

## Original Paper

# The Influence of Music Teachers' Evaluative Language on Students' Learning Motivation

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### **Abstract**

*The evaluative language used by music teachers is a crucial factor influencing students' learning motivation. This study examines how different types of evaluative language (positive encouragement, negative criticism, and neutral instruction) affect students' intrinsic motivation, self-confidence, and long-term learning behaviors. The findings indicate that specific, growth-oriented feedback can effectively enhance students' self-efficacy, while vague or discouraging evaluations may reduce their willingness to practice. Additionally, students' age, personality, and musical proficiency influence the effectiveness of evaluations, necessitating flexible adjustments in teachers' language strategies. Based on this analysis, the study proposes optimization suggestions, such as the "sandwich feedback method" and personalized evaluation models, providing practical guidance for music educators. Future research could further explore differences in evaluative language across various music teaching contexts.*

### **Keywords**

*music education, teacher evaluative language, learning motivation, instructional feedback, self-efficacy*

## **1. Introduction**

Music education involves not only skill development but also the transmission of emotional expression and artistic perception. In this process, teachers' evaluative language directly impacts students' practice attitudes and long-term learning motivation. Research shows that teachers' feedback methods can either strengthen or weaken students' autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and the subjective and performative nature of music learning complicates the role of evaluative language. Currently, many music classrooms rely on experiential evaluation methods, lacking scientific guidance, which may lead to some students losing interest due to inappropriate feedback.

This study aims to analyze the mechanisms through which music teachers' evaluative language influences students' motivation, combining educational psychology theories with teaching cases to explore how

language optimization can enhance instructional effectiveness. Key research questions include: (1) How do different types of evaluation affect students' intrinsic/extrinsic motivation? (2) How do individual differences among students moderate this influence? (3) How can teachers develop evaluation strategies tailored to different contexts? Through systematic analysis, this research seeks to provide actionable feedback frameworks for music teachers while advancing evaluation theory in arts education.

## 2. Types and Impacts of Evaluative Language in Music Education

In the process of music instruction, teachers' evaluative language manifests in diverse forms, each subtly shaping students' musical development and psychological growth. Among these, positive reinforcement stands out as the most constructive type. Such evaluations typically employ specific and genuine affirmations, like "Your dynamic control in this melody was very expressive, especially the well-executed crescendo in the second measure." This type of feedback not only reinforces correct performance but also helps students establish a professional cognitive framework through detailed acknowledgments. Research indicates that when teachers combine technical feedback with artistic praise—such as, "Your interpretation truly captured the melancholy the composer intended to express"—students' technical confidence and artistic expressiveness are simultaneously enhanced (Chen, J. Y., 2024). By fulfilling learners' need for competence, such evaluations effectively stimulate intrinsic motivation, creating a virtuous cycle of "effort-recognition-continued refinement," which proves particularly impactful for beginners.

Neutral, instructional feedback primarily focuses on objective technical analysis, such as, "Your pinky needs to press the strings at a more perpendicular angle." While lacking emotional warmth, this type of evaluation provides clear direction for improvement. Its effectiveness largely depends on context: advanced students striving for technical mastery often readily accept such feedback due to its professional precision, whereas beginners or sensitive learners may find prolonged exposure to it leads to a mechanical learning experience. Notably, when paired with demonstrations—as in a teacher modeling while saying, "Hear the difference in timbre? Try relaxing your wrist further"—its acceptability increases significantly, as students not only comprehend the issue but also visually and aurally grasp the desired outcome.

Negative critical feedback persists in music education despite its drawbacks. Examples include vague dismissals like "This performance completely lacked feeling," or comparative reprimands such as "Even students two years younger play this better than you." Such language tends to trigger defensive reactions, fostering a "fixed mindset"—the belief that musical ability is innate and impervious to practice. Longitudinal studies reveal that students regularly subjected to such criticism are more prone to practice avoidance, performance anxiety, and even "imposter syndrome," wherein they doubt their accomplishments despite evidence of skill. This effect is particularly pronounced during adolescence, when self-identity is most fragile. A case in point involves a 14-year-old piano student who, after enduring repeated remarks that "your playing sounds like a typewriter," gradually developed resistance and ultimately abandoned musical study altogether.

### 3. The Impact of Evaluative Language on Learning Motivation in Music Education

In music education, evaluative language exerts a profound and multi-layered influence on students' learning motivation. When teachers employ positive reinforcement, its mechanism of action resembles sowing seeds of growth in the psychological soil of students. This type of evaluation addresses three fundamental psychological needs—competence, autonomy, and relatedness—thereby activating their intrinsic motivational system (Shen, W. J., 2022). A seemingly simple remark like, "Your rubato interpretation of this phrase showed real individuality," actually communicates multiple messages: it affirms the student's technical mastery (competence), respects their artistic choices (autonomy), and fosters a sense of artistic connection between teacher and student (relatedness). Cognitive evaluation theory suggests that such multidimensional affirmation helps students shift from viewing music practice as an external obligation ("I have to practice") to an internal desire ("I want to explore music"). Neuroscientific research corroborates this, showing that sincere praise triggers increased dopamine secretion in the brain's reward circuitry, physiologically reinforcing practice behaviors on a subconscious level.

The impact of neutral, instructional feedback on motivation presents an intriguing paradox. When a teacher says, "Your triplets need more even timing—let's clap the rhythm like this," this technical guidance, when paired with demonstration, constructs a clear "problem-solution" pathway in the student's cognitive framework. Goal-setting theory explains this phenomenon: specific, actionable advice establishes proximal goals, and the sense of accomplishment from achieving these micro-goals accumulates into sustained motivation. However, this approach requires careful calibration (Chen, H., & Dong, T. X., 2012). Overuse may lead to "technical anxiety," where students become so fixated on correcting details that they lose the joy of holistic musical expression. Experienced teachers often follow technical corrections with visionary statements like, "Once you master this technique, the dance-like character of the entire piece will shine through." This preserves technical rigor while safeguarding the student's enthusiasm for music-making.

The demotivating effects of negative criticism often exceed teachers' expectations. According to the frustration-effect principle in self-determination theory, repeated remarks like, "You still can't play this simple passage correctly," trigger a chain reaction in students' psychological defense systems: first, activating stress responses in the emotional brain (manifesting as practice-related anxiety); then, triggering cognitive self-deprecation ("I'm not cut out for music"); ultimately leading to behavioral avoidance (e.g., making excuses to skip lessons or practicing half-heartedly). This motivational erosion is particularly evident in adolescents due to their heightened sensitivity during identity formation. A case in point involves a music conservatory preparatory student who, after enduring persistent critiques like, "Your intonation problems will never improve," not only drastically reduced practice time but also developed psychosomatic performance anxiety (pre-concert vomiting). In contrast, reframing criticism as growth-oriented feedback—"Intonation issues remain, but your slow-practice approach this week has increased accuracy by 20%"—transforms setbacks into measurable progress, preserving the student's

motivational foundation.

#### 4. Individual Differences and Optimization of Evaluation Strategies

In the practice of music education, individual differences among students play a decisive role in the selection and implementation of evaluation strategies. These differences manifest not only in observable dimensions such as technical proficiency and musical aptitude but are also deeply rooted in implicit factors like cognitive style, personality traits, and developmental stages. Research in neuromusicology reveals significant neurodevelopmental variations among students of different ages regarding auditory processing, motor coordination, and emotional response. For instance, children in the concrete operational stage (ages 7-11) respond more positively to figurative evaluations ("Your fingers are as bouncy as little springs"), whereas learners in the formal operational stage (age 12 and above) require more conceptual feedback ("Your phrasing demonstrates a nuanced understanding of harmonic colors"). Such developmental disparities demand teachers to possess a "microscope for evaluation"—the ability to accurately identify each student's zone of proximal development and strike a dynamic balance between technical demands and psychological comfort zones. A piano teacher, for example, employed differentiated strategies when instructing different age groups performing a Minuet: using imagery like "a dancing bear" to guide younger students' rhythm perception, while analyzing the symmetrical structure of Baroque dance forms with teenage learners. This approach ensured that both groups received feedback tailored to their cognitive characteristics.

The moderating effect of personality dimensions on evaluation strategies is equally noteworthy. The Big Five personality theory indicates that students high in neuroticism are prone to anxiety from criticism, while those high in openness crave creative challenges. For the former, the "sandwich evaluation method" (praise-suggestion-encouragement) can mitigate defensive reactions—e.g., "Your tone is beautiful (praise); it could flow even better with relaxed wrists (suggestion); let's try this new approach tomorrow (encouragement)." For the latter, open-ended prompts like "Your ornamentation was unique—can you explore three more interpretive possibilities?" can stimulate creativity. Notably, motivational orientations introduce further complexity. Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory distinguishes between externally regulated learners (driven by rewards/avoiding punishment) and internally regulated ones (motivated by value integration). For reward-dependent students, setting quantifiable progress markers ("Achieve 80% rhythmic accuracy this week") provides clear behavioral guidance. In contrast, autonomously driven learners benefit more from in-depth artistic dialogues ("What emotional contrast do you think the composer intended here?"). A conservatory professor observed that tailoring evaluations—emphasizing technical metrics for competition-oriented students and stylistic innovation for creative ones—significantly accelerated progress rates.

Cultural differences pose deeper challenges for evaluation strategies. Cross-cultural music psychology highlights that East Asian students generally prefer indirect suggestions ("Perhaps try an alternative fingering"), while Western counterparts often expect direct efficacy feedback ("This passage needs 20

repetitions"). In multicultural classrooms, teachers must construct a "third space for evaluation" that honors native communication norms while cultivating familiarity with universal professional standards. An international music summer camp implemented a "dual-track evaluation system": adapting expressions in private lessons based on cultural backgrounds while using standardized artistic terminology in masterclasses. This flexible-yet-principled approach proved highly effective. Even more specialized are adaptations for students with special needs, such as converting written feedback to audio recordings for those with dyslexia or minimizing sudden loud demonstrations for sound-sensitive individuals. These adjustments not only uphold educational equity but also reflect the essence of music education—awakening each soul's musical potential through the most suitable means. The neurodiversity perspective further reveals that some "deficits" may be artifacts of mismatched evaluation criteria. For instance, a student deemed rhythmically challenged demonstrated remarkable synchronization when assessed via visual rhythm mapping, underscoring that optimizing evaluation strategies fundamentally means creating conditions where diverse neural architectures can flourish.

### **5. Optimization Suggestions for Music Teaching**

In music education, teachers should optimize assessment methods based on individual student differences by adopting a tailored teaching approach. For younger students, vivid metaphors like "your rhythm jumps like a little rabbit" can enhance their understanding, while older students require more professional musical terminology. When dealing with students prone to learning anxiety, the "sandwich feedback method" is recommended - first offering affirmation, then suggestions, and finally encouragement. This approach protects students' confidence while effectively facilitating progress.

Considering the diverse learning characteristics of students from different cultural backgrounds, teachers need to flexibly adjust their instructional language and assessment methods. Asian students generally respond better to indirect, tactful suggestions such as "perhaps you could try a different fingering," while Western students typically prefer direct, explicit guidance like "this section needs more practice." In practice, a "dual-track assessment" model can be implemented - using culturally appropriate expressions during individual instruction while employing standardized professional terminology in masterclasses or group settings to maximize teaching effectiveness.

For students with special needs, teachers should pay particular attention and modify assessment approaches accordingly. For instance, providing audio-recorded feedback for students with dyslexia, or avoiding sudden loud demonstrations for those with auditory sensitivity. From a neurodiversity perspective, some perceived "learning difficulties" may simply stem from mismatched assessment methods. Therefore, the key to optimizing teaching assessment strategies lies in creating suitable learning pathways for students with different cognitive characteristics, enabling every learner to fully realize their potential and achieve personalized development in music education.

## 6. Conclusion

Teachers' evaluative language is a silent yet powerful tool in music classrooms. This study reveals that positive, specific feedback can effectively foster students' sense of competence and autonomy, whereas standardized evaluations that ignore individual differences may backfire. Teachers are advised to dynamically adjust their language strategies—such as using metaphorical encouragement for children and artistic recognition for adolescents—by incorporating methods like the "sandwich feedback technique."

Future research could explore: (1) cross-cultural differences in musical evaluation language; and (2) the potential of technology and AI-assisted evaluation (e.g., intelligent feedback systems). The ultimate goal of music education is to cultivate lifelong learners, and scientific evaluative language serves as the kindling for this journey—it should not merely correct techniques but also resonate as a "soundboard" for students' artistic growth.

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