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Relationality in language teacher emotion regulation: Regulating emotions through, with and for others

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ABSTRACT

Although previous research has shown that teaching is replete with emotion (Zembylas, 2004) and that emotion regulation should be viewed as a key teacher competence (Brackett, Palomera, Mojsa-Kaja, Reyes, & Salovey, 2010; Gkonou & Mercer, 2017), there is still much that we do not know about how such regulation is performed in teachers' day-to-day teaching practice. In this article, we explore the nature of emotion regulation among 50 language teachers working in four national settings, namely the US, the UK, Norway and Germany. In-depth, individual semi-structured interviews with the participating teachers, which were coded and analysed thematically, revealed the following three key themes: a) emotion regulation has strong potential to mediate stronger connections with students; b) emotion regulation is a highly collaborative and relational process as it often takes place together with others or through the help of others; and c) emotion regulation is not only performed *together with* others but also *for* others. We discuss these findings in light of recent calls to attend to collaborative processes in language education which have strong potential to lead to healthy and adaptive interpersonal relationships (Gkonou, 2022; Mercer, 2016).

1. Introduction

When teachers teach in the classroom, the emotions they feel and express can have a strong impact on their teaching practices and their students. At the same time, these emotions fluctuate and are often intermingled with students' emotions and emotional states as teaching is a highly interactive and social encounter during which teachers "connect with their students" (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 835). Teachers – and in fact any individual – have a great degree of control over their emotions and can manipulate both how they feel and the outcomes of their emotions through emotion regulation, which comprises a set of cognitive and behavioral actions directing felt emotions (Gross, 2015; Koole, 2009). In the vast majority of cases, decisions on what can be regulated and how are conscious (Gross, 1998) and determined by intrapersonal and interpersonal motives and outcomes (Tamir, 2016; Tamir, Vishkin, & Gutentag, 2020), as well as by notions of best practice in teaching and institutional and sociocultural norms known as feeling rules (Mercer, 2016; Miller & Gkonou, 2018; Talbot & Mercer, 2018).

In interviewing language teachers to better understand their emotional experiences and their agentic behavior associated with those emotions, we were intrigued by the strongly relational character our teacher participants attached to the process of emotion regulation performed as part of their practice. This led us to explore emotion regulation through a relational lens, by viewing it not just

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as personal and subjective but as social and other-oriented and as being unequivocally shaped and defined by other social actors which surround teachers in the workplace – a perspective also shared by researchers with respect to how emotions in general function (see, e. g., Benesch, 2017; Boiger & Mesquita, 2012; Gkonou & Miller, 2019). We did not necessarily want to focus on how teachers regulate their emotions through relevant and suitable strategies but to understand how emotion regulation is undertaken *through, with and for* others.

2. Literature review

2.1. Emotion regulation in general psychology

Emotion regulation refers to an individual's self-awareness of their emotions, an understanding of how these emotions are experienced and expressed, and the choice of appropriate strategies for managing these emotions (Gross, 2015). Such regulation takes place when emotions are felt to be 'undesirable' in an attempt by individuals to avoid painful feelings and seek out pleasant ones, protect the feelings of others, and feign an emotion in order to protect their self-image and be approved by others (Niedenthal, Krauth-Gruber, & Ric, 2006). In regulating emotions, individuals appraise how they feel and subsequently take action to move an emotion into its most adaptive path (Barrett, 2017; Suri & Gross, 2016), being aware of the necessity to project prosocial behaviors and prosocial emotional displays to promote adaptive relationships with others (Goleman, 2006). Overall, individuals vary in the experience and regulation of emotions, and this variance depends on the duration and significance of their responses to emotions as well as the conditions upon which these responses are activated (Jacobs & Gross, 2014). Thus, the behavioral responses to a range of emotions are not static but are dynamic and malleable and can be controlled.

A key characteristic of emotion regulation is that it concerns both positive and negative emotions; the former are up-regulated in order to increase their intensity and/or duration and to share them with others (Quoidbach, Berry, Hansenne, & Mikolajczak, 2010), whilst the latter are down-regulated in an attempt to decrease the intensity and duration of the negative experience and its accompanying behavioral reactions (Gross, Richards, & John, 2006). We note here that poststructuralist approaches to emotion research have unanimously rejected the dichotomy between positive and negative emotions, foregrounding the role of context, power relations, and normative ideologies in interpreting what emotions do. As Benesch (2020) argues, if a teacher is frustrated at the burden of an untenable workload or if a student is angry when faced with discriminatory practices, can one actually call such emotions negative? She contends that we should instead regard them as signals of unjust systems and structures that can feed into action and teacher activism. However, in reviewing the literature on emotion regulation, we could not eschew the processes of up- and down-regulation simply because they distinguish between and target positive and negative emotions respectively. Although we recognize the problematic nature of these positive and negative binaries, we deemed it necessary to acknowledge their existence in the emotion regulation literature.

Both up-regulation and down-regulation can be achieved through two types of emotion regulation strategies: a) antecedent-focused strategies, which involve modifying an individual's evaluation of the emotional significance of an event/situation and which occur at the outset of the generation of an emotion and before it has been fully elicited, and b) response-focused strategies which take place at a later stage of the emotion generation process and aim at altering the experiential, expressive and physiological dimension of emotions (Gross, 1998, 2015; Niedenthal et al., 2006). Appropriate strategy selection depends on the nature and intensity of the emotion that needs regulating (Sheppes, Suri, & Gross, 2015), with empirical research consistently showing that the earlier an emotion is targeted, the more effective at decreasing undesirable emotional responses regulation is (Gross, 1998, 2002; Gross & John, 2003; Gross & Thompson, 2007).

Another salient feature of emotion regulation processes is the extent to which they can be either intrinsic or extrinsic. In regulating emotions intrinsically, a person tries to influence and modify their own feelings; by contrast, extrinsic emotion regulation occurs when a person endeavours to influence someone else's feelings (Gross, 2008; Gross & Levenson, 1993; Gross & Thompson, 2007). The intrinsic vs. extrinsic dichotomy should be interpreted with caution, particularly within education, and accompanied by the caveat that even if emotion regulation is undertaken intrinsically by teachers, in such an inherently and fundamentally social and interpersonal profession as teaching, intrinsic emotion regulation by teachers can have significant extrinsic outcomes on students (English & Eldsouky, 2020; Jiang, Vauras, Volet, & Wang, 2016).

Gross's (2015) process model of emotion regulation is the most widely used framework for theorizing about and understanding how emotion regulation functions. According to this framework, there are five types of emotion regulation strategies: a) situation selection, where individuals intentionally choose to face or avoid a situation that triggers a specific emotion; b) situation modification, in which case individuals change a situation while it is happening; c) attention deployment, when attention is shifted towards a desired emotion or away from an undesirable emotion; d) cognitive reappraisal, which refers to attempts to adjust the way that the situation that causes an emotion is evaluated, and e) response modulation, which is about the way individuals manage their behavioral responses to emotions. Cognitive reappraisal has been shown to be largely preferred to other emotion regulation strategy types, because it contributes toward maintaining memory (Hayes et al., 2011; Richards & Gross, 1999, 2000) and improving performance especially on stressful and/or cognitively demanding tasks as the individual is likely to re-evaluate a stressful situation and see anxiety as adaptive (Jamieson, Mendes, Blackstock, & Schmader, 2010; Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008). In addition, applying cognitive reappraisal can lead to higher levels of wellbeing, social connectedness and more participation in social interactions and interpersonal relationships (Butler et al., 2003). Cognitive reappraisal is also the emotion regulation strategy most widely associated with positive, adaptive wellbeing (Gross & John, 2003; Troy, Shallcross, & Mauss, 2013).

2.2. Teachers' capacity for emotion regulation

Language teacher emotions have developed into an important area of study within applied linguistics, in part due to multiple calls within general education to attend to teachers' emotional lives as influencing their professional roles (see, e.g., Hargreaves, 2000; Zembylas, 2002). General education studies have demonstrated that emotion regulation can help teachers to protect and sustain their wellbeing and feel less threatened by negative emotions at work (Haeussler, 2013). When teachers regulate their emotions, they also work toward changing student behavior. For example, in tackling student misconduct, teachers can up-regulate certain positive emotions and genuinely display certain negative emotions if necessary, for instance in an attempt to make students understand the teacher's position and empathize with them (Yin, 2016; Yin & Lee, 2012). An added value of teacher emotion regulation is that it contributes to building strong interpersonal relationships with students (e.g., Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Hosotani & Imai-Matsumura, 2011; Sutton, 2004; Yin, 2016; Yin & Lee, 2012).

The calls from general educationists have been further endorsed by applied linguists, urging researchers to give greater consideration to language teacher psychology more generally (Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018). In fact, one way in which the field of applied linguistics demonstrates interdisciplinarity is by drawing on areas such as psychology to better understand how individuals working with language – in our case, language teachers – feel about the process of teaching, and how they feel when they teach. By taking an applied linguistics lens to analyse the interview accounts of language teachers with respect to their emotion regulation procedures, we elucidate how language is used to verbalize a real-life issue, that of emotion regulation, and what its underlying social, psychological and behavioral conditions are. Previous research and theorizing have shown that language teachers attend to their own – and their students' – emotions in their attempt to care for their students (Miller & Gkonou, 2022), achieve classroom goals (Dewaele, Gkonou, & Mercer, 2018), enact professionalism (Gkonou & Miller, 2019; 2021), remain positively engaged at work (Greenier, Derakhshan, & Fathi, 2021), and improve their wellbeing (Brierton & Gkonou, 2022). In addition, language teachers regulate their emotions to negotiate instances of learner anxiety (Gkonou & Miller, 2019) and manage their classrooms in an emotionally wise manner (Gkonou & Mercer, 2017). In both of these studies though, teachers reported that although on the one hand they worked toward creating a relaxed classroom atmosphere, on the other hand they wished to be firm and professional in their roles, thus being faced with a paradoxical situation in which they felt pressured and had to carefully select the emotions they would display in class at different times. Emotion regulation has also been found to function as a learned strategy, dynamically interacting with innate strengths and different forms of external and/or institutional support to boost language teacher resilience (Kostoulas & Lämmerer, 2018). This is a timely realisation, given shared views among researchers that emotion regulation is a teacher skill or competence that can be learned and fostered (e.g., Brackett et al., 2010; Corcoran & Tormey, 2012; Gkonou & Mercer, 2017; King, Dewaele, & Gkonou, 2020). In addition, if practiced frequently and used repeatedly, for example in the case of experienced teachers with lengthy teaching service, emotion regulation can become habitual and automatized (Gyurak & Etkin, 2014; Gyurak, Gross, & Etkin, 2011).

Emotion regulation has also been used for the motivated purpose of understanding and increasing language teacher wellbeing and ensuring a compassionate, whole-school culture of wellbeing where the wellbeing of all stakeholders involved in education is attended to (Brierton & Gkonou, 2022). When everyone's emotions are reasonably regulated, a harmony between the teacher and the class – and among school members – is likely to exist. A set of other studies has also concentrated on the regulation of specific emotions such as frustration and revealed that language teachers' choices of how to regulate it were not set a priori but were determined by their own interpretations of a particular frustration-provoking situation while it was happening (Morris & King, 2018), and that language teacher emotion regulation is activated both for the short-term (i.e., within one single lesson) and long-term (i.e., throughout one's career trajectory) need to manage emotions effectively (Morris & King, 2020). In the latter study, it was also shown how the strategies making up Gross's (2015) process model of emotion regulation were deployed by Japanese university language teachers. Situation selection and situation modification served pre-emptive emotional control, attention deployment strategies improved teacher-learner relationships, cognitive reappraisal was used at regular intervals and for managing the stresses of the job, and response modulation targeted teachers' behavioral reactions to emotions to ensure that they met their epistemic responsibilities as language teachers.

Traditionally, emotion regulation has been viewed as subjective and intrapersonal in that it is performed by the individual for the individual, despite the well-documented positive impact of effective emotion regulation on interpersonal functioning and relationship building (see, e.g., Gross & John, 2003 and Gkonou, 2022 more recently, Gkonou & Miller, 2021; Williams, Morelli, Ong, & Zaki, 2018). However, in psychology-based research, the scope of the emotion regulation agenda has been extended to include interpersonal emotion regulation, which refers to attempts to regulate one's own emotions by turning to others for help and to also reciprocate and help others with regulating their emotions (Rimé, 2007; Zaki & Williams, 2013). This relational aspect of emotion regulation has also been emphasized in applied linguistics research, albeit with a focus on how English language teachers assist students with their own emotion regulation processes in class thus maximizing connectedness with and the emotional stability of their students (Bielak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2020; Gkonou & Miller, 2019). Even so, this limited body of research has not looked at the role of other social actors in the process of teacher emotion regulation, nor at how language teachers themselves capitalize on social resources, including others, to undertake emotion regulation at work. It is this gap in previous research that we intend to fill through our study. In asking language teachers about their emotional experiences as part of their professional roles, we were offered detailed, unsolicited accounts of how emotion regulation is performed *through*, *with* and *for* others. Our study is guided by the following research questions:

1. In what way/s do the participating language teachers' emotion regulation practices impact upon their relationships with their students?
2. How does relationality manifest in the participating language teachers' undertakings of emotion regulation?

3. Methodology

3.1. Context and participants

This study draws on semi-structured interviews conducted with fifty language teachers in four national contexts, including the U.S., the U.K., Germany and Norway. The first set of twenty-five interviews was conducted in Summer 2016 with teachers of English located in the U.S. (interviewed by Miller) and in the U.K. (interviewed by Gkonou). Due to distance and timing issues, ten of the U.S.-based interviews were conducted via Skype. The second set of twenty-five interviews was conducted in Spring 2019 with teachers of English located in Germany and teachers of Norwegian in Norway. All of these were conducted face-to-face, made possible through Miller's Fulbright Fellow to Cologne University in Germany in 2019. Although our data originated from four distinct national settings, making comparisons across the data was beyond the remit of this study as we did not design it with a comparative focus in mind. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling strategies, first by obtaining written permission via email from directors of English language programs and then emailing the teachers with information about the study and what their participation would entail. [Table 1](#) includes further demographic information on our language teacher participants.

The interview guide focused on teachers' emotional experiences as language teachers and included eleven questions that focused on their teaching responsibilities, the aspects of teaching that they enjoyed most and those they enjoyed least, strategies for regulating their emotions while teaching, the degree to which emotion regulation was easy or difficult for them, and the kind of advice they might offer to new teachers on how to regulate emotions. The interview guide for both sets of interviews was identical with the exception of one change: a question asking about job-related stress was dropped and one asking about turning points in the teachers' careers was added to the guide for the second set of interviews in Germany and Norway. The interview questions were derived from our own review and evaluation of relevant literature on language teacher emotions and what we thought would be fair questions to ask teachers about how they felt during their classroom practice. The semi-structured nature of the interviews enabled language teacher participants to raise additional topics as they became relevant in the interview conversations. The average length of the interviews was approximately 32 min, with several lasting more than an hour. The fifty interviews were all transcribed verbatim and the total number of words in our corpus came to 224,046. All interviews were conducted in English except for one which was conducted in Norwegian by a Norwegian colleague in the presence of Miller.

3.2. Data analysis

In order to manage the analysis for such a large corpus of interview transcripts, we started by each coding a set of thirteen interview transcripts separately and independently from each other (25% of the total). This subset of 13 transcripts included three to four interviews from each of the four national contexts. We created codes based on mentions of emotion regulation (e.g., how easy or difficult it was for teachers to perform it in class) and emotion regulation strategies. After discussing our first-round coding ([Creswell, 2014](#); [Mann, 2016](#)), which included categories of strategies and memos on the nature of emotion regulation, we refined our codes and used them to analyse the remaining 37 interview transcripts. Coding was conducted using NVivo 12. We applied the mutually agreed upon codes to the remaining interviews but were also open to additional, potentially more relevant codes that were not identified during the intercoder agreement phase of the coding process. However, what struck us in the interview data was the relational character that the language teacher participants frequently attached to their emotion regulation processes, which was not particularly salient in the first 13 transcripts that we analysed to achieve intercoder reliability. We decided to explore this idea further by creating a new code called 'relationality', which we applied to the full interview dataset by also memoing our serendipitous findings with instances and manifestations of such relationality to generate key themes. Relationality in the emotion regulation of the participating teachers was embodied through the three themes presented in the 'Findings' section that follows.

Table 1
Demographic information of teacher participants (N = 50).

Location	US: 15 UK: 10 Germany: 18 Norway: 7
Type of institution	University-affiliated program (US, UK, Norway): 32 Gymnasium (Germany, grades 5–13 with a focus on university preparation): 13 Volkshochschule (Germany, adult-focused continuing education institutions): 5
Gender	Female: 32 Male: 18 Prefer not to disclose: 0
Full-time/Part-time	Full-time: 36 Part-time: 14
Academic Qualifications	M.A. or its equivalent: 41 Ph.D.: 5 B.A.: 4 Language teaching certification: 11
Years of teaching experience	Mean: 14 (min = 2, max = 45)

3.3. Findings

3.3.1. Emotion regulation as mediating stronger interpersonal relationships with students

In exploring how the participating teachers employed emotion regulation during their practice, we found that they viewed it as a valuable tool for strengthening their relationships with their students in class. Specifically, teachers commented that emotion regulation was often mediated by their agentic efforts to build quality interpersonal relationships with their students, a process which helped to “automatically enhance the good [i.e., the ‘good’ emotions] and minimize the bad [i.e., the ‘bad’ emotions]” (T2). Most importantly though, in their self-reports, teachers acknowledged an added value of emotion regulation processes: through action to regulate their emotions by attending to their relationships with their students, they also managed to build stronger and more meaningful interpersonal relationships with them in the end, an outcome which, according to previous research, constitutes an important emotional reward (Miller & Gkonou, 2018). The teachers characterized their relationships with students using words and phrases such as “trust” and “friendliness” (T2), “harmony” in class and consciously working together toward a “shared goal” and having shared vision (T43), a high sense of “responsibility” to help students “solve the problems” (T3), willingness to get to know the students to avoid “personality clashes” (T47), and “empathy” (T33). With respect to the latter, in Excerpt 1, the teacher elaborated on how their own experiences as student and the fact that they were an “average”, “okay” student have helped them “to understand students who struggle to achieve” and squarely shaped their approach to empathizing with their own students as part of their practice. Mercer (2016) has indeed argued for the centrality of empathy in education and in forming meaningful teacher-learner relationships.

Excerpt 1

T33: And I think also recognizing the ... I mean I was never top of the class in school. I was, you know, I was average, I did okay but I was ... I had to work hard to get what I wanted to achieve. And I think that I am really glad about that because it helps me to understand students who struggle to achieve, because if I've got top marks and gone to be, you know, an expert in this study later, I won't be able to empathize with my students. And I think maybe that's a word that's important for me, that's “empathy” and understanding where my students were coming from. And what they're having to deal with.

Teacher-student relationships were also facilitated by emotional honesty, that is an attempt by teachers to carefully and voluntarily disclose information with their students about how they feel (see also Gkonou & Mercer, 2017). The participating language teachers used emotional honesty to regulate their emotions and as a relational act, which helps students to understand teachers and see them as “fully human beings” (Sutton, 2004, p. 387) and to improve their own emotions and particularly enjoyment too (Cyanus, 2004; Cyanus & Martin, 2008; Cyanus, Martin, & Goodboy, 2009; Elahi Shirvan & Taherian, 2021). Several teachers admitted to openly showing “that you have emotions too as a teacher” (T18) and that “these are all things that happen to us” (T38), and to feeling that they had to “at least address” an unpleasant emotion in class (T8), arguing for “transparency” (T10 and T14) and selectivity in terms of not “going and telling them something that students shouldn't be hearing” (T27). Emotional honesty, thus, enabled mutual understanding, as explicated in Excerpt 2.

Excerpt 2

T14: Um, the solution was to actually talk about it, to sort of spend the lesson, not teach English, but sit together and tell them why I am that strict. Um, it didn't mean that we didn't play games. It didn't mean that we didn't watch clips and approach the language playfully, but it meant that while I'm talking and explaining something, they don't have to do a later doodle on their, in their books or they don't chat with their neighbors or what's basic behavior for me in the classroom, but for them not that basic, and there was sort of friction, let's put it that way. But again, I found out that that talking about that was actually the key to find a way through and helping them understanding me and helping me understanding them.

Such honest acts of self-disclosure in terms of how teachers feel can therefore promote relational practice, which can help teachers to better understand their students, and vice versa. In turn, this can lead to positive emotional displays and a positive classroom atmosphere.

As shown in this section, language teachers' relationships with their students contributed to their emotion regulation efforts. Teachers viewed emotion regulation as an important means for building stronger relationships with their students, and, relatedly, found it useful to reveal aspects of their emotional selves to their students in order to develop and maintain interpersonal understanding. In many cases, teachers find a way through emotion regulation by discussing and analyzing their emotions together with their colleagues. It is this aspect of the emotion regulation process that we turn to in the next section.

3.4. Emotion regulation as a highly collaborative and relational process practiced with and through the help of others

Regulating emotions in collaboration with or through the help of others was another telling aspect of emotion regulation which our interview conversations with teachers helped to unveil. We have argued elsewhere that collaborative reflection among teachers has the potential to function as a form of emotional and social capital in the workplace (see Gkonou & Miller, 2021) – and that reflection on emotionally charged moments in one's practice can be treated as formative both in terms of what teachers can learn about their teaching practices and of their emotional self-awareness (see Gkonou & Miller, 2020). However, what the present data suggest is that having the opportunity to discuss and analyse emotions together with others can have a strongly therapeutic function with respect to emotion regulation. In Excerpt 3, the teacher underlined how “extremely helpful” such “synergies” among teaching staff are. For one

thing, other colleagues might also be teaching “the exact same things [...] for the same age”, which offers teachers opportunities for exchanging ideas and sharing materials. For another, it is important that teachers feel they can rely on their colleagues for advice and assistance and not assume that they “have to do” everything by themselves and “have to invent everything”, which oftentimes is a common misconception among “young”, early-career teachers. Another teacher explained how “empowered” they felt when they could “seek support” from relevant university services and when talking about “what you’re experiencing” with their colleagues, which “goes a long way with processing your situation”. If, on the contrary, teachers keep silent, the problem can get “bigger and bigger” (see Excerpt 4). What is described in Excerpt 4 is a clear example of venting, which is a response-focused emotion regulation strategy for intentionally and consciously allowing emotions to come out through discussions with people that are believed to be in good position to help (Bushman, Baumeister, & Phillips, 2001; Koole, 2009).

Excerpt 3

T2: Um, I would always recommend to work with others, find colleagues because we all teach the exact same things in the same, you know, for the same age. At the same time, we have curricula. You don’t have to invent everything. And, um, I think those synergies are extremely, uh, helpful and, and sometimes young or teachers think they have to do with themselves.

Excerpt 4

T42: We have a student advisor who’s also there to listen to faculty and then there’s an active mediator between faculty and students and I’ve had to make use of that several times, so if there’s an instance in the classroom that I’m unhappy about, I don’t feel powerless, I feel empowered to seek support and to make changes quickly. [...] I think I would say it’s great to talk to your colleagues about what you’re experiencing, because a lot of the time they’ve experienced it or are experiencing it as well and I think just being able to talk about it and share experiences goes a long way with processing your situation, thinking about what choices you have, what you can do about it. I think if you just keep it to yourself, it can become a bigger and bigger problem.

Similar to these teachers’ accounts, other interviewees talked about the value of “communication” (T6) and “cooperation” (T8) among teachers and of “working together as a team, not as a separate teacher” (T10) for the purposes of regulating emotions and “taking the load off” (T14) or “de-stressing” (T43). In one of the narratives, the teacher described this process as similar to “having a hotline with my colleagues”, where classes are openly discussed, a strategy considerably contributing toward “amplifying positive experiences” (T6). The relationality of emotion regulation was further highlighted in the ‘lunch example’ in Excerpt 5. The teacher elaborated on one of their colleagues’ initiatives to set aside “a separate lunch time” during which teachers could “talk through our emotions about particular students and how we were feeling about the class” and “be supportive towards each other”.

Excerpt 5

T26: If I do get negative emotions, I do try to speak to somebody, maybe at home, or colleagues in the office and just, it’s often the same kind of emotions that they’re feeling within the same class. So that does help, sometimes you’ll get some advice. I think it was last year, a colleague suggested that we had a separate lunch time, time that we could just speak to each other, just around emotions about the students, sort of completely off record, but just a time to be supportive towards each other. That was really helpful. [...] We went to the meeting room, so it was something that, it wasn’t just like this is something we did in the office every lunch time. It was something different, something special that, hm, that we could kind of you know, talk through our emotions about particular students and how we were feeling about the class. It’s really useful.

Language teacher emotion regulation is, thus, a highly relational practice and the data excerpts used in the above section point to the fact that it can be practiced more effectively when planned and discussed with colleagues. Teacher collaboration for emotion regulation purposes can increase teachers’ emotional self-awareness by helping them to better understand how they feel and why through talking about it with their colleagues, subsequently enabling them to seek for potent ways to regulate their emotions. We argue that such relationality can act as a catalyst for improved teaching practice and future professional development as they learn from each other.

3.5. *Emotion regulation performed for the benefit of others*

Just as emotion regulation can be effectively performed relationally and through the help of other people, it is also often performed for the benefit of others. Translated into classroom settings, teachers do not just regulate their emotions when they cast them as unhelpful and in order to increase their own psychological wellbeing and mental health, but also when they deem their own emotion regulation as beneficial for their students and in order to change the behavior of their students in the classroom. In other words, teachers often regulate their emotions for their students’ own good, with their intrinsic efforts to manage their own emotions gradually having important extrinsic outcomes for students (English & Eldesouky, 2020). This view relating to the intrinsic-extrinsic diptych of emotion regulation surfaced in our interviews with the participating language teachers. Teachers argued that regulating their emotions “can also be helpful both for them [i.e., the students] and certainly for me [i.e., the teacher interviewee]” (T4) and improves attitudes toward the class “from the part of the teacher, but also for the student” (T20). It is worth speculating though that in choosing to regulate their emotions, teachers do so because they deem it necessary and the ‘right’ thing to do in that given moment – and not

necessarily because of their desire to appease students or directly benefit them despite the fact that teacher emotion regulation often turns out to be for the benefit of students too, as shown in our data. Put simply, teacher emotion regulation often appears to be a natural, spontaneous response to how emotions felt by a teacher with respect to what is happening in class can be addressed, which, when it is undertaken, benefits both the teacher and their students.

Our data have further demonstrated that language teacher emotion regulation is needed because “their [i.e., the students’] emotions can be influenced by my [i.e., the teacher interviewee] emotions as well” (T35) through processes of emotional contagion (Frenzel & Stephens, 2013; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). Excerpt 6 is a representative example of this duality of emotion regulation. When the teacher would not “feel well” and to achieve the equipoise required when entering the class to teach after a long night, they resorted to certain relaxation exercises done together with their students, realizing that doing so was “something that makes me feel better and them feel better”. What became apparent in our data was that a certain emotion or emotional state would be passed on directly from the teacher to the students as a result of teachers having performed emotion regulation.

Excerpt 6

T7: I’m just thinking of, uh, when I’m not feeling well, yeah, I’m tired, I haven’t slept well because my two-and-a-half-year-old kept me awake all night or so. Then what I’ve done with my class before they write class tests, um, I do some qigong exercises with them, which I do, which I sometimes do to fill the time and I know they worked so well for concentration, for just feeling much better. So sometimes when I don’t feel well, and I know they get some, get something from it, I do it with them, but at least 50% for myself. Right? So, I do something that makes me feel better and them feel better.

Teacher emotion regulation was also explicitly linked with stronger teacher ability to address student needs. In particular, the language teachers commented that teacher emotions should be regulated and teacher needs met before any attempt is made to assist students with their own emotions and needs. Teachers would need to “look after themselves first” and then be in a position to “look after others” and make others trust them to “manage [their] emotions in order to help them [i.e., the students] manage what they want to do” (see Excerpt 7). In Excerpt 8, the teacher mentioned aspects of one’s physical wellbeing and how these are important to be taken care of before a teacher “can focus on the students’ needs”.

Excerpt 7

T29: Because you’ve got to look after yourself first. If you look after yourself, then you can look after others. It doesn’t work any other way because the only person that ends up suffering is you, and you’re no help to anybody and people come to you because they trust you and they trust your emotions and they trust you to manage your emotions in order to help them manage what they want to do.

Excerpt 8

T40: And another concrete thing I try to do is to take care of myself so that when I go into the classroom, I’m rested and fed and watered. I have my needs met so I can focus on the students’ needs.

This final section has highlighted another aspect of the relationality of language teacher emotion regulation, which concerns its powerful influence over student psychologies in class and is strongly indicative of teachers’ attempts to meet their students’ diverse needs, be they academic or psychological. Emotion regulation is agentially driven and although we cannot safely conclude from the data to what extent it includes a set of carefully calculated teacher actions, we highly appreciate teachers openly acknowledging its benefits for their students. We next discuss our findings in connection with previous research and by reflecting on the relational dimension of language teacher emotion regulation, which our study has uncovered.

4. Discussion

In this paper, we did not intend to showcase how language teachers could – or indeed should – regulate their emotions by presenting strategies specifically targeting emotion regulation in class, despite some infrequent mentions of examples of such strategies such as venting or practicing emotional honesty which naturally formed part of the participating teachers’ interview accounts. By contrast, guided by our research questions and the serendipitously produced accounts of emotion regulation in teacher narratives, we centered on how language teacher emotion regulation can be relationally enacted to strengthen teachers’ relationships with their students, empower teachers to seek support for emotion regulation from their colleagues and learn from them, and boost the emotional wellbeing of both teachers and students. We find that there are two particularly significant takeaways from the research reported in this paper. First, when a teacher takes action to regulate their own emotions, it is their students and potentially also their colleagues who reap the benefits of this process as well. From this perspective, teacher emotion regulation has a strong social impact on other actors who participate in or shape the learning process, all of whom are embedded in the same social context (e.g. a classroom, a school, a university etc.). Teachers do not operate in a vacuum and cannot be abstracted from their social contexts (Gkonou & Mercer, 2017; Mercer, 2016); and neither can their emotions and, by extension, their emotion regulation. The ontogenesis of emotions and subsequent decisions on how these emotions can be regulated are uniquely influenced by teachers’ social surroundings and their own personal histories. We fully concur with education and applied linguistics researchers who contend that teacher emotions are

socioculturally constructed and historically contingent (Benesch, 2017; Burkitt, 2014; Oxford, 2022; Prior, 2019; Zembylas, 2002, 2004), and are not just internal and subjective. Our study shows that this can be extended to teacher emotion regulation too, which encapsulates elements of relationality.

Second, in reflecting on the benefits for students of language teachers performing emotion regulation, we deem it important to comment on the other-oriented dimension of teacher emotion regulation, being orientated toward students. The participating language teachers explained how nurturing their own physical and psychological wellbeing increased their ability to address their students' academic and emotional needs. In other words, teachers felt that taking care of themselves and regulating their emotions enabled them to be in the right 'mental' state to then assist their students with their learning and own emotions. Previous research has revealed that teachers do not just impart English language ability on their learners but also oftentimes offer pastoral care and explicit advice on how language learning emotions could be regulated (Cowie, 2011; Falout & Murphey, 2018; King, 2016), a finding which is also likely to be linked with teachers' perceptions of their professional responsibilities as well as notions of professionalism (Gkonou & Miller, 2019). Our study has explicitly demonstrated that caring for students can be achieved more efficiently if teachers look after themselves and regulate their own emotions first, without interpreting such findings egocentrically and taking them to mean that students are no longer their teachers' priority in the classroom (Brierton & Gkonou, 2022). We argue that such reciprocity is, in addition, a fundamental building block of quality interpersonal relationships between teachers and students.

While we do not insist that language teacher emotion regulation takes place solely in collaboration with others or necessarily affords extrinsic outcomes for students because we are cautious about extrapolating our findings to other contexts and populations, we do recommend that emotion regulation be researched and practiced relationally. We acknowledge the value of narrative-based research investigations in achieving this. Narrative methodology is driven by an ethos of giving voice to teachers to discursively appreciate and empathetically understand their experiences in order to facilitate their emotional self-awareness and draw lessons for other teachers. We hope to see more projects on emotion regulation from a relational and dialogic perspective flourish.

5. Conclusion

Our present study shows that language teacher emotion regulation can be relationally performed and undertaken, through the help of other teachers, for the benefit of students and in order to improve the quality of teacher-learner relationships. We acknowledge that certain teaching and learning experiences can be emotionally draining thus taking their toll on teachers and students, while others can be the exact opposite and urge teachers to take action to maintain and increase their pleasant emotions. Teachers are motivated to regulate such emotional experiences, in whatever way and irrespective of their valence, and such efforts are laudable and an indication that they are not just teachers of knowledge but individuals with a strong sense of their capacity to exercise agency to regulate their own emotions, attend to the emotions of their students, work toward building quality interpersonal relationships in the workplace, and work together with their colleagues to improve their teaching effectiveness. We are also aware that our study did not make explicit suggestions for regulating emotions on the basis of our gathered data, but at the same time we appreciate that many practitioners would benefit from being presented with specific emotion regulation strategies for use in class. This would be an important takeaway had we approached and analysed our data from that angle as well as a promising future research direction. Another possible research trajectory concerns examining the role that other social actors, such as teacher educators and/or supervisors, might play in language teacher emotion regulation, given the relational character of emotion regulation that our study has unveiled.

In reflecting on the limitations of our study, we admit to only having interviewed the participating teachers. Although our interviews certainly had their value, we could have also observed some of their lessons to potentially see how emotion regulation works in practice, or we could have perhaps attempted a specifically designed intervention targeting both up- and down-regulation of language teachers' emotions. We believe that any attempt at intervention should consider the full range of felt emotions and an overall evaluation of a teacher's emotional experience while teaching. Naturally, if teachers' emotion regulation skills are fostered, they will be better able to cope with the moment-to-moment emotional hurdles in the classroom and also some of the overall stresses of the teaching profession. Finally, we feel the need to underscore that any attempt to make suggestions for how language teacher emotions could be regulated should be context-bound and interpreted with caution in that such recommendations are hard to be universally applied (Cowie, 2011; Gkonou, Dewaele, & King, 2020).

Author statement

The two authors have contributed equally to all stages and activities involved in this publication.

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