



# Rural English Teachers' Emotional Labor: A Case Study from a Chinese Middle School

Minghui Deng 

School of Foreign Languages, Yangtze University, Jingzhou, Hubei, China.

**Type of Work:** Peer Reviewed.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.21013/jems.v19.n2.p1>

**Review history:** Submitted: March 09, 20213; Revised: March 29, 2023; Accepted: April 12, 2023

## How to cite this paper:

Deng, M. (2023). Rural English Teachers' Emotional Labor: A Case Study from a Chinese Middle School. *IRA-International Journal of Education & Multidisciplinary Studies* (ISSN 2455-2526), 19(2), 63-70. <https://dx.doi.org/10.21013/jems.v19.n2.p1>

© IRA Academico Research.

 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) subject to a proper citation to the publication source of the work.

**Disclaimer:** The scholarly papers as reviewed and published by IRA Academico Research are the views and opinions of their respective authors and are not the views or opinions of IRA Academico Research. IRA Academico Research disclaims any harm or loss caused due to the published content to any party.

IRA Academico Research is an institutional publisher member of *Publishers International Linking Association Inc. (PILA-CrossRef), USA*. Being an institutional signatory to the *Budapest Open Access Initiative, Hungary*, the content published by IRA Academico Research is available under Open Access. IRA Academico Research is also a registered content provider under *Open Access Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH)*.

This paper is peer-reviewed following IRA Academico Research's [Peer Review Program](#) .

Minghui Deng  [/0009-0009-7517-9192](https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7517-9192)

## ABSTRACT

This study used a qualitative research method to explore rural English teachers' emotional labor strategies and the factors that influence their emotional labor through interviews. The study found that rural English teachers used more genuine expression strategies and surface acting strategies and less deep acting strategies; teachers used more genuine expression strategies in their interactions with students and colleagues and more surface acting in their interactions with parents and leaders, among which, since most rural students are stay-at-home children, teachers need more emotional labor to communicate with their guardians, therefore, teachers mostly used surface acting, but hardly used deep acting and genuine expression strategies. Factors that influence their emotional labor include teachers' personalities, teaching experiences, colleague relationships, school rules about teachers' emotions, and teacher faculty status. Based on the findings, this study proposes recommendations to improve rural English teachers' emotional labor in order to promote the development of rural English teachers.

**Keywords:** teachers' emotional labor; English teachers; rural English education

### 1. Introduction

Hochschild et al. (1983) pointed out that emotional labor is a form of labor in which workers regulate their own emotions to make their emotions conform to customers' needs and specific situations as much as possible, i.e., workers need to make certain efforts to show their emotions. It is a special kind of labor because it requires a certain amount of effort to show qualified emotions. In the early days, research on emotional labor was mainly focused on service industries such as tourism, department stores, and airlines, while there was little research on emotional labor in the education field. Since the 1990s, researchers began to pay attention to teachers' emotions and related studies began to gradually increase (Benesch, 2020, Yin & Lee, 2012).

Teachers, as the transmitters of knowledge, designers of teaching content, organizers of teaching implementation, and leaders in shaping students' personalities (Ke, 2020), are invisibly supervised by various factors when they carry out teaching activities, such as teachers cannot show emotions that are incompatible with their profession, for instance, boredom and emotional breakdown, and they also need to constantly manage their emotions according to the needs of their positions, especially in the classroom. Teachers need to show kindness, care, and patience when dealing with students in order to be perceived as a sign of professionalism and to be recognized as a teacher identity by the public. Thus, teachers are highly emotional workers. Teacher emotional labor refers to the regulation, planning, and control that teachers make to express the emotions needed by the organization when interacting with students, colleagues and others in the school context (Morris & Feldman, 1996; Yin et al. 2017). The conflict between neoliberal educational culture, teacher accountability, teaching to the test, and the demands of students' parents, and English teachers' views of language, education, curriculum, and critical thinking (Benesch, 2020), makes English teachers have their own unique emotional labor.

In order to perform emotional labor effectively, individuals need to use different strategies to control or regulate their emotions (Yin, 2015). Yin's (2016) framework for classifying emotional labor strategies was summarized for the characteristics of Chinese teachers' emotional labor and applied by many scholars in China (Xu, 2021; Gao & Cui, 2021). Yin (2016) classified strategies of emotional labor into surface-acting strategies, deep acting strategies, and genuine expression strategies. Surface acting refers to individuals pretending to show emotions that they do not feel or hiding their true emotional experiences, emphasizing that the emotions shown are not consistent with the emotions felt internal. Deep acting refers to individuals changing their internal emotional state in order to truly experience the desired emotion. Genuine expression strategies refer to teachers working to bring out their most genuine emotions naturally. Whereas teachers' emotional labor is the result of the interaction of different elements, a great deal of research and discussion on these factors has been conducted by national and international researchers. Broadly speaking, these factors are mainly divided into individual differences and context factors. Numerous studies have shown that differences in demographic characteristics, such as gender, marriage, education, teaching experience, position, affect teachers' emotional labor (Akin, 2014; Yilmaz, 2015; Chen, 2010; Liu, 2007; Li & Wang, 2016). Social constructionists believe that social norms, values, and beliefs can have an impact on individuals' emotional feelings, and that cultural expectations, social standards, or professional norms permeate the teaching profession and have some influence on the norms of the profession (Ding, 2021). The school environment in which teachers live can also have an impact on teachers' emotional labor. School type, school climate, and leadership style can significantly predict teachers' emotional labor strategies (Chen, 2010; Liu, 2007).

It can be seen that teachers, as high emotional workers, have an impact not only on their own physical and mental state and performance, but also on students' physical and mental health, learning attitudes, and learning outcomes. However, there is a lack of research on English teachers' emotional work, and there are few studies on rural English teachers' emotional work. In this study, we investigated rural English teachers' emotional work in order to find out their emotional work strategies and to explore the factors that affect their emotional work.

## **2. Research Design**

In order to understand the real emotional labor of rural English teachers, this paper adopts a qualitative research method in an attempt to gain an interpretive understanding of the behavior and meaning construction of the research participants by putting oneself in the shoes of their emotional labor as they interact and communicate in-depth with the research participants (Chen, 2000).

### *2.1 Research Question*

1. What emotional labor strategies are used by rural English teachers?
2. What are the factors that affect the emotional labor of rural English teachers?

## 2.2 Participants

This study used purposive sampling to select a female teacher, anonymous as "Xiao Min", from a rural middle school in Hubei, who had 2 years of teaching experience, taught grade 8, and taught English as a subject. She was willing to share with us about her experience. Before the interview, the researcher informed her of the purpose of this interview and she authorized it.

## 3. Data Collection and Analysis

### 3.1 Data Collection

This study adopted a semi-structured interview, and due to objective factors, a telephone interview was used. With the consent of the interviewees, the entire interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim for this study. The outline of the interview was developed in relation to perceptions of emotional labor, positive and negative emotions and emotional expressions in interactions with students, parents, colleagues, and leaders in teaching situations, factors that influence emotional labor, and support needed to improve emotional labor. The text was transcribed and given to the teacher for verification.

### 3.2 Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted in three steps; first, the transcribed version of the interview scripts were read carefully in an attempt to extract the emotional labor use strategies and the factors influencing their emotional labor. Second, snippets of emotional labor strategy stories were coded based on Yin's (2016) framework for classifying emotional labor strategies. Third, the extracted snippets of factors influencing emotional labor were summarized.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the data analysis, after analyzing the data, the researcher would first submit the analysis results to two peer researchers for review and listen to feedback, and if the two researchers coded differently, the two peer researchers would be asked for their opinions and the majority opinion would prevail, and then the two researchers would go back to the original data again to test, revise the coding and refine the analysis results, resulting in the following table of data analysis results.

Table 1: Table of results of data analysis of emotional labor strategy

Emotional labor strategy	Coding frequency	Typical Quotes
Surface Acting	5	Sometimes there are parents who are not reasonable, in this situation, you are very angry, but you can not show to them
Genuine Expression	4	In class I am more direct, even if when unhappy I showed directly to students.
Deep Acting	1	Generally, some students may be too tired in the classroom, for example, and may doze off for a while. I am a new teacher, so sometimes I have some empathy and sympathy for the students.

#### 4. Findings

This study found that this rural English teacher used more surface acting strategies and genuine expression strategies and less deep acting strategies. Factors that influenced emotional labor included the teacher's personality and teaching experience, collegiality, school rules about teacher emotions, and teacher faculty status.

##### 4.1 Emotional labor strategies for rural English teachers

###### 4.1.1 Surface Acting

The results of the data analysis showed that the surface-acting strategy was used most frequently.

*In the classroom, in the face of some students, the small mistakes made do not make me angry, but for teaching efficiency, you instead pretend a very angry look, having a deterrent effect on them.*

*In rural education, there are more stay-at-home families, and then grandparents take care of them, and then they spoil their children, and sometimes some grandparents are not reasonable, that is, at this time you are very angry, but you can not show it to them.*

*Although you think the leader's approach is not quite right, but you just can not point out. Because he is the leader, so you can not directly show negative emotions.*

In the classroom, the teacher would pretend to be angry as a teaching technique to deter students, make them more focused, and improve classroom efficiency. And because of her lack of teaching experience, the teacher also tried to ask experienced teachers for advice on how to improve her ability to apply pretending to be angry to achieve classroom control. There are more left-behind students in the countryside, and most of the students live with their grandparents, and the grandparents are more spoiled and less able to understand the teacher's educational methods, and they are prone to argue with the teacher. In this case, the teacher mostly uses the strategy of surface acting, disguising her real emotions to avoid causing conflicts. When the teacher and the leader get along, the teacher is in a position of power and often hides her true emotions because "after all, they are the leader".

###### 4.1.2 Genuine Expression

The results of the data analysis showed that the true expression strategy was used only slightly less frequently than the genuine expression strategy.

*I express it directly to the students during class even when I am very upset. When a student does something wrong, I also express it directly if it is a negative emotion at that time, I make the student stand up first, and then I let the student come to the office after class to talk.*

*Colleagues are the same age as me, there will be no generation gap. When getting along with colleagues my emotions are directly expressed. We will also complain and spit together.*

It is evident that this teacher often uses genuine expression strategies in her interactions with colleagues and in her classroom teaching. In the classroom, this teacher is directly angry when confronted with students who do not meet requirements, and gets angry when she punishes students who seriously disrupt classroom discipline appropriately. When dealing with colleagues, the teacher

also expresses her emotions more directly because most of her colleagues are of the same age, and the generation gap between them is relatively small, and they will spit or complain together, which is also a way to relieve their emotions. This shows that cordial and harmonious relationships among colleagues can help to reduce the teacher's emotional burden to a certain extent.

#### 4.1.3 Deep Acting

The deep play strategy was the least used strategy by this teacher.

*Some students may doze off in class for a while. Because I am a new teacher, I sometimes have some empathy and sympathy for the students, so I feel that they are quite hard, so I am not angry with them most of the time.*

*I sometimes reflect on my own words to students, sometimes I seem to criticize them in an inappropriate way and may have hurt their self-esteem.*

When a student dozed off in class, instead of immediately scolding the student, the teacher put herself in the student's shoes, empathized with the student's hardship, changed her perceptions from the inside, regulated her emotions, and finally "not got angry". The teacher also often reflected on whether she had expressed her emotions to the students in the right way and whether she had hurt their self-esteem. From the interviews, it was found that the teacher only used the deep acting strategy when dealing with students, but when dealing with parents, the teacher said that she basically did not use this strategy.

## 4.2 Influencing Factors

### 4.2.1 Individual Factors

*The classroom may also be related to the teacher's personality, while I belong to the more introverted people, I need to spend a lot of effort to prepare for the classroom atmosphere in order to render the class.*

*I am a novice teacher and still need to learn from experienced teachers in many areas.*

From this, we can find that the teacher's personality affects emotional labor. The subject of English requires a high level of teaching interaction between teachers and students and requires teachers to create a lively teaching atmosphere, which is not a difficult task for teachers with extroverted personalities, while for teachers with more introverted personalities, she needs to put a lot of effort into creating a classroom atmosphere and spend more effort to manage her own emotions by mobilizing her own emotions to drive the emotions of her students.

Teachers' teaching experience also affects their emotional labor. Experienced teachers are more comfortable manipulating the classroom and dealing with parents and leaders, and these experiences may even help teachers develop their own set of methods, so they exert relatively less emotional effort.

### 4.2.2 Contextual factors

*There is a relatively small generation gap between our colleagues, and we will often discuss and analyze student behavior together, and will teach each other our experiences.*

*Our school allows teachers to criticize students' unreasonable behavior with appropriate words during class, which makes my psychological burden less heavy, so I usually express my emotions directly when confronted with students' unreasonable behavior.*

*Rural education is tough, and there is often a loss of teachers. This semester a very experienced 8th-grade teacher was transferred, and I suddenly took 8th grade, unfamiliar with them, and no one I could ask for advice, so I didn't know what to do.*

*If the students have the right attitude towards learning, I will try my best to help them learn. If even they don't take learning English seriously, I won't make that much effort for them.*

From this, it can be found that colleague relationships, school rules about teachers' emotions, and teacher faculty status can affect that teacher's emotional labor. The teacher and her colleagues are mostly of the same age, and the generation gap between them is relatively small; they often directly express their true emotions when they get along, either by analyzing students' behavior or by complaining and griping with each other about something, and this cordial collegial relationship makes the teacher's emotions have a way to be discharged. The teacher's school protects teachers' emotions to a certain extent by allowing teachers to reasonably criticize and punish students without deliberately suppressing teachers' negative emotions, which makes teachers' psychological burden less heavy when expressing their emotions to naughty students in the classroom and relieves teachers' pressure to a certain extent; the problem of teacher turnover in rural education is a very serious problem, especially the transfer of experienced teachers, which brings great inconvenience to the work of new teachers and puts teachers in a confused and overwhelmed state. The teachers are confused and overwhelmed, and their negative emotions will increase, and so will the teachers' efforts to overcome them.

## **5. Discussions**

It was found that rural English teachers used more surface acting strategies and genuine expression strategies and less deep acting strategies, which is the same as most of the current research findings on teachers' emotional labor (Gou & Xu, 2021; Gao & Cui, 2021). However, it should be noted that compared to other subjects, English classrooms require more teacher-student interaction, then teachers often need to use surface acting strategies, and even teachers who are introverted try to create a lively classroom atmosphere, and teachers need to use a little more emotional labor in this area. In addition, rural teachers are dealing with more stay-at-home students, and their guardians are grandparents, and they are more doting on their children, which causes a certain degree of disturbance to teachers' education of students. This can lead to a vicious circle in the home-school relationship.

Rural English teachers play an integral role in the development of rural education. Teachers are able to regulate their emotions in order to teach effectively, and this requires not only their own efforts, but also the efforts of students, parents, and society as a whole. Teachers use a variety of methods, such as reading and developing hobbies, to keep themselves positive. Schools need to



provide professional training that incorporates teacher emotions and introduces effective emotion regulation strategies, while school authorities need to care about how teachers feel about their work and support them in releasing stress, etc., to provide motivation for teacher development.

## References

- Mednick, M. T. , & Hochschild, A. R. . (1985). The managed heart: commercialization of human feeling. *Political Science Quarterly*, 100(1), 176.
- Benesch, S. . (2017). Emotions and English Language Teaching: Exploring Teachers' Emotion Labor. Sarah, & Benesch. (2018). Emotions as agency: feeling rules, emotion labor, and English language teachers' decision-making - ScienceDirect. *System*, 79, 60-69.
- A, H. B. Y., & B, C. K. L. . (2012). Be passionate, but be rational as well: emotional rules for Chinese teachers' work - ScienceDirect. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 28( 1), 56-65.
- Yin, & Hongbiao. (2015). The effect of teachers' emotional labour on teaching satisfaction: moderation of emotional intelligence. *Teachers & Teaching*, 1-22.
- Yin, H., Huang, S., & Lee, J. (2017). Choose your strategy wisely: examining the relationships between emotional labor in teaching and teacher efficacy in Hong Kong primary schools. *Teaching & Teacher Education*, 66, 127-136.
- Akın, U., Aydın, İ., Erdoğan, Ç., & Demirkasımoğlu, N. (2014). Emotional labor and burnout among Turkish primary school teachers. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 41, 155-169.
- CHEN Xiaoning. (2010). An Empirical Study on the Emotional Labor of Young College Teachers. *Heilongjiang Studies of Higher Education*, (12), 23-26.
- 古海波 & 许娅楠.(2021). 中学英语新教师情绪劳动策略案例研究. *外语教育研究前沿*(03),18-25+93.
- 古海波 .(2016). 高校外语教师科研情感叙事案例研究( 博士学位论文, 苏州大学 ).<https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=kerGoTbMf2vYqvGCvxFbSEd3VsRsyraFwf-mFBkB1ghIK0qxhFxK8K0kUK5U4euE7xEodvEkiGalp0vzBEHjdaRZGAA81MehwjFIWNi9CkpHXHDGdtd0uceiXDOZz8Ne&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS>
- 高原 & 崔雅琼.(2021). 英语教师在教学改革中情绪劳动变化轨迹的质性个案研究. *外语教育研究前沿*(03),9-17+92.
- 柯怀英.(2020). 促进中小学教师专业发展的思考与实践. *中国教师*(07),118-119.
- 刘衍玲 .(2007). 中小学教师情绪工作的探索性研究( 博士学位论文, 西南大学 ).<https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=kerGoTbMf2tlf1gU0dRWeOf5UFIibW6xNLoUY5TH6yJxJd4BlmC5nsfyDe2FXUczKUcwmf-ZCS9dDkJANsjcL-l1VDobpMvhmJONwIvfmZDdywQVwzSQuA==&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS>
-