

HEDGING THE UNSAYABLE: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF TEACHER DISCOURSE IN FACILITATING INTERETHNIC LITERARY DISCUSSIONS IN NORTHEAST NIGERIAN CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

Teacher discourse about interethnic dialogue in conflict-affected classrooms is rarely examined for its linguistic texture. Using a qualitative interpretive design, this study presents a pragmatic analysis of interview and observational data from nine literature teachers and nine school administrators in Borno, Adamawa, and Taraba States, Northeast Nigeria, collected during a twelve-week literary intervention programme. Using politeness theory and hedging research, the study identifies three recurrent discourse patterns in teacher discourse about facilitating discussion of ethnicity: mitigated invitation, hedged questioning that opens discussion without imposing; deflective avoidance, topic-shift devices that redirect discussion away from face-threatening ground; and negotiated repair, clarification and reformulation that manage face-threatening student contributions in real time. Teachers' capacity to sustain interethnic literary dialogue is inseparable from their command of these pragmatic resources for managing face in high-stakes classroom talk. Implications for language teacher preparation in conflict-affected multilingual contexts are discussed.

Keywords: pragmatics, politeness theory, hedging, teacher discourse, interethnic dialogue, Northeast Nigeria

Introduction

When a literature teacher in Northeast Nigeria opens a classroom discussion of ethnicity, the risk is rarely in the topic itself but in how it is said. A single unmitigated question can be heard as an accusation; a single unhedged claim can be heard as taking sides. In a region where secondary school classrooms bring together students from Kanuri, Hausa, Fulani, Higgi, Marghi, Babur, and other communities shaped by insurgency-related displacement and loss (Human Rights Watch, 2023), the linguistic choices teachers make in the moment, how they phrase a question, how they redirect a comment that has gone somewhere dangerous, how they soften that redirection, are not incidental to the pedagogy. They are the pedagogy.

This paper examines the discourse of nine literature teachers and nine school administrators across nine secondary schools in Borno, Adamawa, and Taraba States, drawn from interviews, classroom observations, and reflective logs collected during a twelve-week literary intervention programme built around Nigerian novels, poetry, and folktales. Rather than treating teacher discourse as a transparent window onto pedagogical belief or anxiety, this paper treats it as an object of linguistic analysis in its own right: what hedges, mitigators, politeness strategies, and repair devices teachers employ when the topic is ethnicity, and what these choices reveal about how face is managed in a conflict-affected classroom.

Two questions guide the analysis: first, what recurrent pragmatic strategies appear in teacher discourse about facilitating (or avoiding) interethnic literary dialogue; and second, how do these strategies distribute across teachers who sustain open discussion, teachers who redirect away from it, and teachers who manage it through real-time negotiation?

Literature Review

Classroom Discourse

Classroom discourse has a long empirical tradition independent of politeness theory. Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) foundational analysis of teacher-pupil talk established the initiation-response-feedback structure that continues to organise much research on how teachers manage turns, topics, and evaluation in the classroom. Subsequent work by Cazden (2001) and Mercer (1995) extended this tradition toward the social and dialogic functions of classroom talk, showing that teachers' linguistic choices are not incidental to instruction but constitutive of the learning environment itself, a claim the present analysis extends to the specific case of interethnic content. More recent research has kept this attention on the fine grain of classroom talk while extending it to new interactional settings. Waring and Creider (2021) propose a micro-reflective framework for analysing classroom communication that treats moment-to-moment linguistic choices, rather than broad pedagogical style, as the proper unit of professional reflection, a methodological commitment this paper shares.

Xu and Cui (2022) show that teachers' classroom politeness strategies, including hedged directives and face-saving redirection, measurably shape students' willingness to participate, evidence that the pragmatic choices examined here carry consequences beyond the immediate exchange. Moorhouse et al. (2022) document how teachers mediate sensitive or difficult interactional moments through hedged, redressive language even in synchronous online lessons, suggesting that the hedging repertoire identified in this study is not unique to face-to-face, conflict-affected classrooms but is a more general resource teachers draw on when interaction becomes interactionally risky. These studies, however, do not address classroom talk under conditions of active or recent ethnic conflict, nor do they examine hedging and politeness as resources teachers deploy when the content of a lesson is itself face-threatening.

Teacher Pragmatics

A second body of work addresses teachers' own pragmatic competence and awareness rather than classroom discourse patterns as an outcome. Martínez-Flor, Sánchez-Hernández, and Barón's (2023) edited volume on L2 pragmatics in the teaching-learning process argues that teachers require not only theoretical knowledge of pragmatic phenomena but practical repertoires for deploying them under classroom conditions, a distinction that maps closely onto the difference this paper draws between teachers' awareness of face-threat and their in-the-moment linguistic management of it. Glaser and Martínez-Flor (2025) extend this argument, noting that sustainable integration of pragmatics into teaching depends on equipping teachers with usable, situation-specific strategies rather than abstract awareness alone.

Aboulghazi, Amiri, and El Karfa (2024) similarly find that teachers' own perceptions of pragmatic competence shape how, and how confidently, they draw on hedging and politeness resources in the classroom. None of this literature, however, considers teacher pragmatic competence under the specific pressure of a topic, such as interethnic conflict, that makes ordinary classroom talk high-stakes.

Hedging in Educational Discourse

Hedging research supplies a further analytical resource. Liu (2020) reframes hedges, following the politeness principle, as devices whose primary function is interpersonal rather than epistemic: speakers hedge not because they are uncertain of a proposition but because asserting it plainly would carry social risk, a reframing directly relevant to teacher discourse about ethnicity. Research on hedging and politeness in Nigerian institutional discourse offers a closer parallel still. Odebunmi's (2008) study

of diagnostic news delivery in Nigerian hospitals documents how professionals in high-stakes, culturally sensitive encounters use mitigation, indirection, and strategic vagueness to manage the face threat of difficult information, a pattern of institutional hedging that the present analysis finds echoed in teacher discourse about ethnicity. Yet no existing study, to our knowledge, has applied a comparable pragmatic lens to teacher discourse on interethnic content specifically, nor has any study situated such discourse within a conflict-affected Northeast Nigerian setting.

Conflict Discourse

A fourth strand of research examines language and pedagogy in conflict-affected settings directly, though largely without a linguistic-pragmatic focus. Bush and Saltarelli (2000) established the influential account of education's dual capacity in divided societies to either entrench division or model its repair, a framing this study returns to in the discussion of findings. Kester and Chang (2022) examine how instructional-medium choices in conflict-affected contexts can themselves become sites of epistemic injustice, showing that the linguistic architecture of a lesson, not only its content, carries consequences for equity in divided settings. Aristizábal Cardona and Ortiz Medina (2023), working with foreign language teacher candidates preparing to address Colombia's armed conflict in the classroom, find that teachers need explicit preparation in the discursive strategies of facilitating difficult dialogue, rather than general encouragement toward openness, a finding this paper's discussion returns to directly. None of these studies, however, offers a pragmatic account of the specific linguistic devices, hedges, politeness markers, and repair strategies, that teachers in conflict-affected classrooms actually deploy.

The present study addresses this composite gap, treating teacher discourse about ethnicity as an object of linguistic rather than purely pedagogical analysis and extending the classroom discourse tradition, the teacher pragmatics literature, and the Nigerian institutional-pragmatics literature into a conflict-affected Northeast Nigerian setting that none of them has yet examined.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis draws primarily on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which models communication as continuously balancing the transmission of content against the management of interlocutors' face: their want to be approved of (positive face) and their want not to be imposed upon (negative face). Statements that touch on ethnicity in a divided classroom are inherently face-threatening acts: they risk offending a student's positive face by implying a negative judgement of their group, and they risk imposing on a class's negative face by demanding public positioning on a sensitive matter. Teachers who manage this terrain successfully are, in Brown and Levinson's terms, deploying redressive strategies: positive politeness devices that build solidarity (inclusive pronouns, shared framing) and negative politeness devices that minimise imposition (hedged questions, indirect requests).

Brown and Levinson's model was developed primarily from English, Tzeltal, and Tamil data, and has been challenged on the grounds that its individualist conception of face does not transfer cleanly to more group-oriented or discernment-based politeness systems (Matsumoto, 1988). This paper follows the more recent relational-work reframing of politeness (Locher & Watts, 2005), which treats face-management not as a fixed universal calculus but as locally negotiated interactional work; Brown and Levinson's categories are used here as a descriptive vocabulary for identifying redressive strategies rather than as a claim that face operates identically across cultural contexts.

Hedging research supplies the second analytical resource. Lakoff's (1973) foundational account treats hedges as devices that make propositions “fuzzier,” while Fraser's (2010) later work on pragmatic competence reframes hedging as a strategic resource that speakers deploy to modulate commitment, soften assertions, and manage the social risk of a claim. In teacher discourse about ethnicity, hedges function not as evidence of uncertainty about the subject matter but as evidence of sensitivity to its face-threatening potential: a linguistic register calibrated to the stakes of the topic rather than to the speaker's actual epistemic state.

Methodology

Using a qualitative interpretive design, data were collected during a twelve-week literary intervention delivered across nine secondary schools. Nine literature teachers (one per school) and nine school administrators participated in semi-structured interviews (teachers, 60–90 minutes; administrators, 45–60 minutes); teachers additionally kept weekly reflective logs, and twenty-seven classroom observations were conducted at Weeks 4, 8, and 12 using a structured protocol. Teaching experience ranged from four to twenty-two years ($M = 11.3$); ethnic representation included Kanuri, Hausa, Fulani, Higgi, and Marghi teachers. Schools were not sampled independently for this study; the nine teachers and nine administrators represent the full population of literature teachers and school heads participating in the wider intervention programme from which this dataset is drawn, one teacher and one administrator per participating school. All participants took part voluntarily and gave informed consent prior to data collection.

The structured observation protocol recorded, for each lesson, instances of teacher engagement with ethnic content, the linguistic form of the teacher's response, and any hedging, politeness, or repair devices used, mirroring the coding categories subsequently applied to the interview data. Interviews and observations were conducted in English, the medium of instruction in all participating schools; incidental code-switching into Hausa, Kanuri, or Fulfulde during lessons was noted but falls outside the scope of the present English-medium pragmatic analysis.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and imported into NVivo 12. Analytic coding followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic method as an organising procedure, but the unit of analysis for this paper was linguistic rather than topical: utterances were coded for hedging devices (epistemic modals, approximators, disclaimers), politeness strategies (inclusive pronouns, indirect questions, positive-assessment prefaces), and repair devices (clarification requests, reformulation, topic-shift markers). Two researchers coded independently and resolved discrepancies through iterative discussion, a consensus-based approach suited to the interpretive judgement that identifying hedge type and politeness function requires, and consistent with standard practice in qualitative pragmatic discourse analysis. Ethical approval was obtained from the researcher's institutional ethics committee; participant confidentiality is maintained through alphanumeric codes (TCH for teachers, ADM for administrators).

The present study forms part of a broader research programme examining literary intervention in Northeast Nigerian secondary schools; companion studies from the same twelve-week programme examine narrative empathy and classroom safety as thematic concerns. Here, the same dataset is approached through a different analytic lens: rather than asking what teachers and students said about interethnic dialogue, the present study asks how teachers said it, treating classroom discourse as a linguistic rather than thematic object of study.

Findings

Three recurrent discourse patterns emerged from the data, each characterised by a distinct configuration of pragmatic devices: mitigated invitation, deflective avoidance, and negotiated repair.

Mitigated Invitation

Teachers who sustained open discussion of ethnic themes did not do so by speaking more directly about ethnicity; if anything, their classroom discourse was more heavily mitigated than that of teachers who avoided the topic altogether. One teacher described her routine response to a potentially face-threatening student comment:

When a student says something about another ethnic group that could create tension, I do not shut it down. I say: that is one story about this group. The author gives us another story. Can we hold both stories at the same time? (TCH-05, Female, Adamawa, 12 years' experience)

The syntax here is doing careful face-work. 'That is one story' reframes the student's comment as a contribution rather than an error, avoiding a direct negative-face threat to the speaker. The interrogative 'Can we hold both stories at the same time?' is a classic negative-politeness device: rather than instructing the class to reconsider the comment (a bald, face-threatening directive), the teacher poses the reconsideration as a jointly undertaken, optional act, marked by the inclusive pronoun 'we.' The inclusive 'we' recurs across teachers in this pattern and functions as a positive-politeness resource, constructing the discussion as a shared project rather than a teacher-imposed correction.

Deflective Avoidance

A contrasting pattern appeared in classrooms where teachers systematically redirected discussion away from ethnic content. Observational data recorded a recurrent construction: a student comment on ethnic representation in a text met with, 'That's an interesting point, but let's focus on how the author develops the theme of tradition.' The utterance opens with a positive assessment ('that's an interesting point'), a politeness preface that acknowledges the student's positive face before the topic-shift that follows. The connective 'but' signals the pivot, and the inclusive imperative 'let's focus' softens what is, functionally, a directive to abandon the topic. This is deflection accomplished almost entirely through positive politeness devices: the redirection is face-saving for the student even as it forecloses the discussion.

Teachers who used this pattern were often explicit, outside the classroom, about what the mitigation in their own classroom talk was protecting against: 'I know I should push them. But every time we get close to something real, I feel the tension in the room. I can see students looking at each other, wondering what will happen. I cannot take that risk' (TCH-08, Male, Taraba, 4 years' experience).

The modal 'should' marks an acknowledged obligation the speaker is not meeting, and the concessive 'but' that follows performs the same disclaiming function Fraser identifies in hedged discourse: it registers awareness of a norm while exempting the speaker from it. The epistemic hedge 'I feel' (rather than an assertion about the room's actual state) further mitigates the claim, presenting the teacher's risk assessment as subjective impression rather than fact: a linguistic move that lowers the interactional stakes of admitting avoidance.

Negotiated Repair

A third pattern involved teachers who neither fully opened nor fully closed potentially face-threatening contributions, instead managing them through conversational repair. One teacher described her method directly:

I let them go a little way. If someone says something that could be hurtful, I stop and ask: what do you mean by that? Usually, when they have to explain, they realise they did not mean it the way it sounded. (TCH-04, Female, Adamawa, 9 years' experience)

'What do you mean by that?' is a clarification request rather than a correction: a repair-initiator that shifts the interactional burden back to the original speaker without the teacher committing to a negative evaluation of the utterance. This is a negative-politeness strategy in Brown and Levinson's sense: it avoids the face threat of direct contradiction by requiring the student to reformulate their own contribution, often producing a self-correction that the teacher never had to voice. A comparable pattern appeared in an administrator's account of institutional positioning: 'This is a government school. We serve all communities. If I allow this kind of discussion about ethnicity, some parents will complain. I supported the programme because the chairman asked us to. But I watched carefully' (ADM-08, Male, Principal, Taraba, 22 years' experience).

Here the hedge operates at the level of agency rather than content: responsibility for supporting the programme is attributed to an external authority ('the chairman asked us to'), distancing the speaker's own face from a decision that carries institutional risk, while 'I watched carefully' signals ongoing vigilance without committing to a specific complaint or objection: a hedge that preserves the speaker's option to intervene later without having named a present grievance.

Ethnic Identity as a Modifier of Mitigation

In two illustrative cases, teachers' own ethnic positioning appeared to modulate the target of their hedging, though the small number of cases means this pattern should be read as suggestive rather than established. A Higgi teacher facilitating discussion of a Hausa folktale used a rhetorical question to manage her own epistemic authority: 'I thought: who am I to tell this story?' (TCH-09, Female, Adamawa, 5 years' experience). The rhetorical question form here performs self-directed face-work, voicing a doubt about entitlement to speak rather than asserting a claim outright: a hedge aimed inward, at the speaker's own authority, rather than outward, at the content of the discussion.

By contrast, one teacher from a majority ethnic group in his local context showed a different hedging target, softening claims about his own institutional position rather than his epistemic authority: 'I try to let the students from those groups speak more. But then I worry: am I putting them on the spot?' (TCH-07, Male, Taraba, 11 years' experience). The self-directed question again displaces potential criticism onto the speaker before an interlocutor can raise it: a pre-emptive face-saving device.

Discussion

The three patterns identified here are not simply different levels of teacher courage, as a purely pedagogical reading might suggest; they are different configurations of a shared pragmatic repertoire. Every pattern in the data relies on hedging and politeness devices: what varies is where those devices are aimed. In mitigated invitation, mitigation is aimed at softening the imposition of engaging with difficult content, so that engagement can proceed. In deflective avoidance, the same repertoire of positive-assessment prefaces and inclusive imperatives is aimed at softening the imposition of withdrawing from that content. In negotiated repair, mitigation is aimed at the interactional turn itself, using clarification requests to displace evaluative work onto the student.

This distribution of a shared repertoire across divergent interactional goals extends the classroom discourse tradition in a specific way. Sinclair and Coulthard

(1975), and later Cazden (2001) and Mercer (1995), treat the teacher's linguistic choices as constitutive of the learning environment, but largely under conditions where the content being managed is pedagogical rather than identity-based. Waring and Creider's (2021) call for micro-reflective attention to classroom communication, and Xu and Cui's (2022) finding that classroom politeness strategies shape student participation, both concern generically face-threatening classroom moments; the present findings suggest that when the face-threat is compounded by ethnic conflict, the same devices, inclusive pronouns, hedged questions, positive-assessment prefaces, are redeployed toward starkly different ends depending on whether the teacher's goal is to sustain, avoid, or manage the discussion. This is consistent with Moorhouse et al.'s (2022) observation that teachers draw on a broadly similar redressive repertoire across quite different interactional settings, but extends it by showing that the repertoire's aim, not its composition, is what distinguishes facilitation from avoidance. This reframing has a practical implication for teacher preparation that a purely pedagogical account would miss: the difference between a teacher who sustains difficult discussion and one who avoids it may be less a matter of disposition than of which face-threat, in the moment, the teacher's hedging repertoire is being deployed to manage. If this is correct, then discourse-level training (explicit instruction in mitigated questioning, repair-initiation, and inclusive framing, rather than general encouragement to be 'braver') may be a more tractable lever for professional development than affective or dispositional coaching alone.

This finding converges with Aristizábal Cardona and Ortiz Medina's (2023) conclusion, drawn from Colombian foreign language teacher candidates preparing to address an armed conflict in the classroom, that teachers need explicit preparation in the discursive strategies of facilitation rather than general exhortation toward openness; the present study extends that conclusion by specifying, at the level of individual linguistic devices, what such discourse-level training would need to cover. It is also consistent with Kester and Chang's (2022) broader argument that the linguistic architecture of instruction, not only its content, carries consequences for equity and justice in conflict-affected educational settings. This suggests a role for applied linguists, not only teacher educators, in designing professional development for conflict-affected multilingual classrooms. This framing is consistent with Bush and Saltarelli's (2000) account of education's dual capacity in conflict-affected societies to either entrench division or model its repair: the pragmatic repertoire documented here is part of what determines which of these functions a given classroom performs.

Limitations

The analysis draws on a purposive sample of nine teachers and nine administrators in one regional context; the pragmatic patterns identified should not be generalised without further study across other conflict-affected multilingual settings. Interview data may be shaped by social desirability in an institutional research context; this limitation was partly offset through triangulation with classroom observation. The distribution of the three patterns across the full teacher sample is described here qualitatively rather than quantified; a systematic frequency count across the complete interview and observation corpus, and its correlation with variables such as years of experience and ethnic positioning, is left to subsequent analysis of this dataset. Because interviews and observations were conducted in English, this analysis does not capture how hedging and face-work might operate differently during moments of code-switching into Hausa, Kanuri, or Fulfulde, a direction for future research in this multilingual setting. Finally, transcription inevitably flattens some prosodic and

paralinguistic features (intonation, pause, hesitation marker duration) that would sharpen a fuller pragmatic account of hedging in this data.

Conclusion

This paper has offered a pragmatic account of how teachers in Northeast Nigerian secondary schools manage the linguistic risk of facilitating interethnic literary dialogue. Three patterns (mitigated invitation, deflective avoidance, and negotiated repair) reveal a shared underlying repertoire of hedging and politeness devices deployed toward different interactional ends. Treating teacher discourse as an object of linguistic rather than purely pedagogical analysis suggests that facilitation competence in conflict-affected classrooms is, in significant part, pragmatic competence: the capacity to deploy hedges, redressive strategies, and repair devices in service of sustained, face-sensitive engagement with difficult material.

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