

STUDENT PERCEPTION OF POSITIVE TEACHER TALK IN ADDRESSING CLASSROOM CONCERNS: ENHANCING ACTIVE PARTICIPATION, FOSTERING LEARNER AUTONOMY AND PROMOTING SPEAKING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT: This study explores students' perceptions of positive teacher talk in a tertiary setting focusing on its impact in addressing three main classroom concerns: enhancing active participation, activating learner autonomy and promoting speaking skills. This mixed method research primarily adopts a qualitative approach. Google questionnaires were used to collect data. This research examines how students perceive positive teacher talk, and evaluate its effectiveness as a strategy for addressing the aforementioned classroom concerns. Student perception is vital for improving teaching as it assures that the learner needs are accomplished. Thus, the insights gained from this study provides valuable guidance in improving teaching and creating a more learner-centered classroom environment.

Keywords: positive teacher talk, student perception

1 INTRODUCTION

Teaching English as a Second Language comes with myriad concerns. Identifying these concerns through observation is a crucial reflective practice instrumental in research which can ultimately lead to insightful solutions. Here, prominently observed classroom concerns are enhancing active participation, promoting learner autonomy, and improving speaking skill. The chosen background for this research is first-year undergraduates in an ESL context at a renowned state university in Sri Lanka. There is a link between actions and thoughts (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011) in teaching, thus the actions serve as tools in accomplishing learning objectives set according to a specific methodology in a curriculum. The action in this research is positive teacher talk. Positive teacher talk is determined by the qualities such as empathy, caring, involvement, trust, and respect (Frisby, 2019; Mercer & Dornyei, 2020). Positive teacher talk also assists to navigate through classroom concerns in ESL classrooms. Every classroom concern can be addressed with well-crafted teaching strategies, such as positive teacher talk. Therefore, this study discusses how effective positive teacher talk is in mitigating classroom concerns such as enhancing active participation, activating learner autonomy, and promoting speaking skills. Student perception is a crucial aspect as it directly influences the success of lessons. The students' positive outlook towards learning is a point for evaluation. What students think, their emotions and attitudes are discussed here.

2 METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach primarily aligning with a qualitative framework. Data were collected using Google questionnaires. A sample of thirty-five students was selected through convenient sampling. The Google questionnaire which included both open-ended and

close-ended questions, was administered to the sample. The collected data was then analyzed using thematic analysis.

3 RESULTS

The results demonstrated that students' perception of positive teacher talk is central to qualities such as encouragement, kindness, and friendliness. Apart from motivation and boosting confidence, students indicated that positive teacher talk made them feel respected as individuals. A majority of 62.9% reported that positive teacher talk encouraged them to listen and engage in work, while 17.1% claimed that positive teacher talk made them happy and confident. Only 11.4% stated that positive teacher talk had the capability to instantly fix their mood. Notably, no respondent selected the option, *"Sometimes I do not understand the lesson, yet positive teacher talk gives me fulfilment."*

The results highlighted that positive teacher talk has an immense impact on the emotional stability of students. Students appreciate positive teacher talk as it makes them feel safe and helps keep stress under control. Students have also noted that they are not intimidated by the fear of making mistakes. One student said: *"My favourite thing about positive teacher talk is that it makes me feel safe and confident in class. It reduces my stress, helps me stay calm, and encourages me to keep trying even if I make mistakes."* Another student said: *"This really supports my emotional stability and keeps me motivated to learn."* These statements capture that the essence of positive teacher talk has a direct connection to the emotional stability of adult learners, who are considered to be independent thinkers.

When asked to report on positive teacher talk and learner autonomy, a majority of 91.4% stated that positive teacher talk helped them become independent learners. Only 8.6% expressed uncertainty, stating, *"I am not sure about that."* Notably, none of the students stated "No" when asked whether positive teacher talk had helped them become independent learners. This suggests a link between positive teacher talk and learner autonomy. In response to their perceived belief that positive teacher talk supports learner autonomy, one student mentioned: *"Yes, positive teacher talk has made me an independent learner because it gives me confidence to try things on my own and not be afraid of making mistakes. It encourages me to keep learning even when things are difficult."* Another student stated: *"Positive teacher talk has made me an independent learner because it encourages me to believe in myself, take responsibility for my studies, and work with confidence without always depending on others."* This indicates that positive teacher talk can shift students' mindsets in a positive direction, thereby fostering learner autonomy.

When inquired about how well positive teacher talk has helped in setting academic goals, a majority of 48.6% students reported that positive talk helped them set both short-term and long-term academic goals. 34.3% stated that positive teacher talk motivated them to work diligently, and only 14.3% stated that *"Positive teacher talk makes me want to start learning (I may not necessarily be interested, but I start to learn)."* Only one respondent reported that positive teacher talk promotes healthy competition. These results indicate that positive teacher talk has a direct and positive impact on academic goal setting, providing students with a sense of purpose in their academic journey.

The next question explored how positive teacher talk helped students' academic life. Students mentioned that the motivation gained from positive teacher talk is a key benefit. They indicated that it boosts their confidence, linking positive teacher talk directly as a source of motivation. One student said: *"It encourages me to try harder, ask questions without fear, and stay focused, which improves my learning and results."* Another student noted: *"Positive teacher talk gives clear feedback, builds my thinking skills, and makes lessons stick. It turns mistakes into learning moments without shame."* Some students mentioned that positive teacher talk helps them stay focused on their learning. This suggests that students are more intrinsically motivated through positive teacher talk, as they strive to improve their learning.

When examining the effect of the teacher's attitude on students, a majority of 91.4% students stated that they tend to believe what the teacher says even as adult students. They stated: *"Yes, I tend to believe in what my teacher says."* Only one respondent stated that the teacher's attitude is an irrelevant concern: *"No, I normally possess a positive attitude towards learning, so it does not matter."* This indicates that the teacher's voice becomes the students' voice even among adult learners, supporting independent thinking.

When studying informal conversations between teachers and students, a majority of 91.4% stated that informal conversations are important in class and they enjoyed small talk. Twenty-two participants mentioned that they learnt new words and phrases through informal conversations with the teacher, while twelve participants said that small talk with the teacher made them happy. This highlights that informal conversations are impactful both as a learning experience and a mood booster. All respondents (100%) stated that positive teacher talk helped them become better speakers.

In terms of adult learners' perspectives on positive teacher talk, 77.1% of students viewed it as a reward. The remaining options, "No" and "Maybe," were evenly split, each with four respondents. This aligns with the theory of Behaviourism, which suggests that positive reinforcement is a decisive factor in enriching performance. Regarding students' perceptions of positive teacher talk and corrective feedback, a majority (45.7%) stated that there should be a balance between positive teacher talk and corrective feedback, while 28.6% preferred corrective feedback over positive teacher talk. As for suggestions to improve positive teacher talk, students recommended *praising efforts, not just results, and giving constructive feedback gently*. The results suggest the emphasis should be on using encouraging words, with teachers being friendly and responsive as part of positive teacher talk.

4 DISCUSSION

Emotions play an instrumental role in learning a language. Krashen's (1980) affective filter hypothesis speaks about how emotions affect language learning. This is further elucidated by Grace (2008), stating that 'negative emotions' which affect language learning 'are formed through passive moods, including low motivation, low self-esteem, and debilitating anxiety.' The results indicate that positive teacher talk has the ability to reform the mindset of students positively. Positive teacher talk has the ability to combat any negative emotion associated with learning. Positive teacher talk directly influences learner autonomy by fostering positivity which

is then converted into empowerment. Alleman et al., (2005) state that ‘Students will begin to feel empowered, seeing that they can make a difference using what they have learned’. When positive teacher talk gives initial stimulus to start the learning process on a better note, the feeling of empowerment follows. This also indicates that, even as independent thinkers, adult students rely on external stimulus such as positive teacher talk. Positive teacher talk assists in meaningful goal setting. Setting academic goals require strength, motivation and careful implementation. The results indicate that as a result of positive teacher talk, students have become motivated to set academic goals. Going a step further, it is also crucial to adjust positive teacher talk according to the goals set by the student, by engaging in conversations that honour the thoughts of the student (Hollingworth & Drake 2011). Naturally, positive teacher talk has a direct impact on enhancing learner engagement, due to the positive classroom climate it creates keeping anxiety of students at bay. What is more, positive teacher talk has the ability to make learners intrinsically motivated. Even though the learners perceive positive teacher talk as a reward, their focus remains on how to improve with positive teacher talk serving as a pillar, for their academic growth. When it comes to feedback, the students consider corrective feedback to be equally important as positive teacher talk. While a no correction approach can create a positive climate, especially with positive teacher talk praising efforts, the importance of corrective feedback remains indispensable. To fill the void that positive teacher talk cannot fill in giving feedback, the teacher can invite students to give feedback on their peers, making them a part of the evaluation process. As Nash (2016) states , ‘when students are made part of the feedback mechanism, their perspectives will enrich improvement efforts’.

5 CONCLUSION

This research discusses students’ perception of positive teacher talk and how they view positive teacher talk when ESL instructors use it as a strategy in addressing classroom concerns such as enhancing active participation, fostering learner autonomy and promoting speaking skills. Positive teacher talk serves as the initial stimulus. The importance lies in the fact that even adult students, who are generally considered independent thinkers, adapt to the teacher’s voice. Incorporating other teaching strategies alongside teacher talk can yield the maximum benefit.

6 REFERENCES

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