Predicting the emotional labor strategies of Chinese English Foreign Language teachers

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1. Introduction

We are witnessing an explosion of research in the psychology and the emotions of foreign language (FL) teachers (de Dios Martínez Agudo, 2018; Gkonou, Dewaele, & King, 2020; Mercer & Gregersen, 2020; Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018).

De Costa, Rawal and Li (2018) declared that the increased attention to language teacher emotions makes it "the proverbial newest kid on the SLTE block" (p. 401). The contributions in Gkonou et al. (2020) showed that FL teaching can be an emotional rollercoaster and that not all teachers are equally well-equipped to deal with this challenging reality. It can bring moments of exhilaration and excitement as well as frustration and exhaustion that can lead to burn-out. King, Dewaele and Gkonou (2020) argued that FL teachers need some of the skills of martial artists, including the ability to take a blow without buckling and to regulate their emotions. Research on the emotional ups and downs of teachers is vital not just for the well-being of teachers in the profession but also for teacher-trainers who need to prepare future generations of teachers to deal with the emotional challenges ahead and with strategies to cope (Audrin, 2020; Gkonou et al., 2020). Two psychological variables have attracted attention in the field and merit further investigation. The first one is Trait Emotional Intelligence (Trait EI) which is a lower-order personality trait and concerns people's self-perceptions of their emotional abilities and their inner world (Petrides, 2017). The second variable is emotional labor (EL). The concept was developed by Hochschild (1983) and was defined as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display." (p. 7). It

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has led to an explosion of research across various disciplines, including business studies, organizational and educational psychology. It has also stirred the interest of teacher trainers as a better understanding of teachers' emotional labor, display rules, emotion regulation and management may help avert burnout in the longer term (Chang, 2020). The disciplinary diversity in research on emotional labor means that the concept has been defined and operationalized in very different ways, in order to answer specific research questions linked to specific research designs that reflected a wide range of ontological, epistemological and methodological choices. The literature review will thus contain studies that cover a wide range of stances because we feel that it is crucial to acknowledge the diversity of approaches. The stance will be used as an organizational principle in the literature review.

The aim of the present paper is to identify predictors of strategies of emotional labor through statistical analysis of data provided by 594 Chinese EFL teachers through an online questionnaire. A better understanding of the mechanisms underlying teachers' emotional labor may offer teacher trainers the necessary information on the phenomenon and allow them to raise awareness among trainee teachers. Being psychologically prepared for a job in FL teaching is just as important as being cognitively and linguistically up to the job.

2. Literature review

The question on how people control their emotions has fascinated a wide range of researchers, ranging from those interested in martial arts, in drama, and in any sector where an individual has to deal with customers or students. This ability to regulate one's own emotions and those of others is at the heart of social interactions and is crucial in the workplace. Different theories and conceptualisations have emerged to describe and understand the phenomenon. Among them, EL has attracted wide scholarly attention since Hochschild' (1983) groundbreaking proposition that people in service sectors regulate emotions and sell them as a labor for wages. Due to its roots in sociology, management science and psychology, its conceptualizations and perspectives for investigating remain divergent (Grandey et al., 2013). A line of EL research considers EL as emotion regulation (ER) "in a particular context" (Gross, 2013, p. 292). Gross (2013) highlights two EL research contexts as contributory to the broader ER research: the historical and cultural context and the work context. Similarly, Grandey (2015) adds that research on EL is more strongly focused on the real-world and interested in the role of context (hence leaning towards an emic, qualitative approach) while research on emotion regulation is more lab-based and less concerned about context (hence leading to preference for an etic, quantitative approach). He also emphasizes that although overlaps exist between EL and ER in conceptual, methodological and relational aspects, the differences are "mostly semantic, not substantive" (p. 54). Recently, however, another line of EL research advocates a merging of elements from "occupational requirements, emotional displays and intrapsychic processes" lenses for "a clearer EL concept" and "bolder and more distinct EL parameters" (Grandey et al., 2013, p. 17). Informed by the more encompassing perspective from researchers of the second line, we intend to research Chinese EFL teachers' EL and integrate Trait emotional intelligence (EI), attitudinal, linguistic and socio-biographical variables into our study.

To move a step further, we will first delve deeper in research on emotional labor, as this is the preferred basis for educational psychologists.

2.1. The origins

The pioneering study in research on emotion regulation is Hochschild (1979). Hochschild became interested in suppression of emotion through emotional labor after realizing that people's monitoring of emotions is a central part of their impression management and that it is vital for workers to manage their emotions in order to fulfill the emotional requirements for their job. She understood that emotion work could be done through cognition, by changing an individual's ideas in order to transform that individual's emotions, or through the body, by adopting certain strategies to manage the emotions (such as regular breathing to steady the nerves), or through expressive gestures (such as smiling). She was inspired by various approaches to acting in the theatre. Actors could represent their character for the benefit of the audience for the duration of the play (so-called surface acting) or they could strive to become the character so that their acting would become more authentic (so-called method acting or deep acting). In surface acting the emotions are faked, in deep acting the emotions are self-induced and provide the basis for the acting performance.

2.2. The mechanisms

Gross and John (2003) explained that emotions can be regulated firstly through cognitive reappraisal, when people re-evaluate an event and change the perception of the cause in order to regulate their emotions and, secondly, through suppression, which means the emotions are pushed aside in order to deal with the task at hand. The authors found that people who opted for reappraisal expressed greater positive emotion and less negative emotion, reported better interpersonal functioning and higher levels of well-being than people who sought to regulate their emotions through suppression.

Grandey (2015) argued that surface acting is more than mere suppression of emotions as it also involves the amplification and the faking of emotions. Deep acting involves an effort to make emotion appear genuine, which is slightly different from reappraisal (p. 54). People thus have a range of strategies at their disposal to control their emotions. We will present the main emotional labor strategies in more detail in the next section.

2.3. Emotional labor strategies

Three types of emotional labor strategies have been identified that people can use to keep their composure: Surface acting, Deep acting, and the Expression of naturally felt emotions - which is also effortful (Diefendorff et al., 2005). The authors found that Expression of naturally felt emotions was used more frequently as a strategy of emotional labor than either Deep acting or Surface acting. Different personality traits were found to predict the use of the three strategies: extraversion and agreeableness predicted the Expression of naturally felt emotions, agreeableness was the only predictor of Deep acting, and introversion, neuroticism, low agreeableness and low conscientiousness predicted Surface acting.

2.4. Emotional labor in the teaching profession

There is abundant research on how teachers control their emotions (Burić et al., 2017; Chang, 2020; Taxer & Gross, 2018). Researchers have used different ontological, epistemological and methodological approaches.

Adopting a, etic, quantitative approach, Yin et al. (2013) looked at the link between 1281 Chinese school teachers' emotional labor strategies (Surface acting, Deep acting and Expression of naturally felt emotions) and their Emotional Intelligence. They found that Expression of naturally felt emotions was the most frequently used strategy, followed by Deep acting and finally Surface acting. A significant positive correlation emerged between Emotional Intelligence and Expression of naturally felt emotions and Surface acting, but not Deep acting. A higher level of Emotional Intelligence was also linked to increased teaching satisfaction, confirming previous findings (cf. Wong et al., 2010).

Adopting a similar approach, Acheson and Bruce Nelson (2020) investigated preferences for Deep acting, positive Surface acting (pretending emotions) and negative Surface acting (hiding emotions) by 83 North American FL high school teachers in urban, rural and suburban contexts. The authors found that their participants reported moderate to high levels of emotional labor in their classes. Emotional burnout was found to be significantly negatively correlated with both positive and negative surface acting but no relationship existed with deep acting. Gender and teaching experience were unrelated to the emotional labor but while positive surface acting was unrelated with job satisfaction, negative surface acting was positively linked to job satisfaction. A regression analysis revealed that negative surface acting predicted 10% of variance in job satisfaction (a small effect size).

The same authors had taken an emic stance and used qualitative methods in Acheson et al. (2016) to understand emotional labor among FL teachers in a high school in a rural setting. Interviews revealed that the lack of institutional support combined with apathetic students forced teachers to fake enthusiasm or suppress anger, resulting in excessive emotional labor. Teachers expressed concern that such emotional labor might lead to burn-out.

Following a same avenue, King (2016) used semi-structured interviews on emotional labor within Japanese universities which allowed him establish that some Anglophone teachers believed they were expected to display cheerfulness and enthusiasm in front of learners much more than their Japanese counterparts and this led to them resenting being seen as 'entertainers' rather than serious language professionals.

Humphries (2020) was inspired by King (2016) to focus on a single male Japanese EFL teacher who struggled with a lack of support. He expressed frustration about his students' behavioral problems and poor performance. He did express his emotions freely in class, showing his irritation and not engaging in surface acting. Despite this, he showed evidence of burnout. Adopting a similar approach, Oxford (2020) used a multiple case study approach to look at the emotional labor of five North American teachers and teacher educators. She found it to be linked not just to students but also to interactions with hostile administrators. She observed that emotion regulation and emotional labor are linked to dynamic emotions combined with empathy and emotional intelligence. Her conclusion is that even painful emotional labor can lead to wisdom and that teachers should use the "compass of emotion" (p. 249) to grow as a teacher.

Rather than relying on interviews, de Ruiter et al. (2021) used the diaries of 37 primary school teachers who reported on their emotional labor in the classroom. The authors sought to understand the role of teachers' relationship perceptions on their emotional labor strategies (genuine expression, surface acting) with individual students. Teachers were found to report "more genuine expression of emotions in closer relationships, less genuine expression in relatively conflictuous relationships, and more surface acting (faking and hiding emotions) in relatively dependent relationships" (p. 1).

The sources of emotional labor can also be institutional. Benesch (2017, 2020) used an emic and qualitative approach to investigate how power and emotions are interconnected in English language teaching, arguing that teachers' emotions can reveal unreasonable or unfair demands. Interviews with 13 English language instructors in New York revealed that they struggled with the question on how much time and energy to put into marking and giving feedback on students' essays when there was institutional pressure to minimize the time spent on each paper. Participants reported engaging in stressful emotion labor which leads the author to conclude that emotional labor is not just a private matter. She argues that teachers need greater agency in curricular and pedagogical matters in order to create better teaching and learning conditions.

De Costa et al. (2020) used the same critically-orientated perspective to explore the emotional labor of two teachers working in Nepalese public schools that had introduced English as medium of instruction. The teachers complained about pressure and frustration in their teaching which led to a sense of loss of agency, powerlessness and emotional and physical exhaustion. The authors call for teachers training "to better prepare teachers for emotion labor in the workplace" (p. 224). This should include the "different types of emotion labor they might experience or anticipate at individual, institutional and societal levels" (p. 224).

2.5. Trait Emotional Intelligence, attitudinal, linguistic and socio-biographical variables linked to teaching

We reported earlier that Yin et al. (2013) and Wong et al. (2010) had established a link between teachers' emotional labor strategies and their Emotional Intelligence. Trait Emotional Intelligence (EI) has been formally defined as a constellation of emotional perceptions located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies assessed through questionnaires and rating scales (Petrides et al., 2007). It concerns people's self-perceptions of their emotional abilities and their inner world. Petrides (2017) explained that Trait EI is a personality trait that is linked to nature rather than nurture. It consists of 15 facets grouped under four main factors: Well-being, Emotionality, Self-control and Sociability. Well-being is characterized by the ability to feel cheerful and satisfied with life (happiness), to be self-confident (self-esteem), and to look at the bright side of life (optimism). Emotionality refers to the ability of taking someone else's perspective (empathy), of being clear about people's feelings (emotional perception), of communicating feelings to others (emotional expression), and of maintaining fulfilling personal relationships (relationships). Self-control reflects the ability to control emotions (emotional regulation), not to give in to urges (impulsiveness), and to withstand pressure and regulate stress (stress management). The final factor is Sociability, which refers to the ability to influence other people's feelings (emotional management), to stand up for one's rights (assertiveness), and to establish networks thanks to social skills (social awareness).

Trait EI is frequently included as an independent variable in general education studies as it is linked to classroom management and practice. Highly emotionally intelligent teachers have been found to deal better with group dynamics in the classroom, and are more likely to avoid stress and burnout (Brackett et al., 2010; Corcoran & Tormey, 2012, 2013). Teachers with high Trait EI create more engaging lessons and boost learners' motivation while reducing disruptive behavior in their classes (Richards & Gross 1999). Chan (2004) found that teachers' levels of perceived EI predicted their general self-efficacy and self-efficacy toward helping others. Gregersen et al. (2014) found that high Trait EI among FL teachers was linked to stronger emotion-regulation skills in the classroom. Gkonou and Mercer (2017) confirmed that highly emotionally intelligent English teachers were better able to draw on their previous teaching experience to interpret and deal with unexpected classroom events and manage the class smoothly. Training can be the key for teachers with lower levels of EI. Vesely et al. (2014) reported that focused EI training had a positive impact on EI and related psychological well-being variables of 49 undergraduate teacher students and could thus contribute of better management of occupational stress and emotional labor.

Trait EI was one of the independent variables included in five studies based on the same quantitative database of 513 EFL teachers from all over the world. The first study, Dewaele and Mercer (2018), considered sources of variation from sociobiographical, linguistic and psychological sources among EFL teachers' self-reported attitudes towards their students. Teachers with high levels of Trait EI were found to have more positive attitudes towards their students and enjoyed their lively students more than peers with lower levels of Trait EI. The second study, Dewaele, Gkonou, & Mercer (2018), looked at sources of variation from sociobiographical, linguistic and psychological sources on the EFL teachers' self-reported classroom behavior. Trait EI was found to be statistically significantly (and positively) linked with self-reported creativity, classroom management, pedagogical skills and negatively linked to predictability in the teaching. Teachers with longer experience also reported higher levels of creativity in their classrooms, better management of classroom activities, stronger pedagogical skills and lower levels of predictability in the classroom. Dewaele (2019) was the third study on the same database. It took a more granular view of Trait EI and focused on the specific links between the four factors that constitute Trait EI and 11 dependent variables, including attitudinal variables (teachers' love of English, attitudes towards their students, their institution) and their self-reported classroom practices, and a self-assessment of their teaching skills. Sociability was found to be significantly linked with most dependent variables, followed by Well-being, Self-control and Emotionality. Dewaele (2020) was the fourth study that focused specifically on the relationships between EFL teachers' global Trait EI and the four factors, and their scores on the dimensions of teacher motivation, namely intrinsic motivation, identified regulation, introjected regulation and amotivation. Significant positive correlations emerged between the four factors and intrinsic motivation as well as identified regulation. Only Sociability was significantly positively linked with introjected regulation. Significant negative correlations were found between all four factors and amotivation.

The importance of FL teachers' perceived Trait EI on students' positive feelings and attitudes towards the teacher emerged in Moskowitz and Dewaele (2020). The 129 participants who estimated their teacher's Sociability and Self-control more highly reported significantly higher levels of positive feelings and more positive attitudes towards the teacher. A previous study on the same sample showed that the more learners felt their teacher was happy, the higher their levels of attitude and motivation to learn the FL. This is interpreted as evidence of positive emotional contagion.

To sum up, this brief literature review has shown that considerable research has been carried out recently on the psychology of teachers, including on emotional labor. However, a majority of research on the latter has been through case studies. These may bring to the fore causes of emotional labor experienced by unique individuals in unique contexts but they defy any type of generalization. It remains unclear, for example, to what extent variables like proficiency in the FL may affect the emotional labor of FL teachers, or whether their attitudes towards students, their institution, the FL, their classroom practices, or even their age, gender and teaching experience may shape their emotional labor.

In the present study we will carry out a systematic investigation into the combined effects of a range of independent variables, including Trait EI alongside socio-biographical, institutional, attitudinal, behavioral and linguistic variables in order to identify the strongest predictors of emotional labor strategies among 594 Chinese EFL teachers. We will also investigate the preferences for specific emotional labor strategies and the relationships between them and independent variables.

Our ontological, epistemological and methodological stance in the current study leans toward realism, objectivism and quantification but it does not imply a rejection of alternative stances. We very much agree with Dörnyei (2007) who stated that the quantitative approach is "systematic, rigorous, focused, and tightly controlled, involving precise measurement and producing reliable and

replicable data" (p. 34). We also stand squarely behind Pavlenko (2002) who argued in favor of epistemological and methodological diversity in applied linguistics: "poststructuralist approaches will bloom best when surrounded by other flowers in the garden of theory and practice, giving rise to present and future debates and controversies" (p. 299).

3. Research questions

The present study aims to address the following research questions:

1) Are there differences in preference for the different emotional labor strategies among Chinese EFL teachers?
2) What is the relationship between the different emotional labor strategies among Chinese EFL teachers?
3) What is the relationship between institutional, attitudinal, linguistic and psychological variables and the different emotional labor strategies and which are the strongest predictors of the preferences for different emotional labor strategies among Chinese EFL teachers?
4) Are the preferences for different emotional labor strategies among Chinese EFL teachers linked to sociobiographical variables?

4. Method

4.1. Instruments

The instrument to collect data on Emotional labor strategies was based on instruments developed by Yin et al. (2013) and Yang et al. (2019) and slightly adapted to the context of an English EFL class. A first version of the questionnaire was pilot tested with 15 EFL teachers that were invited by the second author. Three items that dragged the Cronbach alpha of the Emotional labor scale down were reformulated and some minor changes were made to the presentation of the questionnaire. Snowball sampling was used to reach participants, which is a form of non-probability sampling (Ness Evans & Rooney, 2013). The final version of the questionnaire was put on Wenjuanxing, a Chinese online survey tool. Calls for participation were sent through social media, direct emails to teachers, students, and informal contacts asking them to forward the link to colleagues. The questionnaire remained online for about two and a half months in 2019 and attracted responses from 624 EFL teachers across China, of which 596 filled out the questionnaire completely.

Online questionnaires are ideal to collect large amounts of data cheaply and efficiently. They allow researchers to reach a large potential pool of participants but also allow them to reach 'small, scattered, or specialised populations which would otherwise be difficult to reach' (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 121). Wider diversity in the sample can be both a strength and a limitation as increased heterogeneity may introduce unwanted noise in the data. Participant self-selection is another double-edged issue as it means that those who decide to spend time filling out the questionnaire are likely to provide better quality data than those who are forced to participate (Dewaele, 2018; Dörnyei, 2007) but it also means that it might introduce a positive bias as those with higher levels of motivation and interest are more likely to choose to participate. It is thus important to acknowledge that even large samples collected through snowball sampling do not represent the general population.

The research design and questionnaires received ethical clearance from the first author's research institution. Participants remained anonymous and started by completing a short sociobiographical questionnaire with questions about gender, age, nationality, country of residence, language history, and numbers of years in the profession. The questionnaire was in Chinese.

Participants also filled out the short version of the Trait EI Questionnaire - Short Form in Chinese (Petrides, 2009), which contains 30 items. The instrument has been shown to be psychometrically solid, with a Cronbach alpha of .88 for Global trait EI (Feher et al., 2019, p. 4). The Cronbach alpha for Global trait EI was 0.66 in our study. Further analyses of the four factors revealed acceptable to satisfactory internal consistency. The Cronbach alpha scores were satisfactory for Well-being: $\alpha = 0.764$, Emotionality: $\alpha = 0.655$, Self-control: $\alpha = 0.637$, and just below the border-line for Sociability: $\alpha = 0.586$. Dörnyei (2007) pointed about that Cronbach alpha scores below 0.60 "should sound warning bells" (p. 207). However, the pattern mirrors that of Feher et al. (2019) for the Chinese sample where Well-being had the highest alpha (0.82), followed by Emotionality and Self-control: both with $\alpha = 0.65$, and with Sociability having the lowest value: $\alpha = 0.47$ (p. 4). The authors explain that the fact that the TEIQue-SF has "a similar factor structure within different cultural contexts do not guarantee that the measure will perform equivalently across cultures" (p. 5). The authors speculate that the items for Sociability may have had a slightly different meaning for the Chinese participants than for the Canadian participants with whom they were compared. We thus decided to maintain the factor Sociability.

The next part of the survey consisted of the English version of the LEXTALE, a 60-item lexical test developed by Lemhöfer and Broersma (2012). It is a "quick and practically feasible test of vocabulary knowledge for medium to highly proficient speakers of English as a second language". It consists of a simple un-speeded visual lexical decision task" (Lemhöfer & Broersma, 2012).[1] The test gives a good indication of overall English proficiency. Scores correlate highly with TOEIC test results, an established test of English proficiency.

The final part of the questionnaire aimed to collect data on three emotional labor strategies: Expression of naturally felt emotions, Surface and Deep acting (see Appendix). Responses were given on a 7-point Likert scale. A Cronbach alpha analysis revealed satisfactory internal consistency for Expression of naturally felt emotions (3 items, $\alpha = 0.836$) and Surface acting (4 items, $\alpha = 0.660$).

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[1] http://www.lextale.com/whatislextale.html.

However, the Cronbach alpha for Deep Acting (4 items, $\alpha = 0.542$) fell well below the threshold set by Dörnyei (2007). Because the deletion of a single item could not improve the Cronbach alpha sufficiently, Deep Acting has been left out of the analyses.

4.2. Participants

A total of 596 participants (491 females, 95 males[2]) filled out the questionnaire. Participants' age ranged from 21 to 58, with a mean of 37.7 years ($SD = 9.2$). The large majority of female participants is typical in web-based questionnaires that deal with language and emotion. All participants had the Chinese nationality. Their first languages include 10 different Chinese dialects, 12 distinct regional variants/local speeches, and 2 minority languages, with Mandarin and the regional Mandarin variants/local speeches constituting the two largest groups, followed by the following dialects: Wu, Min, Hui, Cantonese, Xiang, Ping, Gan, Hakka, and Jin. The participants also speak a total of eight foreign languages, with everybody mastering English followed by Japanese, French, German, Korean, Spanish, Russian and Italian. The sample consists of 246 bilinguals, 245 trilinguals, 93 quadrilinguals and 12 pentalinguals. All participants had obtained a university degree, with 260 having a Bachelor degree, 262 a Masters' degree and 71 a PhD. They included both trainee teachers ($n = 61$) and qualified teachers ($n = 535$). A majority of participants were teaching English at university ($n = 250$) or in secondary schools ($n = 225$) with smaller numbers teaching in primary schools ($n = 72$), and junior colleges ($n = 49$). A large majority taught in schools where Chinese was the working language ($n = 545$), with a minority teaching in Chinese-English bilingual schools ($n = 38$) or in English schools ($n = 13$). They had been teachers between 6 months and 42 years, with a mean of 14.3 ($SD = 10$).

4.3. Independent variables

Data were collected through closed questions with 5-point Likert scale about attitudes towards English, towards students and lively students (first used in Dewaele & Mercer, 2018). A number of questions focused on teaching practices, such as frequency of use of English in class, creativity, predictability, classroom management skills, pedagogical or didactic skills (used in Dewaele et al. 2018; Dewaele, 2020). Other questions dealt with the institutional climate such as participants' influence over the content and skills to be taught, the importance of English in the institution and their self-rated proficiency. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. The mean score of 66 on the LEXTALE test corresponds to upper intermediate users (B2) in the Common European Framework (Lemhöfer & Broersma, 2012, p. 341).

4.4. Dependent variables

Scores for Expression of naturally felt emotions ranged from 1 to 7, *mean* $= 5.45$, $SD = 0.81$. Scores for Surface acting ranged from 2.60 to 7.00, *mean* $= 4.38$, $SD = 0.78$. Q-Q plots suggests that the values follow a normal distribution reasonably well except for the extreme tails (see Figs. 1 and 2). We thus opted for the more powerful parametric statistics. However, when comparing both dimensions, we will use a boxplot to highlight the distribution of values and locate outliers.

5. Results

A paired *t*-test revealed a highly significant difference between Surface acting (*Mean* $= 4.38$, $SD = 0.78$) and Expression of naturally felt emotions (*Mean* $= 5.45$, $SD = 0.81$) ($t(595) = 20.4, p < .0001$, Cohen's $d = 1.35$). According to Plonsky and Oswald (2014, p. 889) this is a large effect size. A boxplot (see Fig. 3) reveals that the median for surface acting is much lower than that for Expression of naturally felt emotions and that the top whisker is longer for surface acting. The bottom whiskers are similar for both but there are more outliers at the lower end of Expression of naturally felt emotions. The upper quartile for Expression of naturally felt emotions is also smaller than for Surface acting.

To answer the second research question, we ran a Pearson correlation analysis that revealed a significant negative relationship between Expression of naturally felt emotions and Surface acting ($r(595) = -0.307, p < .0001$). This corresponds to a small effect size according to Plonsky and Oswald (2014).[3]

The third research question was addressed in two stages. Firstly, a series of Pearson correlation analyses revealed which independent variables were linked to Expression of naturally felt emotions and Surface acting (see Table 2).

Secondly, all the independent variables that were significantly linked to Expression of naturally felt emotions in the correlation analyses were introduced in a stepwise linear regression model in order to investigate the unique effect of each independent variable on the dependent variable while controlling for the effect of the others[4]. The Durbin-Watson value (1.66) and the VIF values (ranging from 1.1 to 1.2) indicated no concern for autocorrelation nor multicollinearity, the normality and residual plots indicated linearity and homoscedasticity. A significant regression equation was found, with four variables predicting 10% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = 9.5$, $F(4, 591) = 16.55, p < .0001$). This represents a small effect size (Plonsky & Ghanbar, 2018). The strongest positive predictor was attitude toward students, explaining 5.5% of variance ($\beta = 0.15, p < .001$) (see Fig. 4). Emotionality explained an additional 3.1% of

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[2] Ten participants did not answer this question.
[3] Plonsky and Oswald (2014) recommend the following benchmarks for the interpretation of effect size in correlation coefficients: "we suggest that *r*s close to 0.25 be considered small, 0.40 medium, and 0.60 large" (p. 889).
[4] With the exception of Global Trait EI as this would overlap with the more granular measures of the four factors of TEI.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for the independent variables.

| Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Love English	1	5	3.98	.668
Attitude students	1	5	3.70	.638
Enjoy lively students	2	5	4.07	.531
Frequency of use of English	1	5	4.11	.695
Creativity	1	5	3.45	.820
Unpredictability	1	5	3.69	.600
Classroom management skills	1	5	3.45	.602
Pedagogical skills	2	5	3.48	.578
Influence over content and skills	1	5	3.17	.781
Importance English teaching	1	5	3.71	.766
Self-rated Proficiency	1	5	4.47	.664
Actual Proficiency	32.5	100	65.8	13.6
Wellbeing	1.67	7.00	5.15	.790
Sociability	1.83	6.17	4.25	.757
Self-control	2.17	6.67	4.72	.792
Emotionality	2.63	7.00	5.09	.701
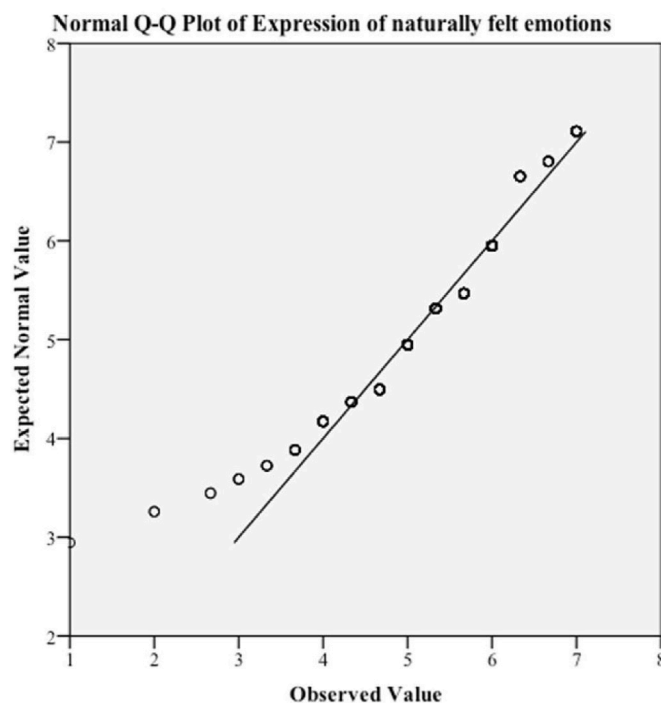
Fig. 1. Q-Q plot for Expression of naturally felt emotions.

variance ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < .0001$) (see Fig. 5), followed by Importance of English teaching in the institution ($\beta = 0.09$, $p < .033$) and Influence over content and skills ($\beta = 0.08$, $p < .046$), which explained a further 0.8% and 0.6% of variance respectively.

A second stepwise linear regression model was run including the five independent variables that were significantly linked to Surface acting. The Durbin-Watson value (0.98) and the VIF value (1.0) indicated no concern for autocorrelation nor multicollinearity, the normality and residual plots indicated linearity and homoscedasticity. A significant regression equation was found, with a single variable predicting 4.5% of the variance (adjusted $R^2 = 4.3$, $F(1, 594) = 27.8$, $p < .0001$). This represents a small effect size. The only negative predictor was Sociability, explaining 4.5% of the variance ($\beta = -0.21$, $p < .001$) (see Fig. 6).

The fourth and final research question dealt with the potential effect of eight sociobiographical variables on emotional labor strategies. An independent *t*-test revealed that gender was the only variable to have an effect on a single strategy: The 95 male participants reported significantly more surface acting (*Mean* = 4.62, *SD* = 0.84) than the 491 female participants (*Mean* = 4.62, *SD* = 0.84) (see Table 3). This represents a small effect size (Cohen's *d* = 0.364) (Plonsky & Oswald, 2014). None of the other variables were linked to emotional labor strategies.
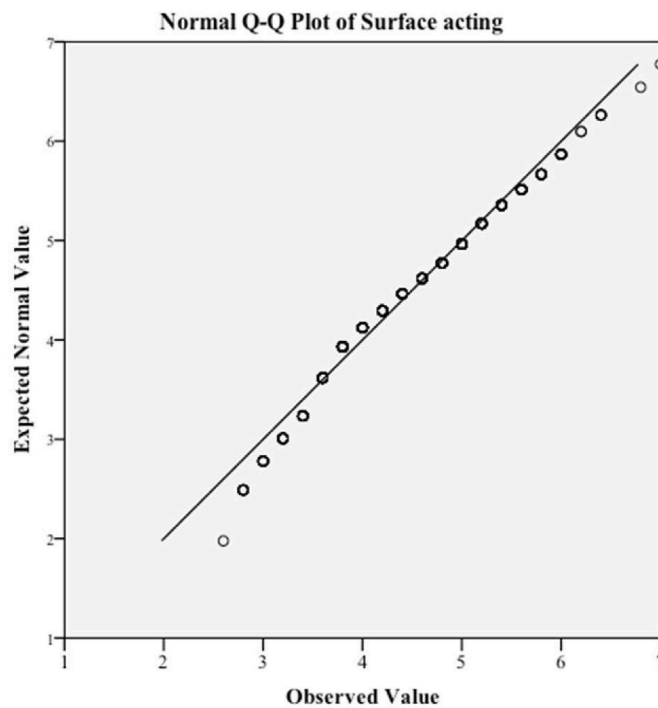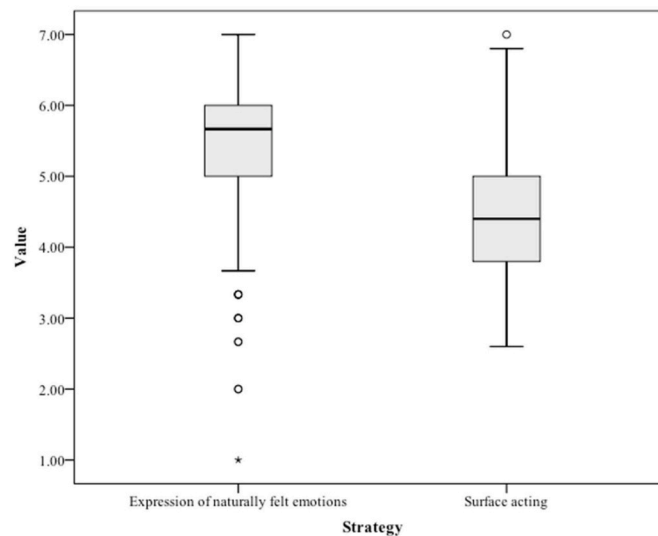
Fig. 2. Q-Q plot for Surface acting.

Fig. 3. Boxplot representing values for Expression of naturally felt emotions and Surface acting.

6. Discussion

The first research question dealt with the difference in preference for Expression of naturally felt emotions or Surface acting. The values for Surface acting were significantly lower than for Expression of naturally felt emotions and it represented a large effect size. The findings confirmed the pattern that Yin et al. (2013) identified among Chinese school teachers, namely a clear preference for Expression of naturally felt emotions rather than faking them. This strategy may have required a conscious effort from the teacher to ensure that their display was consistent with the institutions' expectations but it was probably less costly than faking positive emotions. Overall, the mean values for both Expression of naturally felt emotions and Surface acting confirm the findings in Acheson et al. (2016) and Acheson and Bruce Nelson (2020) that FL teachers engage heavily in emotional labor and that as such, it may come at a price, with future emotional burnout being a constant threat.

Table 2

Correlations between independent and dependent variables (Pearson *r*).

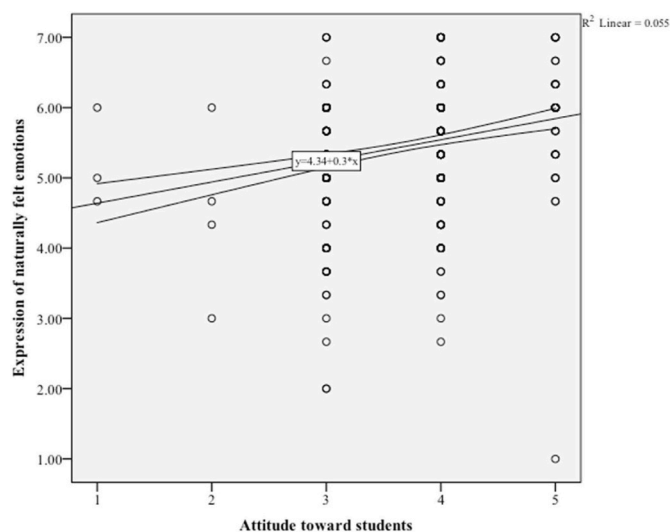| Variable	Expression of naturally felt emotions	Surface acting
Love English	.161**	-.051
Attitude toward students	.236**	-.104*
Enjoy lively students	.140**	-.032
Frequency of use of English	.074	-.079
Creativity	.178**	-.083*
Unpredictability	.090*	-.002
Classroom management skills	.079	.015
Pedagogical skills	.099*	-.020
Influence over content and skills	.172**	-.042
Importance English teaching	.169**	-.030
Self-rated Proficiency	.051	.062
Actual proficiency	-.034	-.031
Wellbeing (Trait EI)	.200**	-.107**
Sociability (Trait EI)	.151**	-.212**
Self-control (Trait EI)	.129**	-.134**
Emotionality (Trait EI)	.233**	-.184**
Global Trait Emotional Intelligence	.224**	-.194**

$*p < .05, **p < .01.$

Fig. 4. Effect of Attitude toward students on Expression of naturally felt emotions (with 95% confidence interval).

The second research question considered the relationship between Expression of naturally felt emotions and Surface acting. A significant negative correlation suggests that there is a limited amount of overlap (9%), representing a small effect size. It means that these two dimensions are independent but that teachers who score higher on Expression of naturally felt emotions tend to score lower on Surface acting. This finding mirrors the negative correlation between surface acting and Expression of naturally felt emotions ($r = -0.26$, $p < .01$) among Chinese school teachers reported in Yin et al., 2013, p. 141).

To answer the third research question on the relationship between institutional, attitudinal, linguistic and psychological variables and Expression of naturally felt emotions and Surface acting, we proceeded in two stages, with correlation analyses preceding multiple regression analyses. Firstly, Expression of naturally felt emotions was found to be significantly linked to 12 independent variables. These included institutional, attitudinal and psychological variables, but not linguistic variables (self-reported and actual proficiency). Secondly, a stepwise linear regression analysis revealed that four variables predicted 10% of the variance in Expression of naturally felt emotions (a small effect size). Participants who had a more positive attitude toward students were more likely to express their naturally felt emotions. Also, participants who scored higher on Emotionality were more likely to opt for Expression of naturally felt emotions. This is not surprising considering that this dimension of Trait EI reflects the ability to perceive one's own and students' emotions, and crucially a capacity to communicate feelings to their students. It is thus linked to fulfilling personal relationships and empathy with the students (Petrides, 2017). Two institutional variables explained a further 1.4% of variance. Firstly, participants who reported that their institution attached a lot of importance to the teaching of English were more likely to opt for Expression of naturally felt emotions. Secondly, those who reported that they had more influence over content and skills to be taught also scored higher on Expression of naturally felt emotions. This fits with the view of Benesch (2017, 2020) and De Costa et al. (2020) that emotional labor can be caused
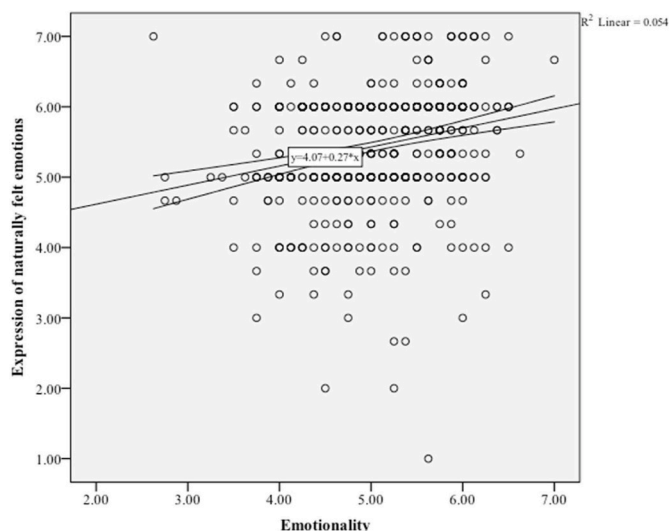
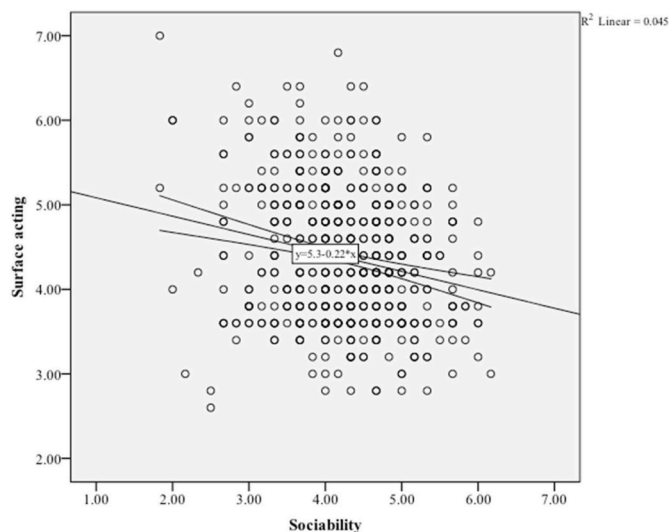**Fig. 5.** Effect of Emotionality on Expression of naturally felt emotions (with 95% confidence interval).

Fig. 6. Effect of Sociability on Surface acting (with 95% confidence interval).

Table 3
Relationship between sociobiographical independent variables and dependent variables.

Variable	Statistical test	Expression of naturally felt emotions	Surface acting
Gender	Independent t-test	$t = -1.6, p = ns$	$t = 3.5, p < .001$
Age	Pearson correlation	$r = .024, p = ns$	$r = .024, p = ns$
Number of languages known	Pearson correlation	$r = .067, p = ns$	$r = -.043, p = ns$
Education level	ANOVA	$F = .41, p = ns$	$F = 2.51, p = ns$
Trainee/Qualified teachers	Independent t-test	$t = -1.5, p = ns$	$t = .94, p = ns$
Type of institution	ANOVA	$F = .99, p = ns$	$F = .70, p = ns$
Working language of institution	ANOVA	$F = .13, p = ns$	$F = .08, p = ns$
Length of time in the profession	Pearson correlation	$r = .028, p = ns$	$r = .041, p = ns$

by institutional pressure and that having a degree of autonomy and power over the content of their classes is beneficial for teachers. The link between having a positive attitude toward students and the Expression of naturally felt emotions fits perfectly with previous research that highlighted the impact of this variable on EFL teachers' classroom behavior (Dewaele, 2019, 2020; Dewaele & Mercer, 2018; Dewaele et al., 2018). It is also worth remembering the research that showed that teachers' positive attitudes toward students

contribute to a more positive emotional environment in the classroom where students are more likely to blossom as a result (Moskowitz & Dewaele, 2020, 2021; Oxford, 2020). A second series of correlation analyses showed that 6 independent variables were significantly linked to Surface acting. These included attitudinal and psychological variables, but no institutional nor linguistic variables (self-reported and actual proficiency). A stepwise linear regression analysis revealed that only a single variable, Sociability, was a significant negative predictor of Surface acting, explaining 4.5% of variance (a small effect size). In other words, teachers who were more likely to fake their emotions had poorer social skills, struggled to influence their students' feelings, lacked assertiveness and found it harder to stand up for their rights (Petrides, 2017). These findings thus confirm and extend previous research on the role of Trait EI on a wide range of variables in FL teaching (Brackett et al., 2010; Corcoran & Tormey, 2012, 2013; Dewaele, 2019, Dewaele, 2020; Dewaele & Mercer, 2018; Dewaele, Gkonou, & Mercer, 2018; Gkonou & Mercer, 2017; Gregersen et al., 2014; Richards & Gross, 1999). It also identified the specific importance of two factors, namely Emotionality and Sociability (cf. Dewaele, 2019, 2020). Finally, the findings fit with the pattern that Surface acting is an indication of feeling emotionally drained and having low job satisfaction (Acheson & Bruce Nelson, 2020). One surprising finding was that actual and self-perceived proficiency in English – a FL for all the participants-were completely unrelated to strategies for emotional labor. This was slightly unexpected because this linguistic variable was positively related to FL teachers' attitudinal variables (Dewaele & Mercer, 2018). It does confirm the finding that proficiency was unrelated to self-reported predictability, classroom management and pedagogical skills (Dewaele et al., 2018). It suggests that even relatively less proficient FL teachers engage in emotional labor to the same degree as their more proficient peers. This result might be linked to the Chinese cultural context, where the authority of the teacher is typically more strongly established than in the Western world. Teachers might thus be less worried that a proficiency gap might undermine their authority leading to more emotional labor.

The answer to the final research question on the relationship between sociobiographical and emotional labor strategies is surprising as gender was the only variable to have any effect on surface acting. This is in contrast with the absence of a gender effect in Acheson and Bruce Nelson (2020). Given the small effect size and the gender imbalance in our sample, it is not really possible to draw any conclusion from this finding.

The present paper is not without limitations. Firstly, we acknowledge the gender imbalance which is typical in web-based studies on emotion that are based on non-random sampling (Dewaele, 2018; Dewaele and Mercer 2018). The teacher profession in China is also largely female (Chengyi, 2017), a pattern that is probably reflected in the EFL profession. In other words, our sample reflects the gender composition of the profession. Secondly, we acknowledge that the internal consistency for some our scales was not very high which calls for extra caution in interpreting the findings. Further research may improve the instruments that were used in the present study. Thirdly, we cannot exclude the influence of variables that were not included in the design. Variables such as the importance paid to the teaching of English and teacher autonomy may be linked to other factors such as the reputation of the school, the quality of the students, the salary of the teacher and the institutional support mechanisms in place to assist teachers showing symptoms of burnout. Qualitative data could also help address the second limitation, namely the fact that the correlational design makes it impossible to pinpoint causality. Indeed, it is perfectly possible for the causality to be multi-directional. While personality traits are usually used to predict behavior, it is possible to argue that teachers' levels of Trait EI may increase as result of their professional activities. Similarly, it is possible that emotional labor affects attitudes toward students, rather than the other way round. If the result of all that emotional effort does not seem to create the desired outcome, disengagement and negative attitudes may emerge (Humphries, 2020). Also, it could be argued that having a positive attitude toward students is the result of a mirror effect, namely them having a positive attitude towards the teacher, especially when the teacher is perceived to be sociable and good in handling emotions (Moskowitz & Dewaele, 2020, 2021).

We realise that the present study has bared scratched the surface of a complex and fascinating phenomenon. Further research could adopt a more granular view of emotional labor, as there are undoubtedly more than three strategies. Intervention studies and longitudinal designs could also help to establish whether teachers' preferences change over time, and whether training might help in sustainable emotion regulation. Moreover, it would be interesting to what extent culture affects emotional labor strategies. Cross-cultural studies could investigate differences, and could also focus on the effect of teachers' acculturation in a new culture on their emotional labor strategies.

7. Conclusion

The present study set out to shed light on strategies of emotional labor among Chinese EFL teachers using an etic, quantitative approach. Expression of naturally felt emotions was found to be preferred over Surface acting. Also, those who opted for the one typically dispreferred the other. Attitude towards students, Emotionality (a factor of Trait EI), and two institutional variables, namely the importance of teaching English in the institution and the amount of teacher control over their teaching were identified as predictors of the Expression of naturally felt emotions. Only a single factor of Trait EI, Sociability, negatively predicted Surface acting. In other words, less sociable teachers were more likely to resort to Surface acting, which is potentially more emotionally exhausting than the Expression of naturally felt emotions.

The pedagogical implications need to be formulated very carefully because the effect sizes were modest which means other unseen factors may play a role. Also, the design did not permit to establish causality unequivocally. Teacher trainers may want to emphasize that emotions play a central role in the profession (cf. Audrin, 2020; Burić et al., 2017; Chang, 2020, Taxer & Gross, 2018) and that minimizing the weight of emotional labor means avoiding the risk of burnout. It is also worth reconsidering the parallelism between FL teachers and martial artists (cf. King et al., 2020) in the light of the present findings. Martial artists who go to their back belt grading are pushed to the point of complete physical and emotional exhaustion. Lacking stamina, showing anger, fear or frustration leads to failure. The key to success is "mushin", a Zen expression that refers to a state of mind where the person is highly alert and free of

negative emotions. Rather than overthinking, the person reacts intuitively and decisively. Like martial artists, teachers who have been trained to regulate their emotions will need less costly emotional labor, will be happier and more likely to have happy students.

APPENDIX. Chinese EFL teacher emotional labor scale

Below are statements about the way you perceive your emotions when you are teaching English to students. On a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), how do you rate yourself?

1.The emotions I express to students in class are genuine.

我向学生表达的情绪是真实的。

2.The emotions I show to students in teaching come naturally.

我向学生表达的情绪是自然产生的.

3.The emotions I show students in teaching reflect what I spontaneously feel.

我向学生表达的情绪是我不由自主的感受。

4.I put on an act in class in order to get along well with students.

教学中为了让学生满意我不得不掩饰真实的自己。

5.I just pretend to have the emotions I need to display for teaching.

教学中呈现出来的情绪通常不是我的真实感受。

6.I put on a "mask" in order to display the emotions I need for teaching.

为了表现出好的教学态度我隐藏我的真实情感。

7.I try to be patient in class with students of low English proficiency.

对于英语不好的学我课堂上努力保持耐心。

8.I try to control myself when students show no interest in English in class.

当课堂上学生表现出对英语没有兴趣时我努力控制自己的不佳情绪。

9.I try to actually experience the emotions that I must show to students in order to teach well.

通常我会试着践行课堂上教师必须向学生表现的情绪。

10.I make an effort to actually feel the emotions that I need to display toward students in teaching.

通常我会努力从内心调整需要向学生表达的情绪。

11.In order to satisfy students, I will try to understand their feelings.

为了使学生满意我会尝试理解他们的感受。

Note: Three dimensions: Expression of naturally felt emotions (items 1–3); Surface acting (items 4–7); Deep acting (items 8–11).

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