



From Idealism to Reality: Emotional Struggles and Labor of Beginning EFL Teachers in Vietnam

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Abstract: *This exploratory study investigates the emotional experiences and labor strategies of novice EFL teachers in Vietnam, particularly in relation to the phenomenon of reality shock. Despite their idealistic expectations shaped by teacher education programs, these teachers often encounter significant emotional challenges stemming from discrepancies between their training and the realities of classroom life. Through semi-structured interviews with six novice EFL teachers in Ho Chi Minh City, the study reveals feelings of confusion, frustration, and self-doubt that impact their emotional well-being and teaching effectiveness. The respondents employed various emotion labor strategies, including surface acting, deep acting, and expressing genuine emotions, to navigate their emotional challenges. While surface acting helped maintain a professional demeanor, it often resulted in emotional exhaustion. In contrast, deep acting and authentic emotional expression emerged as more sustainable strategies, fostering a deeper bond with students and enhancing emotional resilience. The results highlight the need for support networks and training in emotional regulation to be incorporated into teacher preparation programmes to better equip early-career EFL teachers to address the contextual difficulties they face. This study contributes to the growing body of research on teacher emotions and emphasises the importance of prioritising emotional well-being in educational settings to enhance teacher effectiveness and retention. Future research should explore the long-term impact of emotion regulation strategies on language teachers' emotional well-being and professional development.*

Key words: *emotion, emotion labor, reality shock, novice teachers*

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite having a central role to human beings for its interrelationship with people's cognition and motivation, the concept of emotion has been "the victim of significant neglect" due to its subjective and immeasurable nature (Benesch, 2012; Ross, 2015, p. 2). Another explanation for such neglect is the usual accentuation on the cognitive side of humans, leading the affective side to be irrational and subsequently downplayed (Martínez, 2018). In the language teaching realm, such overemphasis has recently been challenged by the growing effort in pointing out the pivotal role of emotions in teaching (Martínez, 2018). In other words, what teachers "feel about what they think, believe and do" is receiving greater attention because teaching is considered an emotionally demanding occupation where the emotions of teachers determine various outcomes including teaching practice, student achievement, job satisfaction, and professional development (Armenta, 2023; Day & Lee, 2011; Chen, 2019; Gkonou & Miller, 2021; Golombek & Doran, 2014, p. 103; Kocabaş-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021; Puckett, 2022; Reis, 2015; Schutz & Lee, 2014; Van Canh Le et al., 2020)

Since teaching is an emotional profession, teachers at any stages of their career are bound to experience emotional struggles as they interact with students, parents, colleagues, or school leaders (Assaf, 2008; Hargreaves, 2001; Loh & Liew, 2016; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003). However, beginning teachers are often more susceptible to negative emotions, which challenges their decisions regarding pedagogy, identity reconstruction, or attrition (Akor & Savasci, 2020; Chen, 2019; Farrel, 2003; Farrell, 2006; Lap et al., 2022; Thanh, 2021). This can be explained by the fact that they are still in the process of learning to teach but having to simultaneously meet their institution's high demands (Golombek & Doran, 2014; Loh & Liew, 2016). This contradiction is termed "reality shock" referring to a teacher's

ideals of their job clashing with the “harsh and rude reality” of school life (Veenman, 1984, p. 143). Therefore, it is essential for EFL teachers to have the ability to regulate their emotions when interacting with the emotionally challenging reality of teaching. Put differently, EFL teachers are required to perform emotion labor (Benesch & Prior, 2023; Hochschild, 1979). This may pose a conundrum for beginning teachers as emotion labor is supposedly a skill that is honed over the course of time along with various forms of support (Gkonou & Miller, 2021). Put it differently, novice EFL teachers are expected to function effectively before having “the necessary competence to do so” (Golombek & Johnson, 2016, p.9). Consequently, these teachers’ lack of competence in utilizing emotion labor to push through their reality shock can worsen their emotional well-being.

It is therefore argued that early-career EFL teachers are in need of support regarding their efforts to regulate the emotional matters arising from reality shock, because their competence in doing so can determine the quality of learning and teaching (Martínez, 2018). However, for this support to be effective, an in-depth contextual understanding of the specific emotional hardships caused by novice language teachers’ reality shock as well as their particular experiences in implementing emotion labor to handle such crises must be investigated. The rationale for the aforementioned claims is the assistance provided for any novice language teachers may be ineffective if the prior need to “locally” understand the specific challenges stemming from their own teaching settings comes unmet (Golombek & Johnson, 2016, p. 27; Thanh, 2021). Therefore, this exploratory study is established to unravel the emotional issues of novice EFL teachers in Vietnam when they are exposed to reality shock, their employment of emotion labor to handle these challenges, and their perceptions of this experience. There is a total of two questions that the study aims to answer:

1. How do novice EFL teachers in Vietnam emotionally respond to reality shock?
2. What emotion labor strategies do novice EFL teachers in Vietnam employ in the face of reality shock?
3. How do novice EFL teachers in Vietnam perceive their experiences with these strategies?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Novice EFL Teachers and Reality Shock

Reality shock is understood as the stage taking place during the first years into teaching when novice teachers’ ideal expectations from their teacher education are crumbled by the reality of school life (Farrel, 2003; Veenman, 1984). Different studies conclude that novice teachers’ reality shock can be attributed to excessive workload, low student motivation or engagement, insufficient on-the-job training, and inadequate collegial support (Buchanan et al., 2013; Farrel, 2003; Kim & Cho, 2014; Lap et al., 2022; K. A. R. Richards et al., 2013; Stokking et al., 2003; Thanh, 2021; Veenman, 1984).

There have been some attempts in helping novice language teachers in overcoming their reality shock. Firstly, they are more professionally supported in terms of theories and practices in planning lessons, managing classrooms, and understanding their students (Akcór & Savasci, 2020; Vu & Dudzik, 2019). Secondly, they also receive organisational support namely mentoring programs or collegial collaboration in inducting them into their new school (Akcór & Savasci, 2020).

However, such assistance is often criticised as “one-size-fits-all” prescriptions neglecting the contextually-related aspects of novice language teachers, thus falls short to sufficiently prepare new teachers for their teaching reality (Van Canh Le et al., 2020, p. 34). Among these ignored aspects, the inner world of teachers including their emotions has been underexplored for a long time due to the assumptions that emotions are subjective, and hard to observe or measure (Benesch, 2012; Ross, 2015). In contrast, the multi-dimensional nature and impact of teacher emotions are argued to be among the vital determinants of effective teaching and learning (Martínez, 2021). The neglected importance of emotions in teaching and learning has filtered down to the field of language teacher education when little has been done to support beginning teachers in terms of their emotional hardships when facing reality shock (Dörnyei, 2009; Golombek & Doran, 2014; Martínez, 2018). In agreement with this criticism, Richards (2022) claims that language teacher education programs tend to focus extensively on providing student teachers with professional knowledge or teaching techniques, thus overlook the necessity to train them to “manage and respond” to emotionally challenging classroom issues (p. 236).

2.2. Novice EFL Teachers and Emotion Labor

As previously stated, the notion of emotion was initially ignored due to the claims that emotions are subjective, unobservable, or irrational (Benesch, 2017; Sherman, 1997). However, the recent realization that the emotion and cognition aspect of human beings are inseparable has given the former the attention it deserves in different fields such as psychology and education (Martínez, 2018). The emergent significance of emotion can also be found in language teacher education as Golombek and Doran (2014) emphasise the role of emotions in the learning-to-teach process of novice teachers. Specifically, though their more experienced counterparts are still subjected to negative feelings due to the emotionally taxing demands of teaching, beginning teachers are more emotionally vulnerable since they only face teaching for the first time (Golombek & Doran, 2014; Loh & Liew, 2016). This may cause the novice to abandon their ideals about teaching at the expense of their students' "emotional, creative, and intellectual development", or even leave the profession (Anttila et al., 2016; Buchanan et al., 2013, p. 113; Richards, 2022). Consequentially, understanding how novice EFL teachers work themselves through "emotional-evoking" situations arising from their classrooms is central (Martínez, 2018, p. 6)

Regarding the management of emotions, the concept of emotion labor is chosen for this study. First, it involves one's commodified set of skills to regulate their emotions in response to their organization's feeling rules, which refer to the implicit social conventions that govern which emotions are appropriate in a particular situation. (Hochschild, 1983).

Secondly, according to Hochschild (1983), emotion labor is necessary when there's a disparity between the ideal and actual feelings in a social context. This discrepancy can drive people to perform several emotion labor strategies. First, surface acting means modifying how emotions are expressed on the outside without changing the underlying emotions. Second, deep acting entails deliberately controlling and modifying one's inner feelings to fit the demands of the role. Third, genuine emotion labor occurs when an individual's emotions are in line with their actual feelings and controlling them requires less effort.

There have been different approaches taken to examine emotion labor. On one hand, a number of practitioners employ the structural approach which breaks down the concept into various work-related variables measured through pre-determined questionnaire or self-report (Keller et al., 2014; Lee, 2019; Zhang & Zhu, 2007). This quantified way of understanding teacher emotion labor is criticised for overlooking the multi-dimensional nature of the construct as well as the connection teachers have with the wider social contexts (Wharton, 2009; Zembylas, 2006, 2020).

Therefore, the post-structural stance is a reaction against this approach as it recognises the role "historical, cultural, or socio-political" factors have with English teachers' emotion labor (Ghyasi & Gurbuz, 2023, p.1). Specifically, issues namely social norms and institutional demands can impact emotion labor (Benesch, 2017, 2020; Gkonou & Miller, 2021). This contradicts the notion that people's emotions are individually psychologically constructed (Zembylas, 2005). Moreover, rather than viewing such impacts as "unidirectional" to emotion labor, post-structuralists propose that language teachers can negotiate these interactions differently due to their educational background, beliefs, or identities (Benesch, 2017, p. 51; Gkonou & Miller, 2021; Kocabaş-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2021). In other words, EFL teachers' emotion labor is a discursive process in which teachers act as "socially and culturally specific" individuals who can choose to resist or comply with their context's feeling rules (Benesch, 2017; Zembylas, 2005, p. 937)

Although the current post-structural studies on English teachers' emotion labor are insightful in revealing its sources and outcomes, most of them target teachers from various stages of their career rather than focusing solely on a particular group namely the novice ones (Acheson et al., 2016; Gkonou & Miller, 2021; King, 2016; Loh & Liew, 2016). In their work, Loh and Liew (2016) suggest that ESL teachers' emotion labor stems from the contradicting views of English as a subject, the culture of exams, excessive grading and the conflicting interest between valuing student diversity or imposing one-size-fits-all pedagogy. In addition, Gkonou and Miller (2021) discover from their research that English teachers' emotion labor is required due to their need to be professional at work. These two studies reveal that emotion labor is often more severe for novice teachers while their experienced colleagues may perceive it more positively. However, they do not dwell on further explaining why the former's experience with emotion labor is more troublesome. The investigation by Kocabaş-Gedik and Ortaçtepe Hart (2021) partly answers this by unraveling how two novice native EFL teachers construct their identity through handling the spectrum of emotions caused by students' misbehaviors, high volume of

workload, and lack of institutional assistance. The two participants, regardless of teaching in the same school, perceive emotion labor differently due to their educational and personal background, local language competence, and institutional supports. Nevertheless, since they are native English speakers, the factors affecting emotion labor may differ from the ones of non-native English teachers, thus showing the significance of understanding emotion labor in “different settings” (Blake & Dewaele, 2023, p.55).

Endeavouring to enhance Vietnamese EFL teacher competence, Van Canh et al. (2020) call for more attention to be paid to encourage teacher learning. Specifically, they employ a social cognitive viewpoint to emphasise the key role emotions play in teacher learning. In other words, EFL teacher emotions should be further studied for “its dynamic relationship to cognitive development, as well as to the reconstruction of agency and identity.” (p. 192).

The similar scarcity of research in EFL teacher emotions can also be found in the educational context of Vietnam since there has been a lack of efforts in gaining deeper insights into the emotional struggles Vietnamese EFL teachers, including the novice groups, have to bear from reality shock. Therefore, a more thorough examination in this matter and how beginning teachers manage their emotional experiences at work is essential.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

This exploratory study focuses on EFL secondary school teachers in Ho Chi Minh City. It is worth noting that emotional management and its related issues have been designated a life skill for teachers and students in all educational contexts in Vietnam by the MOET (Huynh et al., 2021). However, while such integration has been widely implemented across private institutions in Ho Chi Minh City, the same cannot be said for public secondary schools (Huynh et al., 2021). Therefore, conducting an in-depth exploration of the experiences of novice EFL teachers in managing their emotions in this educational setting is essential to understand the “complex reality of teaching” (Van Canh Le et al., 2020, p. 193).

To recruit participants, a call for respondents outlining the research aims was disseminated on social networking sites. Six teachers expressed interest in participating. Subsequently, a formal invitation was emailed to these teachers. Upon receiving and reviewing the invitation, all six teachers consented to participate in the study.

As the research aims to study the emotion labor of a particular group of teachers, this purposeful sampling strategy ensures the selected respondents possess the specific characteristics relevant to the research focus (Flick, 2021). All respondents were selected based on their years of teaching experience and current teaching context. The participating teachers have no more than five years of teaching experience, indicating their novice status. These novice EFL teachers currently teach in public secondary schools in Ho Chi Minh City.

3.2. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to collect qualitative data as their characteristics align with this study’s post-structuralist view of teachers’ emotion labor. First, rather than eliminating “any bias” from interviewees, as is the goal of a structured interview, the chosen instrument explores the “specific perspectives” of its respondents (Flick, 2021, p. 172). Second, each interview was designed to be dialogically stimulating, allowing the respondents to express themselves openly and thoroughly.

The interview questions were designed based on the research questions to approach each participant in a personal manner. Respondents first provided information related to their professional background and teaching context. Second, they described their reality shock in terms of its sources and their emotions when facing it. Finally, the respondents described their emotion labor strategies for handling such emotionally-provoking situations. Furthermore, the questions in this final section were formulated to reveal each participant’s perceptions towards the use of emotion labor by a beginning teacher.

Each interview was conducted in Vietnamese via Google Meet at a time convenient for the participant. The recordings were then transcribed and checked for accuracy. All transcripts were anonymised by removing identifying information, such as participant names and school affiliations, to ensure participant confidentiality.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Findings

The data reveals several themes regarding the respondents' emotional responses to reality shock, their various emotion regulation strategies, and their perceptions of such emotional experiences.

4.1.1. Emotional Responses to reality shock

The respondents all experienced discrepancies between their expectations and the realities of their schools. These discrepancies led to a range of negative emotions. Firstly, confusion emerged as the respondents encountered a large gap in terms of teaching methods. In particular, despite being intensively trained to deliver communicative English lessons, they could not effectively employ this approach due to the poor engagement of their students and the exam-driven culture of their schools. For instance, R1's efforts to foster English interaction among her students were met with indifference from her students who were accustomed to "doing grammar exercises". To her surprise, this was the same way English was practised when she was a student many years ago. R3 was even advised by some students to change his current teaching practice during a writing lesson.

I thought I could easily create discussions, but instead, I was met with blank [...] Little has changed since I was in secondary school; students still prefer doing grammar exercises. (R1)

I was letting them practice writing an email to a friend, then some of them told me I should skip this and let them review for an exam. (R3)

Secondly, a common emotion was frustration. R2 experienced this feeling when she assigned a group project, hoping to facilitate collaboration among her students. However, instead of collaborating, they chatted in Vietnamese, ignoring her attempts to guide the discussion. R5 and R6's frustration stemmed from institutional constraints, which they perceived as stifling their teaching creativity. Specifically, R6 stated that her faculty's overemphasis on preparing students for standardised exams left her "with no choice but leaving behind" her desire to create engaging lessons. Similarly, R5 was assigned duties beyond teaching English. Specifically, she was responsible for the extracurricular activities of grade 6 students. Initially, she felt quite excited about taking on the role, but she soon realised it was "taking up too much time". In addition, R4 mentioned that he did not expect to be overwhelmed with the high volume of paperwork in the faculty. Having to fulfil these institutional demands eventually became "a burden" for these teachers (R6), which they perceived as a hindrance to their expectations of teaching English engagingly and effectively.

It felt like I was losing the very essence of why I wanted to teach. Although my faculty leader did not explicitly require teachers to adopt a form-focused approach, his frequent emphasis on the importance of students achieving high grades led me to believe that this approach was the only option. (R6)

At first, organising those activities were fun before I realised they were taking up too much time. I almost had no time left for preparing my lessons and I felt really bad about this. (R5)

I came into this profession to inspire students, not to fill out forms. (R4)

Feeling confused and frustrated with their teaching realities, the respondents experienced self-doubt regarding their teaching competence. R1 claimed she often ended her teaching days with the question, "Was I making any difference to my students at all?". In addition, pressured by administrative demands, R6 doubted if she was helping her students study English meaningfully. In the case of R3, being confronted by the students led him to question his own pre-service training. More severely, the cumulative effect of these doubts led R4 to question her long-term commitment to the profession.

After a few weeks, I began to doubt whether my training was enough for me. (R3)

Looking at how I am approaching the lessons, I don't know whether I was preparing them for anything meaningful. (R6)

Some days, I just think, 'Maybe I'm not meant to be a teacher.' It's hard to shake that feeling when things don't go well. (R4)

4.1.2. Emotion labor strategies

Upon encountering reality shock, the respondents employed different emotion strategies to cope with the emotions triggered by this phenomenon. In particular, the findings revealed three approaches taken by the respondents, including surface acting, deep acting, and expressing genuine emotions. More importantly, each of these strategies resulted in the respondents' different outcomes navigating their emotional challenges.

Surface Acting

Some respondents attempted to conceal their frustration, self-doubt, or confusion to maintain their professional image in front of their students and colleagues. Believing that showing her frustration would risk negatively impacting her students' engagement, which was already low, R1 employed surface acting, forcing herself to act enthusiastically. In R4's case, being afraid of conflict with her colleagues, she chose to hide her frustration with the administrative workload. Instead, she appeared composed during faculty meetings. Although surface acting helped these respondents maintain professionalism and outward calmness, they noted that it often resulted in emotional exhaustion, as their internal negative feelings remained unresolved.

I couldn't let them see that I was confused with their reactions. So, I smiled and tried to motivate them, even though I was frustrated. (R1)

I just nodded and went along with it, even when I felt like I was drowning in paperwork. (R4)

Deep Acting

Initially experiencing negative emotions, other respondents chose to reframe these experiences to improve their situations. For instance, R5 tried to manage her frustration with being assigned extra duties by believing that such duties were essential for her relationship with the students. R6, despite having to teach against her ideal approach, navigated this frustration by prioritising her students' benefits. Regulating undesirable emotions in this manner enabled these teachers to transform emotional challenges into meaningful experiences, making it a more emotionally sustainable strategy compared to surface acting.

At first, I was annoyed, but I reminded myself that these activities could help me understand my students better. That made it easier to accept. (R5)

I told myself that even if it's not creative, I'm still helping them achieve their goals. (R6)

Expressing Genuine Emotions

Demonstrating authentic emotions was the approach taken by R2 and R3. R2 expressed her frustration to her students by asking them to remain in the classroom during break time and explaining how she felt about their group project. Meanwhile, R3 admitted vulnerability to his students, sharing his struggle to adapt his teaching methods. These examples illustrate R2 and R3's adaptive emotion regulation strategies which allowed them to reduce negative emotions and increase positive feelings, aligning their inner feelings with the feeling rules of their settings.

I told them how I felt when they didn't participate as a team. Surprisingly, they listened and promised to collaborate next time. (R2)

I told them I was new to the job and that I was learning too. That seemed to make them more open with me. (R3)

4.2. Discussion

The findings of this study directly address the research questions regarding novice language teachers' emotional experiences and emotion labor strategies, while resonating strongly with current literature on language teacher emotion. The emotional responses reported by the beginning teachers in this study align with documented challenges faced by language teachers, particularly those early in their careers who encounter substantial disparities between pre-service training and classroom realities (Golombek & Doran, 2014; Martínez, 2018). More specifically, the participating beginning teachers' experiences revealed how expectations of fostering creativity and engagement often clashed with institutional constraints, such as exam-focused curricula and student demotivation (Farrell, 2019). As evidenced in the data, these emotional conflicts contributed to their emotional exhaustion, a factor consistently linked to early-career teacher attrition (Buchanan et al., 2013).

The emotion labor strategies employed by our respondents are closely consistent with Hochschild's theoretical framework of surface acting, deep acting, and genuine emotion expression. Surface acting emerged as a common strategy, particularly evident in R1 and R4's accounts of hiding frustration during challenging classroom situations. While this approach helped maintain professional composure, the findings support Zhang and Zhu's (2008) observation of the positive relationship between surface acting and teacher burnout. For example, R1 reported frequent instances of suppressing negative emotions when faced with classroom disruptions, leading to increased emotional strain over time.

In contrast, deep acting, as demonstrated by R5 and R6, involved conscious efforts to reframe negative emotions to align personal and professional goals. The data showed that this approach, which was supported by Lee and van Vlack's (2018) findings, proved more beneficial. R5's experience particularly illustrated how reevaluating challenging situations helped reduce emotional dissonance while maintaining professional competence. The third strategy, expressing genuine emotions, was exemplified by R2 and R3's approaches to classroom management. Their experiences support existing literature suggesting that authentic emotional expression can help teachers mitigate emotional suffering while fostering trust and rapport with their students in the classroom (Wharton, 2009).

These findings have significant implications for language teacher education and institutional support systems. They highlight the critical need for teacher preparation programs to address the emotional dimensions of teaching more explicitly, while institutions need to implement structured support systems for novice teachers, particularly during their first year when the emotional challenges are most acute. Incorporating emotion regulation training in pre-service programs, establishing mentor-mentee relationships focusing on emotional support, creating safe spaces for teachers to discuss their emotional experiences, and developing institutional policies that acknowledge teachers' emotional well-being emerge as crucial recommendations from our findings.

5. CONCLUSION

This research has contributed to illuminate the intricate emotional landscape faced by novice EFL teachers in Vietnam, particularly in relation to the phenomenon of reality shock. As documented, the respondents grapple with a contrast between their idealised teaching expectations and the challenging realities of their classrooms. The findings reveal that feelings of confusion, frustration, and self-doubt are prevalent, significantly impacting novice EFL teachers' emotional well-being and pedagogical effectiveness.

Moreover, the study highlights the various emotion labor strategies employed by these teachers in response to their emotional struggles. While surface acting provides a temporary solution, it often causes emotional exhaustion. Conversely, deep acting and the expression of genuine emotions emerge as more sustainable strategies, allowing some respondents to align their inner feelings with their professional roles. This underscores the necessity for teacher training programs to incorporate emotional regulation techniques and support systems that empower novice teachers to navigate their emotional experiences effectively.

However, this study is not without its limitations. First, the sample size of six respondents may not fully represent the diverse experiences of all novice EFL teachers in Vietnam, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the research may introduce biases based on the respondents' self-reported emotions and experiences. The study also primarily focuses on teachers in public secondary schools in Ho Chi Minh City, potentially overlooking the unique challenges faced by novice teachers in different educational contexts or regions.

In conclusion, addressing the emotional needs of novice EFL teachers is essential for fostering their professional growth and retention in the field. By prioritising emotional well-being in teacher education and institutional support frameworks, we can enhance the overall quality of teaching and learning. Future research should continue to explore the long-term implications of emotion regulation strategies on teacher retention and professional development, ensuring that the emotional dimensions of teaching are given the attention they rightfully deserve.

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