

# How Emotion Labor Shapes English Teacher Identity in Underfunded Universities of the Global South: A Case Study of Professional Struggles and Resilience

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## Abstract.

*This study deals with the emotional labor and identity construction of teachers of English at underfunded public universities in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The study adopts a narrative inquiry, seeking to discover how teachers deal with their emotional realities in the absence of any material or expressive support from the institution. Eight teachers (five females and three males) between the ages of 29 and 52, participated in two semi-structured interviews over a month and kept weekly reflective journals. The thematic narratives indicated three major patterns: strategically suppressing emotions as a means of professional self-preservation, lack of institutional recognition whereby identity erodes, and in the end, emerging emotional resilience attributed to some forms of student interaction and collegiality. Findings indicate that the dimension of emotion is centrally positioned in the formative process of a professional identity and that, therefore, the higher education institution's curricular reforms have to integrate these dimensions if the development of teachers has to be a long-term process.*

**Keywords:** *emotion labor, teacher identity, English language teaching, narrative inquiry and higher education.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, teacher identity has become a prominent dimension in the exploration of complexities in language pedagogy at the tertiary level. An individual teacher's identity should not be seen as static or innate; rather, it is an evolving socially constructed phenomenon informed by institutional, cultural, and emotional factors (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Varghese et al., 2005). Of these, the attachment of the effort of managing feelings to the institutional or social expectation known as emotional labor has recently gained prominence, although very scant exploration has taken place in the context of a university pedagogy of English language teaching in the Global South.

This research adopts the term Global South to represent nations and territories that, throughout their history, have suffered from economic exploitation, the legacies of colonialism, and have not integrated into global political and economic systems. Therefore, it is not a purely geographical term, but rather a socio-political one used to refer to countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, which suffer from structural inequalities in education, healthcare, and infrastructure (Dados & Connell, 2012). For any resource-constrained, post-Soviet Central Asian republic, this nation is also placed within such an inequitable context due to its economy in development and the systems of governance finding their transition and resources, especially in higher education settings.

The term "emotion labor" which was coined by Hochschild (1983) is the application of the term and the prescript of the feelings that have to be shown, usually it is the feelings the organization wants to see, not the actual feelings of the worker. Most of the early studies were conducted in the service sector, but recently it has become more important in teaching, in which the teacher constantly represses, shows, or changes emotions to maintain peace in the class and fulfill the school's aims (Benesch, 2012; Zembylas, 2005). In the field of English teaching, it often interacts with the changing nature of a teacher's identity, particularly in poorly endowed circumstances where there may be trade-offs involving professional independence, institutional support, and emotional fulfillment.

English teachers at under resourced universities in the Global South, however, typically face a confluence of burdens: large class sizes, inadequate teaching materials, and fickle educational policies. Such circumstances require an equally high degree of emotional labor in dealing with not only students but also various administrative and structural forms of constraints (Tsang, 2011). How these emotional experiences inform the construction of the identity of an English teacher in such a setting is largely an open question, since most of the existing work on teacher identity has centered around issues of pedagogy, fluency, or

professional development (Norton, 2013; Barkhuizen, 2017) — essentially the more overt aspects of affectivity in relation to institutional or environmental stressors.

This study explores the experience of emotional labor among English language teachers working in a university setting in the Global South, which is under-resourced, and how meeting emotional demands shapes their views of professional identity. It uses a qualitative case study to examine the emotional landscape of teaching in demanding institutional contexts and how teachers discover and implement strategies not only to survive and adjust, but also to maintain and develop a sense of self within the profession.

## **Literature Review**

### 2.1. The Changing Nature of Teacher Identity

The teacher's identity has been increasingly viewed as a fluid and situational construct that results from dynamic interactions between the individual and the environment over the long run. Rather than being a personal trait, identity should be seen as emerging through institutional positioning and a larger sociocultural mandate (Beijaard et al., 2004; Varghese et al., 2005). Within the domain of teaching English as a second language or any other additional language, it is doubly constructed and constrained by linguistic imperialism and native speakerism, as well as by other geopolitical ideologies that mediate both the construction of self and construction by the other as a teacher (Norton, 2013; Barkhuizen, 2017). This means that for university-based English teachers, identities are further shaped not only by pedagogical considerations but also by institutional roles and hierarchies and changing student needs.

### 2.2. Context's Role in Shaping Who We Are

Context has much in its store towards the molding process of teacher identity, especially in underprivileged or oppressed settings. The fact is that the structural difficulties that faculty face at higher education institutions in developing countries' regions trigger and shape individual positioning within a professional front. As such, the large class sizes underfunded and poorly structured education systems in these bureaucracies of the Global South rob teachers' innovation, creativity, and emotional well-being, according to Cross and Hong. Indeed, in such identity-forming places of work for ELT professionals working in such tensions, this university environment can simultaneously embody both creativity and constraints.

### 2.3. Emotion labor in language teaching

Emotion labor, as described by Hochschild (1983) and understood as the adjustment of emotional expressions to institutional requirements, is now considered an essential area. The situation in teaching has now come to require more cheerfulness in emotional expression even when one feels tired, disappointed, and rather feeds up. The added degree of emotional burden in the ELT profession is usually caused by a lack of language security, student resistance, or apparent institutional disrespect (Benesch, 2012). Zembylas (2005) revealed the kind of emotional management that teachers carry out between professional standards and individual authenticity. However, although awareness is increasing, the intersection of emotional labor and the shaping of a teacher's identity has received scant consideration in research, particularly in university settings in the Global South.

### 2.4. Emotion work and shaping identity

Recent academic work has started to connect the labor of love for emotions with the teacher's identity, indicating that emotive expression, suppression, or adjustment can shape educators' self-perception of educators (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006; Tsang, 2011). Teachers who constantly need to contain their feelings of anger or overcompensate in investing their emotions may start experiencing identity misalignment and emotional dissonance. Those who cope with them construct meaning by finding emotional consonance with value systems associated with professionalism, primarily by developing even stronger and more resolute identities. In a strong institutional milieu, misalignment is thinly pronounced. Emotions felt at the very place of these teachers' work can either feed their commitment or add to the fragmentation of their identity and, as a result, burn them out (Day & Gu, 2010).

### 2.5. The Current Research Gap

Interest in the affective aspects of teaching and their function in the formation of identity has increased. However, little research has been conducted on this intersection in global South universities. Most studies on this intersection are available for schools and lower and middle education sectors at the tertiary level. Works such as that of Richards are mainly available in this context, which narrows down the problem of teacher identity with pedagogy and professional development. More importantly, the concept of emotional labor, particularly in terms of institutional constraints and professional resilience, has rarely been considered.

#### 2.6. Research Aims and Questions

This research seeks to determine how emotional labor forms the professional identity of English language teachers working at underfunded universities in the Global South. It tries to understand the emotional experiences of these teachers and the strategies they use to navigate institutional challenges while maintaining a coherent professional identity.

#### 2.7. Research Questions:

1. How do English language teachers in underfunded universities experience and manage emotion labor?
2. How does emotion labor influence their construction of professional identity?
3. What coping strategies do these teachers use to sustain emotional well-being and professional resilience?

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative narrative inquiry design to examine how English language teachers at under-resourced public universities face and handle emotional work and how these practices affect their professional identity. A narrative approach was selected because it gives priority to the actual experiences of the participants, which can then be further analyzed for the development of identity over time, brought to light by reflective practices (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This methodological orientation serves the investigation of emotions in teaching very well, focusing on personal voice, affect, and social context.

#### 3.1. Research Context

The research was conducted in two state universities. The reason for their choice is based on the common features shared: both work under the conditions of insufficient funds, face problems with dilapidation of the infrastructure, and have a significant student population. English is taught as a compulsory subject in many faculties without adequate material, with more students than can be accommodated in classes, and with inconsistent administrative support, thus setting the right conditions to determine what it means to emotionally experience and create a professional identity for teachers in such an environment.

#### 3.2. Participants

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, with the aim of selecting individuals who could offer rich insights based on their experience and reflective capacity. All participants were full-time English language instructors employed at two state universities. The sample included five female and three male instructors, aged between 29 and 52 years. They had 5 to 22 years of teaching experience in higher education. All participants had at least one master's degree in English language teaching or applied linguistics. The participants were contacted through departmental emails and informal professional networks. Each participant voluntarily agreed to participate and provided written informed consent. Pseudonyms were assigned to ensure anonymity in reporting.

#### 3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected from three sources: semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and institutional documents, to ensure triangulation and thus a more in-depth and contextualized understanding.

##### 3.3.1. Semi-Structured Interviews:

Two in-depth interviews were conducted with each respondent; they were spaced three weeks apart and lasted 60–75 minutes. The first interview explored the respondent's professional background, emotional experiences pertaining to institutional culture, and any perception of that culture. The second interview elaborated on new emerging themes and gave the respondents another opportunity to elaborate on new reflections that might have come to them during the intervening period of journaling. The interviews were conducted in English, recorded with the respondents' consent, and then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### 3.3.2. Reflective Journals

Participants were asked to keep a reflective journal over four weeks and to produce a minimum of one entry per week. They responded to optional prompts, which guided them to explore emotionally significant moments, identity negotiation, and coping strategies. For example, a prompt could be "Describe a situation this week that challenged or reaffirmed your sense of being a teacher." This gave learners space to explore, on paper, how and what they were feeling and offered a window into sense-making processes of experiences over time.

### 3.4. Analysis of the Documents

Institutional documents were obtained and reviewed to relate the results to a wider administrative and cultural framework. These included university mission statements, faculty workload guidelines, student feedback forms, and departmental quality assurance policies. The style of language in these documents was checked for implicit expectations regarding emotions, professionalism, and performance.

#### **Data Analysis**

A thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) was used, which looked at both the content and structure of stories provided by the participants. The analysis was broken down into several stages: *Immersion*: Transcripts and journal entries were read multiple times to gain a holistic sense of each participant's narrative.

*Coding*: Recurrent emotional expressions, identity markers, and institutional references were coded both inductively (emerging from the data) and deductively (based on the literature). *Theme Development*: Broad themes related to common emotional patterns, coping strategies, and identity shifts.

*Cross-case Comparison*: The distinct nature of each narrative was preserved, with common themes that recurred across cases used to build a shared understanding.

*Integration of Institutional Context*: Insights from document analysis were used to interpret how institutional discourses influenced or constrained emotional expressions and teacher identity. NVivo software was used to support coding and theme organization, but interpretive decisions were made manually to preserve contextual richness.

#### **Ethical considerations**

This study was conducted with careful attention to ethical. The research adhered to the core principles of the Declaration of Helsinki, ensuring that all participants were fully informed about the purpose, scope, and voluntary nature of their involvement. Prior to participation, each teacher provided written informed consent. Throughout the process, confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained, and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Every effort was made to uphold the dignity, autonomy, and well-being of those involved.

#### **Trustworthiness and Rigor**

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study adopted the criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985):

*Credibility*: Prolonged engagement, triangulation of data sources, and member checking.

*Transferability*: Rich contextual descriptions of the participants and settings were employed.

*Dependability*: Coding decisions and analytic memos were recorded on an audit trail

*Confirmability*: and a reflexive research journal documenting the researchers' assumptions was employed.

## **IV. RESULTS**

This section provides the main findings of the narrative analysis of the interview transcripts, reflective journals, and institutional documents. It revealed three big themes that show how emotion labor and English teacher identity mix in underfunded university settings:

*Performing Professionalism: Emotion Suppression as Survival*

*Institutional Neglect and Identity Strain*

*Emotional Resilience and Identity Reclamation*

The themes get support from what participants share, and they're tied back to what the research questions ask.

### *Theme 1: Performing Professionalism – Emotion Suppression as Survival*

Participants continuously reported the requirement to hold back their real emotional reactions, mostly of tiredness, frustration, and anger, to fulfill school expectations and keep a mask of control in the class. This emotional labor was not only a teaching need but also seen as a survival method in firm academic chains.

*“Sometimes, I feel like screaming when my class is too big, students are inattentive, and I have no microphone. But I smile and keep going. That’s what is expected from a ‘professional’ teacher here.”*  
(Laylo, seven years teaching experience)

This shows that being professional often went against the inside feelings of the participants, creating a feeling of emotional dissonance. Teachers said that this unharmony made them feel inauthentic, cut off from their beliefs, and tired out. Not showing emotions also built on how they saw themselves as teachers. For some, it made feelings of being strong and bearing up more; for others, it added a broken or less strong professional self.

*“I used to think being a good teacher meant being passionate and expressive. Now I try to survive the week. I do not recognize myself anymore.”*

(Javlon, 12 years teaching experience)

### *Theme 2: Institutional Neglect and Identity Strain*

The second major theme was the perception of institutional neglect, which amplified emotional labor and destabilized teacher identity. What the teachers talked about were large workloads, outdated curricula, minimal teaching material, and no emotional or professional support from the administration.

*“No one cares how you feel here. You could be sick, stressed, or crying, but as long as you show up to class and students do not complain, it’s fine for them.”*

(Shahlo, five years teaching experience)

This neglect eventually manifested as a strain on identity, slowly wearing away confidence, purpose, and pride she once took in her work. She described herself and her colleagues as “machines” or “replaceable parts” in an environment in which managerial performance took precedence over human contact or teaching innovation. The narratives were supported by a document analysis. There was an emphasis in official school policy documents on efficiency, attendance, and formal evaluations, with no mention of well-being or emotional support for teachers. This disparity between personal experiences and institutional talk further alienates teachers’ emotions.

*“They talk about student satisfaction and academic standards, but what about teacher dignity?”*

(Sanjar, 10 years teaching experience)

### *Theme 3: Emotional Resilience and Identity Reclamation*

Although the burden was great, most teachers shared how they came to develop coping strategies and draw strength from relationships with students, peers, and personal beliefs. Much of this served as a mechanism for identity reclamation—ways to reconnect with the values that initially brought them to the profession. For some, small moments of connection in the classroom—student gratitude or powerful discussions — served as emotional anchors through which their role and identity could be reaffirmed.

*“One student said I inspired her to apply for a scholarship abroad. That one sentence kept me going for weeks’.”*

(Zarina, 8 years teaching experience)

Others chose peer support or informal mentoring as their emotional lifelines. They share stories of struggle and survival, which reduce isolation and provide for collective meaning-making. Several participants reframed emotional labor as a form of resistance, choosing empathy and engaging in a system that discouraged it.

*“Yes, I fake emotions sometimes, but I also choose to feel. I choose to care. That is my way of resisting the cold system we work in.”*

(Nawruz, 15 years teaching experience)

This shows how emotional labor, though tiring, becomes a source of agency and identity rebuilding once teachers think about and take their feelings back.

### **Summary of the Cases**

In all instances, emotional labor was found to have a deep effect on teacher identity, creating stress and disconnection, yet also offering a way to bounce back and change. Neglect by the institution increased the tiredness from emotions, but moments where the teacher had control, support, or connection with a student offered a way to fix who they were as a person and as a professional. The results demonstrate that in low-resource university settings, it is not only the curriculum or pedagogy, but also deep emotional, contextual, and political factors that create the identity of a teacher.

## **V. DISCUSSION**

This study tries to show how English language teachers who work in underfunded universities in the Global South undergo emotional labor and how it affects their professional identity. The results revealed a very emotional teaching environment because of institutional neglect, bound professionalism, and personal resilience. These findings coincide with and add to the existing literature on teacher identity and emotional labor in many key ways.

### **9.1. Emotion Labor as Identity Work**

The first key finding—that teachers suppress emotions in their routine performances of roles—does support Hochschild's (1983) basic notion of emotion labor, but with much critical nuance in higher education. For participants, masking the feeling of being very frustrated or emotionally exhausted was not just a strategy in the classroom; it was a surface performance of professionalism in rigid institutionalized structures. This is in line with Zembylas (2005) who contends that due to the internalized norms of the institutions, teachers regulate their affect and, in turn, that affects how they view themselves as educators. Results were mixed. Some teachers saw their emotional stamina as strength, while others felt a conflict within themselves and their identity had been divided. These findings support the argument of Day and Gu (2010) that teaching is typically considered an intensely emotional profession in which the individual's identity is constantly and consistently tested through surrounding pressure.

### **9.2. Institutional Neglect and Identity Erosion**

An important theme in all the stories was the lack of support from the organization—emotionally, professionally, and in practical terms. Participants kept talking about a system that put more importance on reaching its administrative goals and keeping students happy than on taking care of the teachers. These circumstances made the work of managing emotions even harder and led many to doubt their value and goals as educators. This reiterates what Cross and Hong (2012) had found, that identity work linked very tightly with the perception of institutional care and support by teachers. When institutions do not recognize the emotional reality of teachers, identity 'strain' becomes a chronic condition. Surprisingly, this strain was not only pedagogical—it was deeply existential since teachers felt an emotional disconnection to the values which had attracted them to the profession.

### **9.3. Resistance, Agency, and Identity Reclamation**

Although strain was evident, there was also moments of emotional affirmation and identity renewal. Through meaningful student interactions, collegial solidarity and personal reflection, many teachers found ways to reclaim agency and put to back together again their professional selves. Acts of emotional resilience are not acts of survival, but rather conscious efforts to resist dehumanizing institutional systems. Benesch (2012) encourages researchers to view emotion labor not only as regulatory but also as politically charged and potentially transformative, which this study affirms. Teachers who redefined their emotional engagement saw it as purposive resistance, reporting a greater sense of professional coherence and pride. For them, emotion labor was an identity project, a means to assert values in the face of institutional disregard.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

This study explores how English language teachers at underfunded public universities practice and apply emotional labor, and how those emotive work practices interact with the construction of their emerging

professional identities. In detailed narratives and reflective journals, it was revealed the toll that psychology takes when working in environments that do not recognize one institutionally, have heavy workloads, and little or no emotional support. At the same time, the participants demonstrated resilience, resourcefulness, and high ethical commitments towards their students and the profession. The results reiterate that teacher identity does not evolve merely from pedagogical and linguistic components; the emotive experience, particularly due to institutional pressure, also played a significant role in performing, concealing, or resisting emotions.

### **Implications of the Study**

The policy and practice in under-resourced higher education, first, make institutions recognize emotion work in academic labor and not treat it as a mere private burden of the individual lecturer. This can be interpreted in terms of mentoring for emotional well-being, or even reflective practices in teaching programs. Second, pre-service teacher education programs should help future educators understand and manage their own development of a professional identity as a process of learning how to manage emotion labor. Finally, based on this study, only from apparent overtone respect, institutional administrators and researchers must assess how the policies affect the marginalization of teachers' emotional realities, seemingly harmless in nature. Such findings have ultimate implications for not only retaining a good teacher but also classroom culture and student engagement.

### **Future Research**

Future studies should further investigate how emotion labor associates with other identity dimensions by gender, linguistic background, or contract status in higher education. Comparative studies in other regions of the Global South would indicate whether the emotional labor experienced by university teachers is common to all teachers in that region or specifically shaped by local institutional cultures. Longitudinal research, following teachers over extended academic periods, might reveal how identity develops with sustained emotive stress or support. Bringing student voices into research will help us understand how teacher emotion labor is perceived and how it impacts classroom climate and learning outcomes.

### **Data Availability**

The data that support the findings of this study consist of interview transcripts and reflective journal entries from participants and contain sensitive, personally identifiable information. Due to ethical and privacy considerations, these data are not publicly available. However, anonymized excerpts may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, provided such access does not compromise participant confidentiality.

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### **Competing Interests**

The author declares no competing interests.

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