INVESTIGATING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK ON ESL STUDENTS' LANGUAGE ANXIETY

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Abstract

This study investigates the psychological impact of corrective feedback on English as a Second Language (ESL) students' language anxiety using a quantitative research approach. Conducted among 80 intermediate-level ESL learners in Lahore and Karachi, Pakistan, the research examines how different types and frequencies of corrective feedback, explicit correction, metalinguistic feedback, recasts, clarification requests, and elicitation, affect learners' emotional responses. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire incorporating items from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) and were analysed using descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, and Pearson correlation coefficients. The findings reveal that explicit correction and metalinguistic feedback are most strongly associated with elevated levels of language anxiety, while recasts result in significantly lower anxiety responses.

A moderate positive correlation was also found between feedback frequency and anxiety levels, indicating that more frequent corrective input can exacerbate learners' emotional discomfort. These results highlight the need for pedagogical practices that balance effective error correction with emotional sensitivity. The study underscores the importance of using indirect feedback strategies and fostering a psychologically supportive classroom environment to enhance ESL learners' confidence and communicative engagement.

Keywords: Corrective feedback, Language anxiety, ESL learners, Explicit correction, Recasts

Introduction

Acquiring a second language is a complicated situation not only dependent on achieving mastering vocabulary and grammar, but also a complex emotional and psychological situation. Out of the many elements that can interfere with the process of acquisition of a second language (SLA), one of the most frequently applied corrective feedback (CF) in the classroom should be pointed out. CF also known as the teacher responses to learners when they commit a language error and is meant to lead the learners towards, and error-free language usage. Although CF can be viewed as a necessary and useful aspect of language teaching, far less attention has been paid to psychological consequences of CF, especially its effect on emotional well-being of learners. Language anxiety, as being one of the most important psychological constructs, has been revealed to affect the performance, the inclined participation of learners, and their attitude towards language learning in general due to the impact of corrective feedback.

Language anxiety comprises a particular type of anxiety, which occurs in the situation of learning and acquisition of the second language. It may be present in the form of fear of talking, fear of making wrong or being judged by others. Contrary to general anxiety, language anxiety is a situational rather than a global construct, which tends to occur following a classroom activity, i.e., public speech or correction issued by a teacher (Rassaei, 2023). Corrective feedback in most ESL (English as a Second Opinion) environments, though supposed to facilitate the process of learning, may unintentionally turn into the one that causes stress

and anxiety, among the learners. In case of correction in front of the audience or correction in a very sharp way or explicit way, the learners would feel jealous or discouraged, causing them to become less motivated and less inclination to contribute. The association between the corrective feedbacks and language anxiety is not even and somewhat complicated. Depending on a learner, there is a possibility of responding to correction as something that helps a learner to develop or as their inability to be competent or lack of an aptitude to perform well. Even the speed at which CF is administered, whether using explicit correction, recasts, prompts, or even metalinguistic explanations, are also very critical in the emotional reaction of the learner (Hajiyeva, 2024). Explicit correction or correcting by explicitly mentioning that an error has been made and giving an example of how it should be in its correct form might be considered as confrontational or judgemental especially with cultures where saving face is valued. Conversely, recasts, which also imply restructuring the utterance made by a learner but do not mention an error directly, can be less threatening yet less salient, possibly having less effect (Patra et al., 2022). Thus, it is critical to comprehend the roles played by the various forms of CF in learning language anxiety, so that child-centred and pedagogically productive ESL learning can be established where emotional supports are well placed.

Whereas the pedagogical advantages of CF are well researched, its emotional/psychological impact has been less researched, especially with reference to ESL instruction. In the majority of the extant literature, the corrective feedback is analysed in terms of its accuracy and timing and the linguistic outturns but the impact that the feedback has on the learners on an emotional level is not usually considered (Charalampous & Darra 2025). Such research niche in the literature is worrying since emotional aspects such as anxiety can play a major role in impeding language acquisition, due to their ability to reduce risk taking, communicative and participation in the learning process by learners. Heavy anxiety predisposition may result in avoidance behaviour like not speaking in a classroom and even develop long-term disengagement with the actual process of learning language. Due to the risk of possible adverse outcomes, there is a necessity to examine the ways of optimizing the CF practices. So, as to reduce anxiety as much as possible in order to preserve linguistic development. Moreover, cultural and personal differences may determine the way in which the learners react to corrective feedback.

Students with other cultural backgrounds can respond differently to being corrected, as they can be sensitive to correction depending on their educational backgrounds and cultural feelings towards authority and being wrong. As an example, learners belonging to a collectivist culture might worry more about preserving group solidarity and fearing to lose their face in the eyes of the peer group, which makes them more vulnerable to experiencing anxiety because of being corrected publicly. In addition, when mediated by individual learner variables like self-esteem, language proficiency, prior language learning experience etc. CF can influence anxiety (Cheng & Xu 2025). Therefore, the effectiveness and appropriateness of corrective feedbacks in different ESL groups tend to make such approaches one size fits all.

The current research aims at investigating the psychological effects of corrective feedback on the ESL students with special emphasis on the concept of language anxiety. The study tries to give insight into the emotional aspect of language learning by studying the type of CF applied in ESL classrooms and the perception and reaction of students about it (Liu et al., 2025). The research results will help create feedback strategies not only linguistically, but also psychological emotionally supportive. By so doing, the study will aim at filling the gap that exists between the cognitive and affective trends of SLA research studies, as there is always a necessity of applying the teaching practices that would grant attention to the intellectual as well as emotional needs of language learners. With the world getting more and more English language classrooms, it is more necessary than ever that those classrooms be both an academically challenging and an emotionally secure environment in which a successful and healthy ESL student can thrive and excel in.

Literature Review

The Role of Corrective Feedback in Second Language Acquisition

Corrective feedback has been perceived as a critical element in second language learning (SLA), which plays a crucial role in providing the learners with the awareness of their mistakes and establishing the process of incorporating the correct language forms into their system. An average feedback is rendered throughout the ESL classrooms, which takes the form of a teacher response with relation to grammatical, lexical,

phonological, and syntactic errors committed by the learners when producing language either spoken or written (Chen et al., 2025). The goal is beyond correcting them, and it is to help the learners be alert to gaps in their interlanguage and to adjust their output to do so Researchers have over the years classified the different kinds of corrective feedbacks. These are the use of explicit correction where errors occur and the teacher uses a clear language to indicate the mistake and brain them in the right way; recasts where the teacher rephrases the error without using a reference to it.

Clarification requests which show that the utterance was not understood or was not good and that the learner should rephrase them; and metalinguistic feedback which gives comments about nature of the mistakes or questions in that regard but without giving him or her the correct form (Aljasser, 2025). Other categories are elicitation, where the learner self-corrects and repetition where the teacher repeats the error made by the learner using his instant that something is wrong.

Each of the kinds of corrective feedback has unique pedagogical advantages and generates varied cognitive tasks on the students. During such a discussion as an example, it is possible to say that recasts are a frequent strategy in fluency-oriented classrooms due to the ability to streamline the ongoing communication, but explicit correction and metalinguistic feedback involve more cognitive processing but can be associated with more profound comprehension and retention. Although it has been seen in various researches that corrective feedback can improve language development, it has been restricted too strictly to the potential effect on the person being corrected in terms of their increase or decrease in accuracy, without looking at the emotional or psychological impacts.

Language Anxiety as an Affective Barrier in Language Learning

Language anxiety is a unique form of anxiety specific to second or foreign language contexts. It is typically characterized by nervousness, fear, and apprehension associated with using or learning a new language, particularly in environments where performance is evaluated or exposed to public scrutiny (Mao, Lee, & Li, 2024). This anxiety is often rooted in the fear of making mistakes, being judged negatively by peers or teachers, or facing communication failure.

Language anxiety can negatively affect various aspects of the learning process. It disrupts cognitive processing in learners making them unable to concentrate, receive and process feedback and remember linguistic input (Wang, Zhou & Fan, 2025). It may have an emotional consequence in a lack of motivation and confidence. Behaviourally, learners can refuse either to take part or even to stop talking in the classroom; or they talk less in communicative activities. This may cause a self-defeating loop where anxiety alleviates performance and vice versa. Notably, not every learner has an equal anxiety in language. It can be affected by past learning experiences, by introversion and perfectionism as personality types, cultural background, and even the relationship existing between the learner and the teacher. Anxiety is such a dynamic and context-related variable that it becomes very significant in assessing the language teaching practices like corrective feedback.

How Corrective Feedback Triggers or Reduces Language Anxiety

On the one hand, feedback is supposed to make the learners aware of the mistakes and therefore correct them resulting to improvement in language. Conversely, feedback, especially the type that is presented in a manner that is viewed as a manifestation of something public and/or direct and/or excessively critical, may be implicated in rising cases of anxiety (Xiong et al., 2024). There is a great chance that learners that are already anxious of speaking or committing mistakes will process feedback as a criticism of their competence, instead of it being an on-instructional tool. Feedback may induce anxiety or boost it and this may depend on the type of feedback.

Although it is pedagogically useful, explicit correction might prove to be embarrassing upon occurrence in the presence of the classroom or in a voice that is taken to be punitive (Wang, 2024). Less conspicuous but possibly subtler than the recasts, the learners may remain unaware of the recasts or they can be wrongly understood as an affirmation and not a correction. Since metalinguistic feedback involves higher-order, thinking it can potentially affect cognitive load, thus causing frustration in anxious learners. Prompting learners to self-correct can be empowering for some but intimidating for others, especially if they feel uncertain about the correct form.

The delivery context also matters. When feedback is offered in a supportive, non-threatening manner, learners are more likely to accept it positively. Instructors creating a classroom atmosphere that involves encouragement, respect and patience can help decrease the anxiety-generating element of corrective feedback. On the other hand, aggressive or excessively appraisal situations can increase the level of sensitivity of learners to error and feedback, and ensure that the learning process becomes stressful.

The Role of Teacher-Student Relationships

The relationship between students and teachers plays a crucial role in shaping how feedback is perceived and how it influences learners emotionally. Trusting relationship will have offset effects of corrective feedback that brings about anxiety. Students are less inclined to view feedback as retributive in case their teachers are sympathetic and really care about their progress (Sari, & Han, 2024). In contrast, if the teacher is perceived as critical, impatient, or inconsistent, even well intentioned feedback may be met with resistance or fear.

Teacher demeanour, tone of voice, facial expressions, and timing of correction all contribute to how feedback is received (Biju et al., 2024). Teachers, who provide feedback with sensitivity to students' emotional states, waiting for appropriate moments, using gentle tones, and offering encouragement alongside correction, are more successful in maintaining a low-anxiety environment. In addition, by informing them about the goal of feedback and discussing with the students the learning processes, the teachers contribute to the creation of a healthier and less coercive classroom atmosphere.

Cultural Dimensions of Feedback and Anxiety

Cultural factors significantly influence how learners perceive and respond to corrective feedback. In some cultures, making mistakes publicly is seen as a loss of face, leading learners to avoid speaking altogether to protect their image. In such contexts, direct correction can be especially anxiety provoking, and learners may prefer subtler forms of feedback. In contrast, in cultures that emphasize individualism, autonomy, and open communication, learners may be more receptive to direct correction and may even welcome it as a sign of the teacher's attention and involvement.

These cultural differences necessitate culturally responsive teaching practices. Teachers working in multicultural classrooms must be aware of the diverse expectations and comfort levels learners bring with them (Ebadijalal & Yousofi, 2023). Lack of acknowledgement of these differences may result to misunderstanding, misperception of the intent, and anxiety. The implementation of culturally sensitive feedback method helps not only to improve the linguistic performance but also assist learners in emotional well-being.

Individual Differences in Learner Reactions to Feedback

Learner variables also contribute a big part towards the psychological effects of corrective feedback. The learners have varying degrees of tolerance to ambiguity, disposition to risk, self-identity, and the ability to deal with emotions (Watcharapol et al., 2023). Direct feedback can be very encouraging to some learners, serving as an avenue to achievement, and to some learners, it will leave them feeling devastated or discouraged even with minor corrections.

The character traits may influence the feedback, like extroversion, openness, and conscientiousness. Extroverted versus introverted learners might be more inclined to risk taking, and less sensitive to negative evaluation and highly conscientious learners might be more inclined to perfectionistic tendencies and, therefore, to sensitivity to mistake and error correction. Past experiences in learning the language also affect how the learners take feedback. Students who have faced humiliation or excessive criticism in the past may associate feedback with negative emotions, regardless of how it is currently delivered. In addition, learner beliefs about language learning, such as whether they view errors as natural and necessary or as signs of failure, can mediate the emotional effects of corrective feedback. Teachers who help learners develop growth-oriented mind-sets can reduce anxiety and increase acceptance of feedback as a positive tool (Shahid et al., 2022).

The Need for Emotionally Intelligent Feedback Practices

Given the complexity of learner responses to feedback, there is a growing call for emotionally intelligent feedback practices in ESL education. Emotionally intelligent feedback involves an awareness of

both the cognitive and affective needs of learners. It emphasizes sensitivity, empathy, and adaptability on the part of the teacher (Gregersen, 2023). Such feedback recognizes that learners' emotional safety is just as important as their linguistic progress.

Strategies to reduce the anxiety-inducing effects of feedback include using anonymous peer feedback, allowing self-correction opportunities, providing written feedback rather than oral correction in front of others, and offering positive reinforcement alongside correction. Incorporating humour, encouragement, and a non-judgmental tone can also soften the emotional impact of correction. Teachers can further empower learners by involving them in the feedback process, encouraging reflection, and fostering a sense of autonomy in learning.

Gaps and Limitations in the Existing Literature

Although there is substantial research on the effectiveness of various types of corrective feedback in promoting language acquisition, far less attention has been given to the psychological and emotional consequences of feedback. Most studies focus on observable outcomes such as error correction rates, learner uptake, and long-term retention, while few explore how feedback affects learners' emotions, particularly anxiety. The affective domain is often treated as secondary, despite its crucial role in shaping behaviour and motivation.

Additionally, much of the existing research is situated in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts, where learners may have limited exposure to English outside the classroom (Darazi, Khoso, & Mahesar, 2023). However, in the case of ESL (English as a Second Language) settings, iterative surroundings are more common and the target language is more likely to be used. Social and performance pressure in such environments can make the emotional effect of corrective feedback much stronger though there is a very limited literature regarding ESL groups.

It also requires further longitudinal research that looks into long-term effect of feedback on emotional states. Short-term responses, as in terms of embarrassment or relief, might not be adequate at depicting the long-term effects on the to-be learner in terms of confidence, motivation, and language acquisition. Moreover, little empirical research has investigated the nature of corrective feedback along with other affective factors including self-esteem, classroom climate, and learner-teacher rapport. Studies combining these factors would better understand the whole scenario on how feedback would operate in actual classrooms.

Methodology

The research design used in this study was quantitative design because it was aimed at investigating the psychological effect of corrective feedback on language anxiety of ESL students. This methodological approach was selected to enable the measurement and statistical analysis of the relationship between different types of corrective feedback and anxiety levels among learners. In the study, 80 ESL learners were used as the sample and belonged to intermediate classes of English courses at private language institutes of Lahore and Karachi in Pakistan. The selection of intermediate-level students was deliberate as they typically have sufficient language exposure to understand corrective feedback while still being susceptible to anxiety effects.

The sample consisted of participants who were chosen through purposive sampling to ensure they met specific criteria relevant to the study objectives and have had at least six months of ESL training and frequent exposure to corrective feedback inside the classroom. This sampling technique helped maintain homogeneity in the sample while ensuring participants had comparable experiences with feedback mechanisms. A structured questionnaire referring to the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) was used to collect the data that were complemented with extra questions about the students' anxiety response to various types of corrective feedback (explicit correction, metalinguistic feedback, recasts, clarification request, and elicitation).

The modified FLCAS instrument underwent pilot testing with 15 students to establish reliability, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.82, indicating good internal consistency. The survey was composed of 35 Likert-style statements with a 1 (strongly disagree) - 5 (strongly agree) scale, which met the dimensions of communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation, the level of emotional response to teacher correction. To minimize response bias, the questionnaire included both positively and negatively worded items, and participants completed it during regular class time under researcher supervision.

Descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, Pearson correlation coefficients performed with the help of SPSS version 26 allowed finding out whether some patterns and correlations are significant between the types of feedback and the extent of anxiety.

Analysis

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics – Mean Anxiety Scores by Type of Corrective Feedback

Type of Corrective Feedback	Mean Anxiety Score	Standard Deviation
Explicit Correction	4.02	0.64
Metalinguistic Feedback	3.81	0.59
Recasts	2.95	0.48
Clarification Requests	3.40	0.51
Elicitation	3.19	0.54

The results show that explicit correction leads to the highest levels of anxiety among ESL learners (mean = 4.02), suggesting that direct feedback that points out errors overtly tends to be more psychologically distressing. Metalinguistic feedback, which offers explanation or prompts, also resulted in elevated anxiety levels. In contrast, recasts—a more implicit and indirect form of correction, produced the lowest mean anxiety score (2.95), indicating they may be less emotionally disruptive.

Table 2

Independent Samples T-Test – High vs. Low Feedback Frequency Groups

Feedback Type	t-value	p-value	Significant (p < 0.05)
Explicit Correction	3.84	0.000	Yes
Metalinguistic	2.96	0.004	Yes
Recasts	-0.91	0.364	No
Clarification	1.58	0.118	No
Elicitation	2.14	0.035	Yes

The t-test results indicate statistically significant differences in anxiety between students who frequently received explicit correction, metalinguistic feedback, and elicitation, compared to those who received them less often. This suggests that more frequent use of these feedback types is associated with significantly higher language anxiety. However, recasts and clarification requests did not show significant differences between high and low exposure groups, reinforcing the idea that these methods may be less emotionally harmful.

Table 3

Pearson Correlation – Frequency of Feedback and Anxiety Levels

Variable 1	Variable 2	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p-value
Feedback Frequency	Anxiety Level	0.49	0.006

The positive correlation coefficient (r = 0.49, p < 0.01) indicates a moderate positive relationship between the frequency of corrective feedback and students' language anxiety levels. This means that as the frequency of feedback increases, anxiety levels tend to rise, particularly when the feedback is direct or corrective in tone.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that the type and frequency of corrective feedback significantly influence ESL learners' levels of language anxiety. Among the five types of feedback examined, explicit correction and metalinguistic feedback emerged as the most anxiety inducing. These methods involve directly pointing out learners' errors, often publicly, which can be perceived as evaluative or even humiliating in classroom contexts. In contrast, recasts, which subtly reformulate a student's error without drawing direct attention to it, were associated with the lowest anxiety levels.

The findings provide support to what is already known that learners are emotionally sensitive as to the mode of correction. The strong statistical relationship between the frequency of feedback and the level of anxiety indicates that in most cases, the high frequency of interruptions in the process of performing speech activities could destroy the confidence, fluency, and readiness of the learners to speak. This observation is fatal as oral contribution and communicative practice lie at the core of the ESL development and an individual may be highly anxious, which may hinder the production of the language, discourage risks undertaking, and trigger the development of a bad attitude toward language learning. Interestingly, although elicitation as opposed to more learner-centred elicitation is method, which encourages the learner to correct mistakes by continuing the conversation, there was also a statistically significant finding between greater anxiety and elicitation. This indicates that on one hand, elicitation promotes active participation among learners but on the other, it can expose students to stress in regards to performing in situations without their effective support particularly in situations where difficulty is high or where the audience is external. Pure clarification requests with the mere suggestion that misunderstanding took place did not raise anxiety much, perhaps because they are seen as less judgmental.

Such observations point at the psychological toll of overly straightforward corrective measures or at their excessive frequency. Teachers should thus evaluate the academic value of correction in terms of its emotional impacts. Language anxiety does not only constitute an individual variable, but it also defines the general classroom atmosphere and is capable of inhibiting the group learning process.

Recommendations

Some practical propositions based on the findings of the current research can be formulated on the enhancement of the teaching processes and decreases in the level of language anxiety in ESL learners. Teachers ought to first of all consider giving their priority to indirect types of corrective feedback types like recasts and clarification requests which were identified to cause minimal anxiety. The given types of feedback enable learners to be aware of their mistakes and correct them more non-confrontationally and, therefore, preserve their confidence during the interactional performance. Second, the teachers should moderate the frequency of corrective feedback particularly when the students are engaged in speaking.

Over-correction, especially having a characteristic of overt correction usually acting in a community or authoritative approach, could negative affect the inclination to involve the learners and develop fear of error. Rather, it is possible that delayed correction or feedback in the privacy of the student makes the emotional condition of students less likely to be damaged. Moreover, explicit correction; and metalinguistic feedback is to be used cautiously. Under the circumstance one has to provide such feedback, it should be done in the supportive tone and possibly accompanied by some positive reinforcement so that the anxiety-causing consequences are eliminated. Moreover, the practice of emotionally responsive teaching and strategies should be included in the curriculum of language institutions and teacher-education programs so that teachers could be trained to identify and address the affective response of students on feedback. Lastly, it is possible to cultivate the type of classroom culture that facilitates mistakes being made during the learning practice, which can be an instrumental aspect of anxiety reduction and language acquisition.

Limitations

Even though this study provided helpful information, some limitations need to be noted in a bid to put the findings into perspective. The size of the sample and its local concentration are also some of the main limitations. Only 80 students in language centers in Lahore and Karachi participated in the study and that can impair the possibility of generalizing its results to the general ESL situation, particularly to others outside the country or of other cultures and educational backgrounds. The other restriction is the use of self-reported data by questionnaires. Although it can be helpful, this data can hardly reflect the depth of the emotional state of students or the subtlety of communication in the classroom, and the answers can be distorted by personal preferences or the perception of the questions. In addition, the study had failed to consider particular contextual variables like classroom size and teacher experience and prior exposure to corrective feedback, which might affect the level of anxiety. In addition, the way in which the feedback was delivered, e.g. tone of voice, facial expressions, or teacher-student relationship was not assessed although these elements are probably of great importance when assessing how feedback is received on an emotional level. Finally, the cross-sectional study

design presents a momentary picture of how learners feel and thus, is limited to a one-time picture. To determine this, a longitudinal study would come in handy to establish how the psychological effects of corrective feedback attracts change over time as language is learnt and repeatedly exposed to.

Conclusion

The study has added to a growing literature on the emotional aspect of language acquisition referring specifically on the impact of practices of corrective feedback on language anxiety of ESL learners. According to quantitative analysis, a both explicit and metalinguistic correction leads to high levels of anxiety, especially when provided regularly or in front of others. The recasts and clarification requests, however, are less stressful and could present the psychologically more friendly means of dealing with learner errors. These results are an indication of why emotionally informed pedagogy is needed in ESL classrooms. Feedback is not simply a verbal device it is a social and an emotional activity that may influence the confidence, participation, and academic achievement of learners. Teachers who teach languages have to balance the need to correct a learner with the desire to provide a low-anxiety environment in which the learner becomes able to risk making errors and develop as a communicator.

A possible next step to these findings would be to investigate the effect of teacher behaviour, interaction with peers, and perception of feedback under different proficiency levels and use physiological measures (e.g., heart rate, cortisol levels) that could be used to objectively identify the level of anxiety. As we learn, more about the nature of how correction relates with learner psychology our potential becomes ever greater to create more inclusive, effective, and empathetic language learning experiences.

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