

EMOTIONAL LABOR STRATEGIES IN ONLINE EFL TEACHING: A NOVICE EFL TEACHER'S NARRATIVE

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Abstract: This study explores the emotional labor strategies of novice EFL teachers when teaching online to young learners. Drawing on a post-structural perspective, the research focuses on how novice EFL teachers construct the display rules they are expected to follow and how they perform emotional labor regarding those rules. Two main tools were used in this study, including a narrative frame and a semi-structured in-depth interview. The participant was a novice teacher with two years of experience, currently working as an EFL teacher at a private language center and also teaching primary students online as a freelancer. The findings show that the emotional labor strategies of this novice teacher in online teaching are influenced not only by his institution's display rules but also by how he sees himself as a teacher. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of novice teachers' emotional labor by highlighting the role of context, negotiation, and identity construction.

Key words: Emotional labor; novice EFL teacher; online teaching

CHIẾN LƯỢC LAO ĐỘNG CẢM XÚC TRONG DẠY HỌC TIẾNG ANH TRỰC TUYẾN: LỜI KỂ CHUYỆN CỦA GIÁO VIÊN MỚI VÀO NGHỀ

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu các chiến lược lao động cảm xúc của giáo viên tiếng Anh mới vào nghề khi dạy trực tuyến cho học sinh nhỏ tuổi. Từ góc nhìn hậu cấu trúc, nghiên cứu tập trung vào cách họ xây dựng các quy tắc cảm xúc cần tuân theo và cách thực hiện lao động cảm xúc liên quan. Hai công cụ được sử dụng gồm khung tự sự và phỏng vấn sâu bán cấu trúc. Người tham gia là một giáo viên mới vào nghề với hai năm kinh nghiệm, đang giảng dạy tại một trung tâm ngoại ngữ tư nhân và dạy trực tuyến, với vai trò là một giáo viên tự do, cho học sinh tiểu học. Kết quả cho thấy chiến lược của giáo viên chịu ảnh hưởng từ quy tắc thể hiện cảm xúc của tổ chức và cách anh tự nhìn nhận bản thân trong vai trò giáo viên. Nghiên cứu góp phần làm rõ hơn vai trò của bối cảnh, sự thương lượng và quá trình kiến tạo bản sắc nghề nghiệp.

Từ khóa: Lao động cảm xúc; giáo viên tiếng Anh mới vào nghề; giảng dạy trực tuyến

1. Introduction

In recent years, English language education in Vietnam has become a top priority in national education policy, especially following the implementation of the National Foreign Language Project 2020 (MOET, 2016). Moreover, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it further accelerated English language education to online teaching, making online English learning not just a temporary solution but a long-term option. This shift has created numerous challenges for EFL teachers, particularly those who are new to the profession. They must not only adapt to digital platforms but also manage new emotional demands in online classrooms, where emotional expression relies entirely on eye contact, voice, and screen presence. In such circumstances, the concept of emotional labor, introduced by sociologist Hochschild (1983), becomes more visible than ever. It refers to the process by which teachers regulate, express, or suppress emotions to meet professional expectations.

For teachers, performing emotional labor is not only a personal challenge but also a social one, where emotions are shaped by rules, expectations, and power relations within their working environment (Benesch, 2017; Zembylas, 2005). In online classrooms, emotions are no longer purely individual experiences but are constructed through ongoing negotiations with institutions, parents, students, and the self. While studies on teacher emotions and emotional labor have expanded globally (e.g., Benesch, 2017; Zembylas, 2005), research has primarily focused on face-to-face contexts or experienced teachers. In the Vietnamese context, such studies are particularly scarce, especially concerning novice teachers in online teaching environments. To address this gap, the objective of this study is not only to explore the emotional labor strategies of novice EFL teachers in online classrooms, but also to examine how these strategies inform their professional agency, identity construction, and institutional relationships.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do novice EFL teachers construct and interpret emotional display rules in online classrooms?
- How do they negotiate and perform emotional labor in relation to these rules?

2. Literature review

2.1 Emotional labor in teaching

The concept of emotional labor, introduced by Hochschild (1983), refers to the process by which workers regulate their personal emotions in order to display feelings that meet professional expectations. In the field of education, which has increasingly taken on service-oriented characteristics (Kompella, 2024), teachers are also expected to display emotions to meet the expectations of institutions (Glomb & Tews, 2004).

Teachers' emotional labor has been approached from two main perspectives. The structural perspective views it as a set of measurable components, such as deep acting and surface acting, which are linked to variables like burnout and job satisfaction (Yin et al., 2013). This perspective emphasizes organizational demands and outcomes, but tends to underplay teachers' agency and the complex negotiations involved in everyday practice. In contrast, the post-structural perspective emphasizes that emotions are shaped by discourse and power and are constantly negotiated in social interactions (Benesch, 2017; Zembylas, 2005). This lens highlights

teachers' capacity to resist, reinterpret, or reframe emotional expectations as part of identity work. More recent studies have combined both perspectives to highlight the role of context and identity in shaping teachers' emotional strategies (Bao et al., 2022; Geng et al., 2023). This study primarily uses a post-structural lens to explore how novice EFL teachers negotiate and perform emotional labor in online classrooms, where display rules, power relations, and identity are continuously intertwined. It highlights how teachers' emotions are not only responses to institutional demands but also socially and discursively constructed, shaping how novice teachers interpret and enact display rules in online classrooms.

2.2 Emotional labor strategies

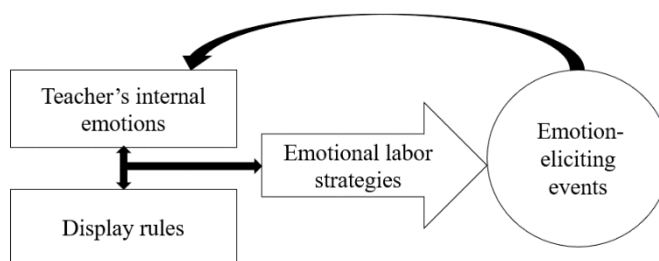
Building on Hochschild's (1983) framework, there are two main emotional labor strategies: surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting occurs when teachers display emotions they do not genuinely feel, such as forcing a smile to meet professional norms, while their internal feelings remain unchanged (Spencer & Rupp, 2009). Deep acting, on the other hand, involves efforts to actually feel the appropriate emotions by recalling memories, using imagination, or amplifying emotional states, which helps create alignment between internal feelings and outward expressions (Hochschild, 1983). In addition to these two, Glomb and Tews (2004) and Diefendorff et al. (2005) introduced a third strategy: genuine expression, in which teachers' natural emotions already align with institutional expectations, making emotional regulation unnecessary.

However, from a post-structural perspective, emotional labor strategies are not merely individual techniques. They are also discursive acts that reflect how teachers negotiate identity, power, and social position through emotion (Benesch, 2017; Zembylas, 2005). These strategies are context-dependent, dynamic, and can even serve as forms of resistance or identity reconstruction. For example, Her and De Costa (2022) described a part-time teacher who used empathy and personal faith to regulate emotions under pressure from new policies. In another study, Benesch (2018) documented how some teachers resisted emotional rules embedded in anti-plagiarism policies, prioritizing students' language development over punitive measures. These strategies reveal the complex relationship between professional roles, institutional power, and teachers' emotional negotiation.

Emotional strategies do not take place in a vacuum. They are shaped by emotional display rules, which are the social and organizational norms that define what teachers should feel and express (Stark & Bettini, 2021).

Figure 2.1

The Emotional Labor Cycle of Teachers (Note: illustrated by the researcher)



The diagram illustrates how emotional labor unfolds in teaching. It begins with emotion-eliciting events (e.g., student misbehavior, unstable internet, or parental interruption), which generate teachers' internal emotions. These emotions are filtered through display rules, shaped by institutional and societal expectations. To manage the gap between felt and expressed emotions, teachers employ emotional labor strategies such as surface acting, deep acting, or genuine expression. From a poststructural lens, these strategies represent not only regulation but also negotiations of power and professional identity.

2.3 Display rules

Display rules are the social and organizational norms that dictate which emotions teachers should express in the classroom. Unlike feeling rules, which prescribe what workers should feel, display rules focus on how emotions should be outwardly expressed (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). In online learning environments, where nonverbal interaction is limited, adherence to these rules becomes even more crucial, as emotions are mainly conveyed through voice and visual presence.

These rules are often implicitly understood by teachers through school culture, social expectations, and professional roles. For instance, primary school teachers are often expected to consistently display joy, patience, and gentleness to align with the developmental characteristics of young children (Curby et al., 2013). In addition, factors such as gender, age, subject taught, and social background also influence how teachers interpret and comply with emotional rules (Stark & Bettini, 2021; Zembylas, 2004). In some contexts, display rules may be universally expected, such as showing constant positivity, suppressing anger, loving the profession, caring for students, and maintaining a professional demeanor (Winograd, 2003). However, there are also implicit rules, such as expressing anger when students cheat (Benesch, 2018) or showing support for new policies even when feeling doubtful (Her & De Costa, 2022).

Following these rules helps teachers maintain a professional image and create a positive learning environment. However, when genuine emotions conflict with those that must be displayed, emotional dissonance may occur, potentially leading to emotional exhaustion or reduced teaching effectiveness (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014; Tuxford & Bradley, 2015).

Display rules, then, are seen as evolving norms that teachers learn, interpret, and sometimes contest, depending on institutional cultures, social dynamics, and their own professional trajectories.

2.4 Emotions of novice teachers

Novice teachers often face emotional challenges to varying degrees, with first-year teachers being more vulnerable to negative impacts (Derakhshan & Nazari, 2023; Karimi & Nazari, 2021). These challenges stem from mismatches between personal expectations and workplace realities, interactions within the organization, and broader sociocultural contexts (Schutz et al., 2018). From a post-structural perspective, emotions are not merely externally imposed pressures but also spaces where teachers can negotiate their identities and exercise agency by reinterpreting or resisting display rules through strategies such as silence, avoidance, or re-signifying emotions (Zembylas, 2005).

2.5 Teachers' emotions in online teaching

The transition to online teaching has significantly changed teachers' emotional environments. In an online setting, teachers rely heavily on facial expressions, voice, and digital tools to maintain engagement with students (Pham & Phan, 2021). At the same time, challenges such as technical disruptions, lack of student interaction, and pressure from parents can lead to emotional exhaustion and feelings of failure in their teaching role (Song, 2022).

2.6 Previous studies

Previous studies have approached teachers' emotions using overlapping concepts such as emotion regulation and emotional labor. In Vietnam, research has largely focused on emotion regulation, as in Ngo (2024), who found that university EFL teachers employed reappraisal and suppression strategies similar to deep and surface acting. Beyond Vietnam, studies on secondary and private language teachers (Herrera & Javier, 2023; Li & Liu, 2021) highlight a wider range of strategies as well as the influence of institutional and commercial pressures on identity. Research on online teaching (Liu et al., 2024; Nyanjom & Naylor, 2020) emphasizes the prevalence of surface acting and the challenges of limited face-to-face interaction, emotional detachment, and surveillance in digital environments. Collectively, these studies confirm that emotional labor is a common aspect of language teaching, but they differ in the contexts, teacher experience levels, and institutional settings examined. What remains underexplored is how novice teachers in Vietnam navigate emotional labor, specifically in online classrooms for young learners, where display rules, technology, and parental involvement interact to shape both their strategies and their emerging professional identities.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study adopted a narrative inquiry approach to explore the emotional experiences of a novice English teacher in the context of online teaching. Narrative inquiry is considered appropriate for this study as it allows the researcher to examine emotion not as a fixed psychological state but as a socially constructed practice that is shaped and given meaning through language, temporality, and relationships (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006). It is particularly valuable for capturing the ways in which teachers construct meaning around their emotions, agency, and identities through storytelling, thereby providing deeper insights into how emotional labor is lived and negotiated in specific contexts.

3.2 Participant

Harry (pseudonym) is a novice EFL teacher with two years of experience. He is currently working at a private language center while also teaching online as a freelancer to students of various ages, most of whom are young learners. Before transitioning to freelance online teaching, he worked through an intermediary platform that provided one-on-one English lessons. His teaching experiences range from being subject to institutional control to exercising full autonomy over his instructional practices. Harry was selected because his trajectory reflects both constrained and autonomous working conditions, offering insights into how novice teachers navigate emotional demands across different institutional arrangements.

3.3 Data collection tools

The data for this study were collected through two primary instruments. First, a narrative frame was used to encourage Harry to write about a memorable emotional experience during online teaching. This written account primarily served to prompt recall and capture his perspective in his own words, offering a baseline narrative of how he understood his emotions in context. Following this, a semi-structured in-depth interview was conducted. The interview focused on Harry's actual emotional experiences in online classrooms, his perceptions of emotional norms, his coping strategies, and how he negotiates institutional demands. It also expanded on key issues emerging from the narrative frame, thereby creating a form of triangulation between written and spoken data. The interview lasted approximately 90 minutes, was audio-recorded, and fully transcribed. All data were used with the participant's informed consent.

3.4 Data analysis

To analyze the collected data, this study adapted Bingham's (2023) five-phase model of qualitative data analysis to suit the narrative nature of the research. The process included the following stages: (1) initial reading of the narrative and interview transcript to gain a holistic understanding; (2) preliminary coding of keywords and emotional imagery; (3) grouping narrative segments into themes related to emotion, identity, and coping; (4) reconstructing the story into thematic clusters using a neutral narrative voice; and (5) linking the analysis to a post-structural theoretical framework to explore how emotions, power, and identity are negotiated and constructed.

3.5 Ethical considerations

The participant was fully informed about the aims of the study and gave written consent before participation. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms are used throughout, and all identifiable information was removed from the data. Given the emotional sensitivity of the topic, the participant was reminded that he could withdraw at any time or choose not to answer specific questions. All data were securely stored, and only the researcher had access to the recordings and transcripts.

4. Findings

Overall, Harry's stories vividly illustrate key aspects of emotional labor, including controlling emotional expressions, limiting proactive engagement, and developing personal emotional labor strategies throughout his teaching process. In particular, his experiences working for the intermediary platform are used as a primary context when discussing experiences of emotional labor in online classes for young learners.

4.1 Emotional expressions under supervision

Harry's initial experiences with online teaching began with strict display rules imposed by the intermediary platform. These rules not only required maintaining a gentle and polite tone and prohibiting loud speech but also mandated behaviors such as turning on the camera for at least 80% of the class, arriving on time, and ensuring students did not have to wait. These processes represent a tightly controlled surveillance system, enforced through written policies, video recordings, and post-class evaluations.

When talking to students, we had to speak softly and avoid loud voices. They clearly specified that we must not speak loudly. Furthermore, we could not let students wait, being late resulted in an immediate warning. (Harry, Interview)

With this system, Harry developed a habit of constantly checking his tone and facial expressions. This was not due to personal preference but out of fear: fear of punishment, losing income, or being expelled from the class.

Therefore, I had to self-monitor. For example, even when I thought I spoke gently, I still asked myself: Is my face calm? Did I communicate properly? (Harry, Interview)

Harry does not see these rules as truly effective. As a teacher, he feels detached from the education process. He has no authority to modify lesson content, no access to parents, and hardly any voice in providing feedback about what actually happens in the classroom.

I am only hired to teach, and honestly, I have no power whatsoever. (Harry, Interview)

These rules caused Harry significant emotional stress, as his feelings during online classes were highly affected by interaction with students. On days when students responded well, whether through body language or Vietnamese language, he felt energized. Conversely, when students ignored him, remained silent, or appeared uninterested, he often felt irritated, disappointed, and helpless.

Students' attitudes truly determined whether I felt satisfied with my teaching that day. (Harry, Interview)

From a post-structural perspective, Harry's situation indicates that emotional labor is not only about managing emotions; it is governed by power. Teachers become objects of emotional labor, observed and directed by others. Without a recognized agency, emotions become something that must be managed rather than negotiated. This explains why Harry often felt doubtful and powerless but still had to perform the expected roles, like an actor on an educational stage directed by others.

4.3.2 Teachers' agency and strategic emotional practices

Even when working in an environment with limited power, Harry does not simply endure. Instead, he develops specific strategies tailored to each teaching situation. From this perspective, emotional labor is not merely an intangible burden; it becomes a space where professional identity is practiced and constructed.

Story 1: The hyperactive student – Refusing to participate as a response

In an online class with a first-grade student showing hyperactivity, Harry faced difficulties as the student repeatedly caused disruptions, refused cooperation, and did not engage in lessons. Although feeling "angry" and "frustrated," Harry tried to suppress these emotions to maintain a professional image. He chose to ignore the student's behaviors and continued with the lesson plan, although he admits that this is only a temporary solution, one that does not help long-term emotional stabilization:

Ignoring it is only temporary... I realize that it's not a good solution. (Harry, Interview)

Harry does not see this as mere submission but as a form of negotiation within limited conditions. After two teaching sessions, he decided to refuse to take the class again if the student returned, signaling deliberate boundary-setting:

I promise myself that if this student returns, I will refuse the class. (Harry, Interview)

Although Harry described this as avoidance, it also marked a conscious act of boundary-setting. This story demonstrates Harry's negotiation of emotional display rules when faced with a disruptive student. The rule to remain calm and pleasant required him to suppress anger and perform emotional labor, even as he recognized its limits. His eventual refusal to continue the class represents a micro-level act of resistance. Viewed through a poststructural lens, this episode reflects agency within constraint, where Harry challenged dominant discourses of infinite teacher patience by redrawing the line of acceptable emotional investment.

Story 2: The silent student – Deep acting through reframing expectations

In an online class with a fifth grader who remained silent and unresponsive, Harry felt both disappointed and helpless:

Who wouldn't feel disappointed teaching like this? (Harry, Interview)

Because the platform prevented contact with parents or refusal of classes, Harry could not address the root cause:

I'm not even sure if they report this to the parents. (Harry, Interview)

Unable to change the system, he reframed his expectations. Instead of demanding full engagement, he considered 70–80% participation a success:

With this student, even 80% is the best I can hope for. (Harry, Interview)

This reframing was less about pretending positivity and more about reshaping his own perception to reduce pressure. Yet, he admitted that without penalties, he would have stopped teaching the class:

If there were no penalties, I would stop immediately. (Harry, Interview)

This story illustrates Harry's use of deep acting by reshaping his expectations, rather than simply suppressing emotions. The institutional rule of patience and positivity left no room for addressing disengagement directly. His strategy of reframing participation levels reflects an adaptive negotiation of emotional labor, where acceptance becomes a survival mechanism under systemic constraints. A poststructural reading reveals how Harry navigates the “gray zone” of institutional power by redefining success on his own terms, highlighting subtle resistance within compliance.

Story 3: The talkative student – Surface acting and tactical professionalism

In a fifth-grade online class, Harry faced a student who talked excessively and often asked off-topic questions. These disruptions created pressure because the class was recorded, and pay depended on completing the lesson:

If I don't cover the entire lesson, I won't get paid. (Harry, Interview)

Unable to show annoyance due to strict display rules, Harry redirected the student by responding in English while maintaining a polite demeanor:

I often respond in English... and then tell him to look at the screen and continue with the lesson. (Harry, Interview)

He framed this as professionalism, using politeness not merely as compliance but as a teaching tool:

I think the way I handle this is okay. I call it professionalism. (Harry, Interview)

Harry also prepared himself mentally before lessons, anticipating possible disruptions to reduce emotional strain:

I always prepare myself mentally, like, "Okay, today they won't talk at all," or maybe they will talk too much. (Harry, Interview)

This story highlights Harry's use of surface acting to comply with display rules while tactically redefining them in practice. In relation to RQ1, he demonstrates how novice teachers internalize institutional demands for politeness, masking irritation under surveillance. At the same time, his strategy of redirecting through English shows negotiation of emotional labor, where professionalism is reinterpreted as agency rather than passive obedience. From a poststructural reading, meanwhile, reveals how he mobilizes politeness as a micro-level resistance, transforming a restrictive display rule into a resource for maintaining both authority and student openness.

4.3.3 Reclaiming emotional space and professional identity

Harry recognizes that his emotions in online classes largely depend on the level of student interaction. When he cannot control the situation or contact parents due to platform regulations, negative emotions accumulate, and professional power diminishes. No longer wishing to perform surface acting or passively endure, Harry leaves the platform to teach independently, where he regains control over his emotions and expertise.

In this new space, Harry is able to directly communicate with parents, adjust lessons flexibly, and receive cooperation rather than supervision.

Now that I teach independently, I have more say... more authority... and I can rely on parental support. (Harry, Interview)

From a post-structuralist perspective, this change is not just a shift in context; rather, it functions as a form of resistance. Harry escapes the space of surveillance and redefines his professional role on his own terms. In this case, emotional labor no longer symbolizes constraint but reflects proactive capacity and professional responsibility. The ability to engage with parents helps Harry gain a deeper understanding of his students and enables him to apply more appropriate and humane strategies. By discussing students' progress directly, his emotional experiences in teaching become less isolated and more collaborative.

5. Discussion

Harry's stories show how novice teachers construct and reinterpret emotional display rules within unequal power relations. As Hochschild (1983) argued, institutions impose emotional norms to align workers' feelings with organizational images, and Harry's case confirms this in

online education. On the teaching platform, calmness and politeness were enforced through surveillance and customer satisfaction (Acheson et al., 2016), reflecting broader norms of showing positivity and controlling negative feelings (Waldbuesser et al., 2021; Winograd, 2003). With hyperactive and talkative students, Harry complied through surface acting, masking irritation to preserve professionalism. Yet this was not passive submission. He reframed politeness as a tactic to redirect behavior, which echoes concerns about emotional dissonance (Tuxford & Bradley, 2015) but also illustrates micro-level resistance.

Power and positioning shaped these interpretations. On the platform, Harry's limited autonomy reflects Her and De Costa's (2022) observation that teachers with less power conform to institutional norms. As a freelancer, he could pause lessons, contact parents, or refuse classes, supporting Benesch's (2018) view that greater agency allows resistance.

Harry's emotional labor strategies also reveal negotiation beyond simple suppression. With the silent student, he engaged in deep acting by reframing expectations; with talkative students, he used surface acting situationally to protect his image. While Li and Liu (2021) found teachers often used surface acting to create emotional distance, Harry used it tactically under surveillance. His strategies also included pedagogical adjustments, such as switching languages, aligning with finding that novice teachers modify instruction alongside emotional discipline.

Overall, Harry's case highlights how emotional norms are continuously reinterpreted in practice. As Zembylas (2005) argues, emotions can be sites of both compliance and resistance. Even under constraints, Harry actively reshaped display rules and cleverly performed emotional labor strategies to balance institutional demands, pedagogical goals, and his own agency.

6. Conclusions and implications

This study examined the emotional labor strategies of Harry, a novice EFL teacher, in online teaching for young learners in Vietnam. It revealed that emotional expressions are shaped not only by personal feelings but also by institutional forces like surveillance and unspoken expectations. Yet, Harry was not passive; he actively negotiated these norms through strategies such as adapting interactions and reshaping his teaching space. His transition to freelance work marked a step toward reclaiming emotional and professional autonomy.

The study contributes to understanding emotional labor in Vietnam's online EFL context. Methodologically, the narrative approach captured the complexity of teachers' emotional struggles. Practically, it highlights the need to support teachers in developing emotional competence and in recognizing subtle pressures from their work environment. Beyond Vietnam, the findings also carry broader significance. The Vietnamese context illustrates how cultural and institutional conditions shape teachers' emotional performances in distinctive ways. Such insights can contribute to regional and global discussions on online teacher emotional labor, especially in settings where English language education is closely tied to socioeconomic mobility and national development goals.

Educational institutions should foster emotionally supportive spaces rather than enforcing standardized displays. Valuing teachers' authentic emotions can strengthen teacher-student relationships. Training programs should also address emotional skills and regulation strategies specific to online teaching.

While limited to a single case, the study offers valuable insights into how emotions are negotiated in teaching. Future research could build on this narrative inquiry by adopting comparative multi-case designs to explore how novice teachers in different contexts navigate emotional labor, or by employing longitudinal approaches to trace how emotional strategies and professional identities evolve over time. Moreover, future studies could also incorporate the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as parents or institutional managers, to provide a more holistic understanding of how emotional labor is constructed and negotiated within online EFL teaching environments.

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