

Speaking Power into Being: Figurative Language, Authority, and Student Agency in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

This study examines how figurative and nonliteral language mediates power in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. It focuses on how lecturers use metaphor, analogy, ambiguity, hyperbole, rhetorical questions, contrast, and register shifting to explain content, evaluate understanding, correct behavior, and shape lecturer-student relationships. A secondary qualitative analysis was conducted on 18 archived semi-structured interviews involving three lecturers and fifteen students in an English Education Program at an Indonesian university. A hybrid inductive-deductive thematic analysis combined data-driven coding with sensitizing concepts from language-and-power theory. Coding moved from recurrent expressions to interpretive codes, themes, and a conceptual model. Five themes were generated: contextual figurative scaffolding; ambiguity as productive challenge and epistemic gatekeeping; hyperbolic correction as disciplinary power and face threat; register shifting as relational power; and negotiated student agency under proficiency-sensitive conditions. Figurative language was productive when it connected abstract material to students' lives and invited interpretation, but restrictive when ambiguity exceeded students' linguistic resources or when hyperbole was used to shame. All students valued simplified explanation when comprehension failed, all evaluated analogy positively, and nearly all rejected excessive corrective language. Lecturers should use figurative language as calibrated scaffolding rather than as an unmarked test of intelligence. Analogies should be contextualized, ambiguity should be followed by clarification, correction should target the task rather than the learner's identity, and formal-informal register shifts should be used strategically to balance academic legitimacy with approachability. The article proposes a Figurative Power Cycle showing how linguistic form becomes pedagogical, epistemic, disciplinary, or relational power and how student responses feed back into lecturers' subsequent choices. The model positions figurative language not merely as ornament or vocabulary content, but as a mechanism through which authority and participation are negotiated in EFL interaction.

Keywords: *language and power; EFL classroom; figurative language; classroom discourse; teacher authority; student agency; thematic analysis*

Introduction

Classroom language does more than carry instructional content. It distributes speaking rights, defines what counts as legitimate knowledge, identifies who appears competent, and regulates how closely teachers and students may relate to one another. In EFL classrooms these functions become especially visible because the instructional medium is also the object of learning. A lecturer's metaphor, ambiguous phrase, rhetorical question, or shift from formal English to everyday speech can simultaneously teach language, frame a concept, test comprehension, mark authority, and invite or inhibit participation.

Critical approaches to discourse treat power as embedded in routine linguistic choices rather than found only in explicit commands. Fairclough (2023) argues that discourse both reflects and reproduces social relations, while Hanks (2005) explains that linguistic authority depends on who is socially authorized to define proper and legitimate expression. In classrooms, lecturers typically control topic choice, turn allocation, evaluation, and the final interpretation of contested meanings. Yet this control is not absolute. Students ask for clarification, consult peers, use dictionaries, resist indirect correction, and express preferences for registers. Power is therefore exercised through interaction and is continuously negotiated.

Figurative language adds another layer to this negotiation. Metaphor and analogy can make abstract knowledge imaginable by connecting unfamiliar ideas to familiar experience (Cameron, 2003; Littlemore & Low, 2006). Awareness of metaphoric organization can also improve retention of figurative expressions in EFL learning (Boers, 2000). At the same time, figurative language requires inferential work. Learners must recognize that a literal interpretation is insufficient, identify a relevant context, and infer an intended meaning. Recent research continues to show that metaphor comprehension varies with linguistic proficiency and cognitive resources (Alipour & Ranjbar, 2024). What functions as intellectually stimulating indirection for one learner may function as exclusion for another.

The archived interviews analyzed in this study provide a particularly useful window into this tension. Lecturers described using ambiguity to stimulate critical thinking, identify responsive students, beautify language, enliven difficult lessons, and indirectly rebuke students. Students described analogous practices as memorable and challenging, but also as confusing, intimidating, or damaging when used excessively in correction. Their accounts show that figurative language cannot be classified in advance as empowering or disempowering. Its effects depend on context, proficiency, explanation, interpersonal sensitivity, and the institutional authority of the speaker.

Existing studies have examined power relations in EFL classrooms, teacher control of interaction, learner initiatives, questioning, and metaphor in language learning. However, these lines of inquiry are often treated separately. Studies of power often focus on classroom management, turn-taking, or pedagogical reform (Brooks, 2016a; Oral, 2013; Qoyyimah & Bargallie, 2026), while figurative-language research often focuses on vocabulary, comprehension, or metaphoric competence. Less attention has been paid to figurative language itself as a power-bearing classroom practice: a resource through which lecturers' scaffold, diagnose, discipline, affiliate, and authorize meanings.

This study addresses that gap through a thematic reanalysis of lecturer and student interviews. Rather than treating language and power, EFL classroom interaction, and figurative language as separate variables, it treats them as interconnected analytical domains. The study asks: (1) How do EFL lecturers use figurative and nonliteral language to exercise pedagogical, epistemic, disciplinary, and relational power? (2) How do students interpret and respond to these practices? and (3) Under what conditions does figurative language expand or constrain comprehension and participation? The study contributes a five-theme account and a Figurative Power Cycle that explains how classroom linguistic choices produce divergent outcomes.

Method

Research design and philosophical position

This article reports a secondary qualitative analysis (Clark, 1999) of archived interview transcripts. The design is interpretive and social constructionist because the study is

concerned with how lecturers and students ascribe meaning to classroom language practices rather than with measuring a fixed effect. Power is treated as relational and discursively produced, while participant accounts are treated as situated interpretations rather than transparent recordings of classroom events.

The analysis used a hybrid inductive-deductive thematic approach (Proudfoot, 2023). Deductively, language-and-power concepts sensitized the analysis to authority, knowledge, discipline, face, distance, and agency. Inductively, codes were generated from recurring participant expressions concerning context, critical thinking, difficulty, motivation, shame, formality, curiosity, and clarification. This combination preserved the conceptual focus while allowing unanticipated patterns to appear.

Data source, context, and participants

The uploaded appendix had verbatim interview transcripts from an English Education Program. The dataset included three lecturer interviews and fifteen student interviews conducted in April 2015. One lecturer taught Cross-Cultural Understanding and two taught Research on English Language Teaching. Student demographic details were not included in the archive. To protect identity and standardize reporting, lecturer codes X2, Y2, and Z2 were recast as L1-L3, and student codes A2-O2 were recast as S1-S15.

Participant group	Codes	Number	Available contextual information
Lecturers	L1-L3	3	L1: Cross-Cultural Understanding; L2-L3: Research on ELT
Students	S1-S15	15	English Education Program students; individual demographic details unavailable
Total	-	18	Semi-structured interviews conducted in April 2015

Data preparation and translation

The transcripts were read repeatedly and organized into a participant-by-question matrix. Lecturer and student accounts were compared to identify convergence, divergence, and negative cases. The source language was predominantly Indonesian with embedded English examples. Quotations used in the findings were translated into English while preserving the pragmatic force of the original. Embedded English expressions, such as 'I have been waiting for you for ages,' 'refresh,' and 'the grade remains, but the knowledge has gone,' were retained or minimally edited for readability.

Because the archive did not include audio recordings, demographic profiles, consent forms, or the original ethics approval record, the analysis does not claim access to these materials. Before journal submission, the authors should insert the original institutional ethics information and confirm permission for secondary use of the archived data.

Thematic analysis process

The analysis followed the recursive logic of Braun, V., & Clarke (2006); Braun & Clarke (2021); Clarke & Braun (2017) and the model-building orientation described by Naeem, et al. (2024). First, the complete dataset was familiarized through repeated reading. Second, semantic codes were assigned to explicit statements, including contextual analogy, diagnostic ambiguity, critical-thinking challenge, correction by hyperbole, face threat, formality distance, informal solidarity, and clarification looking for. Third, related

codes were clustered into broader categories. Fourth, categories were reviewed against every lecturer and student account, including deviant cases. Fifth, five themes were defined and named. Sixth, relationships among themes were integrated into the Figurative Power Cycle.

Descriptive counts were used only to show the distribution of viewpoints, not to convert the qualitative study into a statistical design. For example, all fifteen students requested language simplification when they did not understand; all fifteen evaluated analogy positively; fourteen rejected excessive corrective language and one accepted it only if it did not become personal; and preferences for direct versus indirect meaning were divided, showing that no single register or semantic style was universally preferred. The complete research process is summarized in Figure 1.

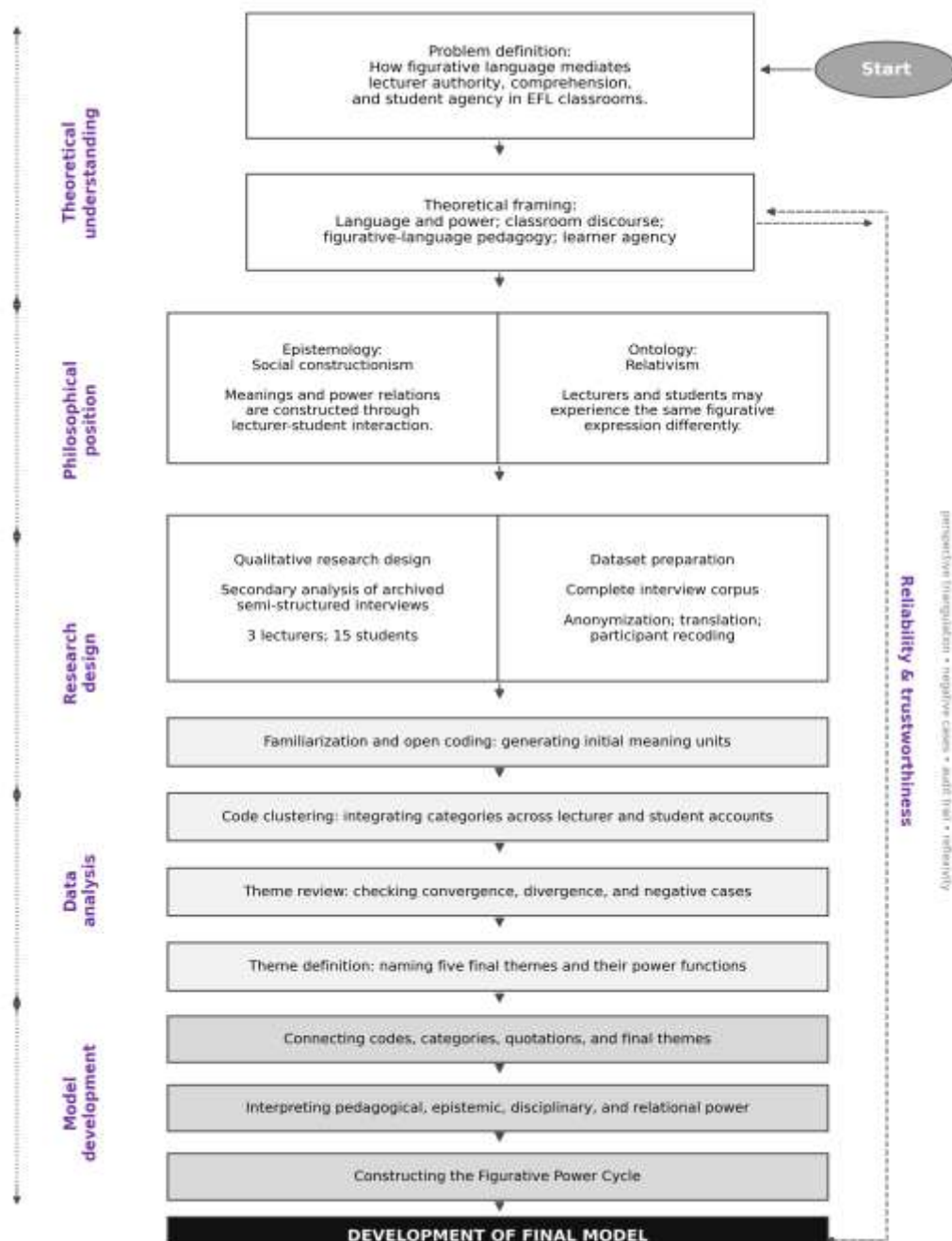


Figure 1: Research process

Trustworthiness

Credibility was supported through perspective triangulation between lecturers and students, sustained comparison across all eighteen interviews, and attention to negative cases. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining a transparent code-to-theme matrix and by reporting how descriptive patterns informed, but did not determine, interpretation. Confirmability was addressed by distinguishing participants' statements from the study's theoretical interpretation. Transferability is supported through a detailed account of the participants, courses, linguistic practices, and limits of the archived dataset (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Table 2. Code-to-theme development

Main theme	Illustrative codes	Power process	Dominant student outcome	Counter-pattern
1. Contextual figurative scaffolding	Analogy; metaphor; concrete example; life-world connection	Pedagogical mediation	Faster comprehension; recall; wider knowledge	Symbolic examples failed when unfamiliar or unexplained
2. Productive ambiguity and gatekeeping	Ambiguous wording; inference; critical-thinking test; rhetorical probe	Epistemic selection and evaluation	Curiosity, vocabulary growth, reasoning	Confusion among less-proficient students; demand for simplification
3. Hyperbolic correction and face threat	Indirect rebuke; exaggeration; shame; self-monitoring	Disciplinary regulation	Awareness of error for some	Reduced confidence, offense, silence, reluctance to speak
4. Register shifting and relational power	Formal English; slang; everyday speech; code-mixing; humor	Distance management and legitimacy	Relaxation, approachability, authentic language exposure	Some students preferred formal academic norms
5. Negotiated agency and contingent uptake	Dictionary use; peer inquiry; lecturer clarification; preference negotiation	Redistribution of interpretive authority	Learner initiative and meaning negotiation	Direct and indirect preferences remained divided

Results

Figure 2 visualizes how the interview data were transformed from recurring keywords into interpretive codes, five themes, power-related concepts, analytical assertions, and the final Figurative Power Cycle.

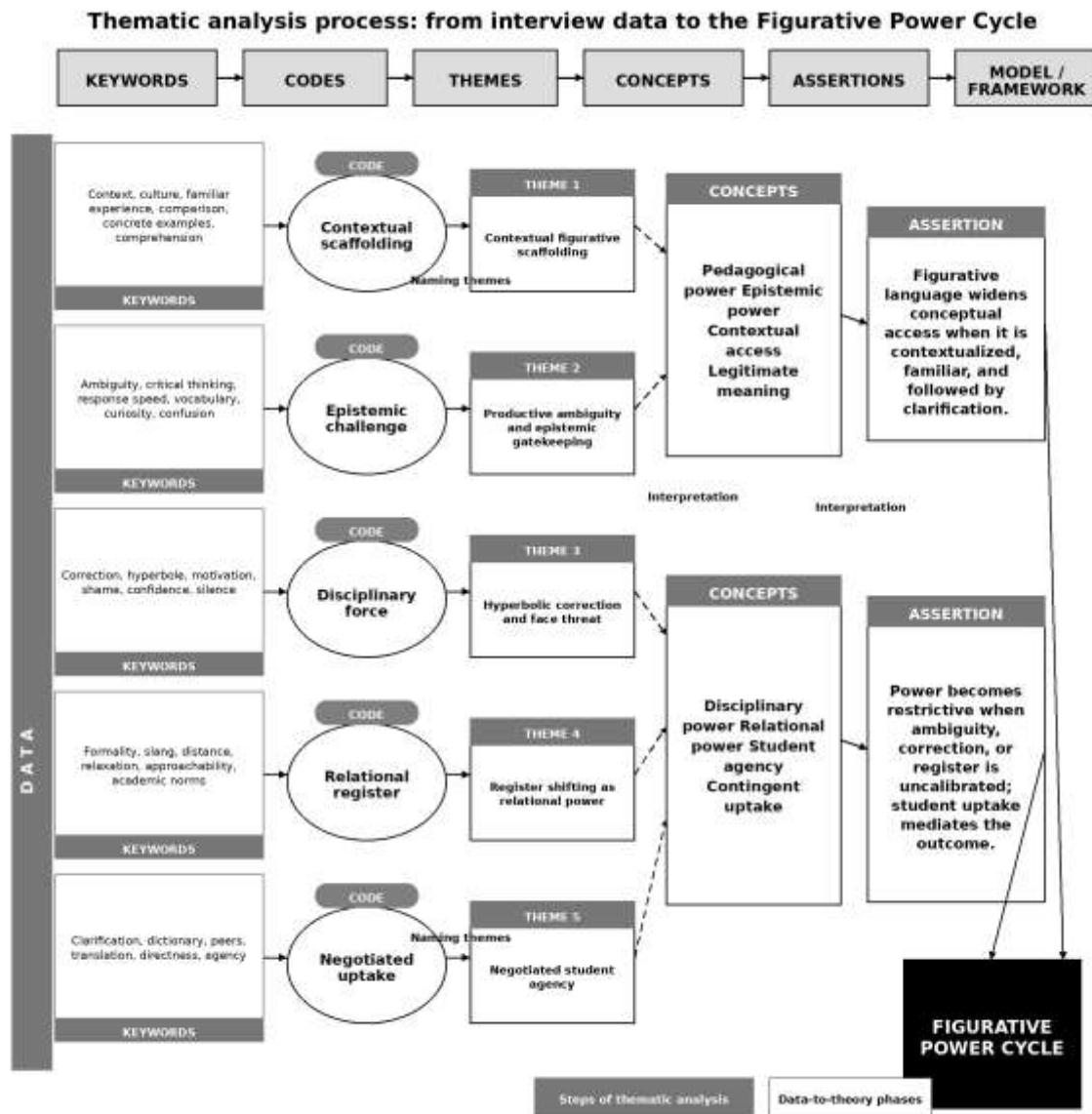


Figure 2. Thematic analysis process from interview data to the Figurative Power Cycle

Main Theme 1: Contextual figurative scaffolding

Codes: contextual analogy; metaphor; personification; concrete illustration; students' life-world; semantic expansion

Keywords: context, familiar experience, culture, comparison, concrete example, comprehension, memory

The first theme concerns the pedagogical use of figurative language to make abstract content accessible. All three lecturers emphasized contextualization. L1 described trying to 'enter' students' world, L2 moved from examples in students' lives to theory, and L3 stated that comparison should be used according to students' needs. Figurative language therefore operated as pedagogical power: lecturers selected a familiar frame through which the target concept could be seen.

"I try to enter their world, or I explain according to the context." (L1)

"I often give examples based on students' lives in their environment, and then I return to the theory." (L2)

The clearest illustration was L1's explanation of culture shock. The lecturer compared a person within their own culture to a fish in water and then asked how the fish would feel outside the water. The analogy organized an unfamiliar cultural concept around embodied experience. Rather than presenting a definition alone, the lecturer controlled the path of understanding by selecting the source domain, inviting students to map comfort and displacement onto cultural experience.

Students strongly endorsed this form of explanation. All fifteen evaluated analogy positively. They described comparisons as faster to understand, easier to imagine, more detailed, and useful for connecting knowledge across courses. S2 stated that without comparison, an explanation based only on talk could be difficult to understand. S14 emphasized that logical comparisons allowed students to visualize the lecturer's meaning.

"It is understood more quickly when it is compared. If the lecturer only talks and there is no comparison, it seems difficult to understand." (S2)

"I agree when the lecturer compares things that make sense, because then we can imagine what the lecturer means." (S14)

Personification and symbolic examples produced a similar but more conditional pattern. Most students understood them when the symbol referred to objects in their immediate environment or when a simple example accompanied it. S3 said that linking the explanation to the real world made it easier to absorb, while S15 understood a symbol when it was 'around us.' Two students did not understand such expressions, and two others said comprehension depended on the example. The theme therefore reveals that figurative scaffolding is not inherently accessible: its pedagogical force depends on shared experience and explicit mapping.

Lecturers' control over the source domain can be enabling because it reduces conceptual distance, but it also places them in the position of defining the preferred analogy and the correct interpretation. Students receive access to the concept through a frame selected by the lecturer. Pedagogical power is productive here, yet it remains asymmetrical.

Main Theme 2: Ambiguity as productive challenge and epistemic gatekeeping

Codes: diagnostic ambiguity; critical-thinking challenge; semantic multiplicity; rhetorical probing; clarification after difficulty

Keywords: ambiguity, quick response, critical thinking, vocabulary, context, curiosity, confusion, simplification

The second theme captures the dual role of ambiguity. Lecturers presented ambiguous or indirect language as a way to cultivate critical thinking, introduce contextual meanings, and assess responsiveness. L1 used 'I have been waiting for you for ages' to demonstrate that meaning depends on context. L2 described ambiguity more explicitly as a diagnostic instrument.

"I often give ambiguous words because I want to see the students' responses - who responds quickly and who does not." (L2)

This account turns ambiguity into epistemic gatekeeping. The lecturer not only teaches multiple meanings but also uses the difficulty to distinguish students who are perceived as quick or slow. Because the lecturer knows the intended answer and decides when clarification is necessary, ambiguity reinforces the lecturer's authority as the arbiter of legitimate interpretation. Rhetorical questions served a related function. L2 used them to

gauge understanding through verbal and nonverbal responses, while L3 viewed rhetoric as training for negotiation and argument at university level.

Students recognized the productive side of ambiguity. Eight expressed clear liking, three were ambivalent, and four disliked it. Positive responses emphasized curiosity, vocabulary growth, reasoning, and active involvement. S3 valued the challenge of finding the actual meaning; S10 said ambiguous language increased vocabulary; and S15 described it as intellectually demanding and a source of new knowledge.

"I like it because we are challenged to become more involved and to find the actual meaning of the word." (S3)

"I like ambiguous words because they challenge us and give us new knowledge." (S15)

Negative and ambivalent responses reveal the boundary between productive difficulty and exclusion. Students with limited vocabulary described ambiguity as too difficult, potentially leading to an interpretation different from the lecturer's intention. Every student expected the lecturer to simplify the language when comprehension failed. This unanimous expectation is analytically important: students did not reject intellectual challenge, but they resisted being left alone within uncertainty.

"I do not like it because it is difficult to understand." (S6)

"I hope the lecturer simplifies the language because simple language is easier to understand." (S15)

Indirect meaning generated an almost balanced division. Six students preferred direct meaning for speed and clarity, six preferred indirect meaning for reasoning and curiosity, and three preferred a contextual or varied combination. This distribution shows that epistemic power becomes legitimate when challenge is calibrated. Indirection can open a space for inquiry, but only if lecturers monitor uptake and provide repair. Otherwise, the practice transforms proficiency differences into participation differences.

Main Theme 3: Hyperbolic correction as disciplinary power and face threat

Codes: hyperbolic rebuke; indirect criticism; motivational shame; symbolic punishment; task-focused correction; face threat

Keywords: correction, exaggeration, shame, motivation, offense, confidence, silence, self-monitoring

The third theme concerns figurative language used to regulate conduct. Two lecturers endorsed hyperbolic or indirect correction. L2 offered the expression 'the grade remains, but the knowledge has gone' to criticize students who obtained high marks but could no longer answer questions. The lecturer interpreted students' lowered heads and embarrassment as evidence that the message motivated self-recognition.

"The grade remains, but the knowledge has gone. The grade is A on paper, but when they are asked, they have forgotten the knowledge." (L2)

L3 described figurative correction as a verbal 'hit' for adult students who were lazy or attended class carelessly. The intended effect was not physical coercion but symbolic discipline: students should recognize that they were being indirectly criticized and examine themselves.

"They no longer need to be hit, but they must be 'hit' with current language so that they realize they are being criticized and examine themselves." (L3)

These accounts align with disciplinary power because the utterance aims to produce self-surveillance. The lecturer does not merely identify an error; the figurative rebuke invites students to judge their own seriousness, knowledge, or character. L1, however, rejected hyperbole in correction because the recipient might not understand it. This negative case shows that lecturers themselves were aware that indirect criticism can fail pragmatically.

Student responses were substantially more critical. Fourteen students rejected excessive language in correction, while one accepted it only when it did not become personal and remained focused on the error. Students preferred direct, simple, task-specific feedback. They associated hyperbolic correction with damaged character, offense, reduced enthusiasm, embarrassment, and reluctance to participate.

"No. It should go directly to the point where the error is." (S2)

"I do not agree with excessive correction because it will make us less enthusiastic. We will feel inferior and may be reluctant to express an opinion again." (S14)

"It may be excessive, but it should not offend the student personally and should focus only on the mistake." (S15)

The asymmetry between lecturer intention and student reception is central. Lecturers framed hyperbole as motivation; students framed it as a possible threat to identity and participation. The same figurative expression may produce compliance without learning, visible embarrassment without conceptual repair, or silence mistaken for reflection. Disciplinary power is therefore the most ethically fragile use of figurative language in the dataset.

Main Theme 4: Register shifting as relational power

Codes: formal register; informal speech; slang; everyday expressions; code-mixing; humor; academic legitimacy

Keywords: distance, fear, approachability, relaxation, authenticity, boredom, politeness, academic norms

The fourth theme shows that power was negotiated not only through figurative meaning but also through register. All lecturers valued some use of everyday or slang expressions. L1 saw slang as important for learning the language of native-speaker conversation. L2 described it as a means of reviving a class burdened by difficult material. L3 saw it as potentially engaging but cautioned that lecturers should consider students' characteristics and university-level expectations.

"Slang can make the classroom atmosphere come alive, so students do not remain gloomy because the material is difficult." (L2)

Students linked register directly to social distance. Eleven favored informal language either clearly or conditionally, whereas four preferred predominantly formal academic language. The supportive group explained that exclusively formal language could make lecturers seem distant, cause fear, and discourage questions. Informality was associated with relaxation, faster understanding, and a more approachable relationship.

"If the language is always formal, there is distance between lecturer and student. Students become reluctant to ask questions or express opinions." (S1)

"Sometimes we need both. Informal language makes us more relaxed." (S4)

The counter-position was not a rejection of relationship but a concern for academic legitimacy. Some students wanted formal language because the university is a formal setting and because academic English should be learned as such. One student accepted slang only when the class became boring; another wanted lecturers to explicitly distinguish when formal and informal forms are appropriate.

"I prefer the lecturer to use formal language, but I also expect the lecturer to explain which form is informal, which is formal, and when each is used." (S14)

Register shifting therefore functioned as relational power: lecturers could enlarge or reduce symbolic distance. Formality authorized academic seriousness but could intensify hierarchy; informality redistributed interactional comfort but could blur expectations. The most inclusive practice in the data was not unrestricted slang but transparent, purposeful movement between registers.

Main Theme 5: Negotiated student agency and contingent uptake

Codes: clarification seeking; dictionary use; peer consultation; lecturer consultation; interpretive resistance; preference negotiation

Keywords: agency, repair, inquiry, participation, proficiency, directness, variation, boredom, negotiation

The final theme integrates students' responses across the dataset. When students encountered difficult words or phrases, all fifteen reported an active strategy: consulting a dictionary, asking a peer, asking the lecturer, translating, or searching the internet. Figurative difficulty therefore did not automatically silence students. It often generated learner initiative and distributed meaning-making beyond the lecturer.

However, these strategies also reveal unequal access. Learners with stronger vocabulary could treat ambiguity as an interesting puzzle, whereas learners with weaker vocabulary depended on repair. Student agency was most visible when the classroom permitted clarification without loss of face. When formal language created fear or hyperbolic correction created embarrassment, the willingness to exercise that agency decreased.

"We are already university students, so we should be able to use our reasoning." (S6)

"Indirect meaning makes us think about what the lecturer actually means." (S13)

The distribution of preferences further demonstrates negotiated rather than uniform agency. Six students preferred direct language, six preferred indirect language, and three preferred a contextual mixture. S15's response most clearly articulated the negotiated position.

"The most interesting approach is varied use of direct and indirect meaning because it keeps us from becoming bored in learning." (S15)

This theme reframes students as interpretive participants rather than passive recipients. They accepted, resisted, qualified, and redirected lecturers' language choices. Their recurring demand was not for the elimination of figurative language, but for contingent use: appropriate to context, matched to proficiency, followed by explanation, and sensitive to interpersonal consequences.

The Figurative Power Cycle

The relationships among the five themes are summarized in the Figurative Power Cycle. Linguistic forms do not carry a fixed power effect. Their consequences emerge through a sequence in which a lecturer selects a figurative-discursive resource, enacts a power function, encounters proficiency- and relationship-sensitive uptake, and then either repairs or intensifies the original effect.

Figure 3. The Figurative Power Cycle in EFL classroom interaction

Linguistic resources	Power function	Moderating conditions	Student uptake	Feedback and adjustment
Metaphor, analogy, ambiguity, hyperbole, rhetorical questions, contrast, register shift	Scaffold concepts; define legitimate meaning; diagnose knowledge; regulate conduct; manage distance	Proficiency; familiarity; context; face sensitivity; academic norms; opportunity to ask	Comprehension, curiosity, vocabulary, reasoning, participation OR confusion, shame, silence, resistance	Clarification; simplification; contextual example; code-mixing; direct correction; rebalanced register
Lecturer choice	Authority enacted	Contingency	Agency or constraint	Cycle continues

Discussion

The findings prove that figurative language is a mechanism of classroom power because it organizes access to concepts, differentiates knowers, regulates conduct, and configures social distance. Its power is neither oppressive nor automatically emancipatory. The same practice can scaffold one student and gatekeep another. The central analytical issue is therefore calibration: how lecturers match linguistic difficulty and interpersonal force to students' resources and the pedagogical purpose.

First, the near-unanimous support for analogy confirms the pedagogical importance of shared experiential frames. This is consistent with Cameron (2003) account of metaphor as a negotiated resource in educational discourse and with Littlemore and Low (2006) argument that figurative thinking supports multiple dimensions of language competence. The students' responses also align with (Boers, 2000) , whose EFL experiments showed that metaphor awareness can support retention. The present study extends this literature by showing that analogy is simultaneously a power practice: the lecturer chooses the comparison, directs attention, and authorizes the mapping. Productive pedagogical power is evident when the frame is familiar, and the mapping is made explicit.

Second, ambiguity illustrates the link between cognitive challenge and epistemic hierarchy. Lecturers understood ambiguity as a means of training critical thinking and observing who could respond quickly. This resonates with classroom-discourse research showing that teacher questions can stimulate cognition while preserving teacher control of evaluation (Chin, 2006). The student data refine this point: ambiguity is welcomed when it opens a solvable problem and rejected when it becomes opaque. Because metaphor comprehension is influenced by proficiency and cognitive resources (Alipour & Ranjbar, 2024), an uncalibrated ambiguous prompt may misrecognize linguistic disadvantage as intellectual weakness.

Third, the contrast between lecturer and student views of hyperbolic correction reveals the disciplinary force of language. Lecturers interpreted indirect rebukes as motivational 'sentences' that cause students to recognize their errors. Students emphasized face threat, damaged confidence, and withdrawal. This divergence supports

a Foucauldian interpretation of power as productive of self-monitoring, but it also underscores Brown and Levinson's (1987) warning that communicative acts can threaten social identity. A bowed head may indicate reflection, but it may equally indicate embarrassment or disengagement. Corrective discourse should therefore be evaluated not by immediate compliance alone but by whether it preserves the learner's willingness to participate.

Fourth, register shifting demonstrates that classroom power has a relational dimension. Students who associated formality with fear and distance were not necessarily rejecting academic English; they were describing the interactional consequences of a register that positioned the lecturer as inaccessible. This supports Walsh's (2011) emphasis on speech modification and interactional space. Informal language can redistribute comfort and create openings for learner initiatives (Waring, 2011), but the countercases show that students also value explicit academic norms. Strategic alternation, rather than either permanent formality or unrestricted slang, appears most responsive.

Finally, the data challenge a binary view of teacher power versus student agency. Students were active interpreters who used dictionaries, peers, lecturers, translation, and online searches. They also articulated clear limits on acceptable correction and register. This resembles the subtle shifts of authority identified by Brooks (2016) and the negotiated classroom relations described by Oral (2013). It also accords with recent Indonesian evidence that pedagogical authority is contingent and can strengthen when interaction becomes difficult (Qoyyimah & Bargallie, 2026). The Figurative Power Cycle captures this contingency by showing that power effects are completed through uptake, not determined by the lecturer's intention alone.

Conclusion

Figurative language in EFL classrooms is not merely decorative language and not merely a vocabulary problem. It is a practical means through which lecturers make knowledge accessible, determine legitimate meanings, evaluate students, regulate conduct, and manage social distance. Its effects are fundamentally ambivalent.

The interview data generated five themes. Contextual analogy and metaphor generally functioned as productive scaffolding. Ambiguity promoted curiosity and reasoning for some students but became epistemic gatekeeping when it exceeded linguistic resources. Hyperbolic correction was intended as motivation but was widely perceived by students as a threat to confidence and participation. Formal-informal register shifts redistributed distance and legitimacy. Across all themes, students exercised agency through inquiry, resistance, preference, and clarification.

The Figurative Power Cycle explains this ambivalence by locating outcomes in the interaction among linguistic form, power function, moderating conditions, student uptake, and subsequent repair. The pedagogical implication is not to remove figurative language from EFL teaching. It is to use it transparently, contextually, and responsively so that linguistic creativity expands participation rather than becoming another test students must pass before they are allowed to understand.

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