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The Effect of Feedback Styles on Students' Willingness to Communicate in English

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Abstract

This study looks at the effect of instructor directed feedback and peer directed feedback in a university-level English discussion class on students' willingness to communicate in English. Willingness to communicate (WTC) in another language reflects the extent a person will readily use a second language in a variety of contexts and can be influenced by both individual character traits, the social situation, and perceptions of one's own second language ability. Both instructor lead feedback and peer lead feedback can improve students' WTC in a foreign language, and to determine which mode of feedback is best suited to this purpose, an experiment was conducted using groups of first-year English Discussion classes. During regular class periods, either instructor lead feedback sessions or peer lead feedback sessions were conducted across two distinct sets of classes. To evaluate the effectiveness of these feedback styles in improving students' WTC in English, the results of WTC pre-test and post-test surveys were compared across both sets of classes. Results showed that there was no significant improvement in WTC for the group that received instructor lead feedback, while the improvement in WTC for the student lead feedback group was statistically significant. These results suggest that student directed feedback is superior with regards to increasing learners' WTC in English.

Keywords: willingness to communicate, instructor-lead feedback, peer feedback, language learning, experiment

1. Introduction

In language classrooms, active learning and communicative teaching approaches make second-language acquisition student-centered and provide them with opportunities to use the target language in practical and meaningful ways as they engage with one another. Communicative language teaching is effective for improving students' language utilization, spoken fluency, and cognitive abilities (Qasserras, 2023), while active learning has been shown to improve speaking skills (Novita, 2016). These methods often function best when students are eager to engage their classmates during in-class speaking activities that require them to use the target language in practical and meaningful ways. Problems that impede learning and hinder

student progress under these approaches can arise when the students are hesitant to use the target language for a variety of reasons, such as shyness or a perceived lack of proficiency in that language. Within the context of English language education in Japan, there can be a tendency towards silence among Japanese university students in second-language classes (King, 2013), with the use of spoken English shaped by an individual's interest in other cultures, motivation, and confidence (Yashima, 2002). These different elements which determine the extent someone will readily use a second language comprise their Willingness to Communicate (WTC).

MacIntyre et al. (1998) developed a model for WTC which is built around both the potential speaker's innate characteristics, their language abilities, and the social context in which they are using the language. Within a language classroom where communicative teaching and active learning are used as methods of instruction, the higher an individual's WTC in the target language, the more they can benefit from these pedagogical approaches, while those who are reluctant to use the target language will experience fewer gains. Hesitation to use another language occurs for a variety of reasons, including an individual's introversion and self-esteem, as well as belief that one's communicative competence is inadequate (Matsuoka & Evans, 2005). Improving WTC in a second language across different contexts would therefore make communicative teaching and active learning strategies more effective, helping students develop their language skills authentically. Language teachers may not be able to influence students' shyness or their other personal facets, but student self-confidence and belief in their own second language communicative capabilities are malleable and can be ameliorated through instruction, practice, and feedback.

Feedback provides language instructors with the opportunity to increase student self-confidence and improve a student's perception of their second language abilities. With higher confidence and greater conviction in their language skills, students will have increased WTC in the target language. Both learners and teachers can benefit from the feedback process, with students understanding what they can do to improve their performance and teachers being able to reflect on how they can enhance their teaching (Herra & Kulinska, 2018). Feedback comes in many forms, from detailed and individualized written feedback to more general verbal feedback given to a group or class. In language learning classes, proper feedback can help students mend errors in output and gain better fluency. Traditionally, a lot of classroom feedback originates from the language instructor. Teacher verbal and written feedback improves student performance as well as their attitudes towards learning a second language (Patra et al., 2022). However, the effectiveness of teacher feedback can vary depending on the disposition and goals of the students receiving it, with students who want to become proficient in the second language they are learning valuing teacher feedback more and being more likely to follow it (Zhan et al., 2022). Simultaneously, teacher feedback can also have negative consequences. Hartono et al. (2022) found that oral corrective feedback from an instructor can harm student self-confidence and cause fear over making mistakes, while nonetheless still improving student performance and not negatively impacting student speaking output.

Along with feedback coming from a teacher, students can also give each other feedback by carefully considering the language output of their classmates and critiquing it. This can benefit both the student receiving the feedback and the student providing it, with the receiver learning what they should do to improve and the provider reflecting on their own language or skill use as they give their classmates advice. In their study, Janesarvatan and Asoodar (2024) found that students saw peer feedback as beneficial for improving medical communication skills and spoken fluency in a second language. When compared to teacher feedback however, students tend to view peer feedback as less useful, but that giving feedback to classmates helps improve their own language abilities even though the student giving feedback may feel uneasy to do so

(Martin et al., 2021). Nonetheless, those receiving feedback from peers have reported feeling less anxiety in class and had positive views about the course overall as a result of peer feedback activities (Motallebzadeh et al., 2020). Furthermore, peer feedback is also more effective than teacher feedback at increasing students' self-confidence among English second language learners (Feyli & Ayatollahi, 2016). In a study on the effects of peer feedback on language learners' pronunciation, it was found that the more students believed in the benefits of peer feedback, the more their pronunciation improved, highlighting the importance of fostering positive attitudes towards feedback in order to boost its efficacy (Martin & Sippel, 2022). Additionally, training students to give feedback improves the confidence of students when providing feedback to their peers and makes them more willing to do so, but this type of training also has the secondary effect of enhancing the perception of their classmates' competence as feedback providers (Sato, 2013).

While many instructors may be concerned that teacher oral corrective feedback can make students conscious of their mistakes, lower their self-esteem, and cause them to be more reluctant to speak in a foreign language, this is not the case in practice. With instructor feedback helping students improve language output, and the relationship between self-efficacy and self-confidence in a second language (Inagaki, 2022), student WTC can in fact increase as a result of receiving performance-based corrective feedback from their teacher (Sa'adah et al., 2018; Montazeri & Salimi, 2019; Zare et al., 2020). At the same time, peer feedback reduces classroom anxiety surrounding the use of a target language and can improve confidence, both of which play a role in contributing to an individual's WTC in a second language (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Furthermore, when using a rubric, both self-evaluations and peer-evaluations were found to increase the WTC of language learners, but peer-evaluations were found to increase it to a greater extent (Hosseini and Mohamadi, 2015). Structured peer feedback is therefore more useful for improving student WTC than students assessing themselves.

However, for the purposes of improving student WTC in a second language, it is not clear whether peer feedback or instructor directed feedback is more effective. This study therefore aims to determine which feedback style results in greater improvements in student WTC in the target language as well as their overall performance in a university-level English Discussion course.

2. Method

Using convenience sampling, the participants were drawn from the researcher's 12 English Discussion classes during the spring 2023 semester at Rikkyo University in Japan, and each class consisted of between ten and twelve students. Students who dropped out were excluded from the study. Participants were given a pretest survey at the beginning of the semester and a posttest survey at the end of the semester to determine their WTC across a variety of situations. This survey was based on one developed by Gol et al. (2014) that asks students how likely they would communicate across 28 scenarios, with answers ranging from "never" (0 points) to "almost always" (4 points). The point total, ranging from 0 to 112, becomes an individual's WTC score. Results of the pretest survey were compared to those of the posttest to determine the extent an individual's WTC improved over the course of the semester.

English Discussion is a mandatory course that all first-year students at Rikkyo University must take in the 14-week spring semester. To determine which feedback approach was best suited for improving student WTC, the 12 classes were divided into two groups of six before the start of the semester: a teacher-directed feedback group and a peer–directed feedback group. Both the teacher-directed feedback group and the student- directed feedback group contained 64 students across their six classes. Over the 14-week semester, there were 10 normal class

periods of 100 minutes in which students learned, and practiced the use of, new discussion skills and phrases before engaging in two long group discussions towards the end of each class period. The discussion groups consisted of three to four students and the discussions were between twelve and sixteen minutes long. The teacher-directed feedback or peer-directed feedback occurred after the first discussion in order to create an opportunity for students to receive constructive comments and advice that they could use to improve their performance for the second discussion. Therefore, these feedback sessions occurred ten times over the course of the semester.

The teacher-directed feedback group of classes received comments from the instructor which consisted primarily of checking if students used the target expressions from that lesson or another recent lesson, praising students for good use of skills or the content of their discussions, and drawing attention to missed opportunities for skill usage, either at the individual or group level. Teacher feedback was largely interactive, as students were asked to raise their hands if they were able to use target phrases or expressions. Students were also asked questions regarding what expressions or discussion skills could have been used at certain points in the discussion to draw attention to missed opportunities to use target discussion skills. Each time, a few students were also asked what they believed their strengths and weaknesses were in the discussion and also what they could do to improve for the second discussion. The teacher-directed feedback took between five and ten minutes each time.

The student-directed feedback set of classes had students give feedback to the other members of their first discussion group after this initial discussion was held. This feedback required students to ask each other a set of questions which were displayed on the screen at the front of the classroom. Students took turns asking their group members these questions. The first few questions involved checking with one another whether they were able to successfully use target expressions a lot, a little, or not at all. Following this, each student asked their peers to explain their strengths and weaknesses. Finally, each student asked their group for one thing they should try to do better for the second discussion. Student directed-feedback took about five minutes each time.

To determine which feedback approach was best for fostering WTC in a second language, the WTC score increases of students in the teacher-directed feedback group were compared to the increases of those in the peer-directed feedback group. All other factors being equal, it can be assumed that the approach best suited to raising WTC will have increased student WTC scores by a greater extent. Furthermore, class aggregated grades from each group were used to supplement the results of the pre and posttests. As the English Discussion course is a performance based communicative class, students are assessed based on how much they share their ideas and invite others to share theirs. Therefore, their performance in the course can be used to evaluate how willing they are to communicate in English and can inform which feedback approach is best suited to improving student performance in a communicative English class.

3. Results

The mean results of the WTC pretest and posttest for the students who completed them from the teacher-directed feedback group and the student-directed feedback group are shown in the table below, along with the number of responses for each test (n) as well as the standard deviation (SD). As seen in the table, the teacher-directed feedback group began the semester with a mean WTC score that was a few points higher than the mean WTC score of the student-directed feedback group, but both groups finished the semester with higher, and very similar, mean WTC scores. The teacher-directed feedback group's WTC scores improved by an

average of 4.72 points, while those of the student-directed feedback group improved by an average of 6.80 points, suggesting that student-directed feedback is more effective at improving WTC than teacher-directed feedback since it is correlated with a greater increase.

Table 1: WTC Pretest and Posttest Mean Answers

Test	Teacher-directed Feedback Group	Student-directed Feedback Group
Pretest	55.08 (n = 24, SD = 10.39)	52.95 (n = 21, SD = 7.76)
Posttest	59.80 (n = 20, SD = 7.71)	59.75 (n = 12, SD = 9.84)

After performing a one tailed t-test of the mean pretest (M = 55.08, SD = 10.39) and posttest (M = 59.08, SD = 7.71) WTC scores of the teacher-directed feedback group, it was found that there was no significant difference in WTC between the start and end of the semester for students of that group, even though their WTC had increased slightly over the course of the semester, t (42) = -1.68, p = .050225. This result is only slightly insignificant, and perhaps could have been shown to be significant with better sampling. A one tailed t-test of the student-directed feedback group's pretest (M = 52.95, SD = 7.76) and posttest (M = 59.75, SD = 9.84) WTC scores shows that the increase in WTC for that group is significant, t (31) = -2.19, p = .017906, indicating that the increase in WTC for the student-directed feedback group was notable.

When considering the average performance of students from both groups in the course, The teacher-directed feedback group of classes had a slightly higher average grade (84.83%) than the student-directed feedback group of classes (83.95%). However, a one tailed t-test shows that there is not a significant difference between the average grade of students in the student-directed feedback group (M = 83.95, SD = 8.84) and the teacher-directed feedback group (M = 84.83, SD = 8.63), t (126) = -0.56, p = .287297. This suggests that neither approach is better or worse than the other for improving student outcomes in a performance-based communicative language course.

4. Discussion

Both the teacher-directed feedback and peer-directed feedback groups saw increases in WTC over the course of the semester, but the increase was greater among the peer-directed feedback group. While it perhaps can be said that teacher directed feedback does not harm WTC, as others have found (Sa'adah et al., 2018), it does not promote it to the same extent as peer feedback according to these results.

Neither feedback approach produced significantly better performance-based grades for students in the course either. In each of the ten regular lessons in the semester, both the teacher feedback and student feedback groups had participants reflect on their performance in the previous in-class discussion. The content of the teacher-directed feedback was therefore very similar to that of the student-directed feedback, in that both forms of feedback had students report on their skill usage, think of their strengths and weaknesses, and set a goal for the upcoming in-class discussion. However, the teacher-directed feedback contained elements that peer-directed feedback did not, such as asking students to consider what expressions or skills could be used in particular situations similar to those the students had just encountered in the discussion they had recently finished. However, according to the results, these additional elements of self-reflection and corrective feedback that were part of teacher-directed feedback had little effect with regards to improving student WTC or achievement in the course. Rather,

it seems that the greater peer interaction afforded by the student-directed feedback helped promote WTC in English more for students in that group than for those in the teacher-directed feedback group.

5. Conclusion

For improving students' WTC, this study found that student-directed feedback is more effective than teacher-directed feedback, which could perhaps be expected considering that teacher oral feedback can reduce students' confidence in a second language (Hartono et al, 2022), and even though it does not cause lower language usage, it does not foster a greater willingness to use the target language. By contrast, peer-directed feedback gave students further opportunities to develop their English fluency in more authentic contexts, which could result in lower second language anxiety (Motallebzadeh et al., 2020) and greater perceived aptitude in the target language (Feyli & Ayatollahi, 2016).

More surprisingly was that teacher-directed feedback did not have any significant effect on student outcomes, meaning that on average, the more detailed and specific feedback provided by the instructor did not have any meaningful effect. However, since student attitudes towards language learning can influence their receptiveness towards teacher feedback (Zhan et al, 2022), it is possible that the teacher-directed feedback in this study was less effective on average across all classes, but was more beneficial to students who were more motivated to improve their English skills. Unfortunately, the initial motivation of students was not assessed in this study, so it cannot be determined whether teacher feedback was more useful for motivated students than peer feedback, yet this may be an interesting area for future research.

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