

# Emotional Labour Strategies in the Professional Practice of Novice Teachers - Based on a Teacher Trainee's Autoethnography

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**Received:** 14 October 2023; **Accepted:** 20 September 2023; **Published:** 11 November 2023

## Abstract:

Teachers, as highly emotional workers, have emotional labour that affects the success or failure of education to a certain extent. Based on the post-structuralist and the ecological perspectives, this study adopts an autoethnographic approach, using the researcher herself as the research object and tool, to explore the emotional labour strategies adopted by teachers and the trajectories of change based on her own teaching experiences in her previous professional practice. The study found that novice teachers' emotional labour strategies in professional practice include surface acting, deep acting and expression of naturally felt, which can be subdivided into camouflage, repression, isolation, reconstruction, adaptation and release, and their trajectories of change are relatively moderate. This study can provide a reference for teacher development.

## Keywords:

Novice Teachers, Professional Practice, Emotional Labour Strategies, Autoethnography

## 1. Introduction

The term “emotional labour” began in 1983 in Hochschild's *Explorations in Emotional Management*, where individuals manage their own feelings to produce a publicly visible expression or physical display [1]. Emotional labour is also gradually becoming the third type of labour after physical and mental labour. Teachers, as high-emotional workers, are expected to maintain “good collegiality and favourable collaborative relationships” [2] in their interactions with their colleagues in leadership, as well as to make more emotional efforts in their teaching work in order to achieve their teaching goals. Therefore, teachers' emotional labour even affects the success or failure of education to some extent.

Previous research has more often explored the relationship between emotional labour strategies and a factor, or the mediating role of multiple factors, and fewer

researchers have explored the trajectory of change in the adoption of emotional labour strategies by teachers. In terms of research methodology, quantitative studies such as statistics, coding, and measurement have been the main focus. Although some studies have begun to use qualitative methods, focusing on teachers' personal experiences and inner thoughts, most of them are from the "other" perspective of secondary processing by the researcher, such as observation, interviews, questionnaires, and comparisons, and there are fewer studies from the perspective of primary processing by which the researcher reflects on and analyses himself or herself.

Based on the post-structuralist and the ecological perspectives, this study adopts an autoethnographic approach, taking the researcher herself as the research object and research tool, and exploring the emotional labour strategies adopted by teachers and the trajectories of change based on her own teaching experience in her previous professional practice, in order to enrich the current research perspectives and methods of teachers' emotional labour strategies, and to provide benefits for the improvement of teachers' emotional labour strategies.

## **2. The Post-structuralist and the Ecological Perspectives**

Hochschild [3] distinguishes between two emotional labour strategies. Surface acting refers to the deliberate masking of real external performance in order to hide the actual feelings inside. The deep acting refers to a change not only in the physical response but also in the inner psyche. Ashforth & Humphrey [4] proposed a third emotional labour strategy: the expression of naturally felt, which is a situation in which the inner feelings coincide with the outer performance.

Zembylas [5] proposed emotional ecology, which began to focus on teachers' emotions from an ecological perspective. Cross & Hong [6] used Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework to explore the complex interactions between teachers' emotions and the environments in which they are embedded, with the workplace environment viewed as a nested complex system. These include temporal systems, i.e. the different emotional experiences of teachers at different stages of their experience, and the emotional labour strategies employed by teachers at different stages of their work can vary.

Based on the post-structuralist and ecological perspectives, this study aims to answer the following two main questions:

- (1). What are the emotional labour strategies adopted by teachers in their professional practice?
- (2). What are the trajectories of change in the emotional labour strategies adopted by teachers in their professional practice?

## **3. Research Design**

### **3.1. Research Method**

This study adopts an autoethnographic approach. Autoethnography, also known as "insider ethnography", is a new paradigm of ethnographic research that emerged from the postmodernist movement in the 1960s. Autoethnography is a research style and form of writing that connects the individual to culture and places the self in a socio-cultural context, and it is an autobiographical personal narrative that explores the researcher's self-life experience [7]. Compared with traditional ethnographic research,

the auto-ethnographic approach has two advantages. First, the auto-ethnographic researcher plays the dual roles of insider and outsider at the same time, being both the researcher and the subject of the research, which can effectively control the problem of data loss and inaccurate understanding of the research data in the process of secondary transfer. Secondly, autoethnographic research takes personal experience and self-consciousness as the main source of data, pays more attention to emotions and thoughts at the individual level, and takes personal experience, ideas, and practices as the main means of responding to and understanding the social context, and examines the internal factors of the individual's perspective in a more secular way.

Autoethnography takes the first-person me as the main subject of narration, and in the process of transforming dual identities, critically examines and sorts out one's own stories and experiences, so as to achieve the purpose of interpreting group culture with the individual as a breakthrough point. The analysis of the material relies mainly on the researcher's dialogue with herself, extracting her own memories related to the research topic, and can introduce cross-verification perspectives and evidence like other types of ethnography [8].

### 3.2. Research Subject

The author was admitted to a postgraduate, majoring in Subject Teaching (English) in 2021 and continued her professional practice from the winter break of 2021 to 2023, teaching English to first- and second-year high school students, as shown in Table 1 below. During the postgraduate period, the author followed her supervisor to conduct a study and research on teachers' emotional labour, listening to her supervisor's advice as well as reading and reflecting on her experiences. The author hopes to put this experience into words to enrich the research on teachers' emotional labour strategies from an insider's perspective. According to Ye Lan's classification of the stages of teachers' professional development, the three years of the author's professional practice belonged to the novice period, also known as the period of focusing on survival [9]. This paper takes these three years of professional practice as the research material to explore teachers' emotional labour strategies and the trajectories of change during the novice period.

**Table 1.** Specific information on professional practice.

|           | Time interval                                   | Teaching objects                           |
|-----------|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Stage I   | Winter holidays 2021 Late December-Late January | Students of the first year of high school  |
| Stage II  | 2022 Early April-early September                | Students of the first year of high school  |
| Stage III | First half term 2023 Mid March - late June      | Students in the second year of high school |
| Stage IV  | Summer 2023 Early July-late August              | Students of the first year of high school  |

### 3.3. Data Collection

The research materials in this paper include - firstly, the author's professional practice experience, which is processed and organised according to the dimensions of time and field. Secondly, the text, video, pictures and other data saved during the author's working period, which come from work logs, meeting minutes, personal notes, WeChat chatting records, etc. Thirdly, the interview data, which is selected by encoring to conduct research on the corresponding important others in the field.

Thirdly, interview data, selected by way of returning to the scene, is the research carried out by significant others in the field, due to the lack of certain memories or key information and in order to make up for the completeness and authenticity of the data. The survey subjects include a colleague ZKF and a student ZQY during the author's professional practice, ZKF is the instructor during the author's professional practice, and ZQY is the author's excellent student, who has always kept in touch with the author to facilitate the author's research.

#### 4. Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of three steps. First, EmEditor word processing software was used to automatically identify all possible emotionally coloured expressions in the interview text, based on the National Taiwan University Simplified Chinese Dictionary of Emotional Polarity. Second, expressions that were not emotional were excluded from the marked emotional expressions. For example, the negative word in "This stage of the course does not practice speaking on a limited topic" is not an emotionally negative word, but it is just stating a fact without conveying emotion, so it was excluded. Thirdly, emotional labour is divided into three categories according to emotional labour strategies, namely, surface acting, deep acting and expression of naturally felt, which are later refined by scholars into camouflage, repression, isolation, reconstruction, adaptation and release. Specific examples are shown in Table 2.

*Table 2. Example table of emotional labour strategies.*

| Emotional labour strategies  | Specific strategies | Typical examples                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Surface acting               | Camouflage          | The conflict between work and study made me reluctant to spend time on teaching and research, but I have to show enthusiasm for learning.                                                           |
|                              | Repression          | Choosing to suppress one's true emotions in order to maintain harmony in relationships.                                                                                                             |
| Deep acting                  | Isolation           | There are differences in levels of expertise among teachers, and when I am challenged, I choose to turn a deaf ear.                                                                                 |
|                              | Reconstruction      | I felt lost when I was criticised by other teachers for listening to and assessing lessons, but I would think rationally and analyse the evaluation to alleviate the negative feelings at the root. |
| Expression of naturally felt | Adaptation          | It is easy not to feel a sense of marginalisation and isolation due to socio-cultural differences, insufficient opportunities for interaction, etc. that limit my participation in learning.        |
|                              | Release             | Achieving self-identity, accepting mood changes reasonably and rationally and expressing one's own views about teaching.                                                                            |

#### 5. Research Findings

##### 5.1. Novice Teachers' Emotional Labour Strategies in Professional Practice

The main emotional labour strategies used by the author in this research stage include surface acting, deep acting and expression of naturally felt, which can be subdivided into six categories of specific strategies, including camouflage, repression, isolation, reconstruction, adaptation and release.

#### ***5.1.1. Novice Teachers Adopt Surface Acting in Their Professional Practice: Camouflage and Repression***

Camouflage refers to the teacher's conscious expression or exaggerated presentation of emotions that he or she does not feel, with a high degree of consistency with the surface acting, in which the teacher's emotional feelings and expressions are out of tune. For example, teachers are not genuinely interested in theoretical lectures, and these observable behaviours or emotions disguise their true inner feelings. When the learning situation is clearly dominated by power, teachers are likely to show emotional states that do not match their inner feelings due to external pressure or in order to meet the evaluation criteria, if the camouflage is still able to maintain a balance between the teacher's true feelings and outer expression, then the repression requires more emotional labour on the part of the teacher. In order to prevent negative emotions from escalating, teachers may take coercive measures to change their true inner emotions. For example, in order to maintain interpersonal harmony or to save face, teachers often choose to suppress their true emotions in order to avoid positive conflict.

#### ***5.1.2. Novice Teachers Adopt Deep Acting in Their Professional Practice: Isolation, Reconstruction***

In addition to the two specific emotional labour strategies mentioned above, teachers also adopt isolation, whereby they promptly isolate negative emotions when they become aware of them arising. Teachers may also make these emotions subjectively acceptable and best exemplify deep playing strategies through reconstruction, i.e. reshaping and reinterpreting emotional situations. In professional practice, teachers are often able to use this strategy to rationalize the situational factors that give rise to emotions, thereby shifting their perceptions and alleviating negative emotions.

#### ***5.1.3. Novice Teachers Adopt Expression of Naturally Felt in Their Professional Practice: Adaptation, Release***

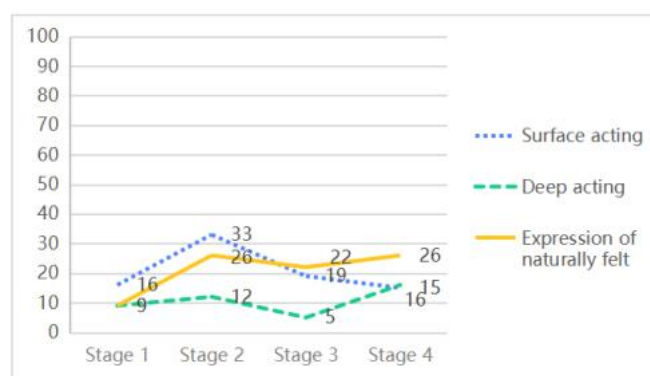
Teachers will adopt the adaptation, i.e., they will not let their emotions be affected by external factors. Not only do they adapt to the work environment and relationships, but they also adapt to and accept the emotions they feel. Teachers will also adopt release, i.e., they will realize a kind of self-identity, gradually release their true emotions, recognize their own emotional needs, accept emotional changes rationally and express their true views on teaching.

### ***5.2. Trajectories of Change in Novice Teachers' Emotional Labour Strategies in Professional Practice***

In the first and second stages of the author's professional practice, the author had less experience of teaching and did not have a strong sense of self-professional identity, and therefore put more emotional labour into teaching through the surface acting.

In the second stage of the professional practice, due to the change of the teaching object from first year students to second year students, the teacher needed to spend more energy on lesson preparation, and also due to the gradual accumulation of some teaching experience, which also made the teaching work gradually comfortable. As a result, the object of the author's emotional labour was quickly adjusted to the classroom and the students, and as a result, more and stronger expression of naturally felt were adopted.

By the fourth stage of professional practice, the author had developed a love for the teaching profession and saw it as a calling for her, and therefore used more surface acting and expression of naturally felt. Overall, after the second stage of professional practice, the changes in the author's emotional labour strategies all tended to moderate. See Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Trajectory of emotional labour strategy change.

## 6. Conclusions

Based on the post-structuralist and the ecological perspectives, this study adopts an auto-ethnographic approach, using the researcher herself as the research object and tool, and based on her own teaching experience in her previous professional practice, she classifies the emotional labour strategies adopted by novice teachers in their professional practice into surface acting, deep acting, and expression of naturally felt, which can be subdivided into camouflage, repression, isolation, reconstruction, adaptation and release with specific examples. In addition, the author drew an emotional labour trajectory diagram to show the development of emotional labour strategies adopted by novice teachers in their professional practice.

It is hoped that this study provides practical empirical references for educational policy makers, implementers, administrators and teacher training groups. First of all, educational administrators, faculties and relevant departments in schools should care about and participate in teachers' psychological experiences. In addition to giving teachers adequate professional knowledge, they should also understand the sources of ordinary teachers' emotions and provide emotional support, such as organizing regular teaching sharing sessions or workshops to help teachers express, reflect and analyse their emotions, alleviate teachers' emotional stress, instruct teachers to follow certain strategies of emotional labour, communicate their emotions appropriately and cohesion of the team. Secondly, teachers themselves should face their emotions correctly and use emotional labour strategies to achieve their teaching goals. They should communicate with students emotionally and heart to heart, and make use of the

double-edged sword of emotional labour with enthusiasm to enhance self-efficacy, maintain work motivation and improve self-identity construction.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

## Funding

This work was supported by “The 2023 Jilin Province Higher Education Research Project” - Students’ Special and Key Project, named “Research on the Emotional Labour of High School English Teachers”, grant number “JGJX2023C82”. Also supported by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Council, China Association of Higher Education (grant 23WYJ0408).

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge the tutor, Li Zhuo who has given author a sea of constructive suggestions and inspired me all the time with her tenacious work ethic and optimistic attitude towards life.

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