



# Investigation of the Current Status of Classroom Instructional Language in English Classes for Primary School Students in Northern Guangdong, China

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**Abstract.** This study investigates the status quo of English classroom teaching language in primary schools in Northern Guangdong, China, and analyzes its impact on students' English learning and classroom teaching quality. Through questionnaires, classroom observations, interviews, and other methods, the study finds that the use of classroom teaching language relies too heavily on direct instruction, lacks specificity in guidance, and is limited in variety. The study recommends balancing direct and indirect instructions in primary school English classes, enhancing the specificity of classroom guidance, diversifying the forms of guidance, maximizing the effectiveness of classroom direction to promote teaching quality, and foster a positive classroom atmosphere.

**Keywords:** Primary School English; Classroom Instructional Language; Northern Guangdong; Teaching Status

## 1 Introduction

English learning during the primary school years establishes the foundation for students' linguistic development, primarily focusing on nurturing English phonology, speech perception, and instilling positive language learning habits [1]. Students at this stage are typically characterized by high levels of energy, an eagerness to learn, and intense curiosity. Cognitively, their thinking is dominated by concrete imagery while progressively transitioning towards abstract logical reasoning [2]. Consequently, English classes in primary education are centered around a variety of engaging experiential activities. Classroom instructional language serves as a vital intermediary between students and classroom activities [3]. Effective directives issued by educators propel student engagement in classroom activities [4], enabling them to complete tasks accurately, foster an interest in English learning, facilitate comprehension of new material, and ultimately reinforce such knowledge, achieving education through enjoyment [5]. In Northern Guangdong, China, primary school English education, as an integral facet

of basic educational curricula, necessitates scrutiny regarding the contemporary application of classroom instructional language. The present study endeavors to investigate the utilization of English classroom instructional language among educators within primary institutions in Northern Guangdong through a triangulated methodological approach encompassing classroom observations, interviews with teachers and students, and questionnaire surveys. This investigation aims to provide strategic recommendations and reference points for the enhancement of effective classroom instructional language usage amongst primary school English teachers, thereby offering a scientific framework for ameliorating classroom teaching practices, and fostering the reciprocal advancement of both educational efficacy and the collective development of teachers and students.

## **2 Research Methodology**

### **2.1 Classroom Observation Method**

In alignment with the objectives of this project, an observation scale was devised. This study conducted observations at a relatively remote township elementary school in Zhenjiang District, Shaoguan City, where the researcher completed an internship, recording the proceedings. Owing to the actual circumstances of the township school, there are only two elementary school English teachers: one full-time teacher and another newly appointed teacher. This study confined its observations to classes conducted by the full-time teacher. A total of four English classes were observed and recorded, resulting in four sets of data, which included audio recordings and observation scale logs.

### **2.2 Interview Research Method**

Tailored to the project theme and characteristics of the interviewees, an interview guide was formulated. Structured interviews were carried out separately with the elementary school English teachers at the aforementioned school and their respective students. There were 23 participants in total: 2 elementary school English teachers, 5 third-grade students, 5 fourth-grade students, 6 fifth-grade students, and 5 sixth-grade students. Among the teachers, one was a full-time educator, and the other was a newly recruited English teacher; the students were randomly selected from the classes taught by the participating English teachers. Audio recording permissions were obtained during the interviews, culminating in a collection of 23 interview recordings.

### **2.3 Questionnaire Survey Method**

The study prepared a "Survey on the Current Use of Classroom Instructional Language by Primary School English Teachers in Northern Guangdong (Teacher Version)" targeting primary school English teachers in Northern Guangdong. The survey was conducted using online questionnaires, distributing 106 copies to primary school English

teachers in Northern Guangdong, with 95 valid questionnaires returned, yielding an effectiveness rate of 89.6% after excluding 11 invalid responses.

### 3 Research Analysis

#### 3.1 The Importance of Classroom Instructional Language Among Primary School English Teachers in Northern Guangdong Province

Based on the survey findings presented in Table 1, it is evident that primary school English teachers in Northern Guangdong province attach significant importance to the use of classroom instructional language. Over 85% of the surveyed teachers believe that classroom instructional language is crucial for students' English learning. Furthermore, 87% of the teachers perceive that their instructional language in the classroom is beneficial to students' English proficiency, with only 12%-13% of the teachers believing that it has minimal or no impact on student learning.

Notably, over 75% of the teachers make a conscious effort to specifically design the instructional language for each lesson before class, indicating a high level of preparation and dedication. However, it is also worth noting that 24% of the primary school English teachers rarely or never design specific instructional language for their classes.

**Table 1.** The Importance of Classroom Instructional Language Among Primary School English Teachers in Northern Guangdong Province

Statement	Strongly Agree	Sometimes Agree	Rarely Agree	Disagree
The belief that classroom instructional language is crucial for students' English learning	72%	16%	8%	4%
The belief that the instructional language they provide is beneficial to students' English proficiency	64%	23%	8%	5%
The practice of specifically designing classroom instructional language before each lesson	30%	46%	20%	4%

#### 3.2 The Characteristics and Analysis of Classroom Instructional Language Among Primary School English Teachers in Northern Guangdong Province:

Following a series of classroom observations, the researcher compiled and analyzed the overall use of classroom instructional language, presenting the findings in Table 2. The observed classroom settings were exclusively EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts.

**Table 2.** Overall Use of English Instructional Language at X Elementary School

Grade	Number of Students	Course Unit	Duration( unit: mins)	Oral In- structions (unit: sentences)	Written In- structions (unit: sentences)	Gesture Instruc- tions (unit: times)
Three	27	“My family”	32	103	1	38
Four	38	“My school”	39	186	4	25
Four	38	“What time is it”	32	74	1	32
Five	38	“My favorite sea- son”	41	85	4	46

### 1. Vocabulary Characteristics.

The new curriculum standard indicates that at the primary school stage, students should learn and master 505 basic vocabulary items [6]. Therefore, teachers have a very limited selection of vocabulary for instructional language, which must consider not only the students' age and overall learning situation but also the vocabulary within the students' zone of proximal development to enhance their English proficiency [7]. Whether students understand the instructions issued by the teacher is often used as one of the criteria to test the effectiveness of an instruction. According to a survey, 87% of the teachers interviewed believe that vocabulary difficulty is one of the factors affecting students' understanding of classroom instructional language.

### 2. Sentential Characteristics.

An analysis of high-frequency sentence patterns used in classroom directives reveals that instructional sentences in primary school English classrooms predominantly employ imperative and interrogative structures, which are fundamental, brief, and highly targeted [8]. English teachers in the Northern Guangdong region believe that the complexity of these syntactic structures also plays a role in students' comprehension of classroom directives. Survey findings indicate that 66% of English teachers consider complex sentence construction to be one of the factors impeding student understanding of these directives.

### 3. Functional Characteristics.

Drawing from the theoretical framework of Speech Act Theory and analyzing the pragmatic functions of classroom instructional language, scholars Chen Aiqi and Zeng Danjun argue that in English classroom teaching, teachers' instructional language serves three primary functions: management, transitional facilitation between teaching segments, and promotion of teaching effectiveness. [9] Building upon this classification of classroom instructional language functions and integrating observations from primary school classrooms in northern Guangdong, Table 3 is compiled to offer a comprehensive overview.

**Table 3.** Main Functions of Classroom Instructional Language in Primary School English Classes in North Guangdong

Functions	Examples of Classroom Instructional Language
Transition between Teaching Sections	Please open your book. You, please
Classroom Management	Be quiet! Ivy?
Promotion of Teaching	How to spell?

It is noteworthy that certain classroom directives are not restricted to a singular function. For instance, "You, please." serves the dual purpose of transitioning between teaching segments and managing the class by quickly refocusing the attention of students who may be distracted [10]. Additionally, an intriguing directive observed in the study is "Ivy.", which is the English name of Teacher T1. Observations indicate that when classroom discipline deteriorates, Teacher T1 issues the directive "Ivy?" prompting the students to automatically respond with "Ivy." while straightening their posture, demonstrating a marked effectiveness in classroom management. This directive is exclusively used for classroom management and represents a unique teaching characteristic and charm point of Teacher T1, reflecting the teacher's creativity and proactivity in teaching management.

## 4 Issues in the Use of Classroom Instructional Language in Primary School English Classes in Northern Guangdong

### 4.1 Overemphasis on Direct Directives

As illustrated by the comparative data presented in Table 4, there is a propensity for English teachers to favor direct directives in the classroom due to their efficiency in advancing lessons and effectively transitioning to subsequent activities.

**Table 4.** Classroom Directive Types Commonly Used by Primary School English Teachers in Northern Guangdong

Frequency	Type of Directive	Percentage
Highly Conform	Direct Directives	60%
	Indirect Directives	18%
Sometimes Conform	Direct Directives	22%
	Indirect Directives	57%
Rarely Conform	Direct Directives	12%
	Indirect Directives	23%
Non-conform	Direct Directives	6%
	Indirect Directives	2%

## **4.2 Insufficient Targeting in Classroom Directives Utilization Strategies**

Based on classroom observations, it was found that English teachers predominantly engage in proactive questioning to check for students' understanding when using the comprehension verification strategy. This is suitable for third and fourth graders with lower English proficiency levels but becomes less fitting for fifth and sixth graders. Observational data indicated a uniform response of "OK" whenever teachers asked "Understand?" or "OK?" Owing to the consistent use of the same query as a verification method, many students in this age range would automatically respond as if they understood, regardless of their actual comprehension level. Such directives thus only serve a superficial purpose and do not adequately assess whether students have truly understood the material.

## **4.3 Uniformity in Classroom Directive Formats**

By transcribing classroom audio recordings, researchers identified that within English classes, non-verbal instructional cues consisted of a small fraction of written directives, with the bulk being constituted by bodily gestures."

# **5 Conclusions**

## **5.1 Utilize Direct Directives and Indirect Directives Effectively**

The advantage of using direct directives is that they are brief and convenient, yet they may induce anxiety among students in the classroom setting. On the other hand, indirect directives allow instructors to express their intentions subtly, contributing to a democratic and harmonious classroom environment. Nonetheless, indirect directives tend to result in lengthier sentences, presenting a challenge for students with less developed skills in comprehension. Therefore, there needs to be an integration of the distinct features of each type of directive into actual teaching practices, ensuring a judicious balance in their employment.

## **5.2 Increase the Relevance of Classroom Directives**

As scholars have indicated, instructions should be tailored to the current cognitive understanding levels of students. [11]. Prior to a lesson, it is crucial for educators to thoroughly comprehend the traits of their students, and in conjunction with the subject matter, meticulously plan and implement strategies involving directive language. For younger students with limited background knowledge, direct directives complemented by physical gestures might be effective. In contrast, indirect directives can be suitably applied for older students with a stronger foundation, supplemented by written instructions and a reduction in physical gestural cues when delegating tasks.

### 5.3 Enhance the Variety of Classroom Directives

Both spoken directives and the significance of non-verbal cues must be recognized. Written directives facilitate students with a sound basis to grasp the intended instructions and react correctly. Meanwhile, gestural prompts aid learners, particularly those who are younger or less proficient in English, to more vividly comprehend the content being directed. By employing a diverse array of directives during teaching, educators can spark students' enthusiasm for learning, heighten their classroom engagement, and foster a captivating and interactive learning space.

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