# Emotional Labor Practices: A Case Study of EFL Teachers in Mexico[1]

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## Abstract

Emotional labor is an area of the wide field of emotions that has been studied by several disciplines. However, it has not been sufficiently approached from an educational perspective, especially that of EFL teachers. In order to contribute to this research area, this study explores a small number of EFL secondary school teachers' emotional experiences in the workplace. The purpose is to understand the factors and main aspects of how EFL teachers experience emotional labor, and to raise awareness of the negative impact that emotional labor may have on a teacher's personal and professional life. For this qualitative case study, data were collected using a semi-structured interview. Given the nature of the data, aspects of grounded theory were used to analyze the information. Findings led to a deeper understanding of some of the factors that influence EFL teachers emotionally, including issues regarding emotional labor, burnout in the working context, coping strategies, and the extent to which the emotions teachers experience impact their practice.

## Resumen

El trabajo emocional es un área del amplio campo de las emociones que ha sido estudiada por varias disciplinas. Sin embargo, no ha sido suficientemente abordada desde una perspectiva educativa, especialmente la de los maestros de inglés como lengua extranjera. Con el fin de contribuir a este campo de investigación, este estudio explora las experiencias emocionales de un pequeño grupo de maestros de inglés de educación secundaria. Esto es con el fin de entender los principales factores y aspectos que pueden llevar a los maestros de inglés a experimentar trabajo emocional, así como también crear conciencia sobre el impacto negativo que el trabajo emocional puede tener en la vida personal y profesional de un maestro. Para este estudio de caso cualitativo, los datos fueron recabados mediante una entrevista semi estructurada y, debido a la naturaleza de la información, se utilizaron aspectos de la teoría fundamentada para el análisis de datos. Los hallazgos dan lugar a un entendimiento más profundo sobre algunos de los factores que afectan a los maestros de inglés emocionalmente hablando, incluyendo problemáticas relativas al trabajo emocional, desgaste emocional en el entorno laboral, cómo logran hacer frente a ello y hasta qué punto las emociones que experimentan tienen un impacto en su práctica docente.

## Introduction

Emotions play an essential role in a teacher's life given that emotional experiences are embedded in school contexts (Schutz & DeCuir, 2002). However, teachers often feel the need to regulate their emotions in the workplace (Keller et al., 2014), where they are expected to display a set of positive emotions (Bayram et al., 2012). In the attempt to display, regulate and/or suppress certain emotions, teachers perform *emotional labor* (Hochschild, 2003). This in turn may cause teachers burnout and/or emotional exhaustion (Keller et al., 2014). Therefore, research on emotional labor in teaching has gained more and more importance (Yin et al., 2017). However, within the TESOL field, emotional labor practices have not been sufficiently recognized and, to some extent, teachers' emotional investment in the teaching practice and their emotional well-being have been neglected (Martínez Agudo, 2018).

To contribute to this research area, this study aimed at exploring the different factors that may lead EFL teachers to experience emotional labor in the workplace, as well as to raise awareness of the negative implications that this may have on a teacher's personal and professional life. By means of semi-structured interviews, a small number of private secondary school EFL teachers' emotional experiences were gathered and, subsequently, analyzed. Findings suggest that EFL teachers in these contexts often experience negative emotions in the workplace. Among factors that lead teachers to these emotions and feelings were the COVID-19 pandemic situation, power relations at work, and lack of teachers' involvement in school decision-making.

Consequently, in order to understand the main issues regarding this topic, concepts such as emotion and labor are discussed as follows. Furthermore, a description of the main referents as emotional intelligence, emotional understanding, emotional regulation, and burnout is provided.

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## Literature Review

### Emotions

The role that emotions play in language teaching has often been marginalized owing to certain paradigms that place the role of cognition and rationality at the core of education (White, 2018). However, there appears to be a renewed focus on the role that emotions play in language teaching and learning which aims to understand the way teachers and learners perceive, experience, and deal with the subjective reality of the classroom as a social space (Richards, 2020). In other words, the role of cognition and rationality "began to be challenged through an *affective turn*" (White, 2018, p. 20). This movement led several authors to reconsider the role of *affective factors* in teaching and recognize the importance of emotion in human life (Clough, 2008). More specifically, the *affective turn* seeks to broaden understanding of the wide variety of emotions that language teachers and learners may experience in the classroom in order to ease language teaching and learning (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018).

Over the last decades, there has been an increasing interest in the field of emotions. This area has been studied by several disciplines, including education. Emotions are an essential part of education given that they lie at the core of teaching and learning processes (Martínez Agudo, 2018). They play a key role in education because teaching is not only a rational or cognitive process, but also a social one (Richards, 2020), where interaction between teachers and others takes place. Therefore, emotions are an integral part of the "teacher's self" (Teng, 2017). As such, emotions can shape and/or reshape the way teachers teach, which in turn may influence students' learning. Thus, teaching involves "mastering how to manage the emotional dimensions of teaching and learning" (Richards, 2020, p. 1).

### Emotional labor

To understand the concept of emotional labor, it is important to explain first the meaning of emotion. According to Hargreaves (1998) "the Latin origin of emotion is *emovere*", which means "to move out, to stir up" (p. 835). This suggests that when someone is emotional or experiences an emotion, they may be moved by their feelings. In other words, emotions are basically "mental states accompanied by intense feelings which involve bodily changes" (Koestler as cited in Hargreaves, 1998, p. 835). In this sense, emotions are "dynamic parts of ourselves that can be positive or negative" (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 835), which implies that good or bad emotions are present everywhere.

Mordka (2016) defines emotion as a "phenomenon which involves behavior, psychological changes and expressions" (p. 29), listing affect, enthusiasm and excitement as examples of emotions, and argues that emotions fulfill certain functions. For example, they help people to perceive the world in a certain way and drive our actions positively or negatively. In addition, emotions emerge involuntarily, which means that they are difficult to control in that they emerge automatically and may be "influenced by culture" (p. 29).

The concept of emotion is usually related to that of feelings. As a matter of fact, some philosophers and even psychologists defend the claim that emotions are actually the same as feelings. However, in the present inquiry emotions and feelings are not considered synonyms; instead, feelings are components and/or parts of emotions (Whiting, 2011). More specifically, emotions are considered as involuntary events that may influence cognitive processes, behavior and, at the same time, register certain bodily changes, while feelings are considered conscious mental perceptions and/or states that help the individual to identify certain emotions (Prinz, 2005). This claim conveys two assumptions: First, emotions are not always conscious; they can be unconscious too. Second, feelings are not emotions, but a way to detect them and, to some extent, can be part of them.

When thinking about the word *labor*, one might relate this concept to the hard work that employees must do in order to make a living. In fact, the etymology of this concept comes from Latin and refers to the activities that workers perform to earn a wage and/or a salary (Merriam-Webster, 2020). Nevertheless, labor may refer not only to the physical work that employees must do, but also to the mental work that their jobs may demand. In this study, however, labor is approached from a different perspective: it is regarded as the emotional work which EFL teachers may experience in the workplace.

The term *emotional labor* was first coined by Hochschild (1983), who describes her search for answers to the questions that arose when living with her parents and being part of meetings held by her diplomatic family. She then questioned to what extent people can "sell" their personalities in order to carry out an expected act and fulfill other people's perceptions and/or expectations. She also wondered where the person

ends, and the act begins, and how a person is related to an act. In short, the term emotional labor emerged out of Hochschild's (1983) curiosity to discover how and why people perform certain acts in their private and personal lives, and how they suppress their real self and convey several messages by doing so.

Subsequently, emotional labor was described as the display of workers' emotions when performing required activities (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). For example, this may occur when organizations need their employees to display a set of inauthentic emotions to convince others to do or believe in something (Barry et al., 2019). That is, employees' emotions and feelings may sometimes be subject to power relations where there is a target and/or demand to fulfill emotionally speaking. Consequently, the discussion of what emotional labor really entails may be controversial owing to the fact that a teacher's personal and professional identity should not be subject to hierarchical relationships and exchanged for wages.

In the teaching context, for example, Arizmendi Tejeda et al. (2016) have confirmed that novice teachers must deal with a great amount of emotional labor. They have also argued that EFL teachers sometimes use emotional regulation strategies to reduce the impact that negative emotions may have on their teaching practice. In sum, emotional labor is then the effort that workers have to make in order to engage in the emotional practices that their jobs may demand.

### Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) is essential in most occupations. In teaching, for example, it is necessary in order to manage not only teachers' emotions in the most effective way, but also to identify students' emotions (Arizmendi Tejeda et al., 2016). Being emotionally intelligent involves the ability to think critically in order to make an effective use of emotions in the workplace or to carry out an effective reasoning to "enhance thought" (Mayer et al., 2008, p. 507). EI can influence the personal and professional development of teachers within their working contexts. Thus, it becomes key in tackling the obstacles in teachers' professional lives and in guiding their emotions with intelligence in contexts of constant struggle, which are not uncommon in their workplace.

EI helps teachers not only to recognize their own emotions and feelings in the workplace, but also to carry out effective decision making. According to Goleman (2005), individuals possess two minds, the rational and the emotional. He argues that individuals have a mind that thinks and one that feels assuring that these two are intertwined. Goleman claims that the rational and the emotional minds are always in balance and act in coordination with one another. This is not, however, the approach adopted in this inquiry. Instead, the idea that emotions tend to take control of the rational mind, given that they emerge involuntarily, is supported. More specifically, certain cognitive processes such as effective decision-making and reasoning, as well as critical thinking, will be at stake when the emotional mind takes over the rational mind. This is of paramount importance since it implies that EI is essential when making decisions that may have an impact not only on oneself as a teacher, but also on students.

Consequently, EI is essential when it comes to accomplishing goals and job expectations as it regulates the impact that emotions may have on the professional self by helping teachers to hopefully think with intelligence. It is therefore a key component of self-motivation, that is, it plays an important role in the task of motivating oneself to manage one's emotions and feelings (Mayer et al., 2008). In sum, EI is essential in teaching as this involves a great amount of emotional labor (Tsang, 2011), and the complex setting of teaching requires teachers to make effective decisions, to manage emotions appropriately, and to recognize their own emotions, as well as those of their students.

### Emotional understanding

According to Hargreaves (1998) emotional understanding is the ability to understand the emotional experiences of others. In this context, it is the ability to understand to what extent teachers may, or may not, put themselves in someone else's shoes, in other words, to comprehend what the people that surround their professional lives have lived, how and why. Emotional understanding is therefore a subjective process that requires teachers to understand others' personal events from their own perspective (Arizmendi Tejeda et al., 2016). These events are experiences of students, colleagues or school authorities in the past, at the present, or in the future. However, in order to understand others, teachers need first to recognize, understand and/or interpret their own emotions and feelings (Mayer et al., 2008); this is in order to provide the people that surround their lives with better tools for their emotional development. In this sense, as Hargreaves (2001) states, it is essential for teachers to understand how their students feel so as to

understand their learning process, which suggests that emotional understanding plays a key role in the teaching and learning process.

Furthermore, in an educational context, emotional understanding is essential given that not only students, but also colleagues, students' parents and sometimes school authorities are people who need to be emotionally understood (Hargreaves, 1998). However, owing to the complexity of putting oneself in someone else's shoes and practicing empathy, emotional understanding may sometimes become emotional misunderstanding. That is, teachers may think that they know how their students are feeling or what they are experiencing, but in reality, they may be wrong (Arizmendi Tejeda et al., 2016). This process occurs when teachers confuse their students' emotions and feelings for other similar or even different emotions. More specifically, teachers could, for example, misunderstand students' anxiety for excitement, disgust for anger or guilt for fear. Consequently, emotional understanding is not only subjective, but also a complex process since it is a shared experience that requires self-knowledge, empathy, and understanding. In sum, emotional understanding lies at the core of teaching and learning and the emotional experiences of others (Hargreaves, 1998).

### Emotional regulation

Emotional regulation is the effort that, in this case, teachers have to make to hide and/or regulate their real emotions and feelings in the workplace (Gross, 2002). Regarding this, it is worth emphasizing that emotional regulation is not the same as emotional labor. While emotional labor is all the work that teachers have to do and carry emotionally throughout the course of their professional lives, emotional regulation is the effort that they make to control their real emotions in specific situations in which their beliefs may not converge with those of the workplace. According to Tamir et al. (2020), emotional regulation is a process that consists in actions directed to change real and/or current emotions for desired and/or expected ones. Accordingly, emotional regulation can be classified into two forms: intrinsic and extrinsic. As Tamir et al. (2020) state, intrinsic emotional regulation occurs when teachers aim their emotions at certain targets, whereas extrinsic emotional regulation occurs when people direct others' emotions towards certain goals. In a teaching context, for example, teachers' emotions may be intrinsically regulated as well as extrinsically. That is, their emotions may be directed by school authorities in order to portray desired emotions as well as regulated by their own emotional intelligence, which is also known as self-emotional regulation.

Consequently, emotional regulation is essential in teaching since it helps teachers to deal with different emotions. Furthermore, in the process of recognizing, understanding, and interpreting their own emotions, teachers can also help their students and colleagues whenever they may need to regulate their own emotions (Arizmendi Tejeda et al., 2016). In sum, teachers' emotions may be at stake owing to different demands and expectations that their profession may require. Thus, teachers' effective regulation of their emotions may play not only a key role in how they react to the difficulties in the workplace, but also in how they engage with students, peers and school authorities.

### Emotional exhaustion and burnout

According to Khan et al. (2014) teachers are often exposed to stressful situations and job demands in the workplace that led them to experience job dissatisfaction, depression, uncertainty, or detachment from work. That is, teachers have to face difficult situations that may lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout. In the words of Tourigny et al. (2013), burnout is a serious condition that many workers experience in their jobs nowadays, as a lack of personal and professional achievement. They also argue that this condition has been considered as a mental health risk in the workplace owing to workers' poor emotional, physical, and mental health. In this context specifically, teachers perform and carry emotional labor, which may lead them to emotional exhaustion and burnout. This in turn may translate into a series of somatic problems such as insomnia, migraine, and gastrointestinal disorders (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). The problem of emotional exhaustion may lead institutions and organizations to high turnover rates, resulting in teachers resigning and seeking new employment opportunities, and schools hiring new teachers (Tourigny et al., 2013).

This exploratory case study sought to explore and understand the different factors and the aspects that may lead a small group of Mexican EFL teachers to experience emotional labor in the workplace. To guide this work, the following main research question and sub-questions were designed:

*What is the nature of Mexican EFL teachers' emotional labor in their workplace?*

- *What is the nature of EFL teachers' engagement with their students?*

- *What is the nature of their relationships with their colleagues, students' parents and school authorities?*
- *How do they feel when they face problems in the workplace?*
- *How do they respond to the difficulties that emerge in their workplace?*

## Methodology

### Research context

The study was conducted in three private secondary schools, two in a capital city of a south-east state in Mexico, and one in a nearby town. These schools were selected as they provide bilingual education and are well-known for the high standards in teaching that they have set, especially in TEFL. These institutions are characterized by the small or limited number of students they accept in each group. In addition, they certify their students' English level with Cambridge English tests that are administered at the end of every school year. Considering the high standards expected from EFL teachers to maintain the reputation of these institutions, these school contexts seemed to be ideal in order to explore, compare, and contrast the different issues that may have an impact on their emotional labor.

### Participants

For this qualitative research, six EFL teachers were selected by means of purposive sampling, a technique that allows the researcher to select well-informed and qualified informants (Etikan et al., 2016). Some of the participants had been the researcher's colleagues at one of the schools previously mentioned, the rest of them were chosen as they graduated from the same language school and were working at recognized bilingual schools.

| Name | Age | Years of teaching experience | Schools (A, B and C) | English level they teach |
|------|-----|------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| Andrew | 28 | 4 | A | B1-B2 |
| Abraham | 27 | 3 | B | B1 |
| David | 36 | 10 | C | B2 |
| Jacob | 29 | 6 | B | B1-B2 |
| Maria | 27 | 5 | C | B1-B2 |
| Roger | 28 | 4 | A | B1-B2 |

Table 1: Participants' background information

As Table 1 shows, the participants are all in-service EFL teachers who have been teaching for at least three years and up to 10 years and who are between 26 and 36 years old. Five of the participants are male and one is female. Two participants come from each one of the different school settings. They all teach at secondary school level, from grades 7 to 9. The English level at these schools goes from B1 in grade 7, and up to B2, when students finish grade 9. The participants hold a B2 English level certification granted by different institutions. Consequently, these participants' experiences seemed to be ideal to explore, and hopefully understand, the complexity of Mexican EFL teachers' emotional labor.

### Data collection procedure

In order to collect the data, a semi-structured interview was employed. An interview guide (see Appendix) was developed based on the main research question and sub-questions of this study. Then, it was piloted so as to identify possible pitfalls or drawbacks, as well as to validate the questions, that is, to identify if the information gathered would achieve the objectives of the research question and sub-questions. Only minor corrections were required after the piloting stage, leading to the interviewing phase. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the first approach to data collection was through phone calls. This was in order to first ask the participants whether they would like to be part of the study and if this were the case, a convenient day and time would be set to carry out the interviews via Zoom, which would then be video-recorded. Pseudonyms are used to refer to each of the participants for ethical reasons. Furthermore, participants were given a written consent to secure their confidentiality. This process took place between late November and mid-December 2020. Once the data had been collected, it proceeded to the analysis phase.

### Data analysis

The information collected was analyzed by means of grounded theory. Interviews were transcribed to identify emergent themes. The transcriptions were repeatedly read for an initial coding to subsequently

identify possible categories and sub-categories (axial coding). Then, a table was created where all the emerging categories from a single participant's interview were compared and contrasted. These categories were ordered so as to find the relation between them. Finally, a second table was designed in which all of these categories and sub-categories were compared and contrasted with those of the other participants. The analysis was carried out over a one-month period that began in mid-December and finished in mid-January 2021.

## Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study indicated that there are several factors and aspects that surround and influence Mexican EFL teachers in the different working contexts where their teaching practice takes place. This in turn may lead them to experience emotional labor, exhaustion, or burnout. As aspects of grounded theory were used to analyze the data, these findings emerged organically from the interview data set. In addition, they are closely related to aspects of research on emotions, as mentioned in the literature review. This includes emotions, emotional labor, emotional intelligence, emotional understanding, emotional regulation and emotional exhaustion and/or burnout. There were eight main emergent themes to this respect, presented as follows:

### Lack of teaching experience

When teachers are novices, they may experience several emotions and feelings owing to their lack of teaching experience (Podolsky et al., 2019). In the present study, for example, Abraham mentioned having felt frustrated in his early years as a teacher due to lack of experience, "When I started working there, I didn't do things right because I didn't have any experience at all." Andrew also seems to have experienced something similar, "At the beginning I was frustrated or desperate because I didn't know how to deal with the pressure of carrying out all the activities or going to a certain event or attending to a certain meeting." However, these teachers seem to have gained some confidence after two or three years of teaching experience.

Similarly, David argues how he developed confidence after a couple of years' teaching, "I felt that way before, but only in some classes, two or three, and now I am so confident about my teaching techniques". Roger also described a similar situation, "Well, I personally feel very confident, but it was not that way at the beginning. I was feeling very nervous at first when I started teaching [...] and I was like a novice teacher, so at the beginning I had to receive guidance." Furthermore, novice teachers may need a sense of recognition and value regarding their teaching practice, as Maria suggested, "I am not that young now, but in previous years they would see me like a really young teacher because my colleagues were older, so they would think that they could change my mind about a punishment or about a complaint." In sum, teachers may experience frustration, despair, or nervousness when they start teaching. However, they may develop a sense of confidence after being immersed in the teaching field for some years (Ryan, 1986).

### Teachers' personal lives

Teachers' personal and professional lives may be intertwined. That is, their professional life can be influenced by their personal life and vice versa. For instance, Bukor (2013) claims that family issues may influence academic achievements and success. In the case of teachers, this may have an impact on their classes. To this respect, Roger admitted that his personal life sometimes interfered with his teaching practice, "It depends on various factors, if I am feeling a bit down personally, and if it is something really strong, it can affect me in the classroom." Thus, teachers' personal lives may influence their effectiveness and, at the same time, lead to negative emotions such as sadness or discouragement. Maria described a similar experience, "I was going through personal situations and that affected the classes." This means that teachers' personal challenging experiences may, to a great extent, influence their teaching practice negatively.

### Students' behavior

Students' behavior is another aspect that may trigger teachers' negative emotions (Tehseen & Ul Hadi, 2015), which may even lead to emotional burnout, "Whenever I'm thinking about a specific group that is kind of difficult, that they don't want to participate, it gets me a little down" (Roger). However, teachers seem to understand the rationale behind students' behavior. They know that their age is probably the main reason for this behavior.

> *The age is a certain pattern that prevents them from being patient, they feel that they know everything at that stage and sometimes they don't, they make mistakes and when you correct them, well, they don't have the best attitude, so I think they would have to be more humble, but it is complicated because they are in this change between being children and teenagers, so all of these processes change them, there are issues - a lot.* (Maria)

In addition to age, student behavior may be influenced by social networks as well. Abraham argued that "With teenagers, sometimes it is difficult because they are going through the process of becoming preadults, it has to do with technology nowadays and social networks, they are teenagers." Although teachers may understand their students' behavior to a certain extent, this may lead teachers to become concerned, "I felt kind of worried because they said there had been an argument or a problem with these two girls" (Abraham). In sum, students' behavior may have a negative impact on how teachers construct their ideas and beliefs regarding learners. Nevertheless, teachers seem to be emotionally intelligent and understand the change process students may be experiencing (Arizmendi Tejeda et al., 2016).

### Teachers' involvement in school decision-making

Another aspect that may lead teachers to experience emotional labor is the school authorities' decision-making. Lloyd (2019) suggests effective decision-making by authorities is vital for successful teaching practice. This appears to be echoed by Sarafidou and Chatziioannidis (2013), who argued that teacher involvement in decision-making may lead to higher levels of motivation, job satisfaction, and teacher effectiveness. However, in this specific context, teachers seem to experience the opposite. For instance, Maria shared, "Sometimes, authorities don't have this empathy for teachers. They would have to be in the actual classrooms and try to follow the rules they impose to understand these don't really work." How can school authorities make informed decisions if they do not consider how teachers, the ones in charge of instruction, feel? If teachers do not actively participate in school decisions, this may trigger feelings of anger:

> *Some of these decisions are only money-related; they see teaching or the school as a business. I know it is a business, but they should also consider time investment, education and empathy. These are aspects I don't like and disagree with!* (Maria)

Similarly, this seems to be the case for Andrew, who claimed that decisions in his workplace are not very practical, "In general, I don't agree with anything they say because they are not very practical, that's the thing, they demand things and I say, what for?"

Another aspect teachers will very likely not agree with is that authorities sometimes make decisions on the grounds of personal interests:

> *I am going to be honest. I don't think that all the decisions the school director makes are good. She tends to follow her heart rather than her mind, like when passing the students who don't have the level. These are decisions that affect teachers as well, as other students who have the level notice it. These decisions are not objective nor professional.* (Abraham)

In short, decision-making, especially in a private institution, may be based on the school's interests, which in turn may decrease the level of teacher participation, job satisfaction, and commitment.

### Global pandemic due to COVID-19

Another factor which may have led teachers to experience a great amount of emotional labor at the time the interviews were carried out was the pandemic. According to Hargreaves (2001), teachers may need physical closeness in order to understand others. Therefore, physical distance during the COVID-19 emergency remote teaching may have hindered real communication and understanding between teachers and learners. This in turn may have led teachers to emotional situations, as Maria argued, "There are also some emotional issues, for instance, sometimes they don't see your gestures because probably the camera is not working properly, or they cannot hear your natural voice." This may also lead to feelings of discomfort, as in Jacob's case, "When this pandemic started, I didn't feel so comfortable when giving my classes online, so I felt tired and I didn't have that push to give my classes because of the lack of face-to-face interaction with my students." This lack of physical closeness may result in demotivation.

> *Probably, they cannot recognize the motivation in your voice, and I don't feel quite motivated either, I think I lost that because I can't walk around the classroom to monitor students' progress as I used to do it. This is so hard to do now.* (Maria)

This accounts for the importance of physical closeness to create emotional connections with students. Without it, teachers may feel that they are not establishing effective communication with others, as Andrew described:

> *It has changed everything. Now that you are in front of the computer, the humanistic part has disappeared because sometimes the students don't turn on their cameras and when they don't turn on their cameras you feel like you're talking to a computer, there is no consideration for the teacher in this regard.*

Keeping up to date with new technologies was another challenge for teachers to succeed in the emerging online teaching, "At the beginning it was difficult, I tried to prepare myself, I tried to take some courses of technological items" (Andrew). In sum, the pandemic seemed to have demotivated teachers and made them uncomfortable due to the lack of physical closeness and emotional interaction with students and too much pressure when dealing with the use of new technological resources.

### Power relations in the workplace

We can see then that teachers sometimes do not agree with the decisions that school authorities make, but they very often do not have a say in the decision-making process. According to Ball (1993) teachers are "enmeshed" in power relations in their teaching cultures where they have to follow certain impositions. Regarding this, teachers expressed there are rules they have to follow which make them feel powerless.

> *I just have to do what she [school principal] says and what the coordinator tells me. I don't like the decisions she makes in the school meetings because I think we can do something better, but at the end of the day, I have to stick to whatever they say.* (Andrew)

These rules and orders teachers have to follow may have an impact on the 'redefinition' of their work (Ball, 2010). For instance, teachers are supposed to care for their students, and they may play not only the role of a teacher, but also that of an advisor or tutor. However, this may sometimes lead to problems when parents are powerful actors, as in Jacob's case:

> *Two parents once went to the school and they asked the principal not to let their children talk to me about the problems they were having because they said I was just the teacher and I just needed to teach English and that was it.*

Furthermore, when teachers have to face difficult situations with parents, they may still be bound to obey certain impositions.

> *I told the academic assistant that I wanted to talk to that parent, and she told me, 'No, you know what? Leave it like that because if you do that there are going to be consequences because the kids are clients, it's a private school and clients have the last word'.* (Abraham)

Maria also experienced a similar situation. She followed the head teacher's indications, and yet this led to a problem, and even to a conflict between her own beliefs and those of the school authorities.

> *I was asked to send some activities for a certain period of time, and I sent all the work, and what do I receive at the end? Complaints, complaints, like, 'it's too much to do, you have to understand that we are in a pandemic,' and later they blamed me because of what I did, that's nonsense! I did what you asked me to do, you the head teacher asked me to do so, and then it turns out it was my mistake, it was my problem! and the only thing that I did was to follow orders. My students did all the job and well, it wasn't impossible, they did it, what's the problem? The problem is that they didn't want to work, I cannot do anything because I am following orders, so that's what I have to do.*

In sum, teachers may be bound to follow orders and rules in their working contexts. Therefore, their emotional well-being may be subject to power relations where other interests are prioritized, and this in turn may influence their teaching practice negatively.

### Emotional regulation and emotional intelligence

According to Arizmendi Tejeda et al. (2016), emotional regulation is essential in a teaching culture because of the implications that negative emotions may have for students' learning. Thus, it is important to understand if and how teachers may regulate their negative emotions in the classroom. Regarding this, Jacob argued that as human beings we all experience several emotions:

> *When it's a negative feeling, because we are adults and we feel worried, or angry or experience a negative feeling, I try not to let my students know that I am feeling worried or sad because this is something that may influence their learning a lot.*

For Jacob, hiding his negative emotions from students is essential so as not to influence them negatively. Similarly, Maria shared her thoughts about it, "Sometimes I feel kind of stressed, even when I don't look that way, I don't want to reflect that on my students." Abraham also seems to suppress his negative emotions, "I'm the type of person, if I'm feeling sad or stressed, I try to hide it so that I don't feel the same way." In Roger's case, he regulates his emotions before entering the classroom, "It is not very common that I take something personal to the classroom, so I go like 'okay, don't worry, it's just 40 minutes, go there and do your thing and then get out'." In Maria's case, she cares for the impression students may receive from her:

> I don't want them to see me like angry or sad, I try to be as serious as possible, I am a person who speaks quite loudly, so, when I feel that I am about to get angry what I do is that I lower my pitch so that I give the appearance of not being angry.

In this specific context, teachers have to deal with suppressing and regulating their negative emotions so as not to affect students' learning and, to some extent, avoid negative implications in the workplace. This suggests that teachers have developed emotional regulation strategies as well as emotional intelligence, which allows them to recognize not only their own emotions, but also those of their students. In short, by means of this, teachers may make decisions with intelligence for their proper emotional development and well-being, as well as their students' academic achievement (Thompson, 1991).

### The importance of recognition in a teacher's life

According to Scholes Gillings de González (2011), recognition is essential in a teacher's life. She argues that teachers need to feel they are accepted, taken into account and respected for who they are by the people who surround their professional lives. A lack of recognition in a teacher's life may lead to demotivation, frustration, and burnout. To this respect, David described the way he feels when the school authorities do not recognize the positive aspects of his practice:

> [When authorities criticize me too harshly,] I would prefer to be somebody else, because at that very moment I think they are not appreciating what I have done or what I did, they are not appreciating what the parents say about me, they are forgetting about everything that is good that I have done before.

Furthermore, a lack of recognition may also negatively influence a teacher's sense of professional identity. This in turn may affect teacher effectiveness, as suggested by Scholes Gillings de González (2011). She also claims that teachers may feel 'undervalued' when they do not receive 'positive reinforcement'. This seems to be echoed by Roger, "This is something that I have discussed with my colleagues, you don't feel like cared about, it's like, ok, your classes are just trash and we don't care about them." Maria seems to share the same feeling, "I want them to see me as the teacher, but it's difficult, they would probably not value me like the other teachers." Scholes Gillings de González (2011) also claims that a lack of positive reinforcement and recognition may lead teachers to burnout, as in Abraham's case, "Sometimes they observe really stupid things that have nothing to do with my teaching practice." Apart from this, teachers may also feel demotivated.

> I wanted to do a lot of activities like dynamics, it's not that I don't want to do those activities now, but I have experienced several situations and I think that now I don't feel that enthusiastic. There is a point when you realize that it's the same and the same, I'm not that enthusiastic as I was at the beginning. (Andrew)

In Abraham's case, he argues that anxiety and stress are the feelings he experiences when the school authorities do not recognize his teaching practice.

> I stress, I'm the kind of person that stresses out a lot because I get really anxious. For example, when students don't pass, it's not the students' fault, it's always the teacher, so if half of the group fails, it sometimes makes me feel like I'm not right for that job, it can make my confidence decline.

As a matter of fact, two of the teacher participants have resigned from their jobs as a result of demotivation because their feelings were not taken into account. David shared, "I could say that the general environment is unfriendly, there is not a good attitude towards collaboration, and I believe, honestly, I believe so much, in all my heart, in collaboration." In Maria's case, leaving her job could have been triggered by deep disappointment, "It is mainly frustration, sometimes because I can see that things don't change, and I don't think they will ever change".

In sum, teachers may have to cope with difficult situations and challenges in the workplace that may represent a barrier for their emotional well-being. Unfortunately, this may lead to emotional exhaustion, which in turn may also lead teachers to, if not quit their jobs, reconsider and negotiate between their own beliefs and values and those of their workplace.

## Conclusion

The present study sought to explore and examine the nature of Mexican EFL teachers' emotional labor in the different contexts where their teaching practice takes place. The purpose was to understand, to what extent, EFL teachers may experience emotional labor, and if, and how, they try to manage, control and/or regulate their emotions in their workplace. This included examining the nature of the teachers' relationships with their peers, students, educational authorities, and parents. Moreover, how they responded to the problems they encountered in their context was also dealt with. In addition, another objective of this study was to raise awareness in different contexts where little is known regarding EFL teachers' emotional labor. Findings showed that these Mexican EFL teachers had to deal with several situations in the workplace that led them to experience a great variety of negative emotions, and thus, emotional labor. However, they tended to hide their negative emotions and feelings when in the classroom so as not to affect students' learning negatively, and therefore, the classroom atmosphere. Furthermore, teachers manifested having experienced several negative emotions and feelings regarding the lack of teacher involvement in decision-making in their working contexts, as well as the power relations enmeshed in their teaching cultures. They also expressed that the pandemic due to COVID-19 influenced their teaching practice, and the set of negative emotions and feelings it led them into. Nevertheless, some teachers developed, to a certain extent, emotional intelligence, emotional regulation strategies, and abilities to deal with the problems and challenges that arise in the different working contexts where their practice takes place. Unfortunately, in some cases emotional burnout led teachers to quit their jobs.

For further research, it is suggested that this negative impact may be ameliorated by introducing teachers to the strategies that may help them to regulate their emotions more successfully and, in particular, examine how helpful a course on how to regulate emotions would be for EFL teachers. It is also suggested that all the emotional labor that teachers perform in the teaching profession, as well as their perceptions and opinions should be studied more in depth by the school authorities and policy makers. As Palmer (1997) claims, teaching emerges from "one's inwardness" (p. 1). Therefore, teachers' emotional well-being should be taken into account by these agents of change, especially when they make important decisions that may influence teachers' teaching practice.

Given the nature of this study, the findings may not be generalized as it focused on a small number of EFL teachers who work in secondary education in a particular context in Mexico. Thus, it is necessary to gather more empirical data that can help agents of change to incorporate future research on this topic in projects, decisions and changes that may have an impact on teachers' professional life. This means that different factors may be discovered, as well as different responses to these issues, gaining more knowledge regarding the exploration and understanding of EFL teachers' emotional labor in other educational contexts. In sum, recognition, external appraisal, and validation in a teacher's life and culture are essential and need to be practiced in the workplace. It is also important that both teachers and school authorities develop emotional understanding and intelligence to deal with the complex context in which education is embedded.

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# Appendix

# Interview guide

| Sub-research questions | Interview questions |
|---|---|
| 1. What is the nature of EFL teachers' engagement with their students? | • How would you describe the atmosphere in your classes and/or classroom? Why?<br>• How do you feel when you are in a classroom? When and why?<br>• Has your teaching changed in any way because of how you feel?<br>• Can you describe for me any of these situations?<br>• How would you describe your students?<br>• What kind of relationship do you have with your students? Why?<br>• Would you say, you get along with all of your students? Why or why not?<br>• Do you try to establish rapport with your students? Why or why not? If so, how and when?<br>• Do you receive feedback from your students regarding your teaching practice? How do you feel about it? Why?<br>• Do you let your students see how you feel in the classroom? Why or why not?<br>• If not, how do you behave so that they do not realize how you feel. Can you give me some examples? |
| 2. What is the nature of their relationships with the students' parents, their colleagues and school authorities? | • How would you describe your relationship with the students' parents?<br>• How do you feel if they come and visit you at school? Why?<br>• How do you react when talking to them? Why?<br>• What are your peers like as individuals and professionals?<br>• How would you describe your relationship with them?<br>• What kind of relationship do you have with the head teacher? Why?<br>• Is there anything that you do in order to get along well with him/her? If so, what and why?<br>• What do you think about the decisions s/he makes?<br>• Do you like these decisions? Why? Why not? |
| 3. How do they feel when they face problems in the workplace? | • How do you feel working for that institution? Why?<br>• Is there anything you would like to be different about your workplace? Why?<br>• What kinds of problems typically emerge in your workplace and with whom? Can you describe for me any of these situations?<br>• How do they make you feel? Why?<br>• How do you feel if you make a mistake or do something wrong in your workplace? Why? Can you give me an example of one or more of these occasions? |
| 4. How do they respond to the difficulties that emerge in their workplace? | • How do you feel when you have to face a problem/difficulty in your workplace? Can you give me any examples?<br>• What do you do when you have to face a problem/difficulty in your workplace? Can you give me any examples?<br>• Why do you think you react like this?<br>• Do you think you have to change your way of reacting to problems? Why? Why not?<br>• How do you feel about the pandemic situation? Why?<br>• Has it affected your teaching in any way? If so, how? |