

Classroom Feedback and English Learning Self-Efficacy of College Freshmen

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ABSTRACT

Classroom feedback plays a positive role in encouraging students' active participation in class activities, fostering a strong interest in English learning, correcting mistakes, and improving proficiency. More importantly, effective positive feedback can enhance students' self-efficacy in learning, stimulate motivation, and sustain perseverance in studies. For university freshmen, positive feedback helps them adapt quickly to the pace of university learning, maintain their passion for the English subject, and continue to excel in it.

KEYWORDS

Classroom feedback; Self-efficacy; Freshmen; College English

1 Introduction

For college freshmen, the English classroom undergoes significant changes. English learning is no longer solely about passing exams, and the content may not directly appear on test papers. The teacher-student relationship becomes more relaxed, with learning increasingly dependent on personal planning and execution. Since college learning attach greater emphasis on self-directed study, with students expected to take initiative in exploring the beauty of the language, teachers should focus on helping college students maintain English learning as a lifelong interest and master the skill of learning on his own. That is, to improve students' self-efficacy.

American psychologist Albert Bandura first proposed the theory of self-efficacy in 1977. "Self-Efficacy is a person's particular set of beliefs that determine how well one can execute a plan of action in prospective situations (Bandura, 1977)." He introduced the concept of self-efficacy as a key factor in human motivation, behavior, and success, and his work emphasized that belief in one's capabilities significantly influences how people approach goals, challenges, and setbacks. It's the confidence in one's ability to influence events and control over one's environment. High self-efficacy has numerous benefits to daily life, such as resilience to adversity and stress, healthy lifestyle habits, improved employee performance, and educational achievement (Lopez-Garrido, 2025). That is, it influences individuals' external behavior by affecting their internal psychological processes. Self-efficacy determines individuals' behavioral choices, shapes their mindset when facing challenges, and impacts their performance (Liu Ping, 2014).

In college English classrooms, teachers assign tasks, such as text comprehension, reading aloud, and discussions, pose questions, and provide targeted feedback based on students' performance—whether by praising accuracy, highlighting strengths, offering hints, correcting errors, pointing out shortcomings, or combining praise with constructive criticism. Hattie defines feedback as "information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, internet, or personal experience) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). He emphasizes that the purpose of feedback is to reduce the gap between current and desired levels of understanding or performance. Based on cognitive complexity, performance-based feedback operates at three levels—task, process, and self-regulation—with its effectiveness closely tied to learners' developmental stages. In classroom settings, teacher feedback primarily occurs at the task level, often termed "corrective feedback". When learners are at surface-level learning stages, they require task-level feedback to identify errors in foundational knowledge. As they progress to connecting concepts and forming cognitive frameworks, process-level feedback becomes more valuable by offering alternative strategies and reducing cognitive load (Hattie & Clarke, 2018).

Teachers' feedback plays a crucial role in shaping students' self-efficacy (their belief in their ability to succeed). According to Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, feedback is a form of verbal persuasion, one of the four key sources of self-efficacy. In Chapter 4, "The Power of Verbal Feedback in the Classroom", Hattie emphasizes the effectiveness of verbal feedback in the classroom. Teachers have a responsibility to create a safe and relaxed classroom atmosphere, building trust with students so that they feel respected and are willing to express themselves and participate in activities. "Only then can they make their learning visible: asking questions, seeking help, or sharing misconceptions". The way teachers deliver feedback can either strengthen or weaken a student's confidence in their academic abilities. Proper use of classroom feedback can enhance teaching appeal, strengthen cohesion, and foster teacher-student bonds. Therefore, the relationship between teachers' classroom feedback and students' self-efficacy in English learning is significant. As an educator's evaluation of students' performance, aimed at motivating learning, teacher feedback assesses responses, and also regulates and influences students' learning attitudes. It can encourage and guide students, subtly influencing their

interest in English as a subject and their personal development. In classroom teaching, positive and constructive feedback from teachers can enhance students' self-efficacy, helping them maintain enthusiasm for English learning and guiding their future learning direction. Therefore, immediate feedback in college English classrooms is highly relevant to freshman's self-efficacy in English learning and plays a crucial role.

2 Challenges college freshmen may face

The transition to university brings significant academic adjustments, particularly in English learning, where freshmen often encounter multifaceted challenges. Dweck's *Mindset* highlights a pivotal crisis during the transition to college: "Another transition, another crisis. College is when all the students who were the brains in high school are thrown together. Like our graduate students, yesterday they were kings of the hill, but today—who are they?" Unlike high school, where structured curricula and exam-focused goals provided clear direction, college demands greater self-directed learning—students must actively set their own objectives, manage their time, and seek resources independently. Many struggle with the increased difficulty of coursework, where effort does not always correlate with grades, leading to frustration and self-doubt. Additionally, without a unified goal like the Gaokao, some students feel directionless, unsure of how to prioritize their English studies. Peer dynamics further complicate this transition; surrounded by classmates of similar or higher proficiency, students may experience heightened comparison and insecurity. To overcome these obstacles, developing self-efficacy—confidence in their ability to improve through persistent effort—becomes essential. Without it, motivation wanes, and disengagement can follow. Therefore, teachers play a crucial role in helping freshmen navigate this transition. In English classrooms, teachers can leverage the power of timely feedback as an effective tool to guide students through these challenges. Well-structured feedback not only clarifies expectations and corrects errors but also reinforces progress, helping learners rebuild confidence in their abilities. By providing specific, actionable suggestions while acknowledging improvements, instructors can foster a growth mindset and strengthen students' self-efficacy. As Dweck elaborates in Chapter 7 on how educators' communication shapes self-perception, "Every word and action can send a message. It tells children—or students, or athletes—how to think about themselves". It can be a fixed-mindset message that says you have permanent traits and I'm judging them. Or it can be a growth-mindset message that says you are a developing person, and I am committed to your development. When educators provide growth-mindset feedback (e.g., "*Your argument strengthened because you revised with peer feedback*"), they do more than encourage improvement; they reinforce Bandura's sources of self-efficacy (Carol S. Dweck, 2006). This approach creates a supportive learning environment where freshmen feel empowered to take ownership of their English studies despite the initial difficulties. Teachers' classroom feedback can be a key mediator of self-efficacy in helping students with this identity shift.

3 Inspirations

So what teachers could do in freshman's English class?

The psychological benefits of skillful teacher feedback are well-documented, particularly in boosting student confidence and alleviating language learning anxiety. For college freshmen, who often face heightened pressure and self-doubt as they adapt to more demanding English courses and academic expectations in higher education, this is especially crucial. Teachers' classroom feedback can serve as a primary vehicle for cultivating self-efficacy during this identity shift, where growth-oriented comments (e.g., "*Your analysis deepened because you actively sought peer feedback*") directly strengthen students' *mastery experiences*—Bandura's most potent efficacy source—while implicitly modeling that abilities are developable (vicarious learning). By framing struggles as skill-building opportunities ("*Many students initially struggle with citations; let's practice specific examples*"), teachers also provide *verbal persuasion* and reduce anxiety (*emotional arousal*), completing the quadruple pathway to robust self-efficacy.

In educational practice, immediate classroom feedback represents a vital pedagogical tool - the verbal evaluation teachers provide either during or directly after learning activities. This real-time interaction serves multiple purposes. It encourages participation, stimulates interest, deepens understanding, corrects errors, and provokes critical reflection. The timeliness of such feedback creates a dynamic learning environment where students gain instant clarity about their performance while teachers can offer precisely tailored guidance.

The immediacy characteristic of this feedback mechanism establishes a productive dialogue between instructors and learners. Students receive personalized support exactly when needed, while teachers acquire valuable insights into individual learning needs. This reciprocal communication fosters mutual understanding of expectations and progress, creating optimal conditions for teaching effectiveness and learning outcomes. The continuous exchange allows for ongoing adjustment of instructional strategies to match students' evolving comprehension levels, making the learning process more responsive and effective.

Hattie posits that feedback directed at the personal level (e.g. praise) demonstrates minimal effectiveness. However, based on my teaching experience, I have observed that positive feedback significantly reinforces students' self-efficacy. This phenomenon may be attributed to the context of university English classes, which typically involve large cohorts rather than small-group instruction. Given that students have limited opportunities to participate during a semester, each instance of teacher feedback becomes particularly valuable. Remarkably, a single praise can leave a lasting impression throughout a student's four-year university journey. Therefore, teachers must conscientiously consider the impact of their feedback.

Positive feedback not only enhances self-efficacy but also actively encourages participation. For example, in my practice on the Superstar Learning platform, I implemented an optional thematic discussion where each submission automatically received a "like" before receiving personalized teacher comments. Analysis revealed that students who received this reinforcement showed continued engagement in subsequent oral discussions. As Cui Yichen's (2012, cited in Hu Suyang, 2017) experimental study demonstrated, when teachers adopt interactive strategies to create a harmonious and relaxed classroom atmosphere, providing verbal encouragement and positive feedback based on modeling effects, students experience the joy of success. This approach effectively enhances learning motivation, boosts students' self-efficacy, and consequently leads to better learning outcomes (Hu Suyang, 2017).

Importantly, not all praise is beneficial; excessive or non-specific feedback fails to offer actionable guidance. Instead, educators should provide specific, constructive suggestions tailored to individual levels—for instance, challenging advanced learners with more complex vocabulary or further reflective questions. Students should be guided to reflect on feedback after class, internalizing and implementing suggestions. The process requires mutual trust and respect. Albert Bandura notes, "The most effective self-assessment likely occurs when individuals evaluate themselves as slightly exceeding their current capabilities." This calibrated self-perception serves as a powerful motivator, prompting learners to undertake realistically challenging tasks that ultimately drive skill development. So teachers should design tasks based on students' proficiency levels following the "N+1" principle—ensuring tasks are achievable yet slightly challenging.

Beyond affirmation, effective feedback should also guide improvement. For instance, after a teaching session, the author received a WeChat message from a student who mentioned how the feedback - "You could be more confident" - following a classroom question had encouraged her. This simple remark motivated the student to actively participate in subsequent lessons, attentively engage with instruction, and willingly cooperate with the teacher's questioning and classroom activities. Such feedback aligns closely with teachers' use of questioning techniques to guide students in self-correcting or improving their answers, an approach more conducive to long-term development. This requires teachers to continuously refine their language proficiency and classroom management skills. Teachers reflect on their feedback language and strategies, adapting them to teaching objectives, student levels, personalities, and emotional needs. For example, replacing "Your response has many errors" with "Your perspective is fresh—let's work on supporting evidence and grammar" can significantly affect motivation and confidence.

However, the effectiveness of classroom feedback is not always immediate. Students can enhance the impact of feedback through post-class reflection, thereby strengthening their determination to improve. This process necessitates establishing mutual trust between teachers and students, where students learn to value and respect the feedback they receive. Teng Bingbing (2013) synthesized students' feedback preferences through research: "Post-class interviews revealed the following patterns: (1) Most respondents desired timely teacher feedback; (2) Novice learners responded better to simple affirmation, whereas advanced learners preferred specific, targeted feedback; (3) While students acknowledged both positive and negative feedback, the majority perceived constructive criticism as most effective; (4) When unable to answer or answering incorrectly, students hoped for encouraging or reassuring comments to overcome psychological barriers; (5) Most agreed that immediate error correction facilitates proper language acquisition, though the correction method significantly impacts speaking confidence—students favored indirect correction or guided self-discovery of mistakes. Obviously, the research reveals students' sophisticated understanding of feedback's dual purpose - they simultaneously seek emotional support and precise guidance for improvement. This nuanced comprehension challenges educators to design feedback systems that honor both the affective and cognitive dimensions of language acquisition.

Interestingly, feedback effectiveness also relates to teachers' individual personalities and presentation styles. Some educators naturally adopt a more serious, rigorous demeanor, while others convey warmth and approachability. These stylistic differences mean the same essential feedback may land differently with various students - yet neither approach is inherently superior, as different learners respond positively to different communication styles.

Perhaps most importantly, teachers must nurture students' capacity to receive feedback with openness and professionalism. This involves guiding learners in how to thoughtfully respond to and implement suggestions from peers, especially when those suggestions come from classmates they might perceive as less skilled. The psychological readiness to accept such feedback and make corresponding adjustments represents a crucial learning outcome in itself - one that requires ongoing teacher support and careful monitoring throughout the feedback cycle. Hattie and Clarke (2018)

mention that “Teaching students how to receive, interpret, and utilize feedback may be significantly more important than focusing solely on the quantity of feedback provided by teachers... Feedback typically requires additional effort to implement improvements, repeated practice, and sustained commitment. It shapes our beliefs about our work, influences our quality judgments, and entails certain costs. The art of feedback lies in transforming these costs into benefits that foster deeper and more meaningful learning” (p.5).

Research indicates that classrooms with frequent feedback exchanges foster more active teacher-student engagement and a more harmonious learning environment. This dynamic occurs because constructive feedback creates a cycle of communication, where students feel their efforts are recognized and teachers can adjust instruction based on real-time responses. A key strategy to sustain this positive loop is incorporating classroom performance and participation into formative assessment as part of the regular grading system. By doing so, students perceive their daily contributions as meaningful, which reinforces their self-efficacy—the belief in their ability to succeed. Studies show that students with higher self-efficacy are more likely to participate actively in classroom interactions, engage in autonomous learning, and seek out teachers for guidance beyond class hours. These learners often discuss their progress, study plans, and goals with instructors, demonstrating a proactive attitude toward improvement. Moreover, their openness to teacher suggestions further enhances learning outcomes, as feedback is more effectively internalized and applied. In summary, immediate classroom feedback—when applied positively, specifically, and adaptively—can significantly enhance participation, self-efficacy, and learning outcomes. It helps create a communicative, supportive, and challenging learning environment, which is especially beneficial for freshmen adapting to university-level English learning.

4 Summary

Feedback serves as a fundamental component of effective teaching, playing a vital role in enhancing student engagement, fostering genuine interest in English learning, and promoting both error correction and skill development. For university freshmen, such feedback proves especially valuable—it eases their transition into academic life, sustains their enthusiasm for English studies, and supports their long-term success in mastering the language. However, effective feedback requires a balanced approach: one that goes beyond unsubstantiated praise to include constructive guidance, while avoiding excessive negative comments that may undermine self-efficacy. Well-delivered feedback—whether stern or warm, but always substantive and confidence-preserving—can significantly boost students’ self-belief, sustain their motivation, and nurture perseverance. When applied positively, specifically, and adaptively, skillful feedback not only enhances academic performance and reduces language anxiety but also fosters a supportive learning environment. Ultimately, by strategically implementing timely, encouraging, and reasoned feedback, educators can create classrooms that nurture both competence and confidence, thereby supporting the holistic development of college freshmen as they navigate the challenges of English language acquisition.

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