

The Impact of Feedback on Learner Motivation: A Discourse-Based Qualitative Study in Vietnamese Contexts

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Abstract: This study explores the impact of feedback as a discourse practice on learner motivation in Vietnamese contexts, particularly in environments that require continuous learning and adaptation. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with eight participants across different professional and educational backgrounds using purposive sampling. Drawing on discourse analysis and pragmatics, the findings indicate that both positive and negative feedback function as communicative acts that shape motivation when realized appropriately. The effectiveness of feedback depends on linguistic features such as politeness strategies, mitigation, tone, and contextual appropriateness. Cultural norms, particularly face-saving and indirect communication, play a crucial role in how feedback is interpreted and internalized. The study contributes to the understanding of feedback as a socially situated discourse practice and provides pedagogical implications for designing effective feedback strategies in language education and professional communication.

Keywords: feedback discourse, pragmatics, learner motivation, Vietnamese context, politeness strategies.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and rapid digital transformation, communication practices have become increasingly central to organizational effectiveness in Vietnamese enterprises. Beyond technological advancement, the ability to manage human interaction-particularly through language-plays a crucial role in shaping performance and engagement. Within this perspective, feedback can be understood not merely as a managerial tool, but as a discursive practice through which evaluation, guidance, and interpersonal meaning are constructed (London, 2014).

From a linguistic standpoint, feedback operates as a form of evaluative and directive discourse, realized through specific lexical choices, pragmatic strategies, and interactional patterns. However, its effectiveness is not uniform. Positive feedback is commonly associated with enhanced motivation and job satisfaction, yet when perceived as overly general or inflated, it may reduce the drive for further improvement (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). In contrast, negative or critical feedback can facilitate behavioral adjustment when linguistically mitigated and accompanied by clear guidance. Conversely, when expressed in a direct or face-threatening manner, it may create psychological pressure, trigger defensiveness, and ultimately hinder performance (Brown *et al.*, 2019).

In the Vietnamese context, feedback practices are deeply shaped by sociocultural norms such as face-saving, interpersonal harmony, and indirect

communication. Existing research has largely examined feedback in educational settings or multinational environments (Dang, Scull, & Chowdhury, 2022), with limited attention to how feedback is linguistically constructed and pragmatically interpreted in domestic enterprise contexts. This gap is particularly significant in multigenerational and multicultural workplaces, where differences in communication styles may influence how feedback is produced, perceived, and negotiated.

Accordingly, this study seeks to address the following research question: ***How does feedback, as a discourse practice, influence employee motivation and performance in Vietnamese enterprise settings?***

To answer this question, the study integrates insights from Feedback Intervention Theory (FIT) (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), while extending the analysis through a discourse and pragmatic lens. A qualitative approach is employed, using in-depth interviews with employees across multiple sectors to capture nuanced, context-sensitive interpretations of feedback.

Academically, this study contributes to the growing body of research that conceptualizes feedback as a linguistically mediated and socially situated practice, thereby extending theoretical discussions in applied linguistics and organizational communication. Practically, it

provides implications for designing more effective feedback strategies by emphasizing the role of language use, politeness strategies, and cultural sensitivity in enhancing motivation, performance, and workplace engagement.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Feedback as a Discursive and Pragmatic Construct

From a linguistic perspective, feedback can be conceptualized as a discursive practice through which speakers evaluate, guide, and negotiate meaning in interaction. Rather than being a purely managerial mechanism, feedback functions as a form of evaluative and directive discourse, realized through specific linguistic choices and pragmatic strategies (London, 2014).

According to Stone and Heen (2014), feedback is inherently interactive, involving not only the transmission of information but also processes of interpretation, negotiation, and response. In this sense, feedback aligns with speech act theory, as it encompasses acts such as evaluation, suggestion, and criticism, each carrying both propositional and interpersonal meaning.

Within organizational and professional contexts, feedback operates as a strategically constructed communicative act that shapes behavior, engagement, and motivation (Baker *et al.*, 2013). Its effectiveness depends not only on content but also on how it is linguistically encoded—through tone, modality, hedging, and discourse structure.

Positive Feedback as Evaluative Discourse

Positive feedback can be understood as an evaluative speech act that expresses approval, recognition, or encouragement when individuals perform tasks successfully or align with expected standards (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Linguistically, it is often realized through:

- explicit praise (e.g., “excellent work”)
- intensification (e.g., “very effective”)
- supportive discourse markers

Such forms of feedback contribute to the construction of positive interpersonal meaning, reinforcing the recipient’s sense of competence and social value. Cameron and Pierce (2002) argue that positive feedback enhances satisfaction and motivation, while studies in Southeast Asian contexts suggest that it also strengthens trust and relational alignment within organizations (Goller & Späth, 2023).

However, from a discourse perspective, overly generalized or formulaic praise may weaken its impact, as it reduces informational value and authenticity.

Negative Feedback as Corrective and Face-Sensitive Discourse

Negative feedback functions as a corrective or directive speech act, aimed at identifying limitations, errors, or areas for improvement (Ilgen *et al.*, 1979). Its effectiveness is highly dependent on pragmatic realization, particularly in terms of politeness and mitigation strategies.

When delivered tactfully—through hedging, indirectness, or supportive framing—negative feedback can help recipients recognize gaps between current performance and expected standards, thereby facilitating adjustment and development (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). In contrast, direct or unmitigated criticism may constitute a face-threatening act, leading to defensiveness, psychological discomfort, and reduced motivation (Baron, 1988).

Thus, the impact of negative feedback is not determined solely by its content but by how it is discursively constructed and contextually interpreted.

Despite extensive research on feedback in organizational settings, much of the existing literature is grounded in Western contexts, where direct communication is more widely accepted. In contrast, Vietnamese communication is shaped by sociocultural norms emphasizing face-saving, indirectness, and interpersonal harmony, which may significantly influence how feedback is produced and received (Nguyen *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, qualitative studies examining feedback as a linguistic and interactional phenomenon in Vietnamese contexts remain limited.

Theoretical Model: Integrating Discourse, Motivation, and Culture

This study adopts an interdisciplinary framework that integrates psychological theories with linguistic perspectives to explain how feedback operates as a discourse practice.

First, Feedback Intervention Theory (FIT) (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) provides a foundation for understanding how feedback directs attention. From a discourse perspective, this can be interpreted as a shift in interactional focus:

- task-oriented feedback emphasizes performance and process
- self-oriented feedback foregrounds personal attributes

Task-focused feedback, typically realized through specific and neutral linguistic forms, tends to enhance motivation and performance. In contrast, feedback targeting the individual—especially when expressed through evaluative or judgmental language—may trigger defensive responses and reduce engagement.

Second, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) explains how feedback influences intrinsic motivation through the fulfillment of three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. From a linguistic standpoint:

- feedback that uses inclusive and supportive language can enhance relatedness
- specific and constructive phrasing strengthens perceived competence
- indirect or autonomy-supportive expressions help maintain agency

Thus, the motivational impact of feedback is closely tied to its pragmatic and interpersonal realization.

Finally, cultural context serves as a critical moderating factor. Hall (1976) distinguishes between low-context (direct) and high-context (indirect) communication styles. Vietnam is typically characterized as a high-context culture, where meaning is often conveyed implicitly and relational harmony is prioritized. As a result, feedback—particularly negative feedback—requires careful linguistic mitigation to avoid threatening face and damaging interpersonal relationships (Thang & Sanga, 2016).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore feedback as a discursive and interactional phenomenon. Rather than treating feedback solely as an evaluative tool, the study investigates how it is linguistically constructed, pragmatically realized, and subjectively interpreted by participants.

Semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary method of data collection, as they allow for both guided inquiry and the emergence of naturally occurring reflections on language use, meaning-making, and interpersonal

communication (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This approach is particularly suitable for examining how individuals perceive and negotiate feedback within specific sociocultural contexts.

Participants and Scope

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with relevant experience in giving or receiving workplace feedback, ensuring access to rich and contextually grounded discourse data (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015).

The study involved eight participants working in Vietnamese enterprises across sectors such as services, manufacturing, and technology. All participants had at least one year of professional experience and were regularly engaged in feedback interactions. Their accounts provide insight into how feedback is produced, interpreted, and negotiated in authentic workplace communication.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected through semi-structured interview protocols informed by the theoretical framework and prior literature. The interview questions were designed not only to elicit experiences but also to uncover:

- participants' interpretations of feedback language
- perceptions of tone, wording, and communicative intent
- emotional and motivational responses to different feedback forms

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and supplemented by field notes to capture contextual and interactional nuances (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted in three stages. First, participants were invited through formal communication outlining the purpose of the study and ethical considerations, including voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any time.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted via online platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet, each lasting approximately 20 to 30 minutes. These settings enabled participants to reflect on their experiences and articulate how feedback is expressed and interpreted in workplace discourse.

Finally, all data were transcribed, coded, anonymized, and securely stored to ensure

confidentiality and ethical compliance (Orb *et al.*, 2001).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), combined with a discourse-analytic perspective. The analysis involved:

1. familiarization with the data
2. coding of recurring linguistic and thematic patterns
3. identification of key themes
4. interpretation of how feedback is constructed and functions in interaction

Particular attention was paid to:

- evaluative language
- mitigation strategies
- tone and stance
- implicit vs. explicit meaning

NVivo software was used to support data organization and systematic coding.

Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility, member checking was conducted by sharing interview summaries with participants for validation and clarification (Birt *et al.*, 2016). This process helped confirm that the interpretations accurately reflected participants' intended meanings, particularly in relation to nuanced linguistic and pragmatic features.

FINDINGS

The findings indicate that feedback in workplace contexts functions not merely as a managerial mechanism but as a linguistically mediated and emotionally charged discourse practice that shapes motivation and performance. Three major themes emerged from the analysis.

Theme 1: Positive Feedback as Evaluative and Identity-Constructing Discourse

The data reveal that positive feedback plays a significant role in reinforcing employees' confidence and motivation. Participants emphasized that feedback is most effective when it is specific, linguistically explicit, and contextually grounded.

Rather than generic praise, detailed evaluative language helps recipients interpret feedback as meaningful recognition, thereby strengthening their sense of competence and professional identity.

"When my manager praised me for completing the project ahead of schedule, I felt very happy and

wanted to maintain even higher productivity." (NV03)

"When I was commended for organizing my work efficiently, I felt more enthusiastic and confident in subsequent tasks." (NV07)

These examples illustrate that positive feedback operates as a form of identity-affirming discourse, shaping how individuals perceive their abilities and role within the organization.

Theme 2: Negative Feedback as Corrective but Face-Sensitive Discourse

Negative feedback is perceived as constructive when it is framed as task-oriented and linguistically mitigated. Participants reported greater acceptance when feedback focused on specific aspects of work rather than personal attributes.

"If feedback points out that my work organization needs improvement, I will adjust. But if it is too harsh, I feel pressured and lose motivation." (NV08)

"Negative feedback will be effective if it focuses on the work, but if it criticizes me as an incompetent person, I will react defensively immediately." (NV05)

These findings highlight that negative feedback constitutes a potential face-threatening act, and its effectiveness depends on how it is pragmatically realized. Linguistic features such as indirectness, hedging, and constructive framing play a critical role in reducing defensiveness and facilitating acceptance.

Thus, it is not the polarity of feedback (positive vs. negative) that determines its impact, but rather its discursive construction and communicative intent.

Theme 3: Communication Style and Cultural Framing of Feedback

A key finding is the influence of cultural norms and communication style on feedback practices. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of subtlety, tact, and relational sensitivity in Vietnamese workplace discourse.

Feedback delivered in a respectful and indirect manner was perceived as supportive, whereas direct criticism was often interpreted as offensive and damaging to interpersonal relationships.

The use of structured discourse strategies, such as the "sandwich" approach (positive–negative–positive), was widely appreciated:

“I often see my boss give praise first and then point out areas that need improvement. I find it easier to accept that way.” (NV 1)

DISCUSSION

This pattern reflects the use of mitigation and politeness strategies to manage face concerns and maintain harmony in communication.

The findings of this study both align with and extend existing research on feedback, particularly when interpreted through a discourse and pragmatic lens. With regard to positive feedback, the results are consistent with Bakker and Demerouti (2017), who highlight its role in enhancing employee satisfaction and commitment, especially when it is specific and timely. From a linguistic perspective, this can be understood as the effectiveness of explicit and contextually grounded evaluative language, which reinforces the recipient’s sense of competence and social recognition. This supports Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000), particularly the role of competence and relatedness in fostering intrinsic motivation.

In relation to negative feedback, the findings confirm that its effectiveness depends not merely on content but on its discursive and pragmatic realization. When negative feedback is constructed in a task-oriented and linguistically mitigated manner, it enables individuals to identify areas for improvement and adjust their performance accordingly. However, feedback that is overly direct or that targets personal attributes tends to function as a face-threatening act, triggering defensiveness and reducing motivation. This observation is consistent with Feedback Intervention Theory (FIT) (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) and prior research on the negative effects of destructive criticism (Baron, 1988).

A key contribution of this study lies in highlighting the role of cultural and interactional norms in shaping feedback practices in the Vietnamese context. Unlike many Western settings, where directness is often acceptable, Vietnamese participants demonstrate heightened sensitivity to how feedback is linguistically delivered. The emphasis on “face-saving” and interpersonal harmony means that feedback must be carefully framed using strategies such as indirectness, mitigation, and supportive structuring. The preference for discourse patterns such as the “sandwich” approach (positive–negative–positive) illustrates how speakers

manage interpersonal meaning while maintaining evaluative intent. This finding suggests that the effectiveness of feedback is deeply embedded in culturally specific communication practices, which are less prominently addressed in Western-based studies.

Furthermore, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of feedback reception by foregrounding the role of subtle linguistic choices and personalization. The data indicate that feedback is most effective when it is tailored to the individual and delivered in a manner that aligns with cultural expectations of politeness and relational sensitivity. This aligns with Hall’s (1976) characterization of high-context cultures, where meaning is often conveyed implicitly and relational harmony is prioritized, as well as with research on communication practices in East Asian organizational settings (Thang & Sanga, 2016).

Overall, the findings reinforce the view that feedback should be understood not simply as an evaluative mechanism, but as a culturally situated discourse practice, where linguistic form, pragmatic strategy, and sociocultural norms interact to shape its impact on motivation and performance.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into feedback as a discourse practice in Vietnamese workplace communication, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the scope of the study is limited to employees and does not include perspectives from managers or leaders. As feedback is inherently an interactive and co-constructed communicative process, the absence of managerial voices restricts a more comprehensive understanding of how feedback is both produced and interpreted across hierarchical levels.

Second, the qualitative design based on in-depth interviews enables rich and context-sensitive insights into participants’ experiences and interpretations. However, it also involves a degree of subjectivity in both data generation and analysis, which may affect the generalizability of the findings (Patton, 2015). In addition, the study relies primarily on self-reported data rather than naturally occurring discourse, which may not fully capture the complexity of real-time feedback interactions.

Third, the data were collected over a relatively short period and from a limited number of enterprises. As a result, the study may not fully reflect longitudinal variations in feedback practices or differences across industries and organizational cultures. Furthermore, the role of technology-mediated communication—such as feedback delivered through digital platforms or in remote working environments—has not been systematically examined, despite its growing importance in contemporary workplace discourse (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study suggest several promising directions for future research.

First, future studies should expand the participant pool to include managers and organizational leaders in order to capture the bidirectional and interactional nature of feedback discourse. This would allow for a more comprehensive analysis of how feedback is constructed, negotiated, and interpreted across different roles.

Second, adopting mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative discourse analysis with quantitative measures could provide a more robust understanding of the relationship between feedback practices and motivational outcomes. Such designs would enhance both the depth and generalizability of findings.

Third, comparative research across different cultural contexts, particularly within Southeast Asia, would offer valuable insights into how feedback is shaped by varying sociocultural norms. This would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of intercultural pragmatics and support the development of context-sensitive communication models.

Finally, future research should pay greater attention to technology-mediated feedback, including digital communication platforms and remote working environments. Examining how linguistic features and pragmatic strategies are adapted in online contexts would be particularly relevant in the era of digital transformation.

Recommendations for Practice

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the need for organizations to reconceptualize feedback as a strategic communicative practice rather than a purely evaluative tool.

First, organizations should invest in training programs that develop employees' and managers' feedback literacy, with a particular focus on linguistic and pragmatic competence. Such training should emphasize the use of appropriate tone, mitigation strategies, and culturally sensitive communication practices, especially in contexts where face-saving and interpersonal harmony are highly valued (Hall, 1976; Thang & Sanga, 2016).

Second, feedback should be personalized and context-sensitive, taking into account individual differences in experience, competence, and communicative preferences. Tailored feedback not only enhances clarity and relevance but also strengthens interpersonal relationships and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Finally, organizations should foster a culture of open, continuous, and dialogic feedback, encouraging two-way communication and mutual understanding. Creating safe spaces for employees to express their perceptions of feedback can help enhance trust, reduce misinterpretation, and promote sustained motivation and commitment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the impact of positive and negative feedback on employee motivation in Vietnamese enterprises by conceptualizing feedback as a discursive and pragmatically mediated practice. Drawing on qualitative interview data, the findings demonstrate that feedback—regardless of its evaluative orientation—can serve as a powerful driver of performance when it is appropriately constructed and contextually delivered.

Importantly, feedback is perceived by participants as a dynamic and interactive process, through which individuals both interpret external evaluation and negotiate their own sense of competence and professional identity. In this sense, feedback functions not only to signal areas for improvement but also to affirm value and shape self-perception within the workplace.

The study highlights that the effectiveness of feedback depends on the interplay between content, linguistic realization, and sociocultural context. Specifically, feedback that is clearly articulated, pragmatically mitigated, and aligned with cultural norms of face-saving and interpersonal harmony is more likely to be accepted and internalized. Conversely, feedback

that neglects these dimensions may undermine motivation and relational trust.

Overall, the findings reinforce the view that feedback should not be treated merely as a managerial or evaluative instrument. Rather, it constitutes a socially situated and emotionally embedded discourse practice that plays a central role in shaping employees' motivation, engagement, and organizational experience.

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