

Introduction to the Special Issue: Conceptualizing Emotion Regulation in Language Education

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ABSTRACT

Over decades of research in language learning and teaching, ample attention has been devoted to the diverse emotional experiences of teachers and learners, demonstrating how these emotions shape their well-being as well as teaching and learning processes. Yet insights into how teachers and learners regulate these emotions have remained scarce. This special issue aims to advance the field by providing a comprehensive picture of teacher and learner emotion regulation across diverse educational and sociocultural contexts. The studies adopt a range of methodologies and illustrate how emotion regulation is driven by different motives, unfolds in specific contexts and over time, and can be supported and enhanced through guidance. In this introductory paper to the special issue, we guide readers toward a foundational understanding of emotion regulation by highlighting three characteristics particularly salient in language education: its motivated, agentic, and context-sensitive nature. We then consider constructs related to emotion regulation and review current research highlighting its importance in language education. This is followed by an overview of the studies included in the special issue and, finally, a discussion of directions for future research.

Keywords: emotion regulation, emotion regulation strategies, language teaching, language learning

INTRODUCTION

Consider the following scenario.

Alex is a relatively new teacher teaching an English class at a university. As the semester progresses, he notices that more and more students seem disengaged, frequently checking their phones during class. He wonders, “Why are they behaving like this?” “Is something going on in their personal lives?” “Is there something wrong with my teaching?” He begins to experience a mixture of confusion, frustration, and anxiety whenever he teaches the class and worries that these emotions may be negatively affecting his classroom practice.

This is where *emotion regulation* enters the picture. For example, Alex may engage in encouraging self-talk to feel less anxious about the situation. He may try to put on a happy face to conceal his frustration. He could also talk to someone he trusts to feel more at ease or consult more experienced teachers for advice. Alternatively, he could directly address the issues that are evoking these negative emotions. These actions are all examples of emotion regulation.

While the field of language learning and teaching has provided rich insights into teacher and learner emotions, less is understood about how these emotions are regulated. Although both lines of inquiry concern emotions, distinguishing emotional experience from emotion regulation changes the kinds of questions we can ask as researchers. Emotion research might ask questions such as, “What gives rise to Alex’s frustration and anxiety?” and “How do those emotions relate to his teaching, his relationships with students, and his professional well-being?” Emotion regulation research opens another set of questions, such as, “Does Alex try to manage those emotions, and if so, how and why?” “Does that regulation achieve its intended purpose?” and “What outcomes follow?”

The above illustration of the difference between the two research domains also underscores an important issue concerning the jingle-jangle fallacy in research. It is

one thing to put forward a construct in a field; it is another to establish that the construct represents a distinct phenomenon rather than something familiar disguised under a fancy new name. Overlooking this issue can produce empirical findings whose theoretical significance remains unclear. It can also hinder the accumulation of knowledge about a particular phenomenon because findings concerning the same phenomenon are framed as evidence about different constructs.

For these reasons, we begin this introductory paper to the special issue on emotion regulation by articulating what emotion regulation is, what it is not, how it differs from other related constructs with which our field may be more familiar, and why emotion regulation warrants attention as a distinct area of research. In doing so, we conceptualize emotion regulation within the contexts of language education. While this conceptualization draws on theoretical perspectives from general, clinical, and educational psychology, it foregrounds characteristics of emotion regulation that are particularly salient in second/foreign language learning and teaching and that distinguish it from emotion regulation as conceptualized in other psychological contexts.

DEFINING EMOTION REGULATION IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

We define emotion regulation as the act of guiding and shaping emotions whilst engaged in the processes of language learning and teaching. Emotion regulation can involve cognitive elements (e.g., perceptions, thoughts, and mindsets) and behavioral elements (e.g., independent activities and those involving others), and these specific actions constitute emotion regulation strategies^[1]. Through the use of emotion regulation strategies, individuals may regulate emotions in a number of ways, including avoiding, suppressing, expressing, reducing the intensity or duration of, or concealing them. At the same time, emotion regulation does not necessarily involve changing an emotional state. It can also involve allowing oneself to experience an emotion—typically an uncomfortable one—without deliberately attempting to change it (for comprehensive lists of emotion regulation strategies, see, e.g., Aldao et al., 2010;

Nakamura, 2023; Webb et al., 2012). In addition to working directly with emotions, emotion regulation can also involve addressing the factors that gave rise to them, such as solving a problem that evoked negative emotions (Boekaerts & Pekrun, 2015; Webb et al., 2012).

Building on this conceptualization, three features of emotion regulation are particularly important in language education. The first one is that emotion regulation is motivated; that is, there is a reason or goal behind the regulation. These motives can be hedonic, aiming to increase immediate pleasure or decrease immediate discomfort, or they can be instrumental, targeting particular emotional states because of the potential impact they may have on performance, relationships, or the behaviors of others (Morris, 2025; Tamir, 2015).

While both forms of motive are extensively researched in broader psychological research (Aldao et al., 2010; Webb et al., 2012), consideration of instrumental motives is particularly important in language education because success may sometimes be dependent on prioritizing instrumental outcomes over hedonic ones. For example, a student with a hedonic motive may successfully regulate anxiety arising from an upcoming presentation assessment by using avoidance-oriented strategies (e.g., distraction). However, such successful regulation of anxiety may not produce positive outcomes for language learning. Alternatively, the student may regulate the same anxiety with an instrumental motive of performing well on the presentation, for example by using skill-enhancement-related strategies, which in turn could further promote L2 skill development.

This illustration is not intended to frame hedonic emotion regulation as maladaptive; rather, its purpose is to highlight the variety of motives that can underlie emotion regulation in the context of language education. Studies in this special issue capture this diversity, including teachers' attempts to better manage challenging classroom situations, improve their overall classroom practice, or help students regulate their emotions. They also include students' efforts to perform better on a specific task, address challenges associated with particular skill areas, or navigate university life

more successfully (Castro & Shelton-Strong, 2026; Dumančić, 2026; Gkonou & Miller, 2026; Hafer-Horowitz et al., 2026; Nakamura & Kenney, 2026; Yamazaki & Nakamura, 2026; Yetiş, 2026).

The next important characteristic of emotion regulation is that it is agentic. In order for an act to be considered emotion regulation, it needs to be enacted by individuals in relation to an emotion regulation motive. This conceptualization is somewhat narrower than those proposed in the broader emotion regulation literature, which discusses subconscious and automatic forms of emotion regulation (Gross, 2014; Gyurak et al., 2011). However, we intentionally foreground the agentic element of emotion regulation because this is what distinguishes emotion regulation from a mere emotional experience. For an action to be considered emotion regulation, it needs to involve both a motive (e.g., a teacher aims to educate students by expressing disappointment) and agency in enacting a response based on that motive (e.g., the teacher chooses to express their disappointment for this purpose).

This distinction is also useful when researching emotion regulation, particularly in the identification of emotion regulation strategies, involving qualitative data. During the development of this special issue, this became a recurring point of discussion between us as editors and many of the contributing authors. When examining participants' descriptive reports, such as interviews and diaries, we repeatedly asked ourselves: What makes a particular report evidence of emotion regulation rather than simply a description of an emotional experience?

The final element of emotion regulation is its contextualized nature. Any instance of emotion regulation by teachers or learners is shaped by a range of intrapersonal and interpersonal factors that interact both in the moment and over time, as illustrated by studies in this special issue (Castro & Shelton-Strong, 2026; Dumančić, 2026; Gkonou & Miller, 2026; Hafer-Horowitz et al., 2026; Yamazaki & Nakamura, 2026; Yetiş, 2026). This has important implications for emotion regulation research. The use and adaptiveness of a particular emotion regulation strategy is often best understood in relation to the individual, emotion, situation, and broader context in which it occurs.

Communicating challenging emotions as a form of emotion regulation, for instance, can be framed as expressing, venting, sharing, releasing, or seeking advice. Each of these forms of emotion regulation can have adaptive or maladaptive orientations as well as different outcomes, depending on who communicates emotions to whom, in what context, and for what purposes, as exemplified in the studies in this special issue. For instance, novice teachers may turn to more experienced colleagues to “seek advice,” as illustrated by Gkonou and Miller (2026), while teachers may simply “talk to” loved ones to seek comfort and calm down, as illustrated by Dumančić (2026). Teachers may also use AI as a space for “digital venting” to release negative emotions, as suggested by Dumančić (2026), yet venting strong emotions to students could have an entirely different impact. Teachers can also encourage students with shared difficult backgrounds, such as refugee experiences, to “share” their emotions with one another, and such “community sharing” can lead to profoundly positive outcomes when built on rapport cultivated among teachers and students, as illustrated by Hafer-Horowitz et al. (2026).

Taken together, these characteristics position emotion regulation as a goal-directed, agentic, and context-sensitive process through which teachers and learners manage their emotional experiences in relation to their immediate and broader goals. These goals may concern the emotional experience itself while others are instrumental to broader teaching and learning goals. Importantly, some of the thoughts and actions involved in this process may resemble those already discussed in language education under other theoretical frameworks. The following section therefore considers the conceptual overlap between emotion regulation and related constructs, while clarifying the distinct focus that emotion regulation brings to the study of language learning and teaching.

CONSTRUCTS RELATED TO EMOTION REGULATION

While emotion regulation as a distinct construct may be viewed as relatively new to the field of language education, the regulation of emotions has been discussed and

researched under the broader umbrellas of language learner strategies/language learning strategies (LLSs) and self-regulated learning. LLSs are broadly understood as thoughts and actions undertaken by language learners for the purpose of learning languages or regulating language learning (Cohen, 2010). One group of LLSs that helps learners regulate their emotions, motivation, and attitudes is referred to as affective strategies, which include anxiety reduction, self-encouragement, and taking one's emotional temperature (Oxford, 1990).

Self-regulated learning refers to a proactive learning process in which students consistently organize and manage their thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and environment so as to attain academic goals (Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011). Within language learning, this process, labeled as strategic learning, has been conceptualized in terms of controlling goal commitment (commitment control), focus and concentration (metacognitive control), boredom (satiation control), emotional states and mood (emotion control), and the study environment (environmental control; Dörnyei, 2001; Tseng et al., 2006).

As indicated by these conceptualizations, affective strategies and satiation/emotion control encompass strategies for managing emotions, such as anxiety and boredom, that could also be described as emotion regulation strategies. The overlap among these perspectives at the strategy level should therefore be recognized. More importantly, however, their different theoretical frameworks and respective areas of focus should be highlighted.

As reflected in their definitions, the primary focus of LLSs and self-regulated, strategic learning is to support language learning, and managing emotions is framed as a means to achieve this objective. While this is also an important element of emotion regulation, a central focus of emotion regulation as a line of research is to develop a fuller understanding of the entire regulatory process, including how individual teachers and learners experience emotions, how they go about regulating them, what motivates their regulation, whether their regulation ultimately serves its intended goals, and how emotion regulation relates to a broader range of

psychological constructs and learning/teaching outcomes. Current insights into these aspects of emotion regulation have highlighted its important role in language education, while also pointing to the need for further accumulation of knowledge in this area. The next section examines these empirical insights more closely to consider why emotion regulation matters in language education.

WHY EMOTION REGULATION MATTERS IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

A compelling rationale for investigating emotion regulation in language education lies in its relevance to broader psychological functioning. A growing body of empirical evidence from psychology and related fields indicates that patterns of emotion regulation are associated with psychological well-being and mental health (Aldao et al., 2010; Gross & John, 2003; Hu et al., 2014). Studies in language education are also beginning to support this association.

For example, teachers' capacity to regulate their emotions has been associated with greater immunity to emotional stressors (Namaziandost et al., 2022) and lower levels of burnout (Ghanizadeh & Royaei, 2015). Habitual use of two emotion regulation strategies, reappraisal and suppression, has also been shown to mediate the relationship between teachers' emotional job demands and their well-being (Yin et al., 2016). Beyond teachers' own well-being, successful emotion regulation can support a range of classroom practices, including managing student behavior, engaging learners with lesson content, and developing productive relationships with students (Morris, 2025; Morris & King, 2023), as well as providing support and care for students (Gkonou & Miller, 2017).

Similarly, studies have shown that students' effective emotion regulation skills are associated with lower levels of burnout (Yu et al., 2022) and greater academic motivation (Liang & Mao, 2025). It has also been shown that students use a wide range of strategies to increase positive emotions and reduce negative emotions in

challenging learning situations (Bielak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2020). Beyond these psychological and affective benefits, emotion regulation also appears to play an instrumental role in sustaining learning behaviors, making students less likely to emotionally withdraw from challenging activities (Wang et al., 2026) and helping them remain engaged in learning activities (Nakamura et al., 2021).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate important roles that emotion regulation plays in the psychological functioning of teachers and learners as well as the processes through which language teaching and learning unfold. The studies in this special issue collectively extend this emerging body of research, which is summarized in the next section.

OVERVIEW OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

In this special issue, we aimed to capture rich insights into emotion regulation across a range of teaching and learning contexts. Beginning with teachers' emotion regulation, the study by Christina Gkonou and Elizabeth R. Miller illustrates the challenges associated with emotion regulation based on data obtained from individual interviews with 50 language teachers working in various educational institutions across four national settings. Their findings highlight the longitudinal processes through which the teachers, who initially relied on their intuitions to regulate their emotions while searching for appropriate strategies, gradually developed their own repertoires of emotion regulation strategies.

In a different context, Dino Dumančić documents Croatian foreign language teachers' emotional responses to challenging situations. One distinctive form of emotion regulation examined in the study is the use of AI, which provided teachers with a range of advice on how to regulate unpleasant emotions. Nevertheless, analysis of data obtained from teachers' online journals revealed the limitations of this approach, particularly those stemming from AI's lack of contextual understanding and the limited feasibility of some of its suggestions.

Shifting the focus from teachers regulating their own emotions, Alexandra Hafer-Horowitz, Shannon L. Harasta, Joanne Cheng, and Peter I. De Costa capture a unique interplay between teacher and student emotion regulation. Based on classroom observations, artifacts, and interviews with two focal teachers, the study portrays teachers' strategies for facilitating emotion regulation among refugee students in ESL classrooms, as well as the challenges associated with providing emotional support to this specific population.

One theme repeatedly highlighted across these studies is the need for sufficient resources and training opportunities to help teachers develop a deeper understanding of emotion regulation and cultivate skills for more effective regulation. In a theoretical and practical contribution, Sam Morris lays out key skill areas that can help teachers enhance their capacity to regulate their emotions and describes a six-session course designed to develop in-service teachers' emotion regulation competence. Morris further offers advice for trainers and course designers on how to implement emotion regulation training successfully and more explicitly.

Another recurring theme across the studies in this special issue concerns the role of specific emotion regulation strategies used by language learners. A large-scale study by Elouise Botes, Pia Resnik, Mostafa Azari Noughabi, Mina Masoumi, and Jean-Marc Dewaele investigates the role of two emotion regulation strategies—cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression—in relation to enjoyment, anxiety, willingness to communicate (WTC), and self-perceived communicative competence (SPCC). Their analysis of questionnaire data from 234 Iranian EFL learners shows that cognitive reappraisal positively predicts WTC and SPCC, whereas expressive suppression negatively predicts SPCC. Enjoyment and anxiety also emerge as significant mediators in several of these relationships.

Employing a mixed-methods approach involving questionnaires, Sachiko Nakamura and Jethro Kenney identify 14 distinct ER strategies used by Japanese EFL learners and examine their links with emotions and L2 proficiency. Key findings include that anxiety is predominantly regulated through approach-oriented strategies whereas

boredom is predominantly regulated through avoidance-oriented strategies and that learners with higher proficiency are more likely to proactively upregulate enjoyment during language learning activities.

Kübra Yetiş also investigates EFL learners' emotion regulation strategies, but in the unique context of English use outside the classroom, involving Turkish university students studying in Hungary. Her thematic analysis of responses elicited through a vignette methodology reveals a range of distinctive emotion regulation strategies and highlights the dynamic nature of emotion regulation, with students drawing on multiple strategies within a single situation and engaging in both interpersonal emotion regulation (i.e., managing others' emotions) and intrapersonal emotion regulation (i.e., managing their own emotions independently).

Two studies in the special issue focus on emotion regulation instruction, but in different formats. Eduardo Castro and Scott J. Shelton-Strong showcase a semester-long course titled *Exploring Emotions in Language Learning*, implemented as a Content and Language Integrated Learning course in Japan. The course consists of two 90-minute classes per week over a 15-week semester, with four classes dedicated specifically to the explicit exploration of emotion regulation. Qualitative analyses of students' reflective diaries and portfolios capture how students cultivated emotional awareness and engaged with experience-based strategies to regulate their emotions effectively.

Joseph S. Yamazaki and Sachiko Nakamura take a different approach to emotion regulation instruction, emphasizing its practicality and feasibility for teachers and practitioners. They investigate the effectiveness of a 10-minute, task-based ER strategy session in enhancing learners' enjoyment during debate tasks. While quantitative data obtained from a Likert-scale questionnaire show no statistically significant effect, qualitative data from an open-ended questionnaire and worksheet suggest the potential usefulness of the strategy session, which may not have been fully utilized due to the cognitive overload imposed by the challenging debate tasks.

Taken together, these studies substantiate and extend the current understanding of emotion regulation in language education established by previous research. In particular, they collectively highlight the diverse ways in which emotion regulation unfolds across educational and sociocultural contexts, how it can be supported and enhanced through explicit intervention, and how it develops contextually and longitudinally. They also highlight the range of methodological approaches through which emotion regulation can be investigated and understood. These contributions, considered alongside the growing body of existing research, provide a basis for reflecting on the current state of emotion regulation research and directions for its future development.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The studies in this special issue, together with previous research on emotion regulation, point to several directions for future research that could further enrich our understanding of teacher and learner emotion regulation. One important direction is to expand practical support for teacher and learner emotion regulation through the development and evaluation of emotion regulation courses, instructional materials, and interventions.

Another avenue is the development of frameworks for classifying and evaluating individual emotion regulation strategies, while taking into account the contexts, motives, and goals surrounding their use. Such frameworks could support the development of new measurement instruments for investigating how different patterns of strategy use relate to a wider range of psychological and educational outcomes.

Research on emotion regulation to date typically focuses on teachers or students but rarely considers both in tandem. Such approaches appear to ignore the fact that the emotions of teachers and students are inseparably wed within the classroom. Therefore, a third direction for future research is to explore how the expression and

regulation of emotions by teachers and students continually influence each other in the formation of the classroom learning environment.

Finally, greater use of longitudinal designs could deepen our understanding of how emotion regulation develops and changes over time, how patterns of regulation shape psychological and educational outcomes, and how regulatory capacities develop through instruction. Given that research, for example, suggests that more experienced educators have more able regulatory capacities, it seems prudent to understand more clearly how we might fast track newer teachers to develop such skills.

As research on emotion regulation continues to expand, advances in these areas can collectively support teachers and learners in both their teaching and learning endeavors and their psychological well-being.

Authors' Contributions

SN and SM contributed to the conception and development of the article and to drafting and revising the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Declaration of GenAI and AI-Assisted Technologies

In the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT to support the clarity and readability of the manuscript. The tool was used for wording suggestions and proofreading support. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed, verified the accuracy, originality, and appropriateness of the ChatGPT-assisted outputs, and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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