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The Emotional Lives of Experienced EFL Teachers

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Nine experienced and committed EFL teachers in Japanese universities were interviewed about their perceptions of emotion in their teaching lives. Two key findings emerged from an analysis of the transcripts. Firstly, that these teachers created warm emotional relationships with their students in which they showed that they cared deeply for the students and acted as moral guides for them. In contrast, emotional relationships with colleagues were often angry and frustrating ones reflecting a perceived lack of shared values and beliefs. It is suggested that the theoretical frameworks of ‘emotional labor’

and ‘feeling rules’ (after Hochschild, 1983 and 1990) may be an appropriate way for teachers to look at and critically engage with the important issue of the emotionality of teaching, and that teachers and institutions need to examine emotions collaboratively, particularly in order to encourage emotional warmth with students and to discuss the moral purpose of teaching.

この論文は、9人の経験豊かなEFL語学教師のインタビューに基づいて、教える上で、“感情”が果たす役割について研究したものである。データ分析の結果、2つのテーマが明らかになった。そのひとつは、教師達は、学生に対して思いやりのある感情をこめた関係を築き、また道徳的に学生達を導くことに意義を見出している。もう一つのテーマは、これとは反対に、同僚との関係に関する感情の多くは、価値観や信念の違いから、怒りや、フラストレーションをともなうものが多いというものである。この研究は、さらに、‘emotional labor’ や ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 1983 and 1990) といった理論が教師の持つ感情を調査する上で有用なものであると示唆し、また、学生と感情的に建設的な関係を築くために教師間、また職場で教師の持つ感情というテーマがさらに注目されるべきと述べている。

Introduction

Nine experienced university EFL teachers from Japan, China, the UK and the USA, living and working in the Tokyo area were interviewed intensively as part of an investigation into why they remained motivated and committed to the EFL profession. Three different kinds of information were produced: a life history of each teacher;

a description of each of their current teaching contexts; and, their perceptions of satisfaction and dissatisfaction within teaching. This data was then analysed from a ‘categorical-content perspective’ (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and, Zilber, 1998, p. 112), which generated a large number of themes across the teacher-participants. From the analysis and interpretation of these themes a number of conclusions were reached, two of which were focused on in the presentation: the teachers’ most important perceived emotions, and the conceptual frameworks of ‘emotional labor’ and ‘feeling rules’.

The importance of emotions in EFL teaching

The teachers described a large number of emotions that they felt in their professional lives of which two categories appeared to be the most important; these are to create ‘emotional warmth’ with students by caring and liking them and, in contrast, the anger and frustration that they felt towards colleagues and institutions. In the sections below these two perceptions will be described and some of the practical implications that follow will be discussed.

Perceptions of emotions with students

It was very important to the participant teachers to create a sense of ‘emotional warmth’ with their students. Such emotional warmth resulted from a number of reasons but liking students and caring for them were the most important. The teachers liked students, not so much in the sense of having particular favourites, although that was mentioned, but in terms of having a genuine affection and regard for all their students and in addition showing great respect for them and what they had achieved in terms of learning. In contrast, being liked by

the students themselves was not such an important concern for the teachers, especially as they became more experienced and gained a much clearer sense of their ‘professional self’ (Keltchermans, 1993 and 2000; Roberts, 2003), which tended to centre more on the best ways to encourage student learning and progress than on inter-personal relationships.

A second important feature of emotional warmth was to care for students, which the teachers showed in a large number of practical ways such as giving extra help out of the classroom. However, a more important, more underlying way to care was expressed through the teachers’ identity as a kind of moral guide. Opportunities to take on this role occurred in response to various student problems that inevitably emerged during courses, or through the teachers’ deliberate inclusion of various moral and political topics into lessons. Such problems and issues, for example, of social injustice or the Middle East conflict, are fundamentally important emotional issues—both teachers and students will have strong feelings about them and they need sensitive and careful handling, and perhaps for those reasons they are often left out of the discourse of EFL teaching and teacher education. Certainly there are vast amounts of learning materials focused on topics such as ‘global issues’ which are often of a moral or political nature (Cooney, 2003; Matz, 2003), or are even considered taboo (MacAndrew and Martinez, 2001), and increasingly there is much work of theoretical relevance in critical pedagogy concerning the ideological nature of the political relationships between teacher and student (Benesch, 2001; Pennycook, 1998), but it seems that there has been relatively little focus within EFL on the desire for teachers to ‘go beyond’ English language as a technical subject and to make lessons morally and politically richer (Fallona, 2000).

There is within the literature on mainstream educational change, epitomised by the work of Hargreaves and Fullan (1998), a concern that teachers should focus on the ‘moral purpose’ of education, the foremost of which for Hargreaves and Fullan, interestingly, is to love and care for children (p. 32). It appears that the teachers in this study have found that it is a fundamental tenet of staying in their work that they can, if not love, at least like their young adult students very much and care very deeply for them, and as part of that care they will try to guide them in deeper ways other than in English language instruction—such as when one teacher discusses what it is like to be a working Asian mother with her young female students, or when another talks about appropriate sexual behaviour with his class, or when a third debates with his students about what it means to be a good and empathetic listener. It may be that these teachers are privileged in that they are largely left relatively undisturbed to teach in a style and a way that best suits them—an independence that may be peculiar to Japanese universities, at least for the moment; but it seems that wherever these teachers were they would still attempt to teach in this way, and is one major reason why they can gain so much satisfaction from their work and have continued to remain in the profession.

Perceptions of emotions with colleagues and institutions

Positive emotional responses to colleagues (and others in TEFL) seemed much less intense than those evoked with students—perhaps summarized by the teachers’ quiet satisfaction reflecting, for example, their sense of shared values and mutual respect. However, they did describe in much stronger terms the negative emotions of frustration, disappointment, and anger that can result from collegial relations and institutional contexts. These could be sparked by

particular incidents; one teacher, for example, found the whole experience of preparing university entrance exams particularly disillusioning, but were more likely to be the result of longer term states such as whether or not an institution was fair or just and collegial relations were supportive and co-operative.

The teachers described their anger towards students’ poor behaviours in terms of short-lived critical incidents, which were soon over and forgotten though very intense nonetheless, whereas anger towards colleagues and institutions could cause much more deep-seated and longer lasting resentments and frustration. Of course students will come and go more frequently than do colleagues or institutions so there is perhaps less chance for long-term stresses as a result of poor student relations to appear. Another interpretation of this is that these teachers found it easier to create good relations with their students and that the strength of these relations, through liking and caring for their students, outweighed the often negative emotions that were felt towards colleagues. However, sometimes even good student relations could not compensate for such stresses and so the teachers did move to other jobs.

‘Emotional labor’ and ‘feeling rules’

The two conceptual frameworks of emotional labor and feeling rules are suggested as useful ways to examine the emotionality of teaching.

‘Emotional labor is a concept introduced by Hochschild (1983) in her classic work ‘The Managed Heart’ in which she looked at various employment contexts in which employees had to alter their emotions for money—for example, flight attendants had to be ‘nicer than normal’ and debt collectors

had to be ‘nastier than normal’. Hochschild (1990) explains that the way in which we all carry out emotional labor is through some kind of acting, either ‘deep’ or ‘surface’, so that we can manage our feelings in order to influence others; in this sense ‘we are all flight attendants’ (p. 121). Such acting is not necessarily negative in that people are forced to put on emotions that are not real—emotional labor is often at the heart of any employment situation, and the passion that teachers show for their work reflects the fact that they find the work meaningful and satisfying—this is what happens in deep acting when teachers use various devices, such as self talk, to make themselves really feel the part they want to play in front of a class. However, if they carry out surface acting in which the feelings they show are forced or unnatural then that can lead to dysfunctional emotional labor which can result in ‘work related maladjustment such as depression, poor self-concept, anxiety, despair and alienation’ (Winograd, in press, p. 9).

The teachers in the study were not asked directly to describe when and how they managed their emotions but it is possible to infer from their answers to questions of satisfaction and dissatisfaction that they, through experience, have found ways to successfully merge deep acting and their teaching approach. These are teachers who are passionate about teaching and who have stayed in the profession for a long time so they exhibit evidence of functional adjustments to emotional labor. Two teachers, for instance, both described how, even now, they still get nervous before every lesson but they view this as being a very positive form of anxiety which energizes them for their lessons. One explained how he was trying very hard as he got more experienced ‘not to put on any kind of mask in the classroom’ but just to ‘be himself’. One interpretation of this is that he is not actually working without a mask but is gradually

getting accustomed to the deep acting that he has to do to teach. Another teacher admitted that his ideal teacher image was to be able to recreate the kind of person that he was in a pub in a classroom, but that it was just not possible for him to do so. Instead he had to ‘put on’ some kind of ‘teacherly’ personality, which he was now comfortable with.

In contrast, the teachers did of course also describe when they cannot go through the effort of emotional labor. One, for example, says that there are times when he just withdraws from the class and cannot really force himself to engage with his students even though he knows he has to. Another teacher said that one reason he did not usually get angry with students was that ‘he just could not be bothered to’. However, the main reason that these teachers appear to be well adjusted is that they do not mention negative effects of dysfunctional labor, particularly in connection with students who were overall a huge source of satisfaction. Dissatisfaction tended to appear more in connection with colleagues and institutional contexts. Of course people must undertake emotional labor in their relationships with colleagues but those kinds of contacts, although extremely important, are much less frequent than those with students and probably require less acting, whether deep or surface.

A second aspect to emotional labor is the concept of ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 1983, 1990), which is the idea that there are cultural expectations of how people in certain occupations or professions should behave. This can be illustrated by looking at anger in response to student misbehavior which was the most frequently mentioned negative emotion and one in which the teachers varied greatly in their response to it—not getting angry at all, using anger as a form of control, or allowing anger to create a hostile and negative atmosphere.

Two teachers, with seemingly the most professional distance from their current students, professed that they never got angry with their students. It may be that the propensity for anger and the intensity of a relationship are correlated in some way. Hargreaves (2000) points out that the elementary teachers he studied had far more intense relationships with their students, showing both negative and positive emotions, than did the secondary teachers who were, for various reasons such as the more segmented timetable and physical layout of schools, more distant and detached.

Differing responses to anger may also reflect signs of differing ‘emotional intelligence’ (Goleman, 1995) or temperament with some teachers better able to use their anger effectively, especially as they gain more experience, for example, to use their anger in a strategic way to control students. One teacher said that she uses her anger in this way and after discovering that it was a tool of power she used anger even when she was not angry. It is interesting that she was somewhat defensive about this use of anger and did not want to appear ‘mean’ by fooling students. For other teachers in circumstances where discipline and control are key issues this use of anger is a perfectly ‘functional’ dimension of the emotion. It would appear that this teacher has internalized the feeling rules for teachers, particularly for female teachers, that it is not appropriate for a teacher to get angry but has to show control and be calm at all times (Winograd, in press). There was some limited evidence in this study that there was a gender dimension to anger—four of the male teachers tried, initially, in many cases not to get angry with their students but eventually overreacted which resulted in some kind of conflict. After this they then went through a period of regret, remorse and subsequent reconciliation with the students. It is interesting to note that none of the female teachers went through this process of self-blame.

Main implications of this study

There are a number of implications of this study but underlying each one is the belief that teachers need to talk to each other about their teaching, whether inside an institutional setting or through some external network. One simple but fundamental implication is for the EFL field to acknowledge the importance of emotions in teaching, teacher development, and teacher research, especially if the field is to retain its older and more experienced staff. Winograd (in press) suggests that institutions and teachers each need to devise their own ways to understand the role that emotions play in teaching but goes on to advise that the ‘collective naming and examination of emotions’ (p. 1) is a possible way to begin the process. Secondly, it is argued that two of the key issues that emerged from this study as being important to the teacher participants need to enter the professional discourse of TEFL; that is, teachers should be encouraged to consider how to create and maintain emotional warmth with students, and to discuss what the moral and political purposes of their teaching are. Thirdly, although it is not known exactly why these teachers are still teaching—and they all have many different reasons to stay—it is clear that they all have a passion for their students and for learning, and, perhaps most importantly, they have a clear sense of their own identity as teachers and ‘professional self’ (Roberts, 2003). And it is that ongoing search for identity and professional self which is one key to teacher longevity.

It is concluded that emotions are a vital part of these teachers’ search for a sense of their professional self—their feelings about who they teach, who they work with, and where they work are all instrumental in the creation and reconstruction of their teaching identity. However, there are ‘feeling rules’

(Hochschild, 1983) of teaching that mean only certain emotions are acceptable within the profession—as anger is not one of these, teachers cannot use their anger against colleagues and institutions in a ‘functional’ way (Winograd, in press) to improve their teaching conditions. Instead they tend to focus their emotional energy on creating warm relationships with students and act as kind and caring moral guides, but regarding their impact on wider collegial and institutional issues of value differences and unequal or poor working conditions the teachers are effectively marginalised and silenced.

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