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Article

Pragmatic Strategies of Genuine Expression in Senior High School English Teachers' Classroom Management Discourse: A Classroom Observation-Based Analysis

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Abstract: Teacher emotional labor involves not only emotion regulation but also classroom management and teacher–student interaction. While research has classified emotional labor strategies, less is known about how genuine expression is organized in classroom discourse. Drawing on speech act theory and face theory, including positive face and negative face, this study examines the pragmatic organization and instructional functions of genuine expression in senior high school English classrooms. Data comprised 25 classroom episodes involving three teachers, collected through non-participant observation and supplemented by informal post-lesson self-reports. Thirteen episodes showing preliminary discourse-level features of genuine expression were analyzed, with relevant self-reports used to assess consistency between teachers' outward expressions and their reported judgments or emotions. Three recurrent, non-mutually exclusive patterns emerged: contextualized immediate affirmation, self-deprecating humor combined with praise, and evaluation combined with mitigation. These patterns organized evaluative feedback, error management, and classroom criticism through adjustments in the target, form, intensity, timing, and sequencing of teacher talk. Rather than guaranteeing facework or learning outcomes, they created conditions for affirming competence, reducing confrontation in public correction, and organizing student response opportunities. The study links emotional labor strategies to the sequential organization of classroom discourse. Ultimately, these findings inform the improvement of evaluative feedback, the management of instructional errors, and classroom criticism, offering valuable insights for teacher training programs aiming to enhance pedagogical effectiveness and foster positive classroom environments.

Keywords: emotional labor; classroom management; genuine expression; face management; teacher discourse

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1. Introduction

Teacher emotional engagement involves both the management of personal affective responses and the conduct of classroom interactions with students. In senior high school English classrooms, activities such as questioning, reading aloud, and error correction require students to display their language proficiency in front of peers. Teachers' expressions of approval or disapproval—and how they respond to unfolding classroom incidents—not only signal evaluative stances but may also influence students' readiness to participate and articulate ideas. Even when teachers convey authentic feelings openly or acknowledge their own mistakes without reservation, such expressions do not inherently yield pedagogically effective outcomes. The purpose, degree, timing, and subsequent handling of these expressions must still align closely with instructional goals and tasks.

Prior research has approached teacher expression from two main angles: strategies for managing affective demands and the functional roles of classroom discourse. Yet these strands remain largely disconnected. The first line of inquiry seldom traces how authentic

affective expression is structured discursively across real-time classroom episodes, while the second typically does not assess whether teachers' utterances reflect their concurrent emotional states. A more integrated approach is therefore needed—one that examines how authentic expression operates in evaluation, error correction, and classroom coordination by triangulating observed classroom interaction with teachers' reflective accounts after lessons [1].

Grounded in speech act theory and politeness theory, and informed by classroom observations of three senior high school English teachers, this study investigates the pragmatic structures through which authentic affective expression is realized and its instructional contributions [2, 3]. It addresses two questions: What patterns of pragmatic organization characterize authentic affective expression in senior high school English teachers' classroom management discourse? How do these patterns uphold participants' social dignity while fostering student responsiveness and advancing instructional objectives?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Research on Teacher Emotional Labor and Genuine Expression

Research on emotional management initially focused on conceptual development and the differentiation of regulatory strategies [4]. Early work defined this phenomenon as the deliberate regulation of internal feelings to produce observable facial and bodily expressions in professional settings, distinguishing between superficial display adjustments and deeper cognitive–affective alignment. Subsequent methodological refinement further identified authentic expression—the outward manifestation of spontaneously experienced emotions—as a distinct category, clarifying that it is not merely the inverse of superficial display. These contributions laid foundational groundwork for strategy taxonomy. However, insights derived from commercial service environments and general occupational contexts offer limited explanatory power for the dynamic, interactional processes through which authentic expression manifests in classroom discourse.

Within teacher education scholarship, validated instruments adapted for use with primary and secondary school educators have advanced measurement reliability [5, 6]. Yet such scales remain inherently constrained in capturing how specific strategies are enacted within discrete instructional episodes. Qualitative investigations involving senior high school educators revealed nuanced distinctions within authentic expression—particularly between the spontaneous emergence of positive affect and the intentional articulation of negative affect—thereby shifting analytical attention from static measurement toward situated pedagogical practice. A recent bibliometric synthesis highlighted recurring thematic clusters, including emotion management, professional identity formation, and emotional demands in teaching roles. A subsequent comprehensive review observed persistent methodological reliance on self-reported data. Consequently, improvements in classification frameworks and assessment tools do not, by themselves, yield explanatory accounts of how authentic expression unfolds in real-time classroom interactions.

Domestic scholarship has consistently framed teachers' emotional expression as inseparable from professional practice and relational context. Emphasis has been placed on how professional identity, interlocutor dynamics, and situational specificity shape affective enactment, underscoring the need to situate authentic expression within the emotional expectations of teaching and the temporal flow of instructional events [5]. Empirical work based on interviews and classroom case materials with novice secondary English educators indicated relatively higher frequencies of both superficial display and authentic expression compared to deeper cognitive–affective alignment. An emergent norm—'leveraging affect to advance instructional objectives'—was identified, suggesting that authentic expression functions not only as personal affect transmission but also as a pedagogically embedded practice intersecting with learning goals, relational authority,

and ethical responsiveness. Studies conducted across western regions of China reported comparatively frequent use of authentic expression and deeper alignment strategies, while parallel investigations examined emotional management patterns among pre-service senior high school English educators. A recent synthesis confirmed that existing research still presents opportunities to deepen analysis of localized contextual variables. Nevertheless, given predominant reliance on surveys, interviews, and decontextualized case narratives, these studies lack the granularity required to reconstruct the sequential, move-by-move organization through which authentic expression is co-constructed in live classroom events.

2.2. Research on Classroom Discourse and Face Management

Classroom discourse research offers another important perspective. Prior work has linked oral corrective feedback to learners' subsequent uptake and repair, while other studies have examined how teacher talk can either facilitate or hinder student participation. These findings suggest that teacher evaluation and error correction should be analyzed in relation to students' immediate responses and their opportunities to engage [7]. Further research has situated questioning, directives, and feedback within concrete instructional activities, clarifying their roles in structuring classroom interaction and eliciting student contributions. Drawing on video recordings from college English teaching contests, one study observed that teachers employed discursive resources—including hedges, apologies, and explanatory statements—to soften potential interpersonal threats associated with questioning, error correction, and negative feedback. Thus, evaluation and error correction serve not only pedagogical functions but also contribute to maintaining respectful interpersonal dynamics in the classroom. However, due to the highly performative context of teaching contests, such observations require careful interpretation when applied to everyday classroom settings.

Overall, research on emotional regulation in teaching has thoroughly documented strategy types and contextual influences, yet seldom investigates how authentic expression unfolds across real-time classroom events [4]. Meanwhile, classroom discourse research has illuminated the interactional purposes of evaluation, error correction, and mitigation devices, but typically does not assess whether teachers' verbal expressions align with their internal affective states. This study bridges these two strands by analyzing authentic expression as it emerges within specific classroom episodes and their sequential interactional development.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Genuine Expression

This study defines genuine expression as a basic consistency between teachers' outward expressions and their judgments or emotions during a classroom management event. An analytical perspective emphasizing alignment between observable expression and internal psychological states informs this definition. However, this conceptualization does not conflate such alignment with strategic regulation of expression [8]. Genuine expression cannot be determined solely from linguistic form; its identification requires integration of the unfolding classroom event, observable nonverbal behavior, and available post-lesson self-reports, with conclusions qualified according to evidentiary sufficiency. Where relevant evidence is unavailable, no definitive inference is drawn regarding teachers' internal emotional states.

3.2. Face Theory

Positive face and negative face refer, respectively, to the desire for approval and the need to preserve freedom of action. Further distinctions include quality face and social identity face, which help clarify the targets of evaluation. In this study, teachers' and students' images of competence are treated as quality face, the class's shared reputation as social identity face, and students' room to explain, revise, or choose their mode of participation as negative face. Face maintenance or repair refers to the conditions

provided by discourse for reducing evaluative threats, affirming competence, or restoring participation. It does not imply that students' subjective experiences have been verified.

3.3. Analytical Framework

This study situates the identification of illocutionary force, the assessment of genuine expression, and face analysis within the same classroom event sequence. Identifying illocutionary force clarifies whether the teacher performs acts such as praising, criticizing, acknowledging an error, or teasing. Assessing genuine expression examines the relationship between outward expression and the teacher's judgment or emotion at the time. Face analysis explains how the relevant discourse handles evaluations of teachers' and students' competence and organizes opportunities for student responses [9]. Moreover, not all classroom expressions that reflect teachers' actual feelings constitute regulated emotional conduct. They fall within the analytical scope of regulated emotional conduct only when they respond to professional requirements—such as encouraging participation, maintaining order, protecting self-esteem, and sustaining a professional image—and when they involve deliberate management of expressive manner and interpersonal consequences.

4. Research Design

In September 2026, this study conducted non-participant observations of three senior high school English teachers with 11, 27, and 33 years of teaching experience, respectively. The observed lessons covered exercise and examination review, reading, listening, grammar, and cultural knowledge. Pen-and-paper notes were taken on teacher talk, instructional events, and observable teacher and student responses. Following the observations, the researcher held informal conversations with the teachers about selected episodes to explore their pedagogical reasoning and emotional experiences at the time. These reflections were compiled into post-lesson self-reports. A total of 25 classroom episodes were documented, 11 of which were accompanied by post-lesson self-reports. Classroom records constituted the primary data source, while post-lesson self-reports served only as supplementary evidence. The classroom utterances cited in this study were reconstructed from on-site notes and should not be treated as verbatim transcripts produced from audio recordings.

Of the 25 episodes, 13 exhibiting preliminary discourse-level features of genuine expression were selected for focused analysis, including four from Teacher A, five from Teacher X, and four from Teacher L. Seven core episodes with complete event sequences and clearly identifiable combinations of illocutionary force were then selected for detailed presentation (see Table 1).

Table 1. Core Episodes and Their Evidential Uses

Code	Classroom Event	Post-lesson Self-report	Analytical Use
[A-6]	Class-level praise and individual encouragement	Available	Linking collective evaluation to individual encouragement
[X-11]	Immediate evaluation in a reading lesson	Unavailable	Feedback timing and participatory functions
[X-5]	Student correction and teacher self-deprecation	Unavailable	Combining the illocutionary forces of self-deprecation and praise

[L-3]	Correction of board writing and pedagogical transformation	Unavailable	Transforming an error into instructional content following self-deprecation
[L-4]	Teacher self-deprecation after supplementary content	Unavailable	A supplementary example of self-deprecating humor
[A-3]	Admonition and invitation following misinterpretation of task requirements	Available	Assessment of genuine expression and analysis of "admonition–repair"
[L-1]	Affirmation and correction following a hypothetical response	Available, but unrelated to the teacher's emotions during evaluation	The "affirmation–correction" sequence and the subsequent shift in learning tasks

The unit of analysis was the classroom event sequence, typically comprising the instructional event triggering the teacher's expression, the teacher's response, and relevant subsequent discourse. The analysis followed a thematic approach integrating theory-informed interpretation with open coding. Each classroom event was first reconstructed, then illocutionary forces were identified. Assessments of genuine expression were cross-checked against available post-lesson self-reports [10]. The face-related functions of the discourse were analyzed using established frameworks of face theory. Finally, recurrent combinations of illocutionary force were identified. For episodes where post-lesson self-reports addressed the teacher's judgments or emotions during the event, consistency between outward expressions and self-reported states was examined. For episodes supported only by classroom records—or where self-reports did not address the relevant psychological states—the analysis focused on discourse forms and interactional functions without inferring internal emotional states.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Contextualized Immediate Affirmation: Evaluative Feedback and Classroom Participation

After evaluating the class's performance, Teacher A invited the whole class to applaud and addressed a student who had provided an incorrect answer and did not join the applause with the phrase "Come on, accept yourself." This interaction involved two coordinated actions: group affirmation and individual encouragement. The teacher first acknowledged the class's collective effort through applause and then redirected attention to the individual student, thereby bridging external recognition and personal reflection. For a student who had just given an incorrect response, this follow-up shifted focus away from answer accuracy toward the student's stance toward their own learning experience. Although phrased as an imperative, the utterance was oriented not toward correcting content but toward fostering self-acceptance. However, the directive tone of "come on" combined with public attention may have limited the student's autonomy in deciding whether or how to respond, potentially introducing a different kind of interpersonal pressure. Thus, the episode reflects a dual dynamic—supportive yet constraining—and underscores that maintaining positive social identity cannot be presumed solely from the presence of encouraging language [11].

Teacher X delivered immediate verbal affirmations such as "wonderful" and "very good job" following students' responses. These expressions were broadly positive and functioned primarily through temporal proximity: feedback was delivered without delay

after each student's language output, establishing a clear link between the act of speaking and the teacher's acknowledgment [7]. Because the affirmations did not specify particular linguistic or cognitive strengths, their main role was to signal recognition of participation rather than to convey detailed evaluative information. Consequently, they do not support conclusions about whether students discerned the rationale behind the feedback or applied it to subsequent performance. No retrospective self-report data were collected for this instance. Therefore, this analysis does not interpret the emotional intensity of the teacher's delivery but focuses instead on how immediacy structures classroom feedback and supports student engagement.

Comparing these two instances reveals that the pedagogical impact of affirmative discourse extends beyond lexical choice. In the first case, the teacher coordinated group acknowledgment with personalized encouragement to connect shared classroom activity and individual reflection. In the second, affirmation was anchored to participation through precise timing—minimizing the interval between response and feedback. Effective pragmatic design need not rely on elaborate phrasing; it may instead emerge from deliberate decisions about whom to address and when to intervene, calibrated to unfolding instructional moments [2].

5.2. Self-Deprecating Humor Combined with Praise: Error Management and Teachers' Professional Image

When a student pointed out that Teacher X had omitted a suffix, the teacher responded, "Oh, you have such sharp eyes; my old eyes are failing me." This response combined two communicative functions: acknowledging an error and affirming the students [4]. "My old eyes are failing me" accepted the student's correction through self-deprecation, while "you have such sharp eyes" positioned the students as attentive observers. These functions were not merely co-occurring. Acknowledging the error removed the need for the teacher to justify or defend it, while affirmation positively recognized the students' contribution. Their questioning was thereby integrated into classroom learning rather than interpreted as a challenge to instructional authority. This combination reshaped the evaluative dynamic within the correction episode and aligns with findings indicating that self-directed humor can ease interpersonal dynamics. Its pedagogical function, however, must be interpreted in relation to the specific correction event rather than attributed solely to the humorous form.

Teacher L's board-writing correction episode further illustrates the relationship between error management and instructional content. After a student pointed out that she had written an extra letter, she laughed and asked, "Ah, how many s's did I write, then?" She subsequently transformed the error into a lexical differentiation task. Self-deprecation softened potential friction arising from the teacher's error, while the subsequent lexical differentiation extended the student's observation into shared learning content for the whole class. This suggests that teacher professionalism can also be understood through responsiveness to one's own oversights: acknowledging an oversight does not inherently compromise professional credibility, and the capacity to convert such moments into learning opportunities merits careful attention. "Mis Lin taught us only one sentence in French" provides a supplementary example of self-deprecating humor used to adjust classroom tone. It should be noted that the available data show only that teachers altered how errors were handled—by acknowledging mistakes, affirming students, or adapting instructional content. They do not establish that self-deprecating humor consistently sustains instructional authority or encourages students to initiate further corrections.

5.3. Evaluation Combined with Mitigation: Teachers' Actual Judgments and Student Response Opportunities

When several students in a high-achieving class misinterpreted the task requirements, the teacher remarked, "This should not have happened." After a student indicated difficulty understanding the question, the teacher responded, "That's all right. Then tell me how you understand it." The post-lesson self-report indicated that the teacher viewed these students as deserving of corrective feedback and attributed the raised tone

to an established classroom habit. This aligns the evaluative expression with the teacher's underlying judgment. Subsequently, the teacher softened her tone without retracting the initial evaluation. Thus, the mitigation in the following turn cannot be interpreted merely as surface-level tonal adjustment. The two utterances jointly formed an evaluative–diagnostic sequence: the first statement explicitly conveyed dissatisfaction and placed students under public scrutiny, while the second reduced the implication of blame and invited the student to articulate their interpretation. Classroom activity accordingly shifted from assessing answer accuracy to identifying conceptual or linguistic barriers. This "admonition–repair" pattern functioned not as simple reassurance following criticism, but as a responsive instructional adjustment informed by the student's subsequent explanation.

Another episode illustrates how mitigation may precede content correction. In response to a student's unrealistic hypothetical answer, the teacher first affirmed, "Very good, very good. Sit down, please," before adding, "But it seems unlikely to happen, though." Positive evaluation and substantive correction were separated into distinct turns. The hedge "seems" and the utterance-final softener "though" attenuated the force of the negative assessment, yet the follow-up still identified a flaw in the answer's practical plausibility. "Sit down, please" simultaneously concluded the student's speaking turn. The teacher then invited contributions from other students and guided whole-class sentence construction [8, 12]. Rather than preserving an immediate opportunity for the original student to revise, the sequence redirected the learning activity toward collective participation. Since no break-time inquiry addressed the teacher's real-time judgment or affective state, this analysis relies exclusively on observable classroom discourse and refrains from inferring internal cognitive or emotional processes.

Both episodes involve evaluation paired with mitigating expressions, yet they differ markedly in how subsequent responses are structured. In the first case, the teacher invited the student to clarify their understanding immediately after the evaluative remark, thereby enabling diagnosis of individual comprehension difficulties. In the second, the teacher concluded the student's turn after affirmation and correction, then advanced instruction through peer responses and whole-class practice. Consequently, the instructional function of evaluation combined with mitigation depends not only on the sequencing of positive and negative feedback, but also on how response opportunities and learning tasks are distributed among participants [13]. The episodes further diverge in evidentiary basis for interpreting authenticity of expression: the post-lesson self-report supports inference about the teacher's actual judgment in the first case, whereas the second serves solely to examine discourse structure and pedagogical design.

5.4. Pedagogical Organization Mechanisms of Genuine Expression and Their Boundaries

The three patterns of pragmatic organization were identified according to their primary functions in classroom events and do not constitute mutually exclusive or fixed categories. Contextualized immediate affirmation links affirmation to learning behavior by adjusting the target of evaluation and the timing of feedback. Self-deprecating humor combined with praise reconfigures evaluative relationships in correction episodes, creating conditions for teachers to acknowledge errors and for students to continue participating. Evaluation combined with mitigation coordinates pedagogical judgment, public evaluation, and the allocation of response opportunities by organizing evaluation, mitigation, and subsequent tasks. While maintaining their pedagogical judgments, teachers can thus arrange explanations of difficulties or subsequent learning tasks in accordance with students' responses and instructional needs [12]. What the three patterns share is not the use of positive or humorous wording, but teachers' deliberate arrangement of the form, intensity, timing, and sequencing of expression in response to instructional events. Consistent with prior research emphasizing the cultural situatedness of emotional experience and the strategic use of emotion to support teaching objectives, this study further shows that genuine expression responds to instructional requirements through

teachers' specific arrangements of evaluation targets, feedback timing, and subsequent moves.

6. Conclusions and Limitations

This study identifies three patterns of pragmatic organization through which genuine expression is realized in senior high school English teachers' classroom management discourse: contextualized immediate affirmation, self-deprecating humor combined with praise, and evaluation combined with mitigation. The data suggest that the instructional significance of genuine expression depends not only on whether teachers communicate their actual judgments, but also on how such expression is embedded in evaluation, error correction, and classroom management to create conditions for student responses and instructional progression. The study contributes to research on genuine expression by situating its assessment within classroom event sequences and connecting strategy classifications with specific arrangements of interactional moves. Genuine expression can thereby be examined as an instructional practice in evaluative feedback, error management, and classroom criticism. In terms of face management, these patterns create conditions for maintaining or repairing teachers' and students' face by affirming students' competence, reducing the confrontational potential of public correction, and organizing explanations, revisions, and subsequent learning tasks. However, public evaluation and directive expressions may also generate new face-related pressure; their effects are neither unidirectional nor guaranteed.

The implications of these findings for teachers' classroom emotion regulation do not amount to a call for less criticism or more humor. Rather, teachers should attend to the relationship between emotional expression and instructional tasks. When evaluating students, they should consider which learning behavior an affirmation targets, when feedback occurs, and whether students are given opportunities after criticism to explain their understanding or revise their answers. When confronting their own errors, teachers should acknowledge what has happened while handling students' corrections appropriately, so that errors can be reintegrated into instructional content.

This study is limited by its data and case scope. Three cases and pen-and-paper records are insufficient to support generalizable conclusions and may have omitted intonation, pauses, and teacher and student responses. Because some episodes lacked post-lesson self-reports addressing teachers' judgments or emotions at the time, assessments of genuine expression remain constrained. Students' experiences were not examined through student interviews; face maintenance and classroom participation therefore refer only to conditions provided by the discourse and should not be treated as verified instructional effects. In addition, multiple coders were not involved in cross-checking the analysis, so the identification of illocutionary force and the derivation of categories may remain influenced by the researcher's interpretation. Future research could integrate audio and video recordings, stimulated-recall interviews, and student interviews to further examine the conditions under which different organizational patterns are used and how students respond to them.

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