

## Online EFL Classrooms: How Teacher Power Affects Attitudes Toward Learning?

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### Abstract

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In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers and students worldwide have embarked on vigorous knowledge discovering adventures as conventional teaching approaches have been challenged and reimagined. The drastic shift from traditional classrooms to virtual methods to avoid learning disruption has paved ways for new educational research needs. This research delves into the impact of teacher power on learning within online EFL classrooms, hoping to provide an insight to help teachers and students better understand their power relation in the digital era. Specifically, it inspects how EFL teachers use teacher power to impact learning in virtual environments. Data collected from a survey and focus group interviews with 465 participants reveal that expert, reward, and reference powers are used at high frequencies, while legitimate and coercive powers are found to be seldom or never utilized. Students respond positively to teachers' contingent exhibition of expertise, dedication, and genuine interest in their development. However, they express reservations about inconsistent communications of rules and expectations, which are likely to induce stress and negative attitudes towards learning. This information highlights a rather complex power dynamics within the studied context. Teachers are encouraged to critically reflect on their power practices to create more conducive learning environments for students in the modern era.

**Keywords:** online language classroom, technology-mediated learning, learning attitudes, teacher – student relation, teacher power

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### Introduction

Over the past few years, the realm of education has experienced remarkable transformations and advancements, with new methods, techniques, and strategies invented constantly to address new challenges for learning. While the COVID-19 pandemic has caused tremendous destruction, it has also paved ways for many unprecedented changes in the classrooms worldwide. To avoid lockdowns, closures, and interruptions, teachers and students have swiftly adapted to virtual platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams to continue their knowledge construction journey. This radical departure from the traditional blackboard classroom may introduce gaps in our understanding of some conventional educational concepts, among them the power dynamics between teachers and students (Kaufmann & Buckner, 2019; Willermark, 2021).

In fact, much research has investigated teacher-student power relations in face-to-face interactions. In the traditional classroom model, it is assumed that the communication of power by the teacher in the classroom is necessary for learning (Esmacili, Mohamadrezai & Mohamadrezai, 2015; Menges, 1977). Common perspectives have reinforced the idea that "students must submit to the teacher," (Menges, 1977), or "if teachers do not exercise authority, students cannot learn" (MxCroskey & Richmond, 1983). These beliefs had shaped our understanding of teacher-student power relation for a long time. However, since the start of the new millennium, there has been a growing interest in re-evaluating this power dynamic. Research has focused on how teacher wield power, the impact of teacher power on learning outcomes, or strategies for sharing power to foster participation and increase learning motivation (Diaz, Cochran, & Karlin, 2016; Kaufmann & Buckner, 2019; Paulsel, Chory-Assad, & Dunleavy, 2005).

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This study aims to contribute to the existing literature by reevaluating students' perceptions of teacher power utilization in the online EFL classroom necessitated by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it examines how teachers use power in virtual environments, how this affects students' learning attitudes, and whether the reinforcement of certain power leads to positive behaviour changes among students. By gaining a better understanding of these matters, the study hopes to provide valuable insights for teachers, students, and relevant stakeholders in EFL field to enhance teaching and learning in online settings. Specifically, the research aims to address the following questions: (1) How do teachers employ teacher power to influence students' attitudes towards learning in EFL online classrooms? (2) How effective is the teacher power use in online EFL classrooms and what are implications for teacher power use when teaching online?

Whereas there is abundant literature on teacher power, research on this matter has predominantly stemmed from North America or Europe, as revealed by a search into the database. There remains a noticeable dearth of reports from Vietnam or similar educational contexts, where this research is based. Hence, it is hoped that the study contributes a perspective to better understand classroom power dynamics from this geographical area. In addition, since qualitative data is taken into account, statistics could be explained in further details and with greater complexity. While there might be established knowledge on the way teachers practice power in virtual classrooms elsewhere in the literature, this investigation seeks to provide yet another perspective for a more comprehensive understanding and improved practice.

## Literature review

### Power

Power, synonymous with influence, control, authority, and dominion, is defined as the right or means to command or control others (Merriam Webster Dictionary). Dahl (1957) posited that power is a relation among people where the possessor of power occupies a superior position compelling the inferior party to do something that the latter "would not otherwise do" (p.203). French and Raven (1959) characterized power in terms of social influence with an ultimate goal to cause psychological change on the bearer (a person, a role, a norm, or a group), and framed power in five forms, namely, coercive, reward, reference, legitimate, and expert powers. In other words, power implies a social relation in which the party that owns power uses it to cause changes in the way others behave, think, or act.

Nevertheless, the interpretation of power could be quite different across different disciplines and settings. In the classroom, Hurt, Scott, and McCroskey (1978) emphasized that the teacher always employs power to control the students and maintained that "power refers to a teacher's ability to affect in some way the student's well-being beyond the student's own control," (p. 124). This viewpoint recommends that the teacher employs power to direct students toward their own welfare while students submit to teacher power whether they want it or not. Kearney (1987), on the other hand, upheld that "within the classroom, power refers to those resources which assist instructors in their attempts to influence the behaviour of students," (p. 45). In reality, conformance to teacher command varies hinging on students' willingness and interpretation of desired behavioural or attitudinal changes. As we enter the modern 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom, students could perceive teacher power quite differently due to the different roles the teacher might assume to deliver knowledge. According to Harmer (2015), teachers can take a variety of roles ranging from being a controller who tells students what to do to being a participant who takes part in activities just like a student. Students' perceptions of teacher power, hence, could change depending on which role the teacher is assuming.

According to French and Raven (1959), power could be categorized into five bases including reward, coercive, legitimate, reference, and expert power. While exertions of the prosocial power bases (reward, reference, and expert) increase attraction toward expected consequences, the use of the antisocial bases (coercive and legitimate) deters rule violations or unexpected behaviours. Specifically, the five power bases are construed as below:

*Reward power* is possessed by individuals who have control of rewards. In the classroom, the teacher can give rewards such as bonus points, praises, homework pass, positive notes to parents, teacher's gifts, priorities or access to limited or VIP school resources to students who make outstanding achievement or contributions, respond positively to teacher requests or class rules, and so on. The teacher can increase, decrease, or even remove rewards. In other words, expected behaviours or conformities to orders are likely to result in increase of incentives while nonconformities might result in the opposite. Reward power is utilized to draw positive responses, yet the desired effect might not work for students who do not find interest in getting rewards.

*Coercive power* is defined by the administration of punishments toward undesirable behaviours or responses to prevent them from happening again in the future. Common examples of punishments could be extra homework, loss

of bonus points, loss of recess time, loss of privileges, warnings to parents, and detention, etc. The threat of being sanctioned might cause individuals to comply with a requirement. Reward power and coercive power are like “carrot and stick,” with reward power increasing attraction toward the expected consequences, while coercive power keeps people from violating rules or behaving in unexpected ways.

*Legitimate power* is the authorized or legalized ability to influence others. As an individual who has an official position in the school, the teacher is conferred authority to make decisions or enforce regulations in their classroom. For example, the teacher can decide what materials to read, what units to study, what assignments count for grades, methods of learning, or models for interactions, among others. They are assigned by their institution to teach and make sure their students learn and make progress. In other words, the teacher has the right to influence students who have an obligation to accept this influence whether they want it or not.

*Reference power* is drawn on the basis of the student’s identification with the teacher. In this power relationship, the student is usually perceived as the less powerful and hence wants to identify themselves with the teacher who is regarded as being more powerful. This power is reinforced by the degree to which the student is attracted to the teacher, wants to act, behave, or believe in the way that the teacher does. The teacher might not be aware that a student is appealed to his or her ways of conduct, therefore, the control or use of this power might not be the same as other powers.

*Expert power* is founded on the basis of the teacher having acknowledged knowledge and skills in a given area. Students are willing to be influenced by their teacher whom they regard as the experts in the field. The teacher, hence, uses knowledge and expertise as a means of legitimizing what they wish to do. The teacher is trusted because he/she is seen as having superior ability or competence in an area that enables him/her to explain, teach, train, transfer that ability/competence to students.

## Teacher power

To gain a comprehensive understanding of teacher power, it is essential to discuss the roles teachers play in the classroom. Research has consistently demonstrated that teachers hold a dominant position in guiding the learning process. They play the key role in providing opportunities and creating an environment conducive to learning (Chan, Spratt, & Humphreys, 2002). Teachers are often associated with an authority, a goal setter, planner, test giver, progress-indicator, opportunity and help provider during the learning process (Januin, 2017; Senbayrak, Ortactepe, & Trimble, 2019). Other studies further affirm the vital contribution of teachers in various tasks such as mentoring, guiding, leading, transmitting knowledge, and facilitating learning (Dislen, 2011; Joshi, 2011). While it is acknowledged that learning can occur without direct teacher involvement, the most effective learning unfolds under the guidance and supervision of teachers, especially when complemented by suitable materials and appropriate learning tactics (Yao & Li, 2017).

In the EFL classroom, depending on what teachers hope their students to achieve how they want their students to learn, teachers can assume roles as mentors of knowledge and moral values construction (Phan, 2004), resource and tutors, task setters, or prompters (Harmer, 2015). Trinh and Mai (2018) reported high expectations of teachers’ responsibility in motivating, directing, explaining, informing, raising students’ awareness. Students rely on teachers for guidance and support in selecting materials, deciding content, and determining time and effort (Nguyen & Habok, 2021). Sudar (2013) observed that teachers hold a superior position in the teacher-student power relation, determining topics of discussion, initiating activities, distributing turns, and leaving messages at the highest frequency. These perceived roles of teachers are particularly prevalent in Asian contexts, where students tend to accept teacher power and authority (Chan, Spratt, & Humphreys, 2002; Littlewood, 1999; Loh & Teo, 2017).

While some research has delved into teacher roles, not as much attention has been paid to how teachers employ power to perform their roles successfully. According to Kearney (1987), teachers strategically communicate their power to gain student compliance, but they do not regard themselves as the only source of power. Rather, they employ student-centred appeals to indirectly influence behaviour change. Kearney (1987) also reported a discrepancy in the use of behaviour alteration strategies across different grade levels, with prosocial or reward-based techniques being more prevalent at lower grade levels, whereas antisocial or punishment-oriented coercive methods being more commonly employed at the upper grade levels.

Jamieson and Thomas (1974) reported a rampant practice of coercive and legitimate powers by teachers in high schools and undergraduate colleges. This tradition, however, appeared to be negatively related to student satisfaction, learning, or attempts to modify their behaviours. However, teachers seemed to have dropped this

traditional practice a decade later, as they were observed to exercise reward, reference, and expert powers more frequently (McCroskey & Richmond, 1983). Newer studies have also proved teachers' tendency to rely on prosocial rather than antisocial power bases to influence behaviour change among students (Kaufmann & Buckner, 2019; Vlckova, Mares, & Jezek, 2015). For examples, the application of more prosocial powers could lead to positive motivation to study (Kaufmann & Buckner, 2019), trust (Paulsel, Chory-Assad & Dunleavy, 2005), or changes in turn taking, posing questions, interruptions, negotiation procedures in teacher – student dialogs (Sidky, 2017).

It is noteworthy to mention that teachers have different ways to communicate their power to students, whether through direct or indirect means. Sidkey (2017) observed that coercion and consent were two main methods used by teachers. In most coercive circumstances, force or threats were not explicitly manifested but rather masked by the teacher's humor. Students, perceiving the teacher as the ultimate authority figure, would comply with their commands without the need for explicit verbal statements. However, it is important to note that "teacher power is based on student perceptions," and "teachers and students do not have the same perceptions of power use" (McCroskey & Richmond, 1983). Hence, teachers might not see the desired result from their communication of power if the student fails to perceive they possess a certain type of power.

To sum up, teacher power in general has received much attention across different disciplines. Nevertheless, new investigations are necessary to update our understanding of this matter, especially as we enter the new millennium with constant changing educational implications for the modern classroom. This research, hence, sets to examine how teachers use power in online EFL college classrooms, if teachers are able to exercise their power efficiently in the virtual environment, and what teachers can do with power to influence learning in a positive way. It hopes to provide perspectives from a culture where teacher power has not been addressed widely, particularly within the virtual classroom.

## Methodology

The study, conducted at a higher education institution in Vietnam, employed Schrodtt, Witt, and Turman's (2007) Teacher Power Use Scale – or TPUS as a survey tool and focus group interviews for data collection. TPUS was developed to measure perceived (observable) teacher power. It contains 30 items describing five power bases on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from never to always. TPUS has been proved having strong internal reliability, as well as concurrent and discriminant validity. Hence, it has been recommended as a useful tool to examine how instructors exercise powers to influence their college classroom.

Participants were selected through stratified sampling based on majors (English, non-English), years in the program (first to fourth year), and gender. The sample consisted of 465 students who had attended online English classes during the pandemic and were asked to refer to their online classroom English teachers while answering the questions. Participation in the study was anonymous and completely voluntary. The participants reserved the right to withdraw from the study at any time they wanted to.

Among the informants, 57% were students majoring in English Language, and 43% were from other majors. As per years in their program, there were freshmen (36%), sophomores (31%), juniors (12%), and seniors (21%). The number of female informants more than doubled that from the male group (68 % and 31% respectively). A few participants chose not to mention their gender.

In the survey, the participants were asked to rank 30 statements representing five bases of powers (coercive, reward, reference, legitimate, and expert) based on the frequency they observed their teachers applying them, using a five-point scale ranging from never to always. Data were analyzed using R 4.3.0.

After the survey, a number of participants were contacted for the focus group interviews. 24 participants were purposefully selected in order to have representatives from different program of studies, gender groups, and years in their programs (first year to fourth year). They were organized into three groups. Questions and discussion points for the interviews were developed based on the topics and the preliminary processed data results from the survey. The interviews revolved around five themes of power bases (coercive, legitimate, reward, reference, and expert), trends and abnormalities in the statistics (why different answer choices), their observations, perceptions, and opinions of their teachers' behaviours in the online classrooms, etc. The interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes each, and the responses were documented and recorded for later analysis. Thematic and content analyses were used to interpret the data.

## Findings and discussions

**Table 1**

*Reliability and descriptive statistics*

Power bases	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of items/ observed	Mean	SD
Coercive	.7496	6/465	1.90931	.62836
Reward	.8467	6/465	3.27957	.82639
Reference	.8167	6/465	3.42114	.70464
Legitimate	.7281	6/465	2.68164	.77573
Expert	.8742	6/465	4.26559	.63701

As can be seen in Table 1, expert power was quite strongly perceived by the students (above .4 at a scale from 1 to 5). Conversely, coercive power was found to be the least applied by the teachers. The students also reported high frequencies in the practice of reference and reward powers among their teachers (above 3.4 and 3.2 respectively). Legitimate power was slightly more prevalent than coercive power (at above 2.6).

The findings indicate that teachers predominantly utilized expert, reward, and reference powers while showing restraint in applying legitimate and coercive powers. Similar results have been observed in traditional face-to-face classroom settings (Finn & Ledbetter, 2013; Schrodt, Witt & Turman, 2007; Vlckova, Mares & Jezek, 2015) or within an online graduate program (Kaufmann & Buckner, 2019). The bottom line is that these findings suggest a consistent pattern across different educational contexts, reinforcing the shift toward a more student-centred approach. The once prevalent reliance on coercive and legitimate powers, as highlighted by Jamieson and Thomas (1974), is now fading away. Similarly, outdated attitudes such as "because I'm the teacher and I said so," (Pytlak & Houser, 2014) are no longer considered appropriate. Instead, modern-day teachers tend to appeal for behavioural change through rewarding exemplary performances, building strong rapport, demonstrating unwavering commitment, or effectively communicating their expert knowledge to students. The shift in teacher-student power relation signifies a move towards a more collaborative and empowering learning environment.

Indeed, Diaz, Cochran, and Karlin (2016) pointed out that while referent, expert, and reward powers contributed positively to learner empowerment, legitimate and coercive powers had little to no impact in this regard. Learners were said to be more engaged, motivated, and willing to improve upon the teacher's frequent applications of clear instructions, showing positive self-perceptions, or giving plenty of compliments to students. Focus group interviews from this study further reinforce preference for reward power as the informants spoke fondly about their experiences being praised or rewarded by their teachers:

"I feel excited when teachers praise me even if my answers are not completely right. I think this encourages me to continue to raise my hand next time and not worry about being wrong."

"I like bonus points the most. If teachers give me bonus points, I will spend more time studying the lesson before class/preparing for class."

"Bonus points make students more active."

Ultimately, the data imply the importance of adopting a positive and empowering approach to power dynamics in the online EFL classroom. By leveraging the utilization of prosocial powers through building rapport, showcasing expertise, and recognizing outstanding achievements, teachers can create an environment that fosters learner engagement, motivation, and growth.

**Table 2***Correlation among power bases*

	<b>Coercive</b>	<b>Reward</b>	<b>Reference</b>	<b>Legitimate</b>	<b>Expert</b>
Coercive	1.0000				
Reward	-.0013	1.0000			
Reference	-.2527	.6009	1.0000		
Legitimate	.4926	.0152	-.1153	1.0000	
Expert	-.2532	.4430	.5724	-.1458	1.0000

\* All correlation  $p < .01$ 

As can be seen in Table 2, coercive and legitimate powers exhibit negative correlations with reward, reference, and expert powers. On the other hand, reward and reference powers show a strong positive correlation (above .6), expert and reference (above .5), or reward and expert (above .4). Additionally, a positive correlation close to .5 is observed between legitimate and coercive powers.

The correlations above indicate that as teachers bend towards prosocial power bases, they reduce the application of coercive or legitimate powers. The same trend has been observed in previous research with traditional face-to-face classroom setting (Schrodt, Witt & Turman, 2007; Vlckova, Mares & Jezek, 2015). A closer look at the interview data revealed that the absence of antisocial power bases such as coercive and legitimate powers might not be mere inclination. In fact, the discussions with the interviewees suggested that teachers might not have communicated these powers effectively. For example, teachers did not have consistent rules, were unclear about punishments for missing deadlines, or did not convey their expectations explicitly. As a results, the communication of their expectations went unnoticed and thus did not bring about desired changes in students' conduct. Here are a few examples from the interviewees' comments:

"I think it is fair to punish those who skip class frequently, always come late, do not submit assignments on time. But it is not quite right if we get punished for forgetting or misunderstanding a deadline, especially for the first time."

"My teacher was nice (not strict), so I was more relaxed in that class. I could ask her to give me more time to do assignments, even resubmit for a higher grade. I had more time to do work from other classes with stricter teachers."

"My teacher did not force us to prepare for class, like reducing grades or giving bonus points. I usually did not read the materials beforehand. I did not spend much time with that subject, but I passed."

"I knew that the teacher did not take attendance, so I skipped class when I had other things to do."

"I only turned on my camera when the teacher asked. But if I didn't want to, I could tell the teacher that my connection was bad or there was something wrong with my phone. Teachers can't punish us for technological problems."

It might be relevant to revisit the Vietnamese traditional view about teachers. In this culture, teachers are held in high esteem due to the significance of their role. They are regarded as a key determinant of success in life, as reflected in popular sayings like "*Khôngthầyđỡmàylàmnên*" (Dare you to achieve success without teachers), "*Mộtngàylàmthầy, cảđờilàmcha*" (A day being your teacher, a lifetime being your father). Consequently, teachers are unquestionably respected, and students are expected to comply with teaches' guidance to ensure academic achievements. In fact, it is uncommon to see teacher power is challenged in this culture or other Asian culture contexts. The feedback above, nevertheless, seems to suggest suspicions of teacher power as the students confessed that they would break rules if they believed they could get away with it. The "take-it-easy" or disengaging attitudes could be due to ineffective coercive or legitimate power usage, while other sources of power were employed but had little impact on motivating the students. It should be noted also that the students seemed to attribute their failure to comply with class rules to technological problems, driving the blame away from themselves.

Suspicions of teacher power are further reinforced from students' frustration and stress regarding teachers' inconsistent or ambiguous communication of expectations. Teachers' behaviours such as unpredictable punishments for turning in class late or not having cameras on, conflicting applications of sanctions, or giving bonus points uneven-handed would cause dissatisfaction among students and negatively affect their learning attitude (see comments below). The students could not explain why their teachers did not apply class rules more strictly or consistently in the virtual environment. However, they said that one of the reasons they found useful for failing to meet class requirements was technology breakdown. It would be interesting to pose this question to the teachers if they are more relaxed in employing antisocial powers or if they believe applying sanctions or being more authoritative will not help in the virtual environment.

"Some teachers have rules, but they did not do anything. If students did not show up or do their homework, teachers did not notice. The grades were based on the midterm and final exams only. Sometimes, those who did not come to class often or contribute to class discussion got high marks. This made me angry."

"My teacher threatened to fail us if we did not post on discussion forums for class. There were too many discussions and I skipped some, but he did not notice."

"I felt frustrated because my final grade was not as good as those of some people who were not as active, even though my teacher said she would give bonus points to those who often raised their hands to answer questions."

Paulsel et al. (2005) indicated that teacher use of expert, referent, and legitimate power communicated fairness meanwhile the employment of coercive power suggested unfairness. However, ambiguous consequences are beyond the teacher's control, and further evidence is still needed to confirm the relationship between the exercise of certain power and classroom justice. As seen above, the informants pronounced their disappointment with teachers' unclear communication of rules and expectations and associated the unclarity with unfair assessment for their performance. Therefore, it is suggested that when teaching online, teachers need to be intentional and strategic to cause the right perception toward a power being used to affect students' learning attitude (Kaufmann & Buckner, 2019).

On a positive note, the students expressed heartfelt contentment in exchanging with their teachers via the virtual environment. They particularly complemented the chat functions of Zoom or Google Meet classrooms which allow them to send texts to the teachers privately or to the entire class. They also employed social media channels to communicate with their teachers during online learning.

"Texting is easier."

"When I was called by the teacher, I could send my answers in the chat box if my connection was not good for speaking."

"I texted my teachers when I needed to ask for permission to extend deadlines or come late, etc."

"I texted my teachers on messenger or Zalo."

"I am a friend of my teachers on Facebook."

This observation suggests that the online environment does not hinder rapport building between teachers and students as they are comfortable connecting with each other through virtual platforms. Teachers who actively connect with students via social media are perceived as dedicated and helpful. The "friend" state in teacher – student power relation has not been reported widely. The informants declared this with sincere pride. They indeed enjoyed this relationship with their teachers who are not only knowledgeable but also committed. Thus, they expressed the willingness to take a more positive stance toward learning:

"I admire teachers who are committed to teaching and care for students. Some teachers are really kind and patient to explain. They know a lot. I want to study hard to be like them."

Finally, this research also noticed a disparity in the utilization of teacher powers across different gender and age groups. As shown in Table 3, female teachers were found to have lower means with coercive and legitimate powers, but higher means with other power bases. Similarly, younger teachers were perceived as using coercive and legitimate power less frequently compared to their older colleagues. Additionally, young teachers were found to employ more expert, reference, and reward powers. The differences observed were statistically significant, as indicated by One-way ANOVA tests with p-values < .001 or .01. In fact, age and gender differences in teacher power use have not received much attention. Future research, therefore, could explore how teachers use power in their early careers and whether these dynamics evolve with professional maturity, or if gender differences would result in various applications of teacher power.

**Table 3***Means by teacher gender and age groups*

Power bases	Gender/ Age	Count	Mean	SD
Coercive	Gender (M/F)	115/350	2.19/1.82	.699/.576
	Age (<30/>30)	159/306	1.78/1.97	.594/.636
Reward	Gender (M/F)	115/350	2.94/3.39	.824/.798
	Age (<30/>30)	159/306	3.56/3.13	.776/.815
Reference	Gender (M/F)	115/350	3.17/3.50	.800/.650
	Age (<30/>30)	159/306	3.62/3.32	.636/.718
Legitimate	Gender (M/F)	115/350	3.02/2.75	.753/.751
	Age (<30/>30)	159/306	2.50/2.78	.744/.776
Expert	Gender (M/F)	115/350	4.10/4.32	.673/.616
	Age (<30/>30)	159/306	4.40/4.19	.578/.655

*\* One-way ANOVA, all p-values <.001 or .01*

### Implications

All in all, the research results unveil a dynamic interpretation of teacher power in the online environment. The students show doubts and questions when teachers did not communicate their legitimate and coercive powers consistently while respond positively to reward, expert, and referent powers. Indeed, there has been evidence that the use of prosocial powers affects motivation to study and cognitive learning (Kaufmann & Buckner, 2019), results in students' better performance and grades (Reid & Kawash, 2017), and affects students' learning attitudes as they view their teachers as examples to look up to and deem them as competent (Finn & Ledbetter, 2013). In addition, the results also indicate avoidance of ambiguous and implicit applications of powers is highly recommended to reduce misinterpretations of expectations or cause frustration. It was understood that technology failures were among the causes for teachers' ineffective applications of rules and sanctions, however, it is the teachers who decide whether they would allow their students to use these as blames for further problems in their future classrooms. Finally, it is worthwhile to further examine the dynamic change in teacher – student power relation in this digital era as teachers and students have more options for dialoguing than face-to-face conferences. Knowing if power boundaries could thin or thicken in this new setting would certainly guide us on the way we organize our classes.

### Conclusion

Experiences and behaviours of teachers and students in an online learning environment can significantly differ due to the mediation of technology, temporal, and spatial distances. This study found that teachers in online EFL classrooms bent more toward prosocial power bases, while restrained from antisocial powers. Expert power was the highest perceived power used as opposed to coercive power, as indicated by the lowest score mean. Students expressed admiration for teachers who frequently employed rewards, established rapport through social media, and demonstrated strong expertise. As a result, they indicated a willingness to take a positive stance toward learning and comply with teachers' instructions. Moreover, the teachers' frequent application of rewards directly linked to more engaging learning as the students were motivated to participate in class activities to get bonus points, or praises. It is, therefore, recommended that teachers should apply more extensively expert and reward powers in their online EFL classrooms.

To summarize, research about online classrooms is still in progress. This research's findings suggest a consistent preference for prosocial power bases among English teachers and provide some understanding about students' reactions against the application of certain power. However, due to some limitations, there is not enough evidence to explain how to use teacher power efficiently in online contexts. Since "online learning is complex" (Burns,

2003), quality or effectiveness in this learning environment are due to many different factors, further research is suggested to deepen understanding of teacher-student power relation and their contributions to successful learning.

### Research Ethics

*Ethical approval:* The research was approved by Nha Trang University's Institutional Review Board with ID: TR-2023-13-01, approval decision number: 465/QD-DHNT signed April 19, 2023. The research's experiment protocols were approved by Nha Trang University's Science and Research Committee.

*Ethical accordance:* The administration of the surveys and the interviews was performed in accordance with institutional and national relevant guidelines and regulations

*Informed consent:* An informed consent statement was obtained from all participants who filled out the questionnaires. By signing in the form, the participants agreed to participate in the research and consent to unrestricted use or publication of the data they provide for the research purpose. Filling out the questionnaires was voluntary and the participants reserve the right to withdraw at any stage by contacting the researchers with contact details provided. The interviewees were selected from the participants who had filled out the questionnaires on voluntary basis.

Participation in the study was anonymous, no personal identification details were collected. All participants were students enrolling at a university, and no one was under 18 years old or needed legal guardian.

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