

Exploring the Emotional Labor Strategies of Pre-service EFL Teachers During Teaching Practicum: An Ecological Perspective

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Abstract

Although research into teachers' emotional labor has gained popularity in English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teaching over the past few years, still little is known about the emotional labor strategies of pre-service EFL teachers during teaching practicum. With this gap in mind, the present study aims to investigate the emotional labor strategies that pre-service EFL teachers employ during teaching practicum and the complex factors influencing their use of emotional labor strategies from an ecological perspective. Six pre-service EFL teachers who had participated in teaching practicum were selected in this study. Drawing on data collected from reflective diaries and interviews, this qualitative study revealed that the most frequently used strategy was genuinely expressing, followed by surface acting, deep acting, and deliberative dissonance acting. Additionally, factors within the microsystem were the main factors that influenced pre-service EFL teachers' use of emotional labor strategies. Factors within the macrosystem including the educational policy and emotional rules in the context of China were the main antecedents of the strategy deliberative dissonance acting. Several changes in pre-service EFL teachers' use of emotional labor strategies throughout the teaching practicum were also discussed. This study provides practical implications for future pre-service EFL teachers, field schools, and teacher education programs.

Keywords

Teaching Practicum; Pre-service EFL Teachers; Teachers' Emotional Labor; Emotional Labor Strategies.

1. Introduction

Teaching practicum plays a pivotal role in pre-service teachers' professional development, whose importance has been widely acknowledged by teacher education programs [1, 2]. During teaching practicums, pre-service teachers develop teaching skills [3], and their teaching beliefs and teacher identity gradually take shape in the process of learning to teach [4]. However, the dual identities of being students and future teachers can lead pre-service teachers into an emotional dilemma. Thrust into the role of a teacher, they need to give lessons and manage classes to gain teaching experience and assert authority in front of students. Trapped in the role of student, they cannot conduct teaching and organize class activities at will because they have to follow the orders of their mentors at university and field schools. The idea of being a "guest" in field school makes them feel lonely and lack a sense of belonging. Meanwhile, the large gap between the academic knowledge they acquire at university and teaching practice can generate a sense of powerlessness. Thus, handling such conflicting ideologies requires pre-service teachers to be sufficiently prepared both academically and emotionally. They have to frequently regulate their emotions because they are expected to display positive emotions in front of their

students and mentors in field school. Considering these factors, it is necessary and meaningful to delve into this field and conduct a study on pre-service teachers' emotions.

Teacher emotions are at the heart of teaching [5]. A plethora of research has been brought forth since the affective turn in educational research in the 1980s [6]. With increased attention being paid to the affective dimensions of teaching and teacher professional development, one psychological concept has come to the fore and merits further investigation, which is Emotional Labor (EL). Coined by Hochschild, it refers to "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" [7]. It has been widely used in many disciplines including business studies, organizational and educational psychology [8]. Teaching, owing to its nature of caring [9], also involves lots of emotional input and output to render them appropriate to specific teaching contexts. In the process of managing their emotions, teachers usually resort to various emotional labor strategies to display the emotions in conformity with the rules of educational institutions. Accordingly, teachers are typical emotional laborers.

Compared with other disciplines' teachers' EL, English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers' EL has received much more attention, which can be accounted for by two reasons. For one thing, "language classrooms are inherently stressful environments for some people" [10]. EFL teachers are more prone to encountering emotional conflicts due to the shifting identities in the cross-cultural environment. Moreover, under the guidance of "The Activity-Based Approach to English Learning", EFL teachers are expected to be passionate about teaching. This passion is aimed at mobilizing students to participate in class activities and emotionally inspiring them, even though teachers themselves may experience a diminution of enthusiasm inside. For another thing, since the majority of EFL teachers are women, the implications of feeling rules are historically associated with women's work [11]. Therefore, more emotional support has to be invested in the teaching occupation. Considering the aforementioned reasons, the connotations of EFL teachers' EL are more diverse and their levels of EL are comparatively higher, which merits further investigation. Drawing upon an ecological perspective, this case study purports to unveil the factors influencing pre-service EFL teachers' use of emotional labor strategies to improve pre-service EFL teachers' emotional competence and provide pedagogical implications for pre-service teacher education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Teachers' Emotional Labor Strategies

The term "Emotional Labor" was coined by Hochschild, referring to "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" [7]. Although emotional labor was initially used to describe employees in the service industry, it has been argued that teaching is essentially a form of emotional labor [9, 12]. Hargreaves shifted the focus to the educational domain, interpreting teaching as an emotional practice that requires teachers to activate, express their feelings, and embed them into action [5]. It is believed that teachers' emotional labor strategies are central to teachers' emotional labor [13]. Empirical research on teachers' emotional labor strategies focuses on two aspects: dimensions of teachers' emotional labor strategies and antecedents of teachers' emotional labor strategies. Early research shed light on the dimensions of teachers' emotional labor strategies. Hochschild divided emotional labor strategies into two dimensions: surface acting and deep acting [7]. Surface acting refers to the strategy by which one expresses unfelt positive emotions through magnifying, pretending, or suppressing true emotions, emphasizing the inconsistency between one's internal feelings and emotional rules. In contrast, deep acting refers to the strategy by which one displays appropriate expressions by altering their true feelings. Ashforth and Humphrey believed that individuals can spontaneously experience and display appropriate emotions [14]. Hence, they proposed a third strategy, namely expression of naturally felt emotions. In Yin's study, Chinese

teachers' emotional labor strategies were further classified into several sub-strategies [15]. This classification includes surface acting comprising pretending and restraining, deep acting consisting of reframing, refocusing, and separating, and genuinely expressing including releasing and outpouring. It has been argued that individuals who aim to conform to the emotional rules of an organization while maintaining inner emotional neutrality tend to adopt "deliberative dissonance acting" [16]. Given the unique nature of Chinese teachers' emotional expressions, this study adopts Yin's framework of emotional labor strategies, while also incorporating deliberative dissonance acting to explore the emotional labor strategies employed by pre-service EFL teachers during teaching practicum [15].

A second growing body of research has focused on various factors at different levels that mediate teachers' use of emotional labor strategies [8, 15, 17]. Demographic variables have been identified as crucial factors influencing teachers' use of emotional labor strategies. For instance, a study by Zaretsky found that more educated teachers tended to employ genuinely expressing, while less educated teachers used surface acting and deep acting more frequently [17]. School climate has also been found to significantly influence teachers' use of emotional labor strategies. Drawing on a quantitative research method, Dewaele and Wu explored the predictors of emotional labor strategies among 594 Chinese EFL teachers. Their findings revealed that Chinese EFL teachers preferred to use genuinely expressing [8]. Moreover, the greater importance schools attached to English teaching, the more frequently teachers used genuinely expressing. In addition, culture serves as a strong predictor, as reflected in Yin's findings that Chinese teachers tended to employ the releasing strategy to show care to students while using the pretending strategy to maintain a professional distance from students [15]. This is influenced by traditional Chinese culture, which views teachers and students as members of a family and emphasizes that "to teach without severity is the teacher's laziness" (*Three Character Classic*).

In general, these two lines of research indicate that teachers' emotional labor strategies are the result of the interaction of various contextual factors. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a deeper understanding of teachers' emotional labor strategies and the factors influencing their use of emotional labor strategies.

2.2. Pre-service Teachers' Emotions

In recent years, pre-service teachers' emotions have come into focus [18, 19, 20]. Most research examines their emotional experiences and the interplay between emotions and identity. Generally, pre-service teachers tend to report positive emotions during teaching practicum [21]. They experience excitement and enthusiasm when they enter the field school. They feel joyful and relieved when they collaborate with peers on teaching tasks. They feel encouraged and satisfied after receiving positive feedback from mentors [22]. However, they inevitably encounter a range of negative emotions. They feel frustrated and disappointed when they are not understood by their students [23]. They feel anxious and powerless when they perceive their teaching as ineffective [18]. Based on a qualitative analysis of emotional diaries from 120 pre-service teachers during their teaching practicum, Ji et al. found that caring and nervousness were the most typical emotions of the pre-service teachers [24]. Their emotional trajectories were observed to be complex and dynamic. As the internship progressed, their positive emotions diminished while negative emotions increased. To navigate their negative emotions, pre-service teachers often perform emotional labor to meet the emotional demands of the field school, which in turn facilitates their reflection and professional development [25].

Numerous empirical studies have indicated that pre-service teachers' emotional experiences are inextricably linked with their identities. Chen et al. investigated the mechanisms of pre-service teachers' emotional experiences interacting with their professional identities [26]. Findings revealed that pre-service teachers' emotions could influence their professional

identities through the mediating role of self-confidence. Yuan and Lee found that a pre-service teacher's negative emotions mainly originated from his mentor and school climate, which challenged his belief in being a teacher [19]. However, the positive emotions he felt when students made progress and recognized him led him to affirm his identity as a teacher.

To date, most research on pre-service teachers' emotions has been conducted in Western contexts, while domestic research focusing on pre-service teachers' emotions is still in its infancy. Among these studies, research exploring pre-service teachers' emotional labor strategies is even scant. Accordingly, this study focuses on pre-service teachers to explore their use of emotional labor strategies during teaching practicum, with a view to enriching research on pre-service teachers' emotions.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

To address the gaps mentioned above, this study draws on an ecological perspective to investigate pre-service EFL teachers' emotional labor strategies [27]. As an important perspective in the study of teachers' emotions, the ecological perspective recognizes that teachers' emotions are the result of the transaction between individuals and the environment. The factor of time is also included, which can better reflect the complex and dynamic nature of teachers' emotional labor. Based on Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem theory [28], Cross & Hong constructed a "Person-Environmental Interaction Model" of teachers' emotions, including microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem [27]. The microsystem involves teachers' interaction with students, colleagues, and administrators in school. Given that teachers are individuals in development and can be influenced by the activities they engage in and the roles they assume [29], their personal factors including past learning experiences should also be classified into the microsystem. The mesosystem consists of the relationship between colleagues and administrators in school. The exosystem comprises factors such as school's location and climate. The macrosystem includes factors such as educational policies, curriculum reforms, and traditional culture. The chronosystem places teachers' emotions in a dynamic process because time can contribute to changes in teachers' lives, thereby influencing the relationship between teachers and the environment. Empirical studies on teachers' emotions from the ecological perspective focus on the emotions experienced by in-service teachers in their interaction with students, colleagues, and experts [30, 31], while there is still a dearth of research exploring pre-service teachers' emotions during teaching practicum. Therefore, this study adopts Cross and Hong's ecological framework to explore pre-service EFL teachers' emotional labor strategies during teaching practicum [27].

In this study, I adapt the framework to the context of teaching practicum and each system is as follows (see Fig. 1). The microsystem involves pre-service teachers' past learning experiences and their interaction with students and mentors. The mesosystem comprises the collaborative relationship between university and field school. The exosystem relates to field school's climate. The macrosystem encompasses educational policy and emotional rules. Underpinned by the ecological perspective, this case study aims to explore pre-service EFL teachers' emotional labor strategies, focusing on two research questions.

- 1) What emotional labor strategies do pre-service EFL teachers employ during teaching practicum?
- 2) What are the influencing factors of pre-service EFL teachers' use of emotional labor strategies during teaching practicum?

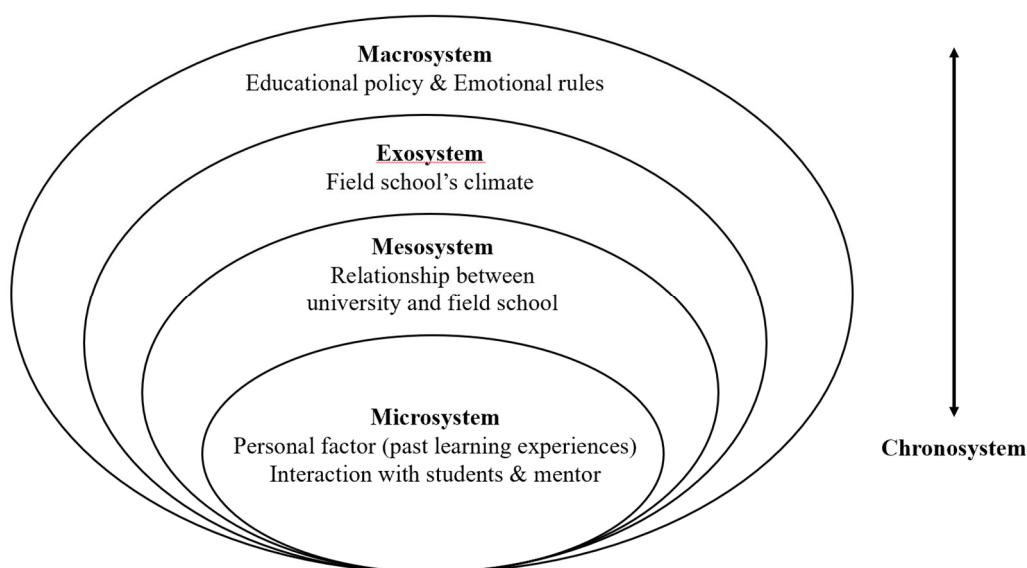


Figure 1. An Ecological Perspective on Pre-service EFL Teachers’ Emotional Labor Strategies

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The current study was conducted at a comprehensive university in eastern China. The university offers a four-year pre-service EFL teacher education program. During the first three years, the participants were exposed to a range of teacher development courses, including English Language Teaching Methodology and Curriculum and Syllabus Design. In the final year, they were required to participate in two 8-week teaching practicums. Given that the teaching practicum in the second semester wasn’t finished during the research period, this study focused exclusively on the teaching practicum in the first semester.

To select pre-service EFL teachers who could provide plenty of information about their emotional labor during the teaching practicum, I adopted purposive sampling so that the research questions could be answered more completely and relatively accurately [32]. Ultimately, I selected six pre-service EFL teachers as research participants. They were invited to the study because 1) they reported more interaction with students and mentors, which may enrich the results of the study; 2) their differences in teaching sessions and field school locations may lead to varying uses of emotional labor strategies. Table 1 presents the basic information of the six participants. Note that all names used are pseudonyms.

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants

Participant pseudonym	Gender	Teaching session	Location of field school
Nicole	Female	Primary school	Urban area
Sophia	Female	Middle school	Urban area
Josie	Female	Middle school	Rural area
James	Male	High school	Rural area
Scott	Male	Middle school	Urban area
John	Male	High school	Rural area

3.2. Data Collection

The study adopted a case study approach and collected data from multiple sources, including reflective diaries, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations. Informed of the purpose and precautions of participating in the study, the six participants were required to update five reflective diaries online every week. Overall, 240 reflective diaries were collected. As a major source of qualitative data, reflective diaries were collected to uncover the emotional labor strategies that the participants did not mention in the interviews.

During the teaching practicum, each participant took part in two semi-structured interviews (see Table 2). The first round was conducted in the middle of the teaching practicum, with each interview lasting approximately 25 minutes. The second round took place at the end of the teaching practicum, lasting about 45 minutes. Both interviews centered on the emotional labor strategies employed by the pre-service EFL teachers during the teaching practicum, and the factors that might influence their use of the strategies. All interviews were conducted in Chinese and audio-recorded with the participants' permission. They were transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. Additionally, informal conversations with the participants via WeChat were collected to ensure data triangulation.

Table 2. Interviews With the Participants

Participant pseudonym	Interview	Duration	Number of transcribed words
Nicole	Interview 1	25 minutes	7903
	Interview 2	44 minutes	11182
Sophia	Interview 1	23 minutes	5084
	Interview 2	40 minutes	8107
Josie	Interview 1	24 minutes	5771
	Interview 2	43 minutes	11702
James	Interview 1	23 minutes	4752
	Interview 2	41 minutes	9017
Scott	Interview 1	25 minutes	8239
	Interview 2	45 minutes	12842
John	Interview 1	25 minutes	8632
	Interview 2	43 minutes	10248

3.3. Data Analysis

The qualitative data extracted from the reflective diaries was used to answer the first research question. Following Yin's classifications of teachers' emotional labor strategies [15], extracts relevant to emotional labor strategies were coded according to their source and time. For instance, the reflective diary written by Josie on November 8th was designated with the code "D-Josie-1108".

In order to address the second research question, namely the complex factors influencing pre-service EFL teachers' use of emotional labor strategies, data retrieved from the interviews were coded based on Cross and Hong's "person-environment interaction" model which illustrates that teachers' emotions are shaped by the transaction between the individual and the socio-cultural environment [27]. Regarding the codes, the second round of interview conducted with John was coded as "John-I2".

Table 3. Pre-service EFL Teachers' Emotional Labor Strategies and Frequencies

Emotional labor strategies	Sub-strategies	Typical quotes	Frequency (f)
Surface acting	Pretending	I walked into the classroom with a stern face. But actually, I was extremely nervous.	26
	Restraining	This was not the first time that this had happened. I did not point it out in order to save their face.	28
	Reframing	It is normal to meet with such problems at work. Just do more and complain less.	16
Deep acting	Refocusing	But when I stood on the stage and saw the trusting eyes of the students, my anxiety instantly disappeared.	7
	Separating	I could not infect my students with sadness. After all, life is life, and work is work.	4
Genuinely expressing	Releasing	At the sports meet, I chatted with them and cheered them on.	47
	Outpouring	I was really tired of being angry, but I just couldn't help myself.	12
Deliberative dissonance acting		I saw the proud look on his face and gave him a cold glance. However, I had already changed my opinion about him.	15

4. Findings

This section presents the major findings revealed by the data. First, the study elaborates on the four categories of pre-service EFL teachers' emotional labor strategies consisting of eight sub-strategies based on their frequency of use. Then, the factors influencing their use of emotional labor strategies are discussed to answer the second research question.

4.1. Pre-service EFL Teachers' Emotional Labor Strategies

The analysis of the reflective diaries uncovered that the emotional labor strategies employed by pre-service EFL teachers were highly consistent with Yin's classification, encompassing surface acting, deep acting, and genuinely expressing [15]. Additionally, it was observed that pre-service teachers employed the deliberative dissonance acting strategy during the teaching practicum. Among these strategies, genuinely expressing was the most frequently used, followed by surface acting, deep acting, and deliberative dissonance acting. Each strategy is explained with examples below. The findings are summarized in [Table 3](#) with typical quotes and frequencies.

4.1.1. Genuinely Expressing

Data analysis revealed that genuinely expressing was the emotional labor strategy that pre-service EFL teachers used the most frequently ($f = 59$). Within this category, they adopted the releasing strategy ($f = 47$) more frequently while the outpouring strategy ($f = 12$) was used less frequently.

(1) Releasing

Releasing is a strategy through which teachers voluntarily adhere to the ethics of care to genuinely display positive emotions to students [15]. The positive interaction between pre-service teachers and students could lead to pre-service teachers using the releasing strategy, allowing them to directly express inner joy. For instance, Josie wrote in her diary:

When the children passed by me, they all warmly greeted me. I responded with a mix of shyness and joy. (D-Josie-1108)

During the teaching practicum, students conveyed their welcome and respect for Josie with friendly greetings, providing her with a sense of satisfaction and aiding in the development of her teacher identity. By positively responding to the students, Josie naturally expressed her inner happiness, which constitutes part of her use of the releasing strategy.

(2) Outpouring

Outpouring refers to a strategy whereby teachers genuinely express their negative emotions, such as anger or sternness [15]. During the teaching practicum, pre-service teachers could inevitably encounter situations that provoke anger. Apart from hiding or suppressing these emotions, they sometimes chose to frankly express them to achieve teaching objectives. James, for example, reported his use of this strategy in his diary:

Today I lost my temper three times in the classroom. I was really tired of being angry, but I just couldn't help myself. They didn't listen to me at all! (D-James-1107)

According to the collected data, outpouring tended to be the last resort for the participants when students' misbehavior exceeded their tolerance. This reluctance stemmed from their desire to avoid leaving a negative impression on their students. However, an outpouring of negative feelings could often achieve positive effects, such as effective class management. Interestingly, it was observed that the participants only adopted the outpouring strategy during interactions with students, rather than with their mentors.

4.1.2. Surface Acting

Surface acting ($f = 54$) refers to a strategy employed by teachers to express emotions they do not genuinely feel or to modify their emotional displays in accordance with the emotional rules of teaching [12]. Data analysis showed that pre-service EFL teachers adopted two specific strategies within this category: pretending ($f = 26$) and restraining ($f = 28$).

(1) Pretending

Pretending is a strategy through which teachers fake unfelt positive emotions to display the expected emotional expressions in teaching. For pre-service EFL teachers, this strategy serves as a means for them to motivate students to engage in English class activities. In Sophia's reflective diary, she provided a detailed account of her experience:

This was the first time that I gave a lesson to the students. I had thought that the videos in the PPT would interest them, but to my dismay, they seemed more engaged during the video segments while remaining silent at other times. What saddened me the most was that a girl sitting in the front row even fell asleep! After all, this was my first class. I needed to break the ice. I tried my best to keep smiling and threw out a few interesting questions to lighten the atmosphere. (D-Sophia-1103)

Sophia's account illustrates the disparity between her expectations and the reality of the classroom environment. Despite the lack of meaningful teacher-student interaction, she was reluctant to exhibit negative emotions. Consequently, she resorted to employing the pretending strategy to foster a relaxed atmosphere even if she was not genuinely happy.

(2) Restraining

Restraining refers to a strategy employed by teachers to suppress internal feelings that hinder the achievement of their teaching objectives [15]. Pre-service EFL teachers often adopt this strategy to maintain harmonious relationships with their students by suppressing their negative emotions.

During the lunch break, there was often the noise of discussion, which greatly annoyed me. But I did not point it out in order to save their face. (D-Scott-1112)

In this extract, Scott experienced frustration when students disregarded their peers' feelings and engaged in loud discussions during the lunch break. Despite feeling irritated, he opted not to confront the situation by using the restraining strategy to avoid causing embarrassment to the students.

Likewise, the participants often employed the restraining strategy when interacting with their mentors to maintain a harmonious relationship. For instance, Nicole reported her use of this strategy in her diary:

Today I arrived at school very early as Miss Wang had asked me to arrive early to catch the students copying others' homework. Upon entering the classroom, I immediately walked straight to those copying others' homework. However, I was reluctant to do so because it would make them more rebellious and even hate me. (D-Nicole-1102)

Schools are regarded as environments where unequal power relations exist [11]. Power plays a crucial role in pre-service teachers' interactions with their mentors, who hold higher status within field school. Nicole's account indicated that Nicole tended to employ the restraining strategy to suppress her internal reluctance and perform the tasks assigned by her mentor.

4.1.3. Deep Acting

Deep acting ($f = 27$) is a strategy whereby teachers manage their feelings by using cognitive techniques to exhibit the required emotional expressions in educational settings [15]. Three specific strategies were identified from the reflective diaries, namely reframing ($f = 16$), refocusing ($f = 7$), and separating ($f = 4$).

(1) Reframing

Reframing involves teachers regulating their internal emotions by altering their interpretation of situations to display the expected emotional expressions. In this approach, teachers' outward expressions are consistent with their inner feelings. Compared to the other strategies of deep acting, pre-service EFL teachers reported a higher frequency of using reframing. For instance, Sophia reflected on her experience:

Today, I came to realize that correcting dictations can be approached with despair or with a smile. Why not correct them happily and without burdening myself? In fact, correcting dictations can be quite interesting. It offers the opportunity to admire the neat handwriting of some students. Even in the role of a "correcting tool," one can still find the unique "moon" amidst a sea of dictation papers. (D-Sophia-1111)

Through the use of the reframing strategy, Sophia transformed her negative perception of correcting dictations. Instead of regarding it as a chore, she embraced it as an opportunity to learn more about her students and appreciate aspects she had previously overlooked. As a result, she significantly alleviated the sense of monotony.

(2) Refocusing

Refocusing is a strategy through which teachers divert their attention away from matters that generate negative feelings and focus more on teaching. In the reflective diaries, several participants mentioned feeling nervous before giving lessons to students, but the pressure and

anxiety gradually disappeared as the lesson progressed. For example, Scott expressed his feelings:

I still felt a little nervous as the lesson approached because I was worried about time allocation. But once the lesson started, the nervousness disappeared since I focused on my teaching language and the students' responses. (D-Scott-1103)

In this extract, Scott felt nervous before giving a lesson to students. However, upon facing the students, he adopted the refocusing strategy, which helped him shift his attention from negative feelings to teacher-student interaction.

(3) Separating

Separating is a strategy whereby teachers separate their "work emotions" from their "personal emotions" [15]. Pre-service EFL teachers attempted to use this strategy during the teaching practicum by considering students' feelings. As Josie wrote in her diary:

After a squabble with my mother on the phone, I was in a bad mood. But I realized that I could not infect my students with my sadness. After all, life is life, and work is work. They should not be conflated. I left my worries behind and walked into the classroom with a smile. (D-Josie-1108)

In order to prevent her negative emotions from affecting her students, Josie actively employed the separating strategy. Through the use of this strategy, she successfully distinguished between her personal troubles and her professional responsibilities, ensuring a positive atmosphere in the classroom.

4.1.4. Deliberative Dissonance Acting

Deliberative dissonance acting ($f = 15$) is a strategy through which emotional laborers consciously allow external emotional expressions to be independent of their internal feelings [16]. The findings indicated that it was the least used emotional labor strategy among the participants. During the teaching practicum, two participants employed this strategy, as they reported in their diaries:

I usually looked stern when managing the class to project a serious image. (D-John-1028)

I often carried out class activities and tried to make friends with students. But during teaching sessions and exams, I usually pretend to be serious to assert my authority in front of them. (D-James-1121)

As pre-service teachers were newcomers to schools, they found it necessary to adopt a stern demeanor in certain educational contexts to establish authority in the classroom while internally not taking it seriously. Similar to the outpouring strategy, it was found that pre-service EFL teachers used deliberative dissonance acting the least frequently and its use only existed in their interactions with students.

4.2. Influencing Factors of Pre-service EFL Teachers' Use of Emotional Labor Strategies

4.2.1. Factors Within the Microsystem

The microsystem involves the activities, roles, and relationships that teachers engage in [29]. For pre-service EFL teachers in this study, the microsystem encompasses their past learning experiences and interaction with students and mentors.

(1) Past learning experiences

Pre-service teachers' experiences as students significantly influence their perceptions and expectations of the teaching profession. For the six participants in the study, reframing emerged as the most frequently used emotional labor strategy, which was influenced by their

past learning experiences. For instance, John recounted an incident where a student contradicted the teacher in public:

One day, a student contradicted the teacher in public. In the beginning, I found his behavior impolite and felt angry. However, upon reflection, I realized that his character resembled mine when I was in high school. This realization tempered my anger, and I wanted to help him. I talked about my past experiences with him and said something tailored to his traits. To my surprise, he suddenly cried, his tears falling like beans. From then on, he became more actively engaged in English classes, particularly in my class. (John-I2)

Despite John's initial anger towards the student's behavior, he employed the reframing strategy by drawing on his past experiences in high school to manage his emotions. He intended to assist the student in changing his attitude towards learning. This effort ultimately resulted in the student's great improvement in the following days.

(2) Interaction with students and mentors

In the process of interacting with students, pre-service EFL teachers employed various emotional labor strategies under different circumstances, among which genuinely expressing was the strategy they employed the most. For example, when students misbehaved during activities, James tended to use outpouring to directly express his anger:

When we were rehearsing for the show, there were always some students disrupting the order. One boy even deliberately acted against me. Then I got very angry and pounded furiously on the desk. (James-I1)

In contrast, influenced by students' active participation in class, pre-service teachers were more inclined to adopt the releasing strategy and directly express their positive emotions. As Scott mentioned in the interview:

The students were really willing to listen to me. When I asked, "Anyone volunteers?" You know what? Almost all the children raised their hands. I thought the atmosphere was great, and I became more and more energetic. (Scott-I2)

It can be observed that pre-service EFL teachers usually employed genuinely expressing to display their emotions spontaneously. When students misbehaved in class, they would resort to the outpouring strategy to directly express their anger and frustration. However, when students actively engaged in class activities, they would employ the releasing strategy to express enthusiasm and passion spontaneously.

Apart from students, mentors are the individuals with whom pre-service EFL teachers spend a significant amount of time in field school. Following interviews with the six participants, the study identified surface acting as the emotional labor strategy frequently employed by pre-service teachers. Considering that they were instructed to adhere to their mentors' arrangements before entering the field school, they were more likely to pretend to be positive even though they did not agree with their mentors internally.

One day I saw a girl who didn't go to the PE class and stayed in the classroom. I walked inside and talked with her. But when my mentor saw this, she told me not to have more interaction with students. I was shocked and a little depressed. But I just nodded with a smile and concealed my sadness. (Nicole-I1)

Although Nicole felt confused and depressed when her mentor limited her interaction with students, she employed surface acting to restrain her negative emotions and pretended to be willing to comply with her mentor's command.

4.2.2. Factors Within the Mesosystem

The mesosystem involves transactions and connections among the microsystem [27]. Considering the context of teaching practicum, the mesosystem in the current study primarily involves the collaborative relationship between the university and the field school.

Pre-service teachers play a crucial role in maintaining a positive relationship between the university and the field school. However, in this study, such invisible pressure forced the participants to resort to the restraining strategy when confronted with unreasonable demands from the field school. They had to suppress their reluctance to finish the tasks and obtain approval from the field school to ensure continued cooperation with the university. James, in an interview, admitted:

There is a contractual agreement between my university and the field school. Many times, I could not directly express my discontent because I had to consider my university. If the administrators of the field school were unwilling to give us good remarks, they would refuse to accept pre-service teachers from my university next year. Therefore, I had to suppress my discontent even if I was unfairly treated. (James-I2)

It can be seen from James' words that pre-service teachers shoulder the responsibility of maintaining good cooperation between the university and the field school. This obligation necessitates the adoption of a restraining strategy to conceal negative feelings when faced with unfair treatment in the field school.

4.2.3. Factors Within the Exosystem

The exosystem refers to the larger social system in which teachers are not directly involved, yet events within the system have an impact on the teacher's immediate environment [27]. For pre-service EFL teachers in the study, the exosystem can be conceptualized as field school's climate.

The overall atmosphere in the school is open and relaxed, which encourages me to be more open to my students. Every time I felt angry at students' misbehavior, I always tried to put myself in the students' shoes. I thought they were just kids and that's no big deal. Then I wouldn't be angry anymore. (Scott-I2)

In Scott's field school, teachers were open-minded and often treated students with love and care. Consequently, under the influence of the school's climate, Scott found himself more inclined to adopt deep acting, interpreting students' misbehavior as normal and thus regulating his negative emotions effectively

4.2.4. Factors Within the Macrosystem

(1) Educational policy

Educational policy is considered to be the main factor influencing teachers' use of emotional labor strategies [31]. As one of the most influential policies in China, *Gaokao* compels high school teachers to reduce teacher-student interaction and allocate significant time to exercises. When listening to the English lessons in high school, John usually felt disappointed due to the stark disparity between his expectations and the reality of the classroom. However, he had to accept the reality and adopt the restraining strategy to avoid his negative feelings affecting his mentor and students. In the second-round interview, John articulated his frustrations:

It's not merely an issue confined to this particular high school but a problem with the entire educational system! All English lessons were oriented to *Gaokao* preparation. Teachers had to focus on exercise drills to enhance efficiency, rendering students no opportunity to express their ideas. I felt I was not very happy in this school, but I had no choice but to accept it. (John-I2)

It can be seen from the interview that John felt frustrated and helpless when he realized his inability to change the educational policy and the current situation. Nevertheless, he recognized the necessity of employing the restraining strategy to navigate through his teaching practicum.

(2) Emotional rules

Emotional rules reflect the cultural expectations, social standards, or professional norms that direct teachers' emotional labor, either in the form of internalized self-regulation or external control [12]. The rules prescribe that teachers should love and care for students while maintaining a professional distance from them [33]. Although pre-service EFL teachers had not yet become formal teachers, they were willing to obey the emotional rule of caring for students by employing the separating strategy, as expressed by John in the interview:

If I met with something unhappy in my life, I would separate it from my students. When I communicated with them, I tried to be in a good mood and not to bring negative emotions to them. (John-I1)

John's reluctance to exhibit negative emotions in front of students stemmed from his belief that such expressions are harmful to their growth. Consequently, he actively employed the separating strategy to prevent his personal struggles from affecting his students.

Moreover, Chinese teachers are always expected to keep a professional distance from their students [15]. This rule was deeply ingrained in the minds of pre-service EFL teachers and served as a primary motivator for their use of deliberative dissonance acting. For instance, Sophia articulated her perspective during the interview:

I always kept a distance from my students by putting on a poker face because, in my opinion, teachers and students should not become friends. A teacher's role is to impart knowledge and educate students, rather than cultivating friendships with students. (Sophia-I1)

These extracts illustrate how pre-service EFL teachers' use of emotional labor strategies was influenced by implicit emotional rules, which, in turn, were shaped by traditional culture. On the one hand, there was an expectation for them to express care and love towards students, necessitating their use of the releasing strategy. On the other hand, the rule of maintaining a professional distance from students compelled them to adopt deliberative dissonance acting.

4.2.5. Chronosystem

The chronosystem emphasizes the factor of time, which often brings changes to teachers' life experiences [27]. For the six pre-service teachers in this study, time plays an important role in the change of their emotional labor strategies during teaching practicum, which can be discovered from several participants' narration.

I worried that my excessive emotional expressions would leave a bad impression on my mentor. I was even afraid to lose my temper when students misbehaved... When I gave the first class to students, a student gave me an answer that I hadn't thought about, which caught me off guard. I just pretended to be calm and invited another student to answer the question. (John-I1)

I could talk to my colleagues freely in the office about something other than teaching. I was completely familiar with the students and felt like "a fish in the water" ... I still felt nervous when students failed to give the expected answer. However, I would adjust my mindset and continue the class with enthusiasm because I knew that sometimes students couldn't understand the question. I should not wait for the answer and should instead immediately move on to the next part. (John-I2)

From John's case, it is evident that he initially tended to adopt surface acting due to his apprehension about leaving a negative impression on his mentor and students in the field

school. He expected that the real class would be the same as his teaching design. However, when students did not perform as anticipated, he experienced nervousness and resorted to the pretending strategy to conceal his inner turmoil. Over time, he became more comfortable conversing freely with colleagues and mentor, suggesting a more frequent use of genuinely expressing. Furthermore, he recognized the disparities between a real class and an ideal one. Thus, when students failed to give the expected answer, he adopted the reframing strategy to adjust his nervousness and continued the class with renewed enthusiasm.

Slightly different from John, James tended to employ deliberative dissonance acting at the beginning. Later, he tended to employ genuinely expressing. The obvious change could be observed in the two rounds of interviews.

When interacting with my students, I always pretended to be serious to deter them. One day, a boy argued with his deskmate in class. I knew it was no big deal, but I still scolded them and made it an example to educate all the students. (James-I1)

After spending a lot of time together, I tended to show my care for students even though I was still strict with them. Last time when our class won the singing competition, I bought milk tea for all the students. Some of them even said that I was better than their class teacher. (James-I2)

James initially asserted authority in front of his students by frequently adopting deliberate dissonance acting to display radical emotions even if he was not angry at all. With the passage of time, he showed his different side to students by adopting genuinely expressing, which made his students both respect and love him.

5. Discussion

The study revealed that pre-service EFL teachers employed various strategies to regulate their emotions during teaching practicum. Among these strategies, genuinely expressing was the most frequently used, followed by surface acting, deep acting, and deliberative dissonance acting. Previous studies have shown that surface acting is the least often used by teachers, which is positively correlated with depersonalization, burnout, and lower job satisfaction [34, 35, 36]. However, this study indicated that pre-service EFL teachers frequently adopted surface acting. This might be associated with their special identity. For one thing, they aimed to develop close relationships with students while maintaining dignity in front of them. For another thing, not being the actual teachers in the field schools allowed them to resort to surface acting to conceal their sense of inferiority in interactions with mentors.

Interestingly, pre-service EFL teachers were selective in their use of emotional labor strategies when interacting with different people in field school. They were more willing to show positive emotions to maintain harmonious relationships with their mentors, who enjoy higher status in field school. Thus, surface acting, deep acting, and the releasing strategy of genuinely expressing, which are used to display positive emotions, were preferred in their interaction with mentors. However, the outpouring strategy and deliberative dissonance acting, which are used to display negative emotions, were only found to be adopted in their interaction with students. This finding further validates that teachers' emotional labor is the corollary to the unequal power relations in schools [37]. Unlike in-service teachers who regard emotional labor strategies as tools to challenge institutional power [38], pre-service teachers only employed emotional labor strategies to regulate their emotions appropriately for teaching and to maintain harmonious relationships. Overall, pre-service teachers' use of emotional labor strategies can be viewed as their agency in adapting to a new environment [39, 40].

In the current study, pre-service EFL teachers reported the most use of emotional labor strategies in the microsystem, followed by the macrosystem, mesosystem, and exosystem.

Their use of emotional labor strategies demonstrated dynamic trajectories in the chronosystem. Consistent with some research findings, pre-service EFL teachers experienced the most emotions in the microsystem, compelling them to employ various emotional labor strategies [41, 27]. For instance, their past learning experiences resulted in more use of reframing and releasing. Interaction with students constituted the largest proportion of the microsystem, in which they preferred to employ genuinely expressing to express their true feelings.

Furthermore, influenced by an enlightened and relaxed school climate, pre-service EFL teachers tended to adopt deep acting to adjust their negative emotions with the aim of facilitating students' development. This finding aligns with previous studies conducted by Yao et al. that school climate is negatively correlated with surface acting but positively correlated with deep acting [42]. Dewaele and Wu also mentioned that the greater importance school attached to English teaching, the more frequently teachers adopted genuinely expressing [8]. However, institutional pressure brought about by the collaborative relationship between the university and the field school requires pre-service teachers to resort to surface acting to display positive emotions and feigning enthusiasm to complete the tasks assigned by the field school. This is consistent with De Costa et al.'s finding that institutional power is an important antecedent of teachers' emotional labor [43].

Moreover, factors within the macrosystem, such as the impact of *Gaokao* on teaching and students' development rendered pre-service teachers' empathy for students. However, their inability to change the reality made them feel helpless and frustrated. In order to complete the teaching practicum without allowing their negative emotions to affect students, they found it necessary to resort to the restraining strategy. Furthermore, pre-service EFL teachers' use of emotional labor strategies was influenced by implicit emotional rules, which are dominated by traditional Chinese culture. On the one hand, teachers and students in China are viewed as members of an extended family [12], which requires teachers to show care and love towards students. On the other hand, "to teach without severity is the teacher's laziness" is emphasized in traditional Chinese culture, which requires teachers to maintain a professional distance from students. Under the influence of these emotional rules, pre-service EFL teachers employed both releasing and deliberative dissonance acting. Interestingly, their use of emotional labor strategies was directly influenced by their interactions with students and mentors, who adhered to the regulations of field school. The climate of field school was, in turn, influenced by educational policies in the macrosystem. This finding further validates Cross and Hong's assertion that "the systems are nested, so events or structures that exist within one system do influence what happens in another" [27].

As an important mediator, time drove changes in pre-service EFL teachers' use of emotional labor strategies during the teaching practicum. When they arrived at the field school as "guests", they suppressed or disguised their emotions to leave a favorable impression on their mentors. In order to establish authority in front of students, they initially adopted deliberative dissonance acting with the aim of deterring students and facilitating class management. As the teaching practicum progressed, they gradually acclimated to the environment and shed their "masks," revealing their true emotions through employing genuinely expressing more frequently. This pattern aligns with Bloomfield's research, which underscores that the process of learning and teaching for pre-service teachers is in a constant state of flux, constituting an integral aspect of teacher professional development [44].

6. Conclusion

The current study aims to investigate the emotional labor strategies employed by pre-service EFL teachers during teaching practicum. In answering the first research question, pre-service EFL teachers employed genuinely expressing most frequently, followed by surface acting, deep

acting, and deliberative dissonance acting. Regarding the second research question, their use of emotional labor strategies was influenced by factors within the ecological framework. Specifically, factors within the microsystem included personal factors such as past learning experiences, and interactions with students and mentors. The collaborative relationship between university and field school was identified as a key factor within the mesosystem. Field school's climate constituted a factor within the exosystem. Factors within the macrosystem included educational policy and emotional rules. Additionally, pre-service EFL teachers' use of emotional labor strategies demonstrated dynamic trajectories with the deepening of the teaching practicum.

The current study is not without limitations. To begin with, the study only focused on a small sample of six pre-service EFL teachers, which may not be applicable to all pre-service teachers. Therefore, the findings need to be interpreted with caution. Future studies can expand the sample size and adopt a mixed-methods approach to make findings more comprehensive. Secondly, although the study observed changes in pre-service EFL teachers' use of emotional labor strategies during the teaching practicum in one semester, a longer period of study such as teaching practicums in two semesters is expected to discover more complex factors influencing their use of emotional labor strategies.

Nevertheless, the findings have significant practical implications for pre-service EFL teachers, field schools, and teacher educators. First, it is suggested that pre-service EFL teachers take the initiative to learn theories related to teachers' emotions and actively apply them to adjust their teaching style in practice, thereby promoting their professional development. Secondly, field school administrators should consider appointing experienced educators as mentors to provide comprehensive guidance and emotional support to pre-service teachers. Meanwhile, cultivating a nurturing and supportive environment within field schools is essential to alleviate stress and enrich the teaching practicum experience for pre-service teachers. Thirdly, courses related to teachers' emotions should be incorporated into the curriculum system for pre-service teachers. Furthermore, an online collaborative community should be established during teaching practicum so that pre-service teachers can confront their emotions and continuously adjust their use of emotional labor strategies with the support of peers and mentors at universities and field schools, which facilitate their transition from pre-service teachers to formal teachers.

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