

The Use of Teacher Metadiscourse in EFL Classrooms: Evidence from One Middle-School and One High-School Lesson

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Abstract: This study compares teacher talk in one middle-school and one high-school EFL lesson to examine cross-level differences in the distribution and density of teachers' metadiscourse and their functional roles in classroom interaction. Based on lesson transcripts, metadiscourse was categorized and quantified using Hyland's^[1] framework. Frequencies were standardized per 1,000 teacher words. Findings show that although the high-school lesson had a higher raw frequency of metadiscourse, the middle-school lesson displayed greater metadiscourse density and higher interaction-turn density once teacher talk length was controlled. The middle-school classroom showed denser use of frame markers and engagement markers, while the high-school classroom showed denser self-mentions, attitude markers, and boosters. These results suggest that the essential cross-level difference lies in the functional configuration of metadiscourse within classroom progression mechanisms.

Keywords: Teacher metadiscourse, English classroom, Classroom interaction

1. Introduction

In English classroom interaction, teachers function as organizers and regulators of classroom discourse. Metadiscourse—language that organizes discourse, signals stance, and manages interaction^[1]—plays a dual role: structuring instructional content and shaping the interactional environment.

Previous research has focused largely on academic writing or university-level discourse^[2], with less attention to secondary school teacher metadiscourse. Moreover, limited research has systematically compared metadiscourse use across educational levels while examining its relationship with interactional sequence structures.

To address this gap, this study investigates teacher metadiscourse in one middle school and one high school English classroom, addressing three research questions: (1) What are the differences in the distribution and density of teachers' metadiscourse? (2) How is metadiscourse associated with classroom interactional sequences (e.g., IRF structures)? (3) How do differences in metadiscourse configuration correspond to differences in interaction density and lesson progression?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Related studies on metadiscourse

The concept of metadiscourse was first proposed by Williams^[3], who believed that metadiscourse is a linguistic tool to help readers understand the structure of a text. Hyland^[1] further developed the theory of metadiscourse and applied it to academic writing and classroom teaching. He categorized metadiscourse into interactive metadiscourse and interactional metadiscourse. Interactive metadiscourse is mainly used to organize information and ensure the coherence of discourse, including transition, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials and code glosses. Interactional metadiscourse, on the other hand, is used to establish interpersonal interactions in discourse and includes hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions, and engagement markers. These metadiscourses make the discourse clearer and also help the audience to understand and respond^[4]. In a classroom setting, a teacher's metadiscourse not only affects students' understanding of classroom content, but may also influence the way students interact in the classroom. It has been found that

teachers' use of frame markers (e.g., First, Next) can help students make sense of classroom structure, while the use of engagement markers (e.g., What do you think? Can you explain more?) can enhance student engagement in the classroom^[5].

2.2. Classroom role of teacher metadiscourse

Research on the classroom function of teachers' metadiscourse has shown multidimensional characteristics. Fu and Xu^[6] showed that the core function of metadiscourse is to regulate the logic of discourse and inter-subjective interactions, and that its categorization system has been expanded from the traditional dichotomy of discourse-interpersonal to a seven-dimensional model that includes stance markers, intervention markers, and so on. In terms of classroom discourse structure, the scaffolding function of metadiscourse has been empirically supported. Yan and Zhang^[7] found that based on a corpus analysis of 60 college English classes, the frequency of teachers' use of transitions and frame markers is positively correlated with the efficiency of classroom information reception. Specifically, the average frequency of using structural metadiscourse per class period was significantly higher for high-level teachers than for novice teachers, suggesting that metadiscourse proficiency is an important indicator of teaching ability. This finding echoes the findings of Zhang^[8] cross-domain study, who found that the density of metadiscourse use in academic lectures was significantly higher than that in daily conversations, which corroborates the necessity of structured metadiscourse in knowledge transfer.

At the level of classroom interaction, there are cross-cultural differences in the moderating role of metadiscourse. Lin and He^[9] compared the English classroom performances of students from China, Japan, Germany, and the United States and found that Chinese students used engagement markers the least frequently, while American students used them very frequently. This difference may stem from teaching traditions - Chinese teachers prefer to use directive metadiscourse, while Western teachers prefer negotiation^[7]. Notably, Lu and Chen's^[10] conversational analysis revealed that Chinese students' ability to use metadiscourse was significantly correlated with their discourse fluency, and that overuse of filler metadiscourse (e.g., that, hmmm) resulted in an increased cognitive load, which placed a higher demand on teachers' metadiscourse modeling.

3. Research Methodology

The study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Data came from transcribed texts of two English classes (one middle school, one high school).

3.1. Research corpus

The data for this study mainly came from classroom transcribed texts, covering one English classroom each in junior high school and senior high school. By analyzing the classroom transcribed texts, the use of teachers' metadiscourse is marked and its distribution characteristics in different classroom settings are analyzed. In addition, the researcher pays special attention to how metadiscourse affects classroom interaction patterns and the characteristics of students' expressions under different types of metadiscourse.

3.2. Data collection and transcription

Data for this study were collected from classroom videos, which were textually analyzed and transcribed to examine teachers' patterns of metadiscourse use and its impact on classroom interaction in middle and high school English classrooms. The researcher fully transcribed the selected classroom videos so that textual content would match accurately with teachers' use of discourse in the classroom. During the process of transcription, the original utterance of the teacher's speech was preserved as much as possible, including repetition, pauses, and other aspects of speech, so that the data were genuine and intact. After the text was structured, teacher discourse was coded manually using Hyland's^[1] metadiscourse classification framework, which classified metadiscourse into interactive Resources and interactional Resources and divided them further into their categories. After the coding, occurrences of various kinds of metadiscourse were counted and analyzed in terms of particular classroom contexts to investigate the patterns of use of teachers' metadiscourse and their roles in classrooms of various class periods.

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1. Characteristics of Teachers' Metadiscourse Use in Middle and High School Classrooms: Distribution, Density, and Intra-category Differences

Table 1: Comparison of Teachers' Metadiscourse in Middle and High School English Classrooms.

Category	Subcategories	Middle School	Percentage(%)	High School	Percentage(%)
Interactive resources	Frame Markers	15	19.2	12	10.6
	Transitions	10	12.8	15	13.3
	Endophoric Markers	8	10.3	8	7.1
	Code Glosses	6	7.7	10	8.8
	Evidentials	2	2.6	5	4.4
Interactional resources	Hedges	3	3.9	7	6.2
	Boosters	2	2.6	9	8.0
	Attitude Markers	5	6.4	11	9.7
	Engagement Markers	15	19.2	6	5.3
	Self-mentions	12	15.3	30	26.5

As shown in Table 1, a simple comparison of raw frequencies suggests that teachers used metadiscourse more often in the high school classroom (113 tokens) than in the middle school classroom (78 tokens), which might give the impression that high school teacher talk is “richer” or “more complex.” However, the amount of teacher talk can differ substantially across lessons; once teacher talk length varies, raw frequencies may exaggerate or conceal the actual contrast. To improve comparability, this study therefore standardized metadiscourse frequency by teacher word count and calculated metadiscourse density per 1,000 words. The results show that the middle school classroom produced approximately 28.08 metadiscourse tokens per 1,000 teacher words, whereas the high school classroom produced approximately 20.31 tokens per 1,000 teacher words. In other words, although the high school classroom contained more metadiscourse tokens in absolute terms, metadiscourse occurred more densely in the middle school classroom when teacher talk length was controlled. This pattern indicates that the cross-level difference is not simply a matter of “more versus less,” but is more likely related to systematic differences in how lessons are advanced and how interaction is organized, which needs to be interpreted together with the analysis of interactional sequences in Section 4.2.

To ensure that the density contrast is not only reflected at the overall level, this study further standardized each of the ten subcategories and computed their frequencies per 1,000 teacher words, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Comparison of Metadiscourse Frequency per 1,000 Teacher Words (Density Standardization).

Subcategory	Middle School (Freq.)	Middle School (per 1,000 words)	High School (Freq.)	High School (per 1,000 words)
Frame markers	15	5.40	12	2.16
Transitions	10	3.60	15	2.70
Endophoric markers	8	2.88	8	1.44
Code glosses	6	2.16	10	1.80
Evidentials	2	0.72	5	0.90
Hedges	3	1.08	7	1.26
Boosters	2	0.72	9	1.62
Attitude markers	5	1.80	11	1.98
Engagement markers	15	5.40	6	1.08
Self-mentions	12	4.32	30	5.39

Table 2 shows that the middle school classroom displays markedly higher densities of frame markers and engagement markers (5.40 each per 1,000 words) than the high school classroom, indicating frequent explicit signaling of lesson stages, task progression, and turn allocation. This distribution is consistent with a “rapid organization–immediate response” rhythm, as the teacher repeatedly marks procedural steps and elicits quick participation to sustain pace. By contrast,

self-mentions reached the highest density in high school (5.39 per 1,000 words), with boosters and attitude markers also denser, suggesting the teacher was more inclined to advance content through stance-taking, extended explanation, and evaluative reinforcement. Put differently, engagement markers in middle school function primarily as an interaction management tool, whereas self-mentions in high school function more as an explanatory and stance-organizing resource.

This study does not equate high frequency in any category with "better teaching." Rather, the distribution reflects strategic choices shaped by different interactional requirements. In middle school, dense use of engagement and frame markers enables the teacher to segment activities into smaller steps, allocate speaking opportunities efficiently, and manage attention resources, building an interactional ecology of tight pacing and frequent short exchanges. In high school, the prominence of self-mentions, boosters, and attitude markers supports longer explanatory stretches in which the teacher maintains interpretive control, strengthens key claims, and constructs epistemic authority to help students cope with conceptually demanding content.

4.2. Metadiscourse and the Structure of Classroom Interactional Sequences

Table 3: Interactional Turns and Sequence Structure in Middle and High School Classrooms.

Indicator	Middle School Classroom	High School Classroom
Teacher English word count (for standardization)	2778	5565
Total interactional turns (teacher initiation–student response)	58	53
Interactional density (turns per 1,000 teacher words)	20.88	9.52
Initiation–response sequences (count)	40	35
Initiation–response–feedback sequences (count)	18	18

Table 3 shows that the middle school classroom produced slightly more interactional turns than the high school classroom (58 vs. 53), but the more substantial contrast lies in interactional density: 20.88 turns per 1,000 teacher words in middle school versus 9.52 in high school. This means that, when teacher talk length is controlled, teacher–student interaction occurred much more frequently in the middle school classroom, where lesson progression relied heavily on continuous cycles of elicitation and response. The high school classroom, despite a comparable absolute number of interactional turns, displayed markedly lower interactional density because the teacher produced longer explanatory stretches, reducing interaction frequency per unit of teacher talk. This finding is consistent with Table 2, where engagement markers are denser in the middle school classroom, suggesting they are closely aligned with a high-frequency interactional ecology.

Although both classrooms produced the same number of initiation–response–feedback sequences (18 each), the interactional work differs. In middle school, teacher feedback functions as rapid confirmation or closure—brief evaluation or acceptance before moving to a new question or task. This creates an interactional rhythm of frequent initiations, short responses, and rapid topic shifts. Because lesson progression depends on such short-cycle interaction, frame markers occur with higher density, connecting micro-interactional episodes into a coherent lesson trajectory. In high school, by contrast, IRF sequences more often perform elaborative follow-up work: the teacher reformulates answers, adds examples, or pushes the same problem forward, embedding a single interactional turn into a longer explanatory chain. This helps explain why self-mentions, attitude markers, and boosters are denser in high school—these resources are especially functional in extended explanatory discourse where the teacher maintains argumentative control and constructs epistemic authority.

When further interpreted in relation to sequence structure, engagement markers in middle school are frequently integrated into initiation moves, repeatedly re-launching interaction and maintaining high density. In high school, engagement markers are less frequent but appear at key cognitive turning points to reorient attention. Meanwhile, the high school teacher relies more heavily on self-mentions to sustain explanatory control. In this sense, interaction in middle school functions as a "default mechanism" of lesson progression, whereas in high school it functions as a "nodal mechanism" within longer teacher-led interpretive chains.

5. Discussion

5.1. *The key cross-level difference lies not in “more or less use,” but in the structured division of labor in lesson progression*

From a theoretical perspective, classroom interaction cannot be reduced to simple “question-answer” exchanges; what matters is how these exchanges are organized into sequences that can continuously advance meaning-making. Sinclair and Coulthard’s^[11] classroom discourse model highlights that teacher initiation, student response, and the teacher’s subsequent uptake (follow-up/feedback) together constitute a basic sequenced mechanism for lesson progression. This perspective provides a structural framework for understanding how different classrooms move forward.

In the present study, interaction in the middle school classroom is denser per unit of teacher talk, and the densities of frame markers and engagement markers are also higher. This suggests that the middle school lesson relies more heavily on “high-frequency procedural signposting + turn allocation” to advance the class. In other words, lesson progression in the middle school classroom resembles a “continuous triggering” mechanism: the teacher repeatedly uses explicit process cues and participation summons to maintain tempo, focus attention, and quickly shift between tasks. Such an organization aligns closely with middle school learners’ need for more overt scaffolding in class, and it also resonates with the view of metadiscourse as an audience-design resource—namely, that speakers use explicit cues to help listeners process information flow, grasp structure, and sustain participation^[1,12].

By contrast, although the high school classroom shows a higher overall (raw) frequency of metadiscourse, once teacher talk length is controlled, interaction density and engagement-marker density decrease, while self-mentions, attitude markers, and boosters become relatively more prominent. In light of sequence structure, this pattern resembles an “explanatory-chain dominant + key-node interaction” mechanism: the teacher maintains the conceptual thread through longer stretches of explanation, and uses stance expression, evaluative strengthening, and self-positioning to ensure coherence and authority; interaction appears more often at key points of conceptual shift or viewpoint comparison, serving to check understanding, push reasoning forward, or guide stance selection. This pattern aligns with recent classroom discourse work suggesting that in classrooms where knowledge organization and comprehensibility are central, teachers often rely on interactive metadiscourse to organize information flow and on interactional resources to mark stance and evaluation, thereby making complex content “clear and stable” for learners^[13].

Therefore, the cross-level difference in this study is better interpreted as two different configurations of progression mechanisms: “high-density interactional scheduling” in the middle school classroom versus “explanatory-chain organization” in the high school classroom. This interpretation avoids simplifying the difference into an intuitive dichotomy such as “high school is more complex/middle school is more interactive,” and instead emphasizes that the function of metadiscourse depends on the classroom action and sequential position in which it is deployed.

5.2. *Metadiscourse and interactional sequences jointly construct the classroom dialogic space*

Examining metadiscourse together with interactional sequences can further explain why different school levels show different category advantages. Hyland’s^[1] framework suggests that interactive resources mainly serve information organization and listener processing, whereas interactional resources are more closely tied to stance expression and interpersonal negotiation^[1].

In this study, the higher densities of frame markers and engagement markers in the middle school classroom indicate that the teacher more frequently uses explicit structural cues and participation summons to organize classroom actions. This corroborates the “high interaction-turn density” finding: when lesson progression depends on continuously triggering interaction, engagement markers are not merely “encouragement to participate,” but directly perform operational functions such as initiating interaction, allocating turns, and maintaining classroom tempo. In contrast, the high school classroom shows a stronger prominence of self-mentions and evaluative strengthening resources, indicating that the teacher more frequently sustains the explanatory thread and assigns responsibility for reasoning through expressions such as “I think / let’s look / I want to emphasize,” thereby incorporating students’ responses at key nodes into the teacher’s overall explanatory framework.

This is highly consistent with recent work emphasizing metadiscourse – teacher-move coordination. Li and Hu’s^[14] study of university classroom interaction argues that teachers deploy different types of

metadiscourse across different teaching actions (e.g., guiding, probing, summarizing, evaluating), and that “action sequences + metadiscourse” jointly shape dialogic spaces that support student reasoning and thinking advancement^[14].

Applied to the present study, this perspective clarifies that metadiscourse in the middle school classroom more often serves “continuous triggering of actions,” whereas metadiscourse in the high school classroom more often serves “explanatory processing of actions.” Accordingly, even if the two lessons show similar numbers of initiation – response – feedback sequences, the classroom function of “feedback” is not equivalent: middle school feedback tends to be rapid confirmation and closure, whereas high school feedback tends to be elaboration, reformulation, and conceptual consolidation. This is not a matter of superiority or inferiority, but a sequential choice shaped jointly by instructional goals, task demands, and developmental constraints.

In addition, Tong^[15] report that in junior-high EFL classrooms analyzed using Sinclair and Coulthard’s framework, IRF and IR0 (initiation – response without an evident follow-up) are common patterns, and that more experienced teachers use more structural variants and show stronger structural flexibility, thereby fostering a more interactive and participatory classroom environment^[15].

This finding provides an important complement to the present discussion: interaction quality depends not only on how frequently interaction occurs, but also on whether teachers can “deepen” interaction at key moments—for example, by probing, reformulating, contrasting, and summarizing in ways that transform student responses into shareable classroom knowledge. Put differently, the contrast observed in this study—“dense interaction but quick switching” in middle school versus “long explanatory chains with key-node interaction” in high school—can be further theorized through structural flexibility and the ways teachers process classroom actions sequentially.

5.3. Shifting from “adding certain markers” to “optimizing sequential placement and follow-up”

For the middle school classroom, lesson progression relies on dense interaction and engagement/framing resources. This helps maintain momentum and broad participation, but risks creating a shallow cycle of “quick question – short answer – quick confirmation – quick shift.” A more productive direction is to upgrade “confirmatory follow-up” into “processing follow-up” at key nodes—for example, by adding probes, requesting reasons or examples, reformulating student language, or guiding comparisons. In this way, engagement markers can be transformed from “scheduling tools” into “scaffolded tools for thinking advancement”^[15]. From a metadiscourse perspective, this means integrating the structuring function of interactive resources with the stance-negotiation function of interactional resources within the same turn^[1,16].

For the high school classroom, which relies more on explanatory chains and stance-strengthening resources, the key is not to reduce explanation but to increase the diffusion of engagement markers beyond a few “key nodes” to form more stable dialogic loops^[14]. High school teachers can shift some “teacher – student” Q&A into “student – student – teacher processing” chains—for instance, encouraging students to respond to and probe one another during viewpoint comparisons, then using frame markers and attitude markers to consolidate outcomes. High school classrooms already have abundant stance-strengthening resources; adding student-to-student dialogic loops can integrate “depth of explanation” with “breadth of participation”^[17]. Finally, the value of metadiscourse lies not only in expressing content but also in organizing relationships and actions^[18].

6. Conclusion

This study compared teacher metadiscourse in one middle-school and one high-school EFL lesson. The middle-school lesson showed higher metadiscourse and interactional density after controlling for teacher talk length, with denser frame and engagement markers. The high-school lesson showed denser self-mentions, attitude markers, and boosters. The essential difference lies in functional configuration: “high-density interactional scheduling” versus “explanatory-chain with nodal interaction.” Limitations include the small dataset (two lessons) and lack of student outcome measures. Future research should expand sample size and incorporate multi-method designs.

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