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EFL teachers' perceptions of emotional exhaustion and associated regulation strategies: a phenomenological analysis

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ABSTRACT

Teaching, particularly in a second/foreign language (L2) context, is an emotionally demanding profession, often leading to negative outcomes for educators. Teaching, particularly in a second/foreign language (L2) context, is an emotionally demanding profession, often leading to negative outcomes for educators. To fill the gap, this phenomenological study examined the causes, consequences, and regulation strategies of Chinese EFL teachers' emotional exhaustion. A semi-structured interview was held with 58 teachers. The results of thematic analysis revealed that this emotional state had different causes and consequences. The most frequent causes were 'occupational pressures', 'identity conflicts and mismatches', 'stressful classroom climate', 'high expectations', and 'students' poor performance and cooperation'. Additionally, it was found that teachers' emotional exhaustion can mostly lead to 'poor teaching quality', 'job burnout', 'low work engagement', 'low teaching enthusiasm', and 'various other negative emotions and outcomes'. To regulate such an aversive feeling, the participants used a range of preventive and responsive strategies before and after its occurrence. The study discusses the findings and presents some conclusions and implications for Chinese L2 teachers, teacher trainers, and policy-makers to raise their understanding of the nature and mechanism of emotional exhaustion in teaching English and its regulation.

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KEYWORDS

EFL teacher; teacher emotions; emotional exhaustion; positive psychology; emotion regulation strategies

1. Introduction

Recent studies on the psychology of second/foreign language (L2) teaching suggest the profession to be highly emotional and governed by one's psycho-affective factors (Derakhshan, 2022; Derakhshan & Fathi, 2024; Mercer, 2020). Given the nature of L2 education, there are many stressors and challenges considering language, culture, context, and instruction that should be taken care of by teachers (Derakhshan et al., 2024; MacIntyre, 2021; Fan & Wang, 2022). This synergy of numerous factors internal and external to the teacher creates emotional pressures and many negative affective states in English language teachers (Derakhshan et al., 2023; MacIntyre et al., 2019). In many cases, the emotional tensions and emotional load that L2 teaching places on teachers lead to damaging emotions like burnout, boredom, disengagement, demotivation, fatigue, and the like (Akram & Li, 2024; Derakhshan, 2022; Kruk, 2021; MacIntyre, 2021). As emotions are tightly connected to teachers' teaching performance, quality, and practice, current scholarship has shifted from pure linguistics concerns toward teacher emotionality in light of positive psychology (PP) trends

(Derakhshan et al., 2023; Derakhshan & Shakki, 2022; Qi & Wang, 2024; Solhi et al., 2023). One of the direst emotional states that teachers, who teach in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts is emotional exhaustion, which has received scant attention from researchers. The concept of emotional exhaustion is a sub-component of teacher burnout, referring to the experience of negative emotions of pressure and depletion of one's emotional resources (Maslach et al., 2001; Wang et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2024). It is a syndrome rooted in job burnout in which a teacher feels overwhelmed, tired, and full of chronic stressors in his/her teaching profession (Klusmann et al., 2023).

Emotional exhaustion is embodied by a complete lack of energy and emotional depletion (Cui, 2022). It is a significant factor in education because its presence and increased level can negatively affect teachers' well-being, efficacy, and quality of instruction (Bing et al., 2022; Yin et al., 2019). Moreover, teachers' mental health, professional success, professional behaviors, satisfaction, teaching enthusiasm, and motivation are directly influenced by their perceived emotional exhaustion in their job (Klusmann et al., 2022; Madigan & Kim, 2021; Schulze-Hagenest et al., 2023). Previous studies also show that teachers' emotional exhaustion is affected by context and mode of instruction as well as dominant teacher-student relationships in the classroom (Olivier et al., 2024; Voss et al., 2023). In EFL contexts, emotional exhaustion has been reported to shape teachers' classroom management (Köksal, 2024), self-efficacy beliefs (Chang, 2022), and reflectivity (Mahmoodi & Ghaslani, 2014). Depending on their experiences, personalities, and resources, teachers may respond to emotional exhaustion differently (Bleck & Lipowsky, 2022). They use different emotion regulation strategies to cope with this negative emotion in teaching (Gross, 1998). These strategies are described as techniques and practices that a person uses to manage, suppress, or augment an emotion (Gross & John, 2003). Although research on the construct of emotional exhaustion is increasing, most of the studies are either in general education or occupational contexts (Olivier et al., 2024; Pöysä et al., 2021; Schulze-Hagenest et al., 2023). Moreover, many studies on this psycho-affective variable have focused on its conceptualization in relation to teachers' burnout (Chang, 2022; Köksal, 2024; Leiter & Maslach, 2016). Additionally, the studies are mainly correlational and few studies (if any) have qualitatively examined EFL teachers' emotional exhaustion. The causes and consequences of this teacher-related emotion are left unnoticed by L2 researchers, to date. As L2 teaching is a highly stressful and emotion-laden job (Ghiasvand et al., 2024), it is essential to sketch out how EFL teachers perceive and regulate their emotional exhaustion. This would help teachers and trainers in devising and cultivating practical methods to cope with negative emotions in L2 instruction. These needs motivated the researchers to run a phenomenological analysis of Chinese EFL teachers' perceptions and experiences of emotional exhaustion and regulatory strategies.

2. Literature review

2.1. Teacher emotional exhaustion

EFL teachers usually experience different negative emotions in their job (Derakhshan et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2021). One such emotion is emotional exhaustion, which is defined as a sense of emptiness and energy depletion in work (Maslach, 1982). When experiencing this emotion, teachers lose their motivation to work, become depersonalized, and show reduced accomplishments due to their lost affective resources (Leiter & Maslach, 2016). Emotional exhaustion in education suggests teachers' burnout and tiredness of their profession due to its high pressures and demands that cause a sense of detachment (Maslach et al., 2001). It is argued that the rate and intensity of being emotionally exhausted depends on teachers' experience and demographic background (Olson et al., 2019). Emotional exhaustion is the first sign of teacher burnout that is characterized by a sense of emotive emptiness due to imposed job stresses, arguments, and burdens (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020). If not treated well, emotional exhaustion can end up with depersonalization, apathy, disrespect, and disinterest in a person's career (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). This negative

emotion may have different sources, too. In L2 education, the emotional dissonance and emotional labor of teaching a foreign language in non-native English speaking contexts may produce exhaustion in teachers (Benesch, 2017; Jalilzadeh et al., 2024). Teacher-student relationship and students' needs may also significantly lead to emotional drain in EFL teachers (Ghanizadeh & Royaei, 2015; Köksal, 2024).

Prior studies also reveal that teachers experience emotional exhaustion due to their perceived decline in their pedagogical efficacy and achievement and this negatively affects students' academic life (Hui et al., 2022; Maslach et al., 2001; Rumschlag, 2017). Emotional exhaustion can also hurt interpersonal relationships in academia by forming negative senses of detachment, cynicism, withdrawal, and disengagement from responsibilities (Dai & Wang, 2024; Maslach et al., 2001; Mérida-López & Extremera, 2017; Zhi et al., 2024). Other investigations consistently correlate high emotional exhaustion to other adverse outcomes among teachers including their low self-efficacy, well-being, work engagement, job commitment, satisfaction (Bing et al., 2022; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; Yin et al., 2019). Emotionally drained teachers also show less teaching enthusiasm and dedication to their role as the cores of education (Mérida-López & Extremera, 2017). Furthermore, it has been claimed that teachers' emotional exhaustion significantly predict their turnover intentions and job leave rate (Haerens et al., 2022). In severe cases, it can lead to depression, stress, anxiety, and mental health problems (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). This might be due the overwhelming emotional demands of L2 education (Derakhshan et al., 2023). Theoretically, such interpretation is undergirded by the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, which is an integrated model for occupational behaviors and emotions of individuals. The model posits that when job demands of an occupation are high and its resources are low, strain, stress, and burnout increase significantly (Demerouti et al., 2001). This shows that the removal of teachers' emotional exhaustion is not only the responsibility of teachers alone. There must be an interactional effect of various factors in educational contexts on this aversive feeling in teachers. So far, the studies on teachers' emotional exhaustion have revolved around its conceptualization and correlation with other teacher-related feelings and professional behaviors/outcomes. There is a lack of research on how EFL teachers regulate this emotion in light of its multifarious antecedents and outcomes.

2.2. Emotion regulation

Like many other behaviors and practices, people regulate their emotional experiences differently using different techniques and strategies called emotion regulation strategies. They are employed to handle emotions and preserve one's productivity (King & Ng, 2018). These strategies are essential to human functioning because emotions are pervasive and dynamic shaping each and every aspect of one's practice (Taxer & Gross, 2018). Emotion regulation strategies are adaptive abilities to response to emotional encounters in a way that one's health and functionality is maintained (Gross, 2015). They are practices used to diffuse, amplify, modulate, and maintain emotions (Gross, 1998). In this study, emotion regulation strategies are techniques that EFL teachers use to cope with emotional exhaustion in teaching English. In the relevant literature, such strategies are classified into two groups; one before the occurrence of emotional experiences and the other after their happening. The former is called antecedent-focused regulation strategies, while the latter is known as response-focused strategies (Gross, 1998). This categorization is based on the Process Model of emotion regulation. Antecedent-focused strategies include 'situation selection' (i.e. chose to face or avoid an emotional situation), 'situation modification' (i.e. trying to change an emotional situation), 'attentional deployment' (i.e. directing one's attention away from an emotional situation), and 'cognitive change/appraisal' (i.e. changing one's evaluation and thinking of an emotional situation). In response-focused strategies like 'response modulation', the person changes his/her reaction to an emotion. In some cases, people regulate their emotions by avoidance, suppression, or acceptance, too (Hofmann et al., 2009). Another classification of emotion regulation strategies is based on their positivity and negativity in that negative

emotion are down-regulated or reduced, while positive ones are up-regulated or boosted (Bielak & Mystkowsks-Wiertelak, 2022).

Empirical studies on EFL teachers' emotion regulation strategies are increasing in the literature. It has been reported that these strategies could significantly predict different L2 teacher-related constructs and emotions such as work engagement, success, well-being, self-efficacy, and resilience (Chen & Tang, 2024; Fathi et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2023; Xie, 2021). In addition to positivity, prior studies demonstrated that the proper use of emotion regulation strategies by EFL teachers could stop and curb negative emotions including boredom, burnout, and anxiety in EFL teachers in both L2 teaching and assessment practices (Derakhshan et al., 2023; Solhi et al., 2023; Wang, 2024). In another study, Donker et al. (2020) argued that teachers' emotion regulation strategies affected their perceived emotional exhaustion in the Netherlands. In Iran, Ghanizadeh and Royaei (2015) found emotion regulation strategies predicting EFL teachers' burnout, which encompasses emotional exhaustion. Although studying emotion regulation strategies is gaining more attention among L2 researchers, the way they are used to regulate negative teacher emotions like emotional exhaustion has received insufficient attentions. The literature is mostly related to the management of stress, anxiety, and boredom in L2 education, but emotional exhaustion, which is more critical in terms of emotional depletion in the job has remained under-explored. To address this gap, this qualitative study aimed to examine Chinese EFL teachers' perceptions of emotional exhaustion in L2 teaching, especially its causes, consequences, and associated regulatory strategies. Correspondingly, the researchers formulated the following research questions:

1. What are the perceived causes and consequences of Chinese EFL teachers' emotional exhaustion?
2. How do Chinese EFL teachers regulate their emotional exhaustion?

3. Method

3.1. Participants and context

The participants in this study were 58 EFL teachers from private English language institutes in China, working in cities like Zhengzhou, Xinxiang, Shijiazhuang, and Wuhu. The participants were chosen based on their teaching experience, ranging from less than 5 years to over 10 years, and their educational backgrounds, which included master's degrees in English education, translation, applied linguistics, and a few with doctoral degrees. This diversity aimed to capture a wide range of perspectives and experiences related to emotional exhaustion in EFL teaching. The sample included 22 males (37%) and 36 females (62%), aged between 28 and 42 years. They taught a variety of courses including 'Listening and Speaking', 'Reading and Writing', 'Introduction to Chinese Culture', and 'Basic Interpretation'. The students they taught were mostly freshmen and sophomores who had passed the national college entrance examination and generally possessed a CET-4 level of English proficiency. The average class size was about 40 students. The schools they worked at provided various support systems such as funding for educational reform projects, team building subsidies, and well-equipped language laboratories.

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. Semi-structured interview

The data of this study were collected through a face-to-face semi-structured interview in the participants' working institutes. First, a set of questions were written in line with the goal of the study. Then three experts were asked to check the content validity of the items. After removing a redundant item, five open-ended items were finalized to be used in the actual interview session (Appendix). At the beginning of the interview protocol, the demographic information of the respondents were requested. The interviews were held in English and after the teachers' instructional classes.

Each interview lasted 30 minutes. An audio-recorder was used to record the interview sessions in a way that the respondents' concentration would not be hurt.

3.3. Data collection procedure

In view of the objectives, a phenomenological design was selected to unpack Chinese EFL teachers' perceptions and experiences of emotional exhaustion and associated regulation strategies. This design fits with studies that focus on a sample's experiences and perceptions of a phenomenon (Wilson, 2015). To this end, a semi-structured interview was carried out with 58 Chinese EFL teachers to unveil their perceived causes, consequences, and regulation strategies when facing emotional exhaustion. The interview questions were pilot tested before the main phases and the content validity of all items was approved by a team of qualitative research experts. Prior to conducting the interviews, we obtained informed consent from all participants. The purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and the potential risks and benefits were clearly explained in both written and verbal forms. Participants were assured of their privacy and confidentiality, and they were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without any consequences. Consent forms were signed by all participants, confirming their understanding and agreement to participate in the study. There were no conflicts of interest. An interview protocol was consistently followed to ensure systematic data collection. While the interview questions were fixed to maintain consistency, participants were given the freedom to provide examples and clarifications in any order they preferred. During this process, the researchers maintained a reflexive stance, critically examining how their backgrounds as EFL educators and their interaction with participants might influence the research outcomes. This reflective practice addressed the aspect of researcher positionality, crucial for interpreting qualitative data. The interviews were audio-taped using a small voice recorder tool beside the researcher. It took 18 days to complete the interviews from 2024/3/1 to 2024/3/18. Subsequently, the accuracy of the data and any missing information were verified before proceeding to the final analysis. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed triangulation, using multiple data sources such as interview transcripts and field notes. Member checking was conducted as a vital component of the verification process; preliminary findings were shared with participants for feedback, which helped confirm the accuracy of the data and provided additional insights. This feedback loop enhanced the credibility and dependability of the research outcomes. Credibility was further established through prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the research settings. Considerable time was spent in the field, building rapport with participants and gaining a deep understanding of the context. This immersion allowed the researchers to capture the nuances of the participants' experiences and ensured that the findings were grounded in their lived realities. An audit trail was maintained throughout the research process, documenting all decisions and procedural adjustments. This practice enhanced the study's transparency and allowed for an assessment of its dependability and confirmability.

3.4. Data analysis

To analyze the data, first, the interview responses were entered into an Excel file. Next, the researchers used thematic analysis to detect the common causes, consequences, and regulation strategies of teachers' emotional exhaustion. All the interview audios were transcribed word by word. Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) model. The process involved several stages: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Each interview transcript was read multiple times, and initial codes were generated systematically. These codes were then grouped into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data. To ensure reliability, a second researcher independently reviewed the themes,

and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Finally, a report was created for the findings. The themes were also double-checked by a second, who sent her feedback after a week interval. Inter-coder reliability was calculated by Cohen's Kappa Coefficient that showed a satisfactory index of reliability ($r = .77$). Transferability was ensured by giving the readers a thick description of the stages of the study and participants. Moreover, another researcher examined the data analysis phases once more to guarantee the confirmability of the findings. Finally, it is essential to mention that the researchers were the data collectors and analyst of this study. They tried to take neutral positionings as much as possible. However, since in qualitative research the researcher plays an active role and acts as an instrument, absolute objectivity would not be possible.

4. Findings

4.1. Perceived causes and consequences of emotional exhaustion

The analysis of the fourth interview question revealed that Chinese EFL teachers perceived different causes and consequences for the aversive feeling of emotional exhaustion in their job. Concerning its causes, the respondents pointed to eight reasons for experiencing emotional exhaustion in teaching English in China (Figure 1). The most frequently mentioned causes were 'occupational pressures', 'identity conflicts and mismatches', and 'stressful classroom climate'. As declared by T11, *'there are imposed many occupational pressures and forces that really make teachers pressed in various aspects. They really demotivate teachers and ruin their emotions'*. Another participant attributed emotional exhaustion to *'the abundance of identity conflicts in teaching English and what actually is done that sometimes violate our own beliefs and goals. When there is such mismatches, teachers normally lose their positive emotions'* (T5).

Referring to a larger cause, some teachers highlighted the role of classroom climate by saying that *'in stressful classroom contexts, it is quite natural to become devoid of emotion and energy. In places, wherein teachers are under pressure, the possibility of fatigue and exhaustion is much higher than positive climates'* (T31). Three other common themes concerned 'high expectations' of teachers and 'students' poor cooperation and academic performance and disengagement'. As argued by T43, *'our perceived emotional exhaustion is greatly due to students' behaviors and practices. In case they avoid cooperation in classroom activities and show no interest in them they hardly progress and this significantly drains teachers' emotionality and energy'*. Other causes of emotional exhaustion concerned teachers' boring and unrelated activities. As stated by T53,

'teachers replete their emotions and hurt their mental health when they have to manage many unrelated chores out of classroom and get back to repetitious lessons and practices each semester. This is really boring for many teachers to do repetitious tasks in different classes'.

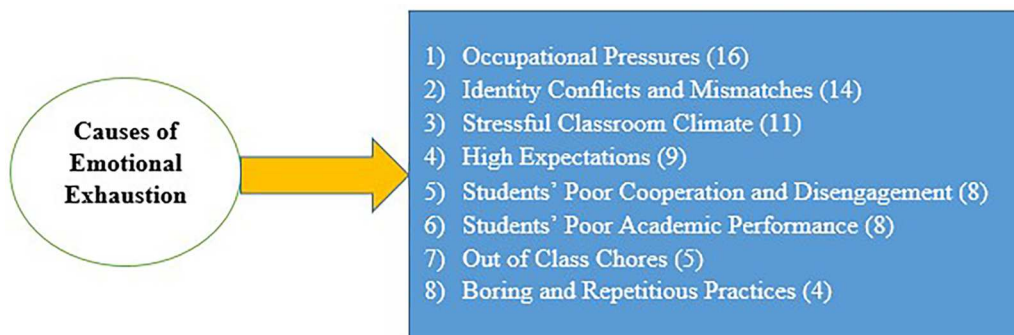


Figure 1. Chinese EFL Teachers' Perceived Causes of Emotional Exhaustion.

With respect to the consequences of teachers' emotional exhaustion, the data analysis demonstrated seven areas that this emotional state may affect (Figure 2). The most frequent consequences were 'poor teaching quality', 'job burnout', 'low work engagement', and 'low teaching enthusiasm'. One of the participants pinpointed *'the effects of emotional exhaustion of teachers is direct. They can lead to a poor teaching quality and effectiveness'* (T55). Another teacher maintained that *'emotional exhaustion reduces work engagement and enthusiasm to teach because it truly damages feeling and performance of a teacher'* (T19). Moreover, some teachers pointed to job burnout as the consequence of emotional exhaustion. For example, T49 stated *'when we feel emotionally drained and lack energy to continue our job, a sense of burnout overwhelms us and prevents our real pedagogical competency'*.

It was also found that emotional exhaustion may lead to many other negative emotions in teachers and lower their self-efficacy in teaching. In this regard, T38 declared *'emotional exhaustion is a broad and pervasive negative feeling in teachers. Its presence activates many other negativities like poor self-efficacy beliefs in one's teaching ability'*. To conclude this research question, the results of thematic analysis showed that Chinese EFL teachers had perceived different causes and consequences for their emotional exhaustion in L2 teaching. The most frequent causes were 'occupational pressures', 'identity conflicts and mismatches', 'stressful classroom climate', 'high expectations', and 'students' poor performance and cooperation'. On the other hand, the participants argued that the presence of this aversive emotion in EFL teachers could lead to 'poor teaching quality', 'job burnout', 'low work engagement', and 'low teaching enthusiasm'. It was also found to lower teachers' self-efficacy and learners' achievement outcomes by inducing other negative emotions.

4.2. Teachers' regulation strategies for emotional exhaustion

The last interview question was examined to answer this research question on the regulatory strategies of Chinese EFL teachers when experiencing emotional exhaustion. The results of thematic analysis showed two broad categories of emotion regulation strategies, namely preventive and responsive strategies (Figure 3). The most common strategies used by the participants to prevent the incidence of emotional exhaustion were 'situation avoidance', 'situation modification', 'attention shift', and 'seeking others' help and guidance'. Focusing on the emotionally draining situations, some teachers contended that *'in emotionally pressing situations, the best technique is to either avoid it or modify it to a positive situation'* (T52). However, shifting the attention from the aversive situation was also emphasized by the participants. For example, T14 declared *'in case our affective exhaustion and fatigue remain, it is a good practice to shift our attention to other issues in the class'*. Another common preventive strategy had to do with others' help in that *'talking and collaborating with others can foster the detection and management of emotional states in L2 teaching. We can copy their previously tested techniques in coping with emotional exhaustion'* (T3).

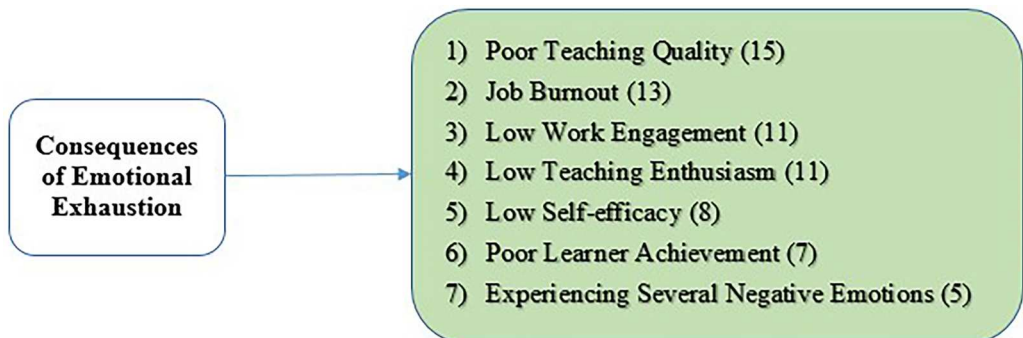


Figure 2. Chinese EFL Teachers' Perceived Consequences of Emotional Exhaustion.

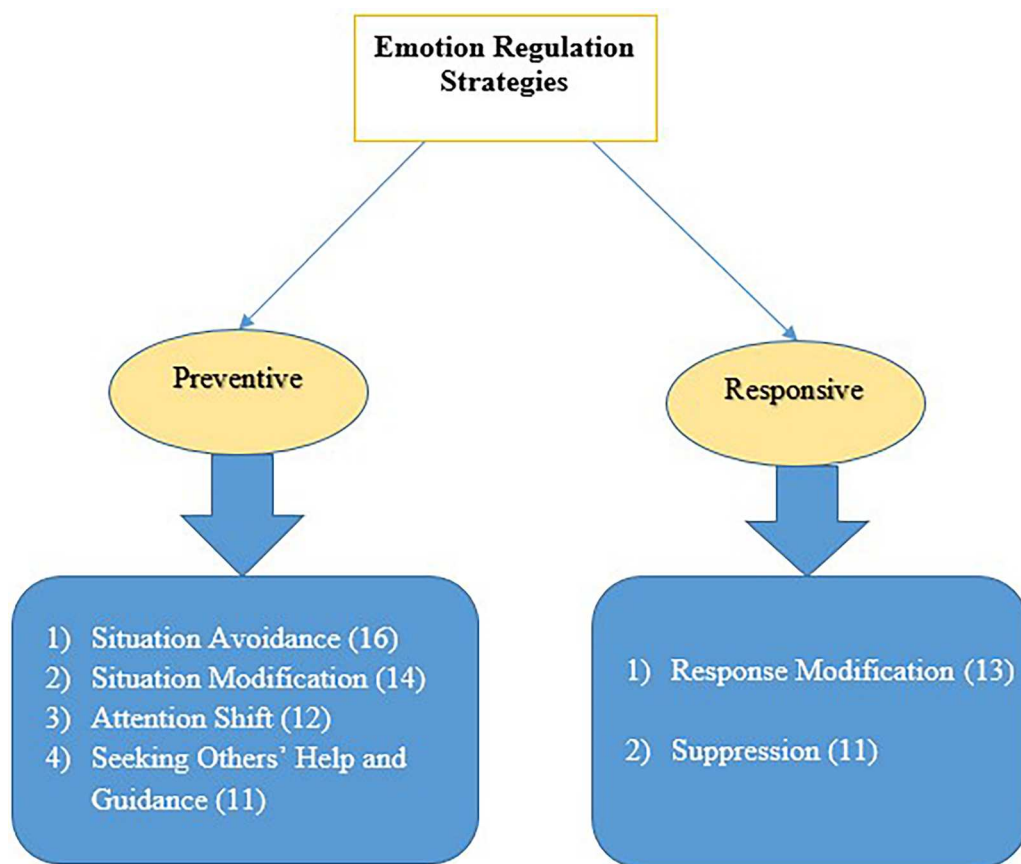


Figure 3. Chinese EFL Teachers' Employed Strategies to Regulate Emotional Exhaustion.

Considering responsive strategies, it was found that Chinese EFL teachers had mostly employed two common strategies, namely 'response modification' and 'suppression'. To support the first theme, an interviewee stated *'even after the occurrence of emotional exhaustion, we can modify the way we react and respond to it. We can adjust our behaviors and reactions in a calm manner'* (T20). However, some teachers took a radical approach and suggested the suppression techniques. For example, a teacher stated *'since emotional exhaustion is a pervasive, damaging feeling we have to suppress it immediately after it arises. It can produce other negativities. Hence, the best strategy to me is suppressing it completely'* (T44). In sum, the analyses for this research question indicated that Chinese EFL teachers had employed a range of strategies to regulate their emotional exhaustion. They had used preventive and responsive strategies. The most common strategies used before emotional exhaustion were 'situation avoidance', 'situation modification', 'attention shift', and 'seeking others' help and guidance'. On the other hand, the participants suggested the use 'response modification' and 'suppression' strategies to regulate emotional exhaustion after its appearance.

5. Discussion

This phenomenological study tried to unpack Chinese EFL teachers' perceived causes, consequences, and regulation strategies of emotional exhaustion in L2 education. The study's findings enrich the JD-R model by illustrating specific job demands unique to EFL teaching and identifying key resources that mitigate these demands. Additionally, the practical application of Gross's emotion regulation strategies in the teaching context suggests a modification of the model to

include specific strategies effective in educational settings. This study not only confirms the relevance of these theoretical frameworks but also suggests their expansion to incorporate unique aspects of teaching foreign languages. In aligning the findings of this study with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, it becomes evident that the high demands placed on EFL teachers, including occupational pressures and high expectations, significantly contribute to emotional exhaustion. This study's identification of high job demands correlates with the JD-R model's assertion that such demands, when not balanced with adequate resources, lead to burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001). Furthermore, the strategies employed by teachers to manage their emotional exhaustion can be viewed as personal resources that mitigate the impact of these job demands. This interpretation extends the JD-R model by contextualizing it within the specific stressors faced by EFL teachers in China. The findings revealed different causes and consequences for emotional exhaustion as perceived by the participants. The most frequent causes were 'occupational pressures', 'identity conflicts and mismatches', 'stressful classroom climate', 'high expectations', and 'students' poor performance and cooperation'. The findings corroborate those of Maslach et al. (2001), who argued that emotional exhaustion is the outcome of many factors such as burnout, professional pressure, detachment, high expectations and demands, and poor relationships with others. Likewise, previous studies reported emotional labor, work burden, students' poor classroom cooperation, and tense workplaces are causes of emotional exhaustion (Benesch, 2017; Jalilzadeh et al., 2024; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020). Additionally, the findings reflect Ghiasvand et al.'s (2023) contention that EFL teachers experience several identity conflicts and paradoxes in their instruction, where self-goals contrast with institutionally imposed objectives. They also stressed out the contribution of such conflicts to the generation of negative emotions in teacher. The findings diverge from previous research in that they consider one's identity and overall working climate as contributing factors to emotional exhaustion. The obtained findings can be because of Chinese EFL teachers' emotional literacy and knowledge of L2 teacher psychology. Without such literacy, it would be difficult to detect and cope with the emotional side of L2 education (Ghiasvand et al., 2024). Another explanation might be the emotional nature of L2 teaching, which had made the participants emotion-sensitive and aware of the causes of their exhaustion. The collective nature of perceived emotion is also a possible reason behind the extracted causes of emotional exhaustion. The participants pointed to the role of workplace, classroom, interaction, and students' behaviors in the appearance of exhaustion, which are all signs of their understanding of social basis of emotions in L2 education. Like other areas, emotions in L2 education are socio-cultural entities rather than simple internal states detached from society.

Additionally, it was found that teachers' emotional exhaustion can mostly lead to 'poor teaching quality', 'job burnout', 'low work engagement', 'low teaching enthusiasm', and 'various other negative emotions and outcomes'. The findings are consistent with previous studies suggesting its role in reducing teaching quality, enthusiasm, and work engagement (e.g. Bing et al., 2022; Mérida-López & Extremera, 2017; Rumschlag, 2017). The production of other negative emotions by emotional exhaustion is also in line with Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2017), who declared that this construct can lead to depression, stress, anxiety, and mental health problems. These consequences might be ascribed to the demanding nature of L2 teaching, as a burdensome profession (Derakhshan, 2022). Theoretically, the findings echo JD-R model, which considers one's behaviors and emotions related to the available resources and demands of a job (Demerouti et al., 2001). The participants' teaching experience and knowledge of their job may justify their perceptions of the consequences of emotional exhaustion. Another reason could be their previous education and training on the negative stressors of L2 teaching acquired on training courses. Moreover, the consequences are mainly emotional and this shows that emotional exhaustion like other emotions is contagious and enters many areas of teachers' instruction. Another explanation could be Chinese EFL teachers' pedagogical content knowledge, which had made them cognizant of the actual outcomes of emotional exhaustion. This could have been due to their trial and errors in dealing with psycho-affective factors of L2 education.

Moreover, the utilization of emotion regulation strategies by teachers, as identified in this study, underscores the application of Gross's (1998) Process Model of Emotion Regulation. Teachers' adoption of both antecedent-focused and response-focused strategies highlights their proactive and reactive approaches to managing emotional strain. This finding not only supports Gross's model but also enriches it by illustrating how these strategies are specifically applied in high-stress educational environments. For instance, the frequent use of cognitive reappraisal by teachers to lessen the emotional impact of classroom challenges showcases a practical application of theoretical constructs within everyday teaching scenarios. Regarding the regulatory strategies, the findings showed that Chinese EFL teachers had employed different preventive and responsive strategies. Specifically, 'situation avoidance', 'situation modification', 'attention shift', and 'seeking others' help and guidance' were the most frequently mentioned preventive techniques. However, they reported to use only two strategies of 'response modification' and 'suppression' to regulate their emotional exhaustion after its incidence. These strategies are in line with Gross' (1998) process model of emotion regulation strategies, which divided such strategies into antecedent-focused and response-focused ones. The preventive strategies of this study echo 'situation selection', 'situation modification', and 'attentional deployment' dimensions of Gross (1998). Likewise, the two responsive strategies agree with the response modulation element of this model. The use of these strategies is empirically supported by Donker et al. (2020) and Ghanizadeh and Royaei (2015), who conducted studies in the Netherlands and Iran and concluded that emotion regulation strategies can prevent emotional exhaustion. The distinction is that this study delved more deeply into exact regulatory strategies that are useful to manage exhaustion before and after its incidence. Again, the participants' teaching experience and pedagogical expertise may be the reasons for reaching these findings. They seem to be aware and familiar with how to deal with negative teacher emotions, especially exhaustion of their profession. Other than theoretical knowledge, the participants appear to enjoy practical knowledge of coping with stressors of L2 teaching. This is attributed to the teacher professional development supports offered by Chinese English education institutes. It is also possible that the participants had been explicitly trained to tackle emotional pressures of their job in professional therapy sessions. The centrality of teacher emotions and their management in China may also be a reason for the findings in this study. Despite these fresh insights, this study excluded the role of teaching experience in perceiving the causes, consequences, and regulation strategies of emotional exhaustion while the literature highlights its significant role (Bleck & Lipowsky, 2022; Olson et al., 2019). Therefore, further research is invited to unveil the mediating factors of experiencing and coping with emotional exhaustion.

6. Conclusion and implications

This study showed that Chinese EFL teachers perceived different causes, consequences, and emotion regulation strategies for their emotional exhaustion in teaching English. The findings imply that emotional exhaustion like other teacher-related emotions highlighted in PP is contagious and powerful enough to enter various aspects of teaching and learning. In view of the findings, it can also be asserted that emotional exhaustion is the outcome of an interplay of teacher-related, learner-related, and context-related factors and its management/regulation requires support from all these levels. Along with teachers' own emotional states, work-related pressures and demands play a vital role in causing affective exhaustion. In sum, emotional exhaustion is a sign of negative classroom climate and working context that need to be managed properly in order to survive teachers and teaching. If not regulated well, emotional exhaustion can generate dire consequences for almost all stakeholders in EFL contexts. Given these propositions, this study may be helpful for developing theories and models of L2 teacher emotional exhaustion ecology, which is missing in the current literature. Moreover, the findings can assist EFL teachers in realizing and coping with the causes and consequences of their emotional exhaustion and fatigue. They can use the strategies

listed in this study to regulate such a damaging feeling in their job. Furthermore, as noted in the study, managing emotional exhaustion requires support from different stakeholders. Hence, language policy-makers and school managers in China can draw on the study to provide opportunities to detect and cope with EFL teachers' emotional exhaustion roots. They can add a psychological dimension to their pedagogical plans for L2 education. Teacher educators may also benefit from the findings by developing professional development courses related to emotional exhaustion and burnout causes, consequences, and regulatory techniques for early career teachers. They can educate them how to cope with other negative emotions, as well. Despite these contributions, this study had some limitations, especially its pure qualitative design. Future research is then recommended to employ other research designs. The use of a one-shot interview with a small sample of EFL teachers is another constraint in the study. Further research is invited to use other tools in larger scales to sketch the whole picture of emotional exhaustion in China. Furthermore, the mediating role of teaching experience and educational degrees in perceiving and managing emotional exhaustion can be explored in the future. The dynamic nature of this emotion may also be an interesting line of thinking for enthusiastic L2 scholars.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

A competing interest's statement

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Consent to participate

Informed consent to participate was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent for publication

Informed consent for publication was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Data availability statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

Part 1: Background Information:

Age:

Gender:

Field of Study:

Teaching Experience Level:

Part 2: Interview Questions

1. As an EFL teacher, can you describe your emotions in a daily classroom instruction?
2. How often do you experience negative emotions like exhaustion?
3. Can you describe emotional exhaustion in the context of L2 education? What do you think of it?
4. What are the causes and consequences of emotional exhaustion in L2 teaching?
5. What strategies do you use to regulate and handle emotional exhaustion in your job? Please, explain your strategies.