

Accountability asymmetry in outsourced ELT: Classroom authority in Vietnamese secondary schools

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The expansion of outsourced English language teaching (ELT) has created hybrid governance arrangements in which internationally recruited teachers assume classroom responsibility within public school systems while operating under private contractual oversight. This study employs analytical autoethnography to examine how classroom authority is mediated across three Vietnamese secondary school contexts. Drawing on one academic term of teaching experience, the analysis explores how institutional backing, accountability design, and symbolic positioning interact to shape authority stability. The findings indicate that classroom authority is not primarily determined by individual teaching style or strictness, but by the alignment between institutional co-presence and enforcement capacity. Where disciplinary responsibility is delegated without corresponding enforcement capacity, authority becomes fragile and is reinterpreted as individual failure while obscuring structural conditions. This pattern is conceptualized as accountability asymmetry, whereby responsibility is localized at the teacher while enforcement authority remains institutionally distributed and structural conditions remain invisible in evaluative processes. Although embodied foreignness may enhance student engagement, it does not substitute for institutional legitimacy. The study suggests that classroom instability in outsourced ELT contexts is structurally mediated and has implications for governance design, institutional integration, and accountability in transnational education systems.

Keywords: Accountability asymmetry; classroom authority; outsourced ELT; hybrid governance; accountability design

Introduction

The globalization of English language teaching (ELT) has expanded the use of outsourced instructional models in which private agencies recruit and deploy internationally recruited teachers into public school systems (Goldring & Cox, 2025). These arrangements, often framed as responses to teacher shortages or as vehicles for internationalization, reflect broader governance shifts that introduce hybrid accountability structures into state education systems (Ferrer-Esteban et al., 2024; Verger et al., 2016). While such models address staffing needs and support institutional prestige, they also reconfigure authority and responsibility at the classroom level in ways that are not always anticipated by policy designers (Choi, 2024).

In outsourced secondary ELT contexts, internationally recruited instructors are typically responsible for both instructional delivery and classroom management, yet they operate within institutional hierarchies to which they are only partially integrated (Golis, 2025; Poole, 2025). They are accountable to private providers for contractual compliance and to school administrations for pedagogical outcomes, but they often lack access to the disciplinary mechanisms and institutional backing available to locally employed teachers (Golis, 2025; Poole, 2025). Under these conditions, classroom authority may depend less on individual teaching style or interpersonal competence and more on the alignment, or misalignment, between delegated responsibility and institutional support.

Although research has increasingly conceptualized classroom authority as relational and institutionally embedded (Eid, 2025; Ince & Tikkanen, 2025), limited attention has been given to how authority is negotiated within hybrid governance systems characterized by fragmented accountability. In Southeast Asian ELT contexts, particularly in Vietnam, the integration of private language providers into public schooling has created multi-layered structures in which responsibility, legitimacy, and evaluation are distributed across actors who are not always in alignment (Ferrer-Esteban et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2016). Teachers may be held accountable for outcomes while lacking the authority to enforce the conditions that produce those outcomes.

This study examines how classroom authority is mediated within outsourced secondary ELT settings in Vietnam. It addresses three questions:

1. How is classroom authority structured within hybrid governance arrangements?
2. Under what conditions does delegated disciplinary responsibility become fragile?
3. How do accountability mechanisms individualize authority instability while obscuring structural conditions?

Drawing on analytical autoethnography across three school sites, the study develops the concept of accountability asymmetry to explain how responsibility for classroom management becomes localized at the teacher while enforcement authority remains institutionally distributed and structural conditions remain invisible in evaluative processes. This concept is necessary because existing frameworks, such as policy-practice decoupling or distributed accountability, operate primarily at the system level and do not capture the interactional consequences of misaligned responsibility and authority at the classroom level (Parcerisa & Pagès, 2025). By conceptualizing authority as structurally mediated rather than individually enacted, the study contributes to research on hybrid educational governance and transnational ELT systems and offers practical insights for the design of outsourced educational arrangements.

Conceptual grounding and framework

Classroom authority has traditionally been examined within classroom management and teacher effectiveness frameworks, where it is associated with clarity, consistency, and teacher control (Buechlein et al., 2025; Jentsch & Senden, 2025). More recent scholarship, however, reconceptualizes authority as relational and institutionally embedded rather than solely an individual attribute (Eid, 2025; Ince & Tikkanen, 2025). From this perspective, authority is co-constructed through interaction and stabilized through alignment between teacher positioning and institutional expectations. In secondary school settings, authority is sustained when teachers are visibly integrated within organizational hierarchies and supported by coherent administrative structures (Ghamrawi et al., 2026; Mincu & D'Addio, 2026). Conversely, teachers positioned at the margins of institutional systems, such as externally contracted instructors, may experience reduced legitimacy and constrained authority (Ghamrawi et al., 2026; la Velle

& Newman, 2025). Authority, therefore, is best understood as a structurally conditioned relation rather than an individual possession.

These dynamics are intensified within contemporary education systems shaped by market-oriented reforms and the increasing involvement of private actors. Such developments have produced hybrid governance arrangements in which authority and responsibility are distributed across multiple institutional sites (Ozga, 2009; Verger et al., 2016). In outsourced ELT systems, teachers are often simultaneously accountable to private providers and public school administrations, generating ambiguity in authority boundaries and lines of responsibility. In Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, private language providers have become integral to English language provision (Nguyen et al., 2016; Phan, 2018), embedding classroom practice within multi-layered governance structures. Within these configurations, disciplinary authority is frequently delegated to teachers who are not fully embedded within institutional hierarchies. As a result, responsibility for classroom management may be operationalized at the level of the individual teacher while enforcement capacity remains institutionally distributed, producing a structural misalignment between responsibility and authority (Bates et al., 2021).

Authority recognition is further shaped by cultural and symbolic dimensions. In many Asian educational contexts, hierarchical norms influence classroom expectations and role visibility (Dang, 2025). However, cultural expectations alone do not determine authority stability; institutional alignment remains central to legitimacy. Within global ELT, symbolic capital associated with foreignness and native-speaker status may enhance student engagement and perceived credibility (Howard, 2019; Pham, 2026). Yet such symbolic resources operate primarily at the level of interaction and do not independently confer disciplinary authority (Kim, 2026). Engagement-enhancing attributes cannot substitute for institutional legitimacy, particularly where enforcement authority is structurally constrained and dependent on institutional co-presence (Howard, 2019; Levinsson et al., 2025).

Building on these strands, this study conceptualizes classroom authority as a structurally mediated outcome emerging from the interaction of institutional backing, accountability design, and symbolic positioning. Institutional backing refers to the degree of visible integration within school hierarchies, including administrative co-presence and recognized enforcement authority (la Velle & Newman, 2025). When teachers are visibly supported by institutional actors—coordinators, administrators, or other authority figures—their directives carry weight beyond their personal authority. Accountability design refers to how responsibility for classroom management is distributed, monitored, and evaluated within governance structures (Yun, 2025). This includes reporting systems, disciplinary protocols, and performance evaluation mechanisms. Procedural constraints, such as attendance protocols, reporting requirements, and escalation procedures, are embedded within accountability design and shape its practical operation. Symbolic positioning refers to the role of embodied identity, including perceived foreignness, native-speaker status, age, gender, and other markers of difference, in shaping student engagement and interactional dynamics (Holliday, 2006; Özkaynak & Sayer, 2026). Symbolic positioning influences how teachers are perceived and responded to, but it does not independently confer enforceable authority. In outsourced systems, these dimensions are not only distinct but frequently misaligned.

This misalignment produces a specific governance condition. Authority may be interactionally enacted by the teacher while remaining institutionally contingent upon actors who are not consistently present in classroom settings (Patterson, 2020). Responsibility is thus localized, while authority remains distributed. This creates a

structural disjunction between enactment and evaluation: teachers are held accountable for classroom outcomes without equivalent access to enforcement mechanisms or institutional reinforcement. Under such conditions, authority instability is likely to be interpreted through individual performance rather than governance configuration (Robertson & Dale, 2013).

This study proposes the concept of accountability asymmetry to capture this condition. Accountability asymmetry is not merely a relabelling of existing concepts such as policy–practice misalignment or distributed accountability. While policy–practice misalignment refers to the gap between formal policy and enacted practice, accountability asymmetry captures how responsibility is localized in enactment while authority remains institutionally distributed, producing observable effects on classroom authority negotiation (Rompis et al., 2026). Similarly, while performativity emphasizes the individualization of responsibility through evaluation regimes (Ball, 2012), accountability asymmetry explains how the misalignment between responsibility and authority produces cumulative authority erosion at the classroom level. In sum, the concept offers a distinct analytical lens focused on the interactional consequences of governance design.

Drawing on recent scholarship that conceptualizes authority as structurally mediated (e.g., Hwang & Yim, 2019; la Velle & Newman, 2025), this study synthesizes these strands into an Authority Mediation Framework, which provides the analytical lens for this study. The framework posits that classroom authority is not a personal attribute but an emergent property of governance alignment. It operates through the interaction of institutional backing, accountability design, and symbolic positioning. Authority stabilizes when institutional backing is visible and accountability design is shared across actors. It becomes fragile when disciplinary responsibility is delegated without corresponding enforcement capacity or institutional co-presence. Symbolic positioning may shape interactional dynamics, enhancing or diminishing engagement, but cannot substitute for institutional legitimacy. These interacting dimensions provide the analytical basis for identifying conditions under which authority stabilizes or deteriorates in outsourced ELT contexts and underpin the concept of accountability asymmetry.

Methodology

This study adopts an analytical autoethnographic approach to examine how classroom authority is mediated within outsourced ELT governance arrangements. Analytical autoethnography combines reflexive engagement with theoretical analysis, enabling the examination of lived experience in relation to broader institutional processes (Anderson, 2006). Prioritizing theoretical analysis and conceptual development over narrative immersion, the study aims to develop conceptually grounded interpretations of authority mediation rather than merely evoking personal experience. In this study, the author's dual role as participant and analyst provides access to governance dynamics that are not readily observable through formal institutional data, particularly in contexts where authority is enacted interactionally but structured externally.

Author positionality

At the time of the study, I was a 50-year-old Turkish male educator with over 25 years of teaching experience. I hold a BA and an MA in English Language Teaching, a PhD in Educational Administration, and a CELTA certificate. I have been employed as an ELT lecturer at a state university preparatory school in Turkey since 2000, with prior experience teaching at the state secondary school level within the same national context.

I am a native speaker of Turkish and a non-native speaker of English, having acquired English through formal education and professional practice. My physical appearance—fair-skinned, brown-haired, and green-eyed—was visibly distinct from the local Vietnamese population, and I was consistently perceived by students as a "Western" or "foreign" teacher, despite my Turkish nationality.

This was my first time living and working in Vietnam. The language, climate, food, and daily routines were all unfamiliar. I had received a two-week orientation before starting classes, during which the reporting system and administrative procedures were explained. However, the gap between theoretical instruction and practical application was substantial. The orientation did not prepare me for the complexity of the reporting system, the variability of Operational Coordinator (OC) relationships, the technical failures, or the cultural nuances of classroom management.

My embodied foreignness had complex effects on classroom dynamics. In some contexts, it initially generated student curiosity and engagement. However, this symbolic capital did not translate into enforceable authority. Where institutional backing was absent, student engagement did not compensate for the lack of disciplinary enforcement capacity. Moreover, in one school, students addressed me by my first name, a practice I did not observe in their interactions with local Vietnamese teachers, suggesting that my foreignness positioned me as less hierarchically embedded and more approachable, but also less authoritative.

My identity as a non-native English-speaking teacher also shaped classroom interaction. In the authority-unstable site, students' limited English proficiency created comprehension barriers that required repeated verbal reinforcement and raised voice levels to maintain attention. These challenges were not pedagogical failures but reflections of the misalignment between student placement and curriculum level, a structural issue over which I had no control.

My extensive teaching experience and formal qualifications in both ELT and educational administration meant that I entered this context with a well-developed professional understanding of classroom management, curriculum design, and institutional governance. Yet none of this expertise compensated for the absence of institutional backing in the unstable site. This disconnect between professional competence, and structural support is central to the concept of accountability asymmetry developed in this study.

Institutional contexts

The empirical context is drawn from one academic term (September-December 2025) in three Vietnamese secondary schools. Due to a non-disclosure agreement with the employing provider, specific institutional identifiers, including school names, exact locations, and demographic data, cannot be disclosed. The following descriptions are therefore limited to features directly relevant to the analysis: coordinator presence, student proficiency, and authority structures. As an internationally recruited teacher, my access to each school was limited to the classroom setting; I had no contact with school administrators, local teaching staff, or students outside of instructional time and received no institutional information regarding school size, catchment area, or student demographics. The descriptions below are therefore based solely on my direct classroom observations.

In all three schools, my role was strictly limited to classroom instruction, with no participation in staff meetings, administrative processes, or student matters beyond the classroom. Operational Coordinators (OCs) were present in each school; they were employed by the private provider, not by the schools. Based on my observations, their

responsibilities included monitoring classroom instruction and reporting on teacher performance to the provider, for example, whether the teacher arrived on time, followed the lesson plan, and completed administrative tasks. They also appeared to serve as a bridge between the school and the teacher, between the teacher and the provider, and between the teacher and parents. In addition, I observed them handling operational tasks such as photocopying materials requested by the teacher, ensuring that attendance reports were entered correctly, and managing other logistical tasks necessary for classroom functioning. I did not observe OCs participating in school governance or exercising administrative authority within the school hierarchy. I do not have full knowledge of their formal role definitions or responsibilities beyond what I directly experienced and observed.

School A maintained consistent OC presence throughout instruction. The OC was a woman—sharp, authoritative, and visibly experienced. She sat at a desk near the board, arms crossed, scanning the room. She was strict, often raised her voice, and became easily angry, but the students complied. Student proficiency was generally adequate for the curriculum, and classroom authority remained stable throughout the term. I taught one Grade 8 and one Grade 9 class here.

School B also maintained OC presence. The OC here was also a woman, but gentle. She often smiled and rarely raised her voice. Students did not seem to fear her the way they did in School A. She would walk between the rows, wake sleeping students, and remind them to open their books. Her interventions were low-key, almost routine. Yet authority remained stable. I taught both Grade 8 and Grade 9 here. Grade 8 students were consistently engaged and linguistically strong. Grade 9 students displayed signs of disengagement, particularly in afternoon sessions. There was one incident where a student used offensive language toward me, which the OC addressed.

School C operated without consistent OC presence. I worked with two different OCs here, both men. One was patient and supportive; he met me outside school once to walk me through the reporting system step by step. The other was critical, distant, and quick to report errors. But the real issue was not their personalities; it was their absence. They rarely came to class. Sometimes one would enter mid-lesson, stand at the door, glance around, and leave. Sometimes neither appeared at all. I never knew their schedule. I taught two Grade 8 classes here. Student proficiency was very low (A1–A2), and the curriculum was mismatched to their level. Persistent comprehension barriers required constant repetition and raised voice levels. Authority was most fragile here.

Data construction

Data were constructed through structured retrospective reconstruction. Temporal sequences were cross-checked against employment records and digital communication to support chronological consistency. The dataset consists of observations, incidents, and interactions documented through this reconstruction process, which were used to examine how authority was negotiated across contexts.

Data selection and analytical process

Analysis followed an iterative comparative approach across the three school sites, examining incidents in relation to the three dimensions of the Authority Mediation Framework: institutional backing, accountability design, and symbolic positioning. Within institutional backing, I focused on mechanisms of institutional co-presence and enforcement capacity; within accountability design, on accountability practices and their differential consequences across sites; within symbolic positioning, on interactional

dynamics including student naming practices, engagement patterns, and responses to my embodied foreignness.

Rather than coding discrete events, the analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns of authority negotiation—how authority was maintained, challenged, or eroded over time across different institutional configurations. Patterns were identified through systematic comparison of classroom dynamics across the three sites, with particular attention to how teacher directives were received, how disciplinary issues were handled, how coordinators intervened (or did not), and how evaluative feedback was framed.

Key incidents, such as the AI-generated test incident, the attendance verification conflict, the swearing incident, and the complaint and removal process, were examined in depth as exemplars of broader patterns rather than as isolated data points. These incidents were selected not for their frequency but for their analytical richness: each crystallized a mechanism that operated across multiple sessions.

To assess potential recall bias, I searched my reconstruction for instances where stable authority persisted without coordinator presence, or where coordinator presence failed to prevent erosion. No such cases were identified. While this does not eliminate the possibility of selective recall, it increases confidence that the observed patterns are not solely artifacts of retrospective reconstruction. Despite these efforts, selectivity in incident recall cannot be fully excluded.

Given these methodological boundaries, the findings should be interpreted as analytically generalizable rather than empirically representative, aimed at identifying governance mechanisms rather than producing population-level claims.

Findings

This section examines how classroom authority was experienced and negotiated across the three schools where I taught. The analysis proceeds in four stages. First, I describe each school individually—School A, School B, and School C—focusing on the OC's presence and style, student profile, and my experience of authority in each context. These descriptions are based on my direct observations and experiences during the teaching term. Second, I compare the three schools to identify what distinguishes stable authority from fragile authority. Third, I examine a set of procedural and institutional mechanisms—reporting systems, attendance verification, and complaint procedures—that reveal how accountability operated differently across contexts. Finally, I synthesize these findings to show how authority in outsourced ELT is not a product of individual teaching competence but emerges from the alignment between delegated responsibility and institutional support.

School A: Authority through institutional backing

School A was the school where I experienced the most stable classroom environment. The OC I worked with was a woman. She was strict, often raised her voice, and easily got angry, but the students complied. I never had to raise my voice in School A.

The OC's presence was consistent. She intervened quickly—a raised eyebrow, a quiet word, a name called. Students adjusted their behavior immediately. I did not need to manage discipline. This aligns with Ingersoll's (2001) argument that organizational integration stabilizes teacher authority.

The student profile in School A was generally proficient and cooperative. There were no significant behavioral challenges. The curriculum matched their level, and lessons proceeded without disruption.

School B: Authority through presence

School B felt different. The OC here was also a woman, but gentle. She often smiled and rarely raised her voice. Students did not seem to fear her the way they did in School A. She would walk between the rows, wake sleeping students, remind them to open their books. Her interventions were low key. Yet authority remained stable.

The difference was not her style—it was her presence. She was there. Students knew she was there. She did not need to raise her voice. Her visibility alone was sufficient to maintain order. Wubbels et al. (2012) note that authority is co-constructed through interaction; here, it was co-constructed through the OC's presence.

I taught both Grade 8 and Grade 9 here. Grade 8 was bright, curious, linguistically strong. Grade 9 was harder: afternoon fatigue, disengaged boys, one student who swore at me in Vietnamese. The OC handled it. She removed the student and made him write a reflection—a common Vietnamese disciplinary practice. Order returned. I documented everything in reports, but I never knew if those reports went anywhere.

Students addressed me by my first name, something they never did with local teachers. This suggested that my foreignness positioned me as less hierarchically embedded. Despite this, authority remained stable because the OC's presence compensated for my reduced symbolic status.

School C: Authority in the absence of backing

School C was the site where authority was most fragile. I worked with two different OCs here, both men. One was patient and supportive; he met me outside school once to walk me through the reporting system step by step. The other was critical and quick to report errors. But the real issue was not their personalities—it was their absence.

They rarely came to class. Sometimes one would enter mid-lesson, stand at the door, glance around, and leave. Sometimes neither appeared at all. I never knew their schedule. Students noticed. They understood that no one was watching—no one who could enforce. Authority became my problem alone.

Students in School C were very low proficiency (A1–A2), predominantly Grade 8. The curriculum was mismatched to their level. Persistent comprehension barriers required constant repetition and raised voice levels. Participation was uneven, and off task behavior became normalized over time.

In earlier sessions, low level disruptions were followed by immediate compliance. By midterm, compliance became delayed or partial. By later sessions, some directives were ignored until external escalation, which meant writing reports that disappeared into the system. Authority eroded not because I changed, but because the perception of enforceability changed. This is what Pace and Hemmings (2007) describe as authority becoming individualized and unsustainable under weak institutional signaling.

Cross site comparison: What makes authority stable or fragile

Across the three schools, the most significant difference was not student proficiency, curriculum alignment, or my own teaching style. The decisive variable was the presence or absence of an OC. In Schools A and B, the OC was consistently present; in School C, the OC was rarely present. This pattern held regardless of the OC's style. In School A, the OC was strict and loud; in School B, she was gentle and low key. Both produced stable authority. In School C, the OCs were men, but their gender did not explain the difference; their absence did.

This comparison reveals that institutional backing functions as a structural condition, not a personal quality. The strict OC in School A did not need to be liked; her authority came from her position. The gentle OC in School B did not need to be feared; her authority

came from her visibility. In both cases, the teacher was not alone. Students understood that someone was watching—someone who could report, escalate, or involve parents. This awareness shaped behavior more than any directive I could give.

In School C, by contrast, the OCs' inconsistency meant that students quickly learned there was no institutional presence to reinforce boundaries. Authority became my individual responsibility. This was not a pedagogical failure; it was a structural one. Students did not resist because they disliked me or the subject; they tested because they saw no consequence. The same behavioral issues that were resolved instantly in School A required escalating in School C. And escalation meant writing reports that might have disappeared into the system.

The student profile alone did not predict authority outcomes. School B's Grade 9 was more challenging than School A's students—more fatigue, more male disengagement, one incident of swearing—yet authority remained stable. School C's Grade 8 was objectively easier, yet authority eroded. The difference was not the students. It was the structure.

Accountability asymmetry in action

The reporting system was the same everywhere: daily reports, four hourly feedback per student, an AI-based interface that accepted numbers but rejected nuance. Technical failures were routine—entries that would not save, late corrections that could not be made, names I could not pronounce. In stable schools, OCs treated these as administrative glitches—annoying but fixable. In School C, however, the same glitches were treated as evidence of incompetence.

One moment captures the asymmetry. The contract required teachers to arrive 15 minutes before class. I arrived within that window repeatedly. But if the OC did not see me—if he was elsewhere, or late, or simply not looking—I was reported absent. My presence was validated not by my arrival, but by his observation. The teacher is responsible; the OC is the gatekeeper.

In a skills writing test, a student used AI. I reported it but was still required to assign a grade—full marks—because no invalidation procedure existed. A complaint followed: footage showed a student combing hair, applying makeup—behaviors I had addressed verbally but chose not to escalate physically, uncertain of culturally appropriate intervention norms. The provider assigned a Vietnamese English teacher—a mentor employed by the provider, not the school—to observe my classes unannounced. She submitted a report noting missing behavioral rules in slides. I met with administration and was told I had failed to manage the classroom. Structural conditions—limited authority, absent OC support, proficiency mismatch—were not addressed.

I had documented behavioral concerns for months. A single complaint against me triggered immediate action. Responsibility was mine alone; consequences were swift. This is accountability asymmetry: responsibility without authority, evaluation without support (Ball, 2012; Lingard et al., 2013).

Discussion

This study examined how classroom authority is negotiated within outsourced ELT contexts embedded in hybrid, market-oriented governance arrangements. The findings indicate that authority stability does not primarily derive from individual teaching style or classroom management competence. Rather, authority emerges as a structurally mediated outcome shaped by the alignment between institutional backing, accountability design, and the discretionary practices of proxy actors. The discussion is organized

around three thematic dimensions corresponding to the research questions: the distribution of authority in outsourced governance, the emergence of accountability asymmetry, and the individualization and obscuring of authority instability.

The distribution of authority in outsourced governance

The cross-school comparison reveals that institutional backing functions as a structural condition rather than a personal quality. Authority stabilized when OCs were present—regardless of whether their style was strict or gentle—and became fragile when OCs were absent. This pattern held across schools despite variations in student proficiency and curriculum alignment, indicating that the decisive variable was institutional presence rather than individual teaching competence.

This finding extends recent scholarship demonstrating that organizational marginality intensifies in outsourced ELT contexts characterized by fragmented governance (Hwang & Yim, 2019; la Velle & Newman, 2025). Authority is not diminished through pedagogical failure but through structural misalignment. This resonates with work on how transnational education arrangements position teachers in peripheral roles where they are expected to deliver outcomes without being integrated into institutional hierarchies (Bates et al., 2021; Choi, 2024).

The concept of proxy authority—institutional power exercised by actors who are not formally part of the school's hierarchy but function as its on-site representatives—emerges as a distinctive feature of outsourced governance. OCs exercised disciplinary and evaluative functions without pedagogical training or formal school employment. In the stable sites, proxy authority operated as a stabilizing mechanism; in the unstable site, its absence was the structural condition that permitted authority erosion.

The emergence of accountability asymmetry

Accountability asymmetry operates as a mechanism linking governance structure to classroom outcomes. When responsibility is localized at the teacher level while enforcement authority remains institutionally distributed, a misalignment emerges between enactment and legitimacy. Teacher directives are interactionally produced but lack consistent institutional reinforcement, reducing their perceived enforceability over time. This process is cumulative: as enforcement becomes uncertain, student compliance shifts from institutional expectation to situational negotiation, increasing the likelihood of authority erosion.

The epistemic dimension of this asymmetry is particularly significant. The teacher produces knowledge—reports, warnings, observations—but the institution controls its circulation and valuation. The teacher writes; the institution decides what counts as evidence. This extends recent research on how accountability systems concentrate scrutiny on individual actors despite distributed authority structures (Yun, 2025). The asymmetry is not merely procedural but epistemic: responsibility without authority, evaluation without support (Bates et al., 2021; Rompis et al., 2026).

The individualization and obscuring of authority instability

Authority instability in outsourced ELT contexts is systematically individualized and obscured through the interaction of evaluative attention, symbolic positioning, and the perception of enforceability.

Evaluative attention following the complaint incident focused entirely on teacher-level enactment—classroom management, slide content, verbal warnings—while structural conditions such as absent OC support, regulatory constraints, and proficiency mismatches were not foregrounded. This reflects the individualization of responsibility

within performative governance regimes (Robertson & Dale, 2013). The teacher is held accountable for outcomes while lacking the authority to enforce the conditions that produce those outcomes.

Symbolic capital associated with foreignness operated as a double-edged resource: attracting engagement while undermining authority (Howard, 2019; Özkaynak & Sayer, 2026). Students addressed me by my first name, marking me as outside the local hierarchy. While foreignness may enhance student interest, it does not compensate for institutional absence. Engagement-enhancing attributes influence interactional dynamics but do not substitute for enforcement authority or institutional backing.

The erosion of authority over time reflects a shift in students' perception of enforceability. When enforcement is uncertain, student compliance shifts from institutional expectation to situational negotiation. Each unenforced directive weakens the perception of enforceability, making future directives harder to enforce. Authority is not earned; it is loaned by institutions—and can be recalled without notice.

Synthesis: The authority mediation framework

Three patterns recur across these cases. First, the reporting system was problematic, but its consequences depended entirely on institutional support—illustrating accountability design. Second, OC presence—not style—was decisive, illustrating institutional backing. Third, symbolic capital did not compensate for institutional absence, illustrating the limits of individual attributes.

Authority emerges at the intersection of these dimensions. Where they are aligned, authority is stabilized; where they are misaligned, authority becomes fragile and subject to managerial reinterpretation. The Authority Mediation Framework proposed in this study provides a heuristic for analysing these dynamics. By conceptualizing authority as an emergent property of governance alignment, the framework extends existing work on classroom authority (Eid, 2025; Ince & Tikkanen, 2025) and offers a basis for examining authority negotiation in transnational and outsourced educational systems (Phan, 2018; Selvi & Galloway, 2024).

The metaphor of authority as a loan draws on Bourdieu's (1986) analysis of capital as relationally constituted—accessed through position in a field rather than possessed as individual property. Just as cultural capital is validated only by institutional recognition, classroom authority in outsourced ELT is validated only by institutional presence. When that presence withdraws, authority is recalled, not because the teacher has changed, but because the structural conditions of its recognition have disappeared.

Implications, limitations, and future research

These findings carry practical implications for the design of outsourced educational arrangements. Authority stability requires institutional co-presence as a structural condition, not as optional support. Providers should ensure consistent on-site coordinator presence as a contractual requirement, rather than leaving it to discretionary implementation. Disciplinary protocols should specify escalation pathways and evidence standards, rather than relying on individual OC discretion. Teacher evaluations should incorporate structural conditions—coordinator presence, curriculum alignment, enforcement capacity—rather than assessing individual performance in isolation. Teacher preparation programs for outsourced contexts should address not only classroom management techniques but also the navigation of fragmented accountability structures.

As an analytical autoethnography, this study relies on a single participant's retrospective reconstruction and lacks triangulated data sources. The findings reflect my interpretive reconstruction of events, not coordinator practices, student experiences, or

administrative decisions as independently documented. While this approach provides unique access to governance-mediated classroom processes that external observation cannot capture, it also means that authority dynamics are represented through a single lens. Additionally, the findings are situated within the specific context of outsourced ELT in three schools in Vietnam and may not be directly transferable to other national or institutional settings.

Future research could extend this analysis through multi-actor and longitudinal designs, incorporating student perception data, coordinator interviews, and administrative perspectives to examine how authority is experienced across different positions within the governance structure. Additionally, comparative studies across different national contexts—with varying governance structures, regulatory frameworks, and teacher unionization—could examine whether accountability asymmetry operates similarly under different institutional conditions, or whether it is specific to the hybrid, market-oriented arrangements typical of outsourced ELT in Southeast Asia. Further investigation into the role of proxy actors, particularly OCs, could illuminate how authority is negotiated in other outsourced service contexts beyond ELT.

Conclusion

This study examined how classroom authority is negotiated in outsourced ELT contexts. The findings demonstrate that authority is not a personal attribute but a structurally mediated outcome: it stabilizes when institutional backing, accountability design, and symbolic positioning align, and fragments when that alignment fails. Symbolic capital—foreignness, native-speaker status—may enhance engagement but cannot substitute for institutional backing. This condition—accountability asymmetry—operates through proxy actors who hold institutional power without formal accountability, localizing responsibility at the teacher while rendering structural conditions invisible to evaluation. Authority, in this sense, is not earned but loaned, and can be recalled without notice when institutional support disappears. For governance design, this implies that outsourced teachers require visible institutional integration, not training in individual classroom management, to maintain legitimate authority.

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