

Teacher Feedback and Willingness to Communicate: A Qualitative Analysis of First-Year English Undergraduates in Pakistani Universities

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Abstract

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Willingness to communicate (WTC) refers to a learner's readiness to initiate communication when an opportunity arises and is a central construct in second-language acquisition. Teacher feedback may shape this readiness by influencing learners' confidence, anxiety, and perceptions of classroom safety. This qualitative case study examined how first-year English undergraduates in one public and one private Pakistani university perceived the influence of positive, corrective, and encouraging teacher feedback on their WTC in English. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions with 50 purposively selected students and analysed thematically. Participants generally described positive, effort-focused feedback as supportive of confidence and classroom participation. They described corrective feedback as context dependent: private and sensitively delivered correction was often experienced as helpful, whereas harsh or public correction was associated with embarrassment, anxiety, and withdrawal. Teacher approachability, classroom climate, and peer presence also shaped how feedback was interpreted. The findings indicate that feedback in the studied settings functioned not only as pedagogical information but also as an affective and relational signal. The article recommends feedback practices that preserve accuracy while supporting learners' psychological safety and communicative risk-taking.

Keywords: willingness to communicate; teacher feedback; corrective feedback; classroom psychological safety; English as a second language; higher education; Pakistan



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1. INTRODUCTION

For many first-year undergraduates, using English at university is both a linguistic and an emotional challenge. Willingness to communicate (WTC) is influenced not only by second-language competence but also by situational and affective conditions in the classroom (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Teacher feedback is especially important because students may interpret it simultaneously as guidance about language performance and as a social evaluation of their competence, status, and right to participate.

In Pakistani higher education, English may be taught as a subject and used as a medium of instruction. Feedback can therefore carry consequences beyond the correction of an isolated language form. It may support confidence and engagement, or it may intensify anxiety and silence, depending on its content, timing, tone, and public or private delivery. Mansoor (2005) similarly shows that English in Pakistani higher education relates to broader educational and social meanings. A context-sensitive account of feedback is therefore needed to explain why some students participate readily while others avoid speaking.

This article reports one component of a larger qualitative case study of pedagogical, affective, and environmental influences on the WTC of first-year English undergraduates. It focuses specifically on students' perceptions of teacher feedback.

1.1. Research Objectives

The general study had five goals and the goal that was most directly met in this article was:

To examine how first-year students' level of confidence and interest in and willingness to speak English is influenced by different types of teacher feedback (positive reinforcement, corrective/remedial feedback and motivational commentary), and to determine the role of teacher feedback in overcoming communication anxiety in the first-year students or reinforcing it.

To achieve this goal, the article also adopts the related goals of finding out which instructional practices inadvertently hinder student participation in the classroom and of identifying practical ways of restructuring feedback delivery to create a more inclusive and communicative classroom.

1.2. Research Questions

How do first-year English undergraduates perceive the influence of positive, corrective, and encouraging teacher feedback on their willingness to communicate in English?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

WTC was initially conceptualised as a situational readiness to enter discourse at a particular time with particular interlocutors (MacIntyre et al., 1998). The model positions communication behaviour at the outcome of interacting linguistic, motivational, interpersonal, and contextual influences. From this perspective, classroom feedback may affect WTC by shaping linguistic self-confidence, communication anxiety, motivation, and the learner's immediate appraisal of the speaking situation.

Teacher feedback is not limited to the transmission of correct forms. Learners also interpret its tone, timing, focus, and interpersonal meaning. Encouragement and acknowledgement of effort may strengthen self-efficacy and normalise error as part of learning. Corrective feedback, however, may be experienced differently across learners and contexts. When delivered supportively, it may help learners improve accuracy without interrupting participation; when delivered harshly or publicly, it may heighten fear of negative evaluation and discourage further communication.

These processes are closely related to classroom psychological safety: the extent to which learners perceive that they can take interpersonal risks, make mistakes, and contribute without humiliation. Teacher patience, approachability, and consistency may therefore influence whether corrective feedback is interpreted as assistance or threat. Peer presence is also relevant because

public praise may validate some learners, whereas public correction may expose others to embarrassment or anticipated ridicule.

The present study uses WTC as an interpretive framework for examining how students connect feedback experiences with confidence, anxiety, and participation. It also attends to the relational and institutional conditions through which feedback acquires meaning.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

The parent study was a qualitative case study, which was chosen because it was able to provide detailed, context-rich descriptions of participants' lived experiences of classroom communication (Yin, 2018). As a construct rooted in feeling, perception and situated interaction, rather than measurable performance, a case study approach was considered more appropriate for the study than a quantitative or hypothesis-testing design, and more suited to the study's aims than other qualitative traditions like phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory.

3.2. Research Setting and Participants

In this study, the English Language and Literature Departments of a government and private university were carefully selected to reflect the contrast between the more traditional (teacher-centred) pedagogies reported from government and the more interactive (student-centred) pedagogies reported from private universities. The sample consisted of purposively selected first-year, first-semester English-medium undergraduate students, because they are an early, formative phase in their communicative development, before they have been exposed to the norms of university-level instruction in English. Thematic saturation, as opposed to numerical representativeness, was the guiding principle of the study, and a total of 50 students were involved in the two institutional settings.

3.3. Data Collection Tools

Two complementary qualitative instruments were used to gather data, both of which were formulated around the cognitive, affective and situational constructs of MacIntyre et al.'s (1998) WTC model:

- Semi-structured interviews (30-45 minutes) were conducted and audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim (with consent) to explore individual students' linguistic self-confidence, classroom anxiety, experiences of teacher feedback, and perceived comfort in communicative situations.
- Focus group discussions (4-6 people, 60-75 minutes) — to elicit socially constructed and peer-mediated aspects of communicative behaviour such as how feedback was received and understood in the presence of peers in class.

Data from two sources was used to triangulate the methodology which enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the themes (Nowell et al., 2017; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

3.3. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was adopted to analyse the data as it was deemed to be suitable for uncovering patterns in subjectively experienced, socially situated accounts of experience, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). The transcripts of interviews and focus groups were read repeatedly for familiarisation and then systematically coded for conceptualisation of the following constructs: teacher feedback, emotional response, anxiety, self-confidence, motivation, communicative opportunity. The codes were reviewed and organized iteratively into conceptually related categories that correspond to the study's research questions and objectives (Saldaña, 2021) and cross-checked between the interview and focus group data to further highlight additional nuances and themes within the data.

4. FINDINGS

The data resulted in feedback, not in a one-dimensional and uniform effect on WTC, but in multidimensional feedback that is dependent on the valence (positive versus corrective), the timing, the privacy, and the wider relational and institutional context of the feedback. The following four themes are reported: Positive feedback, Corrective feedback, Teacher attitude and Peer observation.

4.1. Positive and Constructive Feedback

Praise, encouragement and recognition of effort were seen as the most consistent method of teacher response to strengthen and build confidence. Students who had been given feedback focusing on effort and strengths and not on others' public comments about mistakes, expressed more confidence and took greater risks with communication. Any recognition, an acknowledgment "good try" or "interesting view," etc., etc., were reported as having a cumulative motivational effect.

This pattern was more evident for the private university participants, who indicated that they received a lot of positive feedback that was even steady, than for the government university participants, who reported less but more when present, positive feedback.

Table 1

Positive Feedback and Student Response by University Type

University Type	Frequency Reported	Perceived Effect on WTC
Private University	22 of 25 participants	High — actively motivates participation
Government University	12 of 25 participants	Medium — encourages occasional participation

Participants also linked positive feedback to a growth mindset on error: when they felt their errors were part of the learning process, they reported increased willingness to risk longer utterances, unfamiliar words, and more argumentative and complex forms of spoken English.

4.2. Corrective Feedback: A Bidirectional Effect

Although corrective feedback is generally found to have a positive impact on WTC, it is not a uniform effect but rather depends almost solely on the way, where and in what tone such feedback is given. Personal, gentle, and administered privately correction was illustrated as supportive and not threatening, reporting that students were able to absorb the correction and resume speaking with their confidence intact. In contrast, harsh, public, and critical correction was correlated with embarrassment, anxiety, and fear of peer judgment, especially in large lecture courses at universities that were provided by the government. These students reported using avoidance behaviors like minimal responding, extended silence, or using their first language.

Table 2

Corrective Feedback and Emotional Response

Type of Correction	University Type	Emotional Response	Effect on WTC
Private, personal correction	Private	Awareness, calm engagement	Sustained or improved
Gentle, coaching correction	Government	Learning, moderate confidence	Slight improvement
Harsh, public correction	Private	Anxiety, fear of judgment	Reduced
Harsh, public correction	Government	Embarrassment, stress	Strongly reduced

For participants, repeated exposure to harsh or public correction was correlated with a cumulative, rather than just an instant, effect: sustained apprehension that was carried over to the next lesson and activity (after the initial corrective time). This moderation was influenced by the classroom climate or culture about error; in interactive, English-immersive classrooms, even direct error correction was accepted with greater ease, while in teacher-centred and code-switched classrooms, even direct error correction was likely to cause anxiety or withdrawal.

4.3. Teacher Attitude and Interpersonal Climate

Feedback was always read as the teacher was delivering it. The perception of teacher approachability, patience and empathy was associated with participants' willingness to speak. Those teachers who were described as calm and supportive were given credit for fostering an environment that was psychologically safe for students to make errors and to try long answers, ask questions and engage in discussion. Regardless of the nature of feedback provided, the more teachers were described as strict, impatient, or overly focused on accuracy, the lower the student's WTC was. Students' WTC decreased when they were perceived by teachers as being strict, impatient, or overly critical when it came to accuracy.

Table 3

Classroom Environment and Teacher Attitude

Teacher Attitude	University Type	Classroom Conditions	Impact on WTC
Fostering / Positive	Private	Inclusive	High participation
Relaxed but Low-Interactive	Government	Neutral	Moderate WTC
Critical / Impatient	Government	Threatening, anxious	Low participation
Strict but Fair	Private	Organized, accommodating	Medium-to-high participation

4.4. The Role of Peer Observation

The next challenge was the addition of peers in the feedback delivery. The overall feedback from the public was to build confidence, especially with the private university participants, who felt validated and socially reinforced when recognized in front of their peers. The effect was more complex in government university environments where some students were made to feel good and others, who had less confidence in themselves or less experience in English, said that they felt exposed or self-conscious when subjected to scrutiny by their peers. Public correction, by contrast, was more closely related to fear of judgment and ridicule than any other situation in both institutional settings and was most strongly associated with withdrawal or lessened participation even for students who knew the correct response in the language.

5. DISCUSSION

Overall, the results confirm and build upon the theoretical stance that feedback in an L2 classroom is an affective and a cognitive input (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; MacIntyre et al., 1998). Positive feedback seems to occur mainly by increasing self-efficacy and normalizing errors as learning tools, thereby decreasing the risk of communicative participation. Corrective feedback, on the other hand, has no fixed valence, meaning that the impact it has on WTC depends on how it is delivered, the privacy it creates, and the relational context, working both as a positive pedagogical tool in favor of accuracy and confidence if the corrective feedback is delivered sensitively, and as a negative pedagogical tool if delivered punitively and publicly, by suppressing participation.

The moderating effect of teacher attitude across both types of feedback indicates that the relational nature of the teacher-student relationship might influence the reception of the specific

feedback, regardless of the content of the feedback. This aligns with Mansoor's (2005) findings that corrective feedback in Pakistani English-medium classrooms can have symbols other than linguistic, and this helps in understanding the different emotional and communicative results of the comparable corrective content across the private sector and government sector universities that were studied here.

The difference in the level of positive feedback and WTC reported by private university students versus those of government university students, as well as the difference in the frequencies of public and corrective feedback reported in large and small classrooms respectively and teacher and student-centred classrooms, suggest structural in addition to individual determinants of communicative engagement. The study implies that feedback reform interventions for improvement of WTC should consider institutional and classroom size constraints as well as teacher disposition when it comes to delivering feedback.

5.1. Pedagogical Implications

The results indicate some practical implications for teaching:

- Support individual student correction or group correction (less confident students) rather than public correction, especially in large teacher-directed classes.
- Pair correction and encouragement – recasts, modelled correction, and peer assisted feedback provide ways to provide feedback on accuracy that will not detract from learner confidence.
- Implement more regular and consistent positive feedback, especially in government universities where its reported frequency was significantly lower, but the perceived benefit was matched.
- Establish a classroom culture where errors are viewed as an integral part of learning, as the same corrective content was heard in very different ways based on the surrounding classroom climate.
- Include aspects of the affective nature of feedback delivery, such as tone, timing, privacy, and relationship building, in teacher training programmes in addition to linguistics and pedagogical knowledge of content.

5.2. Limitations

Like the parent study, results presented here are based on a purposively sampled qualitative data set and are designed to provide rich, context-specific understanding and not to make statistically generalizable conclusions (Patton, 2015). The focus was on self-reported perceptions of feedback and its impact - this is self-reported feedback episodes and not an independent record of teacher behaviour. Classroom observation data in addition to those from interviews and focus groups would help to triangulate the results of this study.

6. CONCLUSION

This article has studied the second research question of a larger qualitative research on classroom determinants of Willingness to Communicate among first year English undergraduates of Pakistan which was the relationship between teacher feedback and students' readiness to speak English. The results suggest that feedback is always a non-linguistic process. Positive, effort-driven feedback regularly increases confidence and participation, corrective feedback can increase confidence and participation, but with care and sensitivity to privacy, tone, and relational contexts; and the effects of both are tempered by teacher attitude and the presence or absence of peer observation. The results of this study highlight that feedback needs to be understood and taught as an affective practice, as well as a pedagogical one, for educators and teacher training programmes who want to create more communicative and less anxious English classrooms.

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