Lecturers' Feedback as a Tool of Power: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Lecturer Feedback in Classrooms

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ABSTRACT
The types of conversations we hold or avoid with students determine the relationship that we design in our class. Lecturer feedback plays a central role in shaping the learning process, but it also functions as a site where power dynamics are enacted. This paper explores the power relations embedded in language used in lecturer feedback through the lens of critical discourse analysis (CDA). By analyzing how feedback positions students and constructs their identities, this study seeks to uncover the implicit hierarchies and authority structures present in the classroom discourse of the English Literature Study Program Class. The analysis relies on five power bases: referent, reward, expert, legitimate, and coercive. The data were collected by observing six classroom sessions during this time, and feedback instances were transcribed and compiled. In total, approximately 30 feedback examples were selected for in-depth analysis. These include both oral and written feedback that was considered representative of recurring discursive features. The finding shows that lecturer feedback not only reflects power dynamics but also influences the construction of student identity. Furthermore, the feedback that the lecturer provided negatively impacted the learning behavior due to overusing antisocial-based language, which included legitimate and coercive feedback. This feedback also built the students' identity as incapable learners.

Keywords: classroom discourse, critical discourse analysis, feedback, identity construction, power dynamics

INTRODUCTION

Feedback is widely acknowledged as an essential component of the teaching and learning process, pivotal in improving student outcomes and fostering academic development. It provides students with critical insights into their performance, offering direction on how to refine their skills, address knowledge gaps, and reach their educational objectives. Feedback is not merely a mechanism for evaluation but also a formative process that encourages students to engage deeply with their learning journey. However, feedback is not neutral; it is inherently situated within the social and institutional contexts of education, where power dynamics between lecturers and students play a significant role. As Brookhart (2017) points out, feedback embodies authority and influences how students perceive and navigate their educational experiences.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as conceptualized by Fairclough (2001), frames language as a social practice that simultaneously constructs and reflects power relations. In this framework, the feedback provided by lecturers becomes more than an academic intervention;

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it is a discourse act through which authority is exercised, negotiated, and perpetuated. The language of feedback carries implicit messages that can shape students' identities, reinforce or challenge existing hierarchies, and influence their sense of agency within the classroom. By analyzing the dynamics of feedback through the lens of CDA, we can uncover the underlying power structures embedded in everyday classroom interactions, revealing how feedback operates as a site of authority and identity construction.

Feedback has long been recognized as a powerful tool in enhancing learning and improving student outcomes. Hattie and Timperley (2007) argue that feedback is one of the most impactful educational interventions, significantly influencing student achievement. Effective feedback provides learners with clear information on their progress and actionable steps to improve their performance. The effectiveness of feedback, however, depends on its nature, timing, and how it is received by students. Feedback that is timely, specific, and actionable has been shown to help students better understand their strengths and weaknesses, guiding them toward academic improvement (Shute, 2008). Moreover, feedback that fosters dialogue between students and lecturers creates opportunities for students to clarify their understanding and develop critical thinking skills.

Formative feedback, in particular, which emphasizes student growth rather than summative judgment, is essential for fostering a learning-oriented mindset (Black & Wiliam, 2009). This type of feedback focuses on guiding learners through the learning process by highlighting areas for improvement while encouraging persistence and resilience. When feedback is framed constructively, it has been shown to increase student motivation, enhance self-efficacy, and reduce anxiety (Brookhart, 2017). Conversely, feedback perceived as overly critical or vague can hinder students' academic confidence and engagement, particularly for students from marginalized groups (Carless & Boud, 2018).

However, feedback functions within a larger framework of power dynamics; it is not a standalone phenomenon. The language used in feedback reflects and reinforces the hierarchical relationship between lecturers and students, often positioning the lecturer as the authoritative evaluator and the student as the subordinate recipient (Fairclough, 2001). These relationships profoundly influence how feedback is delivered and received. Lecturers, consciously or unconsciously, may assert their authority through language that reflects legitimate or coercive power bases, as discussed in French and Raven's (1959) framework. Similarly, students' interpretations of feedback are shaped by their perceptions of the lecturer's expertise and the relational context of the feedback exchange (Winstone et al., 2019).

The implications of these power dynamics are particularly significant when considering how feedback affects student identity and agency. Feedback can either empower students by validating their efforts and encouraging growth or undermine their confidence through negative or dismissive language (Chanock, 2000). The teacher's jurisdiction over the student's evaluation, often viewed as a one-way flow of authority, has the potential to shape the student's academic trajectory profoundly. For instance, coercive feedback, characterized by directive or punitive language, may unintentionally reinforce feelings of inadequacy and limit students' willingness to take academic risks (Evans, 2013). On the other hand, feedback that emphasizes collaborative goal-setting and mutual respect has been shown to promote student autonomy and engagement (Carless & Winstone, 2023).

Additionally, cultural factors play a role in how feedback is interpreted and valued. Hofstede's (1986) cultural dimensions theory suggests that students from high power-distance cultures may be less likely to question or seek clarification on feedback, accepting it as a fixed judgment. Conversely, students from low power-distance cultures may perceive feedback as a starting point for dialogue and mutual understanding. These cultural nuances further complicate the feedback process, emphasizing the need for lecturers to adopt culturally sensitive and adaptive feedback strategies (Yang & Carless, 2012).

In summary, feedback is a complex and multifaceted pedagogical tool that extends beyond its surface-level purpose of academic improvement. It is deeply embedded in the social

and relational fabric of the classroom, reflecting broader power dynamics and cultural influences. By recognizing these dimensions, educators can develop feedback practices that not only enhance learning outcomes but also promote equity, respect, and empowerment in the classroom.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Power Relations

Critical Discourse Analysis provides a lens through which the power dynamics in language use can be examined. According to Fairclough (2001), language both reflects and constructs social hierarchies. In classroom settings, lecturers hold a position of authority, and their feedback often serves to reinforce this dynamic (Ivanic, 1998). The language used in feedback can position students in ways that either empower or marginalize them, depending on whether the feedback emphasizes deficits or strengths (Brookhart, 2017).

The embodiment of good power carried out by a particular individual or organization is the topic of discussion in critical discourse. According to Fairclough (1995), power is characterized by the unequal distribution of power among participants in a discourse. In addition, power is conceptualized as the unequal ability to control the production, submission, and delivery of the text to the listener within a specific sociocultural context. There will be several definitions of "power" depending on what it means. The definition of power varies, even within academic fields. Therefore, the definition of power that is directly related to this research will be the main emphasis of this study. Power is the teacher's capacity to affect students' learning in ways that are not under their control. This is one of the more pertinent points of view in the study. Zaleznik & Kets de Vries, 1975, cited in McCroskey & Richmond, 198 and others have further defined the idea of power. According to their definition, power is the capacity to influence others. If those in positions of power are not impacted, they will not want to follow their wishes, resulting in a shift in their behavior, beliefs, and attitudes.

Furthermore, language used in feedback is particularly significant in constructing student identities. Gee (2014) argues that feedback has the potential to shape a student's perception of their competence and worth. For marginalized students—such as those from minority racial, linguistic, or socioeconomic backgrounds—feedback may reflect implicit biases, further entrenching systemic inequities (Foucault, 1980).

In addition, Sultan (2019) examined how teachers and students interacted in secondary school Indonesian language learning classes and found that teachers used linguistic components such as vocabulary, grammar, and text structure, which impacted student dominance. Among other things, the teachers' use of language limited, discriminated against, and restricted the roles that the students might play in the classroom. Moreover, the professors use closed-ended questions, formulations, interruptions, and a speech rotation method to keep students under control during class interactions. According to both studies, academic discourse provides a space for participants to maintain power dynamics. Prior studies have established that interactional discourse involves a power dynamic.

However, feedback is more than a technical intervention; it is a discursive practice embedded within broader institutional power structures (Gee, 2014). Through CDA, feedback can be understood as a site where authority is exercised, and where social hierarchies are perpetuated or challenged (Fairclough, 2001). Feedback that reinforces hierarchical relations can position students as passive recipients of knowledge, while feedback that fosters dialogue can create a more equitable and empowering learning environment. Research on feedback in higher education has advanced quickly, going beyond simply informing students about their work to highlighting the impact on their future work and involving them as active participants in a forward-looking discussion about their studies (Tai et al, 2018). According to this approach, feedback should look beyond the current assignment to future examples of work and help students build their evaluative judgment.

Research on teacher power use in post-secondary contexts is rooted in the theoretical model of French and Raven (1959), who identified five bases of relational power. These five

bases include referent, expert, reward, legitimate, and coercive. A description of each power base and how it is expressed in learning environments is described in the following Table.

Table 1. Power base and description

Power Base	Description	
Referent	Teachers connect with students, identify and empathize with students' needs and concerns, and are open and approachable	Prosocial Power
Reward	Teachers reward students for good performance or compliance with requests (Positive feedback, bonus points, extra credit).	
Expert	Teachers have expertise in the subject they are teaching and expertise in how to teach the subject.	
Legitimate	Teachers are expected to set rules and expectations and have authority over students.	Antisocial Power
Coercive	Teachers punish students for poor performance or not complying with requests (negative feedback/attention, penalties).	

Feedback's role in supporting learning outcomes is well-documented. Constructive feedback helps students evaluate their progress, refine their work, and develop strategies for improvement (Gamlem & Munthe, 2013; Chan & Luo, 2022). It plays a crucial part in guiding learners toward meeting language proficiency goals, academic standards, and personal aspirations (Moser, 2020). Without effective feedback, students may struggle to identify areas of improvement, potentially hindering their academic growth and reducing their confidence in navigating future challenges (Henderson et al., 2021). Whether delivered through formal channels like essay evaluations or informal interactions such as classroom discussions, feedback serves as a bridge between teaching intentions and learning outcomes (Van der Kleij et al., 2015).

Power relations between participants have been uncovered via cross-national studies within the context of interactional discourse. Abdullah & Hosseini (2012) found that interactional elements, including speaking time, taking turns, and elicitation, showed the teacher's dominant position in their study of academic interactional discourse in Iran. According to Brooks' (2016) research, pupils were the only respondents, whereas teachers played a major role as regulators and questioners. Shei (2019) discovered that Chinese students who held positions of power and prestige, such as class presidents, intimidated, reprimanded, and insulted other students. However, the relationship between lecturers and students in higher education interactional discourse is not yet disclosed by these studies, which only showed interactions between participants at the high school level.

The responsibility of the lecturer, therefore, extends beyond providing feedback; it involves creating opportunities for students to actively engage with feedback, fostering a collaborative and reflective learning environment. Feedback must be carefully crafted and reviewed to ensure it meets diverse student needs and promotes equity within the classroom. As Carless and Winstone (2023) highlight, effective feedback strategies are not static—they require continual adaptation and reflection to address the evolving dynamics of student engagement and institutional expectations.

This paper investigates the complex interplay between lecturer feedback and power dynamics in classroom discourse, with a particular focus on how feedback shapes students'

learning behaviors and identity construction. By examining the language of feedback, this study seeks to uncover the implicit hierarchies and authority structures present in the educational context, particularly within the English Literature Study Program. It also explores the differential impact of feedback on marginalized groups, analyzing how these dynamics influence students' sense of belonging, self-worth, and academic engagement. Through this exploration, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of feedback as a dual-purpose tool—one that simultaneously fosters learning and reinforces or disrupts power relations within the educational landscape.

By addressing these dimensions, this research aims to illuminate the broader implications of feedback for educational equity, student identity formation, and pedagogical practice. Ultimately, it calls for a critical re-examination of feedback as not only a tool for academic growth but also as a mechanism of power that shapes the social fabric of the classroom.

METHOD

This study adopts a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to examine how lecturer feedback operates as a mechanism of power within the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom. CDA is chosen for its focus on the relationship between language, power, and ideology, particularly in institutional settings such as education. The analysis explores how linguistic choices made by lecturers in their feedback contribute to constructing students' learning motivation, identity, and the reinforcement of hierarchical relationships in the classroom.

The research was conducted in Purwokerto, Central Java, Indonesia, specifically at the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Jenderal Soedirman. This setting was chosen due to its relevance as an EFL instructional context and its representative nature in Indonesian higher education. The primary data source consisted of classroom observations and documented instances of spoken and written feedback provided by lecturers to students during regular English classes. The study also used observations that focused on various courses to capture a range of feedback styles and discourse patterns. The data were collected over a period of four weeks. Six classroom sessions were observed during this time, and feedback instances were transcribed and compiled. In total, approximately 30 feedback examples were selected for in-depth analysis. These include both oral and written feedback that was considered representative of recurring discursive features.

To analyze the data, this study applied Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA, which includes textual analysis (micro level), discourse practice (meso level), and sociocultural practice (macro level). Each feedback example was examined in terms of vocabulary, grammar, modality, and interactional features to reveal underlying power structures and ideological positioning. Through this methodological approach, the study aimed to offer insights into how seemingly neutral pedagogical practices, such as giving feedback, can in fact shape learner identities and sustain institutional power dynamics in subtle but significant ways.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Feedback and power relations

The analysis reveals that the language used in lecturer feedback often reinforces traditional power structures between lecturers and students. Comments such as "You misunderstood the concept" or "This answer is incorrect" position the lecturer as the ultimate authority and the student as subordinate (Ivanic, 1998). Such feedback typically closes off opportunities for student agency, positioning the student as deficient rather than encouraging further exploration or dialogue. Conversely, feedback that invites students to reflect on their thinking, such as "How might you approach this problem differently?" offers a more collaborative approach, reducing hierarchical distance and empowering students (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Table 2. The Classroom Power Base

Power Base	Feedback Type	Example Feedback	Power Dynamics	Impact on Student Identity
Legitimate Power	Deficit-Oriented Feedback	"You didn't understand the concept."	The teacher uses authority to evaluate, reinforcing hierarchical control.	Students feel subordinate, fostering a passive identity.
Expert Power	Corrective Feedback	"This answer is wrong. Revise it."	Teacher positions themselves as the expert, in correcting student errors.	Students see themselves as dependent on teacher expertise, limiting autonomy.
Reward Power	Strengths-Based Feedback	"You did well on this part, let's build on it."	The teacher offers positive reinforcement, motivating students through validation.	Fosters a positive identity, where students feel recognized and capable.
Referent Power	Dialogic Feedback	"What approach might work better for you?"	The teacher fosters collaboration, reducing the distance between teacher and student.	Promotes a strong, empowered identity with the student as an active participant.
Coercive Power	Deficit-Oriented Feedback	"This is unacceptable. You need to improve."	The teacher asserts dominance, threatening negative consequences for poor performance.	This creates a defensive or fearful identity, where students may feel powerless.

Explanation of power base analysis

Legitimate power

The lecturer has authority in this power dynamic just by their position. For example, deficit-oriented criticism, such as "You didn't understand the concept," perpetuates the teacher's position of authority and creates a strict hierarchy in the classroom. Such criticism frequently reduces students' autonomy and casts them as passive consumers of knowledge, which can lead to a subservient academic identity. Students' agency is discouraged, and institutional norm compliance is emphasized by this type of authority.

Expert power

Corrective feedback, such as "This answer is wrong. Revise it," reflects that the lecturer has expert power. Lecturers hold knowledge and skills that students lack, and the feedback communicates the lecturer's perspectives. This power can be constructive when guiding students toward improvement, but it can also reinforce student dependency on the teacher's expertise. Students may view themselves as needing constant external validation, which could hinder their independent thinking.

Reward power

Strengths-based feedback, such as "You did well on this part, let's build on it," involves positive reinforcement, where the teacher uses their power to reward students. This power base enhances student motivation by recognizing their strengths. When students receive affirmations, they are more likely to develop a confident learner identity, viewing themselves as competent in contributing meaningfully to their education.

Referent power

Dialogic feedback like "What approach might work better for you?" transforms the traditional power dynamic into a more collaborative partnership. By developing a relationship with the learner, the instructor employs referent power to foster a more equitable learning partnership. By involving students in the process of co-constructing knowledge, this approach fosters an identity that is more autonomous and self-empowered by making them feel valued and respected.

Coercive power

Reactions like "This is not acceptable." "You need to improve" is an example of coercive power, used by teachers who threaten students with punishment or use harsh words. Students who experience this kind of power base may become fearful or resentful and feel under pressure to perform up to expectations. Coercive authority frequently backfires, making students internalize a bad academic identity in which they believe they are unworthy or unable to perform to expectations. This table reinforces the idea that teacher feedback operates within frameworks of power, shaping how students perceive themselves and their role in the learning process. Different feedback styles correspond to various power bases, each with distinct implications for student identity formation and classroom dynamics.

Legitimate and Expert Power, which are frequently included in corrective and deficit-oriented feedback, serve to uphold established hierarchies by portraying pupils as dependent on the authority and knowledge of their teachers. These kinds of authority have the potential to erode student autonomy and limit their chances for self-directed learning.

Reward and Referent Power: This feedback, which is more prevalent in strengths-based and dialogic feedback, promotes a more equitable distribution of power in the classroom. They support an environment that fosters positive learning where students are inspired, feel valued, and participate more fully in the educational process.

Coercive Power: This feedback tends to make students feel afraid and anxious; this kind of feedback usually has the worst impact. Coercive feedback undermines students' autonomy and self-worth, feeding a rigid worldview that impedes personal development.

Identity construction through feedback

Lecturer feedback plays a significant role in constructing student identity within the classroom. Feedback that is overly critical or punitive can lead to negative self-perceptions and disengagement from learning. For example, labeling a student as “not trying hard enough” or “lacking understanding” contributes to a fixed identity of underachievement (Ivanic, 1998). Such feedback not only affects a student's current academic performance but may also influence their long-term engagement with education.

On the other hand, feedback that recognizes effort and encourages students to reflect on their learning fosters a more positive academic identity. Statements such as "You’ve made good progress" or "Let’s explore this further together" validate the student’s contributions, positioning them as active participants in their own learning process (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This type of discourse helps to dismantle traditional power hierarchies, fostering a more equitable lecturer-student relationship.

Implications for marginalized students

The impact of feedback is particularly pronounced for marginalized students. Research has shown that students from minority backgrounds often receive feedback that is more critical and less constructive than their peers (Brookhart, 2017). For example, feedback directed at students who speak English as a second language may focus disproportionately on grammatical errors rather than communicative competence, framing these students as linguistically deficient (Ivanic, 1998). Such feedback perpetuates existing power imbalances and reinforces the marginalization of these students in the educational system (Gee, 2014). By shifting from a

deficit feedback model to one that is more inclusive and strengths-based, lecturers can create a more equitable learning environment. Feedback that recognizes the diverse linguistic and cultural resources that students bring to the classroom can help to disrupt traditional power dynamics and promote a more inclusive educational experience.

CONCLUSION

Since teachers' language molds students' perceptions of themselves as learners, teacher feedback has a dramatic effect on students' development of identities. Students may internalize negative academic identities as a result of deficit-oriented and corrective feedback, which is frequently connected to legitimate and expert power. Feedback that continuously points out flaws might lead students to believe they are incompetent or incapable, which can exacerbate their need for instructor approval and feelings of inferiority. This may undermine their feeling of agency and their readiness to participate fully in the educational process, which in turn may promote a fixed attitude that impedes their ability to evolve.

On the other hand, constructive, dialogic, and strengths-based feedback has a big impact on how a kid develops a good identity. These forms of feedback, which are based on referent power and incentive, highlight students' strengths, foster teamwork, and stimulate critical thinking. Teachers assist students in gaining a sense of competence and belonging by encouraging a growth attitude and acknowledging the variety of linguistic and cultural resources available to them. This helps pupils feel more confident in their abilities and gives them the confidence to actively participate in their education. Therefore, feedback is more than just an instrument for evaluating academic work; it is also a potent weapon for influencing students' identities and long-term learning paths.

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