

An Evolutionary Study of English Classroom Evaluative Feedback Models from the Perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics

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Abstract. Classroom evaluative feedback, encompassing praise, criticism, rewards, and punishments, is a pivotal interpersonal and educational tool in English language teaching. It profoundly shapes the classroom atmosphere, directly influences student engagement, and significantly impacts learners' motivation and subsequent behavior. While existing research has extensively explored this topic, it largely does so from psychological or conversational analysis perspectives, often lacking a systematic, unified linguistic explanation for the underlying mechanisms. To address this gap, this paper employs a comprehensive literature review to systematically trace the evolution of English classroom evaluative feedback models, charting their development from early behaviorist and cognitive perspectives through to contemporary sociocultural and systemic functional linguistics (SFL) viewpoints. The central focus is on demonstrating how modern assessment theory can provide a robust and systematic analytical framework for understanding the complexity of classroom feedback. The analytical framework proposed herein supplements existing oral evaluative feedback models, offering a coherent theoretical reference that can effectively guide pedagogical practice and serve as a foundation for subsequent empirical research in the field of English language teaching.

Keywords: System Functional Linguistics (SFL), Classroom evaluative feedback, Feedback model evolution, English language teaching

1. Introduction

Classroom evaluative feedback refers to the responsive evaluations teachers make of students' learning performance, playing a crucial role in second language acquisition and English teaching. Effective classroom feedback can regulate the interpersonal relationship between teachers and students, affecting classroom quality and student engagement [1, 2]. However, existing models are mostly derived from behaviorist psychology or conversational analysis perspectives, with few examining the linguistic implementation of evaluative feedback from a linguistic system perspective [3]. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides a theoretical possibility for solving this problem: its interpersonal metafunctional framework and Appraisal Theory can reveal the attitudes,

involvements, and differential resources constructed by teachers in feedback [4, 5]. In recent years, classroom feedback research has evolved from behaviorist and cognitive perspectives to sociocultural perspectives. Early models viewed feedback as a reinforcement mechanism or error correction tool [6, 7]; subsequent studies have emphasized the scaffolding function and zone of proximal development of feedback, understanding it as an interactive sequence organization [3, 8]. This paper uses a literature review method to trace the evolution of English classroom evaluative feedback models, providing practical reference for English teachers to design and implement more effective classroom feedback.

2. Literature review

2.1. Behaviorist and cognitive perspectives

Reinforcement theory points out that behavior change depends on the feedback signal obtained after the behavior, and these signals are divided into reinforcement, punishment and extinction. Therefore, the essence of reinforcement theory is a theory about post-behavioral feedback. A post-behavioral feedback signal is also called a reinforcer. Positive feedback increases the probability of behavior recurrence, while negative feedback decreases it. This theory has built the first systematic framework for classroom feedback. Kulhavy's information processing model understands feedback and breaks through the "stimulus-response-reinforcement" emphasized by traditional behaviorism. It re-examines the feedback problem from the perspective of cognitive psychology and further explores how feedback information is processed in the learner's brain and thus affects subsequent learning [7]. He believes that the most critical value of feedback is not to "reinforce" correct behavior, but to help learners identify and correct errors in cognition. The two studies have two common limitations: first, they ignore the social interaction attributes of classroom feedback and regard it only as a one-way information transmission from teachers to students; second, they only focus on the reinforcing role and information content of feedback and do not explore the linguistic form of feedback (such as word choice, tone, sentence structure, etc.).

2.2. Sociocultural and interactional turns

Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" and "scaffolding" pulled classroom feedback out of the behaviorist "stimulus-response" and cognitivist "information processing," making feedback no longer just a one-way evaluation or information transmission, but a dynamic and temporary support in the teacher-student dialogue. Teachers lend a hand to students based on their current performance to help them complete tasks that they could not complete otherwise. Conversation analysis starts from the turn-taking structure and uses the IRF (Initiation-Response-Feedback) sequence to explain that feedback itself is a link embedded in classroom interaction. However, both perspectives have a common shortcoming: the lack of a systematic set of linguistic tools makes it impossible to analyze in detail what linguistic means feedback discourse uses and how it constructs meaning [8].

2.3. SFL-informed perspectives

To overcome the shortcomings of behaviorism, cognitivism and socio-cultural perspectives in language analysis, systemic functional linguistics provides a systematic theoretical tool. Halliday's interpersonal metafunction is very clear: language is not just about conveying information, but also about building relationships [9]. In the classroom, teachers use different tones (statement, question,

and exclamation) and modalities ("maybe" and "must") to adjust the distance and sense of authority with students, which are dimensions that previous theories could not describe in detail [10]. Martin & White's appraisal theory is more detailed, breaking down interpersonal meaning into three dimensions: attitude (emotion, judgment, and appreciation), involvement (talking to oneself or talking to students), and grade difference (the strength of appraisal). These three dimensions can be used to analyze how teachers actually give feedback in the classroom [4]. There have been many studies that have used appraisal theory to analyze teachers' verbal feedback and classroom discourse [3, 5]. It is better than Vygotsky and conversation analysis at answering how the wording of feedback affects teacher-student relationships and student learning. Therefore, this study uses appraisal theory as an analytical framework to see how attitude, involvement, and grade difference are distributed in the English classroom and what their teaching effects are.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. Foundational concepts of SFL for feedback analysis

In systemic functional linguistics, interpersonal metafunctions construct teacher-student relationships through mood, modality, and appraiser. Mood defines communicative roles. Imperative sentences (e.g., "Open the book") reinforce teacher authority, interrogative sentences (e.g., "Can you share your thoughts?") tend towards negotiation, and declarative sentences (e.g., "I see you are working hard") de-emphasize power hierarchy. Modality expresses possibility or obligation. High modality values ("must") emphasize the unquestionable nature of the judgment, while medium to low modality values ("may") grant students autonomy. Appraiser expresses attitude. A positive appraiser establishes a supportive relationship, and a negative appraiser, when accompanied by guidance, can also serve as effective scaffolding. In short, authoritative relationships often use imperative mood, high modality values, and explicit negative appraisers; cooperative relationships often use interrogative/declarative mood, medium to low modality values, and positive or guiding negative appraisers.

3.2. The appraisal system

The evaluation system is used to analyze how attitudes are expressed, negotiated positions and intensity of adjustment in language, and includes three subsystems:

The attitude subsystem focuses on emotion, ethics and aesthetic evaluation, and is specifically divided into three categories: emotion, judgment and appreciation. Emotion involves the speaker's emotions, such as: "I'm glad you raised your hand"; judgment is a social evaluation of a person's behavior or ability, such as: "Your reasoning is very rigorous"; appreciation is the value evaluation of an object or process, such as: "Your structure is very clear."

The intervention subsystem is used to manage different voices in the discourse, including single and multi-voice modes. Monophony closes off other positions, while polyphony is further divided into dialogue expansion and dialogue compression. Dialogue expansion includes elicitation: "Maybe we can change the angle" and excerpts: "The textbook says..."; dialogue compression includes denial: "No, there should be a plus sign here" and announcement: "Actually, this principle is the key."

The extreme subsystem regulates the intensity or scope of discourse, involving two levels: momentum and focus. The momentum can be increased (e.g., "very", and "completely") or

decreased (e.g., "a bit", and "maybe"); the focus can be sharpened (e.g., "really", and "typical") or softened (e.g., "to some extent", and "almost").

3.3. Integrated analytical framework

This integrative analytical framework, based on three subsystems of assessment theory—attitude, intervention, and grade difference—systematically maps classroom evaluative feedback behaviors to specific language and instructional functions: The attitude subsystem primarily encourages students or specifies standards through "judgment" (e.g., praising students' abilities or efforts) and "appreciation" (e.g., evaluating the logic and structure of assignments); the intervention subsystem opens up dialogue space to promote students' autonomous knowledge construction through "initiation" (e.g., guided questioning and correction), with the former encouraging students to think for themselves and the latter providing direct answers; the grade difference subsystem balances maintaining students' emotions and clarifying instructional requirements through "tone" and "focus" (sharpening/softening), simply put, by controlling the strength of tone. With these three working together and used in coordination, feedback becomes more than just saying good or bad; it can be flexibly adjusted.

4. Discussion

By reviewing the evolution of classroom evaluative feedback models, it is evident that the feedback concept has gradually shifted from the behaviorist input-output paradigm to a meaning-construction framework. Among them, the third-generation model based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and appraisal theory provides the most comprehensive perspective for understanding feedback as an interpersonal process co-constructed by teachers and students [5, 10].

Firstly, the SFL model transforms feedback from one-way correction to negotiated meaning construction. Traditional behaviorism views feedback merely as reinforcement of correct responses, while SFL's interpersonal metafunction points out that every piece of feedback modulates the teacher-student relationship [6, 10]. In practice, teachers should change "You made a mistake" to "Can you check this step again?" to reduce student anxiety and promote correction. Secondly, appraisal theory provides systematic tools for regulating the interpersonal impact of feedback [4]. Attitudes and intervention levels can finely control praise and criticism: when praising, judgments can be used with increased tone; when correcting, "prompting" ("Maybe from another angle") rather than direct denial can maintain a relaxed classroom atmosphere [1, 9]. Furthermore, the SFL model emphasizes the existence of different voices in the classroom. Teachers can use phrases such as "The textbook suggests..." or "Some students think..." to construct a dialogic classroom, which is consistent with Vygotsky's "scaffolding" and "zone of proximal development" concepts [8]. Finally, this model provides insights for teacher professional development. Teacher training should introduce SFL analysis categories to help teachers analyze their classroom language, see which words can stimulate students' thinking, and guide students to discover the patterns of knowledge. These words are indispensable in the English classroom [1]. In summary, the SFL meaning construction model integrates previous theories into a unified framework, transforming evaluative feedback from merely judging right or wrong into a continuous relational process.

5. Conclusion

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