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Exploring Teachers' Reflections and Narratives of Negative Language

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring Teachers' Reflections and Narratives of Negative Language

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Abstract

Language is used to communicate and express feelings and emotions. In the teaching context, teachers use language to share knowledge and information with students. Teachers' use of negative language, such as duffer, stupid, and lazy, may result in students feeling mistreated, discouraged, and worthless. Such language can also negatively affect students' cognitive processes, feelings, and emotions and blunt their curiosity, and their interest in performing better may be reduced. Although much of the previous research has demonstrated the cause-effect relation between negative teacher talk and students' unsatisfactory performance, none of the studies, to the best of our knowledge, explored teachers' reflections and narratives of negative language. Therefore, this study seeks to explore teachers' attitudes to negative language, reasons for using such language, and ways of reducing the use of such language. Data collected through a narrative inquiry from 20 teachers in Pakistan's Sindh province has been qualitatively analyzed to demonstrate how negative language and its perception are shaped by teachers. Findings show that teachers tend to use negative language for several reasons, not always necessarily with the explicit intent of motivating students to improve. As humans, teachers carry anger, annoyance, and irritation issues from the home and relationship domains to the classroom. It is hoped that the findings will make teachers aware of their use of negative language, and hopefully, such awareness will reduce the use of negative language, which, in many cases, is detrimental to students' well-being.

Keywords: communicate, negative language, students' well-being

Teaching is a social (Richards, 2020) and emotional practice (Dörnyei, 2005) that affects instructions and students' responses to such instructions. Emotional approaches to teaching and learning have not been much investigated because emotions were considered irrational and not quantifiable (Richards, 2020). However, the "affective turn" in Applied Linguistics has shifted researchers' focus to evaluating the role of emotions in teaching and learning (Benesch, 2012). Teachers are "emotional practitioners" who can motivate their students with love and enthusiasm or demotivate them with anger and irritability (Teng, 2017, p. 118).

The use of language in teaching contexts can either be positive or negative (Mercer et al., 2018). The positive language used to address students can improve their academic performance (Budzińska & Majchrzak, 2021), self-image, and social well-being (Tranca & Neagoe, 2018). In contrast, negative words, such as monkey, duffer, and moron, that are used to refer to students can blunt their interest in learning (David & Dumanig, 2020; Gunner, n.d.). The effects of negative words include childhood trauma, poor self-esteem, repercussive results, anxiety, self-defeating behavior, and a cycle of verbal abuse (Gunner, n.d.). Some examples of negative/positive language are given in Table 1.

Premised on the deeply intertwined relationship between emotions and language, this study seeks to investigate how emotional practitioners (teachers) dehumanize their students through negative language

in some of the higher education institutions in Pakistan's Sindh province. In many contexts where negative language is used in some higher education institutions, many researchers (e.g., Yang, 2019) investigated teachers' use of negative language and its effects on students' socio-cognitive and academic performance. Studies on teachers' use of negative language have focused on negativity bias (Jing-Schmidt, 2007), negative evaluation (Rafek et al., 2018), and swear words (Generous et al., 2014). Given the academic losses caused by teachers' negative language, many researchers (Budzińska & Majchrzak, 2021; Kloumann et al., 2012) are calling for the use of positive language in teaching/learning contexts. In view of such academic losses, it is of great importance to reduce negative language and create a humanizing environment where teachers and students can learn and practice in an effective, equitable, and transformative manner (Tang, 2022).

Although there is no shortage of discussion about the use of negative language in educational institutions, how it is enacted in some higher education institutions in Sindh has remained an uncharted territory. In addition, there is also a lack of attention to how teachers select some terms of negative language to address male students and other terms to refer to female students. To address such research gaps, this study looks into teachers' use of negative language and variation within such language when addressing male/female students. This study can contribute new knowledge about when and why teachers use pejorative terms and

Table 1
Negative/Positive Language

Negative Expression	What the Listener Hears	Positive Replacement
You cannot answer this question.	You are a duffer.	If you study well, you can answer that.
Your answer is wrong.	You do not know the right answer.	Perhaps you can provide a much better answer.
Your English is bad.	I cannot speak good English.	You can improve it slowly.
You never cooperate with your class fellows.	You are not cooperative.	I know you are going through a different time, but keep yourself engaged.

Examples in Table 1 show how negative language affects listeners and how listeners can interpret such negative language. Moreover, in the third column of Table 1 alternative replacements have been suggested, which show how negative language can be substituted with more positive language.

the range of lexical items they use. The study also provides implications for teachers regarding the use of language in educational institutions and how negative language can affect students' motivation and inspiration.

Negative Language

In this study, negative language is viewed as the swearing language used in some higher education institutions in Sindh. Expanded and enriched by continuing research and discussion, negative language has evolved into an umbrella term for socially and educationally unacceptable language (see Finn, 2017) over recent years. Specifically, compared to its original focus on grammar (Hu, 2019), it has assumed a more comprehensive definition, referring to "offensive language" (Andang & Bram, 2018, p. 43) through which "judgments of rudeness are not only determined by the propositional content of swear words but by a sense of what is appropriate in a particular situation" (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008, p. 269). According to Dewaele (2004), negative language involves using swear and taboo words that may cause embarrassment to an addressee. Such an understanding of negative language reflects the complex and dynamic social reality in which teachers, as emotion practitioners with an offensive instinct, activate and use negative language (Goddard, 2015).

Negative language has gained increased attention as an offensive approach in curriculum design (Finn, 2017), language teaching (Andang & Bram, 2018), and credibility development in the classroom (Mullins, 2017) because replacing such language with positive language in the classroom can result in academic success and socio-cognitive development in students (Budzińska & Majchrzak, 2021). Mullins (2017) examined the use of negative language in a public university in the United States. Using a series of three focus groups, her study discussed how the use of swearing words can affect students' perceived credibility of their instructor. The findings of her study showed that the context and intent of swear words negatively affected students' learning outcomes rather than the use of swearing words. However, as claimed in her study, it is sometimes difficult to measure the intentions of instructors using swear words and the emotions of students ignited by such swear words in a range of contexts.

In recent years, research attention has also been paid to the enactments and effects of negative language in social contexts. Qualitative, sociolinguistic studies discuss how negative language, both verbal and non-verbal, can embrace exclusive ambitions against marginalized groups (Geyser-Fouche, 2016), gendered discrimination against women (de Lemus & Estevan-Reina, 2021), and racist bias against the colored citizens (Ali et al., 2022). David et al. (2022) argued that negative language could provide many examples of ageist language. Building upon narrative inquiry, their study discussed how older persons perceived ageist language and why such language was used. All these studies identify exclusive language as an instance of negative language.

This study problematizes the use of negative language because negative expressions are stronger than positive words (Liebrecht et al., 2019). Such language may hurt students' sensitivities and negatively affect their performance. Exploring teachers' perceptions/narratives of negative language, this study seeks to minimize and perhaps even eradicate the use of negative language in teaching contexts in Sindh. In addition, suggestions are provided for the use of positive and polite language in teaching contexts.

This study addresses the following questions:

1. What negative language do teachers use to refer to female students?
2. What negative language do teachers use to refer to male students?
3. Why did teachers use negative language?

Method

This research used narrative inquiry conducted with 20 teachers over a period of two months (October 2022 to November 2022). The benefits of employing narrative inquiry include getting in-depth details of a situation or experience, recording historically significant issues, and democratizing the documentation of common persons' experiences (Liamputtong, 2019).

Participants

A formal invitation letter was sent to 25 teachers to take part in this study. These participants were on the contact list of the researchers. Moreover, using the snowball sampling technique, the researchers managed

to get the contact details of the prospective teachers. However, only 20 participants were selected for this study. The participants were guaranteed that their responses would be used for research purposes and that their names would not be mentioned in the study. In this regard, the participants' names have been replaced with numbers. The participants were bilingual, as they could speak Sindhi and Urdu. Ten participants were men, and 10 participants were women. The participants belonged to different districts in Pakistan's Sindh province. The average age of the participants was 32 years. All of them were English language teachers working in four higher educational institutions in Sindh.

Instruments

Each participant responded to seven open-ended questions about the use of negative language in the classroom. In total, 20 conversations were conducted with the participants, each with an average length of 20 minutes. The questions were designed to encourage teachers to provide detailed answers. These questions were asked from the participants:

1. What negative words do you use to address students?
2. What do you say to female students when they do not do their homework/classwork?
3. What do you say to male students when they do not do their homework/classwork?
4. Why do you address female/male students using such words?
5. How do female students react to your language?
6. When and why do you use negative language?
7. How does your language affect students' academic performance?

Data Collection

In this phase, the study involved gathering two sets of data. The first set encompassed background information about the participants. The second set revolved around the instances of and reasons for using negative language. The participants were introduced to the study and subsequently interviewed individually, either via phone calls or WhatsApp. During these interviews, the participants were encouraged to share their narratives pertaining to the use of negative language in the classroom.

Data Analysis

After the data collection phase, the study transitioned into the analysis stage. Negative language was operationally defined as the offensive language employed by 20 teachers towards their students. The narratives provided by the participants were transcribed manually. Subsequently, a content reading process was carried out, facilitating a bottom-up coding approach to identify themes and derive empirical conclusions. The coding process occurred in two phases, with the researchers engaging in discussions during the second phase to resolve any potential discrepancies in the codified data.

Results and Discussion

In this section, research findings are analyzed based on three key themes: (a) the use of negative language, (b) negative language used against boy students/girl students, and (c) reasons for using negative language.

The Use of Negative Language

Teachers use negative language against students, and such language degrades students. The examples of negative language used in some higher education institutions in Sindh are given in Table 2.

Table 2
Negative Language

Response no	Response	Gender
1	Sometimes, I use words such as duffer, lazy, or donkey to refer to students who do not perform well. These words make them silent, and they just stare at the ground.	Male
2	I use sentences like “you are not hard workers” and “you do not know how to study this subject.” I use these sentences only for those students who do not take an active interest in their studies.	Female
3	Unlucky, ill-mannered, or ignorant are the words that I use for some students. Mostly, I use it against those students who are disruptive.	Male
4	I compare them with animals or flop actors, and they may sometimes not like it.	Female
5	I call them backward, rustic, or cheaters because they sometimes try to cheat in exams.	Female

Responses in Table 2 demonstrate how some students are negatively referred to as duffer, lazy, unlucky, ill-mannered, or ignorant and how the animal name, donkey, is used to address some students. These negative words dehumanize students and can perhaps reduce their academic progress. According to Mullins (2017), such negative words can affect students’ perceived credibility of their instructors. When students’ perceived credibility of their teachers is affected, their interest in studies, as shown in response 2 in Table 2, is reduced.

Students’ reduced participation in class and interest in their studies also result in teachers using negative words, such as backward, rustic, or cheaters, and this is how a vicious cycle develops in which some teachers’ negative language and some students’ reduced interest aggravate each other. Response 5 in Table 2 highlights a correlation between students’ reduced participation and interest in their studies and teachers’ use of negative words. The response suggests that the vicious cycle can potentially have detrimental effects on the educational environment, leading to further disengagement and dissatisfaction among students, as well as potentially affecting their self-esteem and motivation.

It is important to mention that male teachers use negative words to ensure discipline and manage disruptive behavior in the classroom (see responses 1 and 3 in Table 2). In contrast, female teachers employ negative language to criticize negative traits in students’ character (see responses 2 and 5). However, as shown in responses 1 and 4, both male and female teachers compare students to animals. Moreover, as indicated in the following responses, more male teachers tend to

use negative words compared to female teachers. As a female teacher reported, “it’s difficult for me to recall the incidents, as I do not lose my temper in class.” Similarly, another female participant narrated, “I do not use bad words in any circumstances.” In contrast, male teachers often use negative words; for example, a participant said, “I might use more offensive words to control my students.” However, a male teacher said, “Although I am a patient teacher and normally ignore mischievous activities of the students during the class, there are incidents in my classroom where I have lost my temper on students.” The response suggests a mix of positive qualities (patience) and potential areas for improvement (losing temper). As the response implicitly shows, it would be beneficial for the teacher to reflect on these incidents, identify triggers, and work on strategies to maintain a more consistent and patient approach in the classroom.

Besides this, five teachers reported that they used non-verbal cues to control their students in the classroom. For example, a participant said, “I mostly use loud tone or sarcastic words.” Moreover, the negative language teachers use can perhaps be different when it comes to addressing male and female students.

Negative Language Used Against Boy Students/Girl Students

Teachers are perhaps selective in their use of negative language, especially when it comes to addressing male and female students, and the selectiveness is shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Gender and Negative Language

Response no.	Response	Gender
6	When addressing disruptive boys, I call them roamers or street boys. In contrast, I use talkative, noisy, or chirping birds to refer to disruptive girls in the class.	Male
7	For example, boys are called rogues, comrades, or arrogant, while girls are called misbehaving, disrespectful, or dumb.	Male
8	I use stubborn, irrational, and deaf to refer to boys. Girls can be shy or lacking in confidence, and I often use these terms.	Female
9	Boys who disturb me are called disgusting, ill-trained, or shameless. For girls, we have different words, such as backbiter, not obedient, and not focused.	Female
10	For boys, I use naughty or gangster, and for girls, not well-mannered, misbehaved, or irritating.	Female

Language that is related to negative socialization is used to address male students. Teachers, as mentioned in response 6 in Table 3, justify their use of negative language on the premise that it helps them prevent bad experiences/behaviors (acquired through roaming) that male students are said to bring to the classroom. In contrast, negative language related to loquacity is used to define female students' disruptive verbal behavior. This shows how male students' behavior is profiled using terms such as roaming, street boys, rogues, comrades, ill-trained, or arrogant (terms related to social behavior), and how female students' behavior is profiled using terms such as chirping, backbiter, or noisy (terms related to verbal behavior).

However, it is important to note that negative language related to socially unacceptable behavior (rogues, gangsters, etc.) is also used to refer to some female students. Moreover, a participant acknowledged using the Eiffel Tower to refer to tall boys. Similarly, another participant recalled, "Once a girl was screaming in the classroom, I immediately called her a monkey in our classroom." Such negative language used to refer

to students can reduce their learning interest (David & Dumanig, 2020). However, not all the teachers use negative language, as a female participant narrated: "I do not use negative words for any gender. I treat both genders equally, depending on their behavior."

The statements provided reveal a troubling pattern of gender bias and stereotyping in how disruptive behavior in male and female students is addressed. The language used disproportionately portrays boys in a more adventurous and assertive light, whereas girls are depicted as chatterboxes, passive, and less severely disciplined. These disparities in terminology reinforce harmful gender stereotypes and underscore the need for more equitable, respectful, and unbiased approaches to student behavior management in educational settings.

Reasons for Using Negative Language

Many reasons are provided for using negative language in the classrooms, and these reasons are given in Table 4.

Teachers use negative and strong language against some students because the former seek to manage the

Table 4
Reasons for Negative Language

Response No.	Response	Gender
11	Well, I use it because they irritate me and disrupt my lesson plan.	Male
12	When they don't focus and whisper in each other's ears, I feel angry and show them my anger. That's why I sometimes insult them.	Female
13	If anyone moves or leaves his or her seat without my permission, I use such language.	Male
14	Because they don't do their homework or they don't obey my instructions.	Female

latter's disruptive behavior. The swear words are used to manage disruption because these words are perhaps what Jay and Janschewitz (2008) called judgments of rudeness. However, as emotional practitioners (Teng, 2017), teachers make such judgments to penalize their students verbally. Some teachers may use negative language to threaten their students. For instance, a participant recalled, "When students are not performing well in the classroom or misbehaving, I often threaten them and say that 'I would give you zero marks or I would deduct your marks.'"

In classes with over 50 students, teachers often get annoyed for multiple reasons, which are shown in Figure 1.

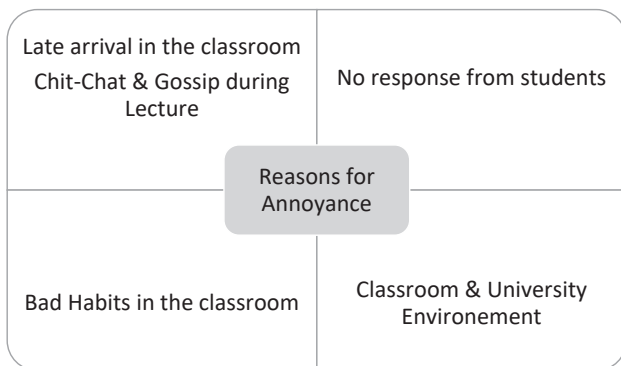


Figure 1
Reasons for Annoyance

Teachers narrated that sometimes students may behave disruptively in the classroom. In such scenarios, teachers often use negative words. As a participant narrated, when students arrive late in the classroom, he calls them "stupid and idiot." Likewise, another participant said: "I don't call them idiots, but I tell them that they are not good students." The language in the response is negative. Although it does not use explicitly offensive language like "idiot," it still conveys a negative judgment by stating that the individuals are not good students.

Similarly, another participant said: "When students talk to each other during the lecture, I often ask them to 'shut their mouths' and 'get lost.'" The language used in the given statement can be considered negative. Phrases like "shut their mouths" and "get lost" are generally impolite and can be interpreted as rude or aggressive, which conveys a negative tone.

Teachers also use negative language because students do not respond properly or pay no attention

to their teachers' lectures. For instance, a participant said, "I call them statues." In the same way, another participant reported: "Once, during the lecture, a few students asked me some questions while the remaining students were using mobile phones, and they started laughing. I lost my temper and told them: 'What's going on? Is this a classroom or a fish market?'" Besides, one of the participants reported that "it once happened that students came to my class after smoking, and I couldn't bear the smell. So I asked the student to leave the classroom." Similarly, a participant narrated a similar behavior:

Being capnophobic, I could not resist the smell in the class and lost my temper and yelled at the students 'that someone has smoked in the classroom and it's not allowed.' As I could not bear the smell and as per the past experience, it gave me shivering, and I might have fallen down.

Firstly, the response indicates an emotional response to the smell of smoke within a classroom environment. The use of the phrase "lost my temper" signifies a lack of emotional control. Furthermore, the response highlights a significant physical reaction, including shivering and the potential risk of fainting. These physical manifestations demonstrate the severity of the individual's capnophobia.

However, a female participant responded that she never used negative words against her students. She respects her students and uses positive language to refer to her students. Finally, it is important to note that about 15 participants (10 males and five females) responded that they used negative language in their classes. In contrast, two females reported that they once used negative language in the classroom; however, they said they would not use such language. Three females reported that they had not used negative language in classrooms.

Conclusion and Implications

This study investigates the use of negative language in some higher education institutions in Pakistan's Sindh province. Moreover, it discusses how some teachers selectively use negative language when addressing students. The reasons for using such language are also provided and discussed in this study. These findings were explored via interviews conducted

in face-to-face contexts and via smartphones. It demonstrated how both male and female teachers use negative language and how they use such language differently. However, three female participants said they did not use negative language in the classroom because they wanted to develop what Mullins (2017) called “credibility.” Male teachers’ negative language was related to students’ behavioral disruption, whereas female teachers’ negative language emphasized negative traits in students’ character. Moreover, common forms of address (negative language) were also observed as both male and female teachers compared some of their students to animals.

Bearing such language and its probable effects in mind, it is suggested that positive language should be used in the classrooms in some higher education institutions in Pakistan’s Sindh province. Such language can perhaps break the vicious cycle in which some teachers’ negative language and students’ reduced participation/interest aggravate each other. Positive language is inclusive, more professional, and it can bring sustainability to teaching and learning (Ali et al., 2022).

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the theoretical knowledge base of negative language used in teaching contexts by discussing how male and female teachers used it, how male and female students are differently addressed in such language, and why the language is used. Understanding the reasons for the use of negative language is significant because this can help reduce its use and create a feasible climate for humanizing learning. According to Jing-Schmidt (2007), the use of negative language results in negativity bias in teachers and learners. However, this study discusses how a vicious cycle of negativity develops through negative language. Therefore, it is suggested that negativity bias and its ensuing vicious cycle be diffused through positive, professional, and polite language.

This study also adds to the theoretical understanding of negative language and gender. According to de Lemus and Estevan-Reina (2021), negative language excludes a person based on their gender. However, this study discusses how such exclusive language can be selectively used by male and female teachers when addressing male and female students.

Researchers (Andang & Bram, 2018; Finn, 2017) have identified negative language as an offensive

approach in curriculum design and language teaching. Drawing upon the discourse of negative language, this study proposes theoretical perspectives on how negative language is used in some higher education institutions in Sindh and how such language differs on gender dimensions. Furthermore, this study expands the existing theoretical literature on the practice of negative language in classrooms by conceptualizing negative language as a practice of dehumanizing students.

Pedagogical Implications

This study highlights the need for teachers in Sindh to consider and value their students by using positive language. Language teachers can initiate the process of neutralizing negative language in the classroom and can facilitate an inclusive climate by using positive language. It is suggested that positive language should be used because it is a socially acceptable and pedagogically practical and rational tool for language teaching.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study used a small sample taken from some higher education institutions in Sindh, we hope researchers will explore the situation in primary/secondary educational institutions in different regions of Pakistan, which may provide similar/different results. It is hoped that this research will pave the way for researchers to expand research on negative language in a wide range of contexts, where such language may hinder students’ educational progress, while the use of positive language can facilitate their academic progress.

Through narrative inquiry, this study explored the use of negative language by teachers and the difference in the use of such language on gender lines. Moreover, reasons for the use of such language were also explored. The findings of the study were discussed with respect to theoretical and pedagogical implications. The limitations and future pathways of research were mentioned to encourage researchers to explore new horizons of research on negative language in different contexts. It is suggested that positive language should be used to foster an inclusive climate through the use of positive language.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest in this study.

Statement of Originality

The research is original.

AI Use Statement

No AI tool was used in this study.