



EMPOWERING THROUGH DIALOGUE

Exploring Safe Classroom Communication Practices in Hungary

Keywords:

EFL classroom, safe space, environment, communication, teacher-student relationship, respect, strict, polite, support, Hungarian context

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Introduction

As future English teachers, we often ask ourselves, what is important for us in the classroom. We have found that safety and safe classroom communication are key factors for both of us. Not only do we personally find these topics important, but we also feel they have become relevant and central issues to be explored and discussed in the context of the Hungarian schooling system. According to our experiences, many teachers and students face difficulties when it comes to teaching and learning EFL. Even though in today's globalized society communicative foreign language skills are the most central and important to be proficiently acquired, these are the skills our students seem to struggle with the most, and as the Hungarian education system is generally exam-focused, it often neglects fostering and prioritizing a safe and supportive EFL classroom environment, which is crucial for building communicative competence and addressing students' affective needs. (Medgyes & Nikolov, 2014)

Currently, as two teacher trainees, we are in a special position where we are both teachers and students simultaneously, and experiencing this duality every single day gives us a unique perspective on this topic. The exchange of information and ideas are crucial in any classroom, therefore safe classroom communication is central not only to fostering an inclusive but also a productive learning environment. But how can we achieve this? Teachers have a huge impact on students' lives, both in their present and in their future, therefore what we do is pivotal in their development.

In this research, we are trying to shed light on what contributes to a safe classroom environment, while focusing on both the students' and the teachers' perspectives. As Sayfulloevna (2023. p. 7.) says "When learners feel safe and comfortable in their learning environment, they are more likely to engage in active learning, take risks, and learn from their mistakes." This statement aligns with research findings that indicate a positive correlation between psychological safety and academic achievement (Edmondson, 1999). Moreover, a safe classroom environment fosters a sense of belongingness and community among students, which is essential for promoting social and emotional well-being (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

According to Dörnyei, it is evident that language-learning motivation varies somewhat even in a single L2 class, and it is predicted that motivation will go through a variety of stages over the course of months, years, or a lifetime of language study. From this angle, motivation is viewed as a dynamic force that exhibits constant variation rather than as a static feature. Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) created a L2 model that divided the motivational process into a number

of distinct time periods, arranged according to a progression that explains how initial desires and wishes are converted into goals, operationalized intentions, and then enacted, culminating in the achievement of the goal and ending with the process's final assessment.

However, many of our colleagues seem lost when it comes to enhancing student motivation and fail to take advantage of its dynamic nature. Often the advice they receive is centred around elaborate, and seemingly complicated teaching methods, making them reluctant to implement change. Part of our motivation to conduct this study was to support the claim that simply creating a positive classroom atmosphere, developing good rapport, using clear and compassionate communication, and fostering self-confidence and autonomy can induce significant positive change in student motivation levels and engagement in the EFL classroom (Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998; Santana, 2020; Li, 2022; Cui & Yang, 2022; Wang, 2023; Li 2023).

While we found ample sources to support our teaching philosophy when it came to an international context, when searching for relevant literature for our specific circumstances, , we stumbled upon a huge problem: there is essentially no literature exploring the Hungarian context, even though the significance and unfortunately problematic nature of pedagogue-child communication is becoming a popular topic of discussion nationwide. Therefore, with this research, we are trying to fill this gap in local knowledge and data, while also applying and testing findings of already existing research, mainly from Canada and England.

Literature Review

The Classroom as a Safe Space

It is important to note that safe space and safe classroom communication do not automatically mean an environment without discomfort, or struggle, being safe is not the same as being comfortable. Getting out of your comfort zone and being able to confront your issues is an important part of the learning process, and a safe environment is essential to that. From the teacher's perspective, creating a safe learning space involves not only implementing inclusive pedagogical practices but also building trust, rapport, empathy, and open communication with students. Teachers play an important role in modelling respectful dialogue, addressing conflicts and any instances of bullying or harassment constructively.

Even though the term "safe space" is being used more frequently to refer to the ideal classroom environment, neither the benefits nor the drawbacks of aiming for safety are

frequently questioned (Holley & Steiner, 2005). In an educational context, this term now means a classroom atmosphere where pupils and teachers can share their feelings and thoughts without being judged by their classmates and teacher(s), where they are motivated and encouraged. According to Hunter's (2008) interpretation, a safe space is a dynamic, ever-evolving concept that results from people's complicated interactions within a specific physical, temporal, and social context. A space is considered safe if the circumstances encourage people to take psychological risks there.

A safe space in an educational context, particularly within an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting, refers to an environment where students feel emotionally and intellectually secure to express themselves without fear of judgment, discrimination, or exclusion. In such a space, learners can make mistakes, explore new ideas, and engage in dialogue without fearing ridicule or negative consequences, fostering a supportive and inclusive atmosphere. (Buchanan et al. 2021), This environment encourages risk-taking in language learning, as students are more likely to practice speaking, listening, and interacting in English when they feel respected and understood. In an EFL context, safe spaces are crucial because they provide the foundation for learners to overcome anxiety, build confidence, and develop a sense of belonging, which is essential for effective language acquisition. According to Buchanan et al. (2021), a safe space in language learning is not merely about physical safety but also involves emotional and psychological support, which is especially important in a diverse classroom where students may come from different cultural backgrounds. The concept of a safe space goes beyond just being non-threatening and includes active efforts to create an atmosphere of empathy, respect, and mutual understanding.

A safe EFL classroom exhibits specific characteristics that make it inclusive and supportive. Physically, the classroom layout might involve circle seating or small-group arrangements that encourage collaboration and reduce hierarchical barriers. Visual elements play a significant role in creating a welcoming atmosphere; for example, posters with encouraging messages, such as "Mistakes Are Proof You're Learning," can reassure students that errors are a natural part of language acquisition. Multilingual displays that celebrate students' native languages alongside English materials further reinforce a sense of belonging and cultural respect.

The auditory environment in a safe classroom is equally important. Supportive feedback from teachers and peers helps build students' confidence. Instead of pointing out mistakes harshly, teachers might rephrase errors constructively, saying, "Great attempt! Another way to

say it could be...” This approach creates an atmosphere where learners feel encouraged rather than discouraged. Peer dialogue is also vital; pair work and group tasks promote collaboration, allowing students to support one another in a non-threatening way. Teachers can model active listening and patience, ensuring that every learner feels heard and respected, even when they struggle to articulate their thoughts.

The practical implementation of a safe space often involves structured activities designed to minimize anxiety while maximizing engagement. Low stakes speaking tasks, such as storytelling, role plays, or games like “Find Someone Who,” encourage students to practice English in a relaxed setting. Teachers can integrate culturally responsive teaching strategies by incorporating learners’ cultural backgrounds into lessons. For instance, asking students to share proverbs from their native languages and comparing them with English equivalents fosters a sense of inclusion and cross-cultural understanding (Gay, 2018). Additionally, reflective exercises, such as journaling about learning experiences, can help students articulate their emotions and allow teachers to address anxieties or challenges.

By creating a supportive and inclusive environment, teachers enable learners to take linguistic risks, a crucial factor in developing fluency and confidence. As Buchanan et al. (2021) note, fostering emotional and psychological safety empowers students to engage more deeply with language learning. In turn, this sense of security helps them overcome language anxiety and build the confidence necessary for effective communication. A safe EFL classroom, therefore, not only promotes language acquisition but also nurtures a sense of belonging and mutual respect, essential for students’ overall growth and success.

In the context of EFL, safe spaces are pivotal in promoting learner autonomy and motivation. When students know that mistakes are a natural part of the learning process and that their contributions are valued, they are more likely to engage actively. Fear of making errors often leads to language anxiety, which can hinder progress. By fostering a safe environment, educators reduce this anxiety, making it easier for students to develop their language skills confidently (Horwitz, 2001).

Moreover, in classrooms where students come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the concept of a safe space becomes even more critical. Language learners may feel self-conscious about their accents, cultural differences, or potential language mistakes. A safe space helps mitigate these concerns and allows learners to focus on communication rather than on fears of judgment. Teachers can promote such spaces through inclusive teaching

practices, such as encouraging open communication, acknowledging cultural differences, and celebrating diversity (Norton, 2013).

Creating a safe space in the EFL classroom is not a one-time effort but an ongoing process. It requires consistent, intentional actions from educators to ensure that every student feels welcomed and supported. This can include setting clear expectations for respectful behavior, promoting positive reinforcement, and being aware of the emotional dynamics within the classroom (Tatum, 2007).

In sum, a safe space is crucial for successful language acquisition, especially in the EFL context, where learners often face challenges rooted in language proficiency, identity, and cultural adaptation. An environment of safety and support enables learners to thrive, making language learning an enjoyable and empowering experience (Krashen, 1982).

Boostrom (1998) found four themes among common safe space metaphors in his review of the phrase's application in teacher education literature. The first theme's focus is the isolation of the learners. Safe space narratives usually focus on the necessity of transforming students from individuals into members of a classroom community. Second, the physical classroom becomes a symbol of the wanted social interaction between students, laying the groundwork for a community of learners that is both physical and abstract. Thirdly, a safe space is designed to be a welcoming environment where students can express their uniqueness and overcome feelings of isolation. Lastly, it is believed that safe spaces foster improved student results and achievements.

Behaviours in a Safe Classroom

To create a safe space in the classroom, there must be certain rules to follow, and certain behaviours to be encouraged. Holley & Steiner (2005) state that there are several ways to encourage students to identify their beliefs, values, and behaviours, and one is through classroom discourse. The journey towards self-realization might be challenging and tiring. When students voice opinions that others might not agree with, they frequently take the risk of being vulnerable and criticized. That is why, among many other reasons, it is highly important to create and maintain an adequate climate in the classroom, so students feel safe and act accordingly. It is essential for people to exist in an atmosphere where they can share their thoughts and feelings unconditionally to function happily and to bring out the best of themselves (Holley and Steiner 2005). However, when teachers or students interpret a safe space in the classroom as a place where no one ever feels uneasy or confronted, problems may arise. Saying

that pupils should not be made fun of for asking a question or giving an incorrect response is one thing. Saying that pupils should never be aware of their mistakes is quite another (Holley & Steiner, 2005).

The Safe Language Classroom

Being a teacher in a language classroom adds extra complexity to teaching as mainly in those classes the teacher and the students use a foreign language for communication. According to Littlewood and Yu (2011), teachers use the first language in three cases mostly; fostering positive social interactions, explaining difficult concepts to guarantee comprehension and/or saving time, and keeping the classroom climate under control. It may not come as a surprise if teachers use the L1 to build these three pedagogical communication dimensions, which offer the scaffolding that students need to learn in the classroom. However, because they are so important, they also offer the perfect structure for target language input and communication, driven by actual communication requirements. Many educators believe that they should make greater use of these target language communication options. Numerous older approaches, such as the Structural–Situational Approach and the Direct Method, used strategies that made avoiding the L1 very simple from the very beginning. However, with a lot of today's methods, even if the activity is straightforward, the explanations or instructions can occasionally be so intricate that relying solely on the target language can cause issues. . When the L1 is the major method of foreign language instruction but teachers want to enhance the usage of the target language, they should employ it first for tasks that pupils are already familiar with or just require basic target language.(Littlewood & Yu, 2011) It is challenging to find the balance between when to use L1 and when to use L2 but by doing enough research on the topic and by practice, teachers are capable of finding the golden mean which is suitable and comfortable for everybody. Doing this takes a lot of effort and time, but when reaching the goal, it is all worth it in the end.

Learning Anxiety and the Affective Filter

Learning, as the process itself, can make numerous people feel anxious. When it comes to learning a foreign language, is especially an immense anxiety factor. Worde (1998) found that a third to a half of the pupils participating in the study had language anxiety. Despite the fact that the term anxiety appears regularly in research on language learning, these studies have produced wildly divergent definitions because they have concentrated on a confusing variety of anxiety-related topics. The progress of second language acquisition, classroom achievement,

and success on high-stakes language exams are just a few of the language outcomes that have been the subject of anxiety studies. These investigations covered a wide range of theoretical topics, from psychodynamic to purely behavioral. According to Zheng (2008), trait anxiety, situational anxiety, and state anxiety have historically been used to distinguish the nature of anxiety. The differences between these three groups can be approximated on a spectrum from stability to fragility, where trait anxiety is associated with a stable tendency to feel anxious in a variety of situations at one point and an unpredictable emotional state at another. The probability of experiencing anxiety in a specific scenario is represented by situational anxiety, which lies in the center of the spectrum. Sparks and Ganschow (1993) have proposed the Linguistic Coding Deficit Hypothesis. This theory states that language anxiety is a result of a linguistic deficit in the way language input is processed. Sparks and Ganschow, who placed a strong emphasis on language coding skills, disregarded anxiety and other affective factors as being crucial to language development, leaving cognitive ability as the primary factor influencing the acquisition and development of second or foreign languages. According to Sparks and Ganschow, second language coding skills are closely related to first language coding skills, which somewhat separates language development from its cultural and socioeconomic bases. Their theory ignores the notable distinctions between the development of first and second languages, particularly the traits that characterize the distinctiveness of second/foreign language learning environments, by focusing solely on cognitive abilities. The problem of language anxiety is widespread, particularly among those learning a second or foreign language. It is crucial to address this theoretically complicated psychological feeling from a variety of perspectives rather than thinking that it is a generic quality of one sort of worry. It should come as no surprise that language anxiety is not only a little extra factor in learning a second or foreign language. Indeed, it is a key emotional concept that has a significant impact on learning a second or foreign language. (Zheng, 2008)

Affective filter also plays a big part in a safe classroom. According to the affective filter hypothesis, learners' filter capabilities for language learning input vary depending on their emotional learning attitudes. Whereas students with negative emotional attitudes have a high filter of language learning information, those with positive emotional attitudes have a low filter. When learners take chances, it indicates that they have the courage to do so. They have no fear of the unknown or of making mistakes. The risk-takers have a positive emotional attitude and will take advantage of every chance to put newly acquired knowledge into practice. Meanwhile, the affective filter of the daring pupils is quite low. In general, pupils who are more willing to

take risks tend to have lower emotional filter capacities than those who are less willing to take risks, and they are also more likely to succeed in language learning. Taking risks is taking on difficult tasks without fear of failure. During the process of learning English, students who are prone to be risk takers will seize every occasion to use English. These pupils have very low emotional filters and are more self-assured. As a result, these pupils have a greater ability to learn the target language and gain more understandable knowledge. Few people take risks in real class. Instead of doing something unsure, the majority of pupils opt to do the tasks they are confident they can finish flawlessly. (Lin & Lin, 2020) In a safe classroom, it is essential to take this filter into consideration as well to help students in their journey as much as possible. Teachers should encourage learners to take risks in terms of foreign languages and reassure them to not be afraid of making mistakes because that only means they are human, and it is not something to be considered as failure.

Safe Communication Techniques

Safe communication techniques involve active listening, establishing ground rules, practicing empathy, addressing conflicts critically, and being polite. Active listening is a fundamental skill that fosters understanding and empathy among students and educators (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Maintaining eye contact and providing verbal and nonverbal cues to indicate understanding and support are all crucial parts of active listening. Establishing clear ground rules for communication sets expectations for respectful interaction and creates a sense of safety within the classroom. Ground rules may include guidelines for turn-taking, active listening, and constructive feedback. Collaboratively developing these rules with students encourages ownership and accountability for maintaining a positive learning environment. Conflict is a natural part of interpersonal communication, and addressing it constructively is essential for maintaining a safe classroom environment (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). Teachers can model conflict resolution skills by facilitating discussions, mediating disputes, and guiding students toward mutually beneficial solutions. According to Macpherson (2021) safe space where students can communicate safely means that students can feel proud of and responsible for the work they produce, that they know each other by name and are familiar with their peers' hobbies, that they accept different points of view without feeling pressured to compromise their own beliefs, that everyone in the space has a voice, and that constructive criticism is given with the creator's permission. .

Politeness is also a significant part of safe classroom communication, fostering a safe and inclusive environment, where students feel valued and comfortable expressing themselves, which includes the use of multiple politeness strategies. In EFL learning, politeness refers to linguistic politeness, which is taught in both oral and written communication in terms of how people choose to speak and how the hearers respond to their speech (Saputra, 2021). Politeness strategies encompass verbal and nonverbal behaviours that individuals employ to maintain social harmony and show respect for others' feelings and opinions (Brown & Levinson, 1987). One of these strategies is positive politeness, which according to Brown and Levinson (1987) in a classroom setting consists of emphasizing common ground, expressing appreciation, and showing friendliness towards others. Indirectness is also a great politeness strategy to use in the classroom because it allows individuals to communicate sensitive or potentially confrontational messages in a more tactful manner, and can soften the delivery of requests and commands, like the use of phrases such as "Could you please..." or "Would you mind...". Moreover, incorporating polite requests and offers in classroom interactions not only enhances communicative effectiveness but also reinforces the importance of mutual respect and being considerate among students and educators.

Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015) emphasize that during interactions, it is essential to be mindful of both forms of face and to choose between two types of politeness accordingly. The first type, positive politeness, involves fostering a sense of connection through acts such as offering friendship, giving compliments, and using informal language. This approach treats others as friends or allies, avoiding any form of imposition or threat. The second type, negative politeness, emphasizes respect through actions like apologizing, using indirect language, and maintaining formality. This strategy focuses on minimizing potential threats to the face of others. Consequently, politeness is applied based on specific communicative contexts, as speakers encounter diverse individuals with varying personalities and levels of communicative competence. By encouraging the use of courteous language and gestures, teachers create an environment where students feel valued and supported in their learning journey, further contributing to the cultivation of a safe and inclusive classroom atmosphere. According to Yoga, Ketut & Hery (2018) rudeness leads to conflict between teachers and pupils, civility must be enforced in a classroom. It indicates that in order to foster positive relationships between teachers and pupils, politeness is used in classroom interactions. It is clear from looking at how students and teachers communicate politely that it is crucial to address the implications of the

politeness strategies employed in classroom interactions. Students can choose the politeness strategy by acting politely toward their peers or teacher. (Yoga, Ketut & Hery, 2018)

Pragmatics can also fulfill an important role, many components of it can be implemented in a language classroom, but not all of them. One of them is (im)politeness, which is one element that might be seen as pertinent and teachable. Good examples of how to approach positive as well as negative politeness in the classroom include teaching students how to use formal or informal language in various contexts, the use of direct or indirect speech, greetings, farewells, requests, forms of address, and so forth. (Schepers, 2014)

Research Questions and Data Collection

In our research we were seeking answers to two questions. One of them aimed to explore the essential elements that contribute to a sense of safety and inclusivity in Hungarian classroom communication, incorporating views from both the teachers' and the learners' sides. The other one investigated the impact of different communication methods used by teachers on students' feelings of safety and how much they partake in classroom conversation.

1. What are the key components of safe classroom communication from students' and teachers' perspectives?
2. How do teachers' communication styles and strategies influence students' perception of safety and inclusion in the classroom?

To collect data and answer these questions a two-part process was created, first we conducted ten interviews, and then we observed ten lessons. Combining interviews and observations enabled us methodological triangulation, which strengthens the validity and reliability of our findings. By comparing what participants say in interviews with what happens in practice, we were able to identify consistencies and discrepancies, giving a better picture of the phenomenon.

Interviews

To gain in-depth insights into the perceptions and experiences of both students and teachers regarding safe classroom communication practices, we conducted semi-structured interviews. The interview process was designed to collect qualitative data that would provide a nuanced understanding of the key components, impacts, and challenges of fostering a safe and inclusive learning environment. Ten interviews were conducted altogether, five with students and five

with teachers. The interview format was chosen because interviews with both students and teachers provide a holistic understanding of the dynamics of classroom communication from both facilitators and participants. Teachers are instrumental in shaping classroom communication. By interviewing them, we were able to gather insights into the strategies they use to foster a safe communicative environment, the challenges they face, and their perceptions of students' needs and behaviours. Students are the primary participants in classroom communication. Their perspectives revealed how safe they felt expressing themselves, their perceptions of teacher support, and any barriers they face in communication, especially in an EFL context where language anxiety can play a significant role. This study's inclusion of interviews from both EFL and non-EFL participants offer a comparative perspective for comprehending safe classroom communication in various settings. The semi-structured interview format allowed us to touch upon the most important points, by having 6 questions for both students and teachers, but it also allowed us to be flexible, and focus on the participants unique experiences and perspectives.

The student participants were a female high school student from a high school in Pécs, she will be referred to as student1 in this study, a female high school student from an high school in Kaposvár, student5 from now on, a male high school student from a high school in Kaposvár addressed as student4, a male middle school student from a middle school in Pécs, called student2 in this research and a female middle school student, student3 from the same middle school in Pécs.

The teacher interviewees were a middle-aged female English and Physics teacher currently teaching at a middle school in Pécs, (having years of experience teaching in high school as well), referred to as teacher1 from now on, a young beginner female Hungarian literature, grammar, and Media teacher from Eger, who mostly teaches in high, called teacher2, a middle-aged male English and Hungarian literature and grammar teacher who is currently teaching in a middle school in Kaposvár where he is the principal, (also having experience teaching in high school as well), referred to as teacher4 from now on, an elderly woman who is quite experienced, meaning she have been teaching for a long time, and teaches English both in middle school and high school in Budapest, called teacher5 in this paper, and a male teacher who has just finished his second year of teaching, he is teaching Math and Physics in high school also in Budapest., addressed as teacher3.

While we worked with a convenience sample, choosing participants we had access to through connections and past experiences, we tried to make our small sample as diverse as possible, picking students and teachers coming from various demographics and backgrounds.

The semi-structured interview format was chosen to allow for flexibility in the conversation while ensuring that key topics were covered. This approach enabled participants to share their experiences and perspectives in their own words, providing rich qualitative data. The interview questions were developed based on themes identified in the literature review, including perceptions of safe classroom communication, strategies and behaviours that contribute to a safe learning environment, challenges faced in maintaining a safe classroom, and the role of politeness and respect in teacher-student interactions. Each question for the students had a counterpart question for the teachers. Each interview lasted approximately twenty-five minutes and was conducted in a quiet, private setting, either within the participant's school or online via teams, to ensure confidentiality and comfort for the participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, to be transcribed and analysed later. Participants were assured of their anonymity, and pseudonyms such as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Student 1, Student 2, etc. were used in the transcription and reporting of the data.

Classroom observations

To complement the qualitative data obtained from interviews, we conducted classroom observations to directly assess the dynamics of communication and interactions in a natural setting. We chose classroom observation as our second method, because they are a critical method for understanding how communication unfolds naturally in the classroom setting. They provide direct evidence of teacher-student interactions, capturing the dynamics of verbal and non-verbal communication. Through observations, we were able to identify instances of both successful and problematic communication, offering real-life examples of how a sense of safety is either maintained or compromised. This method allows for the collection of rich, contextual data that goes beyond self-reported perceptions from interviews, helping to validate or challenge these accounts. By witnessing communication practices in action, observations contribute to a deeper and more reliable understanding of the factors that foster or hinder safe classroom communication.

We had the opportunity to observe three high school lessons and seven middle school lessons. We not only observed EFL classrooms, we also had the opportunity to observe other classes such as physics, biology, history, and literature. Including observations of both EFL and

non-EFL classrooms in this study provides a comparative lens to understand safe classroom communication in varying contexts. EFL classrooms often emphasize verbal participation, where language anxiety and cultural differences can uniquely influence the sense of safety in communication. Observing non-EFL classrooms, such as those in physics, biology, and literature, allows for an exploration of how communication strategies differ across disciplines. For instance, STEM subjects may prioritize clarity and collaborative problem-solving, while humanities classes often require open dialogue and critical expression. This diversity offers a broader perspective on how communication is managed and safety is fostered in different educational settings.

By examining both types of classrooms, the study contextualizes the unique challenges of EFL communication within the broader educational environment. This comparative approach highlights universal strategies that promote safe communication, while also identifying subject-specific practices that could inform improvements in EFL contexts. Additionally, it ensures that findings are not overly narrow or isolated, offering a comprehensive understanding of classroom communication across disciplines.

We surveyed how safe the children felt in the given environment and how much the teacher contributed to creating a safe environment. We focused on honesty, listening, respecting boundaries, empathy, and how often respectful language and tone were used by both the students and the teacher. Moreover, we monitored whether the teacher gave feedback, if yes, how and how did it affect participation.

Results and Discussion

After this two-part process, we were able to identify three reoccurring themes, namely strictness, mutual respect (including polite language use), and support or the lack thereof. These themes were present in the student interviews, the teacher interviews, and the classroom observation as well, therefore making them our foci when analysing data.

Being Strict

Student Interviews

Student 3 shared a nuanced perspective, recognizing that while some teachers were strict, they could still demonstrate empathy and support. She mentioned a positive experience with a strict teacher, where her initial fears transformed into a productive and supportive exchange. This

suggests that strictness does not always have to lead to negative outcomes, particularly if it is balanced with empathy and a willingness to address students' concerns. In an EFL context, strictness can be paired with support to create an environment where students feel safe enough to take risks in language learning.

On the other hand, Student 1 noted that her teacher's quick temper and occasional outbursts, such as yelling, created discomfort in the classroom. According to her, that while a teacher's strictness can sometimes be perceived as a lack of control, it can also lead to a tense atmosphere that negatively affects student engagement.

While Student 3 found that some strict teachers could still foster positive outcomes, Student 4 had a different take. He mentioned that his teacher, despite being friendly, exhibited a subtle form of arrogance. This underlying arrogance created an imbalance in their relationship, which may have contributed to student disengagement. In the context of strictness, this suggests that while teachers may enforce rules, the way they communicate their authority is just as important. In EFL classrooms, where students may already feel vulnerable, an authoritarian communication style can hinder rather than help the learning process.

Teacher Interviews

Teacher 1, for example, emphasized the importance of creating a balance between praise and constructive feedback. Her approach to maintaining classroom order was rooted in creating a nurturing environment, where students felt comfortable, even though she maintained clear boundaries. This suggests that strictness can be effective when paired with a caring attitude. In an EFL classroom, where language learners often need encouragement to participate, fostering a positive environment through nurturing communication may help maintain discipline while encouraging engagement.

Teacher 2, a newer teacher, discussed the importance of creating a safe and respectful classroom environment. She prioritized building a partnership with her students rather than asserting strict authority. Her approach reflects the view that strictness alone is not enough to foster a positive learning environment—mutual respect and collaboration are crucial, especially in EFL classrooms where students may feel intimidated by new language structures and vocabulary. By building trust and respect, teachers can effectively manage their classrooms without resorting to authoritarianism.

The topic of emotional regulation was discussed by Teacher 5, who noted that understanding each student's unique communication style is critical, particularly when managing behavior in the classroom. She acknowledged that strictness could sometimes be perceived as disrespectful if teachers fail to consider students' emotional needs. This aligns with the experiences of Student 1, who felt that her teacher's quick temper created discomfort. Teachers who can balance strictness with emotional awareness are more likely to foster positive relationships and encourage greater participation in the classroom, even in EFL contexts where emotional barriers can hinder language learning. (Lestari, W., & Hidayat, A. 2022)

Classroom Observations

In the classroom observations, the impact of strictness on the classroom atmosphere was evident. During a 6th-grade Literature class, the teacher was noted to be strict at times, especially when enforcing discipline. However, the students still appeared to feel safe and supported. They showed warmth and respect toward the teacher, for example waiting for her in the corridor and greeting her with a hug there, or saying thank you for your feedback, or one student telling the other to stop speaking because the teacher is trying to help them, indicating that despite the teacher's strictness, there was a foundation of mutual respect and care. This aligns with Student 3's experience, where strictness, when coupled with empathy and support, could lead to positive outcomes in terms of student engagement and learning.

In an 8th-grade Physics class, the teacher's attempt at strict classroom management was less successful. The classroom was noisy, and the students showed little respect for the teacher's authority. Despite the teacher's efforts to enforce rules, the lack of clear communication and emotional regulation led to a disengaged and disruptive environment, the students did not do their task, they did not participate in class, and they talked amongst each other during the whole time. This situation reflects the challenges of managing a classroom with a strictly authoritative approach without fostering genuine respect and engagement.

In contrast, in an English class with a supportive teacher, students were observed to feel comfortable and confident, even though the teacher enforced classroom rules. The teacher's ability to maintain clear boundaries while also demonstrating care and encouragement created a positive learning atmosphere. This mirrors the experiences of Student 2, who appreciated a teacher's approachable communication style. In EFL classrooms, where students may be hesitant to speak due to fear of making mistakes, it is crucial to find a balance between strictness

and support to promote an environment where students feel safe to take risks in language learning.

Mutual Respect and Polite Language Use

In EFL classrooms, mutual respect and polite language use are deeply intertwined, creating an essential foundation for fostering a positive, supportive learning environment. These elements work together to ensure that students feel safe, valued, and included, which in turn supports their language development and overall classroom engagement (Brown, 2007; Tudor, 2001). Mutual respect stems from recognizing and valuing students' diverse linguistic, cultural, and personal backgrounds, while polite language use is the practical manifestation of this respect in everyday communication (Canale & Swain, 1980; Dewaele & Wei, 2012). Together, they contribute to an atmosphere where students feel comfortable taking risks in their language learning, without fear of judgment or exclusion (Schmidt, 1990).

Student Interviews

Interviews with students revealed that mutual respect and the use of polite language positively impacted their experiences in the EFL classroom. For instance, Student 1 expressed that their teacher listened attentively, provided empathetic responses, and fostered a supportive environment. This created a sense of being cared for and respected, which made the student feel comfortable asking questions, even during peer conflicts. The teacher's polite and respectful approach encouraged open communication, helping the student engage more confidently in discussions. This aligns with the idea that in EFL classrooms, where learners may feel anxious or self-conscious about their language abilities, creating an atmosphere of mutual respect and polite language is crucial for reducing language anxiety (Horwitz, 2001).

In a similar way, Student 2 highlighted how their teacher's courteous and kind manner promoted open discussions, particularly in English class. The teacher's non-judgmental attitude allowed students to express themselves freely, reinforcing how polite language use fosters a safe space for students to participate without fear of making mistakes. This is particularly important in EFL settings, where students are often hesitant to speak due to concerns about their language proficiency. When teachers use respectful and polite language, it helps build students' confidence, making them feel that their contributions are valued, regardless of language errors (Norton, 2013).

However, not all experiences were positive. Student 3 observed favoritism in the classroom, where certain students received more attention during discussions. While they did not feel personally excluded, the student noticed that others may have felt overlooked, which undermines the mutual respect needed for an inclusive environment. This points to the importance of ensuring that politeness and respect are extended equally to all students, regardless of their perceived abilities. In an EFL context, where students' confidence can fluctuate based on their language competence, this kind of inclusivity is vital for maintaining a positive atmosphere where everyone feels equally respected.

Student 4 also shared frustrations with a teacher who listened to concerns but failed to offer actionable solutions. While the teacher's polite language was evident, the lack of follow-through on addressing student concerns left the student feeling that their opinions were not truly valued. This highlights that while polite language is essential for creating rapport, it must be accompanied by genuine efforts to take meaningful actions based on student feedback. In EFL classrooms, teachers must not only be polite but also demonstrate respect for students by responding to their needs and concerns in a way that empowers them to succeed in their language-learning journey.

The role of polite language in fostering a safe and inclusive environment was also consistently emphasized by students in interviews. For example, Student 5 noted that their teacher's politeness contributed to a feeling of safety in the classroom. They expressed, "I feel like our teacher, they are very polite. I can't tell if they have a favorite student, but I think they're nice to us." The teacher's polite communication helped students feel valued, which in turn encouraged them to engage more fully in class activities. Polite language use in such contexts is essential for reducing the fear of judgment, which can be a barrier to participation in EFL classrooms. By using respectful language, teachers create a supportive atmosphere that fosters trust and allows students to feel confident in their ability to contribute to discussions.

In contrast, Student 3 noted that while most teachers communicated with respect, inconsistency in their use of polite language could hinder students' comfort levels. They pointed out, "Teachers should refrain from probing into personal issues if the student is not comfortable discussing them." This highlights the importance of teachers being consistently polite and sensitive to students' boundaries, especially in diverse EFL classrooms where personal and cultural differences may influence students' comfort levels in communication. Students may not always be ready to discuss personal matters in a second language, and teachers must be mindful of when and how to engage in sensitive topics.

Teacher interviews

Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 both demonstrated how mutual respect and polite language were central to their teaching practices. Teacher 1 emphasized the importance of listening actively to students' concerns and encouraging questions, viewing herself as an equal participant in the learning process. This approach, which involved fostering open dialogue and actively engaging with students, helped boost their confidence, particularly in low-risk activities like revisions. The teacher's polite and respectful communication created a safe space where students felt encouraged to participate without fear of judgment. This aligns with research in EFL contexts that highlights the importance of creating a classroom atmosphere where students feel respected and valued, which in turn facilitates greater engagement and language learning (Norton, 2013).

Similarly, Teacher 2 focused on making students feel comfortable sharing their subjective opinions, emphasizing that there were no right or wrong answers in this context. By prioritizing empathy and understanding, Teacher 2 created an inclusive environment where students felt free to express themselves.

Teacher 3 provided an interesting perspective by highlighting the need for boundaries in communication. She stated, "There are some forms of communication or turns of phrase that I do not allow my students to use," indicating that politeness in the classroom also involves preventing inappropriate language use. This proactive approach was essential for maintaining a safe and respectful environment. In EFL classrooms, where students may come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, establishing clear boundaries around respectful language is crucial to ensure that communication remains inclusive and does not perpetuate harmful stereotypes or discriminatory behavior (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Teacher 3's emphasis on addressing issues such as racist language directly demonstrates how mutual respect can be maintained by actively confronting inappropriate behavior and fostering a classroom culture grounded in respect for all students.

Teacher 4's approach further emphasized the importance of mutual respect in classroom communication by involving students in creating communication rules. By giving students a sense of ownership over the classroom culture, Teacher 4 fostered a collaborative environment where students actively participated in shaping the norms of respectful dialogue. In an EFL context, where students may be hesitant to engage in classroom discussions due to language barriers, creating a collective agreement on communication norms helps ensure that all students feel comfortable expressing themselves in English.

Teacher 5 emphasized that building a respectful and polite classroom culture requires time, consistency, and role modeling. By demonstrating polite, patient, and attentive language, teachers set clear expectations for students and model the behaviors they wish to see in the classroom. Teacher 5's approach highlights the importance of teachers not only communicating respectfully but also embodying the values of mutual respect through their own actions. This consistent modeling of respectful behavior encourages students to adopt similar communication practices, which is essential for creating a positive and inclusive learning environment in EFL classrooms.

Classroom Observation

In the classrooms where polite language markers (such as "please," "thank you," and "could you") were used frequently, the atmosphere was noticeably positive. For example, in the grade 11 English class, where 27 instances of polite language were recorded, students appeared to feel safe and comfortable. The respectful tone established by the teacher through frequent use of polite language created an environment where students willingly participated in lessons. The students mirrored the teacher's behavior, using polite language themselves, which further nurtured a respectful classroom culture. The connection between polite language and a positive classroom dynamic was also observed in the 6th-grade literature class, where 24 polite language markers were noted. Here, the teacher's consistent use of polite language, even when being strict, created a balanced atmosphere where students felt valued and respected, while still adhering to classroom expectations. These examples suggest that when teachers model polite communication, students are more likely to adopt similar language patterns, reinforcing mutual respect and enhancing communication.

In contrast, classrooms where polite language was used less frequently (e.g., 16, 17, and 18 polite language markers) presented a different dynamic. In one 8th-grade physics class, where only 16 instances of polite language were noted, the teacher struggled with maintaining discipline, resulting in high noise levels and a lack of attention from the students. Despite the teacher's attempts to remain respectful and polite, the students' disruptive behavior suggested a disconnect from the learning environment and a lack of respect for classroom norms. The teacher's polite language was not reciprocated by the students, which undermined the teacher's efforts to establish a controlled and respectful classroom atmosphere. This pattern was also observed in a 7th-grade history class, where 17 polite language markers were noted. Although the students seemed to feel mostly safe, there was a noticeable tension in the air when the teacher entered the classroom. The students' reluctance to fully engage or express themselves

suggested that the classroom atmosphere lacked the warmth and openness seen in other classrooms where polite language was used more consistently. Interestingly, in this class, the polite language was primarily used by the students, with few instances of the teacher using such language, which may have contributed to the lack of positive interaction.

The relationship between the frequency of polite language markers and classroom dynamics was evident in the observations. In classrooms where polite language was used frequently, students displayed higher levels of participation, motivation, and respect for one another and the teacher. Conversely, classrooms with fewer polite language markers appeared less cohesive, with students demonstrating lower levels of engagement and respect. These observations align with the idea that polite language is not merely a formality, but a crucial tool for building mutual respect and fostering a positive classroom atmosphere (Brown & Levinson, 1987). When teachers actively use polite language and encourage students to do the same, they create an environment where communication is valued and students feel safe to express themselves without fear of judgment or disruption.

Support

Student Interviews

Support emerged as the third central theme in our research, appearing prominently across student and teacher interviews and classroom observations. In the context of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms, this theme underscored how a nurturing atmosphere significantly contributes to a safe and effective learning environment for language learners.

For instance, Student2 shared an experience, illustrating the profound impact supportive interactions can have on student confidence and engagement. He recounted, “When I felt lost during class discussion, I approached my teacher, and she listened to me without interrupting. She explained things clearly and even offered extra materials and feedback on my essays. This made me feel supported and more confident. Plus, she helped me realize it's okay to ask for help when struggling.” This anecdote highlighted how responsive and attentive teaching fostered a sense of belonging and security, particularly important in an EFL setting, where students may feel anxious about their language proficiency. By encouraging students to voice their challenges and seek help without fear of judgment, the teacher facilitated a learning environment where students could thrive in their language development.

Similarly, Student1 emphasized the importance of teacher support during conflicts, stating, “When I had a conflict with one of my classmates, she asked me if I was okay and if she could help me.” This willingness to provide emotional and practical support is crucial in EFL classrooms, where students may experience cultural and linguistic barriers. The teacher's empathy not only addressed immediate issues but also built long-term trust, enabling students to engage more openly in both language acquisition and social interactions.

Student5 also underscored the significance of support in her learning experience, noting how her teacher's understanding during a challenging exam situation made her feel valued: “She handled my madness really well, so it made me really comfortable.” This indicated that when teachers respond to students with compassion, it can help alleviate anxiety—a particularly important factor in EFL settings where students might worry about their proficiency or making mistakes. The teacher's support reinforced a sense of security, allowing the student to engage with the material more confidently.

Teacher Interviews

Teacher interviews revealed a shared understanding of the importance of support in creating a safe and engaging learning environment. The teachers highlighted different aspects of providing support to students, including praise, emotional assistance, and creating opportunities for students to express themselves.

Teacher 1 shared similar sentiments, emphasizing the importance of praise and open dialogue in her classroom. “I always praise but not overpraise them and encourage them to speak out, share their ideas, stressing that no ideas are worse than bad ideas. Their opinion is very important to me.” Her approach reflected a conscious effort to create an inclusive environment where every student felt valued—key for language learners who may feel vulnerable about expressing themselves in a new language. By encouraging students to listen to each other and express their thoughts freely, she not only enhanced their confidence but also cultivated a sense of community. Her belief that students should dictate their involvement—allowing them the autonomy to remain silent when they choose—demonstrated a profound respect for individual comfort levels. “I won’t humiliate them in front of others if they don’t want to be heard,” she asserted. This philosophy was crucial in an EFL setting, where language learners need to feel emotionally safe to take risks in speaking and practice without fear of embarrassment.

Teacher 2 also emphasized the importance of creating a safe and respectful classroom where students feel secure and valued. She focused on building a partnership with her students, stating, "I try to create as many opportunities as possible for them to express their individual opinions." This approach is especially effective in an EFL classroom, where students' confidence in speaking is often hindered by fear of making mistakes. By fostering an environment where students felt comfortable sharing their thoughts, she helped reduce language anxiety. Teacher2 also actively addressed issues like bullying, dedicating time for students to express their feelings and resolve conflicts, which reinforced a supportive atmosphere conducive to language learning.

Teacher 3 highlighted the importance of support, noting that a safe classroom atmosphere is key to student engagement. Through group projects and conversations, he promoted involvement and made sure that students felt heard by continuously asking for feedback. His use of humor to relieve tension and his commitment to providing constructive feedback further demonstrated his dedication to supporting students. In an EFL context, this approach not only helps students feel comfortable with the language but also fosters a sense of community and mutual respect, which is essential for language development.

Moreover, Teacher 4 introduced an essential perspective on recognizing the limits of individual support. He stated, "If the situation is particularly serious... I involve school consultants or administrators." This highlighted the importance of collaboration and seeking additional resources when needed, which is often critical in EFL classrooms where students may face unique challenges related to language barriers. His willingness to engage with outside support systems illustrated a commitment to student welfare that extended beyond the classroom. By prioritizing students' safety and emotional well-being, he modeled a proactive approach that reassured students they were not alone in facing challenges. This recognition of the need for a broader support network reflected a deeper understanding of the complexities of student needs and the responsibility educators hold in facilitating a safe learning environment.

Classroom Observation

The classroom observations revealed that support—both emotional and academic—played a crucial role in fostering a safe and engaging classroom atmosphere. Across different subjects and grade levels, the effective use of supportive strategies significantly influenced students' perceptions of safety and their willingness to participate actively. In many classrooms, students

reported feeling secure and comfortable, largely due to the supportive interactions with their teachers.

For example, in the 11th-grade English class, the student teacher's efforts to engage in informal conversations before the lesson established rapport and trust. This connection made students feel valued, which is vital for their emotional safety and confidence in using English in an EFL context. The teacher's approach helped students feel comfortable in expressing their thoughts, laying a strong foundation for language learning.

Similarly, in the 6th-grade literature class, the students' affectionate greetings towards their teacher reflected a strong sense of support and belonging. Teachers demonstrated a commitment to creating a supportive environment through their actions and communication. The student teacher built a safe space by facilitating open dialogue and encouraging students to express their thoughts without fear of judgment. This is particularly important in an EFL setting, where students' language skills can vary, and they need encouragement to communicate without fear of making mistakes.

In another instance, the teacher employed a balanced approach, combining strictness with personalized attention, thereby showing care for each student while maintaining classroom order. This balance is crucial in an EFL setting, where students often need structure to feel comfortable and confident in their language use. Supportive communication was evident in the consistent use of respectful language. Teachers employed polite phrases such as "please" and "thank you," setting a standard for interactions and fostering a courteous classroom culture. This respectful tone not only encouraged good manners among students but also reinforced their sense of safety and belonging, which is essential for language learners to thrive.

Feedback was a critical component of the supportive atmosphere observed in the classrooms. In the 11th-grade English class, the student teacher provided continuous feedback that included verbal praise and motivational rewards, which kept students engaged and motivated. This form of support was crucial in helping students feel recognized for their efforts, particularly in an EFL classroom where feedback is essential for language development. In other settings, constructive criticism was framed positively, allowing students to learn and grow without fear of embarrassment, thereby enhancing their confidence and willingness to participate.

The findings demonstrated how encouraging teaching strategies affect student engagement. In the 7th-grade history class, group work encouraged collaboration and

allowed the teacher to provide individualized support, fostering a sense of responsibility among students. The environment was structured in such a way that students felt empowered to take risks in their learning, especially in language acquisition. However, in the 8th-grade physics class, while some students were disengaged, the teacher's attempts to create a supportive environment through structured activities faced challenges due to classroom management issues.

Limitations and Possibilities for Further Research

The study was conducted with a limited number of participants, as the interviews involved five teachers and five students. This small sample size restricts the generalizability of the findings. Future research should include a larger and more diverse group of participants from different educational settings and demographic backgrounds to gain a more comprehensive understanding of safe classroom communication practices. The classroom observations were limited to only ten lessons in a single school. This narrow scope may not fully capture the variability and nuances of classroom interactions across different grade levels, and teaching styles. Additional observations in varied contexts are needed to validate the findings. While semi-structured interviews allow for in-depth insights, they may not provide an entirely objective view of the classroom dynamics. Employing mixed methods, including quantitative measures, could enhance the reliability of the data. The research was conducted within a short time frame. Classroom environments and communication practices can evolve over time, influenced by various factors such as changing student dynamics and external events. Longitudinal studies are needed to understand how safe classroom communication practices develop and sustain over longer periods.

Another direction, instead of extending our scope, would be to narrow our focus. We have received valuable feedback that focusing on practical specifics and coming up with applicable pedagogy implications would be beneficial for our target readers: busy in-service teachers. Coming up with more specific research and interview questions for educational professionals, utilizing our conclusions from this study, could help us create a manual our colleagues would feel comfortable reaching for.

Conclusion

In conclusion, fostering safe classroom communication is pivotal for creating an inclusive educational experience. Both students and teachers recognize the importance of respectful, empathetic, and effective communication in creating a positive classroom atmosphere.

The three key elements, which are all intertwined with each other were strictness, mutual respect, and polite language use, and support. According to both the teachers' and the students' experiences teachers mainly don't appear as strict individuals although they have mentioned a few counterexamples where some teachers' only personality and professional traits were being rigid and representing a passive-aggressive teaching and communication style. In EFL classrooms strictness can be paired with support to create a fostering environment, because strictness in itself can hinder communication because students already feel vulnerable, but paired with a supportive environment that can help maintain discipline while encouraging engagement.

Most teachers strive to develop and maintain mutual respect with the learners; however, the students' experiences were mainly negative, and they felt overlooked by their educators. The consistent use of polite language in the classroom significantly contributes to a supportive and respectful educational atmosphere. Both student and teacher interviews, along with classroom observations, reveal that polite communication fosters a sense of safety and belonging, encouraging students to engage more fully in their learning. It is especially crucial in EFL classrooms, where anxiety levels are already extremely high, therefore mutual respect and polite language use is inevitable to create and foster a classroom environment where students feel less anxious. This highlights the essential role of respectful interactions in cultivating a positive classroom culture.

Furthermore, the support provided by teachers through respectful dialogue, understanding, and empathy is crucial for creating a positive classroom environment. This collaborative approach not only enhances classroom management but also empowers students to feel valued and heard, ultimately contributing to a more engaged and secure learning experience for all.

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