Effects of emotional labor on teachers in post-crisis-affected Brazil

Gysele da S. Colombo-Gomes

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Emotional labor plays a key role in teachers' emotional knowledge and development. This case study focuses on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the lives and professional practices of a group of Brazilian English language teachers, highlighting the post-crisis emotions and emotional labor these teachers had to navigate. Data were collected through a questionnaire and narrative frames. Analysis of the data revealed that, even 5 years after the crisis, participants continue to face distress, apathy, anxiety, and fear in the classroom, stemming from the increased inequality of opportunities among learners in the challenging context of emergency remote teaching in higher education in Brazil. The study also sheds light on the implications for both pre- and in-service teachers, as well as for teacher educators, emphasizing the need to cultivate a deeper understanding of building resilience and well-being through ELT practices.

Key words: emotional labor, ELT, post-crisis, Brazil

Introduction

By 2022, the world had endured 2 years of global chaos due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The profound impact of this crisis, which forced schools and universities to shift entirely to remote learning, was undeniable. Fear, insecurity, and uncertainty made teaching and learning particularly challenging. In an effort to safeguard public health, we were confined to isolation, awkwardly and hesitantly navigating digital platforms to maintain social and educational connections. We faced the constraints of time, space, and technical inexperience in times of crisis.

In Brazil, the need to adopt new technologies in education had already been an imminent issue. However, during the pandemic, it was no longer just about learning to use these new resources—it was about using them to

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teach, learn, and, most importantly, re-establish human connections. This situation exacerbated existing educational challenges, pushing people to the limits and, as Liberali (2020: 15) highlights, 'limited situations, placed by immediate reality, can immobilize subjects'. Since there was no previous experience with situations like that posed by COVID-19, the lack of preparation for it seemed to generate a feeling of total uselessness and inevitable failure or destruction (Liberali 2020). It also created an unprecedented and urgent turning point. Since then, it has become essential to find ways to empower everyone, especially those who, dependent on technology, seek to teach and learn, but fear the adversities of an emerging country. In fact, during the pandemic, scholars explored unequal ways of teaching-learning, especially online teaching in a country where many people were technologically illiterate; nearly 5 years later, the effects of this period remain significant in Brazil.

Several studies have shed light on this topic, including Sepulveda-Escobar and Morrison (2020), who examined the challenges and opportunities of online teaching placements in Chile during COVID-19; Sugianto and Ulfah (2020), who investigated English teachers' perspectives on the challenges and opportunities of intercultural language teaching; Ahmadi and Ilmiani (2020), who focused on the use of digital teaching media in Arabic language instruction; Moorhouse and Kohnke (2021), who analyzed the ELT community's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic; and Erarslan (2021), who provided a global perspective on English language teaching and learning during the first year of the pandemic. Despite these valuable contributions, the emotional experiences and emotional labor of pre-service ELT teachers in Brazil, particularly in the post-pandemic context, have been largely overlooked. This study seeks to address that gap in the literature.

Theoretical framework

Following the affective turn (Pavlenko 2013) and/or the emotional turn, emotions have finally received the attention they deserve, similar to the longstanding focus on cognition. Research on teachers' emotions often highlights how emotions are inextricably linked to teachers' lives. Emotional rules reflect power relations and serve as techniques for regulating human differences in emotional expression and communication (Hochschild 1983). Emotional labor is a social and cultural construct, arising from conflicts between institutional policies, their implied feeling rules, and English language teachers' professional training and other influences (Benesch 2018). Even after the prolonged post-COVID-19 crisis, pre- and in-service English language teachers in Brazil continue to struggle against social inequalities in education while engaging in emotional labor.

This study adopts a critical approach to teacher emotions by exploring the sociopolitical and ideological dimensions that underpin pre-service and in-service teacher emotions. The poststructural perspective employed here neither subdivides emotions into components nor describes the interaction of these parts in an attempt to capture an essential reality. Instead, I focus on how emotions are represented in the narrative frames (NFs) of pre- and in-service English language teachers to portray their emotional labor in their context, and to expose some social inequalities in higher education in Brazil. I share Benesch's (2018) concern with how emotions are discursively

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constructed and her assertion that it is impossible to gain unmediated access to reality, however that might be defined.

As for the term *emotional labor*, initially proposed by Hochschild in her book *The Managed Heart*, it originates from her study of flight attendants and airline cabin crews in the 1980s. In this research, Hochschild focused on how the expropriation of 'deep' emotions predominates in these occupational roles through the social learning of emotional control. The author demonstrated that being a flight attendant required mastering the emotional labor of managing feelings by separating 'I' from 'my feelings'.

Zembylas (2005) distinguished emotional labor from Hochschild's perspective by conceptualizing it as dynamic, multidimensional, and multidirectional, continually constructed and reproduced through interactions of domination and resistance. In this study (2005), Zembylas sought to explore the social and political nature of teacher emotions in school settings in Greece in hopes of identifying potential areas for transforming unfavorable conditions.

Benesch's (2018) assertions about emotional labor from a poststructuralist perspective deserve attention, as her study challenges the traditional notion that teachers should suppress their emotions. Instead, she argues that emotions can be a powerful tool for critical agency and activism. In line with Benesch's ideas, Zembylas (2005) emphasize that emotions constitute a fundamental dimension of teachers' work and professional lives, reinforcing the social perspective of emotional labor. I consider it essential to acknowledge that in teaching-learning processes, teachers and students often modify or suppress their emotions to fulfil their assigned roles. The teacher educator, frequently perceived as primarily responsible for learning, is expected to be tireless and consistently motivate pre-service teachers, who in turn, strive to complete all assigned tasks. As Xu, Fan, and Du (2016) point out, studies on teachers' emotions address issues such as teacher burnout and stress, the role of emotions in the construction of professional identity during educational reforms, the impact of teacher emotions on social relationships, and the connection between teacher competence and emotional regulation.

In line with Benesch's (2018) argument that emotional labor can reveal the injustices faced by students struggling to meet the demands of higher education, this study explores how pre-service teachers engaged in emotional labor to expose social inequalities and injustices during their initial teacher education nearly five years after the COVID-19 crisis. Thus, this study seeks to fulfill that purpose by addressing the following research question:

- How do pre-service teachers engage in emotional labor to highlight inequalities and resilience in response to the adversities caused by the post-COVID-19 crisis in Higher Education?

Methodology

This is a qualitative case study (Yin 2018) that provides a strong foundation for generating and analyzing data on lived experiences. This method was particularly appropriate because I had been able to track the trajectory of a group of students from a subject I taught at the onset of the COVID-19

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crisis. Had I not maintained regular contact with these students over the past five years, the insights into the implications for both pre- and in-service teachers—as well as for teacher educators—regarding the importance of fostering resilience and well-being through ELT practices would likely have been lost.

Research setting and participants

According to the 2022 Higher Education Census by INEP [Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira], Brazil has 2,595 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), which can be public or private and include universities, federal institutes, university centers, and colleges. Public HEIs, which are government-funded and tuition-free, are essential for expanding access to higher education. Among the 312 public HEIs is the Rio de Janeiro State University (UERJ), where this study was conducted. UERJ is known for implementing policies that promote access for Black and low-income students, contributing to the reduction of Brazil's socioeconomic inequalities and allowing many individuals to pursue higher education who might not otherwise have the opportunity.

This study involved the participation of two female and three male pre-service teachers, aged between 24 and 34. All were enrolled in three courses in *Letras* I taught: the first semester of 2020 (2020.1), the second semester of 2022 (2022.2), and the second semester of 2024 (2024.2). Despite being in initial education, all worked as English language teachers in private schools, characterizing them as both pre- and in-service teachers. This dual role provided them with sufficient experience to discuss not only their personal emotional experiences, but also their perceptions of teaching English at the primary and secondary levels, both generally and within their specific contexts. Participants formally consented to the use of their data in the study, and to maintain anonymity, they were assigned pseudonyms.

Data generation

To understand participants' sense-making processes, I used a qualitative design, collecting data via an open-ended questionnaire and NFs. The questionnaire included demographic questions and asked participants to describe their decision to become EL teachers (see Table 1). NFs helped organize responses systematically. Thematic analysis was adopted here as an unequivocal and quite mechanical application of some frequency counting or coding of selected terms in transcriptions or texts, or some break in the content of the protocol or material documentary.

A 14-sentence starter NF was assigned in January 2025. Participants were instructed to read all the starters before beginning to write so they could gain a sense of the story's overall structure. That was to encourage them to reflect on their emotional experiences during and after the pandemic so that I could identify their emotional labor as a tool to expose social inequalities and injustices during their initial education in ELT.

Analysis

In order to identify themes that effectively captured the study's key concerns, the data generated from the NFs were analyzed following the principles of thematic analysis as outlined by van Manen (1990). According to Manen, themes are not merely topics or codes; rather, they are structures of

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TABLE 1

Participants' basic information

ID	Date of birth (age)	Gender	Enrollment at UERJ	Terms studied until 2024.2	Deadline to finish the undergraduate course
Gonçalves	18 April 1995 (30)	M	February 2014	14	2024.2
Coutinho	17 December 1990 (34)	M	January 2019	12	2025.2
Calíope	22 May 2001 (23)	F	January 2019	12	2025.2
Mota	2 December 2002 (22)	M	January 2020	10	2026.1
Brew	8 August 2002 (21)	F	July 2020	09	2026.2

experience—meaningful patterns that reveal how individuals make sense of a phenomenon. First, I immersed myself in the data and engaged in deep reflection on the participants' accounts to identify experiential meanings. The data were carefully read, and initial codes were developed. After several rounds of reviewing and refining the codes, three themes emerged from the analysis:

1. Hopelessness as a lack of teacher recognition in society
2. Social injustice as a lack of technological literacy
3. Fighting apathy, distress, and fear.

Findings and discussion

First, light is shed on the questionnaire on participants' profiles. Then, findings are discussed under the three themes that emerged from the NFs.

Gonçalves came from a socioeconomically disadvantaged family in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro. He initially envisioned graduating from college as a linear journey filled with academic challenges. According to his narrative, from 2014 to 2024, he navigated an arduous path filled with obstacles, self-doubt, and moments of near surrender at university. The post-pandemic period, in particular, posed one of his greatest challenges, testing not only his academic determination but also his emotional resilience.

To **Coutinho,** teaching English was something he could never envision for himself. Throughout his narrative, he confessed that he never felt capable of becoming an EFL teacher due to his deep-seated lack of confidence in using the language. Additionally, his deeply rooted belief that a teacher could not make mistakes had always haunted him. In 2024, the pressure of running out of time to complete his degree heightened his anxiety and reinforced his insecurities. He is the single participant who claimed the pandemic did not make profound changes in his academic life.

Calíope, a 23-year-old woman, believes her life journey has led her to become an EFL teacher due to her proficiency. Throughout the 2024.2 academic term, despite her excellent command of the language, Calíope frequently expressed fear about not completing her degree, with anxiety often becoming her greatest obstacle.

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Mota expressed pride in his decision to become an ELT teacher. Nevertheless, he found it extremely challenging to navigate the pandemic crisis, as everything changed rapidly. Mota emphasizes that one of the defining characteristics of public universities in Brazil is the high quality of education they offer, mainly the level of use of English. He observed, though, that, since the pandemic, students have faced even greater obstacles in pursuing their professional paths, leading to widespread distress and apathy.

Brew always dreamed of becoming an EL teacher. She recognized the importance of studying English at university, since in secondary public schools English lessons are extremely limited to a teacher-imposed curriculum, within just 50 minutes per week. Brew still has five semesters left to complete her degree; however, she also has many remaining subjects, some of which may have scheduling conflicts in future semesters. This issue is also a consequence of the pandemic, as some students enrolled in courses from different academic periods deviated from the standard university program to accommodate their work schedules.

Theme 1: hopelessness as a lack of teacher recognition in society

Rocque (2024: 23) asserts that 'there is a wide variation in teacher recognition across different regions of the world, influenced by several factors, including economic development, cultural norms, and geographical location'. At UERJ, many students enroll in the Letras program with limited English proficiency, a consequence of their educational background. They often confront a prevailing, unspoken feeling rule: the belief that English is reserved for a privileged few and that hopelessness is inherent in their career prospects.

In the NF, Calíope links hopelessness to the lack of recognition and the broader decline not only of the teaching profession but of education itself in the country. She signals her feelings through the adverb 'unfortunately', which reflects her view that hopelessness is tied to the dismantling of public education, as seen in students' disengagement and the devaluation of teachers. In doing so, Calíope engages in emotional labor (Hochschild 1983), especially through her use of the euphemism 'it's possible to infer...' Despite its cautious tone, no inference is needed to grasp the urgent crisis in education today. Rather, this phrase reflects Calíope's adjustment of emotional expression to align her outward demeanour with the institutional expectations of her academic environment.

a. Hopelessness is a feeling that unfortunately spreads across public schools, expressed by the lack of interest among students, the devaluation of teachers and the dismantling of public education institutions. (...) It's possible to infer that access to education has always been an issue for Brazilian citizens, and during the pandemic, inequality grew as many students faced disruptions in their education. (Calíope)

Similarly to Calíope, Brew perceives hopelessness in the demotivation and salary conditions faced by both EFL students and teachers. She attributes the lack of English proficiency to unequal access to ELT across the country. I interpret Brew's way of exposing the inequalities she witnessed during her time at university as an expression of hopelessness as well. However, these

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inequalities do not hinder her from developing her EFL skills and achieving her primary goal: completing her undergraduate degree. Her actions align with Benesch's (2018) argument that emotional labor can serve to expose the injustices faced by students struggling to meet the demands imposed by HEI.

b. Hopelessness is a feeling that unfortunately spreads across public schools, since they don't have motivation or opportunities as students of a private school, for example. They don't receive motivation specially because teachers are also demotivated (with their salary and devaluation) so it's difficult to give something that we also don't have. Seeking to bring comparisons between the university space and school environments during and after the pandemic period, I think that in public school, they had little resources, a lack of teacher support, and no remote classes. In the university space, we had remote classes, access to the teachers' email and some few of us had access to the Internet. But these social differences are huge and demotivating. After over four years, I still don't think things are going to change...(Brew)

I observe multiple layers of emotional labor exhibited by both Calíope and Brew. Their understanding of hopelessness is multidimensional and multidirectional, as they recognize the impact of profound social inequalities on different groups and how these implications affect their own lives. Aware of the power of hopelessness—continually constructed and reproduced within their community—they persist in resisting and striving to become proficient in English and complete their university degrees. In this context, I interpret the social and political nature of these pre-service teachers' emotions of hopelessness as a call to transform conditions and address systemic inequalities. This aligns with Zembylas' (2005) study, which explored the social and political dimensions of teacher emotions to identify potential avenues for transforming unfavorable circumstances.

Theme 2: social injustice as a lack of technological literacy

Social justice in teacher education programs serves to prepare pre-service teachers to challenge oppressive social, political, and economic structures. In this pursuit, UERJ's policies have played a crucial role in supporting a large number of students by providing financial aid to help them remain enrolled and succeed. Nonetheless, some students are admitted with little knowledge of English and are technologically illiterate.

In excerpts (c) and (d), Mota's and Calíope's surface acting (Hochschild 1983) might be understood as a simple demonstration of dissatisfaction, disappointment, and distress when she wonders what people could have learned if they did not have access to technology. Nevertheless, if observed carefully, we notice that the pre-service teacher exercises her agency by highlighting recurring criticism of social injustice, along with an indirect cry for fewer inequalities and equal access to health care and education for everyone, particularly for the sake of social equity.

c. (...) I analyzed how digital inequalities, pedagogical adaptations, some friends' lack of fluency in English and socio-emotional challenges have

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impacted students and teachers in Brazil, highlighting differences in access to technology, the change to remote and hybrid teaching and the long-term effects on educational equity. (...) how can we fill up the gap in language dug by the pandemic? (Mota)

In line with Benesch's perspective, rather than suppressing emotions, expressing them can be a powerful tool for critical agency and activism, as demonstrated in excerpt (d).

d. The problem with social injustice, five years after the pandemic, is still deeply rooted, as seen by the persistence of economic inequalities intensified by the crisis, unequal access to high-quality healthcare and EL education, and the long-term effects of job loss, learning gaps, and ineffective governmental policies on marginalized communities. (...) I see the negative issues in my students' learning because of the lack of immersive and communicative environments. (Calíope)

Mota and Calíope place significant importance on technology, using it as critical activism to advocate for their rights as university students, including equitable access to resources and opportunities in their initial ELT education (Benesch 2018). Similarly, Schutz and Zembylas (2009) emphasize that emotions are a fundamental dimension of teachers' work and professional lives, reinforcing the social perspective of emotional labor. In line with this view, I argue that the same applies to the pre-service teachers in this study.

Theme 3: fighting apathy, distress, and fear

Apathy and distress are complex emotional experiences often signaling a sense of danger. Intertwined with fear, these emotions were present in most NFs. Ghodke and Tasildar (2024) argue that the primary reason for growing apathy toward learning English is that students realized they could survive without it, not only in daily life but also in their chosen careers. According to the authors, fear of failure is the second most significant reason students avoid learning English. In the context of this study, participants reported that during online lessons, some students fell behind their peers, resulting in distress, apathy, and heightened fear of failure. Lutovac and Flores (2021) argue that failure is perceived as an inescapable aspect of future teaching practice, which may help explain why pre-service teachers experience such intense fear—particularly given the limited opportunities for academic success during their undergraduate studies. However, fear of failure was not explicitly articulated in the university context. Gonçalves also notes that his students displayed similar apathy and detachment—symptoms I likewise observed among the pre-service teachers in excerpt (e)—indicating a shared sense of helplessness.

e. Many were disinterested, emotionally detached, apathetic, and struggling to grasp a subject that already felt foreign and challenging. Some students, who once showed promise, even after 4 to 5 years after the pandemic, still battled anxiety, frustration, and a sense of helplessness in a world that no longer made sense to them. (Gonçalves)

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Regardless of these emotions, these teachers have built resilience through credible emotional development and expression resources for understanding their affective experiences, as Gonçalves demonstrated at the end of 2024. This is expressed in excerpt (f), where he concedes that, above his difficulties, he succeeded in seeing change and embracing the process of ELT.

f. Despite these difficulties (...) If I wanted them to persist, I had to show them what perseverance looked like. Thus, I began to approach teaching differently. (...) I emphasized resilience. I shared my own challenges with them—not just as an educator but as a student who had also felt like giving up. We have talked about fear, failure... the importance of trying even when success seemed far away. (...) Students who once refused to participate began to take small risks, answering questions in English, and eventually embracing the process of learning. (Gonçalves)

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the participants employed emotional labor as a means to expose inequalities and exhibit resilience in the face of adversities brought on by the post-COVID-19 crisis in Higher Education. In response to the research question, it became evident that pre-service teachers engaged in emotional labor not only as a coping mechanism but also as a critical response to systemic injustices. Despite continuing to experience unpleasant emotions within their academic context even after the pandemic, they developed sufficient resilience to articulate the social and epistemic injustices they encountered. This articulation functioned as a form of critical activism, aiming to legitimize their rights as university students—particularly the right to equitable access to resources and opportunities within initial teacher education programs.

Through this process, participants cultivated a deeper understanding of resilience and well-being by becoming aware of the power of their agency, especially within the context of English Language Teaching (ELT). Their engagement, marked by self-determination and sustained involvement during the pandemic, reflected key dimensions of well-being as conceptualized in positive psychology—namely, purpose, personal growth, and meaningful social connections. Their experience thus transcended the mere absence of distress, highlighting a form of flourishing amid adversity.

Finally, I do hope that the findings and practical implications discussed in this article will encourage teacher educators to reflect on the significance of integrating emotional labor awareness into professional development in their programs/curricula revisions. Recognizing emotion as a site of personal transformation can serve to meaningfully empower pre-service teachers, both professionally and personally.

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