

A Study on Teacher's Regulative Discourse in Online Academic English Writing Course

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Abstract: This study investigates the use of teachers' regulative discourse in an online academic writing course from the perspective of Bernstein's pedagogic discourse theory. By observing and analyzing the data from the "Academic English Writing" course on the China University MOOC platform, the study examines the forms, syntactic expressions, and functions of directives used by teachers in online classes and explores their impact on teaching and student learning. The findings reveal that teachers prefer to use direct regulative discourses, such as imperative sentences while utilizing indirect and more polite discourses less frequently. The findings help to provide references for MOOC teachers to optimize their use of regulative discourse.

Keywords: Academic writing course; Regulative discourse; MOOC teacher

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1. Introduction

In the English as Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, teacher talk assumes a crucial dual role: it serves as both the input of the target language and the demonstration of language use. Within this framework, pedagogic discourse emerges as a vital area of research, extending its influence into the field of EFL teaching. According to British sociologist Bernstein B (1996), pedagogic discourse encompasses two key dimensions: regulative discourse and instructional discourse^[1]. The former significantly influences the pacing, sequencing and evaluation methods within instructional discourse, thereby shaping the overall construction of teaching and learning interactions^[2].

Research on teacher discourse in the domestic English classroom has formed a certain scale, but there is a slow trend in further research^[3]. Despite the growing emphasis on instructional discourse in EFL research in China, the exploration of regulative discourse remains relatively understudied. While some scholars have delved into the paradigms and functions of regulative discourse in offline college classrooms^[4] and others have examined power dynamics in English classrooms in Chinese secondary schools, there remains a dearth of research attention on regulative discourse within online teaching contexts^[5].

Building upon existing research, this study adopts Bernstein B's (1996) pedagogical discourse theory as a

theoretical framework and gathers data from high-quality academic English writing courses on China University MOOC platforms. Through quantitative analysis, this research aims to identify the types and grammatical expressions of teachers' regulative discourse and explore their underlying paradigms and functions. The study seeks to address the following research questions:

- (1) What directives do teachers commonly employ in online academic English writing classes?
- (2) What functions do these classroom directives serve?
- (3) How can directives be leveraged to foster effective and balanced teacher-student relationships?

By answering these questions, this research intends to provide practical recommendations for Chinese teachers to enhance their use of regulative discourse in online teaching environments.

2. Theoretical framework

Pedagogic Discourse Theory originated in the 1990s. The concept of two registers, regulation and instruction, owes most to Bernstein B's (1996) work and his observations on the nature of educational discourse^[6]. The concept of a pedagogic discourse was part of a complex set of proposals Bernstein B developed over some years and devoted to explaining the production, reproduction and transformation of culture^[7]. In his theory, pedagogical discourses and pedagogical relationships cover a much larger field of activity and its subjects than the field of schooling. What is most important, however, is to analyze and explain how the pedagogical discourse of schooling work is distributed to people. Bernstein B (1990) proposed that pedagogic discourse should be defined as the rules by which discourses about competencies are incorporated into discourses about social order, such that the latter always dominates the former.

Expanding on Bernstein's framework, Christie F (2002) delineated the functions of pedagogic discourse within schooling curricula, highlighting the interplay between regulative and instructional registers^[8]. The regulative register delineates overarching pedagogic directions, including goals, pacing and sequencing, while the instructional register focuses on content and specialized skills acquisition. Successful teaching involves a convergence of these registers, where students engage with content (instructional register) within a structured framework (regulative register), facilitating meaningful learning experiences^[9].

3. Methodology

3.1. Research questions

This study focuses on investigating the use of language teacher directives and their functions in online academic English writing classes. Directives encompass various speech acts, such as requests, commands, suggestions and invitations, aimed at prompting specific actions from learners^[10]. Teachers' utilization of directives constitutes a significant aspect of regulative discourse within the classroom context^[11].

In accordance with Pedagogic Discourse Theory, this study seeks to analyze the types and grammatical expressions of teachers' regulative discourse in MOOC classes, especially for linguistic forms and linguistic functions through class observation, and to identify the main issues in instructional directives for MOOC classes. In conclusion, by discussing the above research questions, this thesis tends to solve these research questions:

- (1) What types of directives do teachers commonly use in online academic English writing classes?
- (2) What functions do these directives serve in an online class context?
- (3) How can directives be strategically employed to foster an effective and equitable teacher-student relationship in online learning environments?

3.2. Research object

The research focuses on an online academic English writing course offered on the China University MOOC platform, specifically analyzing the “Academic English Writing” course provided by Shandong University.

3.3. Method

Data collection is an important guarantee of the quality of empirical research, and only through the use of appropriate and reliable data collection methods can the reliability and validity of empirical research be ensured^[12]. The research employs “Iflynote” for simultaneous course recording and utilizes transcription software to convert video content into textual data. Microsoft Office tools are then used for data organization and statistical analysis, enabling the calculation of overall directive frequencies and densities within teacher talk.

3.4. Analytical procedure

Building upon Liu YB *et al.*'s (2009) directive classification scheme, this study categorizes directives into syntactic forms (imperative, declarative, interrogative), strategy realizations, and pedagogic purposes (implementing classroom procedures or disciplining students). Procedural directives relate to organizing classroom activities, while disciplinary directives pertain to behavior management.

According to three questions involved in this research, firstly, based on Liu YB *et al.*'s (2009) classification of directives mentioned above, by calculating the total number of words and measuring each directive involved in teacher talk, the frequency of each directive listed in Liu YB *et al.*'s (2009) study. Then, the first research question can be answered with a statistical table. After that, by calculating the overall directives density in teacher talk, the densities of different types of directives in teacher talk and discussing the pragmatic function of directives in Chinese and American teacher talk, this study will analyze the similarities and differences of directives application between Chinese and American teachers.

4. Results

4.1. Paradigm of MOOC teacher's regulative discourse

In this section, the study first analyzes the different syntactic features of directives in general and their proportion. The study then analyzes the frequency of the strategic realization of each type of directive. In terms of syntactic form, there are three general types of directives: imperative, declarative and interrogative sentences, which differ in terms of the intensity of their direct imperative function. In these three types of sentences, the form of the imperative or the strategy for its realization also varies considerably. The choice of the type of sentence and strategy used varies in terms of the intensity of the directives, i.e. from the most direct to the most indirect (see **Table 1**).

Table 1 presents the distribution of directives, totaling 140 occurrences. Imperative sentences predominate with 88 instances, comprising 62.85% of all directives, while declaratives represent 22.14% (31 instances) and interrogatives 15% (21 instances). Strategic analysis indicates 118 direct directives (84.28%) and 29 indirect directives (20.71%). These findings reveal three key insights: a preference for direct directives over indirect ones (84.28% vs. 20.71%), predominant usage of imperatives and a propensity towards “inclusive” imperatives as the primary choice.

Table 1. Directives: syntactic form, strategy realizations and their density.

Strategy	Syntactic form	Strategy realization	T1		T2		T3	
			n	%	n	%	n	%
Direct	Imperative	Bold	8	14.8	10	15	9	40
		Prefaced	3	5	7	10	4	18
		Inclusive	21	38	25	39	19	4
	Declarative	Want/need	9	16.7	8	12.5	0	0
		Obligation	3	5	9	14	10	4
Indirect	Interrogative	What/How Where...?	0	0	3	4	4	18
		Ability	9	16.7	2	3	3	13
		Willingness	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Declarative	Hedged performatives	1	1	0	0	0	0

Teachers exhibit a preference for rigid and efficient imperative sentences, particularly favoring the “inclusive” form. Often accompanied by prefaced imperatives, these strategies assert a coercive tone, positioning students passively. This reflects a persistent power dynamic in MOOC classrooms, where teachers wield authority through direct language. The prevalent use of direct discourse underscores the paradigm of regulative discourse in MOOCs, revealing asymmetrical power relations. Teachers leverage overt power codes, employing direct sentence forms to maintain control. Overall, these syntactic characteristics validate the notion of straightforward communication by MOOC teachers.

In comparing the three teachers’ use of regulative discourse, T1 (Zhang Cong) primarily employs imperative sentences (65.62%), similar to T2 (Matthew Lane) and slightly less than T3 (Tyler Garter) (68.08%). Declarative usage varies, with T1 at 18.7% and T2 at 26.56%. Although interrogative sentences are present, their indirect use for instruction is noted. Imperatives mainly convey direct instructions, while declaratives and interrogatives guide thinking and aid task comprehension. However, interrogatives’ overall frequency is low. Pragmatically, imperatives convey lower politeness levels, contrasting with the higher politeness levels of declaratives and interrogatives. Hence, teachers should tailor instruction presentations to student and teaching needs for enhanced classroom interaction and teaching effectiveness.

4.2. Function of directives

The pedagogic discourse used by teachers in the classroom is an important communicative medium for classroom interaction, content delivery, and activity organization, and it plays a crucial role in students’ language acquisition^[13]. **Table 2** provides examples of the seven most commonly occurring strategy realizations of directives in the order of frequency.

Table 2. Examples of most commonly occurring strategy realizations of directives.

Purpose and strategy realizations		Examples
Imperatives	Inclusive	Let's go on. Let's look at an example.
	Bold	Think about it. Take a look at Consider... Stop and go back to...
	Prefaced	Please think for a moment.
Declaratives	Want/need	I want you to...
	Hedged performatives	I would like you to...
Interrogatives	Feasibility/ability	Okay, can you...?
	Bold	What is ...

4.2.1. Clarify requirements and organize activities

The primary function of instructional language used by teachers is to effectively organize students in performing assigned tasks. The quality of instructions depends on how quickly and clearly students can execute the tasks^[14]. Typically, teachers issue direct instructions in the form of imperatives and indirect instructions using declarative or interrogative sentences. For instance:

- (1) Let's look at the second paragraph.
- (2) Next, our mission is to classify different types of plagiarism.
- (3) Stop and go back to our first question.
- (4) I would like you to pause the video and think about it.

Example (1) delivers clear, concise instructions, ensuring immediate student understanding and efficient teaching. In Example (2), declarative sentences guide students to the next task by clarifying key concepts. Example (3) uses imperatives to direct students, facilitating virtual dialogue and effective pacing. Regardless of form, the core function remains the effective assignment of classroom tasks.

4.2.2. Reduce anxiety

A harmonious classroom atmosphere is conducive to promoting students' active participation in classroom interaction, enhancing students' motivation to learn and reducing classroom anxiety. It has been found that teachers can create an equitable and harmonious classroom atmosphere and reduce students' classroom anxiety by using appropriate regulation discourse^[15]. For example:

- (5) Now think about it: Is it plagiarism?
- (6) Ok. So, get yourself ready for the next question: Is it plagiarism?

In example (5), students are prompted to mentally prepare themselves before task instructions, aiding them in brainstorming effectively. In example (6), students are not immediately asked to respond but are given time to contemplate the task through additional verbal instructions. Subsequent questioning ensures student readiness to respond, empowering them in the learning process and avoiding discouragement. Therefore, teachers can use a variety of instructions to alleviate anxiety, foster a relaxed learning atmosphere, promote classroom participation and encourage language output.

4.2.3. Cultivate students' thinking ability

The overarching objective of academic English writing courses is to nurture independent, autonomous, and

proficient learners capable of independent writing. Hence, developing students' critical thinking and learning skills is crucial. Teachers can flexibly use instructional discourse to inspire critical thinking and problem-solving skills. For example:

(7) Please observe the quotation marks and in-text quotation in this case.

(8) Now we have taken on a global view of academic writing, and think about the format when composing your paper.

In example (7), teachers guide students to observe teaching content and think critically from various angles to provide comprehensive answers. Example (8) suggests a broader perspective to students, encouraging them to contemplate global writing concepts. Skillful integration of content into instructional discourse enables effective student inquiry and problem-solving, thereby enhancing classroom instruction efficacy.

5. Findings and discussion

Based on the above data analysis, we have major findings as follows:

- (1) In online academic English writing classes, teachers predominantly use direct regulative discourse, favoring “inclusive,” or “need” directives. Both Chinese (Zhang Cong) and American teachers (Matthew Lane and Tyler Carter) rely heavily on rigid, straightforward imperative sentences, with the “inclusive” form being their preferred choice. However, they employ less indirect, polite and negotiable regulative discourse such as “willingness” or “Hedged performatives”. These differences in discourse strategies suggest a fixed instructional language paradigm among MOOC teachers, with imperative sentences being the primary mode of instruction. Overall, the regulative discourse in MOOC classes remains teacher-centered, with limited emphasis on students' subjective status.
- (2) The functions of the regulative discourse of the teacher in academic writing MOOC courses are as follows:
 - (a) Clarify requirements and organize activities. Teachers give direct instructions in the form of imperatives and indirect instructions in the form of declarative or interrogative sentences.
 - (b) Reduce students' anxiety. Teachers can choose a variety of instructions to ease students' anxiety, create a relaxed learning environment and encourage students to participate in classroom activities.
 - (c) Cultivate students' thinking ability. A teacher's skillful incorporation of content into instructional discourse and its appropriate use in the classroom can effectively guide students in their own inquiry and problem-solving, thus enhancing the effectiveness of classroom instruction.
- (3) MOOC teachers can enhance their use of regulative discourse by employing various directives flexibly, including imperative, declarative and interrogative sentences, to cater to different student needs and teaching objectives. Additionally, they should incorporate more “mitigate” and “prefaced” directives, which have a relaxed tone and promote a conducive learning environment by facilitating student comprehension and engagement. Furthermore, giving greater attention to the effective use of indirect directives can alter the unequal status dynamics between teachers and students, fostering better rapport and creating a more enjoyable classroom atmosphere. Thus, teachers should strive to improve their language quality, consider students' language proficiency levels, teachers carefully design classroom instructions and foster a harmonious teacher-student relationship to enhance learning outcomes and teaching effectiveness.

In conclusion, this study has identified and examined the regulatory functions of teachers' directives in the “Academic English Writing” course on the China University MOOC platform offered by Shandong University. Our findings emphasize the importance of explicit discourse strategies to regulate classroom dynamics and student behavior effectively. The study advocates for a nuanced approach that addresses control modalities and

fosters productive teacher-student relationships.

This study focuses on instructional discourse as a means to explore MOOC teachers' regulative discourse, offering practical strategies to optimize its effectiveness in fostering a balanced teacher-student relationship. The study anticipates that our findings will contribute to enhancing the pedagogical function of teachers' regulatory discourse. However, limitations exist, including the small sample size and inconsistent teaching schedules among the three teachers observed in a single course. Future research will address these limitations to ensure the reliability and validity of the study's findings.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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