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Politeness and Power in Teacher Talk: Vietnamese EFL Teachers Reflect on Classroom Language

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Abstract

In Vietnamese EFL classrooms, where hierarchy, harmony, and emotional restraint shape the norms of interaction, the act of speaking is rarely neutral. This study explores how secondary school English teachers reflect on their own classroom talk, particularly in moments where tone, word choice, or timing carried consequences beyond the surface of instruction. Drawing on a corpus of written reflections composed during a professional development program, the study uses a narrative thematic approach to examine how teachers describe their use of politeness, indirectness, and mitigation as part of their relational practice. Findings reveal that teachers navigate a complex affective landscape in which every utterance is weighed, not only for instructional clarity, but for its potential to preserve face, protect learner confidence, and sustain classroom rapport. While the strategies they describe echo familiar theories of politeness and facework, their reflections emphasize emotional impact over theoretical constructs. Language is remembered not by structure, but by feeling, whether it healed, harmed, or held the space between teacher and learner. The study highlights the need to treat classroom discourse as ethically loaded and culturally situated, suggesting that language in education is not only a vehicle for learning, but a daily act of relational care.

Keywords: classroom discourse, facework, politeness strategies, reflective practice, teacher talk

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1. Introduction

In Vietnamese English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms, language does more than deliver instruction. It also shapes participation, authority, and learners' sense of interactional safety. Prior Vietnamese EFL research has shown that culture is an important dimension of language education, while learners' willingness to communicate can be affected by face concerns, confidence, and the classroom atmosphere (Bui et al., 2022; Hoang Hoa, 2020). For many teachers, the classroom is not only a space for grammatical input or speaking drills. It is a social field, densely layered with unspoken norms about what can be said, how directly it can be said, and what must remain softened at the edges.

This balancing act is especially visible in teacher talk. English lessons are often conducted in settings where learners may hesitate to speak when they feel publicly exposed or interactionally unsafe. In Vietnamese EFL classrooms, teachers have reported that some students avoid public correction, keep silent after being corrected, or prefer peer interaction because they feel safer in smaller groups (Bui et al., 2022). In such spaces, teachers find themselves walking a fine line: how to correct without humiliating, how to instruct without commanding, how to assert expectations while still inviting participation. The language teachers choose, including tone, phrasing, pauses, and forms of correction, can be understood as part of classroom power relations. Vietnamese classroom research has shown that teacher power is exercised and negotiated through classroom interaction, with consequences for student behavior and participation (Do & Mai, 2023).

These linguistic choices reflect more than pedagogical style. They are acts of relational positioning. Politeness, facework, and power in the classroom are not abstract concepts. They are enacted and felt in everyday interactions, often negotiated in the moment and revisited afterward with care or regret. While politeness has long been theorized as a set of face-saving strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987), more recent scholarship conceptualizes it as a dynamic, culturally embedded, and relationally co-constructed phenomenon (Arundale, 2010; Scollon & Scollon, 1995). In classrooms where hierarchy and harmony are tightly intertwined, the teacher's talk carries emotional weight, and its effects cannot be reduced to instructional clarity alone.

Despite a growing body of work on teacher talk in EFL contexts, relatively little research has examined how teachers reflect on the relational impact of their own language use, particularly in settings like Vietnam, where cultural norms of deference

and emotional restraint shape both speech and silence. In the Vietnamese EFL literature, related work has examined culture integration in general education, students' perceptions of teacher written feedback, willingness to communicate, and teacher power in classroom interaction (Bui et al., 2022; Do & Mai, 2023; Hoang Hoa, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021). Yet less is known about how teachers retrospectively interpret their own spoken language as a form of relational and ethical practice. Even fewer studies have explored how politeness and power are remembered, negotiated, or revised in hindsight, through reflection rather than interactional analysis.

This study addresses that gap by examining how Vietnamese secondary EFL teachers narrate their classroom language in retrospect. Drawing on a corpus of written reflections collected during a professional development program, it explores how teachers recall and make sense of moments when their words felt consequential, whether affirming, awkward, or regretted. While the study does not analyze real-time discourse or learner responses, it treats teacher reflection as a site where meaning is co-constructed, relational dynamics are interpreted, and ethical self-awareness is made visible.

By framing politeness and power not as fixed strategies but as relational concerns revisited through memory, this study contributes both conceptually and empirically. Theoretically, it advances a relational view of face and teacher authority, aligned with Arundale's (2010) model and post-structural understandings of interactional ethics. Empirically, it surfaces how teachers in the Vietnamese EFL context negotiate professional presence, emotional tone, and learner dignity in everyday talk. Through their reflections, we gain insight into the quiet moral work of teacher speech, a domain that, while often unmeasured, remains foundational to how learners experience language learning. This article, then, asks: "*How do Vietnamese EFL teachers reflect on their classroom language as a relational practice shaped by politeness, power, and face?*"

2. Literature Review

2.1. Politeness and Face: From Strategy to Relational Practice

The study of politeness has long been anchored in the foundational work of Brown and Levinson (1987), who proposed that all speech acts are potentially face-threatening and that speakers universally deploy strategies to mitigate these threats.

According to their model, face consists of two components: negative face (the desire to be unimpeded) and positive face (the desire to be approved of), both of which are at risk in everyday communication. Politeness strategies, such as hedging, indirectness, joking, and deference, are viewed as rational choices made by individuals to preserve social harmony and avoid confrontation.

While Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory has been widely influential, it has also been the subject of sustained critique. Scholars have argued that the model is grounded in Western, individualistic notions of communication, failing to account for cultural variation and the co-constructed nature of meaning (Eelen, 2001; Locher & Watts, 2005). In East and Southeast Asian contexts, for example, deference, silence, and indirectness are not merely optional strategies, they are central to everyday interactional norms and often reflect relational intelligence rather than strategic face-saving (Scollon & Scollon, 1995).

Building on this critique, Scollon and Scollon's (1995) intercultural discourse framework distinguishes among different politeness systems, including involvement and independence orientations, and shows how solidarity, deference, and hierarchy can be differently organized across contexts. In hierarchical and collectivist cultures such as Vietnam, relational harmony often takes precedence over individual assertiveness. Within this framework, the role of politeness is not merely to soften face threats but to sustain ongoing relationships embedded in power differentials and cultural expectations.

Further advancing this perspective, Arundale (2006, 2010) proposed a relational framework in which politeness and face are not seen as static attributes or strategic acts, but as interactionally co-constituted phenomena. According to this view, politeness emerges through the dynamic negotiation of meaning between interlocutors. Face is not owned by the speaker or the hearer alone, but it is shaped moment by moment in the relational interplay of utterances, responses, and interpretations. This shift reframes politeness as an emergent property of dialogue, rather than a fixed set of speaker-oriented techniques.

Together, these theoretical developments mark a conceptual transition, from politeness as a strategy for managing social threats, to politeness as a relational practice shaped by culture, context, and interactional positioning. This study adopts the latter view, exploring how Vietnamese EFL teachers reflect not only on what they said in class, but on how their words were received, interpreted, and felt in relation to

learners' emotional needs and social positioning.

2.2. Language, Emotion, and Power in the Classroom

Teacher talk is not only instructional but also interactional. In Vietnamese classroom research, power has been conceptualized as something exercised and negotiated through EFL classroom interaction, shaping both classroom norms and student behavior (Do & Mai, 2023). In educational discourse research, this dual function of language, as both pedagogical and interpersonal, has been widely recognized. Pimentel and McNeill (2013), for example, noted that every instructional move also enacts a positioning of the speaker and listener, shaping who holds epistemic authority, who is permitted to speak, and under what conditions. In many classrooms, particularly in EFL contexts, teachers must manage this balance between directing learning and maintaining trust.

The emotional stakes of classroom discourse are especially high in collectivist and hierarchical cultures such as Vietnam, where learners are socialized to respect authority, avoid confrontation, and preserve group harmony. In such settings, correction is not only an academic intervention. Bui et al. (2022) reported that some Vietnamese EFL teachers viewed public correction and peer feedback as practices that need to be handled deliberately because poorly managed correction may reduce students' willingness to speak in class. Learners may interpret a direct critique not simply as feedback but as a public loss of dignity. This makes classroom language an emotionally charged medium, where tone, timing, and phrasing must be carefully weighed.

Recent studies of teacher cognition and classroom interaction in Southeast Asia have highlighted how teachers navigate this terrain. Vietnamese EFL research has similarly shown that teachers attend to the classroom conditions under which learners feel able to participate. For example, Bui et al. (2022) found that teachers used strategies to create a more supportive atmosphere for students' willingness to communicate, while Do and Mai (2023) showed that teacher power is negotiated through classroom discourse and behavior. Hoa and Thi (2020) similarly emphasized that classroom discourse in Vietnam is shaped by unspoken cultural logics, where authority is expected but must be delivered with restraint. Teachers are not only expected to manage content, but also to modulate emotion and to ensure that learners feel respected even when corrected.

Within this dynamic, power is not imposed uniformly but expressed relationally. It resides not only in the teacher's institutional role but in how that role is enacted through speech. Authority may be asserted directly, softened through mitigation, or withheld altogether through silence or humor (Thao & Thuy, 2025). Each of these choices positions the teacher in a particular way, not just as a teacher, but as a relational actor responsible for maintaining emotional equilibrium in the classroom.

What emerges from this literature is a view of classroom language as both structurally constrained and emotionally negotiated. Teachers do not simply instruct. They manage presence. They weigh their words not only for accuracy but for effect. And they remember what they said, not just in terms of learner learning outcomes, but in terms of how it felt, how it landed, and what it did to the atmosphere of the room.

2.3. Reflective Practice and the Memory of Language

Teacher reflection has become a cornerstone of professional development, often valued for its ability to make visible the tacit beliefs, dilemmas, and values that shape pedagogical decision-making (Farrell, 2007; Schön, 1983). Reflective writing has been used in EFL teacher education to make teachers' professional thinking more visible, including through reflective journals and personal experience narratives. However, less attention has been given to how teachers use reflection to evaluate their own classroom language as relational practice. Yet when teachers revisit what they said, and how they said it, they offer insight into the relational and emotional undercurrents of classroom life that are rarely captured through observational or test-based data.

Narrative inquiry provides a useful framework for understanding such reflective accounts. As Clandinin (2022) argued, teacher narratives are not objective recollections but storied reconstructions and texts shaped by emotion, memory, and the moral significance teachers assign to certain events. Similarly, Riessman (2008) emphasized that narratives are performative acts of meaning-making, structured around turning points and infused with personal and cultural significance. From this perspective, teacher written reflections are not simply post hoc explanations; they are interpretive practices in which teachers construct professional selves and relational ethics through storytelling.

When teachers reflect on classroom language, they do more than describe speech

acts. They often focus on the emotional consequences of their talk, whether a learner withdrew after correction, laughed after a joke, or responded silently to a directive. These remembered reactions become central to how teachers evaluate their spoken presence. The act of reflection, in this sense, becomes a site where relational accountability is rehearsed, and where meaning is co-constructed between remembered speech and imagined audience.

Recent work has begun to explore this phenomenon. Farrell (2018) suggested that reflections on teacher talk often reveal deeply embedded beliefs about authority, care, and professionalism. Other studies (e.g., Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021) have shown how reflective narratives provide access to teacher identity work and ethical negotiation in ways that structured interviews or classroom recordings may not. Still, the specific focus on how teachers reflect on language as relational practice and how they weigh tone, word choice, or timing in relation to learner dignity remains underexamined, particularly in the Vietnamese EFL context.

This study builds on these insights by treating teacher written reflections not as a secondary source of data, but as a primary mode through which teachers narrate and negotiate their relational presence. By attending to how language is remembered, interpreted, and emotionally evaluated in hindsight, we gain access to how teachers position themselves not only as teachers, but as moral agents in classroom interaction.

2.4. Theoretical Framework: Politeness as Relational Ethics

This study is grounded in a relational understanding of politeness and face, drawing particularly on Arundale's (2006, 2010) relational framework, which reconceptualizes these constructs as emergent properties of interaction rather than as individual speaker strategies. In contrast to Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, which views politeness as a set of preemptive tactics to mitigate face threats, Arundale (2006, 2010) proposed that face is co-constituted moment by moment through the coordinated actions of speakers and hearers. Politeness, in this view, is not applied to utterances but achieved relationally through interpretation, alignment, and affective attunement.

Such a perspective is particularly relevant for understanding how teachers in hierarchical and affectively charged classrooms evaluate their own language in retrospect. Teachers often reflect not only on what they intended to say, but on how their language was received or misinterpreted, and how it altered the social dynamic

in the room. This aligns with Arundale's (2006, 2010) claim that face is always interactional and reflexive, constructed in relation to the perceived face of the other and to the context of the exchange.

At the same time, the study draws on Scollon and Scollon's (1995) intercultural discourse framework to understand how face, involvement, independence, and hierarchy may be differently organized across cultural contexts. In Vietnamese classrooms, where Confucian traditions of hierarchy, harmony, and restraint remain influential, the enactment of politeness is not only about minimizing threat; it is about sustaining face within a shared relational order. This includes knowing when to soften directives, when to defer, and when to withhold speech entirely as a gesture of care.

Together, these frameworks position politeness not as a checklist of strategies, but as a form of relational ethics. That is, teachers are not merely managing face in abstract. They are navigating the moral implications of their speech: how their authority is voiced, how learner dignity is preserved, and how emotional climates are regulated in real time. In this study, such ethical negotiation becomes visible in reflection: when teachers describe regretting a harsh tone, finding relief in a softened correction, or noting a shift in classroom rapport after a small linguistic adjustment.

This theoretical framing informs both the design and analysis of the study. Rather than coding for politeness formulas, the analysis attends to how teachers narrate their own talk as affectively consequential and ethically loaded. Language is not treated as a vehicle for content delivery, but as a means of enacting presence, authority, and care, relationally and reflexively.

2.5. Gap and Contribution

While the study of teacher talk has received considerable attention in applied linguistics and educational pragmatics, much of the literature focuses on classroom discourse as it unfolds in real time, analyzing interactional patterns, questioning strategies, or feedback moves (e.g., Pimentel & McNeill, 2013; Thao et al., 2023). Other studies examine how teachers implement policy, design lessons, or enact curriculum reforms (Nguyen & Hung, 2021; Yen et al., 2023). Yet relatively little research explores how teachers themselves reflect on the emotional and relational consequences of their own classroom language, particularly in post-lesson narratives where speech is reinterpreted through memory and meaning-making.

This gap is especially evident in contexts like Vietnam, where cultural norms surrounding politeness, hierarchy, and emotional restraint deeply shape classroom interaction. While scholars have examined how Vietnamese learners respond to feedback or experience classroom anxiety (e.g., Nguyen, 2025), fewer studies focus on the teacher's own perspective: how they perceive the impact of their tone, phrasing, or timing on learner confidence, dignity, and rapport. Even fewer studies explore how teachers narrate these concerns in teacher written reflections, where the emotional weight of language often emerges more fully than in observed behavior.

Moreover, although politeness theory has evolved from strategy-based models to relational frameworks, the implications of this shift have not been widely applied to reflective teacher discourse. Existing work on face and teacher authority tends to focus on real-time interactions, yet teachers also engage in relational positioning retrospectively and revisiting moments of tension or repair to make sense of their professional presence. These narratives provide a valuable lens through which to understand how teachers ethically evaluate their language use in relation to learners' emotional and social positioning.

This study addresses these gaps by analyzing written reflections from Vietnamese secondary EFL teachers, focusing on how they describe moments in which their classroom language felt consequential. It contributes empirically by foregrounding teacher voices in a domain, classroom politeness and facework, often dominated by external observation. It contributes theoretically by applying a relational ethics lens to teacher reflection, showing how language is remembered, not for its grammatical form, but for its relational impact. And it contributes methodologically by demonstrating how narrative reflection can serve as a site for understanding not only what teachers do, but how they feel about what they say and what those words may have done.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The voices at the center of this study belonged to 72 secondary school English teachers working across the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. Their teaching contexts varied. While some came from bustling provincial schools with large class sizes and government-sponsored resources, others taught in quieter, more rural settings, often adapting to shortages of textbooks, technology, or consistent learner

attendance. What they shared, however, was a deep familiarity with the unspoken rhythms of Vietnamese classrooms, and a practiced intuition for how language moved between authority and affection.

Most of the teachers had been in the profession for several years, long enough to have seen curriculum reforms come and go, and long enough to have developed their own personal grammars of classroom speech. They knew when a pause could carry more weight than a rebuke. They knew when a look might replace a lecture. And they knew, often without naming it, how much could depend on the way a single correction was phrased.

In their reflections, these teachers wrote not only about grammar points and learning outcomes, but about tone, how they said things, and how those things were taken. Some described moments when they softened their voice to encourage a hesitant learner; others recalled using humor to ease tension, or choosing silence instead of public correction. Their language was shaped by more than pedagogy as it was shaped by experience, emotion, and the quiet awareness that learners do not forget how they were spoken to.

What united these participants was not a shared teaching method, but a shared attentiveness to classroom interaction. Their reflections were not technical reports. They were deeply personal, often marked by uncertainty, care, and the weight of hindsight. In those moments, what emerged was not just talk, but testimony: a record of what it means to teach in a space where power must be voiced with kindness, and where every sentence might do more than deliver content. It might protect, include, or unintentionally wound. These were the teachers who wrote. And these are the voices this study now turns to hear more closely.

3.2. Research Design

This study was not designed to count speech acts or measure politeness frequencies. It began with a different intention: to listen to the words teachers chose when describing how they had spoken, and to the emotions that surfaced when those words were remembered. It is grounded in the belief that language in teaching is not only performative, but deeply reflective, and that the stories teachers tell about their own talk reveal the social, cultural, and ethical dimensions of that language more vividly than any checklist of strategies might allow.

The design followed a narrative inquiry orientation, one shaped by the assumption

that teachers do not simply report what happened, but they make meaning of what mattered (Clandinin, 2022). Their stories are not timelines of events. They are layered, emotionally resonant accounts, often organized around moments of tension or reflection. In choosing this approach, the study treats the reflective act itself as a site of knowledge: not as a second-hand version of classroom life, but as a space where internal teaching logics are revealed through how they are narrated.

Rather than treating politeness as a pragmatic construct to be verified, the design approached it as a relational concern, something teachers feel their way through, not always with theory, but often with care. It is in those feelings, such as in the regret of a sharp tone, in the pride of a softened correction, in the awkwardness of a missed cue, that the study finds its focus. The goal was not to extract universal strategies, but to understand how politeness, power, and responsibility are talked about when teachers are given space to reflect freely.

In this way, the study was designed not as a diagnostic tool, but as a listening framework: an interpretive posture that attends to the language of teacher reflection with the same respect and curiosity that teachers themselves bring to the language of their classrooms.

3.3. Data Collection

The reflections that form the foundation of this study were written as the final component of a professional development program focused on classroom innovation and reflective practice. At the end of the program, teachers were invited, though not required, to submit a written reflection in response to the following open-ended prompt: *“Describe a change in your teaching practice and what it has revealed to you, about your learners, your teaching, or yourself.”* This prompt was delivered both orally in the final workshop session and shared in written form through email follow-up. It deliberately avoided imposing a rubric or structure, to encourage authentic and personally meaningful responses. No word count or genre conventions were specified, though teachers were told that their reflections would be read by the program team to understand how teachers made sense of pedagogical development. While the prompt made no explicit mention of classroom language, teacher talk, or politeness, many of the reflections gravitated toward those themes, especially moments of interaction where tone, word choice, or delivery shaped how learners responded or how teachers later evaluated the impact of their language.

Teachers responded in a variety of ways. Some wrote short vignettes about a particular lesson or strategy that had gone unexpectedly well or unexpectedly wrong. Others offered more extended narratives, weaving together classroom memories, learner responses, and the emotional aftershocks of decisions made in the moment. Most wrote in English, though many subtly infused their writing with Vietnamese rhythms of thought, sometimes code-switching for clarity or emphasis. Their voices were neither polished nor formulaic. They were honest, sometimes tentative, and often deeply thoughtful.

Though the original prompts made no mention of politeness, face, or discourse management, these themes appeared organically. Teachers described conversations that lingered, remarks that fell flat, jokes that softened awkwardness, and phrases that, in hindsight, felt too sharp. They recounted learners turning quiet after correction, or unexpectedly blossoming when a directive was offered gently. These were not abstract discussions of language theory. They were recollections of tone, timing, and trust.

The reflections were submitted digitally, through email or course platforms, and varied in length and detail. But even the briefest texts carried emotional weight. Sometimes it was just a single sentence, like *“I should have said it differently.”* Sometimes, an entire paragraph revolved around one moment of hesitation, one choice of words, one unexpected learner reaction. These fragments became, in their own way, testimonies of teaching as relational work. And together, they formed a collection of voices quietly revealing how power and care are entangled in every utterance.

3.4. Data Analysis

The reflections were read not as data points to be coded, but as stories to be understood, carefully, repeatedly, and with attention to what lingered between the lines. The aim was not to identify how often teachers used hedges or indirect speech, but to listen for when language itself became the subject of reflection: when teachers paused to describe how they had spoken, how it had felt, and what it had meant to them or their learners.

The analysis was conducted by the first author, who read and reread each reflection holistically, attending to emotional tone, relational positioning, and narrative emphasis. Emerging themes were shaped through iterative memo writing and interpretive coding, guided by a narrative thematic orientation (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021; Riessman, 2008). To enhance the credibility of the analysis,

preliminary themes and representative excerpts were discussed with the corresponding author familiar with Vietnamese EFL contexts, who served as a critical peer. While formal inter-rater reliability was not calculated, given the narrative and interpretive nature of the data, analytical decisions were revisited collaboratively to check for thematic coherence, overinterpretation, and cultural plausibility. Disagreements were resolved through discussion until shared understanding was reached, and an audit trail of coding memos and theme development was maintained throughout.

As readings accumulated, two major themes began to form, not as abstract concepts, but as clusters of meaning shaped by how teachers made sense of their own talk. The first centered on mitigation as relational care: how teachers softened directives or critiques to preserve learner confidence and sustain rapport. The second focused on navigating authority and emotion: moments when language was chosen or adjusted in light of cultural expectations, emotional climate, and perceptions of power. These themes did not emerge from frequency, but from interpretive emphasis: what teachers returned to, how they narrated turning points, and what they seemed to carry with them after the lesson ended.

Throughout the analysis, the focus remained not on what was said in the classroom, but on how it was remembered. Politeness, in this study, was not examined as a list of strategies. It was examined as a field of tension, felt by teachers who wanted to instruct clearly, yet speak gently; who wanted to correct, but not embarrass; who wanted to be heard, but not feared. The goal of analysis was to honor those tensions and to read with the teacher, not just about them.

In this spirit, the analytical process became a form of interpretive listening: to stories about classroom language, but more than that, to the ethical work behind that language. While politeness served as an initial sensitizing concept, the analysis did not aim to develop a typology or categorize linguistic strategies. Instead, it attended to how teachers narrated their speech as acts of care, caution, regret, or relational repair. What emerged was not a taxonomy of politeness, but a portrait of care-in-practice, revealed, line by line, in how teachers described what they said, how it felt, and what it seemed to do in the room. Politeness, in this view, is not a discrete construct, but one strand in a broader ecology of relational responsibility.

3.5. Relationship to Related Publications

The dataset used in this article belongs to a broader corpus of Vietnamese EFL teachers' reflective writing collected in a professional-development context. Several related publications have examined different dimensions of this corpus, including reflective writing as biographical learning (Thao & Thuy, 2026a), teachers' metapragmatic awareness (Thuy & Thao, 2026), multilingual reflective style (Thao & Thuy, 2026b), pedagogical display (Thao & Thuy, 2026c), and meta-reflective orientation (Thao & Thuy, 2025). The present study is differentiated from these works by its focus on politeness, power, and face in teachers' retrospective accounts of classroom language. Rather than treating reflection as professional learning, pragmatic development, multilingual composition, institutional display, or meta-reflective positioning, this article examines how teachers narrate the relational consequences of what they said, how they said it, and how those utterances were remembered as caring, awkward, harmful, or reparative.

4. Results

4.1. Mitigation as Relational Care: Speaking Carefully in Retrospect

Across the reflections, teachers described their classroom language not in terms of rules or techniques, but in terms of moments. Moments when they paused before speaking, when they softened a correction, when they chose to use humor, or say nothing at all. These were not anecdotes about methods. They were memories of interaction, often subtle, sometimes tense, where something small in their speech felt meaningful enough to be remembered.

One recurring pattern was the deliberate use of mitigated instruction. Teachers frequently noted that while they had to give orders or point out mistakes, they were careful about how directly they did so. *"I asked, 'Could we try it this way instead?' even though I needed to correct them,"* one teacher wrote, *"It sounds nicer. They still understand."* Another described how she avoided using the imperative form, preferring suggestions over commands, like *"When I say 'Please open your books,' they move quickly. But I think they do not feel ordered."* These small grammatical shifts, such as modals, questions, softeners, were not highlighted as linguistic strategies. They were remembered as acts of consideration.

In several cases, the teachers described apologizing to their learners, not for being wrong, but for being too sharp. One wrote, *"I was tired and spoke strongly. Later, I said sorry. I think they respected me more."* In another reflection, a teacher recounted

a situation where a learner withdrew after being publicly corrected. *“I did not think it was rude, but she looked down. I spoke with her after, more softly. Next class, she smiled again.”* These narratives suggest that teachers did not simply monitor their language in the moment, but they evaluated it afterward, treating language not only as action, but as relational footprint.

Teachers also described rehearsing indirectness not to avoid authority, but to protect learners’ self-image. One teacher explained how he framed feedback in collective terms: *“Instead of saying ‘you are wrong,’ I said ‘some of us may have misunderstood.’”* Another said she corrected by example: *“I repeat the sentence the correct way. I do not say it is wrong. They know, but they do not feel bad.”* These strategies were not presented as pedagogical techniques, but as relational choices, deliberate ways to speak powerfully without speaking harshly.

Importantly, this carefulness was not only for learners. It was for the teacher, too. Many reflected on their own emotional state: how being tired, frustrated, or hurried affected their tone. *“I raised my voice that day,”* one admitted, *“I do not think it helped. They looked scared.”* These reflections reveal that teachers did not see politeness as a linguistic form to be applied. They saw it as a matter of professional presence, how they managed themselves in the role of speaker, and how they took responsibility for the emotional temperature of the classroom.

Even moments of humor were narrated with intention. One teacher described telling jokes not to entertain, but to de-escalate. *“When a learner made a noisy mistake, I joked: ‘You are making music, not grammar!’ Everyone laughed. He laughed. Then he tried again.”* In such accounts, humor was not random. It was a way of rebalancing a moment to acknowledge the error while preserving face, to reset the classroom mood, to remind learners that mistakes could live beside laughter.

Across all these stories, what stood out was not the range of techniques, but the moral undertone beneath them. Teachers were not just describing how they spoke. They were reflecting on how their words felt and what their words might have done. In their hands, language was not just a tool for instruction. It was a way of maintaining dignity, regulating emotion, and sustaining relationship. It was, as one teacher put it simply, *“how we take care of each other.”*

4.2. Navigating Authority and Emotion: Weighing Words Across Cultural Expectations

For many teachers in this study, the question of how to speak in class was never just about clarity. It was about balance, how to instruct with authority while honoring relational expectations that went far beyond the textbook. As they reflected on their language use, teachers did not describe cultural norms explicitly. But those norms lived within their stories: in the hesitation before delivering criticism, in the guilt that followed a raised voice, in the quiet pride when a softened phrase seemed to preserve a learner's confidence. Teaching, in these accounts, was not only technical work. It was culturally sensitive emotional labor.

One thread running through many reflections was an awareness of hierarchical expectations. Teachers knew they were expected to lead, to direct, to correct. But they also knew that these roles came with responsibilities to avoid causing loss of face, to preserve harmony, and to model emotional restraint. Several teachers described moments when they felt the weight of being *"too direct."* One wrote, *"I just said, 'No, that is wrong.' And then I saw the learner go quiet. I felt it was too strong, but I did not know how else to say it."* The discomfort was not just about the error, but it was about how the correction had landed. In that landing, the teacher read more than misunderstanding. She read hurt.

This sensitivity often came with a cultural logic of care, an unspoken understanding that learners should feel respected, even when being corrected. One teacher described how she learned to ask permission before offering feedback: *"I say, 'Can I suggest something?' They always say yes. It feels better, I think."* Another wrote, *"In Vietnam, we do not want to shame people in public. I try to remember this, even when I am busy."* These remarks reveal that decisions about tone were not linguistic strategies alone. They were moral acts, shaped by cultural expectations around face, hierarchy, and emotional containment.

At the same time, teachers reflected on the emotional aftermath of language, not only for learners, but for themselves. Several recounted feeling guilt after speaking sharply, even if the content of their message was pedagogically sound. One wrote, *"It was a long day, I was tired, and I used a strict tone. I saw their reaction and felt wrong immediately."* In such moments, the wrongness was not in what was said, but in how it felt afterward. Language had done its job, but not without cost.

Conversely, some teachers described emotional relief when their tone supported,

rather than strained, the classroom relationship. “*I tried to joke when correcting. They laughed, and I felt better too.*” These were not moments of instructional breakthrough. They were moments of interpersonal coherence, when what was said aligned with how both teacher and learners wanted to feel. These moments were remembered not for their pedagogical effectiveness, but for their emotional clarity. In the teacher’s mind, the tone had “*felt right.*”

Underlying all of this was a quiet cultural understanding: that authority should never humiliate, and that learners, even when corrected, should be left with dignity intact. Teachers did not always know the right phrase, or the perfect timing. But they knew when something had gone wrong. And often, they returned to those moments, not to defend them, but to reimagine how they might speak differently next time.

In this way, the teachers’ reflections reveal a kind of tacit framework, one shaped not by formal theory, but by cultural memory and emotional wisdom. It is a framework in which language is evaluated not by fluency or correctness, but by how it feels to live with afterward. And that feeling, for many teachers, becomes the measure by which politeness, power, and presence are continually renegotiated.

5. Discussion

When Vietnamese EFL teachers reflect on their classroom talk, they do not begin with speech acts. They begin with feelings: uncertainty, regret, relief. They recall not only what they said, but how they said it, and what that language seemed to do in the room. Their reflections do not map neatly onto taxonomies of politeness; instead, they pulse with a kind of moral discernment, shaped by experience, culture, and care. What emerges is a portrait of pedagogical language as something more than instructional: it is relational, emotional, and ethically charged.

5.1. Theoretical Contributions: Rethinking Politeness and Power as Relational Ethics

The findings of this study affirm some foundational insights from politeness theory while also extending them through a relational lens. Brown and Levinson (1987) argued that all communication risks threatening face and that speakers use strategies such as hedging, indirectness, and humor to mitigate these risks. Teachers in this study reported such strategies, including modulating tone, employing modal verbs,

softening directives, and using humor to reduce tension. These findings extend Vietnamese EFL work showing that teachers' interactional choices can affect learners' willingness to participate and the negotiation of classroom power (Bui et al., 2022; Do & Mai, 2023). Yet what distinguished their accounts was not just the strategy but the reasoning behind it: a concern for shielding learners from embarrassment and a felt awareness that authority, if expressed too directly, could wound rather than guide.

This orientation resonates more strongly with later developments in politeness theory, particularly Scollon and Scollon's (1995) concept of culturally configured face systems and Arundale's (2010) relational framework. Politeness cannot be treated as universal or context-free. In Vietnamese EFL education, cultural learning has been positioned as an important part of language education, while classroom studies have shown that face concerns, confidence, and teacher power shape learner participation (Bui et al., 2022; Do & Mai, 2023; Hoang Hoa, 2020). A direct correction is never just a correction; it is a potential rupture in trust.

Arundale (2010) further reframed politeness not as a strategy to be selected, but as an emergent, co-constructed act of relational positioning. Although this study did not analyze live classroom dialogue, the teachers' reflections frequently revealed that the meaning of an utterance was reframed in light of a learner's response. A silence, a downcast look, or a smile retroactively shifted the felt meaning of what had been said. This underscores that the effects of politeness are not authored by the speaker alone, but they are relationally negotiated, remembered, and reinterpreted.

In this light, the study affirms that classroom language is not simply strategic but ethical. The choice to soften a command, delay a correction, or offer a post-lesson apology was not procedural; it was an act of care. These teachers did not assess their talk for linguistic accuracy. They asked whether their tone had caused hurt, whether a learner had withdrawn, whether a different phrasing might have protected dignity. These are not questions of grammar; they are questions of responsibility. Language, in their reflections, becomes a mode of professional presence, a fragile and affective space where power must be weighed, not simply exercised.

5.2. Empirical Contributions: Expanding Reflection and Classroom Management

Empirically, the findings contribute to the literature on classroom discourse, teacher identity, and reflective practice in EFL contexts. Previous Vietnamese EFL studies

have examined how culture can be integrated into English lessons, how students perceive teacher written feedback, how teachers encourage willingness to communicate, and how teacher power is negotiated in classroom interaction (Bui et al., 2022; Do & Mai, 2023; Hoang Hoa, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021). Yet few have examined how teachers retrospectively evaluate their own classroom speech, especially in terms of its relational and emotional impact. This study brings attention to that underexplored dimension, showing that teachers often remember not what they taught, but how they spoke, and what that speech seemed to do to the room.

In doing so, the study adds complexity to existing accounts of teacher talk in Asian classrooms. Much of the literature emphasizes the authoritative nature of teacher discourse, how it structures participation, controls behavior, or conveys content (Thao et al., 2023). Less is said about the internal tension teachers experience as they navigate those roles. The reflections analyzed here reveal that authority is not a fixed stance but a constantly negotiated one. Teachers weighed their speech moment by moment, sometimes realizing, only in retrospect, that their words had landed too harshly, or too weakly, or just right.

These insights also reframe how we understand classroom management. Rather than viewing it as the orchestration of behavior or the enforcement of rules, the teachers in this study enacted management through relational calibration: adjusting tone, offering humor, or speaking gently to maintain trust and engagement. Such practices reframe classroom management as interactional calibration rather than simple behavioral control. This interpretation is consistent with Vietnamese EFL research showing that teachers' power is negotiated through classroom discourse and that students' participation depends partly on whether the classroom feels safe, supportive, and face-preserving (Bui et al., 2022; Do & Mai, 2023).

The reflections thus show that language in teaching is remembered not only for what it achieved instructionally, but for what it left behind relationally. Teachers did not recount successful explanations or learning outcomes. They recalled uncomfortable silences, small emotional ruptures, and moments of repair. In these recollections, politeness is not a strategy; it is a sign of care. It is how teachers protect the emotional conditions under which learning can take place.

6. Conclusion

Language, in the hands of a teacher, is never just delivery. It is presence. It is

judgment. It is the means by which a room is held together, or unintentionally fractured. The Vietnamese EFL teachers in this study did not reflect on their classroom talk in terms of grammatical precision or pedagogical correctness. They reflected on its relational effects: a correction that landed too sharply, a joke that softened tension, a phrase that lingered because it either harmed or held. These were not stories of performance. They were stories of care.

What this study has illuminated is the emotional and cultural texture of that care. Teachers did not describe politeness as a technique. They described it as a tension, something to be felt, weighed, and constantly recalibrated in light of hierarchy, harmony, and the unpredictable dynamics of classroom interaction. Their reflections show that the management of face and power is not simply strategic. It is ethical. It is shaped by cultural values, institutional expectations, and the teacher's own evolving sense of responsibility toward learners.

The contribution of this study lies not in generating new taxonomies of politeness but in reframing how we listen to the ones already in use. In classrooms marked by deference and emotional restraint, what may appear from the outside as hesitation or indirectness is, from within, a form of relational wisdom. Teachers weigh their words not only for clarity but for dignity. They pause not out of uncertainty but out of care. These moments, of restraint, of repair, of recalibrated tone, are not signs of weakness. They are the moral architecture of teacher talk.

Methodologically, the study also highlights the value of teacher written reflections as a lens for understanding professional presence. While classroom recordings reveal discourse patterns, teacher narratives reveal what mattered and what teachers remember, regret, or reimagine. Such reflections make visible the affective labor of teaching and offer a window into how language is interpreted not just as speech, but as a gesture of relational ethics.

At the same time, the study's focus on written reflection captures only one layer of classroom discourse. Future research might pair teacher narratives with classroom observation or learner interviews to explore how relational judgments unfold in real time and how they are perceived by learners. Others might examine how different institutional or cultural settings shape what counts as "polite," "caring," or "professional" teacher talk across contexts.

For those involved in teacher education and professional development, the implications are clear: classroom talk must be treated not just as discourse, but as a

form of ethical practice. When teachers recall what they said and how they said it, they are not simply remembering. They are learning aloud. In that learning, we glimpse not only linguistic competence, but professional conscience.

This study does not end with prescriptions. It ends with a deeper respect for the quiet labor behind every utterance, the moment of choice, the weight of tone, and the human relationship that each sentence seeks to protect. For these teachers, speaking well meant more than being understood. It meant being remembered as someone who spoke with care.

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