AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE TEACHERS' FEEDBACKS TO STUDENTS' ANSWERS IN LECTURES FROM TOEFL IBT

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ABSTRACT:

For those Vietnamese lecturers whose feedbacks are restricted to a limited number of expressions, using appropriate feedbacks can be challenging. This may also reduce students' cooperative efforts in developing the interactive lectures. This paper aimed to examine the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features of teachers' feedback in lectures in English and the students' expectation of these feedbacks. The descriptive study was based on a theoretical framework of Functional grammar, theory of speech act, epistemic modality and politeness. The data collection was conducted with 400 instances of teachers' feedback quoted from transcripts of lecture extracts of TOEFL iBT and a questionnaire for 120 students at Tay Nguyen University, Vietnam. The former was to discover features of teachers' feedback in terms of syntax, epistemic modality and politeness principles. The latter was designed for the analysis of students' perception of teachers' feedback. The study reveals, in view of clause as exchange, clause as message, and speech act theory, that most of the teachers' feedback occurred in forms of truncated declarative sentence as a Theme or Rheme with discourse functions as confirming the validity of the students' answers, encouraging, complimenting the students, correcting and modifying their answers. The study also found that most students expected teachers' instructive and encouraging feedback with the correction rather than just a compliment. Based on the research findings, some implications for teachers' feedback in teaching and learning in English are suggested.

Key words: Teachers' Feedbacks; Students' Answers; Lectures; TOEFL iBT.

1. INTRODUCTION

Among other things that influence student achievement, teacher's feedback is assumed to have crucial effect on student learning. Therefore, it is important to realize that feedback is not only a remark on the student performance but an essential part of the learning process as well. Feedback can be written or spoken and may even be gestured, indicating approval, encouragement or criticism. Effective and high-quality feedback has been identified as a key element of quality teaching. One of the most powerful forms of feedback used by effective teachers is the one-to-one interview with a student. According to O'Farrell (2004), a successful feedback will build confidence in the students, motivate students to improve their learning, provide students with information on performance improvement, correct errors and identify their strengths and weaknesses. Hence in Dinham's viewpoint (2008), comments and suggestions contained within feedback need to be focused, practical and based on a professional assessment of what the student can do and is capable of achieving. The criteria used for giving feedback need to be clear and understood by the student. Effective feedback can stimulate students' study interest, but improper feedback may discourage students. Therefore, the study of teachers' feedback is of great importance to language teaching. In reality of situation in some educational institutions in Vietnamese context of classrooms, teacher's feedbacks to students' answers in lectures sometimes are not appropriate in locution and illocution which may result in the student's confusion. Strategic feedback is not used very often by teachers. However, such feedback helps students to acquire skills which allow them to avoid errors in future by controlling and mastering their own performance. The use of teachers' feedback is helpful to create harmonious relationship between teachers and students and improve students' interest in learning English and consciousness of politeness. In Vietnamese context of education, however, the research on teachers' feedbacks to students' answers in lecture is still untouched. Especially, the study concerning syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features reveal many questions which need being examined. That is the reason for this paper to address how teachers perform the speech act of feedback when responding to student's answers in terms of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features.

To this end, the paper is aimed at: (1) describing and analyzing different types of teachers' feedbacks to students' answers in terms of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features, (2) providing Vietnamese teachers and students of English with an insightful knowledge concerning

the effective use for teachers and interpreting the meaning of feedbacks for students in lectures in English.

With the above aims we intend to seek the information for the following questions (1) What are the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features of teachers' feedbacks to students' answers in lectures in English?; (2) How did the students at Tay Nguyen University experience the teachers' feedbacks to their answers in lectures in English?; and (3) What ped agogical suggestions should be put forward to the teaching and learning concerning teachers' feedbacks to students' answers in lectures in English?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definition of Teachers' Feedbacks

Feedback can be defined as the information that is given or is being given on how an action is being developed in terms of its guality for success (Sadler, 1989). In a pragmatic view, feedback is equally vital in schooling and performs a variety of functions including recognizing, correcting, encouraging, challenging and improving student performance (Dinham, 2008). Focusing on student performance, Ur (1996) pointed out that feedback is information that is given to the learner about his or her performance of a learning task, usually with the objective of improving this performance. In the same vein, Nilsson (2004) considered feedbacks a regular term and defined it as "a method used openly, and with responsibility, to express one's views with the aim of facilitating/promoting more appropriate actions in the future, in relation to a goal and a vision". In a cooperative learning view, teacher feedback is a powerful pedagogical tool for promoting interaction in educational guidance between teachers and students (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). As for the expected learning outcomes, teacher feedback may be useful in the construction of a personally meaningful and socially valuable student life projects (Guichard, 2010). Although researches mentioned above have discovered many of the conditions that enhance learning through the use of feedbacks, there is still much that remains open for study to fill the gaps that include their pragmatic functions with the interpersonal meaning, how the locution of feedbacks are realized with linguistic units, and how the harmonious relationship can be maintained along with the development of the lecture by the successful use of feedbacks. Therefore, to facilitate our research for those linguistic units that function as teachers' feedback to the student's answer during lecture we assume that teachers' feedback is a kind of speech act that functions to

comment on students' answers in order to evaluate, correct or praise their response. In this sense, any kind of linguistic devices that are used in form of oral comment (evaluative or corrective) in classroom that learners receive after their response from teacher on their performance in lectures are called teachers' feedback and will be examined in this study.

2.2 Teacher's Feedback and Functional Grammar

In the discussion about Functional Grammar, Halliday (1994) explains that functional grammar looks at language as consisting of units of meanings rather than chunks of forms. He developed a theory of the fundamental functions of language, in which he analyzed lexico-grammar into three broad metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal and textual. Each of the three metafunctions is about a different aspect of the world, and is concerned with a different mode of meaning of clauses. Being about the natural world in the ideational metafunction broadest sense. is involved with clauses as *representations*. Focusing on the social world, especially the relationship between speaker and hearer, interpersonal metafunction is related to clauses as exchanges. Finally, reflecting the verbal world especially the flow of information in a text, textual metafunction deals with clauses as messages.

This research is concerned with the two last metafunctions: clauses as exchanges and clauses as messages. As for clauses as representations, we do not present it here for the fact that teachers' feedbacks features are seen as a message, as an exchange between teachers and students. What is more, teachers' oral feedback is a sort of special communication occurring only in lectures.

2.2.1. Clause as Exchange: Based on Halliday (1994), clause as exchange is a clause which has meaning as an exchange, a transaction between speaker and listener. In clause as exchange, there are *mood* and *residue*.

2.2.2. Clause as Message: Halliday (1994) states that clause as message is a clause which has meaning as a message, a quantum of information which has some form of organization giving it the status of a communicative event. In the clause as a message, there are *theme* and *rheme*.

2.3. Epistemic Modality and Attitudinal Meaning

Epistemic modality is the speaker's assessment of probability and

predictability. It is external to the content, being a part of the attitude taken up by the speaker: his attitude, in this case, towards his own speech role as 'declarer' (Halliday, 1994). Epistemic modality indicates the status of the proposition in terms of the speaker's commitment to it through 2 subcategories: judgement and evidence (Palmer, 1986). In this paper, both judgements and evidentials can be seen as devices for the speakers as lecturers to indicate that he wishes to modify his commitment to the truth of his speech utterance

2.4. Speech Acts and Lecture Discourse

2.4.1. Speech Acts

A speech act is an act that a speaker performs when making an utterance. According to Austin (1962) there are three types of acts that can be performed by every utterance: (i) Locutionary act: saying something with traditional certain meaning in sense. *(ii)* Illocutionary а act: the performance of an act in saying something. The illocutionary force is the speaker's intent, a true "speech act". e.g. informing, ordering, warning, undertaking. The five basic kinds of illocutionary acts are: representatives (or assertives), directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations; (iii) Perlocutionary acts: Speech acts that have an effect on the feelings, thoughts or actions of either the speaker or the listener. e.g., inspiring, persuading or deterring.

2.4.2. Lecture as Oral Discourse

It is communication or transfer of information using words that are spoken. For oral discourse to happen, lecturers must be speaking either in conversation or through oral delivery of information, such as in a lecture or presentation.

2.5. Teachers' Feedbacks and Politeness Theory

Politeness is viewed as the prerequisite of human cooperation. Meanwhile, foreign language classroom, as an important place where teacher-student interactions happen, is also governed by this rule. The classroom is a unique communication context where highly regulated patterns of communication occur between teachers and students. Studying the teachers' politeness in classroom can lead us to better understanding of the classroom interaction, especially of teachers' feedbacks with the frequent

use of hedges. According to Lakoff (1972), hedges were defined as "words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy". In Brown and Levinson's view (1987), hedges are particles, words, or phrases that modify "the degree of membership of a predicate or noun phrase in a set". Nugro (2002) categories hedges as one type of "qualifiers", i.e., indicators of the level of approximation and speaker commitment to a proposition. Hedging is the general use of linguistic means (which have to be divided into strategies and devices) to increase the likelihood of a better acceptance while at the same time minimizing the risk of rejection. Therefore, in teachers' feedbacks, hedges occur as boosting or mitigating devices of the propositional content of the message.

3. METHODOLOGY

With the aims mentioned above, this study was based on the descriptive and quantitative methods. The descriptive method was based on a theoretical framework of Functional grammar, theory of speech act, epistemic modality and politeness. The quantitative was set up to identify students' perception of teachers' feedback. The data collection was conducted with 400 instances of teachers' feedback quoted from transcripts of lecture extracts of TOEFL iBT and a questionnaire for 120 students from the first year (42 students), second year (40 students) and third year (38 students) at Tay Nguyen University, Vietnam. The former was to discover features of teachers' feedbacks could be a single word, a phrase, a simple, complex or a compound sentence with the function that fits the working definition of the study. The latter was designed for the analysis of students' perception of teachers' feedback.

Our survey questionnaire was built with 11 questions. The five first questions were about student's perception of teacher's feedbacks. These questions offer respondents the opportunity to agree or disagree with a given statement on the progressive scale such as: *strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree* and *strongly disagree*. The last five questions investigated students' expectation of teachers' feedbacks. Specifically, question n° 6 sought information about feedback that students desired from teacher on their answer.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. The syntactic features of teachers' feedbacks in the view of functional grammar

4.1.1. Teacher's Feedback as the Clause of Exchange

To begin the syntactic analysis, first, we cop down teachers' feedbacks into the clauses considered as clauses of exchange. These feedbacks are analyzed into Mood and Residue. (see table 4.1 in the appendix 1)

a. Teachers' Feedbacks in form of Complete Sentences

(1) - Student: I once heard that the war brought changes to the public as well.

- Professor: **That's correct**. The war advanced hygiene, medicine, social services, and such.

(Monika, 2007, p.254)

All of the mood types involving in teachers' feedbacks are declarative, these teachers' feedbacks are generally intended to give comment, so the speech function is a comment. The teacher is giving a comment on students' answers. Teachers' feedbacks are in form of not only simple sentences but also complex sentences and compound sentences.

b. Teachers' Feedbacks with Inversion

The placement of a normally non-initial element at the head of a sentence is so as to give prominence and lend emphasis. Due to inversion, *residue* is found before *mood*. In other words, the normal order of the *mood* and *residue* in a sentence is inverted. In general, *mood* containing Subject and Finite is located in the initial position in comparison with *residue*. That is why the adjective *right* is placed first to emphasize exactitude of student's answer. Instead of saying *you are right*, teacher wants to utter adjective *right* first. He intends to call students' attention to correctness they made.

(2) - Student: Oh, OK then. Well, how about the tides? The moon's gravitational pull causes the tides, right?

- Professor: **Right you are**. That's the information I was looking for, thank you. (MacGillivray, 2006, p.728)

c. Teachers' Feedbacks in form of Truncated Sentence

These feedbacks don't explicitly consist of *mood* comprising normally *subject* and *finite*. They are composed of *residue* containing only

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complement with *head* and *modifier* so we can conclude that there are omissions in these utterances. In other words, ellipsis appears in teachers' feedbacks. In spite of the absence of *mood* as *subject* and *finite verb*, students can understand easily meaning of these feedbacks thanks to context in which these utterances set up.

(3) - Student: I know that one. It's in a museum in Washington, D.C. Um, I think it's called "Woman and Arrow."

- Professor: Pretty close. It's called "The Woman with the Arrow."

(Will, 2007, p.270)

4.1.2. Teacher's Feedback as Clause of Message

The teacher's feedback is thus organized in *theme* and *rheme*. Theme is the part that comes first in teacher's feedback and rheme remains the following part. In general, theme carries the old information while the rheme carries the new. (*see table 4.2 in the appendix 1*)

a. Teachers' Feedbacks in form of Complete Sentences

(4) - Well, maybe because it's popular in places where people don't have cars.

- Great! That was just the answer I was looking for. Bicycles were first introduced in 19th century Europe, and now number over 1 billion worldwide. (Will, 2007, p.312)

As a message, the teacher' feedback cited above comprise two parts: Theme *that was just the answer*, which serves as the point of departure of the feedback and Rheme *I was looking for*, the remainder of the feedback, the part in which the Theme is developed. Going into more detail, Theme *that was just the answer* can be analyzed in theme *that* and rheme *was just the answer*. Similarly, rheme *I was looking for* composes theme *that* and rheme *I was looking for*.

b. Teachers' Feedbacks with Inversion

Each choice of Theme represents a different starting point for the message conveyed in the teachers' feedback. Theme, then, is seen to play a crucial role in focusing and organizing the feedback and to contribute to the coherence and success of the feedback.

- Student: I'm sorry professor, why bother separating the blood plasma at all? Why not just give transfusions of whole blood?

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- Professor: Well, under emergency situations, blood plasma is often better. (Lê Huy Lâm-translator, 2007, p.367)

Theme (marked)		Rheme				
Well,	under emergency situations,	blood	plasma	is	often	better

Theme here consists of a continuative *well* and a prepositional phrase *under emergency situations*, syntactically an Adjunct, and is marked. However, it does not strike us as very unusual. Here *well* is continuative and serves to signal that a new move is beginning. It has no speech function of its own. It is not selecting for positive or negative. It is uttered by teacher at beginning of his feedback with the aim of making his comment softer. In giving feedback, the teacher will often front-place key orientational features for his students, and here is prepositional phrase *under emergency situations* considering as foregrounding of key information about teacher's feedback. In this way, teacher makes students understand *under emergency situations* being important information for them.

c. Teachers' Feedbacks in form of Truncated Sentence

In lectures, teachers usually use truncated sentences to give a comment on students' answers. With truncated sentences, students get the whole thing in one go. These sentences are easy to remember, easy to understand. What is more, they make teachers' feedbacks more powerful.

(5) - Student: Lake Superior.

- Professor: **Great!** You should have no trouble with the Great Lakes on the exam. (Edmunds, 2006, p.669)

Theme does not exist in these teachers' feedbacks and *rheme* stands alone. Instead of giving a feedback to students in form of complete sentences, s/he utters only truncated sentences with *complement* but both teacher and students understand thoroughly.

4.2. The epistemic meaning of teachers' feedbacks

4.2.1. The Factive meaning of Teacher's Feedbacks

The analysis of instances of teachers' feedbacks in this study reveals that in most cases these feedbacks were used with epistemic markers that function as to signal the teacher's attitude towards the truth of the proposition of the student's answer and simultaneously marking the

commitment to his/her feedback. As a feedback functions as to convey the teacher's comment to the students' answers and to the students' performance, teachers' feedbacks in lectures as encouragements, praises are specialized in manifesting the comment as a fact or something like that with validity. On this semantic basis, the teacher wishes to express his/her feeling and confidence into giving a comment and wishes to show that s/he has evidence to present the state-of-affair mentioned in the feedback as a fact. (see table 4.3 in the appendix 1). For example:

(6) - Student A: Um, well... I guess that it wasn't formed all at once.

- Professor: **Exactly**. Here's how you get hailstones. A hailstone starts off as a droplet of water in a cumulonimbus cloud-that's a thundercloud.

(Howard, 2009, p.358)

(7) - M: You mean this was all done by hand?

- W1: Naturally. But the most difficult process was punch cutting.

(Will, 2007, p.332)

(8) - M1: Is that why some desert rabbits have huge ears?

- Professor: **Precisely.** Those ears have lots of blood vessels to let the body heat out. (Monika, 2007, p.265)

By uttering (6) - (8) the teacher was showing his epistemic commitment to the truth of the proposition mentioned in the student's answer. It can be said that these markers such as *exactly, naturally* presuppose the existence of reality and imply the truth as far as the teacher and student's knowledge is concerned. In the same vein of analysis, *precisely* marker can express epistemic modality in the sense that it expresses the teacher's judgement of the truth of the proposition based on what is known to be part of the reality. When students give right answers, the teacher shows his/her judgment relating the truth of proposition to the evidence that functions as background for the assertion of a proposition. (*see table 4.3 in the appendix 1*)

4.2.2. The Non-factive meaning of Teacher's Feedbacks

In giving feedbacks, the teacher sometimes can show his/her high or low commitment to what he/she believes to be true with his own knowledge. In case the teacher lacks adequate evidence, he/she has to show that what he/ she says is his/ her judgement or relative commitment in using nonfactive verbs. In giving feedbacks, the teacher sometimes can show his/her high or low commitment to what he/she believes to be true with his own knowledge. In case the teacher lacks adequate evidence, he/she has to show that what he/ she says is his/ her judgement or relative commitment in using non-factive verbs. (see table 4.4 in the appendix 1)

(9) - M: But is an atmosphere only of water vapor enough to support life?

- *P*: Well, **I** guess if you have a moon that's 99% water, you can't be too surprised to find water vapor in the atmosphere, but what was surprising is that thay also found carbon compounds, **probably** methane, and nitrogen.

(Lê Huy Lâm- translator, 2007, p.379)

(10) - W: To impress and attract people from other cities? Like tourism?

- *M:* That's a **good thought**. *I* **doubt** it was for tourism, but *I* **think** it was to impress and attract others. (Worcester, 2006, p.668)

(11) - M: So the debate is over? I mean, is it now generally accepted as a flute?

- *P*: Not completely. **It seems** every time it's about ready to be accepted, someone else comes up with an opposing idea.

(Lê Huy Lâm-translator, 2007, p.407)

As can be seen from (9) - (11), the teacher used the non-factive verbs such as *guess, doubt, think, suspect* and adverb *probably* to show weak modality. These non-factive verbs uttered to soften the illocutionary force of the utterance as a polite way of speaking in lectures when the teacher wants to express his comment on students' answers. The teacher gave the premises which would be perhaps true in the sense of his prediction. The non-factive verb "*seem*" in (11) was used not only to lessen the illocutionary force of the teachers' feedbacks but also to entertain something as indeterminated with less evidence and little imposition.

4.3. Teachers' feedbacks as hedges

4.3.1. Teacher's Feedback with hedges in boosting the illocutionary force

Teachers as lecturers were found to use various politeness strategies in their feedbacks to students, and for students' different performances the teachers' politeness strategies were also different. Three situations are classified according to students' performances in answering teachers'

questions: when students give right answers; when students give unsatisfactory answers and when students fail to give any answer. In terms of illocutionary force, hedges can be understood as "the most important linguistic means of satisfying the speaker' want" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 146). In feedbacks on students' right answers, the teachers' politeness strategies encompass the lecturer's intent: Congratulating student's performance, Confirming the validity of student's answer, Boosting the assertion of the validity of proposition, Expressing teacher's positive emotion to student's answer, Evaluating student's responses, Asserting student's competence in specific field, Maximizing agreement between teacher and student and Asserting student's cognitive competence. (see table 4.5 in the appendix 1)

4.3.2. Teacher's Feedback with hedges in mitigating the illocutionary force

In conversations, the need for sharing and avoidance of conflict play a crucial role in the consequent modification of the illocutionary force of individual speech acts. Therefore, it is necessary for the teacher to modify his feedback further by using *hedges* in teaching. In mitigating the illocutionary force, teachers' feedbacks were found to have these functions: *Distancing from assertion of the incompleteness of student's answer*, *Disclaiming teacher's assertion of the incompleteness of student's answer by sharing part of the truth in student's answer* and *Acknowledging part of student's answer but asking for modification*. (see table 4.5 in the appendix 1)

4.4. Students' perception and expectation of teachers' feedbacks

4.4.1. Student's Perception of Teacher's Feedbacks (see questions in Appendices)

The results of five first questions indicated that 46% of students strongly agreed and 28% agreed about understanding what the teacher meant through his/her feedback. Their teacher always gave unambiguous feedback to make sure everyone in class understand easily his comment. This may explain why most students (80%: 41% disagreed and 39% strongly disagreed) felt that they were not confused by the teachers' feedback. It was also found that most students (68%) felt that they were encouraged in their answer when their teacher gave feedbacks. Furthermore, there were no differences in how they were affected by the teachers' feedback (62%) as

opposed to teachers' feedback that encouraged students to participate in learning (55%). With the students' answers collected from investigation, we listed, classified and presented in diagram as follows:



Figure 4.1. Student's Perception of Teachers' Feedbacks

4.4.2. Student's Expectation of Teacher's Feedbacks

Question n° 6 sought information about frequency of giving feedback that students desired from teacher on their answer Approximately three-fourths of the students preferred to be always given feedback on their answer (71.7%). It could be that teachers' feedback would encourage them to participate in learning (55% - question 4). Normally, teacher intended to provide feedback on students' performance to improve and accelerate learning.



Figure 4.2. Student's Expectation of Teachers' Feedbacks

In question 7, more than half of the students preferred teacher's feedback as a true comment on their performance (51.6% students) and 42.5% students wanted to receive an encouraging in teacher's feedback. Teacher gives a true, frequent feedback that supports students' beliefs that they can do well. Students did not expect a teacher's flattering in his feedbacks (only 5.8%).



Figure 4.3. Student's Expectation of Teachers' Feedbacks

For the three last questions (questions 8, 9 and 10 correspond to 1, 2 and 3 in the figure below), approximately 50% of students strongly agree that teachers' feedback should show the difference between existing answers and desired ones. In fact, it is important that teacher provide opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance. It would be the best way to encourage students to participate in learning. Over 50% of respondents agreed strongly that teachers' feedback should include some suggestions for the right answer. However, over 94 % of students did not want a flattering any more (question n° 7). The results also demonstrated that most students (over 84%) desired that teachers' feedback should help them to recognize their strengths and weaknesses. This recognition contributes considerably to the encouragement of students' learning. Clearly, there is a significant difference between what most students want and what they receive as far as the encouraging of feedback is concerned.

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Figure 4.4. Student's Expectation of Teachers' Feedbacks

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

This paper has proposed a pragmatic perspective for the further study of teacher talk. The findings reveal that teachers' feedbacks are speech acts which explicitly or implicitly attribute credit to students for some knowledge. From the perspectives of Functional grammar and epistemic modality, politeness theory, feedbacks can be viewed in a variety of forms as truncated or minor clause to serve as speech acts that are primarily aimed at maintaining, improving, or supporting students' face as interactants in lectures. Along with instructional purpose in correcting students' answers, lecturers' feedback can also signal their commitment to the content of utterance, which can give options for the students to show their cooperative efforts in developing the lectures.

5.2. Implications

First of all, teacher should use appropriate feedbacks with the consideration of their interpersonal functions and a wide range of their syntactic forms so as avoid a restriction to just frequently used feedbacks. Secondly, teacher should be aware of providing students with positive and constructive feedback, which is indispensable in building a friendly and cooperative learning with lectures. Thirdly, Vietnamese teachers of English are supposed to avoid giving feedbacks that are solely for descriptive information as constative utterances as true-false comment. Diversity of

sentence patterns viewed in functional grammar perspectives should be factored into the effective use of oral feedbacks during lectures.

Learners might focus on the area of knowledge being mentioned and thus may get confused between teachers' feedbacks with the use of hedges. Therefore, they should be exposed to the lecturer's feedbacks so that they are able to understand what and with which intention the teacher is talking about in giving feedbacks. The lack of this pragmatic knowledge might lead to some problems due to the misunderstanding of teacher's purposes in giving teachers' feedback in his/her lectures.

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