

# *A Study of Early Childhood English Teachers' Classroom Metadiscourse Use and Their Identity Construction from Metapragmatic Perspective*

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**Abstract:** Using Chen Xinren's (2020) metadiscourse classification based on metadiscourse as a theoretical framework, this paper analyses the characteristics of early childhood English teachers' classroom metadiscourse use and identity construction, and explores the metadiscourse awareness embodied behind their metadiscourse use. The study found that early childhood English teachers use sender metadiscourse, addressee metadiscourse, information metadiscourse and code metadiscourse more frequently in the classroom. In the process of constructing identity types, early childhood English teachers mainly constructed the identities of interaction initiator, instructional guide, attitude expressor, classroom controller and contextual interpreter through metadiscourse. The results of this study can contribute to clarifying the role of teacher metadiscourse in early childhood English teaching and thereby promoting the professionalism and teaching competence of early childhood English teachers.

## 1. Introduction

As China's international status rises and economic globalisation deepens, there is a growing demand for English-speaking talents in society. The Chinese government attaches great importance to English education as an important way to cultivate internationalised talents. Early childhood is a critical stage for language acquisition, and parents' attention to the development of their English ability is increasing. However, there are fundamental differences between English acquisition in early childhood and English learning in older age groups. The former focuses on language input and oral expression, and requires teachers to adjust their teaching strategies due to the limited attention span of young children. How early childhood English teachers can use effective language strategies to teach has become an important issue. Based on Chen Xinren's (2020)<sup>[1]</sup> metadiscourse classification theory, this study explores the use of metadiscourse and its identity construction in the classroom of early childhood English teachers, aiming to improve teachers' metadiscourse competence and metacognitive awareness, thus optimising teaching effectiveness, improving teaching strategies and enriching the theory of early childhood English teaching.

## 2. Research Background

### 2.1 Metapragmatics

Metapragmatics refers to the pragmatic phenomena that occur at the 'meta-level' of language use, and explores how communicators choose linguistic devices to self-monitor and manage the appropriateness of communicative content and behaviour (Verschueren 1999)<sup>[2]</sup>, reflecting their self-referential awareness of language use. In 1976, Silverstein first used the term metapragmatics to denote awareness that helps language users identify the relationship between linguistic forms and communicative situation. In 1976, Silverstein first used the term metapragmatics to denote the awareness that helps language users to recognise the relationship between linguistic forms and communicative situations, which relates to the ways in which 'linguistic forms, including non-language forms, can be identified'. "linguistic forms, including non-linguistic forms, anchored into context" (Culpeper & Haugh 2014)<sup>[3]</sup>, i.e. metapragmatics embodies an awareness of the association between language use and context. Using linguistic devices, communicators can frame the propositional content of discourse as true or precise, and can reflect the co-operation or straightforwardness of the communicator in order to reduce communicative uncertainty, ensure the direction of communication in the context, and thus establish or maintain appropriate social relations. A more comprehensive and in-depth study of meta-pragmatics was conducted by Caffi (1994)<sup>[4]</sup>. Caffi provides a more comprehensive and in-depth study of metapragmatics, which she divides into three levels: metatheoretical reflection on pragmatics, the study of the conditions under which communicative behaviours and activities take place, and the study of the speaker's sense of management and regulation of discourse. Currently, metapragmatic research focuses on the third level, namely, the management and regulation of discourse. This regulation is manifested in both macro and micro structures. The macro level is about the shift of the discourse wheel, the arrangement of thematic sequences, and the relationship between the two communicators. The micro level is about the regulation of the structural arrangement of the discourse, such as "what I mean is...". The use of "what I mean is..." means that the speaker consciously restates and explains the previous discourse to the listener, providing the listener with a framework for interpreting the information.

The in-depth explorations of foreign scholars in the field of metapragmatics have provided domestic scholars with valuable theoretical references, revealing the complex cognitive mechanism, cultural background and social motivation behind language users' choice of language, thus opening up a novel and profound perspective for analysing the construction process of language use. At present, metapragmatic theory and its application have become a hot topic in the academic world, with an increasingly wide range of research scope, and a trend of diversification and refinement of research methods and paths. This diversity of research methods and the integration of interdisciplinary fields enable us to explore the uniqueness of metapragmatic expressions in different languages and their co-occurrence laws in a more comprehensive and systematic way (Jiang Hui 2019)<sup>[5]</sup>. At present, domestic scholars have analyzed written or communicative discourse such as academic journals, news reports, political discourse and business dialogues from a metapragmatic perspective respectively, and some scholars have also analyzed teachers' classroom discourse from a metapragmatic perspective, but they have mostly focused on college teachers (Jiang Hui 2020)<sup>[6]</sup> and primary and secondary school teachers, and few studies have analysed the classroom discourse of early childhood English teachers from a meta-pragmatic perspective.

## 3. Research Design

The concept of identity originates from sociology, and with the development of communication,

conversation analysis and pragmatics, the academic understanding of identity has shifted from essentialism to constructivism (Chen Xinren 2013)<sup>[7]</sup>, which views it as a dynamic and variable communicative attribute. Bucholtz & Hall point out that identities are situated representations, which are varied according to the social roles and situations. Chen Xinren (2014)<sup>[8]</sup> proposes a discursive view of identity as a resource chosen by communicators to fulfil communicative needs, constructed through discourse and disappearing with the end of discourse, or reactivated or perpetuated according to needs.

Scholars have studied identity construction features from different perspectives. Sun Li (2020)<sup>[9]</sup> found that authors of Chinese academic papers mainly constructed organiser identities in their writing; Cheng Xia compared the picture discourse on Chinese and American corporate websites and found that Chinese corporations focused on constructing the identity of industry leaders while American corporations focused on the identity of social contributors; Ran Yongping (2023)<sup>[10]</sup> analysed bantering discourse in business interactions and found that the interlocutors constructed different discourse identities by changing the type of banter in order to achieve discourse effects. However, most of the existing research focuses on diplomatic, academic, and interview discourse, and less attention is paid to the identity construction of early childhood English teachers' classroom discourse.

Early childhood English teaching is fundamentally different from traditional teaching in terms of purpose, methodology and focus. Early childhood is the prime period for language learning, which has a profound impact on their language ability, cognition, thinking and intercultural communication skills. Its uniqueness requires teachers to adopt different teaching methods and language strategies from the traditional ones, and its importance requires teachers to grasp the critical period and use the right strategies to get good teaching results. Therefore, it is of great theoretical and practical significance to analyse early childhood English teachers' classroom metadiscourse use and their identity construction from a metadiscourse perspective. Using Chen Xinren's (2013)<sup>[7]</sup> metadiscourse classification as a framework, this study explores the classroom metadiscourse use and identity construction of early childhood English teachers, with a view to providing theoretical support and practical guidance for early childhood English teaching.

### 3.1 Corpus Description and Design

Under the influence of political, economic and cultural factors, nowadays, children's English-enlightenment institutions have been opened up as in the spring, and the corpus collected in this study comes from the English classrooms of a well-known local English institution for young children in Nanjing, where the teachers are two professional female teachers of English for young children, aged 27 and 29 years old respectively. One of the teachers graduated from a 211 university with a master's degree in English as a subject, holds an English teacher's qualification certificate and an English professional grade 8 certificate, and has been engaged in teaching English to young children for four years. The other teacher graduated from the University of Sydney with a Bachelor's Degree in Education, holds an English Teacher's Qualification Certificate and an IELTS 7, and has been teaching English to young children for four years. The target audience was 5-6 year old children who had completed Cambridge Young Learners English Power up 0 and had a little foundation in English language. In this study, a total of 30 early childhood English lessons were recorded and each lesson lasting 45 minutes. First of all, the classroom discourse of the teachers in the recorded video was transcribed into text, and the transcribed text corpus was self-constructed into a corpus of early childhood English teachers' classroom discourse, which contains 240,000 characters. Then, using the metadiscourse classification based on metapragmatics proposed by Chen Xinren (2013)<sup>[7]</sup> as an analytical framework, we came to determine and annotate the metadiscourse

types in the corpus and calculate the frequency characteristics of all kinds of metadiscourse. Finally, relying on a qualitative analysis tool called Nvivo12, we determine, encode and count the types and frequency of identity construction of early childhood English teachers and their percentage.

### 3.2 Research Questions

In order to delve into the classroom metadiscourse and identity construction of early childhood English teachers, this paper intends to answer the following two questions:

- (1) What are the characteristics of the type and frequency of metadiscourse used by early childhood English teachers in the classroom?
- (2) What are the characteristics of the type and frequency of identities that early childhood English teachers use to construct classroom metadiscourse?

## 4. Analysis and Discussion of Results

### 4.1 Early Childhood English Teachers' Classroom Metadiscourse

#### 4.1.1 Types of Classroom Metadiscourse for Early Childhood English Teachers

This study takes the metadiscourse classification based on metapragmatics proposed by Chen Xinren (2013)<sup>[7]</sup> as a theoretical framework. Based on the metadiscourse theories of Culpeper & Haugh (2014)<sup>[3]</sup>, Verschueren (1995; 2010)<sup>[2]</sup>, etc. and Jacobson's practice of dividing language functions based on communicative dimensions, he analyses the various types of metadiscourse awareness to further classify metadiscourse into contextual metadiscourse, sender metadiscourse, addressee metadiscourse, relational metadiscourse, informational metadiscourse, discourse metadiscourse and discourse code metadiscourse. discourse, discourse metadiscourse, discourse metadiscourse and discourse code metadiscourse, whose classification framework is shown in Figure 1. By analysing the corpus and combining it with the theoretical framework, this study found that early childhood English teachers often use contextual metadiscourse, sender metadiscourse, addressee metadiscourse, informational metadiscourse, and discourse code metadiscourse in the classroom.

Type	Function	Examples
Guided Metadiscourse	Helps the audience understand the discourse	Let' go out.
Transition Markers	Express logical relationships in discourse	in addition, but, so, however
Structural Markers	Indicate discourse acts, sequences, and stages	first, to summarize, right, ok
Endophoric Markers	Mark internal information in the discourse	noted above, in this paragraph
Evidential Markers	Indicate relationships with other discourses	according to
Code Glosses	Help the audience understand conceptual meanings	namely, like, for example
Interactive Metadiscourse	Engage the audience in the discourse	My topic today is...
Hedges	Express uncertainty about propositions	might, perhaps, possible
Boosters	Express certainty about propositional content	in fact, of course, sure
Attitude Markers	Express attitudes toward propositional content	I agree, unfortunately
Self-mentions	Explicitly indicate the speaker's identity	I, we, my
Engagement Markers	Treat the audience as discourse participants	consider, you can see

Figure 1: Meta-discourse analysis based on meta-speaking

*Example (1) Good morning, everyone! Please sit down and say hello to each other! How are you today?*

*Example (2) Now, let's start our English lesson! Someone may show me where the letter A is on the board?*

*Example (3) Who can tell me what sound the letter B makes? That's right, it's /b/!*

*Example (4) Great job! Now, let's sing the ABC song together. A, B, C, D...*

*Example (5) Today, we are going to learn about animals. Let's make the sound of a cat.*

*Example (6) Who can show me how to say "I love you" in English? That's right, "I love you"!*

Example (1) mainly uses contextual metadiscourse. "Good morning" is used to refer to the time and "sit down" is used to refer to the situation, which reflects the contextual metadiscourse awareness of the ECE teacher, and helps to improve students' attention by preparing them for the start of the lesson. Example (2) mainly uses addressee metadiscourse. "Someone may show me" indicates that the ECE teacher guesses that the students are willing to actively participate in the classroom activities and take the initiative to answer the questions posed by the teacher, which helps to promote the progress of the class and regulate the classroom atmosphere. Examples (3) and (4) mainly use informative discourse, "That's right" and "Great job!" are the attitudes of the ECE teacher who positively evaluates and praises the information and behaviours conveyed by the students, which can help to increase students' self-confidence and motivation in learning. Example (5) mainly uses the sender's metadiscourse, and the word "we" not only includes the students but also highlights the ECE teacher herself, which helps to bring her closer to her students, making it easier for the children to accept her psychologically, and thus easier for them to accept the knowledge taught by the teacher. Example (6) mainly uses code metadiscourse, "how to say "I love you" in English" suggests that the students should make the corresponding code-switching at this time, which reflects the ECE teacher's cue of meta-pragmatic awareness of the code, and thus highlights the language learnt.

#### 4.1.2 Frequency of Classroom Metadiscourse Use by Early Childhood English Teachers

This study In this study, by using Nvivo12 software to perform word frequency statistics on the corpus, we further excluded dummy words and numbers, and merged and queried the synonyms, and then obtained a list of high-frequency real words, and based on Chen Xinren's (2013)<sup>[7]</sup> metadiscourse-based meta-discourse classification framework, manually categorised and coded its high-frequency words, and found its corresponding metadiscourse type, and thus carried out the statistics and analyses, and its corresponding to its word frequencies are shown in the table below:

Table 1: Metadiscourse type word frequencies.

metalinguistic type (linguistics)	contextual metadiscourse	speaker's original words	Recipient meta-discourse	relational metadiscourse	information metadiscourse	discourse metadiscourse	Coded metadiscourse
word frequency	445	289	124	163	786	65	79
Overall percentage	27.62 per cent	13.92 per cent	14.27 per cent	19.25 per cent	39.25 per cent	9.43 per cent	10.54 per cent

From the data in Table 1, it can be concluded that ECE teachers use the highest frequency of informational metadiscourse in classroom metadiscourse, and their common words are "perfect", "great", "good" and "nice", indicating that in ECE teaching, ECE teachers mainly evaluate the information and behaviours conveyed by students positively, so as to enhance students' self-confidence and convey positive attitudes. "great", "good" and "nice", indicating that in early childhood English teaching, early childhood English teachers mainly evaluate the information and behaviours conveyed by students positively and convey positive attitudes, so as to enhance students' self-confidence, stimulate students' motivation to learn, improve students' learning outcomes and shape a positive Learning atmosphere. Contextual metadiscourse was slightly less frequent, indicating that ECE teachers often use metadiscourse to refer to time, situation and environment, so



as to convey to students that they are in a learning environment and need to pay attention. Their discourse metadiscourse was used the least frequently. Discourse metadiscourse is mainly used to highlight discourse connections, prompt topic selection and transformation, and foretell later information, etc. As young children are at an early stage of language development, their language ability and cognitive level are limited. They are more suited to learning language through imitation, listening and experiencing rather than through abstract grammar rules or a large number of logical discourses, so fewer discourse metadiscourses are involved.

## 4.2 Types of Identity Constructed by Early Childhood English Teachers' Classroom Metadiscourse

### 4.2.1 Types of identities constructed in metadiscourse

By analysing the use of metadiscourse in the corpus and its frequency of use, this study found that metadiscourse has the roles of expressing attitudes, guiding teaching, triggering interactions and controlling the classroom in early childhood English teaching, and that it also side by side reflects the communicative needs that teachers' use of metadiscourse in early childhood English teaching aims to achieve. Based on Chen Xinren's (2013) <sup>[7]</sup> theory of discourse identity, this study found that, driven by these four communicative needs, ECE teachers use classroom metadiscourse to construct the discourse identities of attitude expresser, teaching guide, interaction initiator and classroom controller. Table 2 lists the various types of identities constructed by ECE teachers' classroom metadiscourse use, the corresponding communicative demands, and specific examples.

Table 2: Identity types of classroom metadiscourse constructs of early childhood English teachers

Identity	Social need	Give an example
Attitudinal expressers	Increase student motivation and enliven the classroom atmosphere	"Wow, <u>you did such a great job</u> today, little explorers! You learned a new word and played a fun game. Remember to practice 'cat' at home with your family.
Teaching guide	Transferring knowledge and prompting students to think, explore and learn about knowledge	<u>Look at</u> this picture. What animal do you see? Yes, it's a dog. Woof! Woof!
Interaction Initiator	Grabbing students' attention and increasing their participation in the classroom	Now, <u>let's</u> play a game. I will say a word, and <u>you need to</u> find the matching picture.
Classroom Controllers	Creating a favourable learning environment, fostering students' self-discipline, maintaining classroom order and ensuring orderly teaching and learning.	Come in please and <u>don't be</u> late again.

It is important to note that the various identity types above are not exclusive in the classroom discourse of ECE teachers, i.e. ECE teachers may construct multiple identities in the same classroom discourse, as shown in example (7):

*Example (7) I am so proud of all of you. You are all such wonderful students. After the game, we will do a craft activity. We will make a paper airplane. If you are ready , please put your hands up. Ok! Let's get our scissors and glue ready!*

In example (7), the early childhood English teacher simultaneously constructs the identities of attitude expresser, instructional guide and interaction initiator. This context-based change in metadiscourse use and identity construction driven by different communicative demands further demonstrates the dynamic selectivity of discourse identity.

#### 4.2.2 Frequency of various types of identity

The frequency of occurrences of discursive identity types constructed by early childhood English teachers through classroom metadiscourse is shown in Table 3:

Table 3: Frequency of occurrence of identity types constructed by early childhood English teachers using classroom metadiscourse

Type of identity	Attitudinal expressers	Teaching guide	interaction initiator	Classroom Controller
frequency	786	1272	498	279

As seen in Table 3, early childhood English teachers have the highest frequency of constructing instructional guides through classroom discourse. Therefore, for early childhood English teachers, guiding teaching, imparting English subject knowledge, cultivating English thinking and improving students' cognitive abilities still come first, which is the main goal of teaching. The frequency of their constructing attitude expressers is the second highest. By constructing the discourse identity of attitude expressers, teachers help young children to build up their self-confidence and sense of self-affirmation, experience the fun and sense of achievement in learning, and stimulate the motivation and drive for learning.

In addition, the table also shows that the relative frequency of early childhood English teachers constructing the identity of classroom controller through classroom metadiscourse is low, which may be related to the psychological characteristics of young children. Young children are in a critical period of physical and mental development, and their attitudes towards the environment and others can be greatly influenced, so early childhood English teachers should not use too strong words to control classroom discipline and grasp the classroom atmosphere. Instead, teachers should focus on using guidance and positive motivation instead of verbal control and discipline, cultivating children's self-management and self-discipline, and building a harmonious and positive learning atmosphere.

#### 5. Conclusion

Based on the theoretical framework of metadiscourse classification under the metadiscourse perspective proposed by Chen Xinren (2020)<sup>[8]</sup>, this paper provides an in-depth discussion of early childhood English teachers' use of metadiscourse and their identity construction features in the classroom setting. The results of the study show that early childhood English teachers use metadiscourses such as contextual metadiscourse, sender metadiscourse, addressee metadiscourse, and informational metadiscourse in the classroom, with informational and contextual metadiscourses appearing more frequently, and discourse metadiscourses appearing less frequently. These metadiscourses not only contribute to the effective transmission of information and promote interaction and understanding between teachers and students, but also help to promote students' motivation and initiative in learning, increase their enthusiasm for learning English, and thus enhance learning outcomes. In terms of identity construction, teachers successfully shaped multiple identities of interaction initiator, instructional guide, attitude expressor, and classroom controller through the skilful use of metadiscourse, and the dynamic transformation and overlapping of these identities created a positive and lively learning atmosphere in the early childhood English classroom. This study enriches the theoretical connotation of metadiscourse and identity construction research, clarifies the important role of teachers' metadiscourse in early childhood English teaching, provides practical guidance for improving the professionalism and teaching ability of early childhood English teachers, provides useful references and inspirations for optimising the teaching of early childhood English classrooms and promoting the professional growth of teachers, and is of great

significance in promoting the quality improvement of early childhood English education.

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