

Euphemistic Expressions in EFL Classrooms: Teacher Strategies in Instructional Communication



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ABSTRACT

Euphemistic expressions play a significant role in educational discourse, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms where cultural sensitivity and affective support are central to learning. This study investigates how English teachers in Indonesia strategically use euphemism to manage classroom interaction and provide feedback without threatening students' self-esteem. A qualitative descriptive design was employed, focusing on two secondary school English teachers in South Sulawesi. Data were collected through non-participant classroom observations, with detailed field notes capturing authentic teacher-student exchanges, and were validated through post-lesson clarification. Thematic analysis revealed seven recurrent categories of euphemistic strategies: politeness markers, softening language, downplaying language, indirect requests, minimization of errors, correction with positive feedback, and reassurance. These strategies were not merely linguistic substitutions but pedagogical tools for fostering respectful communication, reducing anxiety, and sustaining learner engagement. Findings suggest that euphemism contributes to the affective dimension of language pedagogy by aligning instructional clarity with socio-cultural expectations of respect and harmony. The study highlights the importance of integrating euphemistic strategies into teacher education and professional development. While limited in scope, it provides a foundation for further research on the pragmatic and pedagogical functions of euphemism in EFL contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a neutral vehicle for communication but a socially situated practice shaped by cultural, ideological, and pedagogical contexts. In classrooms, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, the teacher's language use extends beyond conveying knowledge to regulating interaction, fostering inclusivity, and managing student affect. Among the many pragmatic

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strategies employed, euphemistic expressions occupy a central place. Euphemism refers to the substitution of direct, blunt, or potentially face-threatening expressions with more acceptable alternatives (Alghazo, Bekaddour, Jarrah, & Hammouri, 2021). In educational discourse, euphemism functions as a pedagogical resource that enables teachers to correct, discipline, or instruct without undermining students' self-esteem. Such practices are essential in environments where cultural norms of politeness and respect strongly influence classroom interaction.

The importance of euphemistic communication in teaching is best understood through the lens of politeness theory. Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that politeness strategies are used to protect the interlocutor's "face" needs: positive face (the desire for approval) and negative face (the need for autonomy). Euphemistic expressions help teachers balance these dimensions, allowing them to issue directives or corrective feedback in ways that safeguard learner dignity. For example, a teacher might say, "Could you please review this section?" rather than the more direct "Rewrite this part." In this way, euphemism aligns instructional clarity with socio-emotional support. Such strategies resonate with communicative language teaching principles, which emphasize that effective learning requires both interactional authenticity and affective engagement (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

The pedagogical functions of euphemism have been noted across cultural contexts. In American high schools, Gu (2010) found that euphemisms facilitated discussions of sensitive topics, such as death or illness, by reducing student discomfort. In Chinese EFL settings, Lee (2020) observed that euphemistic strategies promoted intercultural awareness by revealing cultural values embedded in the target language. Similarly, research in the United Kingdom showed that euphemisms helped teachers in multicultural classrooms avoid miscommunication and build inclusivity (Al-Jabri, Allawzi, & Abushmaes, 2021). In Egypt, Samha, Haider, and Hussein (2023) reported that teachers trained in euphemistic strategies were better able to present content on sensitive moral and social issues. More recently, Llorca and Mocanu (2024) demonstrated that Spanish teachers' use of euphemisms reduced anxiety and encouraged student participation. Together, these findings highlight that euphemism is not a superficial linguistic adjustment but a communicative strategy with significant pedagogical value.

Despite this global recognition, the study of euphemism in Southeast Asian EFL contexts remains limited. Most scholarship has focused on Western or East Asian educational settings (Hojati, 2012; Khodashenas & Karimnia, 2016; Alghazo et al., 2021), leaving Indonesian classrooms underexplored. This lack of research is striking given the cultural importance of politeness in Indonesia, where educational discourse is deeply shaped by communal values of respect and harmony (Haryanto, Weda, & Nashruddin, 2018). Teachers are expected not only to deliver linguistic content but also to embody cultural models of courteous interaction. However, applying euphemism in practice is not always straightforward. Teachers often face pressures such as heavy workloads, rigid curricula, or insufficient professional training, which may limit their ability to consistently employ euphemistic strategies (Steer, Betts, Baguley, & Binder, 2020). This tension between cultural expectations and classroom realities raises an important question: how do Indonesian teachers actually integrate euphemism into their everyday classroom discourse?

Scholars have also cautioned that euphemism, if misapplied, can obscure clarity or generate misunderstanding. Chovanec (2019) argues that euphemisms may create communication gaps if they are too indirect, particularly when students lack the pragmatic competence to interpret softened language. Likewise, Al-Ramahi, Ab Rashid, Al-Smadi, and Ismail (2021) highlight the risk of excessive mitigation, which may lead learners to underestimate the seriousness of errors. Thus, while euphemism has clear affective and relational benefits, it must be deployed carefully to ensure pedagogical effectiveness. For this reason, empirical studies situated in local classroom contexts are needed to show how euphemism is adapted to cultural and linguistic realities.

Indonesia offers a particularly compelling site for such inquiry. As a multilingual and multicultural nation, it provides a rich environment where global English norms intersect with local communicative traditions. In South Sulawesi, for example, English teachers must navigate between institutional requirements for clarity and students' expectations of politeness rooted in local culture.

Their use of euphemistic expressions reflects not only pragmatic sensitivity but also an attempt to negotiate cultural values within instructional communication. Investigating how euphemism functions in such contexts can illuminate both the opportunities and challenges of aligning language pedagogy with socio-cultural norms.

Beyond its immediate classroom utility, euphemism has broader implications for EFL pedagogy. By exposing learners to softened language, teachers introduce them to pragmatic aspects of English that extend beyond grammar and vocabulary. Such exposure develops learners' pragmatic competence, enabling them to use language in socially appropriate ways. Euphemism also contributes to the affective dimension of learning by reducing anxiety, encouraging participation, and motivating students to take risks in speaking or writing. Llorca and Mocanu (2024) note that reassurance and softened feedback are particularly effective in fostering resilience among language learners. In Indonesian classrooms, where learners may hesitate to speak for fear of making mistakes, euphemism thus becomes an essential tool for building confidence and sustaining engagement.

Nevertheless, the limited body of research on Indonesian classrooms underscores the need for empirical investigation. Previous studies on euphemism have concentrated on media discourse (Hojati, 2012), intercultural communication (Al-Jabri et al., 2021), or linguistic change (Halmari, 2011), with relatively few examining classroom practices in Southeast Asia. Consequently, little is known about the specific euphemistic strategies used by Indonesian teachers, their pedagogical functions, and their effects on student response. This underrepresentation calls for context-sensitive studies that can inform both theory and practice.

The present study investigates the use of euphemistic expressions in Indonesian secondary school classrooms. Focusing on English teachers in South Sulawesi, it aims to identify the types of euphemistic strategies employed, explore their pedagogical functions, and assess their role in shaping teacher–student interaction. By situating euphemism within the socio-cultural and educational realities of Indonesia, the study seeks to contribute to broader discussions on classroom discourse, politeness, and EFL pedagogy. Ultimately, it underscores the pedagogical value of euphemism as a means of balancing instructional clarity with affective support, offering insights for both teacher training and language education research.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with a particular emphasis on classroom observation of teacher–student interaction. This design was considered appropriate because it allowed the researchers to capture authentic, context-rich language use as it naturally occurred, rather than through contrived or experimental tasks. A descriptive qualitative approach is especially suitable for the study of classroom discourse, as it facilitates detailed description and interpretation of teachers' linguistic choices within their social and pedagogical settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By prioritizing ecological validity, the study documented how euphemistic expressions emerged in real-time classroom interaction and how they functioned as pragmatic and pedagogical resources.

Research Subjects

The participants were two English teachers from a public junior high school in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Both had more than five years of teaching experience and regularly taught English to Grades VII and VIII. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained after the teachers had been fully briefed about the purpose of the study. The school also granted formal approval for the observations. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to the participants and all potentially identifying information about teachers or students was removed.

Data Collection

Data were collected through non-participant classroom observations to capture teacher–student interactions in authentic contexts. Observations were conducted across multiple sessions, encompassing different stages of instruction, including lesson openings, core activities, and closings. The researcher positioned themselves unobtrusively at the side or back of the classroom in order to minimize disruption and to preserve the natural dynamics of teaching and learning.

To guide the process, an observation protocol was prepared in advance. This protocol included categories for documenting the timing and situational triggers of euphemistic expressions—for example, when teachers issued instructions, corrected errors, or managed classroom transitions. It also provided space for recording verbatim or near-verbatim utterances, the euphemistic strategies identified (e.g., politeness markers, softening language), and the immediate student responses such as compliance, repair, or uptake.

Field notes were written during the lesson and expanded immediately afterward to include contextual details. These elaborations captured paralinguistic features such as tone, intonation, and gesture, which often carried meaning alongside verbal messages. To preserve the natural classroom atmosphere, no audio or video recordings were made. Following each lesson, informal checks with teachers were conducted. Selected excerpts from the field notes were shared in brief discussions, enabling teachers to clarify their intended meaning and pedagogical purpose. This stimulated-recall procedure helped confirm the accuracy of the researcher’s interpretations and enhanced the credibility of the data.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed thematically. First, classroom notes and post-lesson confirmations were compiled into extended observation records. Instances of euphemistic language were highlighted, coded, and grouped into preliminary categories. While the coding was initially guided by existing frameworks on mitigation and politeness (Locher & Watts, 2005; Hyland & Hyland, 2001), the categories were refined inductively based on the classroom data. Seven themes emerged from the analysis: (1) politeness markers, (2) softening language, (3) downplaying language, (4) indirect requests, (5) minimization of errors, (6) correction with positive feedback, and (7) reassurance. Within each theme, examples were compared across different phases of the lesson to identify their recurring functions and pedagogical purposes.

To enhance credibility, triangulation was achieved by observing multiple lessons from each teacher, while member-checking was conducted through the post-lesson discussions. Analytic memos were written after each observation to document interpretive insights and evolving reflections. Rather than simply cataloguing euphemistic forms, the analysis aimed to explain their interactional value—how they mediated classroom communication, supported student affect, and fostered engagement in learning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The section presents the findings and discussion that revealed seven types of euphemistic expressions commonly employed by English teachers during instructional practice. These expressions were systematically categorised into themes that illustrate how euphemisms function as pragmatic tools to soften communication, manage classroom dynamics, and foster positive student–teacher relationships. To better visualise the data, Table 1 summarises each type of euphemistic expression, its definition based on theoretical perspectives, and examples drawn from classroom contexts. The following discussion elaborates on each theme, linking observational evidence with relevant literature to highlight pedagogical implications.

Table 1. *Types of Euphemistic Expressions in English Language Teaching*

Euphemistic Expression	Definition	Examples of Use in Teaching
Politeness Markers	Expressions that use politeness strategies such as “please,” modal verbs, or interrogatives to mitigate the force of requests and maintain harmonious classroom interaction (Locher & Watts, 2005).	“Could you please pass me the worksheet?” (instead of “Give me the worksheet.”)
Softening Language	Use of hedges, modal verbs, or tentative phrasing to reduce the perceived severity of feedback or criticism, making it less face-threatening (Hyland & Hyland, 2001).	“It might be a good idea to revise this section.” (instead of “You need to improve this section.”)
Downplaying Language	Minimising the seriousness of an issue by using diminutives or understatement, often to preserve student self-esteem.	“This essay could use a little more development.” (instead of “This essay lacks depth.”)
Indirect Requests	Requests phrased conditionally or as suggestions rather than commands, allowing students to retain a sense of agency.	“If you have a moment, could you complete this exercise?” (instead of “Complete this exercise.”)
Minimisation of Errors	Referring to mistakes as “small” or “few” to reduce their negative impact and encourage constructive correction.	“There are a few minor mistakes in your assignment.” (instead of “Your assignment has several errors.”)
Correction with Positive Feedback	A “feedback sandwich” combining praise with correction to motivate improvement without discouragement (Hyland & Hyland, 2001).	“You’ve made a good attempt, but let’s refine this sentence.” (instead of “This sentence is incorrect, let’s fix it.”)
Reassurance	Normalising difficulty and offering emotional support to reduce anxiety and encourage persistence in learning (He, 2018).	“It’s understandable that you find this concept challenging.” (instead of “You’re struggling with this concept.”)

Table 1 illustrates several types of euphemistic expressions commonly used by the English language teachers in junior high school classrooms. The data indicate that teachers deliberately employed euphemisms to maintain positive relationships with students, by alleviating tensions and delivering feedback in a more sensitive and supportive manner. For example, rather than bluntly pointing out that an essay “lacks depth,” the teacher instead stated, “This essay could use a little more development.” Such linguistic choices reduced the emotional weight of criticism while still conveying the intended instructional message. Similarly, when addressing mistakes, teachers often minimised the severity by using phrases like “a few minor errors” instead of explicitly highlighting multiple problems. These practices enabled students to focus on improvement without feeling discouraged, thereby striking a balance between instructional clarity and emotional sensitivity.

Beyond their role in feedback, euphemistic expressions also proved essential to learning instructions, classroom management, and the creation of a cooperative atmosphere. Teachers frequently used politeness markers and indirect requests, such as “Could you please pass me the worksheet?” instead of issuing direct commands. This not only ensured compliance but also reinforced norms of courtesy and respect within the learning environment. Moreover, reassurance phrases such as “It’s understandable that you find this concept challenging” helped to reduce student anxiety during demanding tasks. These findings collectively suggest that euphemism serves as a pedagogical tool that goes beyond politeness, it enables teachers to manage classrooms effectively, foster rapport with learners, and encourage persistence. Euphemistic language thus emerged as a vital resource for balancing instructional demands with the affective well-being of students.

Politeness Markers: Framing Requests as Respectful Interaction

One of the most salient features in the data is the use of frequent politeness markers by the teachers such as *please*, *could you*, or *would you mind*. Instead of issuing direct commands, teachers softened their requests by framing them as polite interactions with the teachers showing respect and engaged communication between them. For example, “Could you please pass me the worksheet?” replaced the more direct “Give me the worksheet.” This strategy aligns with Locher and Watts’ (2005) concept of relational work, in which politeness contributes to maintaining harmony and respect. In classroom settings, such markers both regulate student behavior and model courteous communication by the teachers (positioning themselves as the role model in proper communication). Fitriyani and Andriyanti (2020) similarly observed that politeness strategies in EFL classrooms foster voluntary compliance and encourage learners to mirror respectful discourse. In the Indonesian EFL context, where cultural norms emphasize respect for teachers, the use of politeness markers not only supports classroom management but also reinforces socio-cultural expectations of deference and mutual respect (Haryanto et al., 2018).

Softening Language: Reducing the Harshness of Criticism

Teachers also used hedges and tentative phrasing to soften critical feedback, as in “It might be a good idea to revise this section,” instead of bluntly commanding revisions to the students. Hyland and Hyland (2001) note that softening strategies reduce the face-threatening force of teacher feedback, allowing students to perceive critique as supportive advice rather than evaluation; this is a constructive feedback that is beneficial for the students for the next tasks. Nguyen (2005) adds that hedging invites student cooperation by mitigating potential defensiveness. In the EFL settings, where students often lack confidence in their language abilities due to linguistic constraints, softened feedback is particularly effective in encouraging persistence. Research by Lee (2020) further confirms that indirectness and hedging in Asian classrooms align with cultural communication styles, making them pragmatically appropriate strategies for maintaining rapport while achieving instructional clarity.

Downplaying Language: Minimising the Weight of Errors

Another strategy identified was the use of downplaying language to reduce the perceived seriousness toward student’s mistakes. Teachers often described such shortcomings as “a little more development needed” rather than stating “this essay lacks depth.” Halmari (2011) argues that the euphemism serves to cushion negative evaluations, particularly in institutional settings where authority figures seek to preserve positive relationships. By downplaying errors, teachers instead encourage students to approach revision as manageable rather than overwhelming. However, scholars such as Al-Ramahi et al (2021) caution that excessive use of euphemism can obscure the clarity of feedback, potentially leading to misunderstanding. Thus, while downplaying helps sustain student motivation, it must be paired with specific guidance to ensure learning objectives remain clear.

Indirect Requests: Preserving Student Autonomy

Teachers who frequently used indirect requests to guide classroom activities, for example: “If you have a moment, could you complete this exercise?” intend to avoid imposing immediate authority and instead offers students a sense of choice. According to Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory, indirectness protects the interlocutor’s “negative face” or autonomy. In classroom practice, indirect requests allow teachers to maintain authority while fostering an atmosphere of respect. Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) demonstrated in cross-cultural pragmatics research that indirectness is widely valued in educational discourse as a sign of tact. In Indonesian classrooms, where hierarchical respect and cooperative learning must coexist, indirect requests offer a culturally appropriate balance of authority and learner agency (Nugroho and Rekha, 2020).

Minimisation of Errors: Encouraging Engagement with Feedback

Minimising errors through expressions like “a few minor mistakes” was another common euphemistic practice. By framing errors as small and easily correctable, teachers reduced the potential damage to student self-esteem. It is believed that such strategies are central to maintaining a supportive classroom atmosphere, particularly in foreign language learning where error-making is inevitable. Lyster and Ranta (1997) found that corrective feedback phrased in supportive terms increases learner uptake and engagement. This study reinforces those insights: minimisation served to preserve student motivation while keeping attention on necessary improvements. Still, teachers must be cautious not to understate persistent errors, as doing so may limit learners’ awareness of recurring issues that require targeted instruction.

Correction with Positive Feedback: Balancing Critique and Praise

A significant pattern was the pairing of correction with praise, often referred to as the “feedback sandwich.” For example: “You’ve made a good attempt, but let’s refine this sentence.” Hyland and Hyland (2001) emphasise that combining praise with critique makes feedback more palatable and enhances learner receptivity. Empirical evidence from Lyster and Ranta (1997) shows that students are more likely to engage with corrective feedback when it is paired with positive reinforcement. In Indonesian EFL classrooms, where learners may be particularly cautious about making mistakes publicly, this strategy not only improves linguistic accuracy but also builds learner confidence. Such feedback styles affirm student effort while guiding them toward higher standards of performance.

Reassurance: Normalising Struggle and Promoting Resilience

Finally, teachers used reassurance to normalise the challenges of language learning, with utterances like “It’s understandable that you find this concept challenging.” He (2018) shows that reassurance is a politeness strategy that protects learners’ positive face, strengthening rapport and reducing anxiety. Similarly, Dweck’s (2006) growth mindset framework underlines the importance of framing difficulty as part of the learning journey, thereby motivating learners to persist. In this study, reassurance served to validate students’ experiences while encouraging them to persevere despite linguistic hurdles. Such strategies are crucial in the Indonesian EFL context, where learners may experience heightened anxiety due to limited proficiency or fear of negative evaluation.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the important pedagogical role of euphemism in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, particularly in contexts where cultural traditions emphasize respect, politeness, and social harmony, such as Southeast Asia. The observed use of euphemistic expressions demonstrates how teachers strategically balance instructional clarity with sensitivity to learners’ emotional and cultural needs. By employing markers such as politeness strategies, hedges, downplaying, and reassurance, teachers were able to provide critical feedback while minimizing face threats and sustaining student engagement. This aligns with Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness

theory, which suggests that linguistic mitigation strategies protect learners' positive and negative face, thereby preserving rapport and facilitating cooperation in classroom interactions.

From a pedagogical perspective, the results suggest that euphemism is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a teaching resource that enhances the affective dimension of learning. The ability to deliver critique without discouraging learners is particularly important in EFL settings where students often struggle with self-confidence and may be hesitant to participate actively. Previous studies, such as those by Hyland and Hyland (2001) and Lyster and Ranta (1997), similarly note that softened feedback increases learner uptake and reduces resistance to correction. The findings of the present study reinforce these claims within the Indonesian context, showing that euphemism can transform potentially face-threatening feedback into constructive guidance that motivates students to persist.

At the same time, the study also draws attention to the cultural embeddedness of euphemistic practices. While euphemism has been widely documented across global contexts (Gu, 2010; Lee, 2020; Al-Jabri, Allawzi, & Abushmaes, 2021), its pragmatic value varies according to cultural expectations. In Indonesia, as in many Southeast Asian societies, politeness is not only a communicative preference but also a deeply ingrained cultural norm. Teachers' use of euphemism thus reflects broader socio-cultural obligations to maintain respect and harmony. This contrasts with more individualistic societies, where directness may be perceived as more efficient or even desirable. By situating euphemism within Indonesia's educational culture, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how classroom discourse is shaped by the interplay of language, pedagogy, and cultural values.

The implications for teacher education are considerable. Professional development programs could integrate explicit training on pragmatic strategies, including euphemism, to better prepare teachers for managing the affective and relational dimensions of classroom communication. Such training would not only enhance teachers' feedback practices but also enrich students' exposure to pragmatically appropriate English. In doing so, teacher education could bridge the gap between linguistic competence and pragmatic competence, equipping learners with the skills necessary to navigate sensitive interactions in English.

For researchers, the study opens several avenues for further inquiry. First, while this study focused on teachers' use of euphemism, future research could explore how students perceive and respond to euphemistic strategies, particularly in terms of their effects on motivation, anxiety, and uptake of feedback. Second, comparative studies across different cultural or institutional contexts could reveal how euphemism is adapted to varying pedagogical traditions. Finally, longitudinal research might examine whether sustained exposure to euphemistic strategies fosters long-term gains in learners' pragmatic competence and communicative confidence.

Euphemism emerges from this study as a powerful resource for balancing instructional clarity with affective support. It provides teachers with a means to foster respectful, inclusive, and effective classroom environments while also modeling pragmatic features of English. By situating euphemism within both pedagogical and cultural frameworks, this study contributes to the growing recognition of pragmatics as a vital component of language education.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the use of euphemistic expressions in English language teaching at a junior high school in Indonesia and its implication in the EFL countries. Classroom observations revealed seven recurring strategies, i.e. politeness markers, softening language, downplaying, indirect requests, minimisation of errors, correction with positive feedback, and reassurance. Each strategy served to soften communication, preserve students' self-esteem, and sustain a supportive learning environment. Rather than relying on direct or potentially face-threatening language, teachers strategically employed euphemisms to provide constructive feedback, manage classroom interactions, and motivate learners

to persist in challenging tasks. These findings confirm that euphemism is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a pedagogical tool with both cognitive and affective dimensions.

The pedagogical implications are substantial. Incorporating euphemistic strategies into teacher education and professional development can enhance classroom communication, particularly in contexts where cultural values emphasise respect and harmony. By modelling positive discourse, teachers can build rapport while ensuring that instructional goals remain clear. For researchers, this study underscores the need to examine euphemism within broader classroom discourse, linking its use to outcomes such as learner uptake, participation, and long-term motivation. Comparative studies across different cultural or institutional contexts would further enrich our understanding of how euphemism operates as a communicative strategy in education.

Nevertheless, the study is not without limitations. The findings are based on observations of two teachers in one school, which limits the generalisability of results. Future research could expand the scope to include diverse settings, triangulate classroom observation with interviews or student perspectives, and employ discourse analysis to examine subtler patterns of euphemism. Longitudinal studies could also investigate how sustained use of euphemistic strategies influences learner outcomes over time. Despite these limitations, this research highlights the crucial role euphemism plays in balancing instructional clarity with affective support, offering valuable insights for both language pedagogy and educational discourse studies.

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