

Voices of Value: A Sociopragmatic Analysis of Discourse Patterns in Student Evaluations of Teaching

Yasmine Soheim, The American University in Cairo, Egypt

The Paris Conference on Education 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs) are widely used in higher education to assess teaching effectiveness, yet the rich qualitative feedback within them remains underexplored—particularly in cross-cultural and sociopragmatic contexts. This study examines how undergraduate students at the department of Rhetoric and Composition at the American University in Cairo use language to evaluate instructors, focusing on how praise and criticism are linguistically constructed in written SET comments. Grounded in Appraisal Theory, Politeness Theory, Cross-Cultural Pragmatics, and Biber's Stance Analysis, the research explores how students manage face-threatening acts and position themselves in relation to authority figures. Using a qualitative methodology, the study analyzes written comments from six semesters of SETs collected from eight instructors in the Department of Rhetoric and Composition, alongside semi-structured interviews with faculty and students. Key features examined include expressions of affect, judgment, appreciation, stance markers, engagement strategies, and linguistic intensification. Preliminary findings indicate that SET discourse is overwhelmingly positive, with students frequently using direct and intensified language to convey praise while softening or depersonalizing criticism. Cultural norms, particularly those aligned with collectivist values in the Egyptian context, influence students' preference for effusive praise and indirect critique. Gender-based patterns also emerge, with male instructors receiving more personal and emotive language, while feedback for female instructors tends to be more formal and professional. This study offers insights into the sociopragmatic dimensions of student feedback and underscores the importance of attending to language patterns when interpreting SETs. Findings aim to inform more equitable evaluation practices and improve the design and use of feedback mechanisms in higher education.

Keywords: student evaluations of teaching (SETs), sociopragmatics, appraisal theory, cross-cultural pragmatics, politeness theory, stance analysis, qualitative feedback, gender-based discourse analysis, higher education, linguistic patterns

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Student evaluations of teaching (SETs) have become a vital component of quality assurance and instructional improvement in higher education. While quantitative metrics such as Likert-scale ratings are widely analyzed and used for administrative decisions, the qualitative, open-ended comments students provide are often overlooked or underutilized. These comments, however, contain a wealth of information about teaching effectiveness, classroom dynamics, and the student experience. They also reflect broader social, cultural, and institutional factors that shape how students perceive and articulate their educational journeys. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the language and discourse strategies students use when providing written feedback on their instructors at the American University in Cairo. Drawing upon frameworks from applied linguistics, discourse analysis, and pragmatics, the research investigates how students construct praise and criticism, manage face-threatening acts, and position themselves in relation to their instructors and the institution. The aim is to uncover the sociopragmatic features of student feedback, offering insights into the attitudes, cultural norms, and power dynamics that underlie the evaluation process. This deeper understanding can inform more effective and equitable interpretation of SET data in higher education.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations

The analysis of qualitative student feedback in SETs is grounded in several interrelated theoretical frameworks. Politeness Theory, as articulated by Brown and Levinson (1987) and Grice's (1975) pragmatics provide a lens for understanding how students mitigate the interpersonal risks inherent in delivering criticism or praise. These theories posit that individuals employ various strategies to preserve social harmony and avoid conflict, particularly when providing negative feedback that could threaten the "face" of the recipient. Speech Act Theory, developed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1975), conceptualizes praise and criticism as social actions shaped by cultural norms and contextual expectations, as illustrated in the work of Holmes (1988) and Herbert (1986). In the context of SETs, student comments are not merely descriptive but performative, serving to affirm, challenge, or negotiate the roles and relationships between students and instructors. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), particularly Halliday's (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013) model, and Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal System frame language as a social semiotic system. The Appraisal System is especially useful for analyzing evaluative language, interpersonal positioning, and the strategies students use to amplify or soften their evaluations. This framework allows for a detailed examination of attitudinal, engagement, and graduation resources in student feedback. For example, Alhamdan (2023) used SFL to categorize student feedback into subtypes such as reaction quality and valuation relevance. Natural Semantic Metalanguage Theory, as proposed by Wierzbicka (1991), introduces a cross-cultural dimension to the analysis of evaluative language. By seeking universal patterns in the expression of praise and criticism, this approach enables the identification of culturally specific norms and the comparison of evaluative practices across different linguistic and cultural contexts, an approach used by Morozova et al. (2023) in their study of Russian students' feedback. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as advanced by Fairclough (1995), provides tools for interrogating how evaluative language reflects and reproduces institutional power relations and ideologies. Through the analysis of discourse, researchers can uncover the ways in which student feedback both challenges and reinforces the authority of instructors and the values of the institution.

Methodological Developments

Recent years have seen significant methodological advances in the study of qualitative feedback in SETs with Alhamdan (2023) applying the Appraisal System to identify affective and judgmental language, while Stewart (2015) examined how students moderate or intensify their tone in evaluative comments. Discourse analysis and stance analysis have become increasingly prominent, with frameworks such as Biber's (2006) stance analysis enabling the identification of grammatical markers that convey attitudes, certainty, and obligation. The integration of computational tools and corpus-based methods has facilitated the analysis of large datasets, allowing for the identification of patterns and trends that might otherwise go unnoticed (Morozova et al., 2023). Comparative studies have expanded the methodological landscape, enabling researchers to examine differences in evaluative language across disciplines, institutions, and cultural contexts (Young & Duncan, 2014). These studies have highlighted the influence of disciplinary norms, institutional policies, and cultural values on the ways in which students express praise and criticism.

Key Themes and Gaps

The literature reveals several recurring themes in the analysis of qualitative SET data. One consistent finding is the dominance of positive feedback, with students frequently praising instructor enthusiasm, clarity, and approachability. Negative comments are less common and, when present, tend to focus on aspects of course structure or assessment rather than personal attributes of the instructor.

Cultural influences play a significant role in shaping the expression of praise and criticism. In collectivist cultures, for example, students are more likely to offer effusive praise and to soften or avoid criticism, reflecting broader social norms of respect for authority and the maintenance of harmonious relationships. In contrast, students in more individualistic cultures may feel more comfortable expressing direct criticism and challenging the authority of instructors.

Despite these insights, the literature also highlights persistent gaps. Most research continues to prioritize quantitative ratings over qualitative feedback, leaving the linguistic and discursive dimensions of student evaluations relatively neglected. There is a particular lack of longitudinal studies that track changes in evaluative language over time, as well as cross-cultural studies that compare practices across different institutional and national contexts. Furthermore, the influence of gender, language proficiency, and other demographic factors on evaluative language remains underexplored.

Rationale and Research Questions

The rationale for this study is rooted in the recognition that qualitative feedback in SETs offers a unique window into the lived experiences, attitudes, and values of students. In the context of the American University in Cairo, where students and faculty navigate a complex interplay of cultural, linguistic, and institutional influences, understanding how students construct praise and criticism in their written comments is particularly salient. The study seeks to address several pressing questions:

1. How do undergraduate students in the Department of Rhetoric and Composition at the American University in Cairo use language to evaluate their professors in qualitative SET comments?

2. What linguistic patterns emerge in positive versus negative feedback, and how do these reflect cultural and academic expectations in an Egyptian context?
3. What role do gender and other demographic factors play in shaping the linguistic choices students make when providing feedback on their professors?
4. How can discourse analysis of qualitative SET feedback inform more equitable evaluation practices?

The research aims to inform more effective interpretation of qualitative feedback, address potential biases, and offer recommendations for improving SET instruments. By uncovering the sociopragmatic features of student comments, the study aspires to contribute to a more nuanced and inclusive approach to student evaluation in higher education.

Methodology

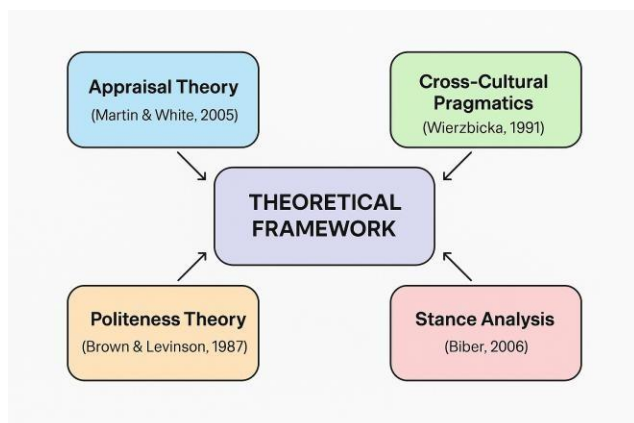
Study Design

This research adopts an exploratory, qualitative approach, seeking to observe and identify linguistic features in student feedback from a sociopragmatic perspective. Rather than seeking to generalize findings, the goal is to deepen the understanding of human experiences (Creswell, 2007; Dörnyei, 2007). The primary data sources will include written comments from SETs collected over six semesters from eight instructors in the Department of Rhetoric and Composition at the American University in Cairo. To supplement the textual analysis, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with both faculty and students, providing deeper insight into the perspectives and intentions behind the feedback. All participants are assured confidentiality, and ethical approval has been obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board. The data collection process involved gathering SETs from a diverse group of instructors, balanced by gender and teaching experience, to ensure a representative sample. The focus group of undergraduate students will include individuals from various academic backgrounds and levels of English proficiency, reflecting the multilingual and multicultural context of the American University in Cairo. Thematic coding and analysis of linguistic patterns in feedback should follow.

Theoretical Framework

The study integrates four complementary theoretical approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis of evaluative language in SETs. Appraisal Theory, as developed by Martin and White (2005), is employed to examine the attitudinal, engagement, and graduation resources that students use to express evaluation, amplify or soften their comments, and position themselves in relation to their instructors. Cross-Cultural Pragmatics (Wierzbicka, 1991) offers a lens for exploring culturally specific norms of expression, particularly in the domains of praise, criticism, and politeness. Politeness Theory (1987) is used to investigate the strategies students employ to manage face-threatening acts, especially when delivering negative feedback. Stance Analysis, drawing on Biber's (2006) framework, enables the identification of grammatical markers that convey certainty, affect, intention, and obligation, providing a nuanced understanding of how students construct their evaluative stance.

Figure 1
Suggested Theoretical Framework



Data Analysis

The analysis of the qualitative SET comments proceeded in several stages. First, the comments were coded for attitudinal resources, distinguishing between affect (emotional responses), judgment (moral or ethical evaluations), and appreciation (aesthetic or value-based assessments). Next, the comments were analyzed for engagement resources, identifying whether statements were presented as bare assertions (monoglossic) or as part of a broader dialogic context (heteroglossic). Graduation resources were then examined to assess the use of intensifiers, quantifiers, and other linguistic devices that amplify or downscale the force of the evaluation. The analysis also considered the use of face-saving strategies, such as hedging, depersonalization, and the use of passive voice, particularly in the expression of criticism. Patterns of stance were identified through the examination of grammatical markers, including modal verbs, adverbs, and evaluative adjectives. The data were further analyzed for the influence of gender, cultural background, and language proficiency on the expression of praise and criticism.

Preliminary Findings

Overview

The analysis of qualitative SET comments at the department of Rhetoric and Composition at the American University in Cairo reveals several key patterns that illuminate the sociopragmatic dimensions of student feedback. Positive feedback overwhelmingly dominates the dataset, with students using direct and intensified language to praise instructors. Criticism, when present, is often softened or depersonalized, reflecting a reluctance to threaten the face of instructors or disrupt the social harmony of the classroom. These patterns are shaped by cultural norms prevalent in the Egyptian context, where respect for authority and the maintenance of harmonious relationships are highly valued.

Gender differences also emerge in the analysis of feedback. Male instructors tend to receive more personal and emotive praise, with students emphasizing the transformative impact of their teaching. In contrast, feedback for female instructors is more formal and focused on professional qualities, such as organization, clarity, and subject-matter expertise. Criticism is more specific and slightly more frequent for female instructors, often relating to grading and clarity, whereas criticism for male instructors is rare and gently phrased.

Sample Data: Female Instructor (Dr. Nadia)

The analysis of SET comments for a female instructor, referred to here as Dr. Nadia, illustrates the dominance of positive feedback and the use of face-saving strategies in the expression of criticism. In the attitude domain, positive affect, judgment, and appreciation are the most prevalent categories. Negative comments are rare, accounting for a small percentage of the total. In terms of engagement, most comments are monoglossic, presented as bare assertions, while a minority are heteroglossic, indicating some degree of dialogic engagement. The use of graduation resources is notable, with frequent use of intensifiers and quantifiers to amplify praise. The language of the comments reflects a positive student-teacher relationship, with students positioning themselves as appreciative learners. Criticism, when present, is rare and softened through the use of hedging, depersonalization, and passive constructions.

Sample Data: Male Instructor (Dr. Yassin)

The analysis of SET comments for a male instructor, referred to as Dr. Yassin, reveals similar patterns of positive feedback, with some notable differences. In the attitude domain, positive affect, judgment, and appreciation are prevalent, while negative comments are minimal. Engagement resources show that most comments are monoglossic, and a smaller proportion are heteroglossic. The use of graduation resources is high, with students employing intensifiers and comprehensive quantifiers to amplify their praise. The feedback is highly effusive, aligning with cultural norms of respect and admiration for instructors. Criticism is rare and, when present, is gently expressed, often accompanied by mitigating language and expressions of gratitude.

Linguistic Patterns in Praise and Criticism

The analysis of linguistic patterns in SET comments reveals that praise is typically expressed through direct, personal, and intensified language. Students frequently use superlative adjectives, adverbs of degree, and personal pronouns to convey their appreciation and admiration for their instructors. Positive comments are often presented as bare assertions, with little need for justification or elaboration. In contrast, criticism is expressed indirectly, impersonally, and with considerable mitigation. Students are more likely to objectify criticism by focusing on course elements, such as assessment methods or course materials, rather than personal attributes of the instructor. The use of passive voice, hedging, and depersonalization serves to soften negative feedback and reduce the risk of offending the instructor.

Stance and engagement resources are also employed strategically in the expression of feedback. Positive comments are straightforward and assertive, while negative comments involve more complex positioning, including the use of modal verbs, conditional constructions, and expressions of uncertainty. The use of intensification is more common in praise, with students amplifying their positive evaluations through the use of adverbials and quantifiers. Criticism, when present, is downscaled or softened through the use of minimizers and mitigating language.

Gender-Based Comparison

A comparison of feedback for male and female instructors reveals both similarities and differences in the expression of praise and criticism. Both groups receive overwhelmingly positive feedback on teaching style, organization, and supportiveness, with students frequently praising the classroom atmosphere and the effectiveness of teaching methods. However, feedback for female instructors is more formal and focused on professional qualities, such as clarity, organization, and subject-matter expertise. In contrast, male instructors receive more personal and emotive praise, with students emphasizing the personal impact and transformative experiences associated with their teaching.

Criticism is more specific and slightly more frequent for female instructors, often relating to grading practices and clarity of instruction. For male instructors, criticism is rare and gently phrased, often accompanied by expressions of gratitude and appreciation. These patterns suggest that gender norms and expectations may influence the ways in which students express praise and criticism, with potential implications for the interpretation and use of SET data in faculty evaluation and professional development.

Implications

The findings of this study have significant implications for students, faculty, and higher education institutions. For students, understanding how praise is expressed can lead to improved feedback mechanisms, greater influence in shaping their educational experience, and heightened cultural awareness. The analysis of language use in SETs empowers students to reflect on their evaluative practices and to consider the impact of their feedback on instructors and the broader educational community. By highlighting the role of cultural norms and face-saving strategies in the expression of praise and criticism, the study fosters greater intercultural understanding and promotes more equitable learning environments.

For faculty, the findings offer deeper insights into how their teaching is perceived by students, supporting targeted professional development and the refinement of teaching practices. The semantic analysis of praise and criticism provides instructors with concrete examples of behaviors and approaches that resonate with students, enabling them to adapt their teaching methods to better meet student needs and expectations. By identifying patterns of bias and differential treatment in student feedback, the study also supports more fair and equitable evaluation processes, contributing to faculty well-being and career advancement.

For institutions, the study provides a foundation for the development of more nuanced interpretation frameworks for SET data, taking into account the linguistic, cultural, and demographic factors that shape student feedback. The findings can inform policy changes aimed at making evaluations more equitable and effective, as well as the design of more sophisticated evaluation surveys that capture the full range of student perspectives. By emphasizing the importance of qualitative feedback, the study encourages institutions to move beyond simplistic metrics and to engage in a more holistic and inclusive approach to faculty evaluation and instructional improvement.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges several limitations that must be considered in interpreting the findings. The qualitative nature of the analysis introduces potential

subjectivity and limits the generalizability of the results beyond the specific institutional and cultural context of the American University in Cairo. While efforts are made to ensure reliability through multiple coders and triangulation with interview data, the interpretation of linguistic and discursive features remains inherently subjective. Gender bias in evaluations, sample size constraints, and challenges in coding and categorization present additional hurdles that may affect the robustness of the findings.

Cultural and linguistic influences, particularly the use of English as a second language by Egyptian students, add complexity to the interpretation of discourse patterns. The transfer of cultural norms from students' first languages and the influence of institutional policies and expectations further complicate the analysis. The resource-intensive nature of qualitative analysis, including the time and expertise required for coding and interpretation, also limits the scalability of the approach.

Recommendations for Future Research

Building on the findings and limitations of this study, several recommendations can be made for future research in the analysis of qualitative SET data. Cross-institutional studies applying the appraisal framework in different cultural and institutional contexts would allow for the identification of universal and context-specific patterns in evaluative language. Longitudinal research tracking changes in evaluative language over time could provide insights into the evolution of student feedback and the impact of institutional interventions.

Investigating the correlation between qualitative feedback and quantitative ratings would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between different forms of evaluation. Further exploration of survey design, including the phrasing of open-ended questions and the structure of evaluation instruments, could enhance the quality and interpretability of student feedback. Comparative studies examining differences between undergraduate and graduate feedback, as well as analyses of faculty responses to evaluative language, would deepen our understanding of the dynamics of evaluation in higher education.

Conclusion

This research provides a comprehensive sociopragmatic analysis of student feedback in higher education, revealing the complex ways in which students in the department of Rhetoric and Composition at the American University in Cairo construct praise and criticism in SETs. The findings underscore the dominance of positive feedback, the influence of cultural and gender norms, and the strategic use of language to manage interpersonal dynamics. By highlighting the importance of linguistic patterns and cultural context, the study offers valuable insights for improving evaluation practices, addressing biases, and fostering more equitable and effective teaching and learning environments. The recommendations for future research point toward a more nuanced and inclusive approach to interpreting and utilizing student feedback in higher education.

In summary, the analysis of qualitative SET comments demonstrates that student feedback is a rich and multifaceted resource that, when properly understood and interpreted, can inform instructional improvement, faculty development, and institutional policy. By moving beyond quantitative metrics and engaging with the sociopragmatic dimensions of evaluation, higher education institutions can create more responsive, inclusive, and effective systems of teaching and learning assessment. This study contributes to the growing body of research

advocating for a more holistic and context-sensitive approach to student evaluation, one that recognizes the value of students' voices and the complexity of the educational experience.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

It is important to note that this study utilized *Perplexity.ai* to assist with the coding according to the theoretical framework of the Appraisal Theory in relation to sociopragmatic analysis of student evaluations.

References

- Alhamdan, B. F. (2023). Students' Perceptions about Course Evaluation: A Discourse Analysis from the Perspective of the Appraisal System. *World Journal of English Language*, 13(2), 187-199.
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford University Press.
- Biber, D. (2006). Stance in spoken and written university registers. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 5(2), 97–116.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford University Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.
- Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics* (Vol. 3, pp. 41–58). Academic Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. (2013). *Halliday's introduction to functional grammar*. Routledge.
- Herbert, R. K. (1986). Say “thank you”—or something. *American Speech*, 61(1), 76–88.
- Holmes, J. (1988). Paying compliments: A sex-preferential politeness strategy. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 12(4), 445–465.
- Martin, J. R., & White, P. R. R. (2005). *The language of evaluation: Appraisal in English*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Morozova, Y., Rasskazova, O., & Tareva, E. (2023). Semantic analysis of student evaluations: Cultural dimensions in Russian academic feedback. *Journal of Language and Education*, 9(1), 12–24.
- Perplexity. (2025). *Perplexity.ai* [AI chatbot]. <https://www.perplexity.ai/>
- Searle, J. R. (1975). Indirect speech acts. In P. Cole & J. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics* (Vol. 3, pp. 59–82). Academic Press.
- Stewart, M. (2015). The language of evaluation in student feedback: Appraisal and stance in university teaching evaluations. *Discourse Studies*, 17(5), 585–608.
- Wierzbicka, A. (1991). *Cross-cultural pragmatics: The semantics of human interaction*. Mouton de Gruyter.

Young, J. R., & Duncan, H. E. (2014). Online and face-to-face teaching evaluations: Are they equivalent? *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 10(3), 489–503.

Contact email: soheim@aucegypt.edu