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Exploring tertiary English teachers' emotions during their teaching practice: a case study

Explorando las emociones de los profesores de Inglés de educación superior durante su práctica docente: un caso de estudio

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the emotions experienced by two English teachers at a public university in Ecuador and how these emotions influence their teaching practice and professional well-being. Through interviews, observations, and visual narratives, both pleasant emotions such as enthusiasm and joy, and unpleasant emotions such as nervousness, frustration, sadness, and stress were identified. The teachers used various emotion regulation strategies, including breathing exercises and not taking situations personally, to maintain their resilience. While one teacher showed consistent emotional stability, both faced emotional challenges related to administrative responsibilities, family loss, and student behavior. The findings highlight the importance of acknowledging teachers' emotional dimensions and supporting the development of skills to manage emotions in complex educational contexts with multiple demands.

Keywords: English teachers, emotions, teaching practice, resilience, regulation strategies

RESUMEN

Este estudio exploró las emociones experimentadas por dos docentes de inglés en una universidad pública de Ecuador y cómo estas influyen en su práctica docente y bienestar profesional. A través de entrevistas, observaciones y narrativas visuales, se identificaron emociones placenteras como entusiasmo y alegría, así como emociones desagradables como nerviosismo, frustración, tristeza y estrés. Los docentes utilizaron diversas estrategias de autorregulación emocional, como ejercicios de respiración y la capacidad de no tomar las situaciones personalmente, para mantener

su resiliencia. Aunque uno de los docentes mostró estabilidad emocional constante, ambos enfrentaron desafíos emocionales relacionados con responsabilidades administrativas, pérdida familiar y comportamientos estudiantiles. Los resultados destacan la importancia de reconocer la dimensión emocional del profesorado y de apoyar el desarrollo de habilidades para manejar emociones en contextos educativos complejos y con múltiples demandas.

Palabras claves: docentes de inglés, emociones, estrategias de regulación, práctica docente, resiliencia

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INTRODUCTION

Emotions are an intrinsic part of the human experience, shaping how individuals perceive, respond to, and interact with the world around them. In the context of education, emotions not only influence how teachers relate to students but also how they engage with their professional responsibilities, make decisions, and cope with daily challenges. As Hargreaves (1998) noted, teaching is inherently emotional work, requiring more than the delivery of content; it involves care, empathy, frustration, joy, and sometimes even grief.

Within the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), the role of emotions becomes even more pronounced. English teachers in tertiary education often navigate unique emotional landscapes: managing students' language anxiety, adapting to diverse proficiency levels, facing institutional pressures, and sustaining their motivation over time (Shi, 2021; Mercer et al., 2019). Despite these challenges, many educators continue to find joy, connection, and personal growth in their profession. However, this emotional labor often goes unrecognized or unspoken.

Studying teacher emotions is, therefore, essential, as it sheds light on how educators sustain resilience, maintain their sense of purpose, and adapt to professional demands. Emotions are not merely personal experiences; they impact pedagogical choices, classroom climate, and ultimately, student outcomes (Fried et al., 2015). Although there has been increasing attention to emotions in education, the majority of studies focus on primary and secondary school settings, leaving the tertiary ELT context underexplored, particularly in Latin American countries like Ecuador (Uitto, Jokikokko, & Estola, 2015).

For that reason, this study aims to address that gap by examining the lived emotional experiences of two tertiary English teachers at an Ecuadorian university. Through qualitative methods including semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and visual narratives, this research aims to understand how these teachers experience and regulate their emotions during their teaching practice, and how this emotional management contributes to their professional resilience.

Research Questions

What emotions do two tertiary English teachers experience during their teaching practice?

Do these two teachers manage their emotions to maintain resilience?

Literature review

Emotions

An emotion is a reaction that occurs when we perceive something, whether external or internal, that we consider essential to us. This reaction involves coordinated changes in different parts of the body and mind, such as thoughts, physical sensations, and behaviors, occurring simultaneously (Scherer, 1987, 2001).

Emotions have long been a subject of inquiry in psychology, with numerous theories attempting to define their nature, origin, and function. While there is no single, universally accepted definition, most scholars agree that emotions are complex, multidimensional experiences involving physiological arousal, expressive behavior, and conscious or unconscious cognitive appraisal (Scherer, 2005; Gross, 2015). Lazarus (1991), one of the most influential figures in this field, proposed the Appraisal Theory, which emphasizes the individual's evaluation of environmental events as central to emotional experience. He argues that emotions arise when an individual appraises a situation as significant to their well-being, particularly in terms of its relevance to their goals and potential for coping.

Plutchik (1980) developed a psychoevolutionary perspective, suggesting that emotions evolved to help humans adapt to their environment. His well-known "wheel of emotions" identifies eight primary emotions: joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, anger, and anticipation, which can blend into more complex feelings. Ekman (1992) contributed to this field with his theory of basic emotions, which are universally recognized and associated with distinct facial expressions. These theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for understanding emotions not merely as reactions, but as processes that influence perception, behavior, decision-making, and social interaction.

Given the emotionally demanding nature of teaching, especially in language classrooms, teachers' emotional regulation is essential for managing classroom challenges and maintaining well-being. Gross (1998) explains emotional suppression as consciously inhibiting emotional expression to prevent interference with professional duties. Techniques such as deep breathing can effectively reduce stress responses (Ma et al., 2017), supporting teachers' emotional resilience.

Emotions in ELT

In recent years, emotions have emerged as a significant area of study within English Language Teaching (Benesch, 2012; Gkonou, Mercer, & Daubney, 2016; Zembylas, 2005). Teaching, especially in language classrooms, is not a purely cognitive or technical activity; it is inherently emotional (Hargreaves, 2000). Teachers frequently experience a range of emotions, from satisfaction and joy when students succeed to frustration, anxiety, and even burnout when faced with challenges such as heavy workloads, classroom management issues, or a lack of institutional support (Day & Leitch, 2001).

Benesch (2017) introduced the concept of "emotion labor" in ELT, highlighting the emotional regulation teachers engage in to meet institutional expectations. In multilingual and multicultural settings, ELT teachers must often suppress or modify their emotions to appear enthusiastic, patient, or encouraging, even under stress. This emotional dissonance can affect teachers' well-being and job satisfaction. Additionally, teacher emotions are influenced by

external factors such as curriculum policies, student attitudes, and socio-political contexts, making the teaching of English particularly demanding in certain regions (Song & Park, 2019).

From the learner's side, emotions such as foreign language anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986), motivation (Dörnyei, 2005), and enjoyment (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014) play critical roles in language acquisition. However, less attention has been paid to the emotional lives of teachers, even though their emotional state can have a direct impact on the classroom atmosphere, instructional effectiveness, and student outcomes (Golombek & Doran, 2014). Understanding teacher emotions in ELT settings is, therefore, essential for fostering emotionally supportive and sustainable teaching practices.

Teaching involves balancing genuine emotional engagement with institutional expectations. Zembylas (2005) argues that teacher emotions are political and professional acts, often requiring emotional labor where teachers regulate their feelings to meet norms. Palmer (1998) notes that "we teach who we are," emphasizing the importance of emotional authenticity.

Types of emotions (Pleasant and unpleasant)

Emotions experienced in English Language Teaching (ELT) can be broadly categorized into pleasant and unpleasant types. Pleasant emotions, such as joy, pride, and love, often arise from positive classroom interactions, student progress, and a sense of professional accomplishment (Khajavy & Ghonsooly, 2018; Chen, 2016). In contrast, unpleasant emotions such as anxiety, anger, and shame are frequently triggered by disruptive student behavior, lack of preparation, institutional pressures, and challenging teaching conditions (Khajavy & Ghonsooly, 2018; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003).

According to Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory, pleasant emotions broaden teachers' cognitive and affective resources, fostering creativity, resilience, and stronger teacher-student relationships. On the other hand, unpleasant emotions tend to narrow attention and promote avoidance behaviors, which may negatively impact teaching effectiveness and well-being (Fredrickson, 2001). Hence, understanding how teachers experience and regulate both pleasant and unpleasant emotions is crucial for sustaining their professional satisfaction and enhancing student outcomes in ELT settings.

Emotions in ELT: Studies and Findings

Several empirical studies have investigated the role of emotions in ELT, particularly from the perspective of teachers (Gkonou, Dewaele, & King, 2020; Mercer & Gregersen, 2020; Khajavy, Ghonsooly, & Frenzel, 2018). Alzaanin (2024) conducted a qualitative study involving university-level EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia, using semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. His findings revealed that emotional experiences were central to how teachers constructed their professional identity. Teachers described emotions such as pride, helplessness, and resilience as recurring themes in their teaching journeys. Similarly, Golombek and Doran

(2014) found that emotional understanding was key to teachers' professional development, as emotions mediated their engagement with pedagogical practices and interactions with students.

Yu (2022) offered a systematic review of studies on learner emotions in foreign language classrooms, identifying foreign language enjoyment (FLE) and anxiety as the two most commonly studied emotions. While the review focused on learners, it emphasized the reciprocal nature of teacher–student emotional dynamics. In a related study, Pishghadam, Zabetipour, and Aminzadeh (2016) examined emotional responses of EFL learners and showed that classrooms where teachers expressed enthusiasm and empathy saw greater student participation and academic success.

In the Latin American context, Santos et al. (2020) explored the emotional experiences of Ecuadorian secondary students in English classes in the province of Los Ríos. Their study found that unpleasant emotions such as fear of making mistakes, anxiety, and lack of confidence hindered students' oral participation, with female students experiencing higher levels of emotional barriers than males. These findings highlight the significant impact of emotions on language learning and emphasize the need for emotionally supportive teaching strategies in ELT.

Moreover, Benesch (2017) emphasized that teachers perceived emotional autonomy, being able to feel and express emotions without institutional censorship, was crucial to maintaining job satisfaction and teaching quality.

Furthermore, research indicates that personal adversities, such as bereavement, significantly impact teacher emotions and motivation (Dunn, 2021). However, many teachers draw strength from their dedication to students, utilizing emotional regulation strategies to maintain their work despite these challenges.

This study also aligns with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) objectives of promoting teacher well-being and inclusive quality education. By exploring the emotional experiences and resilience of English language teachers in higher education, this research contributes to the global efforts outlined in UNESCO's Education 2030 Framework for Action, which emphasizes supporting teachers as essential agents for achieving equitable and quality education worldwide (UNESCO, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore and understand the emotional experiences of two tertiary English teachers during their teaching practice. This method enables an in-depth examination of these individual perspectives and experiences within their natural context, offering rich and detailed insights into the emotional dynamics of teaching; therefore, it is also regarded as a case study.

Context and Participant

The study was undertaken in a public university in the Los Ríos province. All of the teachers of the English pedagogy undergraduate course were invited to participate. Still, only two accepted the invitation (One woman and one man):

Ele is 42 years old (Woman). She is an English teacher in the National and Foreign Languages Pedagogy program at a public university in Ecuador. She has extensive experience in English language teaching, as she began her teaching career at a very young age.

Jota is 38 years old (Men). Like the first participant, is an English teacher in the same National and Foreign Languages Pedagogy program at the same public university. He also began teaching at a young age and has therefore developed a long career in English language instruction.

When the data was collected, both participants held the position of *sub-coordinators*¹ in the program and also taught several subjects at different levels or semesters.

Data Collection Instruments

First, semi-structured interviews were conducted in Spanish to explore participants' emotions, coping mechanisms, and perspectives on resilience. These interviews, which lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, provided in-depth narratives that revealed the emotional challenges and successes in their teaching practice. Second, they were invited to create a visual representation (drawing) that illustrates their emotional journey as teachers in the classroom and to explain what they wanted to convey in the drawing. These visual narratives offered an additional perspective to understand their experiences and complemented verbal data. Next, non-participant classroom observations were conducted to contextualize participants' emotions within their teaching environment. Observations focused on their interactions with students, classroom management strategies, and emotional expressions during teaching. Finally, field notes were recorded during observations to document non-verbal cues, contextual details, and the researcher's reflections. These notes enriched the data by providing a more detailed understanding of participants' emotional experiences.

Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted using Grounded Theory, a research method that generates theory based on systematically collected and analyzed data, with a focus on social relationships and group behaviors (Scott, 2017). Initially, the verbal interviews were transcribed, followed by a thematic analysis to identify emotional patterns in the two participants. Subsequently, the observations and field notes were reviewed to determine the connection between the participants' emotions, the experiences shared during the interviews, and their teaching practice.

¹ Subcoordinator is an academic or administrative staff member who assists a program or course coordinator in organizing, managing, and overseeing courses, academic activities, or departmental tasks.

The study adheres to ethical standards to ensure participants' rights and well-being: Participants are provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks, and their voluntary consent is obtained through a signed consent form. Participants' identities were anonymized using pseudonyms, and any identifiable information was removed from the data. Additionally, they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Jota

Jota, an enthusiastic, relaxed, and consistently positive teacher, exemplifies emotional stability in the classroom. Throughout the research process, he demonstrated a steady emotional state, showing minimal variation in his feelings. His passion for teaching is evident from the very beginning of each lesson, as he approaches the classroom with high energy and enthusiasm: “Before the class, I feel very energetic; I enjoy teaching and I enjoy sharing knowledge.” (Interview). This is also confirmed in the visual narrative, where he drew himself with a big smile:

Figure 1

Jota's visual narrative



One day, Jota asked a student to participate voluntarily, but she refused and left the classroom. This situation did not trigger any emotional reaction in him. However, the complaints from other students about what happened made him feel nervous. Despite that, Jota managed to control his emotions: “I didn’t allow those emotions to affect me; I simply let her go.” (Interview). This reaction aligns with Gross’s (1998) concept of emotional suppression, a form of response-focused emotion regulation in which individuals consciously inhibit their emotional responses after an emotion has been triggered, to prevent it from influencing their actions.

On another day, Jota asked his students to complete an assignment, but they were not taking it seriously. One student went to complain to the coordination office, saying that he was singling him out: “At that moment, they saw my strictness, because my main goal is for them to learn” (Interview). Although they only saw him as strict at that moment, during the observations, a certain tension between the students and the teacher could be noticed. In response to a directive

given by the teacher, a student reacted negatively by rolling her eyes, although she did not say anything: “The teacher did not respond to this behavior and continued the lesson as normally” (Field Note).

During this semester, Jota was working as a sub-coordinator, and this role led him to experience different sources of unpleasant emotions. He said, “I have felt stressed due to office work, paperwork, coordination tasks, etc.” (Interview). Besides feeling that way, he also felt frustrated:

“It has affected me because sometimes I can’t teach a class since I have a meeting. I have to go to the classroom and tell the students I will not be there because I need to leave. I have to go to another department, and that frustrates me. It’s not just that I feel angry, but also frustrating because I want to be in the classroom rather than in an office. That is how I feel.” (Interview)

One technique that he used to maintain resilience in this situation was breathing exercises: “A specific strategy is breathing... I mean, when I feel a strong emotion related to coordination work, I take a breath and keep going” (Interview). This finding aligns with previous research, which suggests that breathing exercises can reduce the physiological responses associated with stress in healthy individuals (Ma et al., 2017). Say one study that a teacher did the same, or explain better the Ma et al., 2017 article.

This level of resilience could only be achieved through years of practice. At the beginning of his teaching career, Jota used to feel sad, frustrated, and would cry frequently:

“Experience has helped me a lot. I remember my years in high school; they were very difficult. I was very sensitive; I cried, tears would come out, and I was extremely emotional. Then I learned to control and manage it in a different way, through writing, reflecting at the end of the class, or at the end of the day when I got home. Reading about psychology also helped me a lot. My school years shaped my character and prepared me to become a teacher and work with students of different ages.” (Interview)

In conclusion, although Jota is known for being a positive, enthusiastic, and relaxed teacher, during this semester, he experienced several unpleasant emotions such as nervousness, anger, frustration, and stress. These challenges were mainly related to his additional responsibilities as a sub-coordinator. Despite this, Jota managed to stay emotionally balanced by using self-regulation strategies. One of the most helpful techniques for him was deep breathing, which allowed him to calm down and continue with his duties. His experience shows that even emotionally stable and optimistic teachers can struggle, and it highlights the importance of developing coping strategies in the teaching profession.

Ele

Ele stands out for being reflective, analytical, and deeply emotional. Throughout the research process, she experienced a wide range of emotions that resembled an emotional roller coaster (Santos and Luque-Agulló, 2025). Her journey offers valuable insight into how personal experiences and emotional sensitivity can influence a teacher's practice, relationships with students, and ability to cope with professional challenges. In one episode, Ele suffered the loss of her grandmother and cousins. In two different situations, she found out that her family member had passed away, which occasioned unpleasant emotions:

"I've lost family members, like my grandmother and my cousins. Lately, I've been having a hard time going to university because sometimes I just don't feel like going to work. I'm going through a very difficult time, one I've rarely experienced before. I feel unmotivated and sad." (Interview) This emotional impact is consistent with Dunn's (2021) findings, which highlight how losing loved ones can profoundly affect individuals' motivation and emotional well-being, leading to challenges in daily functioning. In the context of my participant, this connection suggests that personal loss does not remain confined to private life but inevitably permeates professional identity and classroom performance. Such experiences highlight the dual burden teachers carry navigating their own emotional struggles while simultaneously striving to maintain a supportive learning environment. This underscores the importance of considering teachers' emotional well-being not as separate from, but as integral to, their professional practice.

Her students were a key point to help her overcome these situations whenever she was sad: "But once I am in the classroom, I forget about everything, and sometimes I end up laughing with my students. It changes my whole world." (Interview). This illustrates the crucial role of teacher-student interactions in fostering resilience and providing emotional support. While personal loss created significant emotional strain, the classroom environment became a source of healing and motivation, showing how professional identity and teacher well-being are deeply interconnected.

After her two days of leave, she was not ready to return to her classes. She did not want to come because she was very sad, but the responsibility of coordinating and her classes pushed her to attend university: "Because of family losses, I don't feel like coming to work. I'm not in the mood, I'm sad, and I don't want to get up. But once I arrive at the university, especially in the classroom, I enter that world. Since I love teaching, I really forget about my problems and try to make sure the students enjoy their learning process." (Interview). This is reflected in Dunn (2022), who highlights that teachers often feel compelled to hide negative emotions and prioritize students' learning needs, which can become emotionally exhausting. Ele's experience reflects this tension, as despite her personal grief, she continued to fulfill her responsibilities as a teacher, demonstrating how educators are frequently required to maintain emotional control even in the face of profound personal challenges.

On the day she returned, she was unable to start the class as usual and began to cry: “I couldn’t start the class as usual, and I began to cry.” (Interview). However, her duties as a teacher made her move on. Ele said that, as teachers, we need to suppress our emotions in the name of professionalism: “The emotions I feel inside do not matter because what is important is managing the students’ emotions.” (Interview). We believe that we have the permission to feel in the classroom; experiencing a range of emotions in class does not make us less professional. However, our emotions cannot affect the students' learning. According to Zembylas (2005), emotions are not just personal experiences, but also political and professional acts. Acknowledging emotions in the classroom becomes a way of resisting the institutional expectations that label vulnerability as unprofessional.

This situation generated a deep discussion with Ele. She believes that teachers are actors, so they need to fake their emotions. “The teacher is almost like an actor; inside the classroom, you have to perform” (Interview). While this argument highlights the performative dimension of teaching, it also implies that emotions can be deliberately concealed or staged to maintain control. However, we argue that teaching cannot be reduced to a theatrical performance. Instead, it requires authentic emotional engagement, since emotions are not mere strategies but essential components of human connection. As Palmer (1998) states, “we teach who we are,” which means that denying or suppressing our own feelings makes it difficult to genuinely connect with and support our students. In this sense, emotional awareness begins with self-recognition and validation. Rodríguez and Murillo (2018) also stress that when teachers acknowledge and regulate their emotions, they create conditions for students to develop emotional learning themselves. In other words, authenticity allows teachers to model emotional literacy, while excessive acting risks creating distance, mistrust, or superficial relationships within the classroom.

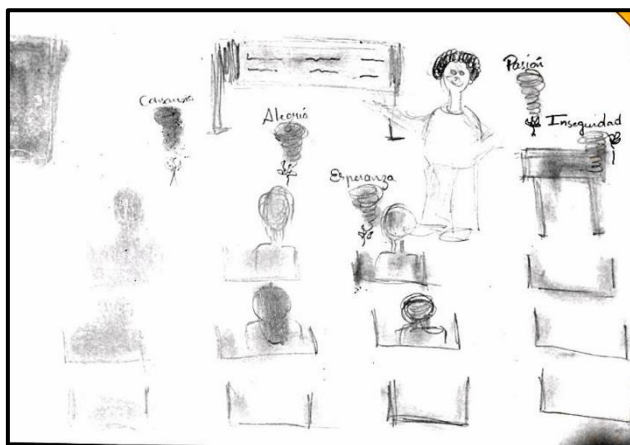
The technique she used to maintain her resilience during a disturbed semester was not taking things personally, as part of her emotional maturity. “Not taking anything personally and not bringing anything home or outside the classroom, what happened in the classroom, stays there, especially if it was something negative” (Interview).

Ele also agrees with Jota about the importance of experience to know how to manage emotions in class: “Experience gives you more calmness, greater confidence, and better classroom management compared to what you feel at the beginning of your teaching journey.” (Interview).

Ele's visual narrative goes against her idea of the teacher being an actor, because she is aware of her students' emotions, and consequently, she knows that a classroom is a place that permits you to feel.

Figura 2

Eles' visual narrative



In her visual narrative, we can see her standing in front of a classroom with different students sitting at their desks. The students are paying attention to what she is saying. We can also observe some swirls, and in the middle, there is a plant. Inside each swirl, there are words like tiredness, joy, hope, passion, and insecurity.

In conclusion, Ele is a reflective and emotional teacher who faced difficult moments due to the loss of her family members. Despite feeling sad and unmotivated, her love for teaching and responsibility helped her continue working. She believes that teachers need to manage their emotions professionally, but also that the classroom is a place where it is okay to feel. Ele's experience shows how personal feelings affect teachers, and how important it is to balance emotions and professionalism in education.

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to understand the emotions experienced by two English teachers during their teaching practice at a public university in Ecuador. To explore this, we employed interviews, visual narratives, field notes, and classroom observations.

Throughout the study, it became evident that teachers experience a wide spectrum of emotions, from stress, sadness, and frustration to joy and motivation. These feelings are often influenced by personal challenges, student behavior, heavy workloads, and administrative responsibilities.

Even during emotionally challenging moments, teachers demonstrated remarkable resilience. They employed strategies such as not taking things personally, leaving problems in the classroom instead of bringing them home, and managing their emotions through breathing techniques. These small yet meaningful actions helped them remain strong and continue their work with passion. This study reminds us that feeling in the classroom is part of being human and part of being a teacher. Emotions do not take away from professionalism; they are a part of it.

Limitations and recommendations

One of the main limitations of this study was the tight schedule of the participants, who were full-time teachers. As a result, it was not possible to conduct as many interviews as initially planned. However, despite this challenge, all the guiding questions were successfully addressed during the interviews.

Future studies could consider employing a longitudinal design to track participants over an extended period. It is also advisable to compare the emotional experiences of teachers from various regions of Ecuador or to investigate the emotions of English teachers working in private universities. These approaches could yield more comprehensive insights into the emotional aspects of teaching across different contexts.

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