



## **Exploring the Dynamics of Teacher-Student Relationships in Vietnamese Higher Education: A Qualitative Study of EFL Teachers' Relational Tools**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study investigates the relational tools used by Vietnamese EFL teachers in higher education, a critical yet underexplored aspect in the field of language education. Focusing on the perspectives of nine Vietnamese EFL teachers from two institutions, representing various career stages (novice, mid-career, and near-end), this research provides in-depth insights into the strategies employed to build and maintain effective teacher-student relationships. Employing semi-structured interviews, the study revealed three key themes: building rapport through personalized learning, nurturing a supportive classroom environment, and emphasis on empathy and understanding. These themes highlight the importance of tailoring teaching to individual student needs, creating inclusive and supportive classroom atmospheres, and employing empathy in understanding student challenges. The findings underscore the role of relational pedagogy and sociocultural theory in enhancing the effectiveness of EFL teaching and learning. The study also sheds light on the unique context of Vietnamese higher education, where cultural nuances play a significant role in the dynamics of language education. This study contributes to the broader discourse on EFL teaching methodologies, emphasizing the critical role of teacher-student relationships in successful language acquisition.

**Keywords:** *Qualitative Study, Dynamics of Teacher-Student Relationships, EFL Teachers, Relational Tools, Higher Education*



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### **INTRODUCTION**

In the evolving landscape of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, the role of teacher-student relationships has garnered increasing attention, particularly in the context of higher education (e.g., Ma et al., 2018; Vattøy & Gamlem, 2020). This study focuses on the Vietnamese higher education sector, exploring the relational tools employed by EFL teachers. The significance of this research lies in its setting—Vietnam, a country where EFL education is pivotal yet understudied in terms of the interpersonal dynamics within the classroom.

Language acquisition is not merely a cognitive process but also a social one, where the interaction between teachers and students plays a crucial role. In the field of EFL, the

importance of these interactions is amplified due to the nature of language as a tool for communication (Sundari, 2017). The teacher-student relationship in this context is not just a conduit for knowledge but also a medium through which the language is experienced, practiced, and internalized.

Vietnamese higher education has seen a rapid expansion in EFL programs in response to globalization and the growing need for English proficiency in professional domains (Tran & Tanemura, 2020). However, the pedagogical strategies, especially those concerning relational tools utilized by educators in this context, remain under-examined. This gap in research is particularly evident in the lack of qualitative studies that offer an in-depth understanding of how Vietnamese EFL teachers build and maintain relationships with their students, and how these relationships impact learning outcomes.

The present study aims to fill this gap by providing a qualitative analysis of the relational tools used by Vietnamese EFL teachers in higher education. It draws on the perspectives of the teachers themselves, offering insights into their strategies, challenges, and experiences in fostering effective teacher-student relationships. Through in-depth interviews, this research seeks to uncover the nuanced ways in which these educators navigate the interpersonal aspects of EFL teaching. This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What relational tools do Vietnamese EFL teachers in higher education use to build and maintain relationships with their students?
2. How do these relational tools vary across different stages of teachers' professional careers (novice, mid-career, and near-end)?
3. In what ways do these relational tools influence classroom dynamics and student engagement in the EFL context?

Understanding these relational tools is critical, as they can significantly influence student motivation, engagement, and ultimately, language proficiency. Moreover, this study contributes to the broader discourse on EFL teaching methodologies, highlighting the importance of the socio-emotional dimensions of language teaching, especially in a culturally unique context like Vietnam. By shedding light on these aspects, this research not only adds to the academic understanding of EFL teaching in Vietnamese higher education but also provides practical insights for educators and policymakers seeking to enhance the effectiveness of language education in similar contexts.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Teacher-Student Relationships in EFL Education**

The dynamics of teacher-student relationships have been extensively studied across various educational contexts. Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) emphasized that in language education, these relationships transcend traditional pedagogical boundaries, becoming a cornerstone for effective learning. Dincer et al. (2019) highlighted that the relational aspect in EFL classrooms significantly influences student motivation and engagement, which are critical factors in language acquisition. Moreover, Martin and Rimm-Kaufman (2015) suggested that positive teacher-student relationships are linked to higher levels of student self-efficacy in language learning.

### **EFL Teaching in Vietnamese Higher Education**

In the Vietnamese context, English language education has undergone substantial transformations. Thao and Mai (2020) provided a comprehensive overview of the policy changes driving the current emphasis on English proficiency in Vietnam. However, there is a notable gap in research regarding the interpersonal dynamics in Vietnamese EFL classrooms.

Studies by Bui et al. (2022) and Ho (2011) have begun to explore this area, but primarily focus on pedagogical strategies and curriculum design, rather than the relational aspects of teaching.

### **Relational Tools in Language Teaching**

The concept of relational tools in language teaching is relatively nascent. Riley (2010) defined relational tools as the strategies and practices teachers employ to build and maintain relationships with students. These tools can range from communicative techniques to emotional support mechanisms. In the EFL context, Soutter and Clark (2023) argued that such tools are vital for creating an environment conducive to language practice and risk-taking. Furthermore, Hollie (2017) illustrated how relational tools can bridge cultural and linguistic barriers in the classroom, enhancing the overall effectiveness of language education. However, there is a lack of literature specifically examining the use of relational tools in Vietnamese higher education settings. This study, therefore, seeks to contribute to the field by providing a detailed exploration of how Vietnamese EFL teachers employ relational tools, and how these tools impact the teaching and learning process.

The existing literature establishes the significance of teacher-student relationships in EFL education and the evolving landscape of English teaching in Vietnam. However, there is a clear gap in understanding how Vietnamese EFL teachers in higher education use relational tools to enhance teaching and learning. This study aims to fill this gap, offering valuable insights into the interpersonal dynamics of EFL classrooms in Vietnamese higher education and contributing to the broader discourse on effective language teaching strategies.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

The methodology for this study is rooted in a qualitative research design, specifically focusing on the use of semi-structured interviews to gather rich, detailed data about the relational tools used by Vietnamese EFL teachers in higher education. This approach is chosen for its ability to provide depth and nuance, allowing for an exploration of the participants' experiences, perceptions, and practices in their own words.

Central to this study's design is the constructivist paradigm, which posits that reality is socially constructed through individual or collective experiences (Kamal, 2019). This paradigm is particularly suited to exploring the complex, subjective nature of teacher-student relationships in the educational context. By adopting a constructivist lens, this research acknowledges that the relational tools and strategies employed by teachers are shaped by their personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and the specific contexts in which they teach.

The theoretical frameworks underpinning this study are drawn from sociocultural theory and the concept of relational pedagogy. Sociocultural theory, as articulated by Vygotsky (1978), underscores the importance of social interaction in learning and development. It provides a foundation for understanding how teacher-student relationships can facilitate the language learning process in an EFL context. Relational pedagogy, on the other hand, focuses on the significance of relationships in teaching and learning, emphasizing the role of empathy, respect, and connection in educational settings (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). This framework aids in conceptualizing the various relational tools teachers use and how they impact student engagement and learning outcomes.

### **Participants**

The participant pool for this study comprised nine Vietnamese EFL teachers, representing a diverse cross-section of teaching experiences within the higher education system in Vietnam. These participants were purposively selected from two distinct educational institutions,

ensuring a mix of urban and rural settings to capture a broader range of teaching contexts. The selection was strategically designed to include three groups of teachers, each representing different career stages: three novice teachers (with less than five years of teaching experience), three mid-career teachers (with 5 to 15 years of experience), and three near-end career teachers (with over 15 years of experience). This stratification was intended to explore how relational tools and strategies might evolve or differ across various stages of a teaching career.

In considering the ethical issues pertinent to this study, several measures were put in place to uphold the principles of respect, confidentiality, and informed consent. Firstly, all participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, nature, and procedures. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, ensuring that they were willingly participating and understood the scope of their involvement.

Confidentiality was a paramount concern, given the personal and potentially sensitive nature of the information shared during the interviews. To address this, all participants were assured that their identities would be anonymized in any published reports or presentations of the research. Names and any identifying details were replaced with pseudonyms or general descriptors to protect their privacy.

Additionally, the potential for power dynamics, especially given the varying levels of experience among the teachers, was acknowledged and carefully navigated. Efforts were made to create an open and non-judgmental interview environment, where all participants felt equally valued and comfortable sharing their experiences.

### **Data Collection**

The primary method of data collection in this study was through semi-structured interviews, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the relational tools used by Vietnamese EFL teachers in higher education. Prior to the main data collection phase, a pilot study was conducted with two EFL teachers who did not participate in the main study. The purpose of the pilot study was to test the interview questions for clarity, relevance, and flow. Feedback from this preliminary phase led to several revisions of the interview questions to ensure they effectively elicited detailed and meaningful responses relevant to the research objectives.

The revised interview questions included inquiries such as, "Can you describe the strategies you use to build rapport with your students?" and "How do you think your approach to student relationships has evolved throughout your teaching career?" These questions, along with others, were designed to prompt reflection and discussion about the teachers' practices, experiences, and perceptions regarding the relational aspects of their teaching.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, providing ample time for participants to elaborate on their experiences and insights. The interviews were conducted in settings where the participants felt most comfortable, primarily in their offices or quiet meeting rooms within their respective institutions. This choice of location was intended to ensure privacy and a relaxed atmosphere, conducive to open and honest communication.

Considering the linguistic and cultural context of the study, all interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. This decision was made to allow participants to express themselves more naturally and comfortably, ensuring that nuances and subtleties in their responses were not lost in translation. For participants who were more comfortable expressing certain pedagogical concepts in English, the option to switch languages was available. This bilingual approach ensured that participants could fully articulate their thoughts and experiences without language barriers.

The data collected from these interviews provided rich, qualitative insights into the relational tools and strategies employed by Vietnamese EFL teachers in higher education. The

diversity in participants' experiences and the depth of the conversations facilitated by the semi-structured format contributed significantly to the comprehensiveness and relevance of the findings.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis for this study was conducted using thematic analysis, a method particularly suited for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). This approach allowed for a flexible and nuanced interpretation of the complex data set derived from the semi-structured interviews with Vietnamese EFL teachers. The process began with a thorough transcription of the interview recordings, translating them from Vietnamese to English where necessary while ensuring the accuracy and authenticity of the translations.

Following transcription, the data were read and reread to gain a deep familiarity with the content. This initial immersion phase was crucial for developing an intuitive understanding of the data and for beginning to identify preliminary patterns. The next step involved systematically coding the data, a process where segments of the text were labeled with codes that succinctly summarized and categorized the core idea of that segment. This coding was done iteratively, with codes being continuously refined, combined, or split as the analysis progressed.

Once a comprehensive set of codes was established, the analysis moved towards identifying broader themes that captured the essence of the coded data. This thematic development was guided by both the research questions and the patterns that emerged organically from the data. Themes were reviewed and refined, ensuring they were coherent, distinctive, and relevant. This phase often involved a back-and-forth process between the dataset, coded extracts, and the developing themes to ensure a consistent and accurate representation of the data.

The final step of the thematic analysis involved defining and naming the themes, a process that required a careful consideration of the overall narrative the data portrayed. Each theme was then thoroughly analyzed, with a focus on how it related to the research questions and the broader context of the study. The themes were also examined in relation to each other, understanding their interconnections and the collective story they told about the relational tools used by Vietnamese EFL teachers in higher education.

Throughout the analysis, rigor was maintained by constantly checking and rechecking the findings against the data. Peer debriefing was also employed, where preliminary findings were discussed with other researchers in the field for their insights and critique. This process of analysis not only ensured a rich, detailed understanding of the data but also upheld the validity and reliability of the findings, making a significant contribution to the study's overall trustworthiness.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Building Rapport through Personalized Learning**

A key finding of this study centered around building rapport through personalized learning. This theme was highlighted by all nine participants, with a particularly strong emphasis from the novice teachers. Six out of the nine teachers, including all three novices, two mid-career teachers, and one near-end teacher, explicitly mentioned the importance of tailoring their teaching approach to the individual needs and backgrounds of their students as a primary strategy for building rapport.

For instance, a novice teacher, Ms. Trinh, described her approach: "I try to learn about their [students'] interests, backgrounds, and even challenges they face in learning English. This knowledge helps me connect with them on a personal level and tailor my lessons accordingly."

This sentiment was echoed by Mr. Bao, a mid-career teacher, who stated, "Each student is unique, and recognizing that in my teaching has not only helped me connect with them but also made my teaching more effective."

These excerpts demonstrate how personalized learning, as a relational tool, is not merely about adapting teaching materials but also involves teachers investing time and effort in understanding their students as individuals. This approach aligns with the principles of relational pedagogy, which emphasize the importance of building strong, empathetic relationships as a foundation for effective teaching and learning. By personalizing their teaching, these EFL teachers were able to create a learning environment that was more engaging, supportive, and conducive to language acquisition.

From a sociocultural theoretical perspective, this finding underscores the importance of social interaction and the role of the teacher in mediating the learning process. By taking into account the individual socio-cultural backgrounds of their students, the teachers were able to make the learning process more relevant and meaningful, thereby facilitating a deeper engagement with the language. This personalization of learning not only enhanced the student-teacher rapport but also reinforced the concept that learning is a socially mediated process, deeply influenced by interpersonal relationships and the cultural context in which it occurs.

### **Nurturing a Supportive Classroom Environment**

Another significant finding from this study was the emphasis on nurturing a supportive classroom environment. This theme was identified by seven of the nine participants, encompassing all career stages: two novice teachers, three mid-career teachers, and two near-end teachers. The participants highlighted the importance of creating a classroom atmosphere that is supportive, inclusive, and conducive to risk-taking in language learning.

A mid-career teacher, Mr. Thanh, described his approach: "I focus on creating a safe space where students feel comfortable making mistakes and trying out new language skills without fear." Similarly, Mrs. Hien, a near-end teacher, shared, "Over the years, I've learned that an environment of support and mutual respect is crucial. It encourages students to participate more actively and take risks in their language use."

These excerpts reflect the teachers' understanding that a supportive classroom environment is key to facilitating language learning. This approach resonates with the concept of relational pedagogy, which advocates for the creation of learning spaces where students feel valued, respected, and encouraged to explore and express themselves. By fostering a supportive environment, these teachers were able to reduce the anxiety often associated with language learning, thereby promoting greater student engagement and participation.

From the perspective of sociocultural theory, this finding emphasizes the role of the social environment in the learning process. A supportive classroom acts as a community of practice where students can interact, collaborate, and learn from each other. This social interaction is not only vital for language acquisition but also for developing a sense of belonging and community among learners, which is instrumental in motivating and sustaining their language learning journey.

### **Emphasis on Empathy and Understanding**

The study revealed a prominent theme of emphasis on empathy and understanding across the experiences of the Vietnamese EFL teachers. This theme was particularly pronounced among the mid-career and near-end teachers, with six out of the nine participants (one novice, three mid-career, and two near-end teachers) explicitly highlighting it. The teachers spoke about the critical role of empathy in understanding and addressing the challenges faced by their students in learning English.



Ms. Trang, a mid-career teacher, shared her perspective: “I try to put myself in my students’ shoes, especially when they struggle with language barriers. This empathy guides how I interact with them and adjust my teaching.” Similarly, Mr. Quang, a near-end career teacher, remarked, “Understanding the individual struggles and backgrounds of my students helps me connect with them on a deeper level, making my teaching more responsive and effective.”

These insights underscore the significance of empathy as a relational tool in the EFL classroom. Empathy goes beyond mere sympathy; it involves a deeper understanding of students’ experiences, emotions, and challenges. This empathetic approach is in line with relational pedagogy, which advocates for the cultivation of strong, empathetic connections between teachers and students as a foundation for effective learning. By practicing empathy, these teachers were able to create a more responsive and supportive learning environment, tailored to the specific needs and challenges of their students.

From a sociocultural theory perspective, the emphasis on empathy aligns with the view that learning is a socially and culturally mediated process. Understanding the cultural, emotional, and linguistic backgrounds of students allows teachers to make the learning experience more relevant and accessible. This understanding not only aids in language acquisition but also fosters a sense of belonging and community within the classroom, which is crucial for students’ academic and personal growth.

The thematic analysis yielded three core themes that characterize how Vietnamese EFL teachers employ relational tools in their classroom practice. These themes, including (1) building rapport through personalized learning, (2) nurturing a supportive classroom environment, and (3) emphasis on empathy and understanding, reflect diverse but interconnected relational strategies used across different career stages. To enhance the clarity and coherence of these findings, Table 1 summarizes each emergent theme alongside a brief description, the distribution of participants across career stages, and a representative quote that illustrates the theme in practice.

**Table 1.** Emergent themes, descriptions, participant distribution, and representative quotes

Theme	Brief description	Career stage distribution	Representative quote
Building rapport through personalized learning	Teachers adapt lessons to students’ interests, backgrounds, and challenges.	3 Novice, 2 Mid-career, 1 Near-end	<i>“I try to learn about their interests, backgrounds, and even challenges... This helps me connect with them.”</i> (Ms. Trinh, novice)
Nurturing a supportive classroom environment	Teachers create emotionally safe, inclusive spaces that reduce anxiety and foster participation.	2 Novice, 3 Mid-career, 2 Near-end	<i>“I focus on creating a safe space where students feel comfortable making mistakes.”</i> (Mr. Thanh, mid-career)
Emphasis on empathy and understanding	Teachers show empathetic awareness of students’ struggles, adjusting teaching accordingly.	1 Novice, 3 Mid-career, 2 Near-end	<i>“I try to put myself in my students’ shoes... This empathy guides how I interact with them.”</i> (Ms. Trang, mid-career)

## DISCUSSION

### Building Rapport through Personalized Learning

The finding of building rapport through personalized learning in this study resonates with existing literature on EFL teaching, yet it also offers unique insights, particularly in the Vietnamese higher education context. Previous studies, such as those by Mercer and Dörnyei (2020), have emphasized the importance of teacher-student rapport in language learning environments. These studies, however, often focus on broader pedagogical strategies rather than the nuanced approach of personalized learning highlighted in this research.

The emphasis by all nine participants, particularly novice teachers, on tailoring their teaching to individual student needs and backgrounds marks a significant contribution of this study to the field. While existing research acknowledges the importance of understanding

student needs (Perna, 2023), the depth of personalization described by participants like Ms. Trinh and Mr. Bao extends this understanding. Their approach goes beyond general adaptations, delving into the individual interests, backgrounds, and challenges of each student. This level of personalization in building rapport is less extensively covered in the current body of literature, particularly in the context of Vietnamese EFL education.

Moreover, the current study's findings contribute to the field by illustrating how this personalization is operationalized in the classroom. The teachers' accounts provide concrete examples of how understanding individual student profiles can significantly enhance the effectiveness of teaching. This practical application of personalized learning as a relational tool provides valuable insights for EFL educators, especially in similar cultural and educational settings.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study reinforces and expands upon the principles of relational pedagogy (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017) and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). While these theories are well-established in the literature, the current study applies them specifically to the Vietnamese higher education context, demonstrating how personalized learning can serve as a powerful mediator in the social aspect of language learning. It highlights how the socio-cultural backgrounds of students are not just peripheral elements but central to the learning process, influencing how they engage with the language and the classroom environment.

### **Nurturing a Supportive Classroom Environment**

The theme of nurturing a supportive classroom environment, identified by a majority of the participants across all career stages in this study, provides an important contribution to the existing literature on EFL teaching, especially within the specific context of Vietnamese higher education. While the concept of creating a supportive classroom environment is well-established in educational research (e.g., Farooq, 2015; Liao & Wang, 2015), this study sheds new light on its implementation and significance in a Vietnamese EFL setting.

In comparison to existing studies, the emphasis on creating a space conducive to risk-taking in language learning is a notable aspect of this research. The findings align with the work of scholars like Martin and Rimm-Kaufman (2015), who stressed the importance of a supportive learning environment in fostering student self-efficacy. However, the current study goes further by providing specific examples from Vietnamese EFL teachers, like Mr. Thanh and Mrs. Hien, who illustrate how such environments are actively constructed in their classrooms. Their strategies for reducing language anxiety and promoting active participation offer practical insights that are less extensively documented in the current body of EFL research, particularly within the Vietnamese context.

This study's findings also contribute to the field by emphasizing the role of the teacher in actively shaping a supportive classroom atmosphere. This aspect is crucial in a culture where traditional educational settings might not always prioritize student-centered approaches. The teachers' accounts of how they foster mutual respect and a sense of community provide valuable examples for educators in similar contexts striving to enhance their teaching practices.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings reinforce the principles of relational pedagogy (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017) and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). The study highlights how a supportive classroom environment is not only a backdrop for learning but an active, dynamic space that facilitates the social interaction central to language acquisition. It underscores the teacher's role in creating a learning environment that is not just academically stimulating but also emotionally and socially nurturing. This perspective is particularly significant given the sociocultural context of Vietnam, where the communal aspect of learning and respect for authority figures play prominent roles.



### **Emphasis on Empathy and Understanding**

The emphasis on empathy and understanding in the Vietnamese EFL teaching context provides a distinctive contribution to the field of language education research. While empathy has been recognized as a significant factor in effective teaching practices (Aldrup et al., 2022; Meyers et al., 2019), its specific role and implementation in EFL settings, particularly in Vietnam, have not been extensively explored in existing literature. This study's focus on empathy as articulated by Vietnamese EFL teachers, especially those in mid-career and near-end stages, offers new perspectives on how empathy is operationalized in language teaching.

Comparatively, existing research often discusses teacher empathy in general terms or within the context of primary and secondary education. For instance, studies have highlighted the importance of understanding students' emotional and cognitive states (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). However, the current study dives deeper into the practical application of empathy in the specific context of language barriers and cultural nuances in Vietnamese higher education. Teachers like Ms. Trang and Mr. Quang provide tangible examples of how empathy is not just a passive trait but an active strategy for enhancing language learning, which is a relatively underexplored aspect in previous studies.

Furthermore, this study's findings extend the discussion of empathy beyond a generic educational tool, positioning it within the specific challenges and dynamics of EFL teaching. The insights from participants reveal how empathy can effectively address the unique challenges faced by EFL learners, such as language anxiety and cultural differences, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of empathy in language education.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings enrich the application of relational pedagogy (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017) and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) in EFL settings. The emphasis on empathy aligns with the sociocultural emphasis on the teacher's role in mediating learning within the cultural and emotional context of the students. This study contributes to the field by illustrating how empathy, as a component of relational pedagogy, is instrumental in creating a learning environment that acknowledges and accommodates the socio-cultural backgrounds of students, thereby facilitating a more inclusive and effective language learning process.

### **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study underscore the pivotal role of relational tools in enhancing the effectiveness of EFL teaching in Vietnamese higher education. Across career stages, teachers emphasized building rapport through personalized learning, nurturing a supportive classroom environment, and practicing empathy and understanding. These strategies are not peripheral to language instruction but central to creating the social, emotional, and pedagogical conditions necessary for student engagement and language acquisition.

Personalized learning enabled teachers to connect with students on an individual level, adapting their approaches to students' interests and challenges. This strategy was especially salient among novice teachers and reflected a student-centered orientation that deepened engagement and facilitated trust. Creating supportive classroom environments further allowed students to take linguistic risks and participate without fear of judgment, conditions essential for communicative language learning. Empathy, particularly emphasized by mid- and late-career teachers, emerged as both a relational disposition and a pedagogical act, allowing teachers to attune their methods to students' emotional and linguistic struggles.

These relational tools are not isolated strategies but interwoven practices that reflect a relational pedagogy grounded in Vietnamese cultural norms of respect, care, and harmony. Moreover, the findings affirm the importance of contextually embedded, socially mediated learning, as articulated in sociocultural theory. In Vietnamese EFL classrooms, where

hierarchical norms often shape teacher-student interactions, these relational practices signify a shift toward more reciprocal and responsive pedagogies.

Taken together, the study suggests that fostering meaningful teacher-student relationships is not only an ethical imperative but also a pedagogical one. Relational tools support not just affective bonds, but also the cognitive and social conditions that enable successful language learning. This conclusion invites teacher education programs, institutional leaders, and policymakers to recognize relational work as integral to teaching quality and to provide training and support that cultivates such practices within culturally grounded frameworks.

The implications of this study are multifaceted and hold significant relevance for the field of EFL education, particularly in the Vietnamese higher education context. Firstly, the finding that emphasizes building rapport through personalized learning suggests that EFL programs should incorporate training and professional development focused on student-centered teaching approaches. Educators should be encouraged and equipped to understand and integrate their students' interests, backgrounds, and learning challenges into their teaching practices. This approach not only enhances student engagement but also fosters a deeper connection between the teacher and students, which is essential for effective language learning.

The theme of nurturing a supportive classroom environment has implications for classroom management and educational policy. It underscores the need for creating learning spaces where students feel safe, respected, and motivated to participate. This finding suggests that educational institutions should prioritize the establishment of inclusive and supportive classroom cultures, possibly through policy changes that advocate for smaller class sizes, collaborative learning strategies, and teacher training in emotional intelligence and classroom dynamics.

Moreover, the emphasis on empathy and understanding highlights the importance of empathy as a critical teaching skill. Teacher education programs should incorporate components that focus on developing teachers' empathetic understanding of their students. This involves training teachers to recognize and address the emotional, cultural, and linguistic challenges that students face in the EFL classroom. By doing so, teachers can create more responsive and effective teaching strategies that cater to the diverse needs of their students.

Additionally, these findings have implications for curriculum design in EFL education. Curricula should be flexible enough to allow for adaptations based on student needs and backgrounds. Incorporating elements that allow for personalization and a focus on student well-being can make the learning experience more relevant and engaging for students. Finally, on a broader scale, this study highlights the need for further research in the area of teacher-student relationships in EFL settings, especially in contexts similar to Vietnamese higher education. Future research could explore how these relational tools impact specific learning outcomes or how they can be effectively integrated into various EFL teaching methodologies. This could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of teacher-student relationships in language acquisition and contribute to the development of more effective EFL teaching practices worldwide.

This study, while offering valuable insights, is not without its limitations. Firstly, the sample size of nine Vietnamese EFL teachers, though diverse in terms of career stages, is relatively small and drawn from only two educational institutions. This limited scope may not fully capture the wide range of experiences and perspectives existing among EFL teachers in Vietnam, particularly those in different types of institutions or geographical regions. Additionally, the study's reliance on self-reported data through semi-structured interviews, while rich in detail, is subject to the limitations inherent in such data, including the potential for bias in participants' responses and the influence of the researcher's interpretation during

analysis. Furthermore, the focus on qualitative data, while providing depth, limits the ability to generalize the findings to a broader population. These factors should be considered when interpreting the study's results and conclusions.

Given these limitations, future research in this area could take several directions. Expanding the sample size and including teachers from a wider variety of educational contexts and regions in Vietnam would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relational tools used by Vietnamese EFL teachers. Quantitative studies, or mixed-methods approaches, could complement the qualitative findings of this study, offering a broader view of the prevalence and impact of different relational strategies. Further research could also explore the perspectives of students, providing a more holistic view of the teacher-student relationship dynamic in EFL settings. Additionally, longitudinal studies could offer insights into how these relational tools and strategies evolve over time and their long-term impact on teaching effectiveness and student outcomes. Lastly, comparative studies between different cultural or educational contexts could illuminate how cultural and institutional factors influence the use of relational tools in EFL teaching, contributing to a more global understanding of effective language education practices.

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