



Communicative Willingness in Dialogic Feedback: A Relational Extension of Feedback Literacy

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: Dialogic feedback assumes that students will respond to evaluative comments through clarification, negotiation, or further discussion. However, students do not always turn internal feedback processing into visible dialogue, especially in hierarchical performance settings where speaking may feel risky. This study examined how undergraduate debaters constructed communicative willingness when responding to coach feedback and aimed to extend feedback literacy theory by theorising this relational decision point.

Methodology: This study used a constructivist grounded theory design. Twelve second and third-year undergraduate debaters were selected through purposive sampling from a one-semester university debate preparation program. Data were generated through two semi-structured interviews with each participant, observations of 16 feedback sessions, and relevant artefacts such as feedback sheets and notes. Analysis involved initial coding, focused coding, constant comparison, memo writing, and theoretical integration.

Main Findings: Students' communicative willingness developed through an iterative process of interpreting feedback, regulating affect, assessing relational safety, negotiating possible consequences, and then enacting or withholding dialogue. Silence did not automatically indicate disengagement, because many students continued reflecting on and using feedback privately. Communicative willingness increased when prior interactions suggested that students' voices would be received respectfully.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study introduces communicative willingness as a relationally constructed mediating process between managing affect and dialogic enactment within feedback literacy. It shows that dialogic opportunities alone do not guarantee participation because students also judge safety, legitimacy, and exposure before speaking.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Dialogic feedback has become a central principle in contemporary higher education assessment because feedback is now understood as something students interpret, negotiate, and use rather than simply receive [1]-[6]. Rather than treating feedback as a one way transmission of information from teacher to student, recent

scholarship has emphasised interaction, clarification, and the co-construction of meaning. In this view, feedback becomes meaningful when students actively engage with comments, ask questions, compare interpretations, and connect evaluative information to future improvement [1]-[6]. Dialogue is therefore not just an added feature of feedback practice, but an important condition through which feedback supports learning.

Yet one practical problem continues to appear across many feedback settings: students do not always speak, ask, clarify, or challenge when feedback is given [7], [8]. Even when teachers invite discussion, some students respond immediately while others remain silent, revise privately, or delay interaction [2], [9]-[13]. This means that feedback may be dialogic in design but not fully dialogic in practice. In other words, the structure of the feedback process may invite exchange, but the interaction itself may still remain partial or one sided. This recurring mismatch matters because it shows that creating opportunities for dialogue does not automatically lead to student participation. If this issue is not examined more carefully, feedback may continue to be designed as dialogic in principle while remaining uneven in practice.

This issue is important because recent assessment scholarship has shifted attention from feedback delivery to student engagement. The concern is no longer only whether feedback is clear, detailed, or well intentioned, but also whether students are able and willing to do something meaningful with it. Within this shift, Carless and Boud conceptualise feedback literacy as the capacities and dispositions that help students appreciate feedback, make evaluative judgments, manage affect, and take action [14]. This framework has been influential because it explains why useful feedback still depends on what students do with it rather than on what teachers provide alone [15]-[17]. It positions students as active participants in feedback processes and shows that engagement involves cognitive, emotional, and behavioural work.

The value of this framework lies in the way it explains productive feedback engagement as something more complex than simple compliance. Students need to recognise the value of feedback, understand evaluative standards, regulate disappointment or defensiveness, and turn comments into improvement oriented action [14]-[18]. This is a major contribution to feedback research because it moves beyond transmission models and helps explain why even carefully designed feedback does not always lead to learning. However, the framework leaves one crucial relational step underexplored. Students may regulate their emotions and intend to improve, but they must still decide whether their perspective can be voiced in the feedback encounter itself [16]-[21].

That missing step creates a clear theoretical gap. Between managing affect and taking action lies a situational judgment about whether speaking is safe, appropriate, and worthwhile [16], [17], [19], [22], [23]. Students do not move automatically from emotional regulation to visible participation. A student may understand the feedback, calm an initial emotional response, and even plan to improve, yet still choose not to speak. Another may disagree internally with the comment but decide that expressing that view is too risky. In such cases, feedback literacy is present, but it remains internal rather than becoming visible in interaction [20], [21]. Without theorising that moment, dialogic feedback can appear to fail for motivational or cognitive reasons alone, when in fact students may be making relational judgments about authority, legitimacy, and self-protection.

This gap is important and timely because higher education feedback practices increasingly promote dialogue as a sign of effective assessment, yet the literature still offers limited explanation of why students may withhold participation even when dialogic space is available. Without a clearer account of this missing relational process, educators may misread silence as low motivation, weak understanding, or lack of engagement, when it may instead reflect strategic, protective, or context-sensitive judgment. This makes the issue both theoretically significant and practically important for improving feedback design and interpretation in higher education.

Research on feedback engagement has examined interpretation, uptake, peer dialogue, and transfer across contexts [24]-[27]. These studies have made important contributions by showing that students actively work on feedback rather than merely receiving it. At the same time, other work has explored sociocultural and relational dimensions of feedback, including psychological safety, authority, identity, and face [23], [28]-[45]. Together, these studies suggest that speaking in response to feedback is not a neutral act. Asking for clarification may expose uncertainty [35]-[38]. Disagreeing may be heard as resistance or as a challenge to authority [39]-[41]. Remaining silent may preserve dignity, relational harmony, or perceived competence [42]-[44]. The willingness to communicate in feedback therefore reflects more than comprehension or motivation. It reflects how students judge the social conditions of response and the possible consequences attached to visible participation.

Seen from this perspective, feedback encounters are not only instructional events. They are also relational events in which students must interpret both the comment itself and the interactional space in which the comment is delivered. Students may ask themselves whether their question will be welcomed, whether disagreement will be taken seriously, or whether speaking will make them appear weak, defensive, or incompetent. These concerns are not incidental. They shape whether feedback becomes a site of dialogue or remains a site of private processing. This is why a more explicit account of communicative willingness is needed. It helps explain how students move, or fail to move, from internal sense making to interpersonal exchange.

This study conceptualises communicative willingness as a relationally constructed process that mediates between affect management and dialogic enactment. The construct differs from general psychological safety because it focuses specifically on evaluative feedback moments [45]. Psychological safety helps explain whether a broader environment feels safe for interpersonal risk taking, but communicative willingness attends more directly to the moment in which a student receives critique and must decide whether to respond. It also differs from willingness to communicate in language education because feedback encounters are shaped not only by confidence but also by critique, authority, and identity [46], [47]. In language education, willingness to communicate is often discussed in relation to confidence, competence, or readiness to speak. In feedback encounters, however, students are not simply deciding whether they can speak. They are deciding whether speaking is legitimate, worthwhile, and safe in a context where evaluation may shape how they are seen by authority figures and peers.

Communicative willingness is therefore treated here not as a stable personal trait, but as a context-sensitive judgment formed within feedback interaction. It is relational because it emerges through students' perceptions of how their voice will be received. It is processual because it develops through repeated encounters rather than appearing as a fixed characteristic. It is also evaluative because students weigh possible gains and risks before deciding whether to enter dialogue. This conceptualisation allows feedback engagement to be understood not only as individual cognition or behaviour, but as something shaped by the social conditions under which students decide whether to speak.

Competitive academic debate preparation offers a particularly revealing context for examining this process [48]-[50]. Debate students repeatedly perform before peers and a coach, receive structured evaluative comments, and are expected to improve through iteration. Feedback is frequent, visible, and often tied to judgments about reasoning, strategic judgment, comparative analysis, and delivery. At the same time, performance is public, competence is visible, and the coach holds recognised authority. These conditions intensify the relational pressures already present in many higher education settings and make the decision to speak especially consequential. Students must not only interpret the substance of the feedback, but also assess how their response may position them in relation to the coach and their peers.

This setting is useful because it amplifies features that often remain less visible in more routine classroom contexts. Debate preparation makes evaluation highly public, places students under repeated performance pressure, and situates feedback within a clear hierarchy. Students are encouraged to improve through dialogue, yet dialogue unfolds under conditions where vulnerability, reputation, and legitimacy are highly salient. For that reason, competitive debate preparation offers a strong context for examining how communicative willingness is constructed and how feedback literacy becomes either publicly enacted or privately contained.

Accordingly, this study sought to explain how undergraduate students construct their willingness or reluctance to communicate with a coach about the feedback they receive during competitive debate preparation. The objective of the study was to develop a process-oriented explanation of communicative willingness and to clarify how this process refines feedback literacy theory. More specifically, the study proposes that communicative willingness functions as a mediating process between managing affect and taking action, shaping whether feedback literacy becomes visible in dialogue or remains internal. The study was guided by the following research question: How do undergraduate students construct their willingness or reluctance to communicate with the coach about the feedback they receive during competitive debate preparation?

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative design with a constructivist grounded theory approach to explore how undergraduate students construct their willingness to communicate about feedback [51]. Grounded theory is particularly suitable when a study seeks to generate an explanatory account of a social process from participants' experiences rather than test predetermined hypotheses. A constructivist orientation assumes that meanings are co-constructed through the interaction between researcher and participants, and that analysis is interpretive rather than purely objective. This design was selected because communicative willingness has not been explicitly theorised as a mediating dimension within feedback literacy. In line with the introduction and the study's focus on a missing relational step between managing affect and taking action, the purpose of the research was to build a process-oriented explanation of how students decide whether to speak or remain silent in feedback encounters. Rather than measuring the frequency of participation, the study aimed to understand how communicative willingness was formed, negotiated, and reshaped across repeated evaluative interactions.

The research was conducted within an undergraduate competitive debate preparation program at Universitas Negeri Surabaya. The program prepares students for participation in national debate competitions and involves regular practice debates followed by structured evaluative feedback delivered by a single coach. Debate preparation constituted a feedback intensive environment in which critique was frequent, performance was public, and dialogue was encouraged. Students presented arguments before peers and the coach, received

detailed evaluative commentary, and were expected to refine their reasoning iteratively. This context was chosen because it made the relational issues highlighted in the introduction particularly visible. The public nature of performance, the presence of peers, and the clear authority of the coach created conditions in which students had to decide not only how to interpret feedback, but also whether it was safe and worthwhile to respond openly. The presence of one consistent authority figure also enabled examination of how communicative willingness developed within a relatively stable relational context across the semester.

Participants were twelve undergraduate students in their second and third year of study who were actively involved in the debate preparation program. These students were academically experienced yet still consolidating disciplinary identity and performance confidence. The study used purposeful sampling to ensure variation in debate experience, team positioning, and competitive exposure. Participants were selected because they could provide rich information about feedback encounters in a context where speaking, silence, and evaluative pressure were especially salient. The sample included students with differing levels of debate experience and competitive achievement so that the study could compare how communicative willingness was shaped across different relational positions within the same feedback environment. In grounded theory research, sample size is guided by conceptual development rather than numerical targets. Data collection continued until emerging categories related to communicative willingness became conceptually dense and further interviews were refining rather than altering theoretical insights. At that point, data collection was concluded. Participation was voluntary. Ethical approval was obtained from the university research ethics committee, and informed consent was secured from all participants. All participant names used in this paper are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

The study used three qualitative instruments and sources of data: a semi-structured interview protocol, non-participant observation field notes guided by an observation focus, and supporting artefacts such as feedback sheets and students' written notes. These instruments were selected to capture both participants' reflective accounts and the situated features of actual feedback encounters. The semi-structured interview protocol was developed by the researcher based on the literature on feedback literacy, dialogic feedback, and feedback engagement [14], [16], [17]. It was not adopted as a standardised questionnaire from a single previous study because the purpose of the research was exploratory and theory-building rather than measurement. Accordingly, Cronbach's alpha was not applicable in this study, as no psychometric scale or closed-response instrument was used. Instead, the interview protocol functioned as a flexible guide that allowed participants to describe their experiences in depth while enabling the researcher to follow emerging issues relevant to communicative willingness.

Data were collected through three qualitative sources to capture both reflective accounts and situated experiences. Semi structured interviews, Each participant completed two in depth semi structured interviews conducted at different stages of the preparation period. The longitudinal design allowed examination of how communicative willingness developed across repeated feedback encounters. The first interview was conducted during the early phase of the preparation program, while the second took place toward the end of the semester, enabling comparison of communicative willingness across time. Initial interview questions explored participants' experiences of receiving feedback, emotional responses to critique, and instances of speaking or remaining silent. Participants were encouraged to describe specific feedback episodes to ground analysis in concrete decision making processes. Consistent with constructivist grounded theory, the interview protocol evolved as analysis progressed. Emerging themes related to relational safety, perceived authority, identity negotiation, and communicative hesitation informed subsequent interviews. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Quotations presented in this article were translated into English by the researcher, with careful attention to preserving the meaning and tone of participants' original expressions.

Observations, A total of 16 feedback sessions were observed across the semester, with each session lasting approximately 90 minutes. The researcher adopted a non-participant observer role and focused on the structure of feedback delivery, opportunities for dialogue, student participation patterns, and interactional tone. The observations were guided by attention to features that were central to the study's conceptual focus, including how feedback was delivered, how students responded verbally or non-verbally, how the coach reacted to student contributions, and how public interaction shaped the atmosphere of the session. Detailed field notes were written immediately after each session to document interactional dynamics and contextual features. Artefacts, Where available, feedback sheets and written notes from practice sessions were collected to support contextual understanding during interviews. These artefacts were used to prompt recall during interviews and to contextualise participants' descriptions of specific feedback episodes. They were not coded independently but informed analytic interpretation.

Data analysis followed iterative grounded theory procedures as outlined by Charmaz [51]. The analysis was designed to produce a process-oriented explanation that matched the study's objective in the introduction, namely to explain how communicative willingness was constructed as a relational mediating process in feedback encounters. Initial Coding, Interview transcripts and observation notes were coded line by line to remain closely

grounded in participants' language and actions. Coding focused on identifying processes and decision points related to communicative engagement. Consistent with grounded theory practice, gerunds were used to emphasise action and process (e.g., assessing relational risk, withholding clarification, testing coach responsiveness, protecting reputation). During this stage, the aim was to avoid imposing predetermined categories and instead remain open to participants' own constructions of experience. Early codes were provisional and numerous, capturing variations in how students described interpreting feedback, managing emotional responses, and deciding whether to speak.

Through constant comparison across participants and across the two interview waves, analytically significant and recurrent codes were synthesised into higher-level categories. Comparisons were made between students with differing levels of debate experience and competitive positioning to explore how relational status shaped communicative willingness. Codes that appeared conceptually similar were clustered, while those that reflected distinct processes were differentiated. For example, codes related to processing criticism privately were analytically distinguished from those related to withholding speech due to reputational concern. This stage involved refining the boundaries of emerging categories and examining conditions under which communicative willingness increased or diminished.

Emerging categories were examined relationally to identify how they connected within a broader process. Memo writing played a central role in tracing relationships among interpreting feedback, regulating affect, assessing relational safety, negotiating consequences, and enacting or withholding dialogue. Diagramming was used to visualise how these elements interacted across time and feedback encounters. Rather than using feedback literacy theory as a fixed coding framework, the theory functioned as a sensitising concept. This allowed the analysis to remain grounded in participants' accounts while also connecting the emerging findings to the study's broader theoretical aim of refining feedback literacy. Analysis continued until categories were conceptually robust and further data contributed nuance rather than substantial modification to the developing process model. At this stage, communicative willingness was conceptualised as a relationally mediated process linking affect management to dialogic enactment. Coding was conducted by the primary researcher. Throughout the analysis, detailed memos were written to record emerging ideas, category development, and reflections on analytic decisions. These memos helped trace how early codes evolved into more abstract categories and ensured that interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts. Constant comparison across participants and between the two interview waves allowed patterns and differences to become visible over time. An organised record of coding iterations and conceptual diagrams was maintained to support transparency in how the relational process model was developed.

Several strategies were used to strengthen the credibility and transparency of the study. The longitudinal design allowed examination of how communicative willingness developed over time rather than relying on isolated accounts. By interviewing participants at two different stages of the preparation period, it became possible to trace shifts in interpretation, emotional responses, and participation patterns across repeated feedback encounters. Methodological triangulation further supported interpretive depth. Interview data were considered alongside observation field notes and relevant artefacts to ensure that emerging interpretations were consistent with observed interactional patterns. Observations helped contextualise participants' retrospective accounts, particularly when they described moments of hesitation or engagement during feedback sessions. Participants were invited to respond to preliminary interpretations of the emerging process model. These conversations did not function as formal validation but provided an opportunity to assess whether the developing analysis resonated with their lived experience. Their reflections helped clarify distinctions between internal reflection and public participation, which became central to the conceptualisation of communicative willingness.

Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process. As the researcher was familiar with the debate environment, particular attention was given to recognising assumptions about participation norms and performance expectations. Reflexive memos were written regularly to examine how prior familiarity might shape interpretation and to ensure that analytic claims remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than taken-for-granted understandings of debate culture. Taken together, these procedures supported the alignment of the method with the study's introduction, findings, and discussion. Because the paper aims to explain communicative willingness as a relational and developmental process, the method was intentionally designed to capture repeated feedback encounters, students' evolving interpretations, and the contextual conditions that shaped whether feedback literacy became visible in dialogue or remained internal.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Constructing Communicative Willingness in Feedback Encounters

The analysis generated a relational process model of communicative willingness that explains how students decided whether to voice or withhold their perspective in feedback encounters. This finding directly answers the research question by showing that willingness to communicate was not a fixed personal trait, but a context-sensitive process shaped through repeated evaluative interactions. Across participants, communicative

willingness did not operate as a stable personal trait or as a simple reflection of confidence. Rather, it developed through repeated feedback encounters in which students interpreted critique, regulated emotional responses, assessed relational safety, considered the consequences of speaking, and then enacted or withheld dialogue. These processes were identified through iterative analysis of the interview, observation, and artefact data, and they form the core explanatory result of the study.

This model helps explain a recurring tension in dialogic feedback research. Although feedback scholarship increasingly emphasises interaction, clarification, and co-construction of meaning [1]-[6], students in the present study did not participate evenly even when dialogic opportunities were available. Some participants asked questions, clarified ideas, or defended their reasoning, while others stayed silent, revised privately, or delayed interaction. This supports earlier research showing that the existence of dialogic design does not necessarily ensure dialogic enactment [2], [8], [9]. At the same time, the present findings go further by showing how students arrived at that decision and why silence sometimes emerged even when students remained cognitively engaged.

These findings align with the feedback literacy framework proposed by Carless and Boud [14], particularly its emphasis on managing affect and taking action. However, the present study suggests that an additional relational step is involved before action becomes visible in dialogue. Students may be emotionally ready to learn and cognitively prepared to improve, yet still judge that speaking is too risky, unnecessary, or socially costly. In this sense, communicative willingness emerged as a mediating process between affect management and dialogic enactment. This extends feedback literacy by showing that the movement from internal engagement to interpersonal participation is not automatic, but relationally negotiated [20], [21].

Interpreting Feedback Between Instruction and Identity

Communicative willingness began with how students interpreted feedback. When critique focused on technical elements such as timing, structure, or clarity, students often treated it as direct instruction. They described acting on such feedback privately, without perceiving a need for further discussion.

*“If it is about structure or timing, I just fix it. It feels clear. I don’t think I need to ask anything.”
(Rina, Interview 1)*

In these situations, silence reflected a practical judgement that dialogue would not add value. Students did not experience withholding speech as avoidance, but rather as efficiency. This finding aligns with studies suggesting that silence can indicate deep cognitive processing, emotional regulation, or other non-verbal forms of participation rather than disengagement [52]–[54]. It therefore challenges common assumptions within assessment research that equate visible participation with engagement [55]–[57]. Rather than signalling disengagement, communicative restraint functioned as an adaptive way of engaging with feedback, shaped by students’ assessment of how clear and actionable the comments were. This suggests that communicative willingness operates not simply as a matter of confidence or motivation, but as a situational judgement influenced by how feedback is interpreted and understood. This pattern was most evident when feedback was perceived as technical and immediately actionable.

“When the coach said my framing didn’t work, I felt confused because I thought that was my strongest part.” (Arif, Interview 1)

In such moments, interpretation shifted from task-focused instruction to identity-relevant evaluation. Students described pausing before speaking, needing time to process the implications of the comment and to regain emotional balance. Rather than responding immediately, they often entered a period of internal negotiation, weighing whether speaking would help clarify understanding or instead expose uncertainty about their competence. This hesitation reflected not a lack of engagement, but an effort to manage the personal stakes associated with critique directed at their reasoning or intellectual contribution.

This pattern aligns with scholarship that highlights the affective and identity-related dimensions of feedback. Feedback at this level was experienced as touching not only the quality of the task but also students’ sense of themselves as capable performers and thinkers [58]–[61]. At the same time, the findings extend feedback literacy theory [14]. Although managing affect is recognised as central to feedback literacy, the present data suggest that affect regulation does not automatically lead to dialogue. Students may successfully calm themselves and reflect internally while still choosing not to speak if identity vulnerability remains unresolved. In these situations, communicative willingness depended less on emotional recovery alone and more on whether students felt sufficiently secure to publicly re-engage with the feedback conversation.

Consequently, silence in these encounters functioned as a protective response, allowing students to preserve relational safety while continuing to process feedback privately. This highlights that decisions to speak or remain silent were shaped by ongoing evaluations of psychological risk within the feedback interaction,

reinforcing communicative willingness as a context-sensitive and relational judgement rather than a stable personal disposition.

Over time, some participants described learning to reinterpret critique as improvement oriented rather than personally threatening.

“Now I see feedback as about improving the case, not about me being bad.” (Dimas, Interview 2)

As this reframing developed, communicative willingness often increased. Students spoke about becoming gradually more comfortable responding to or engaging with feedback during discussions, as critique was no longer experienced as a personal judgement. Interpretation, affect regulation, and relational judgement therefore evolved together rather than unfolding in a fixed sequence. Students did not first understand, then regulate emotion, and only later speak; instead, these processes developed alongside one another through repeated feedback experiences.

This pattern resonates with feedback literacy research emphasising students’ capacity to reinterpret feedback and manage emotional responses as part of productive engagement [14]. However, the present findings suggest that such development also reshapes students’ willingness to participate dialogically. With time, participants appeared to develop greater trust in feedback interactions and in their ability to participate within them. As critique became easier to interpret as part of shared improvement, voicing questions or perspectives felt less risky. In this sense, communicative willingness emerged not merely as an outcome of feedback literacy, but as a relational capacity gradually formed through ongoing participation in feedback encounters.

Assessing Relational Safety: Can My Voice be Received

After interpreting feedback, students assessed whether speaking felt relationally safe. Relational safety refers to students’ perception that their voice can be expressed without humiliation, dismissal, or loss of credibility. Rather than being taken for granted, this sense of safety was actively evaluated within each feedback interaction. Feedback discussions were experienced as social situations shaped by tone, responsiveness, and prior interactional experiences.

“I see how the coach reacts when someone else asks a question. If the response feels open, I feel more confident to ask.” (Sinta, Interview 1)

Although the program involved one consistent coach, students differed in how they interpreted his stance. Early experiences of careful explanation fostered a sense that dialogue was welcome, whereas moments perceived as dismissive could linger and influence later decisions about whether to speak. Students therefore monitored interactional cues closely, using previous encounters to anticipate how their contributions might be received. These findings resonate with sociocultural perspectives that conceptualise feedback as relationally constructed [1], [2], [4], [62]. At the same time, the findings complicate an implicit assumption within some dialogic feedback literature that providing opportunities for discussion is sufficient to generate participation [2], [8], [63], [64]. In this study, opportunity alone did not guarantee dialogue. Students continuously recalibrated their willingness to speak based on subtle interactional signals that shaped perceptions of relational safety.

The findings therefore extend feedback literacy by clarifying that the movement from internal engagement to voiced participation depends on relational safety. When such safety was uncertain, students often continued engaging with feedback privately while withholding public contribution. Without relational safety, feedback literacy remained enacted internally rather than dialogically expressed.

Negotiating Consequences: Exposure Image and Legitimacy

Students also considered the potential consequences of speaking. Feedback sessions occurred in front of peers, which heightened awareness of visibility and reputation.

“When everyone is watching, I don’t want to look like I don’t understand something basic.” (Kevin, Interview 1)

Concerns about image were not limited to less experienced students. Those who were perceived as strong performers also described protecting their established competence.

“Because I’m usually one of the stronger speakers, I feel like I should already know.” (Maya, Interview 2)

These findings indicate that communicative willingness was shaped by ongoing identity maintenance and legitimacy work. Students were not simply deciding whether they understood the feedback; they were also

anticipating how speaking might position them in relation to others. Several described carefully rehearsing their responses in order to avoid appearing defensive, confrontational, or insufficiently prepared. In this way, decisions to speak involved managing both learning goals and social credibility simultaneously.

This finding adds nuance to feedback literacy theory by foregrounding hierarchy and face management within feedback interactions [28], [65]. While dialogic feedback is often presented as empowering, the present findings show that authority and evaluation remained salient features of these encounters. Rather than disappearing in dialogic settings, concerns about status and recognition continued to shape participation. The data therefore do not contradict dialogic theory outright, but reveal tensions that are sometimes understated. Opportunities for dialogue did not automatically remove concerns about reputation, legitimacy, or belonging.

Enacting or Withholding Dialogue: Visible and Invisible Engagement

The outcome of these layered judgements was either the enactment or withholding of dialogue. After interpreting feedback, regulating emotional responses, assessing relational safety, and considering potential social consequences, students ultimately decided whether speaking felt warranted in that particular moment. When students perceived sufficient relational safety and legitimacy, they were more willing to voice their perspective and engage openly in discussion.

“If I really believe my reasoning has logic, I explain it just to understand the difference.” (Nadia, Interview 2)

In these situations, speaking was experienced not as confrontation but as collaborative sense-making, allowing students to clarify understanding and negotiate meaning with the coach. Others, however, chose delayed engagement, preferring to approach the coach privately after the session when the interaction felt less publicly exposing and carried fewer reputational risks. Dialogue therefore did not disappear but was sometimes relocated to contexts perceived as safer or more manageable.

When communicative willingness remained low, students withheld speech during the feedback encounter. Yet withholding dialogue did not indicate disengagement. Many participants described continuing to reflect on comments internally, revisiting feedback after the session, and making adjustments independently.

“Even if I don’t speak, I still think about it later and adjust.” (Arif, Interview 2)

These findings suggest that engagement with feedback frequently continued beyond observable interaction. Students remained cognitively and strategically involved even when they chose not to participate verbally. In this sense, communicative willingness shaped the form and visibility of engagement rather than its presence or absence. This finding directly challenges assumptions that equate spoken participation with effective feedback engagement. While dialogic feedback research often treats dialogue as evidence of successful feedback processes [1], [2], [66], the present data indicate that engagement may remain partially invisible within feedback encounters. Silence, in this sense, functioned as a contextually rational response shaped by ongoing evaluations of risk, identity, and relational dynamics. Students were therefore not simply deciding whether to engage with feedback, but how and under what conditions that engagement could be expressed publicly.

Iterative Development Over Time

Communicative willingness developed differently across participants over the semester. Some became increasingly comfortable speaking as repeated positive interactions made dialogue feel more normal and less risky.

“Now I feel more relaxed discussing feedback. It feels normal.” (Dimas, Interview 2)

For these students, familiarity with the feedback process and consistent experiences of respectful exchange gradually built confidence. What initially felt evaluative and tense began to feel routine. Speaking up was no longer experienced as a moment of exposure, but as part of the expected rhythm of feedback conversations.

Others, however, described gradually settling into silence. This was not because they cared less about feedback, but because caution felt safer and more predictable.

“At the beginning I wanted to ask more, but after a few times I just thought it’s better to listen and fix it myself.” (Rina, Interview 2)

For these participants, earlier moments of uncertainty or discomfort appeared to linger, shaping later decisions about whether speaking was worth the potential risk. Over time, silence became familiar, reinforcing a

pattern of private engagement rather than public contribution. These differing trajectories introduce a temporal dimension to feedback literacy. Engagement is not only a matter of developing individual capacities; it is shaped by accumulated relational history. Students' willingness to speak reflected patterns formed across prior encounters rather than simply reactions to isolated moments. Positive experiences gradually strengthened communicative willingness, while moments of embarrassment or uncertainty could linger and influence later participation.

This temporal insight aligns with perspectives that conceptualise feedback literacy as an emergent relational practice unfolding across space and time rather than a static individual capacity [5], [67]-[69]. From this standpoint, communicative willingness is not a fixed disposition but something formed and reformed within ongoing interaction. Longitudinal research on feedback processes similarly suggests that successful experiences of uptake can enhance self-efficacy and foster more active engagement in subsequent cycles. The present findings extend this work by showing that such developmental patterns also shape students' readiness to participate dialogically. Communicative willingness therefore emerged as dynamic and developmental, continually reshaped by remembered interactions and anticipated future encounters. In this sense, feedback participation was not merely the outcome of increasing skill, but of evolving relational experience across the semester.

Theoretical Contribution: A Relationally Mediated Model of Communicative Willingness

Taken together, the findings point to a relational process model of communicative willingness in feedback encounters. Students do not simply decide to speak or remain silent. Rather, they interpret critique, regulate affect, assess relational safety, consider possible consequences, and then determine whether voicing their perspective feels warranted in that moment. This process is iterative rather than linear, unfolding across time and shaped by interactional memory and accumulated experience.

The study contributes to assessment scholarship in three important ways. First, it extends the feedback literacy framework of Carless and Boud [14] by identifying communicative willingness as a mediating process between affect management and dialogic enactment. Managing emotion does not automatically lead to participation. Feedback literacy becomes interpersonally visible only when students judge that speaking is relationally viable. Second, the findings nuance dialogic feedback theory by showing that the mere presence of opportunity does not ensure dialogue. Even in explicitly dialogic settings, relational safety and concerns about legitimacy continue to shape whether students choose to contribute. Participation is therefore socially negotiated rather than structurally guaranteed. Third, the study reframes silence within assessment contexts. Silence should not be interpreted automatically as disengagement. It may represent reflective, strategic, or self-protective engagement within hierarchical and evaluative environments. By foregrounding communicative willingness as relationally constructed and historically shaped, this study offers a socially situated account of how feedback becomes publicly voiced or remains internally processed in higher education.

The novelty of this study lies in positioning communicative willingness as a relationally constructed mediating process within feedback literacy. While existing feedback literacy research has explained how students appreciate feedback, make evaluative judgments, manage affect, and take action, the present study shows that a further relational judgment shapes whether these capacities become visible in dialogue. Rather than simply applying the framework to a new context, this study refines it by explaining how students move, or do not move, from internal feedback engagement to interpersonal participation. It also contributes to dialogic feedback research by showing that dialogic opportunities alone are insufficient unless students judge that speaking is safe, legitimate, and worthwhile.

The implications of this study are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the findings suggest that feedback literacy should be understood not only as a set of individual capacities and dispositions, but also as a relationally mediated process shaped by interactional conditions. Practically, the findings indicate that educators should not assume that inviting students to respond is enough to produce dialogue. Teachers also need to build relational conditions in which students believe that their questions, clarifications, and even disagreement will be received respectfully. This means attending not only to the quality of comments, but also to interactional tone, public exposure, and the accumulated relational history of feedback encounters. These implications are especially important in hierarchical higher education settings, where students may remain engaged with feedback privately even when they choose not to speak publicly.

The findings of this study are shaped by the particular context in which the research took place. The debate preparation program was performance intensive, public, and competitive. Students regularly presented arguments in front of peers and received critique from a coach whose evaluative role was clearly recognised. Such conditions likely heightened students' sensitivity to reputation, visibility, and hierarchy. In settings where feedback occurs in less public or less competitive formats, communicative willingness may unfold differently. Future research could examine how students navigate dialogue in classroom based assessments or written feedback contexts where exposure and performance pressure are configured in alternative ways.

The study was also conducted within a single program guided by one consistent coach. This allowed careful attention to how students' perceptions of relational safety developed over time within a stable authority structure. At the same time, feedback interactions may vary across educators with different communicative styles, disciplinary expectations, or institutional cultures. Exploring communicative willingness across multiple instructors or institutions would provide further insight into how relational dynamics shape feedback engagement. Finally, the analysis relied primarily on students' reflective accounts gathered through longitudinal interviews, supported by observations and artefacts. These accounts offered rich insight into how students interpreted and experienced feedback. However, future studies could examine real time interactional data to capture how willingness is negotiated moment by moment in discourse. Acknowledging these contextual boundaries clarifies the scope of the present study. Rather than limiting its contribution, they point toward the broader applicability of communicative willingness as a relational process that may take different forms across higher education environments.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined how undergraduate students constructed their willingness or reluctance to communicate with a coach about the feedback they received during competitive debate preparation. The findings show that students' responses to feedback were shaped not only by whether they understood the comment or intended to improve, but also by whether they judged that speaking was safe, appropriate, and worthwhile within the feedback encounter. In this sense, the study answers the research problem by showing that dialogic feedback does not automatically become dialogic in practice, even when opportunities for discussion are available. The study also clarifies the objective of refining feedback literacy theory. Based on the analysis, communicative willingness emerged as a relationally constructed mediating process between managing affect and dialogic enactment. This means that students may regulate emotional responses and still choose not to voice their perspective if the relational conditions of the encounter feel risky, exposing, or illegitimate. Feedback literacy, therefore, does not always become visible through spoken participation, because students first evaluate whether their voice can be expressed without threatening their credibility, safety, or standing. A further conclusion of this study is that silence should not automatically be interpreted as disengagement. In many cases, students continued to reflect on feedback, reconsider comments, and make revisions privately even when they did not speak during the feedback session. This suggests that engagement may remain internal and less visible when students judge that public dialogue carries too much relational cost. Overall, this study contributes a clearer conceptual explanation of why dialogic opportunities do not always lead to dialogue. By identifying communicative willingness as a relational dimension of feedback engagement, the study extends feedback literacy beyond internal processing and action alone and offers a more socially situated understanding of how feedback is enacted in hierarchical higher education settings.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Landry Dwiyoga Daniswara was responsible for the conception of the study, research design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and manuscript writing.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGY

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the generation, analysis, or writing of this manuscript. All aspects of the research, including data collection, interpretation, and manuscript preparation, were carried out entirely by the authors without the assistance of AI-based technologies.

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