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# **Online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic: Vietnamese language teachers' emotions, regulation strategies and institutional policy and management**

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## **Abstract**

Teaching is often described as one of the most emotion-laden professions. In times of the COVID-19 pandemic, the conversion to online teaching has triggered new emotional experiences of teachers that not many studies have taken into account. Studying emotion from a post-structuralist lens, this study examines the emotional experiences of ten language teachers in a university in Vietnam and their responses to the new teaching platforms. Analysis of the in-depth semi-structured interviews shows that the pedagogically and technologically distinctive features of online teaching aroused unique challenges for and emotions of the teachers, both positive and negative. Also, the teachers reported a number of strategies to cope with the new situation which we term as in-the-moment and out-of-class emotion regulation. The study highlights the need for acknowledgement and support for teachers in terms of resources, policy and management of institutions in the 'new normal situation', while displaying teachers' self-reliance and emotional self-regulation. The article calls for attention to teachers emotion as an integral dimension of the profession, regardless of the physical or virtual setting of the classroom.

**Keywords:** teachers emotions, online teaching, emotion regulation, institutional policy, COVID-19, Vietnam.

## **Introduction**

Teaching is inherently emotional work (Schutz, 2014), which has been accentuated by the strain that COVID-19 has placed on educators and students since its advent in early 2020. Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have created a vast array of unique challenges for teachers due to the lack of previous experiences, preparation, and expertise of both teachers and institutions (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020). In this new unprecedented situation, studies show that a high percentage of teachers demonstrated anxiety, depression and stress symptoms (Santamaría et al., 2021), although increased efficacy in classroom management and increased sense of accomplishment among teachers have also been reported (Sokal, Trudel, and Babb, 2020). From previous research, suggested implications usually focus on technological literacy and utilization. However, as a study by Trust et al. (2016) postulates, teachers also have other social, affective, and identity needs to meet, including the needs to express emotions and receive emotional support.

The importance of teacher recognition of their emotions, especially in crisis contexts, has been emphasized to improve their own well-being, and in turn, enhance students' well-being (O'Toole and Friesen, 2016). Teachers' emotional responses are correlated with coping strategies, leading to substantial levels of positive (happiness, resilience, and growth) and negative reactions (stress, anxiety, anger, sadness, and loneliness) (MacIntyre, Gregersen, and Mercer, 2020). However, little is known about the emotion management of teachers when switching to the new online mode of teaching. The ways teachers cope with the stress and challenges, as well as the institutional support for teachers of while teaching online in the COVID-19 era, remain unexplored while their journeys to becoming accustomed to the new environment of emergency online teaching is well worth exploring to further enhance the quality of education.

This study aims to address the above-mentioned gaps in the current scholarship by investigating the emotional experiences of ten Vietnamese language teachers in response to the COVID-19 situation, their strategies to regulate their emotions, and the support they received from their institution both emotionally and professionally. The findings of this study hopefully will empower teachers during periods of uncertainty and facilitate policy implementation to support their teaching and overall well-being.

## **Literature review**

### ***Teachers emotions and emotion regulation***

Emotions are an inseparable part of the teaching profession, and teachers experience various emotions in different classroom situations. Emotions arguably play an important role in a teacher's capacity to thrive, not just survive in their professional life (Mansfield et al., 2012). Despite little agreement upon what constitutes an emotion, it is a must to theorize emotions to be able to study about them (Benesch, 2017).

There is a strong need to explore emotions in renewed theoretical and methodological perspectives that move beyond the dichotomous thinking that separates realms of emotion into private and public, and genuine or fake emotional expressions. In teacher's emotion studies, researchers (Benesch, 2017; Zembylas, 2007) have suggested the use of poststructuralist perspectives as the most promising to the study of emotion, although the poststructuralist lens has not been used much in education in teacher emotion. The poststructuralist approach criticizes entrenched binary oppositions (such as mind/body, nature/culture, rationality/emotion) because these binary oppositions support a hierarchy or economy of value that operates by privileging one term over another. Instead, poststructuralist perspectives take social, cultural, and political factors into account to study emotion without overlooking the interpersonal components of emotions (Abu-Lughod and Lutz, 1990; Rosaldo, 1984; Weedon, 1987). It acknowledges the constitutive effects of emotions as 'discursive practices' (Abu-Lughod and Lutz, 1990), which means that the words used to describe emotions are themselves "actions or ideological practices" that serve specific purposes to create and negotiate reality (Zembylas, 2005: 937). Following this line of argument, Zembylas (2005) contends that "power, agency and resistance are at the center of exploring the role of emotion and identity in teaching" (936). In other words, emotion is interwoven with issues of power and resistance in teaching, meaning that power relations and the role of culture and ideology (Zembylas, 2003a, b) should also be considered when studying teachers emotion.

Power relations are inherent in emotion and shape the expression of emotions by allowing some emotions to be expressed while others being prohibited. Poststructuralist studies on teacher emotions examine the role of culture, power, and ideology in creating emotion discourses. Simultaneously, teachers' participation in this process of emotion discourse creation through adopting or resisting these discourses is also investigated (Zembylas, 2002a). The analysis of teachers emotions does not cease at mere descriptions but focuses on what can be done to help teachers with these complex everyday emotional transactions. To borrow Zembylas' (2005) words,

poststructuralist ideas of emotion can help educators better analyze the complexities of “emotional rules” (Zembylas, 2002b) and explore the role of emotional practices in teaching. For these reasons, this study follows the poststructuralist approach to teachers emotions, which is considered “valuable” as a new direction for emotion study in education (Zembylas, 2005: 22).

Emotion regulation in the workplace has officially entered the mainstream of research since the seminal work of Hochschild (1979, 1983). She defined emotion regulation as the effort to manage emotions by changing the quality or intensity of an emotion or feeling. The regulation of emotion often relies on ‘feeling rules’, a set of guidelines on what individuals should feel in specific situations. These guidelines are shared among a community, although they are often latent (Hochschild, 1979, 1983). Emotional rules refer to any means that govern both feelings and communications of emotions in desired directions. They reflect power relations, and are both the means and results of human differences in emotion expression and communication (Zembylas, 2002b) which may take place through people assessing which emotions are appropriate or inappropriate, deviant or normal. In an educational context, emotional rules regulate teachers’ language and embodiment of emotions. For instance, Zembylas (2002b: 201) asserts that generally, teachers need to “control emotions of anger, anxiety, and vulnerability, and express empathy, calmness, and kindness.”

Prior studies confirm that emotional authenticity greatly matters to teachers’ health and well-being (Keller et al., 2014; Philipp and Schüpbach, 2010). However, it is shown that teachers practise emotion regulation because they believe it makes them more effective in managing, disciplining, and maintaining their relationships with students (Sutton, Mudrey-Camino, and Knight, 2009). They also tend to communicate their positive emotions and use a variety of emotion regulation strategies to reduce negative ones.

### ***Against the COVID-19 context: The shift to online teaching worldwide and in Vietnam***

Due to the unrelenting COVID-19 pandemic, many countries have had to resort to nationwide lockdowns and temporary school and campus closures to avoid the rapid infection of the novel virus, leading to the shift to online education. Initial actions of universities were to transfer contents to online learning environments with synchronous classrooms, without catering to the pedagogical strategies of online teaching (Crawford et al., 2020). The lack of proper preparation for online teaching and learning is a major barrier for both teachers and students (Rahimi and Martin, 2020).

Although teachers generally believe the new mode of teaching and learning bring new experiences and opportunities, adapted pedagogical content knowledge for online learning is definitely needed. For instance, making digital learning experiences engaging requires teachers to have distinctive knowledge and skills (Rapanta et al., 2020).

In Vietnam in particular, schools were constantly closed and reopened, depending on the times of the outbreaks. However, in the third wave of the COVID-19 outbreak since May 2021 until currently when this paper is being written, Vietnamese students of all levels in many cities and provinces have had to stay at home and switched to online learning instead. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has made a stipulation of ‘suspending schools without stopping learning.’ MOET has also been working to develop guidelines on online teaching and learning for teachers and parents. The long-term plan is to improve teachers’ skills to use technology to achieve practical, effective, and quality education.

Although virtual classrooms have been a sound replacement for traditional physical classrooms for the past year, with the exceptions of Pham and Phan (2021, 2022) or Foreman-Brown, Fitzpatrick and Twyford (2022), there is still scant research on teachers’ experiences in the migration process from offline to online teaching, their emotions emerging out of these experiences and the institutional support they have had. This study is among the first to investigate the emotional experiences of Vietnamese language teachers in response to the COVID-19 situation, their strategies to regulate their emotions, and the support they received from their institution both emotionally and professionally. This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What were Vietnamese language teachers’ emotional experiences when teaching online in the COVID-19?
2. What strategies did the teachers use to regulate their emotions when teaching online in the COVID-19?
3. What types of support did the teachers receive or expect to receive when converting to online teaching in times of the pandemic?

In what follows, we are going to elaborate on the methodology used to conduct this study before presenting our findings and discussing the findings in relation to the literature and policy implications. We then conclude the paper with a brief summary of the research, its contribution to the field, and suggestions for further study in the future.

## **Methodology**

The paper draws on qualitative data from a project we carried out in May 2021 on teacher emotions and pedagogical practices in online teaching during COVID-19, and a follow-up study conducted in August and September 2021. The preliminary result of the project has been published (see more in Pham and Phan, 2021). This paper employed a phenomenological approach to illuminate Vietnamese language teachers' lived experiences within the new online mode of teaching. This approach helps to gather deep information and perceptions from the perspective of the research participants, which emphasizes the importance of personal experience and interpretation (Lester, 1999). We, therefore, used this powerful tool to gain insights into the teachers' emotional experiences. The interpretive dimension of phenomenological research also enables phenomenological research to be used as the basis for practical theory, and to inform, support or challenge policy and action (Lester, 1999).

Ten English teachers in a university in Vietnam were recruited by purposive sampling (Merriam, 2009), which is appropriate as our goal was to select participants "in a strategic way" so that those sampled are relevant to the research objectives of the study (Bryman, 2012: 418). The university in this study was a public, research-intensive higher education institution that offered programmes on language education, linguistics, international studies and related social sciences and humanities. We particularly chose English language teachers as the population of the study because being a foreign language teacher triggers unique emotional characters of the profession that come from various factors including self-doubts about one's own language ability; emotional anxieties of learners; mixed level of proficiency among learners; threats to sense of self and identity; teaching workload; or working conditions (Gkonou and Miller, 2017; Gkonou et al., 2020). The participants were recruited by purposive sampling through both authors' personal network. This sampling method allowed us to identify and select information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources in the context of COVID-19 (Patton, 2002). We attempted to diversify the participants in terms of years of teaching experience, ranging from six to over 25 years. We used semi-structured interviews which require a limited number of questions prepared in advance and follow-up questions on site (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). The interviews were conducted via online tools due to the COVID-19 social distancing protocol in Vietnam when this study was undertaken.

Before the interview started, the participants were reminded of the purpose of the study. We also obtained their verbal informed consent after informing them that the interview would be recorded, and their personal information would remain confidential. The participants were encouraged to talk about what they felt comfortable with and they could stop the interview whenever they wanted without any repercussions. The interview questions were centered around the first reactions of the participants towards the sudden conversion to online teaching, the ensuing challenges and their learning to master the new teaching platforms, their strategies to cope with or enhance their emotional responses (negative and positive respectively), and the institutional support they received. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, recorded, transcribed and translated by both authors. Pseudonyms were given to each participant to protect their anonymity and confidentiality. Each interview lasted from 30 minutes to 90 minutes. Table 1 sketches the demographic information of the teachers in this study.

<b>Name of participants (Pseudonyms)</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Teaching experience</b>
Thao	Female	10 years
Duong	Female	11 years
Ha	Female	Over 25 years
Hoa	Female	Over 20 years
Thu	Female	11 years
Nhung	Female	11 years
Lan	Female	10 years
Mai	Female	11 years
An	Female	8 years
Minh	Male	6 years

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants

We undertook a reflexive thematic analysis of the transcript (Braun and Clarke, 2019), utilising a collaborative coding approach to identify the shared patterns of meanings in the teachers' emotional experiences and their emotional regulation strategies. Both authors independently coded all the interview transcripts before discussing our mutual understanding of

the coded themes. We began the coding process by writing memos on the margin of the transcriptions which included 35 pages in total. The first round of data exploration focused on summarizing the meanings of each paragraph in each transcription. The second round placed extra emphasis on searching for new contents that were left out. Our coding process was driven by theoretical bearings of the study (the poststructuralist approach to teachers emotions with attention to power, resistance, agency, discourses), with a particular focus on the data that deductively aligned with the concepts of teachers emotions (positive and negative emotions). For example, we paid attention to the teachers' management of their negative emotions, or enhancement of their positive emotions, and their assessment of the classroom situations to either display their emotions or not. Meanwhile, our coding process also involved a inductive approach, which means that the themes were strongly linked to the data and emerged from it. For example, as we coded the data of teachers' strategies, we noted their strategies were used within and outside their online sessions contexts. The coding resulted in three broad categories, which are: teachers emotions, teachers' emotion regulation, and institutional policy and management. Examples of this process can be seen in Table 2. These categories were then used as the foundation of the analysis, which is presented in the following sections.

In this study, member checking, peer review, and researcher's reflexivity (Merriam, 2002) are the main measures used to build trustworthiness of the data and the data analysis process. After transcribing the interviews and finishing the first round of analysis, we contacted the participants to check if our understanding of their narratives were appropriate or not, which served the purpose of member checking. In addition, we discussed together on "the congruency of emerging findings with the raw data, and tentative interpretations" so that we ourselves could examine the rationality and validity (Merriam, 2002: 31). As the first author is an English language teacher herself, her insider view helped us beware of the complexity in teachers emotion in response to the shift to online teaching. Her insider positionality also granted us easier access to the participants and hence, built up researchers-participants trust. However, we were conscious of our outsider positionality, reinforced by the second author. The cross-checking of understanding between the two authors was to assure that we would not rely on our assumptions about the participants' experience while analyzing the data but kept a critical stance towards the participants' narratives. The peer review process while analyzing data allowed both authors to keep a balanced insider and outsider positioning.

Broad categories	Themes	Definition of category	Example
Teachers emotions	Initial stage of online teaching	Descriptions of teachers' emotional experience in their journey of switching to online teaching	I was quite confused at first when I needed to teach online. I didn't really know what and how to initiate an online class because I hadn't tried it before....I felt a lack of interaction between the teacher and the students....When I was required to use technological-assisted devices for online learning for the first time, I was not so confident because I haven't tried it before. (Minh)
	Subsequent stage of online teaching		I started to enjoy online teaching. I know how to design an online lesson. The students were also more familiar with online learning....I felt happier and more comfortable. (An)
Teachers' emotion regulation	In-the-moment regulation strategies	Different strategies the teachers used to regulate their emotions	I turned my camera off sometimes, and tried to use my voice and other audio-visual aids to teach....I dressed more comfortably and had more flexible movements. (Lan)

	Out-of-classroom strategies		I shared with my husband and close colleagues who were also going through the same experiences like me when teaching online. They understood what I had to cope with. (Hoa)
Institutional policy and management	Professional development support	Teachers' opinions and descriptions of the policy and support of the institution in the 'new normal' situation of online teaching	There were workshops to provide teachers with technological training on how to use online platforms and software for teaching. (Minh)
	Emotional support		There has never been a formal programme that specifically supports teachers' well-being (Thao)  The institution has started to pay attention to teachers' emotions. Although I was not quite interested in the mindfulness programme organized by the institution, I was glad they started to think about us. (Mai)

Table 2. The coding table

**Findings**

*Teachers' emotional experiences when teaching online*

There were a wide range of emotional experiences that the teachers underwent on the migration of their traditional teaching to online platforms. Summarized in Table 3 are the emotions that

topped the list of emotional experiences that the teachers reported. We grouped the emotions into two categories, *negative emotions* which emerged when the teachers were suddenly forced to switch to online teaching, and *positive emotions* which were felt when the teachers were more familiar with the new mode of delivery. These categories will help to explore the development of the full spectrum of teachers emotions in the migration from traditional physical classroom education to digital/distance education.

Emotions		Emotion-laden reasons
Negative emotions: switching to online teaching	Confused	Teachers' unfamiliarity and lack of digital literacy
	Worried	Students' low level of engagement
	Exhausted	Workload and longtime online exposure
Positive emotions: getting acquainted to online teaching	More confident and adaptive	Teachers' capability to use technological infrastructure
	Excited	More stimulating classroom environment and increased students' participation
	Empathetic	Teachers' connection and empathy to students

Table 3. Teachers emotions

*Negative emotions: switching to online teaching with confusion, worry, and exhaustion*

When COVID-19 hit Vietnam, the teachers understood clearly that education digitalization was the only choice to keep them safe and to keep their teaching job ongoing. However, the overnight switch did evoke negative emotional responses among the teachers, and some of them were particularly opposed to online teaching as the mode of instruction was changed.

In the beginning, the teachers' *confusion* and *worry* stemmed mostly from their unfamiliarity and lack of experience with technological instructional tools and platforms. The teachers described themselves as "inexperienced", "nervous" or "not ready" for remote instruction delivery. Minh, for instance, said that he did not even know "how to start an online session". At the start of the conversion to online teaching, An and Minh were both clumsy at technological

manoeuvre when they could not “break out rooms” or “share screens on Zoom”. Nhung, Mai and Thu also reported that the first online sessions did not go smoothly because they were learning to use the new teaching tools. In this regard, all of a sudden, the teachers were being deskilled, turning from being experienced in a physical classroom setting into inexperienced teachers in a virtual one (Downing and Dymont, 2013; Pham and Phan, 2021).

In addition to the inexperience in using online tools, the teachers reported significant increase in their workload. The reason is the online platforms were also novel to students, which doubled the hardships for the participants since they had to both educate themselves to use technology effectively and instruct their students to use technology in their learning. The teachers described the class organization on those platforms as “messy”, requiring significant efforts from both themselves and the students. They had to prepare the lessons more carefully and had different back-up plans in cases of Internet connectivity break-downs or their students’ failure to use technological devices. This created extra work for the teachers and urged them to quickly develop technology literacy. Duong, for instance, had to spend a whole day having one lesson digitalized. Another example was Nhung who reported that it took her one year to restructure and redesign a course because converting the face-to-face lessons to virtual platforms required multiple skills. For Nhung, it was a very challenging task. The significantly increased workload led to the teachers’ serious concerns about their health because long synchronous online classes left them *exhausted*. All participants mentioned physical health issues such as eye-straining, backache, headache, sore throat and fatigue, which made them less enjoy this transition and instead caused them more stress. Some of the teachers mentioned “mood swings”, “bad-tempered” and “aggressive” as the direct results of their deteriorating physical health.

The teachers further mentioned a worry over the quality of online teaching and learning because it, in Thao’s explanation, required more student autonomy and teacher’s effort to maintain their students’ engagement. Minh similarly raised his concern over the interactions between himself and students. “Sometimes, the atmosphere was a little bit depressing, and students were not as excited as they were before”, Minh said. This situation in turn led to increasing teacher talking time, which again contributed to health problems of the teachers. An’s account testified to this point.

I hold too high expectations in myself and in my students. I had hoped the lesson would be interesting, I talked a lot and hoped to increase students’ interactions. But then I realized online teaching was never similar to offline teaching [...] Things just went sideways.

The low level of students' engagement in a virtual classroom undoubtedly put stress on the emotional fabric of the teachers' everyday practices (Pham and Phan, 2021). Furthermore, the students' invisibility and inaudibility due to camera and microphone turn-off or breakdown in class brought "sadness" to the teachers. There were times when the teachers asked questions and there were no responses from the students, which caused disruption and demotivation to themselves and the whole class. The participants all admitted that it was frustrating to not be able to get a good sense of students' comprehension, confusion, and general well-being through their facial expressions and demeanors as much as in face-to-face classrooms.

*Positive emotions: getting acquainted to online teaching with confidence, excitement and empathy*

The teachers gradually developed a wide range of positive emotional experiences towards the new mode of teaching. Most of them reported their *excitement* and *confidence* in using novel teaching platforms. They expressed their increasing confidence and capability in using technological infrastructure. They were also excited because of the new mode of teacher-student interaction. Specifically, while in traditional classes, it might be difficult for the students to express opinions on personal topics or sensitive issues, in online classes they were more willing to join the discussion because they could voice their opinions anonymously. Lan, for instance, recalled the first lesson of "Your childhood" she had at the beginning of the semester. By using Padlet (a real-time collaborative web platform on which users can upload, organize, and share content to virtual bulletin boards), there was a stream of answers, which actually boosted the environment and motivation of the whole class. Thao, another teacher, acknowledged that the Chatbox function on Zoom through which students could send teachers questions privately without disturbing others made them feel less embarrassed. Such features aided the teachers' teaching performance and their students' learning process, which they cared most about. The improvement in utilizing technology in teaching and students' better responses to the shift in their learning platforms empowered the teachers and allowed them to start enjoying their new teaching practices. Mai, for instance, explicitly said she was "happy" and "satisfied" with her new online teaching routines. Moreover, the teachers showed their satisfaction when their students had a space to be more open to them.

In addition, the teachers grew more empathetic to the shift in their students' learning process. The switch to online teaching not only encouraged the teachers to use innovation and creativity in their lessons but also highlighted the importance of teacher-student relationship. Mai

cared for the students' emotional well-being and tried to create more engaging and meaningful lessons:

I felt sorry for my students. They were in a situation like my son's as they could not go to school and meet their friends and teachers. That's why I wanted to do more for them, I wanted my lessons to be more helpful and interesting for them so they could sustain their learning despite the ongoing challenges. There was one time when in the middle of a session, one of my students asked to be absent for half an hour so he could quickly get a COVID test per the requirement in his hometown. He came back after exactly 30 minutes and was very active, eager to participate in all activities. I felt so moved. How could I not care for my students? I told myself to try better because of their efforts and attitudes.

The teachers understood that their students had their own difficulties when studying online. During the interviews, many teachers emphasized that they tried to do their best to keep the lessons engaging and to ensure students' engagement as much as possible so that the differences between online and offline learning would not affect their students' learning results. They were more available to support students by answering emails and staying on Zoom after class to foster collaboration and *connection* with the students.

The range of emotions displayed by the teachers allows us to understand their agency and resistance to the difficulties brought about by the new situation of online teaching, increased workload, and higher health risks. Their emotions were influenced by discourses such as 'teaching and learning quality', or 'student engagement'. They worried because of the possible reduced-quality teaching session. They felt exhausted while trying to maintain students' interest when no real interactions happened in class. In this regard, the teachers' emotional experiences were discursively constituted. While grappling with all the ensuing changes, they learned to negotiate to lower their expectations of a stimulating online lesson and students' engagement in order to regain their confidence and excitement. In so doing, the teachers reframed their emotions in the service of the 'new normal' happening to their life and work so that their professional values and efforts could be maintained. Simultaneously, the online platforms also worked as an emotional outlet for students, which partly enhanced teacher-student relationship because the power distance between teachers and students might not have allowed students to display their positive emotions to teachers previously.

### ***Teachers emotion regulation strategies***

Emotionally speaking, teaching online and engaging in remote teaching during COVID-19 presented divergent challenges to the teachers. In order to smooth the teaching performances on online platforms and to keep the differences between online and offline classrooms at the minimal level, emotion regulation was an indispensable mechanism through which the teachers could maintain a stimulating and engaging virtual learning environment. This section details the strategies that took place in various emotional expressions at different moments in the participants' online teaching practices during the COVID-19 situation.

As the teachers invested emotionally in their profession and in every lesson, the switch to online delivery required them to regulate their emotions accordingly and to be strategic in order to be less emotionally vulnerable in the new situation. Summarized in Table 4 are different strategies that the teachers in this study used to regulate their emotions to achieve the teaching goals and alleviate the pressure both they and their students were put under. We grouped their strategies into two main categories: *in-the-moment emotion regulation*, indicating the strategies that the teachers used during the teaching sessions, and *out-of-classroom emotion regulation*, meaning that the strategies that the teachers used after their teaching sessions ended.

<b>Strategies</b>		<b>Articulation of strategies</b>
In-the-moment emotion regulation	Using humour	Making jokes during online sessions to alleviate pressure for both teachers and students
	Bodily enhancement	Dressing up and making up
	Displaying negative emotions	Letting students aware of teachers' negative emotions
	Using encouragement and compliments	Giving students compliments to cheer up the class atmosphere and teacher's emotion
	Taking breaks	Inserting more breaks in the teaching sessions to avoid exhaustion and negative emotions
Out-of-classroom emotion regulation	Accepting reality and using positive reframing	Acknowledging the reality and necessity of online teaching, seeing the situation from a more affirming light (as a new learning process and opportunity for transformations)

	Seeking emotional support	Seeking comfort and understanding from others (students and colleagues), verbalizing unpleasant feelings with family members
	Seeking instrumental support	Seeking support and sharing from colleagues regarding pedagogical issues
	Practising self-care	Meditating, not putting too much pressure on themselves, and eating healthy food
	Body movement	Moving around the house (going upstairs downstairs, going out after the lessons to let the steam off)

Table 4. Teachers’ emotion regulation strategies

From the teachers’ *in-the-moment emotion regulation strategies*, we could observe both genuine and regulated emotional expressions of the teachers, both negative and positive emotions. It should be noted that the genuine emotions of the teachers could be displayed or hidden, but not faked. In other words, the teachers did not mask their negative emotions by pretending they were having positive emotions, but made efforts to hide negativity so that the students would not be affected. In an Asian culture context like Vietnam, teachers’ hiding or suppressing negative emotions is frequently observed in prior research (Matsumoto, 1989). Like most teachers, the participants in this study saw negative emotion displays as a threat to their students’ learning atmosphere and enthusiasm, which meant they failed at their job. They chose to consider their negative emotions “nothing and then continued teaching”, to borrow An’s words. Minh, another participant, took the liberty of breaking the lessons into smaller sections to avoid stress for both himself and his students, by which he would feel less tired and re-control his emotions to prevent negativity. Even when the teachers chose to let the students know they were having negative emotions, it was not for the sake of finding an outlet for their dissatisfaction but for the sake of alerting their students about their responsibility for their own learning while everything was at stake. As Duong emphasized, “teachers are human beings, so I genuinely let my emotions be known to the students so that they know how to adjust their manners and attitude towards their learning”.

Other participants like Ha, Lan, and Mai used various strategies to create a stimulating atmosphere in their sessions, which would then make them feel happier during their teaching. While Mai used humour and gave constant encouragement to her students, Ha used mindful

empowering questions such as “What are you most grateful for?”, “What makes you happy today?”, “Do you feel stressed?” at the beginning of every class as an ice-breaking activity, which helped to “create a stimulating class environment and foster connection between teacher and students”. Using another strategy, Hoa and Lan lift their emotions up in embodied ways by dressing up and using make-up. Hoa explained, “I dressed smartly as I often did in my face-to-face classes so that I had the feeling of going to work and meeting the students”.

When they chose emotional non-expressions while in class, teachers sought other outlets for their suppressed emotions, which we put under the category of *out-of-classroom emotion regulation strategies*. It means that the teachers seemed to “internalize the emotional rule that negative emotion was an individual problem and that should be taken care during one’s own private space” (Zembylas, 2005: 943). Their coping strategies included looking for mutual sharing from colleagues and sympathy from family members. Having a husband with the same profession as a university teacher, Hoa could find heartfelt sympathy from him, and talking with colleagues also helped her feel less alone because they were going through the same experiences. Similarly, Thao sought understanding from her family members, especially her husband, to help her manage new family organizations as a result of the work-from-home protocol and act as listeners to her suppressed emotions. Most teachers also practised self-care such as meditating or eating more healthy food to enhance their physical health and to “feel better”, in Hoa’s words. But most importantly, all of the teachers considered accepting reality as the main strategy in order to manage their emotions. They chose to see the switch to online teaching from a more positive perspective, considering this process as a chance of professional development and a learning process. Duong added that “distance learning offers a new opportunity for teachers because now we can even have extra tutoring online classes in which students from other provinces or cities can join, which is a new source of income for us”.

In light of the heavy emotional demands in the teaching profession, it is not surprising that the teachers themselves found the need to find spaces to discuss emotions and at the same time were careful to display their emotions. On the one hand, they showed their subscription to the discourse of professionalism in teaching by avoiding emotional exhibition in class, which is commonly found in literature (Zembylas, 2005). On the other hand, their emotional self-regulation strategies highlighted their agency in order to not suppress their own emotions which might lead to stress and mental health issues, but at the same time to not badly reflect on their teaching

practices. The analysis shows evidence of teachers' resistance to the unwritten rules of teachers trying to be emotionally professional, meaning hiding their negative emotions (Matsumoto, 1989). They wanted their negative emotions to be known by students so that changes in students' behaviours and attitudes would happen. This also points out the power relations between teachers and students whereby teachers used their negative emotions to signal their dissatisfaction and expectation of students' improvement. Furthermore, both the teachers in-the-moment emotion regulation and out-of-classroom emotion regulation reveal their self-negotiation and "self-control" in teaching (Zembylas, 2005).

### ***Institutional policy and management on teachers emotions and teaching practices***

When asked the participants to provide their comments on their institutional policy and management that supported teachers both emotionally and professionally in the context of the 'new normal' situation, most participants agreed that the response of the university during the conversion to online learning was "timely", "prompt" and "flexible" although there were signs of overuse technology that disturbed their personal life. However, in terms of teachers emotions, the support was described as "insufficient", "unspecific", "short-term" and "untimely", leading to their reliance on self-regulation and self-care.

Due to the shift to online platforms for teaching and learning activities, the institution provided technical support for teachers' professional development. The immediate adoption of online teaching at the beginning of the pandemic showed the institution's proactivity and its priority of the safety of students and staff. In the beginning, as Duong reported, any online platforms (Zoom, Skype, and Google Meeting) could be used to make sure students' learning continuation. Afterwards, according to the teachers, only Zoom was used to ensure consistency. There were a number of workshops and training sessions provided by the institution for the teachers to enhance their skills to effectively incorporate technology (Flipgrid, Padlet, Whiteboard) into their classroom. However, according to the participants, the workshops were mostly introductory training that dealt with technical issues, while what they wanted to be trained about was pedagogical skills of delivering online instruction. Moreover, the teachers struggled with student assessment and evaluation because they were not provided with appropriate tools to conduct online testing that ensured academic honesty.

Some teachers expressed their dislike and discomfort as they raised their concern over the overuse of online platforms for all professional activities in their institution. Thao was the most provocative in voicing her fear for the abuse of online tools. She held strong criticism towards the way her professional commitments consumed her personal life, which she pointed to the unorganized management at different levels of management in her institution.

There were even meetings that started at 8:30 or 9 o'clock in the evening and lasted until 10 or 11p.m., which drove me crazy. Some of the meetings yielded no results and were merely time-consuming. Social networking sites now act as official platforms of professional communication in my institution. This has become more and more common, which I think is unprofessional because these channels should only be used for personal purposes. Now they are channels to discuss work matters, which makes me incredibly uncomfortable because people think it's convenient. It's way too convenient. I keep receiving instant messages day and night.

Thao showed discomfort towards the new professional practices in her university, which she dubbed as "unprofessional". The excerpt from Thao's interview revealed how much power the institution had on the teachers through the overuse of communication (social networking sites as platforms for professional communication), and temporal disciplining (day and night). Despite the dislike, Thao did not mention any specific resisting actions towards this issue, and neither did other participants including Nhung who also complained about virtual meeting after eight o'clock in the evening. The resistance at this stage was more in attitudes, but it could be developed into actions once the teachers found their personal life and family time was negatively influenced.

In terms of teachers' emotions and well-being in general, the teachers thought the support from their institution was inadequate and too general, although there were initiatives from the managerial level. Several teachers mentioned the mindfulness talks and workshops that they could register and a short professional development course of 'Becoming inspirational educators' that was mandatory for all teachers. Thu acknowledged that these two programmes were important in helping the teachers learn to regulate their emotions and "hold a positive emotion towards the teaching profession and our life in general". Mai shared a similar viewpoint, adding that mindfulness activities were gradually added into recent workshops and meetings, indicating that teachers' emotion was now more recognized in her workplace. The participants, however, emphasized self-regulation as the most important factor in their own well-being. Although they wanted and expected the institution to develop agendas on teachers' well-being and emotion, they acknowledged the importance of self-care. Thao explained that:

It is not easy to implement a program to support teachers' emotions, despite its necessity, because every teacher's individual life is different. Each has their own issues. That is not to mention some teachers don't feel comfortable sharing with others about their personal life. What if a teacher complains about something and then is reported to the school manager, or judged by others? I don't think teachers here will be willing to voice their emotions. Maybe in a small group, like what we are doing now. Sometimes when we have a group meeting, we may spend an hour and a half talking about our lives, sharing our concerns, or making complaints about our job.

Here the teachers relied on social bonding as a source of support for their burnout and an outlet for emotion display with less fear of judgement. Thu and Mai had a similar view towards the emotional care they received from their institution. "There was support, but just to cheer-up the teachers, which was not adequate", Mai commented. Nhung and An said the support in terms of teachers' emotion was "short-term", and "lack of a long-term vision with consistency". However, they did not expect the institution to go beyond what they did in terms of emotional care, but wanted to receive more technical training provision for teachers to be more proficient in utilizing online pedagogical and assessment resources. Again, the teachers relied more on themselves to practise self-care and regulate their emotions, not only because "there is not such a thing as institutional emotional support for teachers" according to Thao's claim, but also because when there was an initiative, it was not to get down to the actual issue of teachers' emotional experiences, but to encourage teachers, superficially, to continue their teaching performance.

The lack of a systematic and comprehensive support scheme from the institution forced the teachers to 'fight their own fight', meaning that they had to learn to resist implicit emotional rules of professional teaching in their own ways. It seems that the best resistance was to create spaces for exciting emotional connections among students and teachers, and for self-satisfaction of teachers themselves. In agreement with Boler (1999), we contend that resistances function both as defenses against vulnerability in this particular situation of the pandemic, and as assertions of power in the face of impositions of switching to online teaching while maintaining education quality and student engagement.

## **Discussion and implications**

The article offers an exploration of the emotional experiences of Vietnam language teachers at the onset of the global pandemic when online teaching came as both a rescue for teaching-learning activities and a burden for teachers. Under these conditions, teacher emotions were shaped and

performed. From the poststructuralist approach, the article discovers how the emotional rules (for instance hiding emotions in class) and discursive practices (teacher as parent, teaching for quality) implicitly and explicitly imposed on teachers when choosing the expression of certain emotions and the disciplining of others. While COVID-19 has forced teachers to face perhaps the most jarring changes in their professions, it has also brought heartening educational transformations. Specifically, teacher-student interactions reduced, teachers' care increased. Even when the teachers reported negative emotions, these negative emotions (anxiety, worry or confusion) stemmed from their care for students, which reflected the caring ethics of the teaching profession, particularly when teachers were aware of the precarity and instability their students were experiencing. The analysis on teachers' emotion expression and regulation unpacks how they attempted to exhibit positive emotions and avoid negative emotions because they *cared* about their students' well-being and emotions. They likened their students' online learning situation to their children's, which showed how they saw their identity as a teacher somewhat similar to that as a parent.

Teacher emotions are not merely the effects of outside structures which in this case refer to the overnight conversion to online teaching and inadequate institutional support and infrastructure. Teacher emotions are “performative”, meaning that the ways teachers understand, experience, perform, and talk about emotions are highly related to their understanding of culture, power, and themselves. Although there was not any explicit rules written in the institution policies that laid out rules of emotional display and expression for teachers, it needs to be emphasized that the teachers internalized the values of how a teacher should express emotions in class and what emotions deemed appropriate and inappropriate thanks to their own experiences as students and their learning from their former teachers. By describing events (the COVID-19 pandemic), objects (online platforms, technological resources), persons (teachers, students, institution manager) and their relationships (teacher-student interactions, tensions in virtual classrooms), the article highlights the ways emotions were experienced and expressed in relation to the teacher-self (individual reality), the others (social interactions) and the university culture in general (sociopolitical context). While the teachers were confused, anxious and unsure about the overnight digitalization of education, they were also excited and satisfied with the new educational tools and teaching platforms. Although the COVID-19 advent was a good start for developing an institutional policy on teachers' well-being and teachers' emotion in particular, the teachers still

relied more on themselves to regulate emotions: either enhancing positive emotions or controlling negative emotions. They continued to believe that practising self-care and emotional self-regulation was most salient in their teaching profession. The teachers' emotions, in the context of the pandemic, were put under the strain of not getting themselves disappointed, at the same time not letting their students down.

The article provides some insights into the issue of teacher emotions and implications for institutional policy. First, the teachers' emotional experiences highlight the fact that the advent of the global pandemic has altered the way teachers work and hence has brought their challenges to the mix: health concerns, social and physical distancing, stress, increased childcare and family care (Pham and Phan, 2021). However, the conversion to online education seemed to be prioritized over other issues, given that the teachers had other commitments and their personal lives were equally affected by the crisis. Their experiences can testify the point made by MacIntyre, Gregersen and Mercer (2020) that the long-term consequences of COVID-19 for language teachers and teaching are unknown. In that sense, institutions should take these factors of teachers' personal life commitments into account so that teachers will not be drained from the overwhelming situation both at work and at home. We concur with Starkey et al. (2021) that policies in education should be oriented towards the teachers' professional learning within the transformation of educational models rather than the mere provision of technological resources. Furthermore, given the consequences of laborious online teaching, there should be efforts from policymakers to reduce the duration of online classes for students and online work hours for teachers to minimize health problems amid the pandemic COVID-19 (Ganne et al., 2021). Therefore, a comprehensive support scheme in terms of psychological, technological, methodological, and professional development for teachers is desirable to both ensure effective online education and minimize negative impacts of the pandemic on the educational process. We call for attention to teachers' emotions as an integral dimension of the profession, regardless of the physical or virtual setting of the classroom.

## **Conclusion**

While other studies about teaching and learning during the COVID-19 crisis often put the way classrooms 'going virtual' in the front of the inquiry, this paper chose to explore teachers' emotions when they had to quickly shift their teaching to new digital platforms. Specifically, the study

charted the emotional experiences of ten English language teachers in a university in Vietnam when they were required to convert their traditional face-to-face teaching to online synchronous classrooms. The study highlighted the teachers' strategies to regulate their emotions and avoid a health break-down, both in and out-of-class.

We acknowledge that there are several limitations in this study. First, the sample size is small, hence, the findings cannot be represented for and generalized to a wider population of Vietnamese English language teachers at the tertiary level. Instead, the findings of this study provide specific insight within the scope of this research and can be understood as one among the first attempts to study the cohort of foreign language teachers in Vietnam in the pandemic situation (see more in Pham and Phan, 2021, 2022), which can invite future studies to expand the discussion initiated in this paper. Second, the accuracy of quotes can be influenced by the translation from Vietnamese to English since translation does not always reflect the nuances of what was said in the original language. In this regard, there could be a risk of inaccuracy in expressing the teachers' emotions in written English. However, the authors were convinced that the essential message of the informants was reflected in these pages. Furthermore, although we did attempt to include both female and male teachers, the uneven representation of the participants' gender in this study did not allow us to provide any conclusion regarding the differences in emotional expressions and regulation between male and female teachers. This point can be a suggestion for future inquiry about teachers' emotions in online teaching.

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