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Perceived Teacher Interpersonal Behaviour and ESL Proficiency: A Retrospective Study of GFP Students in Oman

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Abstract

The General Foundation Programme (GFP) marks a pivotal transition for Omani students entering higher education, yet the English language proficiency students bring into the programme varies considerably and is shaped by years of prior classroom experience. While curriculum design and instructional methods are well-studied determinants of English as a Second Language (ESL), the influence of teachers' interpersonal behaviour has received less attention in the Omani context. This study adopted a retrospective design to investigate how 86 GFP students at the National University of Science and Technology foundation program perceive the influence of their former school English teachers' interpersonal behaviour on their current ESL proficiency. Participants completed an adapted version of the Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction (QTI; Wubbels & Levy, 1991), measuring eight dimensions of teacher behaviour, alongside self-rated proficiency across the four language skills. Pearson correlation analysis revealed weak overall associations, but skill-specific patterns emerged: teacher autonomy-granting was most associated with speaking ($r = 0.22$), strictness with writing ($r = 0.21$), and teacher hesitancy with weaker listening ($r = -0.20$). These findings suggest that the relationship between teacher interpersonal behaviour and ESL development is skill-specific rather than uniform, with implications for GFP pedagogy and teacher professional development aligned with the quality and innovation goals of Oman Vision 2040.

Keywords:- General Foundation Programme, Teacher Interpersonal Behaviour, QTI, ESL Proficiency, Retrospective Study, Oman Vision 2040

I. INTRODUCTION

English language proficiency plays an important role in Omani education and in the national vision for social and economic development. The General Foundation Programme (GFP) acts as a bridging stage for students before higher education, transitioning their school-level English to a more academic and professional register. While existing research on the GFP has focused primarily on curriculum and programme effectiveness (Nouraey et al., 2025), the interpersonal dimension of teaching has received comparatively little attention in the Omani context. The present study adopts a retrospective design, using an adapted Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction (QTI; Wubbels & Levy, 1991), to examine how GFP students perceive the influence of their former school English teachers' interpersonal behaviour on their current ESL proficiency, and to inform teacher development in alignment with the goals of Oman Vision 2040.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on second language acquisition has shown that learning occurs beyond the syllabus and textbook. Language learning is a multifaceted experience that engages not only cognitive processes but also emotional and interpersonal ones. Xie and Derakhshan (2021) argue that teachers' interpersonal behaviour is a vital element of language learning, reflecting the highly interactional nature of the process itself. This view is consistent with Gabryś-Barker (2016), who identifies three interrelated elements shaping second language performance: learners' positive emotions, personality traits, and the learning environment. Within this framework, teachers play a central role in cultivating a positive classroom climate and building the rapport that supports language development. Dewaele et al. (2017) similarly found that teachers' interpersonal variables

significantly influence learners' foreign language enjoyment and anxiety. Their findings suggest that a teacher's role extends beyond delivering a syllabus but rather the emotional and psychological comfort students feel in class.

Interpersonal skills are intangible, which means that they require a special instrument to measure their complexity in a structured way. The Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction (QTI), developed by Wubbels and Levy (1991), was designed to capture students' perceptions of their teachers' interpersonal behaviour in a structured, measurable form. The QTI uses eight dimensions to map teachers' behaviour. These dimensions are leadership, helpfulness, understanding, student responsibility and freedom, uncertainty, dissatisfaction, admonishment, and strictness. Each of these categories reflects a distinct feature of how teachers relate to their students. Since its publication, the QTI has been adapted in many different educational contexts and languages, including a 48 item Australian version developed by Fisher, Fraser, and Wubbels (1993). This paper adapts this 48 item version as the basis of its methodology.

Measuring teachers' interpersonal behaviour is fundamental due to its connection to L2 acquisition, specifically the learners' emotional state. This connection is captured in Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis. The hypothesis proposes that the learner's ability to absorb language input is directly correlated to their emotional state. Krashen (1982) identified three variables that shape language acquisition: motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety. Researchers have increasingly used the QTI in English language classrooms to examine how teachers' interpersonal behaviour influences these affective conditions. For instance, Tuyan (2017) applied the QTI in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) higher education context to assess both teachers' and students' perceptions of their classroom interactions. While Krashen's affective filter hypothesis has remained influential for over four decades, researchers such as Xie and Derakhshan (2021) challenged its uniform framing and argued that affective conditions interact dynamically with specific classroom behaviours rather than as a single global filter. This study empirically examines these conditions in the Omani context.

The English language in Oman is an important part of the educational system. It is taught both in government and private educational institutions starting from kindergarten. Al-Mahrooqi and Denman (2016) surveyed 321 employed Omani graduates and found that participants identified English as vital to their work yet reported struggling to use it effectively, leading them to recommend a shift from teacher-centred to student-centred, communication-focused approaches. The General Foundation Programme (GFP) has become a principal site where this preparation takes place, serving as a bridging year between school and higher education for Omani students. Nouraey et al. (2025) evaluated the effectiveness and efficiency of the GFP with a study that involved 177 students and 11 faculty members. The study concluded that while the programme has significantly improved over time, meaningful challenges and weaknesses persist. However, existing research on GFP in Oman has given a larger focus on the programme's structure, curriculum, and overall outcomes, while paying less attention to the specific role of teachers' interpersonal behaviour in shaping students' ESL proficiency, particularly from the students' own retrospective perspectives. This study aims to investigate this gap by examining how GFP students perceive their former school English teachers' interpersonal behaviour in relation to their current ESL proficiency.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative survey design with a retrospective orientation. Participants were asked to reflect on their former school English teachers and rate their perceptions of those teachers' interpersonal behaviour across eight established dimensions, alongside self-rated proficiency in the four English language skills. A retrospective approach was chosen because it allowed participants to draw on their experience with teachers they had already finished interacting with, providing perspective that current classroom evaluations may lack.

3.2. Participants

Participants were 86 current students enrolled in the General Foundation Programme (GFP) at the School of Foundation Studies, National University of Science and Technology (NUST), Muscat, Oman. Students were invited from six sections taught by the researcher, with participation being entirely voluntary and anonymous. Demographic information was collected on age, gender, years of prior English study, type of school attended (public, private, or international), and duration of current GFP enrolment.

3.3. Instrument

Data were collected using an adapted version of the Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction (QTI; Wubbels & Levy, 1991), drawing on the 48 item Australian version developed by Fisher, Fraser, and Wubbels (1993). The adaptation consisted of 24 items, three items for each of the QTI's eight dimensions of teacher interpersonal behaviour: leadership, helpful/friendly, understanding, student responsibility and freedom, uncertain, dissatisfied, admonishing, and strict. Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always).

The instrument also included self-rated proficiency items measuring participants' current ability in each of the four English language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) along with an overall proficiency rating. These were rated on a five-point scale from 1 (Very weak) to 5 (Excellent). Two open-ended questions invited participants to describe, in English or Arabic, one former English teacher whose behaviour had a positive influence on their English development and one whose behaviour had a negative influence.

To accommodate participants with varying levels of English proficiency, the full instrument was presented bilingually in English and Arabic. The Arabic version was produced through a forward-translation and back-translation procedure. The researcher initially translated the instrument into Arabic, and an independent bilingual colleague back-translated the Arabic version into English without reference to the original. The two English versions were compared, and minor discrepancies were resolved through discussion to ensure conceptual equivalence. A second native Arabic-speaking colleague then reviewed the

final bilingual instrument for clarity, natural phrasing, and cultural appropriateness, resulting in two minor wording revisions prior to distribution.

3.4. Procedure

The survey was administered via Google Forms during regular class time across six sections of the GFP. Before distribution, the researcher provided a brief verbal introduction explaining that the study concerned students' perceptions of their former school English teachers and emphasised that participation was voluntary, anonymous, and unrelated to any form of academic assessment. Students completed the survey on their personal devices and submitted responses directly to a secure Google Sheet linked to the form. The form required participants to confirm consent and age (18 or older) before proceeding. All 86 participants who completed the survey provided consent. No identifying information was collected.

The study followed the research ethics policy of the National University of Science and Technology. Because the study involved an anonymous, voluntary questionnaire with consenting adult participants and collected no personally identifying information, no separate institutional ethics approval was required beyond standard consent procedures. Participant welfare was protected through a consent form, the decision to withdraw at any point, and a clear statement that participation was optional and unrelated to academic assessment.

3.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics to summarise participants' perceptions of teacher interpersonal behaviour and their self-rated proficiency. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the strength and direction of relationships between each of the eight QTI dimensions and participants' overall self-rated ESL proficiency. Responses to the two open-ended items were reviewed and categorised thematically to provide qualitative context for the quantitative findings.

IV. RESULTS

4.1. Participant Characteristics

A total of 86 students participated in the study. All participants provided consent and indicated they were 18 years of age or older. The majority of respondents were aged 17–18 (n = 61, 70.9%), with the remainder aged 19–20 (n = 25, 29.1%). The sample was predominantly female (n = 81, 94.2%), with four male respondents (4.7%) and one participant who preferred not to disclose their gender (1.2%). In terms of prior schooling, most participants attended public schools in Oman (n = 76, 88.4%), with smaller numbers from private (n = 5, 5.8%) and bilingual or international schools (n = 5, 5.8%).

4.2. Perceptions of Teacher Interpersonal Behaviour and Self-Rated Proficiency

Descriptive statistics for the eight QTI dimensions and the five self-rated proficiency items are presented in Table 1. Among the eight dimensions of teacher interpersonal behaviour, participants rated their former school English teachers highest on Helpful/Friendly (M = 4.13, SD = 0.79), Leadership (M = 3.91, SD = 0.58), Freedom (M = 3.71, SD = 0.87), and Understanding (M = 3.59, SD = 0.94), indicating that students generally recalled their teachers as warm, competent, and respectful. The negative-orientation dimensions received lower ratings, with Uncertain the lowest (M = 1.67, SD = 0.58), followed by Admonishing (M = 2.31, SD = 0.86) and Dissatisfied (M = 2.45, SD = 0.90). Strict fell in an intermediate position (M = 3.19, SD = 0.80). Taken together, these patterns suggest that participants generally recalled their school English teachers in a positive light, with warmth and competence rated highly and overtly negative behaviours rated low. The relatively low standard deviations across the positive dimensions further indicate that this favourable impression was widely shared among participants except by a small subgroup.

For self-rated proficiency, participants gave themselves the highest rating on Reading (M = 4.06, SD = 0.76), followed by Listening (M = 3.92, SD = 0.97), Writing (M = 3.84, SD = 0.89), and Speaking (M = 3.55, SD = 0.93). Overall proficiency was rated at M = 3.95 (SD = 0.68). The lower rating of speaking relative to the other three skills is consistent with previously reported patterns of skill asymmetry among Omani English learners. The narrower range of self-rated overall proficiency (Min = 3.00) relative to the individual skills also suggests that participants assessed themselves toward middle-to-positive when asked to evaluate their English skills.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Teacher Interpersonal Behaviour Dimensions and Self-Rated Proficiency (N = 86)

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max
Leadership	3.91	0.58	2.33	5.00
Helpful	4.13	0.79	1.00	5.00
Understanding	3.59	0.94	1.00	5.00
Freedom	3.71	0.87	1.00	5.00
Uncertain	1.67	0.58	1.00	4.00
Dissatisfied	2.45	0.90	1.00	4.67
Admonishing	2.31	0.86	1.00	5.00
Strict	3.19	0.80	1.00	5.00
Reading	4.06	0.76	2.00	5.00
Writing	3.84	0.89	2.00	5.00
Listening	3.92	0.97	1.00	5.00
Speaking	3.55	0.93	1.00	5.00
Overall Proficiency	3.95	0.68	3.00	5.00

4.3. Correlations Between Teacher Interpersonal Behaviour and Self-Rated Proficiency

Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine relationships between the eight QTI dimensions and participants' self-rated English proficiency. Correlations with overall proficiency are presented in Table 2, and correlations with each of the four individual language skills in Table 3.

Correlations between the eight dimensions and overall self-rated proficiency were generally weak, ranging from r = −0.20 (Admonishing) to r = 0.15 (Helpful/Friendly). Although none of the correlations reached conventional thresholds for moderate strength, the direction of the associations was consistent with theoretical expectations: the four positive-orientation dimensions correlated positively with overall proficiency, while three of the four negative-orientation dimensions (Uncertain, Dissatisfied, and Admonishing) correlated negatively.

Table 2. Pearson Correlations Between QTI Dimensions and Overall Self-Rated Proficiency (N = 86)

Dimension	r
Leadership	0.08
Helpful	0.15
Understanding	0.09
Freedom	0.09
Uncertain	−0.17
Dissatisfied	−0.12
Admonishing	−0.20
Strict	−0.01

Examining each language skill separately revealed skill-specific patterns not apparent in the overall-proficiency analysis (Table 3). The strongest positive correlation in the full dataset was between Freedom and Speaking (r = 0.22), suggesting that participants who recalled their former teachers as granting autonomy and encouraging self-expression rated their current speaking ability higher. Strict correlated positively with Writing (r = 0.21), indicating that participants who remembered stricter teachers also rated their writing more highly. Understanding correlated with Speaking (r = 0.16) and Freedom correlated with Listening (r = 0.14). Among the negative-orientation dimensions, Uncertain showed modest negative correlations with Listening (r = −0.20) and Speaking (r = −0.14).

Table 3. Pearson Correlations Between QTI Dimensions and Each English Language Skill (N = 86)

Dimension	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking
Leadership	−0.06	0.15	0.16	0.11
Helpful	0.00	0.11	0.10	0.09
Understanding	0.07	0.21	0.12	0.16
Freedom	−0.01	0.02	0.14	0.22
Uncertain	−0.09	0.07	−0.20	−0.14
Dissatisfied	−0.04	−0.08	−0.03	−0.07
Admonishing	−0.06	−0.11	−0.08	−0.13
Strict	0.10	0.21	0.17	0.01

Across all 32 correlations in Table 3, the strongest patterns emerged for Freedom, Understanding, and Strict, which showed the clearest associations with specific skills rather than with proficiency as a whole. These skill-specific patterns are examined in the Discussion.

V. DISCUSSION

This study examined how GFP students perceive their former school English teachers' interpersonal behaviour in relation to their current ESL proficiency. An adapted version of the QTI was used to measure eight dimensions of teacher behaviour, alongside students' self-rated proficiency in the four English language skills. The results revealed weak overall associations between former teacher interpersonal behaviour and self-rated proficiency, with the direction of the relationships consistent with theoretical expectations. Examining each language skill separately revealed several skill patterns that are not visible at the level of overall proficiency. Students who recalled their teachers granting them autonomy and freedom rated their speaking ability higher (r = 0.22), those who recalled stricter teachers rated their writing higher (r = 0.21), and those who recalled their teachers as uncertain or hesitant rated their listening ability lower (r = -0.20). These skill-specific patterns, although modest in magnitude, suggest that different teacher behaviours may cultivate different language skills. This possibility is examined more closely below.

The skill-specific patterns observed in this study can be interpreted in consideration of how each English language skill is acquired and used in the classroom. The strongest correlation in the present study is between Freedom and Speaking. It is consistent with the idea that speaking is the language skill most dependent on a learner's willingness to take risks. Similarly, classrooms where teachers grant students agency to express their own ideas and make choices about their learning may foster the confidence needed to speak in a second language, with effects that persist beyond the classroom itself. Teachers that were rated as strict were associated with higher self-rated writing abilities. Writing is the skill that most consistently rewards precision and adherence to convention. Teachers who hold students to clear standards and demand precise work may instil habits of accuracy and self-monitoring that benefit writing development over time. The negative correlation between Uncertain and Listening points to a different mechanism. Listening depends on clear, confident input, and teachers who appear hesitant

or unsure may provide weaker models for students to follow. Together, these patterns suggest that what matters is not whether teachers are warm or strict in general, but how their behaviour aligns with the demands of each specific skill. The consistently negative correlations involving Admonishing indicate that strictness should not be confused with harshness. The latter offers no skill-specific benefit.

The modest size of the overall correlations invites reflection on the study's design. Three factors may help explain why associations were weak at the aggregate level. First, the retrospective design introduces a significant time gap between the teachers being rated and the proficiency being reported, with years of additional English exposure intervening. Second, participants were currently enrolled in the GFP, an intensive programme explicitly designed to develop English proficiency, the cumulative effect of which may have overshadowed earlier teacher influence. Third, the QTI asked about school English teachers as a whole rather than individuals; because students typically encounter several different teachers across their school years, ratings reflect an average impression, and a strong effect from one teacher may have been offset by another whose behaviour pulled in the opposite direction. Taken together, these factors do not invalidate the findings so much as contextualise them. The skill-specific patterns that emerged despite these factors suggest that certain aspects of teacher interpersonal behaviour leave traces in how students perceive their English ability today.

Read against the existing literature on teacher interpersonal behaviour and second language acquisition, the findings of this study both confirm long-standing claims and add nuance to them. The correlations in this study broadly align with Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, which argues that the learners' emotional state shapes whether language input is acquired or blocked. The current findings, however, suggest that the affective filter does not operate uniformly across language skills. It appears to operate most strongly on productive and oral skills, particularly speaking, and less so on receptive skills like reading. Similarly, the present findings are consistent with Xie and Derakhshan's (2021) argument that positive teacher interpersonal communication behaviours are central to L2 development, while suggesting that the importance of any specific behaviour may depend on which skill is being developed. The contribution of this study is twofold: it extends the application of the QTI into the under-researched context of the Omani General Foundation Programme, and it offers initial evidence that the relationship between teacher interpersonal behaviour and ESL development may be more skill-specific than uniformly affective.

The findings of this study should be read in light of several methodological and contextual limitations. First, the sample was drawn from a single institution and was predominantly female (94%) and predominantly composed of graduates of public schools (88%). The findings therefore describe a particular slice of the GFP population and may not generalise to male students, private-school graduates, or other Omani universities. Second, English proficiency was measured through self-rating rather than objective assessment. Self-reports are subject to a range of biases, including over- and under-estimation of ability and the influence of momentary confidence on responses. Future studies would benefit from pairing the QTI with standardised proficiency measures such as placement test scores. Third, the retrospective design relies on the participants' memory of their teachers from earlier school years. Students may have averaged across teachers, mixed their experiences, or rated teachers in light of their current sense of themselves as English speakers. A longitudinal study that tracks students through their school and GFP years would provide stronger evidence on how teachers' behaviour relates to language development over time.

Beyond the limitations of the present study, the findings carry several practical implications for GFP teaching and for broader English language education in Oman. First, the association between teacher autonomy-granting and speaking development suggests that GFP instructors should explicitly create opportunities for student-driven oral participation, for example, by structuring lessons around open-ended discussion tasks, allowing students to choose topics for presentations, and treating student-initiated questions as legitimate rather than peripheral. Second, the link between teacher strictness and writing development indicates that rigour in writing instruction, including clear standards, consistent feedback on grammar and structure, and explicit modelling of academic conventions, remains valuable, provided it is distinguished from harshness, which the data associated with no skill-specific benefit. Third, the negative association between teacher hesitancy and listening proficiency points to the importance of confident, well-modelled oral input. Teacher training programmes might therefore prioritise pronunciation confidence and clear classroom delivery alongside subject knowledge. More broadly, these findings argue for integrating student-perspective measures, such as adapted QTI surveys, into ongoing GFP teacher evaluation and professional development. Such integration aligns directly with the quality and innovation aims of Oman Vision 2040.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study examined how 86 Omani GFP students perceive their former school English teachers' interpersonal behaviour in relation to their current ESL proficiency, using an adapted version of the QTI. Although overall correlations were weak, skill-specific patterns emerged: teachers who granted autonomy were most associated with speaking development, stricter teachers with writing, and teachers who appeared hesitant with weaker listening. These findings suggest that the relationship between teacher behaviour and language learning is skill-specific rather than uniform.

Beyond its specific findings, this study contributes a learner-centred view of teacher interpersonal behaviour in a context where such perspectives have been underexplored. Future research could build on this work through longitudinal designs, larger and more demographically diverse samples, and objective proficiency measures alongside the QTI. By centring how students themselves perceive the teachers who shaped their English, this study offers a small but useful contribution to ongoing efforts to enhance Omani foundation education in line with the priorities of Vision 2040.

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