

Analysis of the Interpersonal Meaning on Teacher Talk: Take the 16th National Junior High School English Teaching Seminar as an Example

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Abstract: In English classroom instruction, teacher talk is a critical role to impart comprehensible language to students and serves as a medium for the application of pedagogical strategies. The implementation of the English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education requires junior high school English teachers to be more conscious of the ways in which their teaching incorporate emotional attitudes and values. Consequently, the analysis of excellent junior high school English teacher talk in terms of interpersonal function theory, proves instrumental for front-line teachers to reflect on their discourse regarding student emotion, teacher role, and the teacher-student relationships. This study endeavors to unravel the interpersonal significance embedded in teacher talk based on the mood system of the Systemic Functional Grammar model advanced by Halliday. And the research data are carefully collected through observing and recording classroom discourse of 5 distinguished junior high school English teachers in the 16th National Junior High School English Teaching Seminar. Based on the research findings, the study proposes pragmatic strategies aimed at refining teacher talk in order to foster an equitable and harmonious classroom atmosphere.

Keywords: Interpersonal Meaning; Junior High School English Teacher; Mood System; Systemic Functional Grammar.

1. Introduction

According to the *English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition)*, English is a language that is widely used in political, scientific, economic, and cultural contexts around the world today. It functions as a crucial means of communication for international exchanges and cooperation, as well as a carrier of human civilizations, contributing to the establishment of a community with a shared future for mankind. Consequently, the English courses in China assumes paramount importance, with a primary objective of developing students' English core competencies, encompassing language ability, cultural awareness, thinking capability, and learning ability. However, because of the limitations imposed by national context, oral English is rarely used outside of the classroom. Consequently, classroom instruction is the predominant way for students to study English and develop their English core competencies.

Moreover, the New Curriculum Standard requires junior high school English educators to address teaching objectives related to emotional attitudes and values, emphasizing the need for effective teacher-student interactions (Yang Xiaoni, 2008). This mandate emphasizes the crucial role of teacher talk in shaping students' emotional attitudes, behaviors, and the dynamics of teacher-student relationship. The impact stems from the interpersonal meaning incorporated in teacher talk in the classroom, which sheds light on the teacher's role, students' involvement in classroom interactions, and the development of the teacher-student relationship.

This study analyzes the interpersonal functions in the teacher talk of 5 exemplary teachers from the 16th National Junior High School English Teaching Seminar. These 5 teachers are outstanding teachers selected from diverse regions across the country, so their talk in class is typical and representative to some degrees, which is a valuable teaching source for front-line educators. By analyzing the talk of the English educators in 16th seminar, the study aims to explore

the common characteristics of emotions and functions of teacher talk and foster a harmonious teacher-student relationship. Meanwhile, the research findings will provide educators with a beneficial way of self-reflection, empowering them to recognize and tackle prevailing challenges in their in-class language. Therefore, the study delivers not only theoretical insights but also practical applications for teachers seeking to improve their pedagogical approaches in compulsory education.

2. Theoretical Review

2.1. Systemic Function Grammar

1. Malinowski, esteemed as the founder of the functional school of anthropology, underscores the function of language and the vital role of context. His emphasis on "situational context" and the assertion that "meaning is the function of context" revolutionizes language research, providing a new vision through which discourse is comprehended within the broader scope of life. In the wake of Malinowski's influence, Firth advances the concept that language is not a mere collection of conventional symbols and signals but, fundamentally, a manifestation of human social life. This perspective, aligned with Malinowski's emphasis on context, extends the understanding of language beyond its lexical and grammatical components. Both scholars contend that the meaning conveyed in discourse transcends linguistic structures, encompassing the broader situational context within which communication unfolds.

2. Halliday, a disciple of Firth, refines and extends these foundational ideas in the development of Systemic Functional Grammar. Halliday presents the framework that highlights the complex interactions between language structure and communicative functions, showing the varied nature of language. He proposes three meta-functions of language, namely experiential function, interpersonal function, and textual function, which are connected with the transitivity

system, mood system, and thematic system respectively. In practical use, these functions align with specific clauses that reflect diverse functions of clause components (Thompson, 2008:78-79), realizing distinct meanings.

3. The experiential function of language pertains to a portrayal of processes and entities existing in both subjective and objective world. The interpersonal function, on the other hand, involves the speaker engaging in a given context, expressing their opinions and viewpoints, and making an effort to influence the behaviour and attitudes of others. (Hu Zhuanglin et al., 2005:115). Furthermore, language operates not merely at the level of individual words or sentences, but rather as "text," wherein ideas are comprehensively expressed. These functions consolidate when speakers organize linguistic elements into cohesive textual structures. And this study mainly focuses on the interpersonal function of language.

2.2. Interpersonal Meaning

Interpersonal meaning captures the dynamic relationship that exists between a writer and reader or speaker and listener within a language environment. It manifests as a form of human activity aimed at fulfilling needs through the exchange of information. This aspect of language is intricately tied to interpersonal connections and human expressions facilitated

by language (Fauziah, 2021). In interpersonal communication, language has two primary functions, often referred to as speech roles or speech functions: delivering and demanding commodities (J.R. Martin & Painter, 1997). Within the framework of interpersonal function, individuals use language to express their emotions and feelings to others, shaping the texture and tone of communication interactions. Interpersonal meaning, in the context of communication interactions, denotes the manner in which language is used. In essence, this dimension adds a layer of significance to the use of language so as to connect people in relationships, encompassing tasks such as maintaining social connections, exchanging perspectives, and exerting influence on others. (Eggs, 2004).

Indeed, interpersonal meaning is the way that language functions as a bridge in human relations, requiring it to be involved in decisions of a particular kind. Although still limited in number, these decisions exhibit a less discrete nature on both axes, highlighting the elaborate aspects of social communication. Under the influence of speech roles and the exchange of commodities, there are four main speech functions: offer, command, statement, and question. These functions constitute essential elements in understanding how language works in human interaction, manifesting the essence of interpersonal meaning.

Table 1. Four Speech Functions (Halliday & Mattheissen, 2014: 136)

Role in exchange	Commodity exchanged	
	Goods and services	Information
Giving	'offer' Would you like this teapot?	'statement' He is giving her the teapot.
Demanding	'command' Give me that teapot!	'question' What is he giving her?

2.3. Mood System

Mood in language is intricately linked to the transmission of information or services, whether the language conveys or seeks information and reflect the tenor of the relationship between communicators. Tenor, another linguistic element, is related to the gender or status-based power inherent in interactions. Muir (1972) and Halliday and Martin (2010) define mood in parallel with interpersonal communication, which incorporates three grammatical categories of speech functions: speech function, modality, and tone. According to Eggs (2004), the mood system consists of two constituents: mood and residue.

The mood and residue collectively shape the communicative purpose. The mood element is composed of the subject and finite components, while the residue is made up of predictor, complement, and adjuncts. This intricate interplay within the mood system contains the interaction between parties and reveals the speaker's or writer's attitudes and judgments. The mood system can be analyzed through three primary units: declarative mood, interrogative mood, and imperative mood.

The declarative mood serves to convey statements or assertions, while the interrogative mood involves posing questions or seeking information. In contrast, the imperative mood is used to give commands or make requests. Each unit of the mood system contributes distinctively to the overall structure of interpersonal meaning, shedding light on the ways in which language functions in communication interactions. Thereby, the mood system plays a key role in

comprehending the subtleties of linguistic expression within various interpersonal contexts.

3. Analysis of Mood System in Teacher Talk

The mood system is the main way to realize the interpersonal function, with the declarative, interrogative, and imperative moods constituting the basic mood of this system (as depicted in Table 1), which facilitates the interaction throughout the communication process. In classroom teaching, teachers typically use the declarative mood to provide information, the interrogative mood to elicit information, and the imperative mood to issue commands and give orders. Teachers strategically choose moods with distinct grammatical structures to fulfill diverse speech functions and realize varied speech roles. In other words, the teacher, as the speaker, consistently adopts a specific speech role for themselves while assigning a complementary role to the listener, such as the information provider and receiver, the questioner and responder, and so forth. The ongoing activities of classroom interaction between the teacher and students are evolved through the continual process of role selection and assignment. An in-depth analysis of the mood system proves instrumental in unveiling the interpersonal relationships among participants in the interaction (Li Zhanzi, 2002). Therefore, the study of the mood system in teacher talk becomes a valuable tool for elucidating the impact of teacher-student interaction and the interpersonal relationships between them. This study endeavors to illustrate the distribution and frequency of the three types of mood by

analyzing the mood system of 5 excellent junior high school English teachers. Upon scrutinizing the collected data, Table 2 presents the distribution and frequency of the mood system

among these outstanding junior high school English educators in 16th National Junior High School English Teaching Seminar.

Table 2. Distribution and Frequency of Mood System

T \ M	Declarative	Wh-interrogative	Yes/No interrogative	Imperative
T1	68	45	32	49
T2	95	37	47	38
T3	111	56	43	82
T4	102	72	29	54
T5	92	48	52	68
Total (Percent)	468 (38.36%)	258 (21.15%)	203 (16.64%)	291 (23.85%)

(Note: M=mood, T=teacher)

As can be seen from Table 2, among the 5 teachers analyzed, the most frequently used mood is the declarative, constituting 38.36%, followed by the interrogative at 21.15%, and the least used is the imperative, accounting for 16.64%. The distribution of these moods is tied to the specific speech functions fulfilled in the teaching context.

In English teaching, the declarative mood is used as a vehicle for providing information to students, teacher's role as an authoritative source of knowledge. On the other hand, the interrogative mood is strategically used to elicit information from students, fostering a dynamic classroom interaction that is compliant with the student-centered approach advocated by the new curriculum reform. The shift from a flow of information characterizes teachers as both information providers and facilitators of student learning. The least frequent use of the imperative mood signifies a deliberate avoidance by teachers to issue commands in a directive way. This strategic choice aims to alleviate the pressure inherent in teacher talk, contributing to a more relaxed classroom atmosphere.

3.1. Analysis of Declarative Mood in Teacher Talk

As is presented in Table 2 above, the declarative mood is the major mode used by English teachers in the classroom, accounting for 38.36%, which emphasizes the role of teachers as information providers and the primary source of knowledge for students. In the teaching context, the declarative mood works as a versatile tool, allowing teachers to provide a diverse array of information such as explaining teaching materials, setting scenes for specific knowledge points, clarifying teachers' opinions and insights, as well as organizing classroom activities and making requirements. In addition, in the actual use of language, the declarative mood also achieves additional interpersonal functions, such as expressing teachers' opinions and attitudes, and influencing students' behaviors and attitudes in the classroom. To delve into the interpersonal functions realized through the declarative mood, this study meticulously analyzes the collected data of 5 excellent teacher talk. Table 3 delineates the distribution and frequency of declarative mood and demonstrates how it functions.

Table 3. Distribution and Frequency of Declarative Mood

T \ D	Offer information	Repeat answers	Give comments	Express feelings and opinions	Offer other things	Give orders	Ask questions
T1	56	25	12	14	3	11	7
T2	45	16	9	10	7	10	3
T3	37	22	5	12	2	7	11
T4	42	30	10	8	3	14	4
T5	33	14	13	10	1	6	8
Total (Percent)	213 (40.96%)	107 (20.58)	49 (9.42%)	54 (10.38)	16 (3.08%)	48 (9.23%)	33 (6.35%)

(Note: D=declarative mood, T=teacher)

As can be seen from Table 3, a detailed demonstration of interpersonal functions realized through the declarative mood, shedding light on the communicative roles adopted by teachers during classroom interactions.

The leading communicative role identified is that of an information provider, accounting for 62.69%, which shows the function of teachers in imparting knowledge and facilitating learning by delivering information or providing

goods and services to achieve the teaching objectives. The latter two functions embody the communicative role of making demands. Teachers pose questions or give commands to stimulate students to provide corresponding information or elicit corresponding reactions through declarative statements. In essence, teachers use the declarative mood to realize the functions of both interrogative and imperative. It signifies a commendable effort by excellent teachers to enhance

communication between teachers and students and diminish the sense of authority associated with teacher commands.

Furthermore, the declarative mood primarily serves to provide teaching information (40.96%). However, English teacher talk is distinguished from other speech by serving dual functions, both as a target language and a tool for organizing teaching. Consequently, it is also frequently used to repeat students' answers (20.58%), express feelings and opinions (10.38%), offer comments (9.42%), give orders for activities and tasks (9.23%), inquire for information from students (6.35%), and provide additional details (3.08%). The versatility shows how teachers adapt declarative sentences for different communication needs in the classroom.

3.2. Analysis of Interrogative Mood in Teacher Talk

Functional grammar classifies interrogative mood into two primary categories: Yes/no interrogative sentences and Wh-interrogative sentences. According to Thompson (2000:356), the former seeks a polar response from the listener, typically

in the form of "yes" or "no," indicating a binary answer. The latter, Wh-interrogative sentences, involve the speaker prompting the listener to provide additional information, with the "Wh-" component signifying the missing part of the information. The varied forms of questions derived from these two categories, Yes/no and Wh-interrogative sentences, can yield diverse interpersonal meanings in classroom, thereby enhancing opportunities for teachers and students to engage in interactive language use. This diversity enhances the opportunities for teachers and students to engage in meaningful interactions.

As depicted in Table 1, the Yes/no interrogative mood accounts for 16.64%, while the Wh-interrogative mood constitutes 21.15%. In English class, teachers often employ the Wh-interrogative mood when posing questions to students. Regardless of the proportion, teachers leverage both Yes/no and Wh-interrogative moods to achieve a range of interpersonal functions. The distribution of the interpersonal functions of interrogative mood are calculated in Table 4, providing insights into the role of interrogative constructions in teacher-student interactions.

Table 4. Distribution and Frequency of Interrogative Mood

T \ IG	Obtain information	Stimulate students' participation	Confirm or affirm	Give orders indirectly	Obtain other information
T1	35	10	25	8	5
T2	42	7	29	8	2
T3	33	4	36	7	7
T4	57	8	23	10	5
T5	28	12	17	5	7
Total (Percent)	195 (45.35%)	41 (9.53%)	130 (30.23%)	38 (8.84%)	26 (6.05%)

(Note: IG=interrogative mood, T=teacher)

Table 4 demonstrates a comprehensive overview of the various functions of the interrogative mood in teacher talk. The major function of interrogative questions to inquire about classroom teaching content or main knowledge points, constituting the majority at 45.35%, which is closely related to the interrogative constructions in facilitating students' discussions on subject matter, emphasizing teachers' efforts to check whether students comprehend the language content and engage them in the lesson. Additionally, teachers frequently use interrogative questions to verify whether students comprehend specific concepts or to confirm the accuracy of their answers, accounting for 30.23%. This function is a crucial element in the classroom interaction, and it enables teachers to assess students' comprehension and provide targeted support. Compared with traditional English classroom, teachers in this study tend to encourage active student participation, constituting 9.53%. Moreover, teachers in this study also give indirect command or ask for other information through interrogative sentences to enhance the overall classroom environment, promoting a more cooperative atmosphere.

3.3. Analysis of Imperative Mood in Teacher Talk

The imperative mood in speech serves to demonstrate the speaker's authority and to demand that the listener supply

products and services. Rather than an overt negotiation, Halliday (2014:39) noted that the imperative is a demand and command for the exchange of goods and services based on interpersonal meaning. Teachers fundamentally use the imperative mood in the classroom to give students commands or opinions as a way to establish their authority and status.

To explore the interpersonal meaning of imperative mood in teacher talk, the 16th National Junior High School English Demonstration Classes were observed and transcribed. The study discovers that there are four primary forms of imperative mood in classroom teacher talk. Firstly, there are mitigated imperative sentences that incorporate interpersonal adjuncts such as "please" "now" and "then", etc. Secondly, imperative sentences usually commence with connecting adjuncts like "well" "OK" and "alright". Thirdly, inclusive imperative sentences often begin with "let's" Lastly, there are bold imperative sentences where the entire statement serves as a direct command. Gao Lijuan (2005) found that these types of sentences express four interpersonal functions: giving classroom instructions, offering advice or suggestions to students, extending support or encouragement to students, and providing services. Each of these functions conveys distinct interpersonal meanings. Therefore, Table 5 below presents the data of the distribution and proportion of different interpersonal functions in imperative mood of teacher talk in this study.

Table 5. Distribution and Frequency of Imperative Mood

T \ IP	Give instructions	Provide advice or suggestions	Support or encourage students	Offer services
T1	58	24	6	3
T2	39	17	4	1
T3	42	22	4	2
T4	61	20	2	3
T5	47	15	5	1
Total (Percent)	247 (65.69%)	98 (26.06%)	21 (5.59%)	10 (2.66%)

(Note: IP=imperative mood, T=teacher)

On the basis of this table, the distribution of specific interpersonal meanings conveyed through the imperative mood in teacher talk has been presented clearly. Through analysis and synthesis, it is found that the use of the imperative mood is particularly effective in providing teaching instructions, giving suggestions, encouraging students, and offering services.

As shown in Table 5, it illustrates that 65.69% of classroom instruction is delivered by teachers in the imperative mood. Beginning with the second-person viewpoints, it is a sort of direct expression. The interpersonal function, which provides guidance or suggestions for students, ranks second with 26.06%. And this kind of mood structure typically starts with the "let's" to cultivate a close relationship between the teacher and the students. Additionally, only 1.3% of imperatives that start with "let me" are employed to supply learners with goods or services.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Major Findings

The study analyzes the classroom teacher talk of 5 excellent teachers in the 16th National Junior High School English Teaching Seminar, from the perspectives of mood system in terms of interpersonal meaning theory, aiming to explore the characteristics of teacher talk in high-quality classes, discerning both strengths and areas for improvement in the study of teacher discourse.

The analysis reveals that the interpersonal meaning of the mood system is mainly realized through declarative sentences, interrogative sentences, and imperative sentences. Among them, the declarative mood is the most frequently used, representing 38.36% of instances, followed by the interrogative mood at 37.79%, while the imperative mood is used least, accounting for 23.85%. This distribution suggests that teachers in this study usually use declarative sentences to teach language knowledge, use interrogative sentences to a lesser extent to stimulate students' classroom participation through questioning, and employ imperative sentences even less frequently to issue commands to students. However, the research data in the discussion section reveals divergent emphasis on interpersonal functions of the mood system. Teachers primarily use declarative sentences to provide students with pertinent teaching information and offer timely feedback. Interrogative questions are predominantly used to express confirmation or affirmation, while the imperative mood structure is chiefly used to give classroom instructions and encourage students to actively participate in class. However, other functions of the mood system are used to a lesser extent.

As a result, the study advocates for teachers to pay attention to the diverse functions of the mood system to create a more varied and engaging discourse that aligns with the teacher-

student interactions, which not only emphasizes the strengths of teacher talk observed from the teaching seminar but also encourages a more comprehensive use of the mood system to enhance the quality of teacher talk in the classroom.

4.2. Implications and Prospects

Based on the major findings of the study, some suggestions can be put forward for junior high school English teachers to enhance the quality of junior high school English teaching.

Firstly, teachers are encouraged to keep a balance in the use of declarative mood, offering students more opportunities to actively participate in class discussions. By adjusting the proportion, the English class will be more student-centered, fostering a more participatory learning environment. Secondly, teachers should increase the amount of interrogative mood to stimulate more classroom interaction. Incorporating more interrogative questions into the teaching discourse can elicit student responses, promoting engagement and facilitating a students' exchange of ideas. Thirdly, in terms of the imperative mood, teachers are advised to use imperatives that begin with expressions such as "let's", "please" or "thank you", which not only make students feel a sense of respect from teachers but also satisfies students' emotional needs for equal communication. These polite imperatives contribute to a more positive and collaborative classroom atmosphere.

However, there are certain limitations with regard to both subjective and objective factors. It will be better if more English teacher talks from the 16th National Junior High School English Teaching Seminar could be analyzed in order to get a variety of outcomes and determine whether they differ or are comparable to those of the current study. Besides, further information may be obtained by analyzing the teacher's discourse from the perspective of other interpersonal function dimensions, such as modality and pronoun system.

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