

THE REFLECTIVE TEACHER ADVANTAGE: CRITICAL THINKING ATTRIBUTES AND FEEDBACK PREFERENCES AMONG IELTS SPEAKING INSTRUCTORS

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Abstract

This study investigated feedback preferences and critical thinking (CT) attributes among 200 IELTS Speaking teachers cross-nationally. Participants completed electronic questionnaires assessing four feedback strategy types and cognitive attributes related to reflective skepticism and critical openness. Data were analyzed using SPSS (exploratory factor analysis, reliability testing, correlation, and hierarchical regression). Teachers most preferred Formative and Personalized Feedback ($M = 4.22$), followed by Elicitation and Metalinguistic Feedback ($M = 3.92$). CT attributes significantly predicted learner-centered feedback preferences ($\beta = .586, p < .001$), uniquely accounting for 29.4% of variance beyond teaching experience; the full model explained 47.2% of variance ($F(2, 197) = 88.05, p < .001, f^2 = 0.89$). Experienced teachers showed significantly higher learner-centered feedback preferences than less-experienced peers ($t(198) = 4.26, p < .001, d = 0.63$). Findings suggest that cultivating reflective CT attributes in teacher professional development programs can enhance feedback quality in IELTS speaking instruction.

Keywords: *IELTS Speaking; Teacher Feedback; Critical Thinking; Professional Development; EFL.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of advanced speaking proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts increasingly depends on the integration of critical thinking (CT) and high-quality teacher feedback [1, 2, 3]. This is especially evident in IELTS speaking preparation, where candidates must produce coherent, analytically justified discourse under time pressure while maintaining linguistic accuracy and fluency.

Contemporary feedback research has shifted from behaviorist corrective models to sociocultural and reflective paradigms that conceptualize feedback as a dialogic, scaffolded process within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development [4, 5, 6]. In these frameworks, feedback serves not only to remedy errors but to mediate cognitive growth, metacognitive awareness, self-regulation, and learner autonomy.

Teachers' CT attributes—enduring tendencies toward reflective skepticism, open-mindedness, and analyticity—are increasingly recognized as the cognitive driver that determines whether feedback functions as directive correction or as scaffolding for reasoning and autonomy [1, 7, 8]. Yet, empirical investigation remains limited, particularly in high-stakes oral assessment contexts.

The present study addresses this gap through a large-scale, cross-national investigation of 200 IELTS speaking teachers from five EFL contexts. It examines (a) the feedback strategies teachers most prefer, (b) the extent to which their CT attributes predict those preferences, and (c) the role of teaching

experience. It further introduces and validates the IELTS Speaking Teacher Feedback Preferences Questionnaire (IST-FPQ). Three research questions guide the study:

RQ1: To what extent do IELTS Speaking teachers prefer different types of feedback strategies?

RQ2: Is there a significant relationship between teachers' CT attributes and their feedback preferences?

RQ3: What is the relationship between teaching experience and preference for learner-centered feedback?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study integrates four complementary theoretical lenses. Sociocultural Theory [9, 10] frames feedback as mediated scaffolding within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development. Reflective Practice Theory [11, 12, 13] positions teachers' reflection-in-action as the mechanism that transforms routine error correction into opportunities for cognitive growth. 'New-wave' Feedback Scholarship [4, 14, 6] foregrounds feedback literacy and learner uptake as the ultimate criteria of effectiveness. CT Attribute Theory [7, 1, 8] identifies enduring traits—reflective skepticism, open-mindedness, analyticity, and truth-seeking—as the cognitive drivers that determine whether teachers adopt transmissive or transformative feedback practices. Together, these lenses predict that teachers with stronger CT attributes will favor learner-centered, formative, and elicitation-based feedback over directive correction.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Feedback in L2 Speaking Contexts

Contemporary L2 research views feedback as a dynamic socio-cognitive process that scaffolds linguistic accuracy, fluency, and higher-order speaking skills [4, 15, 16]. Meta-analytic evidence confirms that strategies emphasizing elicitation, metalinguistic cues, formative commentary, and self-regulation prompts yield larger gains in oral proficiency than explicit correction alone [15, 17]. In Chinese tertiary EFL contexts, personalized formative feedback during speaking simulations predicted 32% of variance in band descriptor improvements [3, 18]. Implementation challenges persist, however; a cross-national survey found that while 68% of EFL instructors recognized the value of learner-centered approaches, only 42% integrated them regularly [19, 20].

3.2 Teacher Cognition and Critical Thinking Attributes

Teacher cognition research has increasingly positioned CT attributes as key predictors of pedagogical choices in L2 contexts [21, 22, 19]. Teachers with higher CT scores are more likely to adopt dialogic, metacognitive strategies over directive correction [13, 18, 23]. A structural equation modeling analysis of 250 Iranian EFL teachers found CT attributes explained 41% of variance in learner-centered feedback preferences [24]. Teaching experience also emerges as a moderator, though its independent effects are modest; without deliberate cultivation, tenure alone yields minimal shifts toward sophisticated feedback [20, 25].

3.3 Research Gap

While CT attributes and feedback preferences have been studied independently, no study has directly examined how they jointly predict IELTS-specific feedback preferences using a validated, context-specific instrument. This study fills that gap.

4. METHOD

4.1 Participants

Data were collected between August and September 2024. The final sample consisted of 200 currently active IELTS Speaking teachers from five EFL contexts: Iran (n = 72), Oman (n = 54), Turkey (n = 34), Pakistan (n = 24), and India (n = 16). Of approximately 500 eligible teachers invited through professional networks, 200 provided complete, usable responses (effective response rate = 40%). Participants were required to have at least one year of dedicated IELTS Speaking teaching experience.

Ethical approval was granted by the institutional review board, and all participants provided informed consent. The majority were male (64%), aged 30–39 years (49%), and held a Master's degree (60.5%). Mean IELTS Speaking teaching experience was 7.4 years (SD = 3.9, range 1–22 years).

Preliminary one-way ANOVAs and chi-square tests confirmed no significant differences across the five countries on CT attributes, teaching experience, or any feedback preference subscale (all $p > .15$, $\eta^2 < .03$). Table 1 presents the demographic profile.

Table 1: Demographic and Occupational Characteristics of Participants (N = 200)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	128	64.0
	Female	72	36.0
Age (years)	20–29	34	17.0
	30–39	98	49.0
	40–49	54	27.0
	≥ 50	14	7.0
IELTS Experience	1–5 years	76	38.0
	6–10 years	89	44.5
	≥ 11 years	35	17.5
	M (SD) = 7.4 (3.9)		
Qualification	Bachelor's	62	31.0
	Master's	121	60.5
	Doctoral	17	8.5
Certified IELTS instructor	Yes	79	39.5
	No	121	60.5
Country	Iran	72	36.0
	Oman	54	27.0
	Turkey	34	17.0
	Pakistan	24	12.0
	India	16	8.0

4.2 Instruments

Two instruments were used. The IELTS Speaking Teacher Feedback Preferences Questionnaire (IST-FPQ), developed by the researchers, contains 28 items across four subscales: Explicit Correction and Repetition, Elicitation and Metalinguistic Feedback, Formative and Personalized Feedback, and Technology-Enhanced and Self-Regulation Feedback. EFA confirmed a four-factor structure accounting for 65.4% of variance. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from .86 to .94.

The Critical Thinking Attribute Scale (CTAS), adapted from Walsh et al. [26], is a 25-item scale measuring CT attributes including reflective skepticism and critical openness.

In this study, the CTAS showed excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .90$), high test-retest reliability ($r = .82$), and strong content validity ($CVI = .92$). EFA supported a unidimensional structure explaining 54.3% of variance, with all item-total correlations between .42 and .71.

4.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was distributed electronically. Reminders were sent at mid-collection and incomplete responses were excluded. A random subsample of 52 participants completed the CTAS again four weeks later to assess temporal stability. Data from 200 valid participants were analyzed using IBM SPSS v.28.

Normality was assessed using Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests; reliability via Cronbach's alpha; construct validity via EFA (Principal Axis Factoring, Promax rotation); group differences via independent-samples t-tests; and predictor relationships via hierarchical multiple regression.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Preliminary Checks

Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests yielded non-significant results for all scales (all $p > .05$), indicating no significant deviation from normality (Table 2). Shapiro-Wilk tests indicated mild non-normality for two subscales: Explicit Correction and Repetition ($W = 0.974$, $p = .020$) and Elicitation and Metalinguistic Feedback ($W = 0.978$, $p = .035$).

Given $N = 200$ and the robustness of parametric tests under mild non-normality [27], analyses proceeded parametrically; results for these two subscales should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

Table 2: Normality Test Results for Feedback Preference Scores (N = 200)

Scale	K-S	df	p	S-W	df	p
Total Feedback Preference	0.053	200	.200*	0.981	200	.058
Explicit Correction & Repetition	0.070	200	.067	0.974	200	.020†
Elicitation & Metalinguistic	0.060	200	.200*	0.978	200	.035†
Formative & Personalized	0.064	200	.190	0.983	200	.070
Technology & Self-Regulation	0.061	200	.180	0.980	200	.050

Note. * $p = .200$ (lower bound of reported value). † $S-W p < .05$; results interpreted with caution given large N .

5.2 Feedback Preference Descriptive Statistics

Means and standard deviations for the four feedback preference dimensions are presented in Table 3. Formative and Personalized Feedback received the highest mean rating ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.79$), followed by Elicitation and Metalinguistic Feedback ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.86$). Explicit Correction and Repetition ($M = 3.66$) and Technology-Enhanced and Self-Regulation Feedback ($M = 3.55$) received moderate ratings.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Feedback Preference Dimensions (N = 200)

Feedback Type	M	SD	N
Formative and Personalized Feedback	4.22	0.79	200
Elicitation and Metalinguistic Feedback	3.92	0.86	200
Explicit Correction and Repetition	3.66	1.01	200
Technology-Enhanced and Self-Regulation Feedback	3.55	1.03	200

5.3 Instrument Reliability and Validity

Internal consistency was strong across all IST-FPQ dimensions, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .86 to .94 (Table 4). The total questionnaire yielded $\alpha = .94$, indicating excellent reliability. EFA confirmed a four-factor structure explaining 65.4% of variance (Table 5). All primary factor loadings exceeded .70. Table 6 presents the psychometric properties of the CTAS.

Table 4: Reliability Analysis of the IST-FPQ (N = 200)

Scale	Items	Cronbach's α
Total Questionnaire (IST-FPQ)	28	.94
Explicit Correction & Repetition	8	.86
Elicitation & Metalinguistic	6	.88
Formative & Personalized Feedback	6	.89
Technology & Self-Regulation	8	.87

Table 5: EFA: Factor Loadings and Communalities for Selected IST-FPQ Items (N = 200)

Item	F1	F2	F3	F4	h ²
Explicit correction after grammar mistakes	.83	.12	.05	.07	.72
Repeating errors with questioning intonation	.79	.10	.03	.08	.69
Pause and prompt self-correction	.08	.85	.06	.09	.73
Comment on answer organization	.06	.79	.15	.20	.68
Emphasize fluency & coherence	.02	.13	.82	.19	.70
Use digital tools for instant feedback	.05	.06	.14	.86	.77
Prompt self-assessment with band descriptors	.04	.12	.23	.81	.75

Note. Extraction: Principal Axis Factoring. Rotation: Promax. Only loadings $\geq .30$ reported.

Table 6: Psychometric Properties of the Critical Thinking Attribute Scale (N = 200)

Statistic	Value	Interpretation
Number of items	25	Item count
Cronbach's alpha (α)	.90	Excellent internal consistency
Mean inter-item correlation	.27	Adequate homogeneity
Test-retest reliability (r)	.82	High temporal stability (4 weeks)
Content Validity Index (CVI)	.92	High expert agreement
Construct validity (EFA)	1-factor	Unidimensional structure
Variance explained	54.3%	Adequate explained variance
Item-total correlation range	.42-.71	Good item discrimination

Note. Mean inter-item correlation calculated via Spearman-Brown formula: $\bar{r} = \alpha / (k - \alpha(k - 1))$, where $k = 25$.

5.4 Group Comparison by Teaching Experience

An independent-samples t-test compared learner-centered feedback preferences between less-experienced teachers (< 5 years; $n = 76$) and experienced teachers (≥ 5 years; $n = 124$; Table 7). Experienced teachers demonstrated significantly higher preferences for learner-centered feedback ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.50$) compared to less-experienced teachers ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.65$), $t(198) = 4.26$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.63$, indicating a medium-to-large effect. No significant differences emerged on other feedback subscales.

Table 7: Independent-Samples t-Test Comparing Experience Groups on Learner-Centered Feedback (N = 200)

Group	n	M	SD	df	t	p	d
Non-experienced (< 5 years)	76	3.95	0.65	198	4.26	< .001	0.63
Experienced (≥ 5 years)	124	4.30	0.50				

Note. Cohen's $d = 0.63$ indicates a medium-to-large effect.

5.5 Hierarchical Multiple Regression

Correlation analyses revealed a significant positive relationship between CT attributes and learner-centered feedback preferences ($r = .47, p < .001$). Hierarchical regression was used to examine the unique predictive contribution of CT attributes beyond teaching experience (Table 8). Step 1 (teaching experience only) accounted for 17.8% of variance ($\Delta R^2 = .178, p < .001$). Step 2 (adding CT attributes) increased explained variance by a significant 29.4% ($\Delta R^2 = .294, p < .001$). The full model was statistically significant, $F(2, 197) = 88.05, p < .001, R^2 = .472, \text{adjusted } R^2 = .467, \text{Cohen's } f^2 = 0.89$ (large effect). CT attributes were the strongest predictor ($\beta = .586, p < .001$), with teaching experience also contributing significantly ($\beta = .245, p < .001$).

Table 8: Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Learner-Centered Feedback Preference (N = 200)

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	ΔR^2	R^2	Adj. R^2	f^2
Step 1						.178***	.178	.174	
Teaching experience (years)	0.067	0.010	.422	6.553	< .001				
Step 2						.294***	.472	.467	0.89
Teaching experience (years)	0.039	0.009	.245	4.313	< .001				
Critical thinking attributes	0.025	0.002	.586	10.463	< .001				

Note. *** $p < .001$. $F(2, 197) = 88.05$ for the full model. Cohen's $f^2 = R^2 / (1 - R^2) = .472 / .528 = 0.89$.

6. DISCUSSION

This study addressed three RQs concerning the interplay of CT attributes, teaching experience, and feedback preferences among 200 IELTS Speaking teachers from five EFL contexts. For RQ1, teachers showed a clear preference hierarchy: Formative and Personalized Feedback ($M = 4.22$) and Elicitation and Metalinguistic Feedback ($M = 3.92$) were rated highest, mirroring the broader paradigm shift in L2 speaking research from transmissive correction toward dialogic and metacognitive strategies [15, 16].

For RQ2, CT attributes emerged as the strongest predictor of learner-centered feedback preferences ($\beta = .586, p < .001$), uniquely accounting for 29.4% of variance after controlling for experience. This aligns with findings that teachers with stronger reflective skepticism and analyticity favor formative strategies over directive correction [21, 22, 18]. The present study extends these results to the underexplored domain of high-stakes IELTS speaking preparation in a cross-national sample.

For RQ3, experienced teachers scored significantly higher on learner-centered subscales. However, once CT attributes were entered into the regression model, experience's contribution was substantially reduced (β from .422 to .245), indicating that experience does not automatically produce learner-centered practice but operates through the cultivation of reflective CT attributes [14, 13].

6.1 Implications for Teacher Professional Development

These findings hold direct implications for teacher education programs. Simply accumulating teaching years is insufficient; programs must deliberately cultivate CT attributes through sustained reflective activities—critical-incident analysis, peer dialogue journals, and structured reflection protocols [13, 20].

The IST-FPQ offers a validated tool for assessing baseline feedback preferences and monitoring change following professional development interventions. The lower preference for Technology-Enhanced and Self-Regulation Feedback points to a training priority: integrating accessible digital tools that support learner autonomy without adding excessive teacher burden [28, 17].

6.2 Limitations and Future Directions

The study relied on self-reported preferences rather than observed classroom behavior, raising the possibility of social-desirability bias. Future research should use stimulated-recall interviews, classroom observations, or corpus analysis of feedback episodes. The cross-sectional design precludes causal claims; longitudinal intervention studies targeting CT attribute development are needed to establish directionality. Extension to native-speaker environments and fully online IELTS preparation settings also remains warranted.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR PRACTICAL USE

This large-scale, cross-national study demonstrates that CT attributes drive preferences for learner-centered, dialogic, and metacognitive feedback strategies more powerfully than years of teaching experience alone. Teachers with stronger reflective skepticism, open-mindedness, and analyticity consistently favored formative, personalized, and elicitation-based approaches that scaffold cognitive growth and autonomy. Practical suggestions include: 1) incorporating structured reflective practice activities into professional development programs to build CT attributes; 2) using the IST-FPQ as a diagnostic tool to assess feedback preferences before and after interventions; and 3) integrating technology-enhanced feedback training into IELTS instructor certification programs.

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Declarations

AI Use Declaration

Grammarly was used to check the language and coherence of the manuscript. All analysis, interpretation, and intellectual content are the sole work of the authors.

Ethics and Consent

This study received ethical approval from the institutional review board. All procedures complied with institutional ethical guidelines. All participants provided informed written consent.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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