

Research Article

Learning to Feel: Emotion Regulation as Language Teacher Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

Emotion regulation refers to the ability to understand and manage one's own emotions through (sets of) strategies, which – depending on the valence of emotions or the extent to which they are pleasant or less desirable – could either increase or decrease the duration, intensity and impact of emotions on teachers. Although emotion regulation processes have been studied among language teachers (see, for example, Gkonou & Miller, 2023; Morris, 2025; Morris & King, 2023), we still know relatively little about how teachers experience shifts in their use of strategies while regulating their emotions as part of their classroom practice. In this article, we analyse accounts produced during individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews by 50 language teachers who work in different types of educational institutions across four national settings. Specifically, we focus on teachers' subjective responses to interview questions about how they performed emotion regulation and how they rated it as easy or difficult. Data were analysed through qualitative coding and thematic analysis. Findings showed that the participating teachers went through several moments of uncertainty and self-doubt while looking for appropriate strategies for regulating their emotions and had to rely upon intuition and instinct. Nevertheless, throughout the years, they gained confidence and developed a repertoire of personal strategies for emotion regulation in the classroom. Our findings point towards the learnability of emotion regulation strategies amongst language teachers, and we argue for their teachability and inclusion in both pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes.

Keywords: emotion regulation; teacher education; teacher needs; pedagogical knowledge; experience; shared responsibility

INTRODUCTION

Emotion regulation has become an increasingly prominent concern in the field of language education. The act of teaching a language is not only cognitively and pedagogically demanding but also emotionally charged (Gkonou et al., 2020), given the interpersonal, cultural, and performative nature of classroom interactions. Teachers are expected to manage their own internal emotional states while also navigating the affective dynamics of their relationships with students, colleagues, and institutional stakeholders (Gkonou, 2022; Miller, 2025; Miller & Gkonou, 2025). This dual burden – of instruction and emotion – has spurred a growing body of research exploring how teachers regulate their emotions and what supports or undermines their capacity to do so effectively (Gkonou & Miller, 2023; Morris, 2025; Taxer & Gross, 2018; Xiyun et al., 2022; Yin et al., 2016).

Within this landscape, the present study investigates how language teachers across four national contexts (Germany, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States) understand, experience, and develop emotion regulation abilities in their professional lives. While existing literature has examined theoretical models of emotion regulation and explored intervention-based programmes to support teachers, less is known about the grounded, everyday strategies that language teachers adopt to manage emotional challenges in context. This study contributes to filling this gap by analysing 50 interview transcripts to identify themes in teachers' lived experiences of emotion regulation. In doing so, it emphasises the developmental and pedagogical dimensions of emotional work that should be included in language education.

The paper proceeds by reviewing relevant literature, presenting findings from the empirical study, and concluding with implications for teacher education and professional development. We argue that emotion regulation should be treated as a core component of teacher identity and professional knowledge – one that is teachable, context-sensitive, and ethically significant.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Emotional Nature of Language Teaching

Emotion regulation has increasingly gained attention as a core concern in language teacher education, both as a fundamental component of teacher wellbeing and as a factor influencing classroom effectiveness and professional identity (Brierton & Gkonou, 2022; Morris, 2025). The emotional demands placed on language teachers are significant and multifaceted, arising from interpersonal dynamics in the classroom, institutional structures and policies, and the affective investments teachers make in their students' learning journeys (Moskowitz & Dewaele, 2019; Pinner, 2019). Language teaching is not simply a cognitive or instructional task; it is an emotionally charged process that requires constant monitoring and management of internal emotional states as well as interpersonal emotional exchanges.

Researchers have highlighted how emotional experiences in teaching are often underpinned by vulnerability, ambiguity, and unpredictability (Day & Leitch, 2001; Hargreaves, 1998; Kelchtermans, 2005; Nazari & Kamali, 2024; Schutz & Zembylas, 2009; Song, 2016; Zembylas, 2005). Teachers regularly encounter emotionally intense situations, ranging from disengaged students and curriculum constraints to ethical dilemmas and relational conflicts (Benesch, 2018). Benesch (2017) critiques the dominant tendency to view emotional treatment as a purely internal, individual task, arguing instead for a conceptualisation of emotions as relational, political, and ethically complex. Emotions are not just feelings to be controlled; they are socially situated and shaped by institutional discourses and power structures. Similarly, Gkonou and Miller (2023) emphasise the relational labour teachers perform in managing not only their own emotions but also the affective climate of their classrooms. This labour is often invisible and undervalued, yet critical for pedagogical success.

Day and Lee (2011) add that institutional norms and professional expectations frequently pressure teachers to perform particular emotional displays such as enthusiasm or patience, even when such expressions do not align with their internal

states. This dissonance between felt and displayed emotions can create emotional strain, complicating efforts to maintain authenticity in the classroom. Taken together, these perspectives challenge the common belief that emotion regulation is a matter of personal discipline or (innate) emotional intelligence. Rather, they frame it as a complex, contextualised process embedded in broader sociocultural, pedagogical, and institutional systems (Hulda & Zhao, 2024).

Psychological Theories of Emotion Regulation

Response Modulation

A foundational framework for understanding how individuals manage their emotions is provided by Gross's (1998, 2015) process model of emotion regulation. This model categorises regulation strategies into antecedent-focused strategies such as situation selection and cognitive reappraisal, and response-focused strategies, most notably expressive suppression. In teaching contexts, research has consistently shown that cognitive reappraisal is a more adaptive and sustainable strategy than suppression (Chang, 2009; Fried et al., 2015; Gross, 1998, 2015; Sutton & Harper, 2009; Taxer & Gross, 2018). Reappraisal involves reframing the meaning of an emotionally challenging situation in ways that reduce its emotional impact. In contrast, suppression, which deliberately inhibits emotional expression, may lead to emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and decreased job satisfaction – all recognised as indicators of burnout syndrome. Indeed, Taxer and Gross (2018) and Chang (2009) both provide empirical evidence that suppression is associated with higher levels of teacher burnout, while reappraisal is linked to improved emotional wellbeing and more effective classroom management. These findings underscore the importance of equipping teachers with tools to engage in antecedent-focused emotion regulation. Such strategies not only protect teachers' psychological health but also promote positive teacher-student relationships (Gkonou, 2022), as teachers are better able to respond calmly and constructively in emotionally charged moments. Antecedent-focused emotion regulation includes other strategies too such as situation selection and

situation modification (Gross, 2015); however, we concentrate on cognitive reappraisal here to maintain analytic alignment with our empirical data and the existing teacher emotion regulation literature.

Control-Value Theory: Emotions as Appraisals of Teaching Contexts

Pekrun's (2006, 2014) control-value theory adds further nuance by framing emotions as arising from individuals' appraisals of their control over and value assigned to specific activities. In the case of language teaching, pleasant emotions – such as pride, enjoyment, or hope, among others – often emerge when teachers feel both capable of managing classroom situations and invested in the significance of their pedagogical work. In contrast, difficult emotions, such as helplessness, anxiety, or frustration, may arise when teachers perceive low control and high value, a situation common in rigidly structured or high-stakes educational contexts.

This theory further helps to explain how systemic pressures such as high workloads, standardised testing, and accountability regimes, can undermine emotional wellbeing by diminishing teachers' sense of agency. It also illustrates why effective emotion regulation is not only an individual skill but also a systemic issue: teachers' emotional landscapes are shaped by policy environments, institutional culture, and organisational support. Schutz and Zembylas (2009) argue that these emotionally taxing contexts reflect broader ideological forces, such as neoliberalism and managerialism, which prioritise performance metrics over relational and emotional aspects of teaching.

Emotion Regulation in Teacher Education and Professional Learning

Despite the critical role of emotion regulation in sustaining teacher effectiveness and satisfaction, it remains marginalised in many teacher education programmes. Numerous studies (e.g., Mercer & Gkonou, 2017; Sutton, 2004; Yin et al., 2025) have

pointed out the scarcity of formal training or pedagogical frameworks that address emotion regulation as a teachable competency. Instead, teachers often report learning how to manage their emotions through informal, experiential, and self-directed means. For example, Hagenauer and Volet (2014) and Sutton (2004) have documented how teachers frequently engage in post-hoc reflection, peer observation, and trial-and-error strategies to cope with emotionally demanding classroom events.

Fried, Mansfield, and Dobozy (2015) conceptualise these informal strategies as part of an “emotional repertoire” that develops over time and includes techniques such as pausing before reacting, mentally re-framing student behaviour, or journaling about difficult experiences. However, this approach places the burden on individual teachers to develop these capacities without systemic support, a point which Yin et al. (2013) underscore in their research with novice teachers. They found that these relatively inexperienced teachers are particularly vulnerable to emotional overload, largely because they lack prior experience and formal preparation in emotion regulation. Such findings highlight a critical gap in teacher education and point to the need for structured and scaffolded approaches that normalise emotional learning as part of teachers’ continuous professional development.

Morris’s (2025) recent monograph marks a significant advancement in how emotion regulation is theorised and practised in teacher education. Drawing from psychological theory and critical pedagogy, Morris challenges the individualised framing of emotion regulation and calls for a shift towards viewing it as a form of professional, relational knowledge. His argument is that emotions are not isolated, internal experiences but are shaped through interactions, cultural scripts, and institutional expectations. Consequently, he proposes that teacher training programmes should move beyond surface-level workshops to embed emotional learning as a sustained, critical practice. Both pre-service and in-service teachers can benefit from structured engagement with emotional themes, including opportunities to reflect, experiment with strategies, and build communities of emotional practice. Importantly, Morris aligns emotion regulation with social justice, arguing that

recognising and validating emotional experiences can empower teachers to resist oppressive structures and advocate for more humane working conditions. His framework positions emotion regulation not just as a coping mechanism but as a pedagogical and ethical competency central to relational teaching and inclusive classroom practice.

Evidence from Interventions and Professional Development Programmes

Empirical research into professional development programmes within general education further reinforces the view that emotion regulation is a learnable and improvable skill. Programmes like RULER (Brackett et al., 2012), CARE (Jennings et al., 2017), and mindfulness-based interventions (Roeser et al., 2013) have demonstrated measurable improvements in teacher self-awareness, emotional balance, and relational engagement. These programmes typically combine reflective exercises, scenario-based discussions, mindfulness techniques, and group work to help teachers build emotional resilience and empathy. Schonert-Reichl (2017) notes that such programmes can foster deeper qualities such as compassion and perspective-taking, which are essential to navigating the emotional complexity of teaching.

However, despite their promise, such initiatives are often short-term or optional, rather than fully integrated into teacher education curricula. They are also more common in affluent, well-resourced educational contexts, raising concerns about accessibility and equity. Moreover, many programmes are designed reactively to address teacher burnout or turnover, rather than proactively and as part of an ongoing developmental trajectory. These limitations point to the need for systemic changes in how emotional support is conceptualised and institutionalised in teacher training and professional learning. In addition, while these interventions have gained traction in general education, the field of language education has yet to develop or adopt comparable programmes in any systematic way. Very few emotion-focused

interventions have been designed specifically for language teachers, despite the fact that language teaching entails unique emotional demands such as managing intercultural communication, navigating identity and vulnerability in language use, and sustaining emotional energy in highly interactive and performative classrooms. This gap suggests a critical oversight in language teacher education and professional development, one that risks leaving language educators under-supported in terms of their emotional wellbeing and pedagogical resilience. Addressing this gap would require not only adapting existing models to the specificities of language education but also developing new, context-sensitive approaches that reflect the sociolinguistic and affective complexities of language teaching.

Emotion Regulation as Situated, Ethical, and Pedagogical Practice

Beyond theoretical models and training programmes, qualitative research offers rich insights into the situated nature of emotion regulation in everyday classroom life. Teachers often use intuitive and context-specific strategies to manage their emotional states and maintain pedagogical presence. Gkonou and Mercer (2017) and King and Ng (2018) show how teachers actively adjust their lessons, use humour or storytelling, and engage in brief cognitive breaks to regulate emotional intensity. These micro-level decisions are often made in real time and reflect a teacher's ethical orientation towards students' needs and the classroom climate.

O'Connor (2008) and Gkonou and Miller (2019) further explore how emotional responses are intertwined with teachers' moral commitments, especially when navigating conflict or failure, or when working with highly anxious students. For example, a teacher's frustration may stem not from student misbehaviour per se, but from a deeper concern about failing to meet students' needs (see also Gkonou, forthcoming). These findings reinforce the idea that emotion regulation is not simply about managing mood, but about engaging ethically with the responsibilities of teaching. In multilingual and multicultural classrooms, this ethical engagement becomes even more critical, as emotional cues may be misinterpreted or overlooked

due to cultural differences. Emotion regulation, then, becomes a relational and inclusive act, deeply tied to social justice and equity.

In total, the literature provides robust evidence that emotion regulation is a vital, learnable, and teachable aspect of language teaching. It cannot be reduced to personal resilience or individual coping strategies alone. Rather, it should ideally be situated within collective, relational, and ethical frameworks that recognise the institutional, cultural, and political forces shaping emotional life in educational institutions. Reframing emotion regulation as a shared professional capacity and responsibility calls for a pedagogical transformation in teacher education. This includes sustained training, critical inquiry, and systemic support aimed at fostering emotionally literate, reflective, and socially responsive educators. By embedding emotion regulation into the heart of language teacher development, we move towards a more humane, equitable, and sustainable model of education that honours the emotional and relational work teachers do every day. But before we do this, it would be worth exploring in depth and at length teachers' perspectives on the learnable and improvable dimensions of emotion regulation as a key skill in language teaching. To address this, we have formulated the following research questions, which have guided the present study.

RQ1: How do language teachers develop and refine their emotion regulation strategies over time and across settings?

RQ2: What factors influence the perceived ease or difficulty of emotion regulation among language teachers, and how do these perceptions evolve with experience?

RQ3: To whom do language teachers assign responsibility for emotion regulation?

METHODS

Context and Participants

This study draws on in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with 50 language educators across four countries: Germany, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The data collection occurred in two phases. The first phase took place during the summer of 2016 and involved interviews with English language teachers in the U.S. (conducted by the second author) and the U.K. (conducted by the first author). Due to geographical limitations and scheduling constraints, ten of the U.S.-based interviews were carried out via Skype, while the remainder were conducted face-to-face. The second phase of data collection occurred in the spring of 2019 and included interviews with English language teachers in Germany and Norwegian language teachers in Norway. These interviews were all conducted in person during the second author's Fulbright fellowship at the University of Cologne in Germany. Although the dataset comprises voices from four national contexts, the study was not designed as a cross-national comparative project. Thus, no direct comparisons across national settings were made; instead, the focus was on identifying patterns, tensions, and meanings that emerged from participants' lived experiences within their specific institutional and sociocultural environments.

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling. Institutional approval was first obtained by contacting programme directors via email to seek permission to invite their teachers. Once approval was granted, teachers were contacted directly and provided with a participant information statement outlining the aims of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any point, and how data would be stored, used, and anonymised. Participants who agreed to take part provided written informed consent. To protect confidentiality, all names have been replaced with participant codes, and identifying details such as institution names or specific course titles have been anonymised too.

Table 1 summarises key demographic data. Of the 50 educators, 15 were based in the U.S., 10 in the U.K., 18 in Germany, and 7 in Norway. Institutional affiliations varied: most U.S., U.K., and Norwegian participants were employed in university-linked programmes (32 in total), while the German cohort included teachers from Gymnasium (secondary schools

with an academic orientation, $n=13$) and Volkshochschulen (public adult education institutions, $n=5$). The gender distribution leaned female ($n=32$), with 18 male-identifying participants and no one choosing not to disclose. Full-time employment was reported by 36 individuals, with the remainder working part-time. Most participants held a master's degree or equivalent ($n=41$), while others had a doctoral degree ($n=5$) or bachelor's degree ($n=4$). Eleven educators held a formal language teaching certificate. The average length of teaching experience was 14 years, ranging from 2 to 45 years.

Table 1. *Demographic Information of Teacher Participants (N=50)*

Location	US: 15 UK: 10 Germany: 18 Norway: 7
Type of institution	University-affiliated programme (US, UK, Norway): 32 Gymnasium (Germany, grades 5-13 with a focus on university preparation): 13 Volkshochschule (Germany, adult-focused continuing education institutions): 5
Gender	Female: 32 Male: 18 Prefer not to disclose: 0
Full-time/Part-time	Full-time: 36 Part-time: 14
Academic Qualifications	M.A. or its equivalent: 41 Ph.D.: 5 B.A.: 4 Language teaching certification: 11
Years of teaching experience	Mean: 14 (min=2, max=45)

Interview Design and Procedure

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured protocol that encouraged participants to reflect on their emotional experiences in language teaching. Questions focused on aspects of teaching they found most and least enjoyable, specific techniques they used to manage or regulate emotions during instruction, their perceived ease or difficulty in performing emotion regulation, and any advice they would offer to less experienced colleagues. Although the same interview guide was used across both phases of data collection, a small modification was made in the second phase. We decided to eliminate a question on occupational stress in the second interview guide after finding that participants' responses to this question often paralleled their responses to a question on whether they found it easy or difficult to regulate their emotions. We replaced the question on occupational stress with one focusing on pivotal moments or turning points in participants' careers.

The interview prompts were developed based on a review of literature on language teacher emotions, emotional labour, and emotion regulation, as well as the authors' practical experience working in the field. The flexible format of the interviews allowed participants to raise and elaborate on issues of personal significance as the conversations unfolded. Given the sensitive nature of discussing emotional challenges in the workplace, interviews were conducted with particular care and empathy. Participants were explicitly encouraged to expand on responses and share personal anecdotes, or, on the other hand, not to elaborate on emotionally charged moments should they wish not to.

Interviews averaged 32 minutes in length, with several extending over an hour. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in a corpus of 224,046 words. All interviews were conducted in English except for one, which was conducted in Norwegian by a Norwegian-speaking colleague with the second author present to ensure consistency and ethical oversight.

Data Analysis

Given the size and scope of the dataset, we adopted a staged and collaborative approach to data analysis. Initially, each author independently analysed a subset of 13 transcripts, representing approximately 25% of the total corpus. This subset included interviews from all four national contexts to ensure a diverse starting point for theme generation. We employed thematic coding using NVivo 12 software, focusing on segments in which participants discussed their experiences of emotion regulation, including both the difficulties they encountered and the strategies they employed. After completing this first round of coding, the authors met to discuss emergent patterns, refine thematic categories, and agree on a coding framework informed by published research methodology handbooks (e.g., Creswell, 2014; Mann, 2016) and our own interpretations. This framework was then applied to the remaining 37 transcripts, with continued openness to new themes that might emerge during this second phase.

What became increasingly salient during the later stages of analysis was the distinctly learnable and teachable nature of emotion regulation among teachers, a finding that emerged not only through explicit reflections by participants on how they developed emotional strategies over time, but also through their descriptions of mentoring, modelling, and peer support as integral to this process. Emotion regulation was not portrayed as an innate trait or personal disposition, but as a dynamic, evolving skill cultivated through experience, guided reflection, and dialogic learning within specific institutional and interpersonal contexts. This reinforces the view that emotional competence, much like pedagogical or linguistic expertise, can be explicitly supported and developed through intentional teacher education practices.

Researcher Positionality

Both authors brought insider perspectives to the research, having previously worked in language teacher education across a range of institutional contexts. This dual positionality – as both practitioners and researchers – provided insight into the emotional complexity of language teaching but also necessitated critical reflexivity. We

were aware that our own professional identities, values, and assumptions could shape data interpretation. For example, our prior experience in language teacher education sensitised us to participants' emotional narratives, while also requiring us to remain attentive to how our advocacy for effective emotion regulation and teacher wellbeing might influence analytic emphasis. To address this, we engaged in ongoing dialogue throughout the research process, using peer debriefing and reflective writing to interrogate our assumptions and remain attuned to participants' voices. Our goal was to make sense of teachers' emotional narratives on their own terms, while recognising the interpretive nature of our analysis.

Findings

Learning Emotion Regulation Through Experience and Practice

A dominant theme across the interviews is that emotion regulation was rarely acquired through formal instruction but was instead developed through teachers' everyday classroom experience. Participants repeatedly described learning how to manage their emotions through trial-and-error practice, reflection on challenging teaching moments, and informal guidance from colleagues or mentors. Rather than emerging from structured training or explicit pedagogical frameworks, emotion regulation was portrayed as something gradually learned in the flow of professional practice, as teachers encountered emotionally demanding situations and adapted their responses over time. In this sense, classroom experience itself functioned as the primary site of learning, where teachers experimented with strategies, reflected on their effectiveness, and gradually refined their emotional responses. For example, T27 reflected on how they entered the profession feeling somewhat underprepared for its affective realities:

Excerpt 1

"I think I was very disillusioned, um, after university because I thought teaching, um, no, it was the other way around. I was, so I thought that what I learned at university would prepare you for what I, I have to do here. And that was a surprise

that it has nothing to do with one another apart from maybe, you know, language skills that you could talk about. Um, so that was a negative, a negative turning point that made me work even more because all of this was new and nobody had ever prepared me.”

Here, the teacher explicitly identified the gap between university preparation and the emotional demands of practice, and framed emotion regulation as something learned reactively, following a “negative turning point” that prompted greater personal effort. Nonetheless, this mismatch acted as a catalyst, pushing them to rely on self-learning through practice. This emphasis on experiential learning is echoed by T17 who recalled how earlier experiences forced them to recalibrate expectations and develop strategies for maintaining composure when entering new classrooms.

Excerpt 2

“I think I learnt from the experience of teaching those students I have just mentioned that, I think I have learnt from that particular experience that now whenever I go into a new classroom for the first time, when I don’t know what, you know, I will be careful about my expectations. [...] So I think that’s something I’ve learnt, yeah. And of course by doing that, your own emotions are kept. You know you are not going to get angry or annoyed or irritated by that, by the students because you’ll find out in a more considered way.”

This reflection illustrates how T17 links emotion regulation directly to pedagogical decision-making. By “testing” students and moderating expectations, the teacher reduces the likelihood of frustration or irritation. From this perspective, T17 embeds emotion regulation within everyday instructional planning, showing how emotional control develops through trial and error in classroom contexts.

Such comments suggest that emotion regulation is intimately tied to the practice-based realities or nature of classroom teaching, which are often characterised by unpredictability and require that teachers act ‘in the moment’. Through these ongoing and accumulated teaching experiences, teachers strategically learn to manage their emotions, cultivating patience, resilience, and perspective, and increasing their teaching effectiveness. This developmental trajectory is captured by T44, who rationalised it as a gradual strengthening of self-assurance.

Excerpt 3

“I think um I’m more in control of my emotions now. That’s partly because I I’m more self-assured, I’m secure, I know more or less what I can do and not do, so I have don’t have to prove myself perhaps that much, or I don’t feel that I have to prove myself as a teacher. I hope I do a decent job.”

Here, T44 attributed improved emotion regulation to greater self-assurance and professional security. The movement from needing to “prove” oneself to feeling “more in control” suggests a developmental trajectory in which emotion regulation becomes easier as teachers gain experience and confidence.

In total, these accounts converge on a central idea: teachers learn to regulate their emotions by engaging in cycles of action, reflection, and re-interpretation embedded in classroom practice. Teachers learn to anticipate emotional triggers, adjust their expectations, and refine their responses over time. In relation to RQ1 and RQ2, participants consistently described early-career uncertainty and difficulty, followed by increased ease as experience accumulated. Taken together, these narratives illustrate that emotion regulation is not a discrete skill but a situated, practice-based competency which strengthens with professional maturity. At the same time, participants’ accounts also suggested that this development involves an important

internal dimension, as teachers gradually become more aware of their emotional responses and learn to manage them more deliberately over time.

Emotion Regulation as a Gradual, Internal Process

While the previous section highlighted how teachers develop emotion regulation through experience in the classroom, participants also described a more internal dimension of this development. Beyond learning from specific teaching encounters, teachers portrayed emotion regulation as an evolving process of emotional self-awareness and reflective self-management. Over time, participants described becoming more conscious of their initial emotional reactions, learning to pause before responding, and gradually developing greater emotional distance and perspective. In this sense, emotion regulation was not only something learned through practice but also something internalised through increasing self-knowledge. For instance, T26 described their own emotional growth through seeing change and progress in students.

Excerpt 4

“And then I started to teach English, uh, for kids and these camps and, um, suddenly this kind of absolute fascination and enthusiasm developed because I saw that students who were very frustrated, very anxious about, um, you know, their careers, about how their, you know, their social life would develop if they fail at school, because they suffer a lot more than we give them credit. Right? So, um, I, I realized that these students suddenly managed to go from grade five to grade nine.”

This account shows how witnessing students overcome anxiety and frustration fostered renewed enthusiasm and fascination for the teacher, thus becoming a form of emotional learning for them. It also illustrates how teachers often derive their

emotional strength from the longer-term changes they perceive in their students, reinforcing the idea that emotional growth is intimately tied to the lived realities of the classroom.

Similarly, T18 captured a reflective routine that grew over time and often outside the classroom too, showing how it was part of their own internal, developmental journey of emotion regulation:

Excerpt 5

“If it’s a negative [emotion], then I think it would, then I would have to review what I have done or I would have to have a think about if it’s a particular problem with a particular student. I’d have to think about ‘Right, how am I going to deal with it? Should I speak to the student individually? What will I say?’ So maybe a little bit of forward planning or just thinking around it, you know. So try to go away from it and have a think. It’s not always done here. It’s often when I am driving home. I will be thinking, returning over my mind and I think, ‘Oh alright, I think I will try that.’”

This excerpt highlights a form of delayed emotion regulation, where emotional processing often takes shape after teaching and when teachers revisit and reinterpret their emotional responses, rather than in the moment. By revisiting classroom encounters, replaying them mentally, and testing out alternative responses in future lessons, T18 developed strategies for future situations and normalised the process of taking time and space outside the classroom to consider possible responses. This underscores that emotion regulation is a learned practice rather than an innate trait.

Another interesting experience was shared by T5, who demonstrated learned equanimity built from accumulated practice.

Excerpt 6

“I had a student and I don’t know what I said but he yelled at me during class in front of everybody else and my first response was, I want to yell back, and my second response was, yeah right! So I took a deep breath and I said to him [...] Then he said, and his voice wasn’t as elevated, but still loud, [...] and the other students in the class started laughing [...] That broke the tension, so there are times when I’ve had to just take a deep breath and deal with whatever it is that is happening.”

This incident exemplifies how teachers gradually develop the ability to pause, override an immediate emotional impulse, and choose more constructive, calmer responses. What initially could have escalated into argument and confrontation instead became a moment of professional growth. The teacher’s capacity to override the “first response” and enact a more measured one is not simply a technique but the outcome of years of accumulated experiences and increasing internal awareness of their own emotions.

Across these accounts, teachers described how they managed their emotional responses over time, by learning to recognise initial reactions, create emotional distance, and respond more deliberately, and highlighted the internal dimension of this development. This process contributed not only to personal wellbeing but also to a reshaping of professional identity and integrity over time, as teachers became more confident and less reactive in emotionally charged situations. What emerges is an image of teaching as a career-long process of emotional calibration, in which the classroom serves as the primary site of learning. Importantly, these accounts also suggest that emotion regulation is not a static capacity but a continually evolving skill. Teachers emphasised how their experiences with emotion regulation allowed for calmer and more appropriate responses to students. This view shows that emotion regulation is part of what it means to “become” a teacher. These internal processes

are interwoven with the external demands of the classroom, reinforcing the idea that emotion regulation is a deeply personal as well as professional journey.

Emotion Regulation Treated as Teachers' Responsibility

In relation to RQ3, participants often framed emotion regulation as an individual responsibility. For instance, T17 in Excerpt 7 described how teachers experience stress and anxiety, particularly when facing a classroom, and framed stress as something teachers should manage through personal perspective and mindset.

Excerpt 7

"I mean people will get very stressed about just the idea of going into a classroom and standing in front of people. Arguably they shouldn't be doing it. But I would also say this, that stress sometimes comes from this idea that everything rests on the success of the lesson. You know, what if this doesn't work? What if that doesn't work? And if you think about the bigger picture. [...] It's not, it doesn't count that much. You know? The individual moments don't count that much."

This framing demonstrates how the responsibility of managing stress is placed squarely on the individual teacher to reframe difficult moments rather than seek structural support, reinforcing the sense that emotion regulation is a private concern.

In addition, T2 described how during a period of personal crisis, their ability to cope came directly from the act of teaching and the actual classroom experience itself.

Excerpt 8

"I remember I was going through a really terrible time and I thought I cannot go in this classroom. I'm so broken, but I had no choice. There was a group of

students waiting and I can't shirk my duties and I went in there and it was like taking an anti-depressant or something. All of a sudden I realized I'm laughing and I thought that was interesting."

Here, T2 emphasised classroom interaction as the primary emotional resource, reinforcing the sense that teachers are expected to cope privately through their work. T5 similarly described relying on personal strategies and self-management:

Excerpt 9

"And another concrete thing I try to do is to take care of myself so that when I go into the classroom, I'm rested and fed and watered. [laughs] I have my needs met so I can focus on the students' needs. [...] I can easily get sucked into being emotional and so that's part of my preparation before I come to the classroom so I'm much less likely to become emotional if I'm okay with the other physical needs."

Here, emotional regulation is constructed as part of the teacher's personal responsibility and as personal preparation and self-awareness, enabling the teacher to remain available to students.

Advice offered to novice teachers in terms of regulating their emotions further reflected this individualised framing. T35 encouraged emotional self-monitoring:

Excerpt 10

"Take them [emotions] seriously because they can affect your wellbeing instantly. Very important to listen to them very carefully and, and try to avoid negative

emotions. [...] and try to use the positive ones and reinforce positive ones and try to find ways how you can feel better every day, and um, and proactively sort of seek these moments, um, if it's, if it goes in accordance with the wellbeing of the students obviously. [...] And if it's negative ones, yeah, um, tackle them, should they occur too often. If you can do it yourself, then that's fine. Um, if you're feeling overwhelmed, seek advice, ask colleagues straight away, and um, yeah, maybe keep track of whenever they occur because um, if they're getting too often, cause your wellbeing as a teacher and your, yeah, your success as a teacher can, in my case it does, um, or is affected by these emotions, by great sort of degree.”

Similarly, T18 suggested writing down worries and reframing them as solvable problems.

Excerpt 11

“My suggestion to them [novice teachers] would be to write down what’s bothering them. You know, write down what exactly they think the problem is, get it onto a paper, put it aside for a little while and then think about it, then go back to it and ‘Right, okay, I feel this is a problem, how am I going to solve it?’ Cause I think it turns it from a very negative into a positive thing.”

Such simple techniques, anchored in self-awareness and distance-taking, could form part of a broader emotional toolkit shared with pre-service and early-career teachers. They highlight practical, reflective strategies, which could complement structured professional support.

Taken together, these excerpts provide compelling evidence that emotion regulation is both learnable and teachable. Teachers acquire it through experience, observation, reflection, and peer guidance, and as such, responsibility for emotion

regulation and subsequent emotional wellbeing appears to be largely individualised. At the same time, teachers' references to collegial discussion and reflective practices suggest the potential for more collective approaches. While these teachers have learned how to regulate their emotions with little external support, that finding does not mean that teachers should do so. In fact, several of the interviewees offered subtle indications of how their emotion regulation is enhanced through interacting with students and processing challenging situations with their colleagues. They also offered suggestions for practices that language teachers could adopt in working to regulate their emotions. Although these practices were recommended as tips for individual teachers to work on emotion regulation on their own, such efforts could be greatly enhanced if institutions and teacher education programmes adopted them and offered systematic opportunities for teachers to explore and strengthen their emotional capacities. Rather than shouldering this work alone, novice teachers could benefit from explicit training that prepares them for classroom realities, while more experienced teachers could access ongoing resources to sustain their professional wellbeing. Emotion regulation is not just a personal coping strategy; it is a professional competency central to relational, ethical, and pedagogical practice. Recognising it as such and incorporating it into training and institutional frameworks could significantly improve teacher preparedness and wellbeing in contemporary, emotionally demanding educational contexts.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how language teachers develop emotion regulation strategies over time (RQ1), how they experience the ease and difficulty of regulating emotions (RQ2), and how responsibility for emotion regulation is understood and distributed (RQ3). The findings demonstrate that emotion regulation is a learnable professional capacity that teachers reported developing largely through experience, reflection, and collegial exchange rather than through formal preparation. In relation to RQ1 and RQ2,

teachers described entering the profession feeling emotionally underprepared and uncertain, with emotion regulation initially experienced as difficult and overwhelming. Over time, however, participants reported greater confidence, self-awareness, and emotional control, suggesting a developmental trajectory in which regulation becomes easier through accumulated classroom experience. While the ability to regulate emotions emerged as a learnable skill, teachers consistently described developing emotion regulation strategies through personal experience and reflective practice. Notably, participants rarely referred to formal preparation or structured training in emotion regulation during their teacher education. This echoes research on teacher emotions more broadly, which has highlighted the mismatch between what is emphasised in teacher education (i.e., methodology, subject knowledge, assessment) and what teachers later discover to be central to their daily professional lives (Fried et al., 2015; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Sutton, 2004; Yin et al., 2013), and where emotion regulation is described as part of an ‘emotional repertoire’ developed through trial-and-error learning. What our study adds to this conversation is a clearer understanding of how reflective processes scaffold this development. Teachers spoke of rehearsing emotional responses, reflecting after or outside of class, and discussing emotional dilemmas with peers, practices that support the argument made by Schonert-Reichl (2017) and Gkonou and Miller (2023) that emotion regulation involves iterative engagement with one’s professional context, including members embedded in it such as colleagues.

Our data also confirm that emotion regulation is inherently relational. Teachers do not regulate emotions in a vacuum but in response to others, such as students, colleagues, and administrators, whose actions, expectations, and emotional states shape how regulation unfolds (Miller, 2025). As Benesch (2017) and Gkonou and Miller (2023) argue, emotion regulation is not simply internal self-management but is co-constructed in social interaction. One of our most striking findings is that teachers use relational strategies – such as co-constructing classroom agendas with students or seeking emotional distance to avoid shared overwhelm – that suggest a high level of ethical engagement (Gkonou & Miller, 2019). Teachers regulate emotions not only

to function effectively but to maintain dignity, empathy, and professionalism in their interactions. This supports O'Connor's (2008) claim that emotional practice is deeply tied to teachers' ethical commitments.

Additionally, teachers in our study made sense of their emotional experiences in ways that underscore both the vulnerability of the profession and the resilience it demands. Several described entering the classroom during moments of personal difficulty and finding that interaction with students acted as an emotional resource and had a therapeutic function. Others stressed the importance of colleagues as sources of informal guidance, echoing previous findings on the social dimensions of teacher emotion (Schutz et al., 2018). This highlights the relational nature of regulation: teachers do not simply suppress or reframe their emotions as individuals but rely on collective support and shared professional wisdom.

With respect to RQ3, participants overwhelmingly positioned emotion regulation as an individual responsibility, and emphasised personal coping strategies, self-reflection, and informal collegial advice. Even when teachers acknowledged the value of sharing experiences with colleagues, such support remained optional and unofficial. This individualised framing suggests that teachers themselves often perceive emotion regulation as a personal responsibility rather than as something systematically addressed through institutional structures or formal professional development. These findings point to a persistent inequity in how teachers' emotional needs are acknowledged and supported within educational systems. When teacher education programmes and institutions neglect the emotional dimensions of teaching, they implicitly require teachers to manage both their own wellbeing and the broader affective climate of their classrooms without structural recognition or resources. This neglect reproduces patterns of injustice within the profession (Benesch, 2017; Zembylas, 2005, 2007), by rendering emotion regulation invisible while simultaneously treating it as essential to professional practice. From this perspective, institutional provision of emotional training and support should not only be seen as a matter of improving teaching effectiveness or reducing burnout but also a matter of professional

equity and social justice. In this context, we use the term *social justice* to refer specifically to the structural conditions under which teachers are expected to manage emotional demands individually, without systematic institutional support. Our participants' accounts reveal how responsibility for emotion regulation is largely privatised. Framing emotion regulation in social justice terms thus foregrounds inequities in how emotional responsibilities are distributed and supported within educational systems. Teachers, like students, have a right to conditions that recognise the emotional demands of their work and provide the tools to meet them.

Despite its centrality, emotion regulation could be more systematically supported in formal teacher education programmes. Participants repeatedly commented on the intensity of the emotional demands of the profession. This supports findings from Yin et al. (2013), who show that novice teachers often enter classrooms under-prepared for the emotional aspects of teaching. However, support can be systematised, with relevant programmes and interventions such as RULER (Brackett et al., 2012), CARE (Jennings et al., 2017), and mindfulness initiatives (Roeser et al., 2013) being seen as mainstream rather than marginal, and with technical or cognitive concerns viewed as equal to emotional skills (Gkonou & Mercer, 2017). Our data strengthen calls to embed emotional preparation and competence into teacher education not as an optional extra or as remedial focus, but as central pedagogical knowledge. This would not only normalise teachers' experiences but also contribute to more inclusive and sustainable professional cultures.

In sum, our study demonstrates that while emotion regulation is learnable, it is unfair to expect teachers to develop it in isolation. While emotion regulation clearly develops through experience, our findings suggest that teachers often navigate this process largely through personal reflection and informal collegial interaction. This raises the question of whether teacher education and professional development programmes could play a more explicit role in supporting the development of teachers' emotional competencies. A more socially just vision of teacher education and support ought to include emotional preparation as a core professional competency,

recognising that teachers' capacity to sustain themselves emotionally is inseparable from their ability to foster equitable, supportive, and effective learning environments.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the growing recognition that emotion regulation is not merely an individual coping mechanism or an innate trait but a developmental, learnable, and socially mediated skill that ought to be supported through careful and thoughtful educational design. The insights from our participating language teachers across diverse national contexts reveal that emotion regulation can develop through experience, is shaped by interpersonal dynamics, and is enhanced when teachers have opportunities to reflect, share, and receive guidance. These findings support a reimagining of institutional structures and teacher education – one that places emotion regulation at its core and views it as a foundational component. Recognising and formalising emotion regulation as part of teacher education can help move the field towards a more equitable and sustainable model of teacher preparation, one that values not only cognitive and methodological aspects of teaching but also the emotional capacities that are central to ethical, relational, and effective pedagogy. In addition, such integration is both a practical and an ethical imperative. Practically, it can reduce stress, support teacher retention, and enhance the quality of classroom interactions. Ethically, it affirms teachers' right to work in conditions that acknowledge and support their emotional work. In practical terms, integrating emotion regulation training would include not only teaching theoretical models of emotion regulation in an abstract manner, but also offering practical tools, reflective exercises and practice groups, mentoring schemes, and peer discussion opportunities. Teacher educators and professional development coordinators should be trained to support pre-service and early-career teachers in navigating emotional challenges. Mid-career and more experienced teachers might often need some additional support too (Babic et al., 2022; Shin et al., 2023). Overall, emotion regulation should not be treated as a soft

skill that teachers can simply learn by themselves, but as core professional preparation, akin to the technical aspects of teaching which currently occupy a large proportion of input offered as part of teacher education.

While this study offers rich qualitative insight, it is not without limitations. The reliance on convenience sampling and self-selection in terms of participant recruitment limits the generalisability of the findings, and the reliance on self-reported data means that the accounts may be shaped by retrospective bias or social desirability. Moreover, while national diversity is a strength, the lack of a comparative design means that we cannot systematically analyse differences across educational systems or cultures. Future research could address these limitations by adopting a comparative cross-national approach to examine how institutional structures and cultural norms may shape emotion regulation practices. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable in tracking how emotion regulation evolves over time and across careers, particularly in response to professional development interventions. Finally, researchers might explore how emotion regulation intersects with other professional competencies, such as culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive teaching, or language teacher identity construction. In conclusion, we argue that emotion regulation should be recognised as a teachable, relational, and justice-oriented aspect of professional practice. By embedding it in teacher education and professional learning, we can better prepare educators for the emotional complexity of their work and support their long-term wellbeing and effectiveness.

Authors' Contributions

CG and ERM participated in the design of the study and completed the data collection and worked on data analysis. CG and ERM participated in the interpretation of the

results. CG was involved in the writing of the manuscript. Both authors revised and approved the final manuscript.

Ethics Approval & Consent to Participate

This study was approved by the University of Essex Research Ethics Committee and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte Institutional Review Board (IRB #16-0432). All participants provided written informed consent prior to enrolment and data collection in the study.

Declaration of GenAI and AI-Assisted Technologies

In the preparation of this work no GenAI and AI-assisted technologies were used.

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