety of modalities such as handwritten feedback (e.g., writing comments or correcting errors on essay drafts), oral feedback (e.g., commenting on classroom discussions and oral reports) and electronic feedback (i.e. feedback in digital form and transmitted via the Internet). A number of factors need to be considered other than the task type when determining what delivery modes teachers should use in their feedback practices. According to Goldstein (2005), although written feedback is permanently available to the learners for later reference and allows teachers to reflect on student work in a deeper manner, it runs the risk of one-way communication because the learners are usually not present when the teachers write their comments. Instead, oral feedback

which often occurs face-to-face provides more opportunities for two-way communication and is beneficial to meaning negotiation and scaffolding (Carson & Nelson, 1996). Electronic feedback, also called computer-mediated feedback gives students a greater sense of anonymity but allows for less negotiation of meaning than oral face-to-face feedback (Tuzi, 2004). In the context of oral presentations, teacher feedback in previous studies (e.g., Cheng & Warren, 2005; Saito, 2008; Shimura, 2006) has remained predominantly outcome-based with grades and scores being habitual feedback practices. This is hardly surprising since these studies aimed to yield statistical results about the effectiveness of teacher feedback on students' presentation performance in experimental settings.

Apart from the forms of teacher feedback, teachers are faced with the choice of what to focus on in their feedback practices. The review of previous feedback studies on oral presentations suggested that the delivered feedback was related to pre-defined assessment criteria. For example, Van Ginkel et al. (2015) described four main presentation criteria in terms of "the content of presentation", "the structure of presentation", "the interaction with the audience" and "the presentation delivery" (p. 7). However, the above criteria are not all-encompassing and mostly address the presentation task itself. Thus, this study adopted Hattie and Timperley's (2007, p. 90) analytical framework of the focus of feedback:

- Feedback on the level of task (FT) mainly deals with whether student work is correct, often in relation to the task criteria, and may entail the need for more information, e.g., "You need to include more about the Treaty of Versailles."
- Feedback on the level of process (FP) informs students about how to approach a task, how to perceive the relationship between their effort and achievement and how to use specific learning strategies, e.g., "You need to edit this piece of writing by attending to the descriptors you have used so the reader is able to understand the nuances of your meaning."
- Feedback on the level of self-regulation (FR) is intended to help students seek and act on feedback by engaging them in self-assessment and self-management of their work, e.g., "You already know the key features of the opening of an argument. Check to see whether you have incorporated them in your first paragraph."
- Feedback on the level of student self (FS) entails personal remarks about students, e.g., "You are a great student."

There is hardly any research investigating the function of teachers' feedback on tasks of oral presentations. Nevertheless, studies on L2 writing have identified a number of functions of teacher feedback such as giving or asking students for information, requesting or suggesting what students do and not do, praising, criticising and making comments on content, grammar and mechanics (Ferris, 1997; Kumar & Stracke, 2007). F. Hyland and K. Hyland (2001) pointed out that some of the categories identified above (e.g., providing information, making a request and making grammar/mechanics comments) are "essentially means of praising, criticizing and suggesting" (p. 191). They argued for a positive-negative dimension of the feedback function in which teachers positively acknowledge student work, reinforce their behaviour and build a close and supportive teacher-student relationship, in contrast to expressing dissatisfaction with student work and undermining their motivation and self-confidence. Unlike blunt criticism, suggestion is more positive and usually entails a proposal for future improvement. In fact, teachers may fulfil different roles simultaneously when they give these three types of feedback: as evaluators positively or negatively appraising work, as facilitators giving advice to enhance learning, and as relationship builders creating a benign instructional environment. Overall, the selection of praise, criticism and suggestion as functions of teacher feedback in this study is in line with the informational, pedagogic and interpersonal roles of feedback suggested in the educational literature (Burnett, 2002; Hyland, 2000).

Teacher Feedback and Formative and Summative Assessment

Several studies (e.g., Yu & Lee, 2013; Kumar & Stracke, 2011) have attempted to identify the nature of supervisory written commentary on masters' and doctoral theses and proposal writing: is it feedback-oriented or assessment-focused? It was concluded that the supervisors mainly provided feedback to assist postgraduates to revise theses and become members of the scholarly community. Considering students' oral presentations, EFL teachers in prior quasi-experimental research (e.g., Cheng & Warren, 2005; Saito, 2008; Shimura, 2006) often assessed whether students have met the standards established by the rubric of oral presentation skills, consisting of a five-point scoring scale for each criterion. In this sense, the provided feedback is essentially assessment-focused, measuring students' oral presentation performance

and competence. Empirical evidence is therefore lacking in terms of real-life language classrooms. Are the EFL teachers' comments intended to give feedback on or assess oral presentations? Are they differentiated from score reporting in terms of the pedagogical purposes for which they are used? To deduce key characteristics underpinning assessment-oriented and feedback-focused teacher comments, several articles are analysed (e.g., Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Wiliam, 2001).

Feedback can be defined as the information used to "reduce discrepancies between current performance and the desired goal" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 87). Some studies attempted to understand the characteristics of effective feedback that should help close the learning gaps (Parr & Timperley, 2010), encourage self-regulated learning (Stracke & Kumar, 2010) and be specific (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). In other words, feedback helps students to identify the causes of the discrepancies (e.g., learning difficulties and weaknesses) and fill that gap with increased effort and more effective strategies. Educational assessment can be either summative or formative in nature. Generally, a summative assessment is an end-of-period measurement of learning outcomes and aims to evaluate students' learning abilities and teacher effectiveness (Sadler, 1989). In contrast, formative assessments comprise on-going reviews and observations of learning processes that are intended to improve learning through providing adequate information about what actions students need to take to improve their learning (Huot, 2002; Wiliam, 2001). Many researchers consider that feedback is an integral part of formative assessment and use different terms instead, such as formative feedback (Kiley, 2009) and assessment for learning (Parr & Timperley, 2010).

To summarize, feedback and assessment are two distinct but related concepts in the field of education. In this paper, we use the term feedback to focus on the process of closing a gap between current and desired performance, which distinguishes it clearly from summative assessment. Below are the summarized criteria for teacher feedback and assessment for analysing the nature of EFL teachers' comments on oral presentations.

Assessment-oriented commentary:
1. Teachers set assessment criteria or standards for learning and oral presentation performance;
2. Teachers intend to measure and evaluate student learning progress

and competence (e.g., language skills, oral proficiency and communicative ability) and the quality of oral presentation performance;
3. Students are unaware of their strengths and weaknesses and how to conduct self-correction and autonomous learning (e.g., Huot, 2002; Sadler, 1989).

Feedback-focused commentary:
1. Teachers focus on enhancing student learning and oral presentation performance;
2. Teachers identify and describe student learning difficulties and the strong and weak points of oral presentation performance;
3. Teachers provide information about what needs improving, how to improve and what to do next with regard to future learning and oral presentation performance (e.g., Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

THE STUDY

Research Questions

This paper presents some of the preliminary findings of a continuing research project on EFL teachers' feedback on task-based oral performance in mainland China. An exploratory case study approach was used to examine the practices of experienced EFL teachers when commenting on EFL oral presentations in a Chinese university. For one thing, case study emphasizes investigating the phenomenon (i.e. experienced teachers' commentary practices) within a real life context (i.e. real EFL classrooms), especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not entirely clear-cut (Yin, 1994). For another, since no existing knowledge or hypotheses of note could be drawn from the available literature, in line with this, we consider this study appropriate for the exploratory phrase of such investigation. This study aims to address the following research questions:
1. How do experienced EFL teachers in a Chinese university provide comments on students' oral presentations with regard to their mode, function, and focus?
2. What is the nature of these teachers' comments on students' oral presentations? Are they feedback-focused or assessment-oriented?

Context and Participants

This study was conducted at a university with multiple disciplines and located in Shandong—an eastern province of mainland China. In recent years, the EFL instruction in Chinese universities has witnessed a shift from a teacher-dominated to a learner-centred approach and from a focus on linguistic skills to an emphasis on oral communication (Zhou, 2015). Consequently, this university implemented a communicative English curriculum that aimed to enable students to achieve oral communicative abilities and greater learner engagement in their English classroom practice. Oral presentation is included as a common class oral activity in many English-major courses at the university. Teachers assigned oral presentation tasks at the very beginning of each semester (about nineteen academic weeks). Students are then required to make at least three oral presentations during the semester. Topics of these oral presentations were closely related to both students' daily lives and lesson units. Typically, at the beginning of the classes, students used PowerPoint to deliver their presentations individually or in pairs/groups, which were followed by teacher comments on their performance. This oral task (including teachers' comments) lasted for about 15-30 minutes (i.e. a quarter of the class time).

Since this study was also situated in the wider Chinese sociocultural context, it is also important to note that the Chinese culture of learning, such as the maintenance of "face" and group harmony could influence the Chinese EFL teachers' teaching beliefs and practices in class. The Chinese concept of "face" (*mianzi*) is characterized by a sense of self-image and self-dignity, emphasizing "the harmony of individual conduct with views and judgements of the community" (Liu, 2001, p. 205). As a result, many Chinese tend to compromise and avoid conflicts, thus refraining from giving critical remarks out of "other-face concern" (Triandis, 1995, p. 118). We assumed that the Chinese cultural background may have a vital role to play in understanding the Chinese EFL teachers' comments on students' oral presentations.

Three experienced EFL teachers were selected to participate in this study: Liu (male), Sun (female) and Wang (female) (all pseudonyms). The teachers were recruited through the personal contacts of the first researcher who had obtained her MA degree in applied linguistics at this university. The participants were selected because they were all experienced teachers with teaching experience ranging from 11 to 27

years, and they regularly used oral presentations as oral tasks in their respective courses. Table 1 shows their background information. The participants were all academic staff in the Department of English. Liu and Sun had master's degrees in Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, whereas Wang had a master's degree in English literature. When the study was conducted, Sun taught the sophomore English majors *Communicative English*, whereas Wang and Liu taught the junior English majors *Classroom Audio-Video Course* and *Advanced English*, respectively. According to the department's English programme handbook, these three courses were the core and compulsory courses offered to undergraduate English majors. Specifically, both *Communicative English* and *Advanced English* were integrated courses centering on the development of English skills. *Communicative English* was run at the intermediate level and focused on cultivating students' communicative competence, especially their oral skills, whereas *Advanced English* was run at the advanced level and designed to train students' comprehensive English skills, especially in reading comprehension, rhetoric and writing. The *Classroom Audio-Video Course* focused on highlighting ways of integrating multimedia into instruction and aimed to improve students' listening comprehension skills and cross-cultural communicative capability, as well as to share their experiences via these new technologies. As the course instructor, Wang assigned oral presentation tasks for the purpose of "providing participants an opportunity to discuss their interests in using both video and audio technologies" (interview with Wang). Overall, these courses played important roles in developing Chinese EFL students' English proficiency and helping them move towards a near-native level of English. As these three teachers were veteran teachers responsible for designing course syllabuses, it provides us a better understanding of how oral presentation tasks were assigned and commented on by experienced EFL teachers.

Table 1

Profiles of the Teacher Participants

Name	Gender	Age	Teaching experience	Courses	Educational background
Liu	Male	44	19 years	Advanced English	MA in Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics
Sun	Female	52	27 years	Communi-cative English	MA in Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics
Wang	Female	37	11 years	Classroom Audio-Video Course	MA in English Literature

For the purposes of data triangulation, three students were selected to take part in the study: Elena (female), Pansy (female) and Oliver (male) (all pseudonyms), who were all junior undergraduates majoring in English and had more than 10 years of EFL learning experience. The three students were in the same class and had been or were currently being taught by the three case teachers, thus being quite familiar with the teacher participants' commentary practices. The students' demographic information is presented in Table 2. Based on the grades of a national test for university English major undergraduates (Test for English Majors-Grade Four), Elena (Excellent) and Pansy (Good) had an upper intermediate level of English proficiency, and Oliver (Acceptable) had a lower intermediate level.

Table 2

Demographic Information of the Student Participants

Name	Gender	Age	English learning experience	Language proficiency
Elena	Female	21	10 years	Upper intermediate
Pansy	Female	20	13 years	Upper intermediate
Oliver	Male	21	11 years	Lower intermediate

Data Collection and Analysis

This study draws on qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews with teachers and students. After informing the teachers and students of the objectives of this study, all of them agreed to participate in this study and gave consent for us to use the data. The interviews with teachers lasted one to two hours. During the interviews, the teachers reflected on their commentary approaches in their respective courses and explained their beliefs and concerns while making comments on oral presentations. The three students were also interviewed individually for about one hour to seek information on the teachers' commentary practices based on their experiences in making oral presentations. It should be particularly noted that the teachers' commentary practices were explored through self-accounted narratives, which may not truly reflect the teachers' feedback behaviours. Although all the participants were originally expected to be interviewed in English, they had a strong desire to express themselves in their native language of Chinese. Therefore, to facilitate better communication, all interviews were conducted in Chinese (see the Appendix for the English translation of the interview guide) and audio-recorded.

The data analysis mainly involved the full transcription and coding of the interview data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Specifically, to answer the first research question, the mode, function and focus of teacher comments were identified referring to the frameworks proposed by F. Hyland and K. Hyland (2001), and Hattie and Timperley (2007), with the triangulation of student interviews where necessary. To determine the nature of teacher comments, the defining characteristics of the feedback-focused and assessment-oriented comments summarised in

Section 2.2 were used in analysing teacher interview transcripts. To make the analyses of teacher interview data as reliable as possible, triangulation of student interviews was used as a way of cross-checking. Moreover, given that subjectivity was inevitably involved in interpreting the qualitative data, the preliminary findings were sent by e-mail to teacher and student interviewees for member-checking to minimise misinterpretation and further enhance the reliability of the research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of this study by addressing each of the two research questions, also providing reasons to explain the teachers' rationales behind their commentary practices based on the data collected.

The Teachers' Commentary on Oral Presentations

Delivery mode of teacher commentary. As Table 3 shows, the three teachers all delivered their comments in the oral mode because they perceived that the task of oral presentation better lent itself to oral comments. Also, Liu and Wang also provided students with handwritten and computer-mediated comments outside of class, respectively, because they felt that they could not deliver comprehensive comments at length to the students. For example, Liu asked students to hand in their printed PPT slides on which he gave scores and wrote specific comments:

> I also write comments on the print formats of PPT slides and hope that students will read and reflect on my comments after class. Realistically, I cannot comment that much, and even if I do, it would affect the prescribed curriculum of each lesson. By writing comments, I can have more time to provide constructive suggestions to students. (Teacher interview with Liu)

Wang mentioned that making comments was a quite demanding job; therefore, she attempted to supplement her oral comments with computer-mediated comments, i.e. she used the on-line chat room on QQ (i.e., a Chinese instant messaging program) to leave messages to students, mainly pointing out room for future improvement:

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> It is not easy to respond exactly within such a short period. So I usually make a general comment in class and leave students messages by using the on-line chat room of QQ. Students and I are QQ friends. I send them messages after class and tell them what needs improving in detail. I also give them suggestions that they can use to make changes. (Teacher interview with Wang)

The benefits evident in Wang's computer-mediated comments were voiced by the student participants. For example, one advantage of Wang using QQ to deliver her comments was that students had opportunities to reflect upon the comments and communicate their ideas with teachers at their own pace:

> Leaving massages through QQ helps me to ponder over what the teacher said. It is good for idea building. I do not have to respond to my teacher immediately. I can take my time and rehearse my response to the teacher. (Student interview with Elena)

The interviews and comments from Pansy and Oliver suggested that computer-mediated comments were more personal distant than face-to-face oral feedback. Just as Oliver remarked, "As the only feedback-receiver, I get to see what the teacher commented on. If it is something bad, none but I know the comments." (Student interview with Oliver)

The teachers mentioned that oral presentation was only one regular part of classroom instruction and they had a packed curriculum and syllabus to teach in every class. It is reasonable to assume that the rather limited amount of time may result in Liu's handwritten comments and Wang's computer-mediated comments accompanying their in-class verbal feedback.

Table 3

Teacher Commentary on Oral Presentation

Category	Subcategory	Teacher participants		
		Liu	Sun	Wang
Delivery Mode	Oral	√	√	√
	Hand-written	√		
	Computer-mediated			√
Focus	Task	√	√	√
	Process		√	√
	Self-regulation	√	√	
	Self			
	Praise	√	√	√
Function	Criticism		√	
	Suggestion	√	√	√

Focus of teacher commentary. When commenting on oral presentations, as Table 3 shows, we found that there were three levels at which teacher comments operated. These included the level of oral presentation task performance (i.e., how well an oral presentation task was performed), the level of process underlying an oral presentation task (i.e. how to do an oral presentation task), and the level of self-regulation (i.e. students' monitoring, directing and regulating of actions). For instance, at the task level, Sun paid attention to students' written mistakes on PPT slides and commented on students' overall presentations. Liu emphasized the topics and contents of presentations and Wang focused on word pronunciation. Wang said:

> I pay close attention to students' precise pronunciation of English words in case they sound too "Chinglish". (Teacher interview with Wang)

The analysis of interview data also showed that Sun and Wang provided comments at the process level (FP). Sun intended her comments to suggest alternative steps if she were to deliver the oral presentation, stating:

> If I were standing in your shoes, I would have arranged my presentation in a clearer way: presenting the topic, raising questions,

addressing the topic, inviting discussions, and making a summary. (Teacher interview with Sun)

Wang gave discourse strategies such as the appropriate use of tone and intonation to help students reach the expected communication effects. Both Sun's and Wang's comments on alternative strategies proved to be useful based on Pansy and Oliver's reflections in the interviews:

> The presentation strategies Mrs. Sun proposed and emphasized are very useful. Every time when I am going to make a presentation, I will think of these strategies and then structure my own presentation. I think I adopt them quite subtly and naturally. (Student interview with Oliver)

> I used to use one tone in my speech. It's emotionless. But, Mrs Wang encouraged me to do some repetition practices by listening to how actors in the American TV series delivered their lines and then read aloud. (Student interview with Pansy)

In addition, Sun and Liu also made comments at the self-regulation level. They intended their comments to encourage students to take responsibility for their own work and learning. Sun stated that her comments were sometimes accompanied with questions to stimulate students to self-assess their strengths and weaknesses. She explained the purpose of this practice was to introduce students to self-reflection. Liu stated that his self-regulation related comments were formulated to develop students' self-efficacy by drawing connections between students' current language learning and their intentional efforts. Liu provided a vivid example in the quote below:

> A student once made a presentation about the distribution of well-known German enterprises… I believed his topic did not adequately arouse other students' interest. I asked him why he chose this topic and whether there were other perspectives…after several days, the student reported again and his topic changed to the culture of well-known German enterprises. This time he was loudly applauded. (Teacher interview with Liu)

When asked why they provided process-related and self-regulation-related comments, the three teachers said they believed the importance of "Teaching them how to fish and they eat for a lifetime" (授人以魚不如授人以漁), in the words of Sun. Sun further added that:

> This is in line with the communicative teaching approach which emphasises learner-centeredness and communicative competence. As long as they are not passive information takers, they will get their own thinking started. (Teacher interview with Sun)

For Wang and Liu, their commentary practices also largely hinged on the type of English course they were teaching, which could possibly explain why Wang's comments focused on the process level while Liu's comments focused on students' self-regulation. Wang mentioned that the *Classroom Audio-Video Course* was skill-oriented because it combined English listening and speaking. Wang believed that students need to be able to transform their basic language knowledge into skills. Therefore, her comments focused on how to approach the language task of oral presentation with the acknowledged learning and discourse strategies. Liu's comments on self-regulation were closely associated with his belief that language learning also occurred outside the formal classroom environment:

> At this university, *Advanced English* is a very important course for undergraduates in the junior and senior years. It includes sections on reading, writing, speaking and translating…The mere classroom instruction is not enough. Students have to learn and practice after class. (Teacher interview with Liu)

Interestingly, during the interviews, none of the teachers said that they made comments at the level of the students themselves (FS). Lack of information was put forward as a reason to explain why the teachers did not make personal comments. They believed that comments should be informative and specifically related to learning improvement. As Wang explicitly stated:

> The comments should focus on the learning, not the students. It is a learning process rather than a process of praising or criticising the student as an individual. (Teacher interview with Wang)

Function of teacher commentary. In addition to the mode and focus of teacher comments, the interview data showed that the teachers regarded praise as the primary function of their comments, considering encouragement as a major strategy when they made comments. Typically, the teachers gave compliments to students by identifying their merits and strengths, and therefore most of their comments were positively formulated and related to outstanding presentation performance. They

conceived encouragement as beneficial in enhancing self-confidence and building a positive classroom climate. It appeared that they had great expectations of using positive comments to increase students' sense of accomplishment. This is probably due to their beliefs about the positive effects of teacher feedback and may explain the use of praise in their commentary practices. As Sun stated in the interview:

> What students need is positive encouragement to foster their confidence. Praise should prevail in our comments because of its positive influence on learning. Negative comments can only damage students' learning motivation and enthusiasm. (Teacher interview with Sun)

Although Sun identified what the students had done well in most cases, she also described her commentary practices as a combination of criticism and suggestion. On the one hand, Sun criticized simple mistakes made by her students. On the other hand, she offered insights into how to improve current performance with presentation strategies:

> When the presenting student performs poorly, for example, lots of misspellings on the PPT slide. Under such circumstances, I talk to them in a serious manner and say "You should avoid such simple mistakes". It is the attitude that matters… But typically, I do not criticise too much. I like giving strategies to students… (Teacher interview with Sun)

In the interviews, Liu and Wang stated that they also drew on the similar functions of praise. However, Liu held a rather conservative attitude toward praise by claiming that teachers should not give too much generic praise, as they might run the risk of not conveying genuine encouragement. In his commentary practices, Liu used peer models to encourage students to learn from each other and depicted this strategy as the "demonstration effect". Moreover, Liu and Wang considered suggestion to be a viable option for criticism, as this meant the students were more aware of what they were bad at than how to improve their learning and performance. Liu said that he seldom corrected language errors or made negative comments, as there was no right or wrong way of delivering the presentation tasks. Wang shared a similar vision in offering advice to students. She believed that suggestions were informative and thus guided the students' learning progress.

Another possible reason why Liu and Wang preferred not to

criticize student performance was their concerns of the emotional effect of criticism on students' initiative and self-confidence. In their opinion, suggestions were more constructive and less hurtful. This is particularly true when we take into account the Chinese learning culture. When interviewed, all three teachers said that they knew the vast majority of undergraduates are Chinese in this university. Also, the teachers are all born, raised and educated in the province of Shandong where the Chinese cultural traditions (especially Confucianism) are deeply rooted. Because most of their comments were delivered through face-to-face interaction, the teachers particularly highlighted the necessity of maintaining a sense of indirectness to preserve the students' face (*mianzi*). For example, Liu stated that he usually attended to students' feelings and attributed the lack of critical comments to the face-saving issue:

> I know some students are very introverted, especially the female students. They care much about the teacher's comments. If the comments are too acute, even a bit negative in public, they will feel blue or even lose face. (Teacher interview with Liu)

Wang also referred to the importance of face (*mianzi*) and the need for lessening language anxiety and maintaining harmonious teacher-student relations:

> Actually, it is hard to tell student presenters negative things quite frankly in class… I need to save their public self-image and build good rapport with them. A good relationship may contribute to great learning enthusiasm. (Teacher interview with Wang)

In this regard, this avoidance of face-threatening policy, students' emotional status and teachers' commentary practices are therefore interrelated. As confirmed in the student interviews, the teachers' comments were indeed characterized by the above three functions but focused on praise and suggestion. For example, Elena and Pansy stated:

> The teachers often give me a lot of praise, which makes me feel recognised and confident… (Student interview with Elena)

> These teachers rarely criticise me in front of my classmates. Instead, I receive a lot of suggestions from both the teachers and my classmate peers. (Student interview with Pansy)

To sum up, to answer the first research question about the teachers' practices of providing comments on tasks of oral presentations, the

findings show that the three teachers diversified their comments in terms of mode, focus and function, which could be influenced by the educational and sociocultural context in China. Results suggest that the three teachers provided oral comments to students. However, other forms of feedback provided (by Liu and Wang) included hand-written and computer-mediated comments. Moreover, the three teachers focused on a variety of aspects of students' oral presentation performance, but they had one thing in common: the belief that it is important to give feedback about how well a presentation task is being performed (FT). Praise and suggestion were the most frequently used functions in the comments of these three teachers. In the next section we move on to reveal the nature of the three teachers' comments on oral presentations.

Nature of Teacher Commentary

Based on the criteria for feedback and assessment summarized in section 2.2, the data analysis revealed that the three experienced teachers primarily provided feedback-focused comments on oral presentations. To begin with, all three teachers claimed that oral presentations were not used as assessment tasks compared with end-of-term examinations. Sun and Wang mentioned that they did not use any assessment forms, scoring rubrics or report cards when they made comments. Instead, they gave the students many opportunities to receive feedback without grades being involved. That is to say, the teachers' pedagogical purpose was not to assess student presentation performance. For instance, Wang challenged the use of assessment tools in her commentary practices partly because an evaluative atmosphere in the classroom was detrimental to students' emotional well-being:

> In my opinion, grades and scores intensify students' anxiety and stress, especially when they do not perform adequately in the task. In the long run, they may lose confidence and interest in learning English. (Teacher interview with Wang)

Liu explicitly stated that the essential purpose of his comments was to provide 'feedback' to help the students reach the expected standards in terms of their performance. However, Liu also gave scores to students, which appeared to be more assessment-oriented. He explained his purpose as follows:

> The scores only "count" as a small proportion toward the final

> grades of this course. Generally students care much about their grades. I think grading is useful. It encourages students to be more committed to this task. (Teacher interview with Liu)

The three teachers also attempted to frame their comments as feedback relative to setting learning goals and standards, identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses and giving useful suggestions for learning and task improvement. For instance, Sun and Liu mentioned that they sometimes told students what good oral presentations were like, which implied goal-setting information. Wang made clear her expected standards through leaving QQ messages and described her comments as learning guidelines with an illustrated example:

> A student once had difficulties in delivering her oral reports because she was quite shy. I tell her practice makes perfect and she can watch some on-line videos, like TED talks, observe how those speakers perform, and then simply rehearse her own delivery process through several rounds of practice. (Teacher interview with Wang)

The students confirmed the positive influence of the three teachers' feedback-focused comments on their knowledge of English language, oral skills and self-confidence:

> I get to know more new English words and phrases and how to use them in different linguistic contexts. (Student interview with Elena)

> I used to speak fast when I got nervous and Mrs Wang told me I need to slow down my speaking speed so that others can hear me clearly. Adopting this communication skill, I have more confidence in speaking. And my classmates reflect that they can understand me better. (Student interview with Oliver)

Overall, the three teachers' comments were feedback-focused in terms of providing goal-setting information and information about performance related presentation tasks. More importantly, the comments were given to inform and guide the students toward closing the gap between what they had currently achieved and what should be the case in the future. As revealed by the interview data, the three teachers expressed the belief that their comments can facilitate students' oral language learning and presentation performance. This belief possibly explains why the three teachers gave feedback-focused comments. As Wang said:

> The comments act as a director to guide students' oral English

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development, and like general guides to inform students of the steps to be taken toward future improvement of presentation performance. (Teacher interview with Wang)

To sum up, the findings show that teacher comments in this study were largely feedback-focused rather than assessment-oriented, primarily serving the purpose of using feedback as a pedagogical tool for improving students' English learning and oral presentation performance.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study illustrate the diversity of experienced EFL teachers' commentary practices with respect to the delivery mode, focus and function, shedding light on the possible causes of such teacher commentary. The findings of Liu's and Wang's out-of-class comments suggest that the teachers attempted to create other feedback mechanisms (apart from oral commentary) through which students can communicate when they were not face-to-face with the teachers. Concerning the insufficiency of in-class teacher oral comments, this study provides evidence about the benefits of using electronic feedback and technology in EFL learning (Barrs, 2012; Evans, 2008).

While previous studies by Arts, Jaspers and Brinke (2016) and Orsmond and Merry (2011) reported that teachers mainly focused on the task level in the context of higher education, the finding in this study indicates that the three experienced EFL teachers also paid much attention to the processes of how to perform oral presentations and students' self-regulated English learning. That is to say, the three EFL teachers in our study encouraged the acquisition of presentation strategies and oral skills as well as personal development of students. Their comments on student oral presentations were therefore both product-focused (task) and process-oriented (process and self-regulation). It can be attributed to the fact that the objective of College English in China nowadays is "to develop students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 2). Furthermore, in this study, we used Hattie and Timperley's (2007) theoretical model to categorize four types of teacher comments: comments on the level of task, the level of process, the level of self-regulation, and the level of self. From the literature, Hattie and Timperley (2007) differentiated the potential effects in terms of the level

at which feedback is directed. Yet, since no analysis of whether teacher comments were used for future learning and performance by the students, it is doubtful that these comments can create a learning effect. As follow-up research, it would be valuable to look into student use of these four types of teacher comments.

In analysing the function of teacher comments, this study adopted Hyland and Hyland's (2001) theoretical framework. From the interview data, it may be concluded that the three functions (praise, criticism and suggestion) carried very different pragmatic forces. However, while this categorisation scheme is perhaps descriptively useful in this study, it remains unclear about the acts and strategies (such as hedging devices) that are used to achieve these functions, as described in their study by Hyland and Hyland (2001). Therefore, more textual data are needed to examine the patterns of language use in the teacher comments on students' oral presentations.

The finding that the three teachers considered praise and suggestion as the main functions of their comments on oral presentations indicates the intriguing possibility of positive teaching that praise is far more effective than punishment in the Chinese context. The three teachers in our study interacted with students in a typical classroom setting where comments were delivered not only face-to-face but also in front of the whole class, and therefore they participated in a shared learning environment (i.e. Chinese context and the same classroom) of interpreting feedback. In particular, this unique situational classroom environment calls for the teachers' consideration of "face-saving" in the wider context of Chinese culture, thus resulting in the teachers' indirectness in criticizing student performance. Notably, however, although the three Chinese EFL teachers perceived the value of beneficial praise, the literature suggests that praise can indicate lower expectations in the German context (Möller, 2005) and that criticism is not necessarily detrimental to student learning when provided constructively in New Zealand ESL classrooms (Hyland & Hyland, 2001).

In this study, the teachers' commentary practices were situated within a decision-making framework of giving feedback rather than making summative assessments, and therefore differed from other EFL teachers' evaluation practices of giving letter grades (e.g., Cheng & Warren, 2005; Saito, 2008). This finding is not difficult to understand because the teachers attempted to support students through rounds of oral presentations by suggesting task improvements throughout the

academic semester. In this regard, the teachers' feedback-focused comments have potential to provide students with opportunities to practice their oral skills, develop oral presentation competence, and eventually become qualified orators in English. Moreover, given that Liu's grading practices reflected the motivational needs to build students' self-efficacy in dealing with feedback and therefore may indirectly support the argument that any information (i.e. feedback) given with the aim of closing the gap can be considered an essential part of formative assessment (Wiliam, 2011). Furthermore, since we did not conduct a quantitative analysis of the teacher commentary texts, it remains unclear about the proportion of feedback- and assessment-oriented teacher comments on oral presentations, pointing a need for further investigation in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

This study investigates three experienced EFL teachers' commentary practices in oral presentation tasks, as well as the nature of provided comments in a Chinese context. This exploratory paper contributes to the literature and pedagogy in two dimensions. First, unlike previous studies (e.g., Murillo-Zamorano & Montanero, 2017; Van Ginkelet al., 2015, 2017) taking a quasi-experimental design, this qualitative case study provides empirical evidence about the underlying processes of which teachers provide comments on oral presentations without the intervention of researchers. Research focusing on analyses of feedback processes is necessary, since these are considered essential in fostering students' oral presentation performance (Van Ginkel et al., 2017). Second, this study provides useful insights into how teachers formulate their comments on oral presentations, although the commentary approach adopted by the three experienced teachers in the study may not be relevant to all teachers in other EFL or similar contexts. For instance, teachers can supplement verbal comments with computer-assisted feedback to give students reflection and response time, using e-mails and social communication apps like WeChat in flexible ways. Besides, when deciding what to say in their comments, teachers need to give students feedback information about how they approach their oral presentations, as well as to develop students' willingness to seek and engage with feedback. In this regard, teachers can perhaps organize whole-class feedback sessions to teach students how to use the

provided feedback in improving future presentation tasks. Finally, according to Smith and Sodano (2011), oral presentation is viewed as the most prevalent fear that some individuals experience, and teachers' blunt criticism runs the risk of threatening the "face" of Chinese students. As the three experienced EFL teachers in this study were largely aware of the Chinese culture of learning, teachers can phrase their critical comments into suggestions that mitigate the criticism and therefore are less hurtful to Chinese students when they present.

The discussion of this paper should make it clear that this study is at the exploratory stage of a large research project and is not without limitations. The primary limitation concerns the unitary data sources of teacher and student interviews, which mainly project the teachers and students' beliefs rather than accurately reflecting their commentary behaviour. While the teachers in the study described their commentary experiences (based on their memory), it is not certain whether they are real practices, and whether mismatches if any, exist between self-reports and real commentary practices. To overcome this methodological flaw, multiple sources of data, including samples of teacher comments and in-class observations need to be included so as to conduct detailed text analyses of teacher comments on oral presentations. Building upon the current study, future research can explore the cultural issues involved when teachers provide comments on oral presentations. While the present study focuses on Chinese EFL teachers and students, differences among teachers of different cultural backgrounds, for instance from the US where directness is more common can be explored. Moreover, future research could also investigate novice EFL teachers' comments on oral presentations because research suggests that novice teachers differ from experienced teachers with respect to their cognition of language teaching in general and oral feedback practices in particular (Rahimi & Zhang, 2015). Last but not least, future studies could also examine and compare the use of other sources of feedback (e.g., peer feedback) with teacher feedback on oral presentations in a naturalistic EFL classroom setting. Such investigations are meaningful in that more fine-tuned pedagogical implications can be drawn for teachers intending to adopt peers in feedback processes and the improvement of oral presentation performance.

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APPENDIX

Interview Guide

Interview with teachers

1. Please talk about your experiences of teaching EFL in brief.
2. What do you think of the purpose of oral presentation in your classroom instruction?
3. Please describe and explain how you comment on students' oral presentations.
4. What aspects of students' oral presentations do you focus on while making comments? Why?
5. Have you ever shifted the way and focus of your comments? If yes, describe and explain these changes.
6. What is your purpose of giving comments on the students' oral presentations? Why?
7. How do you perceive the role of your comments on the students' language learning and oral presentation performance? Why?
8. Do you mark or score students after their oral presentations? If yes/not, in what situations do you decide to give or not to give grades/scores? Why?
9. What particular strategies/methods, if any, do you use in giving comments on the oral presentations? Describe and explain your strategies.
10. What concerns or problems, if any, do you have in giving comments on the oral presentations? Why?
11. What do you expect the students to do after your commentary?

Interview with students

1. Please talk about your EFL learning experiences in brief.
2. In your opinion, what is the purpose of making oral presentations in the classroom? What do you want to show by your oral presentations?
3. Do you always get comments from the teachers after your oral presentations?
4. What types of comments do you usually get from your teachers? Please give some examples.
5. What aspects do the teachers usually focus on while commenting on your oral presentations?
6. How do you feel when you received the teachers' comments?
7. What do you think of the teachers' comments on your oral presentation? Do you find the comments useful? Why or why not?
8. How do the teachers' comments influence your language learning and oral presentation? Please give some examples.

英語課堂中口頭彙報任務的教師點評——
一項基於中國大陸的探索性個案研究

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大多數實驗研究表明教師的評估和回饋能夠促進學生口頭彙報的表現，但這種研究現象致使我們對教師回饋的過程缺乏理解。本研究以三名教學經驗豐富的中國大學英語教師為個案，運用半結構式訪談，探索在自然條件下的英語課堂，教師採用點評方式對學生口頭彙報進行回饋的本質和過程。資料分析結果表明，三名教師點評的本質在於給予學生回饋而非評估學生表現。另外，結果也表明受多種因素影響，三名教師的點評方式、焦點和功能各不相同。最後本文對教師回饋實踐和後續研究提出一些可行性建議。

關鍵詞：點評、教師回饋、英語課堂口頭彙報任務