

SOCIAL CONTEXT FACE-SAVING STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH AND THEIR EQUIVALENTS IN VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE

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Abstract: *This article explores what face-saving - “giữ thể diện”- is and what strategies used in social interactions within Vietnamese and English-speaking cultures. Face-saving, which involves maintaining dignity and avoiding embarrassment, plays a key role in ensuring respectful communication. While important and rather familiar in both contexts, the ways in which face-saving is practiced differ notably. The article examines verbal and non-verbal communication, politeness strategies, and conflict avoidance methods used to preserve “face”. It highlights that Vietnamese speakers in their high-context culture often rely on indirect and highly polite forms of expression, whereas English native speakers in their low-context culture tend to communicate in a more direct and explicit manner. Furthermore, the article discusses how cultural norms influence perceptions of respect, shame, and social harmony, shaping behavior in interpersonal situations. By comparing these cultural patterns, the study provides valuable insights into intercultural communication and emphasizes the importance of cultural awareness in fostering effective and respectful interactions across diverse settings.*

Keywords: *face, face-saving, high-context, low-context culture*

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of “face” – “*thể diện*” – is central to interpersonal communication, shaping how people manage relationships, conflict, and harmony. Goffman (1955, 1967) defined it as the positive social value one claims in interaction, while Wilson (1992) noted that threatening face can end communication. Scholars have emphasized its pivotal role in behavior (Brunner & Wang, 1988; Buttery & Leung, 1998). Face-saving, the effort to protect this value, involves strategies to preserve dignity and self-image, and varies across cultures. In high-context societies like Vietnam, saving face maintains harmony and guides communication, whereas English-speaking cultures, influenced by individualism, emphasize clarity and autonomy.

This study compares face-saving strategies in Vietnamese and English, examining

linguistic practices, cultural values, and pragmatic usage to reveal similarities and differences in managing face-threatening acts. The current research hasn’t clearly compared how English face-saving techniques relate to their equivalents in Vietnamese across different social situations.

This article fills that gap by offering a new framework showing that the fundamental difference lies in cultural priorities by which English focuses on individual freedom, while Vietnamese focuses on social respect and harmony. This explains why their communication strategies are so different, providing practical insights for cross-cultural training and language teaching. Purposely, this article attempts to:

1. identify the face-saving strategies, and
2. compare the similarities and differences of face-saving strategies in

social interactions in Vietnamese and English language.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH METHOD

2.1 Understanding “face-saving” in the cultural context

2.1.1 The concept of “face” and “face-saving”

Face - “*Thể diện*” - refers to the positive social value one claims in interaction (Goffman, 1955, 1967). Redding and Ng (1982) described it as how individuals believe others view them. Building on this, Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) introduced Politeness Theory, distinguishing between positive face—the desire for approval—and negative face—the desire for autonomy. Speakers use strategies such as indirectness, hedging, and honorifics to reduce face-threatening acts. Ting-Toomey (1994, 2005) later developed face-negotiation theory, defining face as one’s projected self-image in social interaction and face-saving as communicative strategies to preserve dignity, avoid embarrassment, and show respect. Such behaviors include indirect refusals, apologies, or justifications, and may involve saving one’s own face or helping others maintain theirs.

The Vietnamese approach to face-saving - “*giữ thể diện*” - is a core cultural principle rooted in collectivism and Confucian hierarchy, driving a communication style that prioritizes indirectness and conflict avoidance to maintain peaceful relations - “*hòa khí*”. Face is seen as a collective asset, making strategic apologies and vague phrasing common methods for softening potential FTAs (Pham, 2011). Adherence to social hierarchy is enforced through a mandatory system of honorifics “*anh, chị, cô, chú, em*”

which validates the interlocutor’s status and preserves their positive face (Phuong, 2011). When disagreement is necessary, it is often handled privately or mitigated using impersonal language like passive voice to avoid direct blame, ensuring that the primary communicative goal is the preservation of social harmony (Nguyen et al., 2014).

The APA Dictionary of Psychology defines face-saving as efforts to uphold dignity after a social blunder, while the Cambridge Dictionary views it as preventing embarrassment or admitting fault. Ting-Toomey (2005) describes it as strategies to preserve self-image in conflict, such as avoiding direct criticism, using polite language, or offering apologies. Face-saving occurs when individuals protect their own dignity or help others maintain theirs, actively or passively.

2.1.2 High-context vs. low-context cultures

Edward Hall (1976) distinguished between high-context cultures, such as Vietnam, China, and Japan, where communication is largely implicit and indirect, and low-context cultures, like the U.S. and U.K., where messages are explicit and direct. In high-context cultures, face is closely tied to group dynamics, hierarchy, and non-verbal cues, with meaning often inferred rather than stated. Indirect communication, reliance on tone, silence, and shared traditions help preserve harmony and avoid embarrassment—for example, saying “That might be difficult” to politely mean “No.” In contrast, low-context cultures emphasize clarity, logic, and individualism, with people expected to speak directly. Disagreement is openly expressed, such as “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” without concern for causing offense.

2.2 Methodology

This article employs a qualitative, cross-cultural pragmatic analysis to compare face-saving strategies used by native English speakers and native Vietnamese speakers. The methodology is designed to systematically identify, categorize, and interpret the socio-pragmatic equivalence of these strategies across the two languages. Several most popular linguistic devices have been used for social context face-saving strategies such as euphemism, hedging, honorifics, question forms, impersonal expressions, and evasion. These language tools fit into the framework of Politeness Theory, originally established by sociologists Erving Goffman with his concept of face-work and linguists Brown and Levinson who categorized the strategies.

The primary data consist of naturally occurring conversational samples collected from interactions between colleagues in workplaces. Only samples that contained a clear Face Threatening Act (FTA) followed by an observable face-saving strategy such as mitigation, apology, or euphemism were selected. These samples were then analyzed to identify the specific face-saving strategies to mitigate the threat and maintain social harmony.

2.2.1 Euphemism

Euphemism is a word or phrase used to avoid saying an unpleasant or offensive word. Furthermore, euphemism is defined as linguistic constructs that rephrase and express meanings in a delicate, aesthetically pleasing manner, ensuring principles of politeness in communication (Truong, 2024, p. 88). In the high-context culture like Vietnamese, euphemism is one of the mostly used tactics for verbal communication

where face-threatening seems to happen and, therefore, face-saving is necessary. For example, in English euphemism the word “senior citizen” is politely used instead of “old person”. Similarly, in Vietnamese the word “*người cao tuổi*” is respectfully used instead of “*người già*”. Another example of English euphemism is the use of “hearing-impaired” instead of “deaf”. Likewise, the Vietnamese euphemism for “*điếc*” is “*khiếm thính*”.

2.2.2 Hedging

Hedging is a way of avoiding giving a direct answer or opinion. For example, when refusing an invitation one may say in Vietnamese “*Chắc hôm đó em bận, để em xem lại nhé*” compared to in English “I would love to but can’t make it then”.

2.2.3 Honorific

Honorific is a title or word used to show honour or respect. For example, in Vietnamese there are titles like “*anh, chị, ông, bà, ngài, phu nhân...*” compared to the ones in English “Mister, Miss, Sir, Madam...”

2.2.4 Impersonal expression

Impersonal expression is also used to avoid assigning blame or agency. For example, an English speaker would say “It seems there was a misunderstanding.” instead of saying “You misunderstood” while a Vietnamese may say “*Dường như có một sự hiểu lầm*” instead of saying directly “*Anh đã làm*”. Alternatively, employing passive voice is another tactic in using impersonal expression. It emphasizes on the action done rather than the doer to avoid blaming directly, soften criticism, create emotional distance, and to maintain harmony. Take, for example, the sentence “The incident was not reported in time” is used instead of “You didn’t report the incident in time”.

2.2.5 Question form

Question form is using questions instead of direct statements like “Would you mind helping me?” instead of “Help me.” Equivalently, in Vietnamese “*Anh vui lòng giúp tôi được không?*” instead of “*Giúp tôi đi*”.

Or if a student cannot answer a teacher’s question, the student can avoid a direct answer like: “I don’t know”. Instead, he/she can say: “It’s a challenging question. May I have more time to think it over?”

Similarly, in Vietnamese the student can avoid saying “*Em không biết câu trả lời*” by saying “*Đây là câu hỏi khó. Em có thể có thêm thời gian để suy nghĩ không ạ?*”

2.2.6 Evasion

Evasion is a technique to avoid something or someone directly. “Let me check my schedule.” or “I’ll think about it.” same as in Vietnamese “*Tôi sẽ xem lại lịch làm việc của tôi*” or “*Tôi sẽ xem xét*”.

2.3 Comparison of language usage for face-saving

2.3.1 Linguistic practices

Linguistic practice refers to language use shaped by social norms, roles, and relationships. Hymes (1974) defined it as the way language operates within cultural contexts to achieve communicative goals. While present in both English and Vietnamese, its function varies according to each culture’s context.

Aspect	Vietnamese Culture (High-context)	English-speaking Culture (Low-context)
Indirect expressions Example	Indirect speech is preferred to avoid confrontation or refusal “ <i>Để tôi xem đã.</i> ” (Let me see first – a polite refusal)	More direct expressions are expected, even in disagreement “Sorry, I can’t make it.” (Direct refusal)
Use of passive voice Example	Common to avoid assigning blame or to downplay errors “ <i>Báo cáo bị nộp trễ.</i> ” (The report was submitted late – no agent mentioned)	Used, but often less than in Vietnamese; clarity preferred “The report was submitted late.” (Passive but still more direct)
Honorifics and pronouns Example	Rich system of kinship-based terms to show respect and hierarchy “ <i>Thưa cô, em xin phép...</i> ” (Using respectful kinship pronouns)	Simplified system; mostly first names or titles (Mr./Ms.) “Ms. Taylor, may I ask...” (Formal, but using a fixed title)
Apologies & refusals Example	Often expressed vaguely or softened to maintain harmony “ <i>Em bận một chút rồi ạ.</i> ” (Soft refusal without saying ‘no’)	Apologies and refusals are clearer and more explicit “Sorry, I’m not available at that time.” (Polite but still saying ‘no’)

Compliments and modesty	Compliments are often downplayed or deflected to save face	Compliments are openly accepted or returned
Example	“ <i>Không có gì đâu, may mắn thôi.</i> ” (Downplaying compliments)	“Thank you, I worked hard on it.” (Accepted openly with personal credit)

2.3.2 Cultural values

Cultural values are the core principles and standards exercised by members of a culture that guide behavior, shape perceptions, and influence social interaction. They explain what a

society sees as good, right, important, or acceptable. Edward T. Hall (1976) presumed that cultural values are the deeply embedded orientations that guide communication, behavior, and interaction in specific cultural contexts.

Aspect	Vietnamese Culture (High-context)	English-speaking Culture (Low-context)
Collectivism	Group harmony, family honor, and social roles are central	Individualism, self-expression, and personal responsibility
Face as social image	Strong emphasis on avoiding shame or embarrassment in public	Face is respected but less fragile; openness is valued
Hierarchy	Respect for age, status, and titles; communication reflects rank	More egalitarian; communication is often peer-to-peer
Avoiding conflict	Highly valued; people avoid direct disagreement to maintain peace	Conflict or debate may be accepted as part of discussion
Community judgment	Concern for how one is seen by others (saving collective face)	Focus on individual choice and independence
Examples	Example in Vietnamese Context	Example in English-speaking Context
Collectivism	Decisions made based on family opinion or harmony	Personal choices emphasized over group approval
Face as social image	Avoiding public correction to protect another’s face	Feedback given openly, even in meetings
Hierarchy	Using titles like “ <i>anh</i> ”, “ <i>chị</i> ”, or “ <i>thầy</i> ” in daily speech	Using first names even for superiors

Avoiding conflict	Changing topic to avoid disagreement	Open disagreement seen as normal
Community judgment	Concern about how neighbors or community perceive behavior	Focus on personal values or identity

2.3.3 Pragmatic usage

Pragmatic usage concerns how language achieves social goals such as requests, refusals, or apologies. Vietnamese speakers often use indirect, elaborate apologies to

preserve harmony and respect, reflecting negative politeness (Pham, 2014). In contrast, English speakers favor more direct apologies, emphasizing sincerity and mutual understanding through positive face strategies.

Aspect	Vietnamese Culture (High-context)	English-speaking Culture (Low-context)
Speech acts Example	Requests, refusals, and criticism are softened or implied Request: “ <i>Nếu anh rảnh, anh giúp em nhé?</i> ”	Performed more explicitly, often with polite phrasing Request: “Could you help me with this?”
Face-saving strategies Example	Use of silence, hedging, avoidance, and vague language Avoidance: “ <i>Để tôi xem đã</i> ” (let me see) or “ <i>Tôi sẽ cố gắng</i> ” (I will try).	Use of softeners (e.g., “maybe,” “I think”), but still direct Avoidance: “Maybe I won’t have time for that”
Apologizing Example	Even for things not one’s fault (to restore harmony) Apologizing even when not at fault: “ <i>Em xin lỗi vì chuyện này.</i> ”	Usually only when one is personally at fault Apologizing when directly responsible: “I’m sorry, it was my mistake.”
Disagreement Example	Often avoided or expressed through suggestion “ <i>Cũng được, nhưng nếu mình thử cách khác thì sao?</i> ”	Often open, framed as opinion rather than offense “I don’t think that will work. Let’s try another approach.”

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the key findings of the study and analyzes the differences and similarities in face-saving strategies between Vietnamese and English-speaking

cultures. The data was gathered through discourse analysis, and existing literature. The findings reveal notable contrasts shaped by cultural norms, social expectations, and communicative values.

3.1. Indirectness vs. directness in speech acts

Vietnamese communication often prioritizes indirectness to safeguard social harmony, frequently employing ambiguous language to soften rejections or critiques (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Nguyen, 2012). For instance, a direct “*không*” answer is often substituted with phrases like “*Để em suy nghĩ thêm đã*”. This practice is continually affirmed in recent research. Bui (2024) confirms the persistent use of indirect strategies by Vietnamese speakers when refusing invitations, reinforcing that indirectness is a culturally preferred tactic for maintaining harmony. Conversely, English-speaking cultures value clarity and direct assertion. Although politeness is maintained, it is achieved through linguistic devices like modal verbs, hedging, or softening phrases—such as “I’m afraid...” to minimize the impact of potentially face-threatening actions.

3.2. Politeness forms and honorific use

Vietnamese communication heavily relies on a system of honorifics (*anh, chị, cô, chú, em*) to demonstrate respect, manage hierarchy, and ensure smooth interactions; their incorrect use is considered a serious slight. In sharp contrast, English employs fewer standardized titles, instead expressing deference and politeness through modals, formal phrasing, and euphemisms, reflecting its cultural focus on individualism and equality (Hofstede, 2001).

3.3. Apologies and expressions of gratitude

Vietnamese speakers tend to use apologies extensively as a reflection of humility, deference, and a proactive strategy

for conflict avoidance, even when no fault is assigned—a common example is prefacing a refusal with “*Xin lỗi, nhưng mà*” (Sorry, but...). In English, apologies are also vital for maintaining social equilibrium, but they are typically coupled with justifications, balancing the requirement for politeness with a need for sincerity and the preservation of positive self-image.

3.4. Managing disagreements and conflict avoidance

In Vietnamese culture, conflict avoidance is central to face-saving, with speakers using vague language, smiles, or topic shifts to preserve “*hòa khí*” (peaceful relations) over asserting personal opinions. Nguyen (2025) provides contemporary evidence that while professional or peer interactions may allow for directness, criticism in mixed-age or sensitive contexts still balances direct approaches with indirect strategies to uphold hierarchical respect. By contrast, English speakers are more comfortable with direct disagreement, though they soften it with polite phrases like “I see your point, but...” to balance clarity with respect for others’ views.

3.5. Strategies to mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs)

Both Vietnamese and English speakers employ specific linguistic strategies to mitigate the impact of FTAs. Vietnamese frequently relies on the passive voice, impersonal constructions, or referring to a third party to prevent direct accusation or blame, aligning with negative politeness and the cultural emphasis on collective harmony (Nguyen & Kasper, 2009). English speakers mitigate FTAs using discourse markers, conditional statements, indirect phrasing, and humor, which serves to alleviate tension

and protect dignity during communication. Recent studies on specific FTAs by Nguyen (2019) found that while Vietnamese speakers may engage in complaints regardless of social distance, the linguistic realization is heavily mitigated based on the context to avoid high-threat FTAs.

3.6. Contextual influence and situational adaptability

Context is paramount in determining the appropriate face-saving approach in Vietnamese culture. Speakers report actively adjusting their register—from formal to informal—based on the specific setting (e.g., family, school, or workplace). There is a keen cultural awareness of “*phong cách giao tiếp*” (communication style), and the ability to adapt is highly valued as a social skill. English speakers also adjust their politeness levels according to context, but this adaptation is generally less dependent on strict hierarchical distinctions. While power dynamics (like the boss-employee relationship) certainly influence speech, the main focus remains on efficient task completion and demonstrating mutual respect rather than overt deference.

4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Face-saving is a dynamic, culturally rooted concept that plays a crucial role in shaping interpersonal communication across both Vietnamese and English-speaking societies. While the desire to preserve face exists in both contexts, the ways in which it is maintained differ substantially due to underlying cultural values and social norms. Vietnamese communication tends to emphasize indirectness, social hierarchy, and collective harmony, reflecting a high-context orientation where meaning often lies beneath the surface. In contrast, English-speaking cultures generally value directness, personal autonomy, and sincerity, favoring explicit verbal expression in line with a low-context communication style. Understanding these contrasts not only deepens our appreciation of cultural diversity but also supports more effective practices in intercultural communication, language education, translation, and international relations. By recognizing and adapting to these face-saving strategies, individuals can build stronger cross-cultural connections and avoid unnecessary misunderstandings.

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CHIẾN LƯỢC GIỮ THỂ DIỆN THEO BỐI CẢNH XÃ HỘI TRONG TIẾNG ANH VÀ CÁC PHƯƠNG THỨC TƯƠNG ĐƯƠNG TRONG TIẾNG VIỆT

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Tóm tắt: Bài viết này khám phá “giữ thể diện” là gì và cách nó hoạt động trong các tương tác xã hội trong nền văn hóa nói tiếng Việt và tiếng Anh. Giữ thể diện, bao gồm việc duy trì phẩm giá và tránh bối rối, đóng vai trò quan trọng trong việc đảm bảo giao tiếp tôn trọng. Mặc dù quan trọng và khá quen thuộc trong cả hai bối cảnh, nhưng cách thực hành giữ thể diện lại khác biệt đáng kể. Bài viết xem xét giao tiếp bằng lời và không lời, các chiến lược lịch sự và các phương pháp tránh xung đột được sử dụng để giữ “thể diện”. Bài viết nhấn mạnh rằng người nói tiếng Việt trong nền văn hóa ngữ cảnh cao của họ thường dựa vào các hình thức biểu đạt gián tiếp và rất lịch sự, trong khi người bản ngữ tiếng Anh trong nền văn hóa ngữ cảnh thấp của họ có xu hướng giao tiếp theo cách trực tiếp và rõ ràng hơn. Hơn nữa, bài viết thảo luận về cách các chuẩn mực văn hóa ảnh hưởng đến nhận thức về sự tôn trọng, xấu hổ và sự hòa hợp xã hội, định hình hành vi trong các tình huống giữa các cá nhân. Bằng cách so sánh các mô hình văn hóa này, nghiên cứu cung cấp những hiểu biết có giá trị về giao tiếp liên văn hóa và nhấn mạnh tầm quan trọng của nhận thức văn hóa trong việc thúc đẩy các tương tác hiệu quả và tôn trọng trong các bối cảnh đa dạng.

Từ khóa: giao tiếp liên văn hóa, giữ thể diện, thể diện, văn hóa ngữ cảnh cao, văn hóa ngữ cảnh thấp

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Ghi chú

Tác giả xác nhận không có tranh chấp về lợi ích đối với bài báo này.