

Exploring Teachers' Emotion Regulation Strategies: A Case Study on Chinese Junior High School EFL Teachers

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Abstract

Teachers' personal emotional state during the process of teaching activities can affect students' academic emotions and thus the quality of teaching. Teachers should recognize the importance of different emotion regulation and learn to adopt good behaviors to cultivate their positive emotions. In view of the fact that the current attention to the emotions of middle school foreign language teachers needs to be improved, this study investigated the level of emotion regulation strategies of five middle school English teachers from eastern China. The study found that the current level of middle school English teachers' emotion regulation strategies is good, but in the use of specific strategies, the expression inhibition strategy is not as good as the cognitive reappraisal strategy, which suggests that the teachers' ability to cope with emergencies needs to be improved. Teachers' effective management of their own emotions has multiple meanings, such as being conducive to their own improvement and development, to the healthy growth of students and to the development of quality education. Teachers' emotion management is not a personal matter for teachers, and society and schools should pay enough attention to it.

1. Introduction

In today's complex social environment of education, junior high school foreign language teachers have to deal with a variety of psychological pressures, which may cause them to feel anxious. If they are unable to adjust their emotions in time, this may lead to burnout or a variety of more extreme behaviors. Some studies have shown that students' foreign language learning emotions are related to teachers' affective and emotional regulation. Students' emotional state is largely subject to teachers' emotional state. However, for a long time, the professional development of English teachers has been more concerned with teachers' professional knowledge and professional skills, while neglecting the impact of teachers' emotions and their regulation on teaching. Since teachers' emotional state affects students and classroom effects, how should teachers regulate their emotions to optimize English classroom teaching?

2. Literature Review

The first foreigner to mention the concept of "emotion management" was Hochschild who suggested that the connotation of emotion management is the behavior of an individual who tries to change the degree or quality of emotions and feelings. He also suggested that emotions can be consciously utilized and managed. Teachers' emotion regulation refers to the process by which teachers attempt to control and manage their internal emotions and external expressions in accordance with their beliefs about the teaching profession (Yin et al., 2013). According to Brackett, Timperley, and others, teacher emotion management aims at how teachers regulate their own emotions to help them achieve their teaching goals. Two process mediation strategies, cognitive reappraisal and expressive inhibition, were proposed in Gross and John's (2003)

study. Cognitive reappraisal, or cognitive change, moderates emotions by cognitively altering an individual's perceptions and attitudes about the meaning of an emotional event, thereby altering the emotional experience. Expressive inhibition is the suppression of emotional expressive behavior that is about to occur or is occurring. Cognitive reappraisal and expressive inhibition have different concepts, roles, and mechanisms for regulating emotions, and these two regulatory strategies may have different effects on different emotional experiences. Both strategies are characterized by high frequency of use, ease of observation and measurement, and high representativeness (Gross & John, 2003). Although initially proposed in the context of research on student learning, these two strategies have been used in subsequent research exploring emotion regulation in foreign language teachers.

Kyle TALBOT and Sarah MERCER (2018) explored the emotional health of twelve university foreign language teachers from Japan, the United States, and Austria through an interview approach. These language teachers used a range of strategies when managing and regulating their emotional health. One of these strategies, cognitive reappraisal, was used by all 12 teachers. It was found that in redefining the situation, a potentially "scary" situation was reframed as something more positive, as well as a potential site of interest and engagement. In addition, expressive inhibition and downward comparisons were also commonly used by respondents to regulate their emotions. Morris and King (2018) conducted a case study of seven Japanese university foreign language teachers and found that cognitive reappraisal and expressive inhibition were the main emotion-regulation strategies used by the teachers, and had a high correlation with teacher frustration, a negative emotion. Bielak and Mystkowska - Bielak and Mystkowska (2020) investigated the use and effectiveness of emotion regulation strategies of 357 Polish university foreign language teachers and found that cognitive reappraisal, expressive inhibition and situational choice were the main emotion regulation strategies used by the teachers, and that their effectiveness was confirmed by the students the teachers taught. case studies, found that the most important of the emotion regulation strategies used by the teachers was cognitive reappraisal, which affects how teachers redefine, reinforce, conform, or adjust their teacher identity. In her study, Lan Meichun (2020) mentioned that the emotion management of foreign language teachers has a great impact on the physical and mental development of primary school students. Through the study of Chinese elementary school English teachers' emotion management strategies, it was found that expressing inhibition was a method they often used. In addition to this, cognitive reassessment plays an important role in regulating teachers' emotions.

To summarize, emotion management plays an important role in coping with stress and slackness generated in the teaching process. In previous studies on foreign language teachers' emotion regulation strategies, researchers have mostly focused on the use of emotion regulation strategies in specific teaching and life situations, among which cognitive reappraisal and expressive inhibition are used more frequently, and the flexible use of these two strategies enables teachers to cope with negative emotions in the workplace effectively. In terms of research subjects, university foreign language teachers are the main research subjects, and the number of studies in which secondary school teachers or elementary school teachers are the main research subjects is much smaller than the number of studies in which university teachers are the main research subjects. Therefore, this study focused on two regulatory strategies, cognitive reappraisal and expressive inhibition, to explore the level of middle school English teachers' emotion regulation strategies, as well as the variability of regulation strategies in terms of gender and teaching age.

3. Methods

3.1. Sampling and Participants

The participants who volunteered for this study were five middle school English teachers who speak English as a second language. Four of them were female teachers and one was a male teacher. The age range of the teachers was 25-38 years old with a mean age of 30.2 years. The range of teaching experience was 1-10 years with an average of 6.6 years. Please see Table 1 for academic and other details.

Table 1. Interview Subject Information

	gender	Educational background	Seniority	age	Onboarding school
Teacher A	woman	Graduate	0-1 years	26	Urban key junior high school
Teacher B	woman	undergraduate	2 years	25	Urban key junior high school
Teacher C	man	Graduate	3 years	27	Township junior high school
Teacher D	woman	undergraduate	15 years	38	Urban ordinary junior high school
Teacher E	woman	undergraduate	10-15	35	Township junior high school

3.2. Research Instrument

In July 2023, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with five junior high school English teachers through a combination of WeChat voice calls as well as face-to-face communication. The interviews lasted about 15 minutes. The researcher audio-recorded the interviews for transcription purposes after seeking the consent of the interviewed teachers and promising that the interview data would only be used for this study and that the personal information of the interviewees would not be disclosed. All interviews were transcribed, including contextual factors such as laughter and long pauses. All names were removed from the transcripts and pseudonyms were assigned to each participant. Participants in the study were given a small gift as a symbol of reciprocity.

4. Results and Discussions

Before joining the profession, Teacher A would imagine that she would have lovely students, friendly colleagues, would practice a lot of learned theories in the classroom, would realize both economic and spiritual freedom, and would have double holidays that others envy. But in reality, middle school students are in the rebellious stage, and classroom discipline is not easy to maintain. At the same time, colleagues and leaders under the double pressure of various rolls of grades. But after one year of experience, she figured out a lot of things and experienced some ups and downs, such as class English scores regressed from the first to the last two in the grade. The growth of a new teacher is indeed a difficult process. Although she was confused, she kept exploring and adapting. Mindset is very important. If you have a bad mindset, you will not only bring that emotion to your class as well as your teaching, but also make a mess of your own life. So Teacher A's primary goal now is to go about maintaining order in the classroom as well as catching up on academic performance, followed by keeping her own emotions stable. It is clear from this chat that Teacher A encountered many frustrations during her adjustment to her new position, such as student discipline problems and the common problem of "involution" in the

workplace. During the year-long adjustment period, she adopted cognitive reappraisal strategies to regulate her current and potential negative emotions, i.e., she was able to interpret a potential emotion-provoking situation in a way that could alter the emotional impact. For example, "I have figured out a lot of things" and "I am confused, but I am still exploring and adapting," she was able to re-examine the difficulties she encountered in her work. More importantly, as a new teacher, she was proactive in overcoming the initial negativity and saw it as a process of growth.

Teacher B would always be furious with her students for their mistakes and also discovered thyroid nodules during her medical check-up two months after joining the profession. From that moment she realized the importance of emotional management. At the beginning of her career, she wanted to be a good friend to her students because she was a new teacher, and she wanted to mingle with them. However, Teacher B found that this was difficult for the adolescents because they could not understand my thinking and were somewhat rebellious. Also, English is a very important subject in middle school, and many parents and students take it very seriously, so she felt that she was carrying a very heavy burden. She was depressed and under a lot of pressure. She resisted communicating with her colleagues and students because she felt that she could not do a good job and was afraid of being teased by her colleagues. However, during that time, the English scores of the class dropped very much, especially because many students who could have scored over 110 could only just get to 100. So Teacher B took the initiative to look for the reasons from her own body. The first thing she did was to adjust her mindset, stop being afraid of going into the classroom, and take the initiative to communicate with the students in the class to understand their learning difficulties. Secondly, she asked the veteran teachers for advice on how to control the classroom atmosphere or how to design interesting English teaching sessions. Through that experience, she deeply realized that the teacher's mood would greatly affect the learning state and efficiency of the whole class. It is clear from the chat that Teacher B, as a teacher in a major junior high school, is under relatively more pressure. As a new teacher, it was easier for her to face the problems that arose in the teaching process, so she often felt "low" and "anxious" at the initial stage. However, after a medical check-up, she discovered a thyroid nodule problem and realized the importance of emotional management. Teacher A then adopted a cognitive reappraisal strategy to cope with possible negative emotions in the course of her work. As mentioned in the interview she was no longer afraid to enter the classroom and took the initiative to talk to the students in the class, which was a key positive shift in mindset. It shows that she was able to reconceptualize the relationship between teacher and student and worked to overcome her withdrawal.

Teacher C was seconded this year to a school in another township where the establishment is located, and was initially very resistant. Then he started to work with the mentality that if you are here, you are here. The first and second weeks were a bit of a breakdown, wondering if he really needed the staffing, and from the third week onwards it got a lot better. He's in a very small school, 2 classes per grade, so 6 classes total for the whole school. I take the second year, two classes of English, do not do classroom teachers, no other chores, in addition to the class there is no other messy things. School principal and teachers are more enthusiastic and friendly, do not understand things to help him solve. Except for the school facilities and surroundings, which are a bit poor, the human touch is very strong. Teacher C's school has a lot of left-behind children, so the student body is very special, family education is almost missing, but most of the rural children are still relatively simple, more than the city children he had contact with before a few points of simplicity. Do not do classroom teachers do not sit in the class, so there is no class in the afternoon he basically went home, at noon you can sleep beautifully, English language are scheduled in the morning one or two sections, on the end of the can make up sleep. He still felt happy for the time being! What can be learned from this conversation is that Teacher C, as an English teacher in a rural junior high school, was initially very resistant because she

was seconded to the countryside. He was also dealing with a large number of left-behind children, which required him to control his emotions and pay attention to their mental health. During the third week, he gradually adapted to the environment. In this adjustment process, he mainly used cognitive reappraisal strategies. As he mentioned in the interview, he was able to re-examine the teaching environment and proactively identify positive factors around him, such as friendly colleagues and low work pressure. Through his own proactive emotional regulation, he was able to bring better teaching standards and positive learning attitudes to his students.

Teacher D has been working for about ten years and is currently a middle level teacher. As a middle-aged person, she is under a lot of pressure in all aspects, from life and family pressure to the pressure of promotion at school. Especially after turning thirty, she finds that she is getting more and more short-tempered, and it is hard for her to control her emotions towards her students. She believes that when she is not calm it is all the more necessary to calm down and allow herself to figure out what to do about the matter. Teacher D thinks that the most irrational way is to be too serious with the students, which is also the old mistake she made when she started her job. In addition, English as a subject it has language barriers and students with poor foundation may not be able to keep up with the progress, causing them not to pay attention to the lesson. For example, if a student doesn't listen carefully and is criticized by the teacher, he will talk back. After many years of experience, her solution is to calm down, control her temper, go to class first, and then deal with the problem after the class is over. More importantly, she tries not to bring her emotions into the classroom, and tries to maintain a positive image in front of her classmates. This conversation suggests that Teacher D, as an English teacher with ten years of teaching experience, has a wealth of teaching experience while facing a common problem that older teachers would encounter - emotion management. Due to age and pressure from various aspects, she has become increasingly short-tempered in the process of teaching. However, facing a group of middle school students who are in the rebellious stage, an emotionally stable teacher is important for the students' academic performance as well as their mental health. So she adopted an emotional regulation approach of expression suppression, which included suppressing persistent emotionally expressive behaviors. In this interview, she repeatedly mentioned a key word - calm. That is, when faced with a student who was being disruptive in class, she first stabilized her emotions and could not show her anger even if she had a great deal of it. This approach effectively curbed her own negative emotions and set a positive example for other students in the class.

Teacher E is a middle-aged teacher in a rural junior high school with ten years of rich teaching experience. However, at the same time, she also faces the difficulty of emotional management. As mentioned in the conversation, she was in an agitated state, believing that life was boring yet powerless to change. So she adopted the Expressive Inhibition Method to control the negative emotions she generated when she was with her students. She changed from being angry every day to overcoming her irritability in a variety of ways, basically because she realized the differences among her students and learned to embrace individual uniqueness in her teaching process. When she encountered a student who was gossiping in the classroom, Teacher E used humor to focus the student's attention rather than venting her anger during class. This process demonstrates the importance of expressive discouragement, which not only moves the lesson along smoothly, but also sets a positive example for the students. It is clear from the chat that Teacher E has been teaching in a rural area for almost ten years, and when she first started her job she was in a very bad state of mind and was often anxious. Her family lived in the city and she had to drive thirty minutes to work every morning. Every time she finished an exam and her students did not do well, she felt a deep sense of frustration and put herself into serious self-denial. Every semester, in addition to the normal teaching duties, there were endless forms to fill out, endless manuals to write, countless shortcomings of parents, and

countless times of wanting to quit but not daring to do so so easily and hopelessly. So at that time, teacher E was agitated, feeling that life was monotonous, wanting to change but unable to do so, so caught in a vicious circle. Before that, she was still incredulous about the average life expectancy of teachers at 59 years old, but she really felt it after she became a teacher. But then she realized that getting angry every day would not change anything except for her own discomfort. After realizing this, she began to use various methods to overcome her irritability. For example, she weakened her sense of responsibility. Teacher E believes that every child has a different flowering period, so teachers should be good at recognizing their differences and teaching them according to their abilities, rather than demanding a uniform set of standards from every student. In addition, she is good at defusing problems with humor, which is especially applicable in English class. In the classroom there are often students talking, she will say, "Good, now let's listen to what this student said, and teacher who said it better ah?" She is dealing with a group of children who have not yet formed their own cognitive system, so it is inevitable that they will have emotions and get angry. But the important thing is to learn to digest their emotions!

5. Conclusion

This study found that the current level of emotion regulation strategies of junior high school English teachers is good, but in the use of specific emotion regulation strategies, the expression inhibition strategy is inferior to the cognitive reappraisal strategy, which indicates that the ability of teachers to cope with emergencies needs to be improved. Since the level of teachers' emotion regulation strategies needs to be improved, and the cycle of improvement is long and difficult, we believe that in addition to the teachers themselves, the society and the school should take the necessary measures to improve the level of teachers' emotion regulation strategies, and to construct an ecological system that will help teachers' emotion regulation ability to be improved.

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