

EMOTIONAL LABOR AMONG NOVICE UNIVERSITY EFL LECTURERS IN HANOI: CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES

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| ARTICLE INFO | | ABSTRACT |
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| Received: | 14/4/2025 | This study explores the emotional labor experienced by novice English as a foreign language lecturers in Vietnamese universities. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six early-career lecturers, along with reflective journal entries from three participants. Thematic analysis identified four key themes: emotional triggers in teaching, emotion regulation and institutional expectations, coping strategies and support systems, and professional identity development. Findings reveal that emotional labor is a core component of novice teaching, shaped by student behavior, institutional culture, and internalized professional norms. Participants used a range of strategies to manage emotional strain, from suppressing emotions to engaging in peer dialogue and reflection. The study highlights the importance of emotional competence in teacher development and calls for greater institutional support to help lecturers navigate emotional challenges effectively. |
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| Emotional labor | | |
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LAO ĐỘNG CẢM XÚC CỦA GIẢNG VIÊN TIẾNG ANH MỚI VÀO NGHỀ TẠI CÁC TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC Ở HÀ NỘI: THÁCH THỨC VÀ CÁCH ỨNG PHÓ

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| THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO | | TÓM TẮT |
|---------------------------|------------------|---|
| Ngày nhận bài: | 14/4/2025 | Nghiên cứu này khám phá lao động cảm xúc của các giảng viên tiếng Anh mới tại các trường đại học ở Việt Nam. Phương pháp nghiên cứu định tính được sử dụng thông qua phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc với sáu giảng viên mới vào nghề, kết hợp với các nhật ký phản tư hàng ngày từ ba người tham gia. Phân tích chủ đề đã xác định bốn nhóm chủ đề chính: các tác nhân gây cảm xúc trong giảng dạy, điều chỉnh cảm xúc và kỳ vọng từ tổ chức, chiến lược ứng phó và hệ thống hỗ trợ, và phát triển bản sắc nghề nghiệp. Kết quả cho thấy lao động cảm xúc là một phần thiết yếu trong giảng dạy, bị chi phối bởi hành vi của sinh viên, văn hóa tổ chức và các chuẩn mực nghề nghiệp nội tại. Người tham gia đã sử dụng nhiều chiến lược để kiểm soát cảm xúc như kiềm chế, chia sẻ với đồng nghiệp và phản tư cá nhân. Nghiên cứu nhấn mạnh tầm quan trọng của năng lực cảm xúc trong quá trình phát triển nghề nghiệp và đề xuất sự hỗ trợ thiết thực hơn từ phía tổ chức nhằm giúp giảng viên vượt qua những thách thức cảm xúc hiệu quả hơn. |
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1. Introduction

The emotional dimension of teaching has garnered increasing attention in both international and Vietnamese educational research. Novice university lecturers, particularly those teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), frequently encounter emotional challenges that affect their classroom management, instructional performance, and evolving professional identity.

A foundational concept for understanding these challenges is *emotional labor*, introduced by Hochschild [1], which refers to the regulation of one's emotions to meet workplace expectations particularly in professions requiring ongoing interpersonal interaction. Hochschild [1] identifies two main forms: *surface acting*, where individuals display emotions, they do not truly feel, and *deep acting*, where individuals attempt to align their internal states with expected emotional displays. Deep acting is generally more sustainable, as it fosters authenticity and reduces emotional dissonance. Teachers employ a variety of techniques to manage emotional labor, including cognitive strategies (e.g., reappraising a stressful event), physical regulation (e.g., deep breathing), and expressive behaviors (e.g., smiling to build rapport) [1].

Complementing this framework, *Coping Theory* by Lazarus and Folkman [2] offers a dynamic perspective on how individuals respond to emotionally demanding situations. The model consists of three components: primary appraisal (evaluating whether a situation poses a threat), secondary appraisal (assessing resources for coping), and the application of coping strategies. These strategies include *problem-focused coping*, which targets the stressor itself, and *emotion-focused coping*, which seeks to regulate emotional responses [2]. Together, emotional labor and coping theory offer a holistic lens to analyze how teachers manage affective demands in professional settings.

Empirical studies reinforce the centrality of emotion regulation in education. Ghanizadeh and Royaei [3] found that emotional labor strategies significantly relate to teacher burnout. Hu [4] highlighted the role of emotion regulation and self-compassion in building teacher resilience. In a recent study, Zhang and Zhang [5] demonstrated how prolonged emotional labor without adequate support could lead to burnout and even resignation among novice EFL teachers. Their findings underscore the importance of addressing emotional well-being early in a teacher's career.

In Vietnam, recent studies have begun to address these concerns. Ngo and Le [6] reported that novice teachers often experience emotional distress when faced with student disengagement and disrespect. Nguyen and Tran [7] found that student performance outcomes directly affect teacher morale and self-efficacy. Nguyen and Ngo [8] identified emotional tensions among novice lecturers attempting to reconcile institutional norms with their own emotional authenticity, while Hoang and Nguyen [9] emphasized that emotions are central to the development of teacher identity in the Vietnamese context.

Despite these contributions, few studies have examined how novice university EFL lecturers in Vietnam experience emotional labor in real time and how these experiences shape their identities and pedagogical choices. This study addresses that gap by exploring the emotional experiences, regulation strategies, and identity development of early-career EFL lecturers working in Hanoi-based institutions.

To investigate these questions, the study adopts a qualitative approach, drawing on semi-structured interviews and reflective journals from six novice lecturers. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify emotional triggers, coping mechanisms, and the relationship between emotional labor and identity formation.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 describes the research methodology, including participant demographics, data collection tools, and analytical procedures. Section 3 presents the results and interprets them through thematic discussion, supported by participant quotes and a coding framework. Section 4 concludes the study with a summary of key findings and offers implications for EFL teacher training and institutional support.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design to understand the emotional labor of novice university EFL lecturers in Hanoi. This approach was selected for its strength in capturing rich, subjective, and context-specific insights into how lecturers interpret, manage, and reflect on emotional experiences in their early teaching careers. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate given the complex and often invisible nature of emotional labor, which is best understood through the lived experiences of those directly involved. The study is exploratory in nature due to the limited existing research on emotional labor within the Vietnamese higher education context.

2.1. Research participants

The study employed purposive sampling to recruit six novice EFL lecturers (with less than three years of teaching experience) from public and private universities in Hanoi. The participant group included four females and two males, with an average age of 29 and an average of two years of teaching experience. Of the six, four were teaching at state universities, while two were employed at private institutions. Participants represented a range of teaching contexts, including General English, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and English Education programs. One pilot interview was conducted before the main data collection to refine the interview guide and ensure the clarity of questions.

2.2. Data collection instruments

Two primary data sources were used:

Semi-structured interviews, lasting 20–30 minutes, conducted in English or Vietnamese depending on participant preference. These interviews explored emotional triggers, coping mechanisms, and professional identity development. The guide was informed by prior research [4], [9] and included open-ended questions grouped into six thematic areas.

Reflective journals, submitted by three lecturers, documented daily emotional incidents in the classroom. These journals offered immediate, in-situ emotional reflections to triangulate the interview findings. All interviews were audio- or video-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Reflective journals were translated into English where necessary to support consistent coding.

2.3. Data analysis

All interview recordings were transcribed using TurboScribe.ai, an AI-powered transcription tool, and then manually checked for accuracy. Transcriptions were generated in Vietnamese or English depending on the original interview language. This combination of automatic transcription and manual verification ensured both efficiency and reliability.

Data were analyzed using Taguette, an open-source qualitative analysis software. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's six-step approach [10]: (1) data familiarization, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) reporting. All coding was done in both English and Vietnamese to maintain fidelity to participants' voices.

Codes were assigned to meaningful segments of text and gradually grouped into larger themes, such as *emotional triggers*, *emotion regulation*, *coping strategies*, and *identity development*. Memos and keyword filters in Taguette were used to support iterative refinement and thematic saturation. The reflective journals were used to triangulate and enrich these themes, offering additional emotional depth and temporal immediacy.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Emotional triggers in the classroom

The most commonly cited emotional triggers were student-related behaviors, such as inattentiveness, mobile phone use, tardiness, and failure to complete assignments. Participants

described experiencing frustration, discouragement, and self-doubt when students appeared disengaged. For example, Teacher 6 described: *“Despite repeated requests to stop talking, several students continued to ignore me... I ended up raising my voice, which made me feel guilty afterward.”*

This resonates with Ngo and Le [6], who found that student misbehavior and a lack of accountability frequently cause emotional strain among Vietnamese EFL teachers. However, while their study focused on negative feelings, the present study also reveals how internalized guilt and self-blame emerge emotions less emphasized in earlier research.

Reflective journals provided unique insights into participants' raw, unfiltered emotions. Three participants submitted reflective journals that provided rich, real-time accounts of emotional labor. These documents captured frustration with late assignments, feelings of helplessness in chaotic classrooms, and moments of self-doubt. Unlike interviews, which rely on memory and retrospective sense-making, journals revealed immediate affective responses. These raw reflections helped validate and deepen themes identified in interviews, particularly around emotional regulation and identity growth. Methodologically, the inclusion of reflective journals contributes a valuable layer of temporal authenticity, capturing emotion as it unfolds rather than as it is recalled.

Together, these findings provide a comprehensive understanding of emotional labor among novice university EFL lecturers in Vietnam. They reveal how emotional labor is not only a source of stress but also a foundation for resilience, growth, and pedagogical innovation. Teacher 6 wrote: *“The noise in class today was unbearable. I felt invisible.”* Teacher 5 wrote: *“A student kept interrupting me with unrelated comments it really tested my patience.”* Meanwhile, Teacher 6 reflected: *“I wasn't angry, but I felt like nothing I did was working. Maybe this is a turning point.”*

Moreover, some participants noted that emotional triggers were contextual, depending on class size, student major, and perceived motivation. ESP classes were viewed as less emotionally taxing than General English classes a nuance not fully explored in Nguyen and Tran's study [7], which focused more broadly on outcome-based stress.

3.2. Emotion regulation and professional expectations

Most lecturers shared that they often suppressed their emotions and maintained a calm appearance while teaching. As Teacher 2 stated: *“Even when I'm tired or upset, I still have to smile and stay calm. That's what a professional does.”*

This supports Hochschild's theory of surface acting [1] and aligns with Hu's [4] findings that emotion regulation is a key predictor of resilience. Interestingly, Teacher 5 reflected: *“At first, I faked being confident. But eventually, pretending became practicing. I started to believe in myself more.”*

This reveals an important transition from surface to deep acting, where emotional displays gradually align with internal states. This finding extends Ghanizadeh and Royaei's study [3], which focused on emotion regulation as a burnout buffer, by showing how emotional habits evolve and may strengthen teacher identity.

These reflections not only validated themes found in interviews but added nuance. Journals revealed how emotions fluctuated throughout the week and how teachers self-regulated between classes. Teacher 5's entries showed a progression from frustration to acceptance: *“Day 1: Angry. Day 3: Tired. Day 5: I tried a new approach it worked better.”*

Gendered expectations were also evident, particularly for female lecturers who felt pressure to appear both gentle and authoritative. This confirms Nguyen and Ngo's [8] findings on emotional identity tension, but the current study adds a gendered dimension underrepresented in prior Vietnamese contexts.

3.3. Coping strategies and informal support systems

To cope with emotional stress, participants employed a range of self-developed strategies. These included deep breathing, informal debriefing with colleagues, journaling, and meditation.

Teacher 4 shared: *“Writing down how I feel after class helps me clear my head. It stops me from carrying that stress into the next day.”*

This complements Hu’s [4] findings on self-compassion and resilience, who emphasized institutional support, by illustrating how novice teachers often compensate for structural gaps through personal initiative.

Peer support also played a critical role. Teacher 2 noted: *“Sometimes, just knowing a colleague has gone through the same things helps a lot.”*

However, the lack of formal institutional mechanisms for emotional support was widely acknowledged. Several lecturers expressed a desire for structured workshops or mentoring systems to address this gap.

Additionally, emotional boundaries were crucial. Most participants mentioned the importance of not bringing work stress into their personal lives. Teacher 5 stated: *“I try not to talk about my teaching frustrations at home. That space is for recovery.”*

These strategies demonstrate emotional resilience but also highlight the burdens carried silently by early-career educators.

3.4. Identity development through emotion

Emotional labor was seen not only as a burden but also as a vehicle for professional growth. Participants described how moments of vulnerability, frustration, and reflection reshaped their views on what it means to be a teacher. Teacher 1 said: *“There were times I felt I wasn’t cut out for this job. But over time, those experiences helped me find my own way of teaching.”*

This finding reinforces Hoang and Nguyen’s study [9] on teacher identity as fluid and emotion-informed.

This process of emotional sense-making supported identity construction. Through emotional struggles, lecturers discovered the values, boundaries, and beliefs that would form the core of their professional selves. Teacher 3 noted: *“My identity as a teacher isn’t fixed. It changes every semester, sometimes every week, based on what I learn emotionally.”*

The journals also documented emotional growth. Teachers increasingly used emotionally intelligent language, identifying triggers and naming strategies. This suggests that the act of reflection itself contributes to emotional development, and points to journaling as a pedagogical and emotional tool worth integrating into teacher education.

While participants in this study viewed emotional labor as a pathway to professional growth, the long-term effects of unaddressed emotional strain remain a concern. Zhang et al. [5] found that for some early-career EFL teachers, sustained emotional dissonance and lack of institutional support led to eventual resignation from the profession. Although no participants in this study indicated an intention to leave, several expressed recurring doubts about their teaching capacity, especially when emotional challenges accumulated over time. This suggests that without proper support, emotional labor may evolve from a developmental force into a destabilizing one.

Table 1. Overview of emergent themes, initial codes, illustrative quotes, and participants

| Theme | Initial Codes | Illustrative Quotes | Participants |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|--------------|
| Emotional Triggers in the Classroom | Student misbehavior, disengagement, disrespect, and poor performance | <i>“They said the activity was just a formality... that really hurt my motivation.”</i> | T1, T2, T6 |
| Emotion Regulation and Expectations | Surface acting, emotional suppression, institutional norms, and gender expectations | <i>“Even when I’m tired, I still have to smile. That’s what a professional does.”</i> | T2, T3, T5 |
| Coping Strategies and Support Systems | Journaling, meditation, peer discussion, and emotional boundaries | <i>“Writing down how I feel after class helps me clear my head.”</i> | T2, T4, T5 |
| Identity Development Through Emotion | Self-reflection, professional growth, role adaptation, and confidence development | <i>“Those experiences helped me find my own way of teaching.”</i> | T1, T3, T6 |

To ensure transparency in the analysis process, Table 1 summarizes the four dominant themes, initial codes, representative quotes, and associated participants.

Data from semi-structured interviews and reflective journals of six novice EFL lecturers in Hanoi revealed four major themes, reflecting both the emotional intensity of early-career teaching and the strategies lecturers develop to manage and grow through those emotions. The findings demonstrate that emotional labor is not merely a challenge to be endured but also a source of professional insight, identity formation, and pedagogical transformation.

4. Conclusion

This study explored the emotional labor of novice EFL lecturers in Vietnamese universities through semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. The findings illustrate how emotional experiences shape daily teaching practices and contribute to the development of professional identity.

Four key themes emerged: emotional triggers in the classroom, emotion regulation and professional expectations, coping strategies and support systems, and identity development through emotion. These results underscore that emotional labor is a central and often invisible component of early-career teaching, influenced by student behavior, institutional culture, and implicit expectations.

Rather than being passive recipients of emotional strain, participants displayed active emotional agency. They developed informal yet resourceful coping strategies - including journaling, meditation, peer support, and emotional boundary-setting - that contributed to their sense of resilience. Many viewed emotion not merely as a challenge, but as a formative element of their teaching identity.

This study contributes to the literature by offering a context-specific understanding of emotional labor in Vietnamese higher education and by highlighting the value of reflective journals as a real-time data source. Importantly, while the participants demonstrated adaptive strategies, the risks associated with prolonged emotional dissonance remain. As shown by Zhang et al. [5], emotional labor, when left unacknowledged or unsupported, can lead to burnout and even resignation among early-career teachers.

These findings reinforce the need for proactive institutional support, including structured mentoring, emotional resilience training, and open dialogue on teacher well-being. By embedding emotional competence into teacher education and workplace development, universities can help ensure that emotional labor becomes not a burden, but a foundation for sustainable professional growth.

Further research could take several directions. One line of inquiry is to investigate how emotional labor varies across different teaching levels or institutional types. Another important area is to explore the long-term emotional trajectories of novice lecturers through longitudinal studies. In addition, future studies could examine how digital tools such as AI and learning management systems shape and mediate emotional experiences in the EFL classroom.

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APPENDICES

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. Warm-Up & Background
 - 1.1 Can you briefly introduce yourself and your current teaching context (e.g., years of experience, subjects taught, type of institution)?
 - 1.2 What motivated you to become a university EFL lecturer?
2. Emotional Triggers in Daily Teaching
 - 2.1 Can you describe a recent moment in class when you felt a strong emotion (either positive or negative)?
 - 2.2 What situations typically trigger stress or emotional discomfort in your classroom? (E.g., disengaged students, poor performance, discipline issues)
 - 2.3 How do student outcomes (e.g., success or failure) affect your emotions as a teacher?
3. Emotion Regulation and Institutional Expectations
 - 3.1 Do you feel the need to hide or fake emotions (like pretending to be cheerful or calm)? In what kind of situations?
 - 3.2 Are there any unspoken rules about how lecturers should "act" emotionally in your workplace?
 - 3.3 How do you balance your true feelings with expectations from your institution or students?
4. Coping Strategies and Support Systems
 - 4.1 What do you do when you feel emotionally drained or overwhelmed by your teaching responsibilities?
 - 4.2 Have you developed any personal or professional strategies to cope with emotional challenges?
 - 4.3 Who or what helps you stay emotionally resilient? (e.g., colleagues, family, institutional support, self-reflection)
 - 4.4 Have you ever considered leaving the profession due to emotional strain?
5. Identity and Professional Growth
 - 5.1 How have your emotional experiences shaped your teaching style or sense of who you are as a teacher?
 - 5.2 What internal or external factors have influenced your emotional journey in teaching?
 - 5.3 What advice would you offer to new lecturers who are just starting and may struggle emotionally?
6. Wrap-Up & Follow-Up
 - 6.1 Is there anything else you'd like to share about your emotional experience as a new lecturer?
 - 6.2 Would you be open to writing a short reflection later, if you think of more to share?