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TESOL Teachers' Emotional Labor and Occupational Well-being: A Review of Emotion Regulation Strategies

Yan Guo

College of English Language and Culture, South China Business College Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China
jennieguo26@163.com

Abstract. As the global focus on teacher professional development in the TESOL field has shifted toward holistic development, teachers' emotional teaching competence has emerged as a core issue in research and practice within this domain. Grounded in Emotional Labor Theory, this paper adopts a literature review approach to systematically sort out the research trajectories of relevant studies on TESOL teachers' emotional teaching competence worldwide. The review reveals that existing research has formed a diverse analytical framework for TESOL teachers' emotional competence, with international studies characterized by the integration of qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods, and domestic research primarily focusing on practical application. However, critical research limitations persist, such as the restricted generalizability of research findings and an ambiguous mechanism for the collaborative empowerment of emotion, identity and technology. This study seeks to clarify the core controversies in this field and identify the key dimensions and pathways of TESOL teachers' emotional teaching competence. It aims to provide a solid literature basis and theoretical support for context-sensitive and evidence-based research, and further advance the substantive transformation of TESOL teacher education toward the paradigm of holistic development.

Keywords: TESOL Teachers, Emotional Labor, Occupational Well-being, Emotion Regulation Strategies

1. Introduction

Emotional labor was first proposed by sociologist Hochschild, referring to the process in which individuals actively regulate, manage, and express their own emotions to meet the requirements of their professional roles [1,2]. In the field of TESOL, it specifically refers to the professional behavior in which teachers consciously regulate their emotional states and display appropriate teaching emotions in intercultural teaching interactions to adapt to teaching objectives, student needs, and interaction norms [3,4]. Hochschild's theoretical framework of emotional labor clarifies that its essence lies in the requirements of organizational and professional norms on individual emotional expression, and distinguishes two core strategies: surface acting and deep acting, which have laid a theoretical foundation for subsequent research on emotional labor in education [1,2].

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Many scholars have conducted in-depth research on the complexity and contextual diversity of TESOL teachers' emotional labor. For example, Fan and Wang adopted a combination of questionnaire surveys and interviews, taking Chinese and foreign TESOL teachers as research participants to analyze the correlations among emotion regulation behaviors, occupational well-being, and professional development indicators, confirming that emotion regulation ability and occupational well-being have a significant positive predictive effect on the professional success of TESOL teachers [5]. Although certain progress has been made in the study of TESOL teachers' emotional labor, many unresolved issues remain. Existing emotional labor theories rely excessively on Western individualistic cultural perspectives and cannot fully explain teachers' choices of emotional labor strategies influenced by traditional educational concepts in collectivist cultures [4]. In addition, there is a serious lack of emotional labor measurement tools for Chinese EFL teachers; most existing scales are direct translations of Western versions without considering local cultural factors, which makes the adaptation mechanism of emotional labor strategies in different cultural contexts unclear [4]. At the same time, current research in this field mostly focuses on the impact of emotional labor on teachers' personal well-being, while its dynamic process of acting on classroom interaction, student engagement, and teaching effects lacks sufficient empirical support [6]. Existing research also provides insufficient contextual analysis, making it difficult to reveal the dynamic variation of emotional labor in different teaching scenarios, so the interactive relationship between emotional labor and teaching practice still needs further verification [1].

This review aims to systematically sort out relevant studies on TESOL teachers' emotional labor, emotion regulation, and occupational well-being in China and abroad, clarify their internal connections and mechanisms, and identify research gaps in the local context of non-English speaking countries. It intends to provide clear research ideas and references for the subsequent construction of localized theories of TESOL teachers' emotional labor, the verification of cross-cultural contextual mechanisms, and the development of emotion regulation strategies to improve teachers' occupational well-being [3,7].

2. Literature review

2.1. Emotion labor and emotion regulation

In recent years, the global focus on teacher professional development in TESOL has gradually shifted from the mere transmission of pedagogical knowledge to an in-depth exploration of teachers' holistic development, and teachers' emotional teaching competence has consequently become a core issue in both research and practice [8]. This competence does not exist in isolation; it encompasses multiple dimensions, including emotion regulation, social and emotional learning (SEL), reflective teaching, and self-efficacy. Essentially, it refers to teachers' comprehensive ability to accurately identify and manage their own emotions as well as those of their students in specific teaching contexts, while integrating various affective resources to optimize the entire teaching process [7,9].

This shift is by no means accidental. Its theoretical roots are deeply grounded in a number of classical theories, including Hochschild's emotional labor theory, social constructivism, positive psychology, ecological developmental theory, and the process model of emotion regulation [1,2]. The surface acting and deep acting proposed by Hochschild provide a core analytical perspective for understanding teachers' emotional display and emotion management in the classroom [1,4]. Meanwhile, the cross-cultural complexity inherent in TESOL further amplifies the contextual specificity and practical challenges of teachers' emotional labor [3,10]. Collectively, these theories emphasize that teachers' affective states, cognitive patterns, and professional identities are not static

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individual traits, but dynamically constructed organic wholes within specific socio-cultural contexts [3,11].

In fact, positive affective states and effective emotion regulation abilities are of profound significance to teachers: they can not only significantly promote teachers' professional growth and enhance their psychological well-being, but also directly influence students' learning experiences and inject positive momentum into language acquisition outcomes [5,7]. A review of the field's developmental trajectory reveals that this transformation originated from a profound reflection on the traditional information-centered paradigm of teacher training. Through continuous evolution, it has gradually developed into an integrated, contextualized cultivation model that deeply embeds emotional well-being, identity development, and technology integration into the entire process of teacher education [9,12,13].

2.2. The relationship between emotional labor and teacher development

At present, research on TESOL teachers' emotional competence worldwide has outlined a diverse and rich landscape of exploration [8,14].In Western and Asian contexts, research approaches show distinctive diversity: some adopt qualitative methods to deeply analyze the core challenges faced by TESOL teachers in Iran, Thailand and other regions in emotion regulation and SEL-integrated training, such as content gaps, resource shortages and misaligned systemic priorities [9,12]; others employ quantitative approaches including structural equation modeling to confirm significant positive correlations among emotion regulation, reflective teaching, self-efficacy and teachers' psychological well-being [5,7]; still others use Q methodology to identify three main types of emotion regulation strategies among teachers facing emerging technologies, namely attention diverters, cognitive reframers and context regulators [12]. Case studies in specific contexts such as Kuwait and Poland focus on the integration of pedagogy and emotional support, highlighting the vital role of authentic material integration, collaborative interaction and culturally responsive teaching in empowering teachers emotionally [7,10].

In contrast, domestic research in China places greater emphasis on the localized application of TESOL models, for instance, the practice of a "cooperative + autonomous" dual-track model in secondary vocational English teaching, and the construction of a case-based training model for overseas local teachers of Chinese as a foreign language. All these explorations highlight the alignment of emotional support with local teaching scenarios [15]. Scholars, including Fan and Wang, further reveal that emotional labor is closely linked to teachers' professional development: emotion regulation competence not only directly affects teachers' occupational well-being but also deeply participates in the process of teacher identity construction. Meanwhile, as technologies are increasingly integrated into classrooms, the interactive relationship between emotion regulation and technological integration has drawn growing attention [3,5].

In terms of research methodology, international studies feature a parallel development of qualitative approaches (case studies, and Q methodology), quantitative approaches (structural equation modeling, and confirmatory factor analysis) and mixed methods, while domestic research is dominated by applied practice and action research [7,12,15].

Current divergences and debates in existing research mainly center on three aspects: First, no unified consensus has been reached on the evaluative dimensions of emotional teaching competence, some studies focus on the practical application of emotion regulation strategies, while others emphasize comprehensive teaching effectiveness [5,7]. Second, disputes exist over the localized adaptation of international experience: the academic community has not yet agreed on whether it should involve simple technological transplantation or systematic institutional restructuring [8,10].

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Third, studies differ in their targeted settings for emotional training: some focus on pre-service training, whereas others prioritize the professional development of in-service teachers [9,13,16].

2.3. Research gap

Although existing research has fully confirmed the importance of emotional factors for TESOL teachers, considerable gaps and limitations remain [3,14]. First, current studies display an obvious cultural bias: most empirical investigations focus on a single culture or specific region and lack cross-cultural comparative designs and long-term tracking data, which restricts the generalizability and ecological validity of research findings [7,10]. Second, the measurement tools and evaluative dimensions of emotional teaching competence have not been standardized, leading to problems regarding instrument applicability and cross-context stability [5,7]. Third, research has largely remained at the macro level of correlational analysis, with insufficient in-depth exploration of the dynamic mechanisms of emotional emergence and regulation at the classroom level, making it difficult to address the complex demands of real teaching contexts [2,6]. Fourth, novice teachers have been largely overlooked in the existing literature. Systematic and differentiated training programs targeting emotional teaching competence for novice TESOL teachers are lacking, most current training models are designed for in-service teachers or address generalized professional development needs, failing to fully account for the unique challenges novice teachers face in identity transition, emotion management, and the integration of practical skills [3,11,16].

These gaps point to a clear direction for future inquiry: there is an urgent need to develop a context-sensitive, evidence-based, and differentiated training framework for novice TESOL teachers' emotional teaching competence. Such a framework should rationally draw on effective international practices, including case-based teaching, professional learning communities, and data-driven support, while deeply integrating local cultural contexts and institutional realities. In both theoretical and practical terms, this will help drive a substantive shift in teacher education toward the paradigm of holistic development [8,9,13].

From a future-oriented perspective, the global exploration of TESOL teachers' emotional teaching competence still offers vast, underexplored research space. For instance, longitudinal tracking studies could be conducted on the emotional teaching competence of novice teachers across different educational stages and L1 backgrounds. Emerging technologies such as virtual reality and artificial intelligence could also be employed to develop immersive simulated scenarios for emotional teaching practice. These cutting-edge topics are expected to bring new theoretical breakthroughs and practical paradigms to the field, providing richer empirical evidence for understanding the dynamic process of teachers' emotional development [3,12].

At the same time, many independent lines of existing research have the potential for interdisciplinary integration: for example, combining mature emotion regulation strategy training from Western contexts with the localized "cooperative + autonomous" teaching model in China, or integrating teacher emotion regulation types identified through Q methodology with influencing factors verified via structural equation modeling, so as to form a more explanatory theoretical framework and more effective training programs [5,12,15].

Naturally, in advancing such research, a systematic review of the safety, effectiveness, limitations, and shortcomings of current work is essential. In terms of safety, more refined ethical considerations and risk assessments are required to ensure that emotional intervention training does not increase teachers' psychological burden or trigger conflicts in cultural values [2,6]. Regarding effectiveness, most studies only establish correlations between emotional teaching competence, teacher well-being, and student outcomes, yet rigorous experimental designs are needed to confirm

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clear causal chains; the variation in intervention effects across cultural backgrounds also requires urgent clarification [5,7].

As for limitations, existing research suffers from insufficient cross-cultural data, inadequate attention to novice teachers, limited applicability of measurement tools, and weak inquiry into dynamic classroom mechanisms. Furthermore, theoretical frameworks remain largely single-dimensional, lacking an integrated construction of the synergistic mechanisms among emotion, identity, and technology, all of which represent critical challenges and gaps that future research must address [3,14].

Only by acknowledging these limitations, continuously exploring new directions, and integrating existing findings can we truly advance and refine research on teacher professional development in the TESOL field [8,13,16].

3. Discussion

Theoretically, this study fills the research gap of insufficient attention to TESOL teachers in existing studies, clarifies the synergistic empowerment mechanism of emotion, identity and technology, defines the integration path for the localization of international experience, and further enriches the theoretical system of the "holistic development" paradigm in TESOL teacher education.

Practically, the research scheme precisely addresses the practical pain points of novice teachers in identity transformation, emotional management and cross-cultural teaching adaptation. The constructed closed-loop model of "theory–practice–reflection" provides an operational paradigm for teacher training, which helps improve novice teachers' professional competence and career well-being, and promotes the professionalization of TESOL teaching staff in China.

For TESOL teachers, they should take the initiative to cultivate awareness of emotional labor, distinguish between surface acting and deep acting, strengthen their self-emotional regulation and reflective abilities, actively adapt to cultural differences in cross-cultural teaching, and organically integrate technological tools with emotional support.

For schools and teacher education institutions, emotional competence should be incorporated into pre-service and in-service training systems, systematic and situational emotional training courses should be offered, a long-term support and supervision mechanism should be established, and an inclusive environment for professional development should be fostered.

In the long run, this study can provide references for the reform of teacher education, meet the development needs of cross-cultural education, and facilitate the cultivation of global interdisciplinary talents.

4. Conclusion

Under the theoretical framework of emotional labor, this study focuses on the design of training programs for the emotional teaching competence of TESOL teachers. Theoretically, it fills the research gap of insufficient attention to novice teachers in existing studies, clarifies the synergistic empowerment mechanism of emotion, identity and technology, defines the adaptive path for the localization of international experience, further enriches and improves the theoretical connotation of the "holistic development" paradigm in TESOL teacher education, and provides a more systematic theoretical reference for subsequent relevant research. Practically, the differentiated training program constructed in this study precisely addresses the pain points of novice teachers in identity transition, emotional management and cross-cultural teaching adaptation, forming a replicable and

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promotable practical paradigm. This helps improve teachers' professional literacy and teaching effectiveness, and drives the high-quality development of the TESOL teaching workforce in China.

This study still has certain limitations. The research samples are concentrated in international schools in specific regions, which limits the universality of the conclusions; the study mainly adopts literature review and single case analysis, lacking support from large-sample empirical data; the long-term follow-up cycle is relatively short, making it difficult to comprehensively test the training effect. Future research can expand the sample scope to conduct cross-regional comparisons, adopt mixed qualitative and quantitative research methods to enhance the argumentation strength, and extend the follow-up cycle to verify the long-term value. Meanwhile, it is necessary to further explore the technology-enabled paths and introduce intelligent evaluation tools to continuously optimize the training program.

This study provides a solid theoretical basis and practical support for the systematic cultivation of novice TESOL teachers' emotional teaching competence, and carries important significance and application value for deepening teacher education reform and promoting the high-quality development of cross-cultural education.

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