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Research Article

Teacher-Facilitated Emotion Regulation Strategies: A Comparative Study Involving Refugee Students in ESL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Students' emotional experience plays a major role in their ability to comfortably and successfully acquire an additional language (Dewaele et al., 2018). For migrant English language learners, the issue of emotion and emotion regulation becomes particularly salient. This is due in part to the trauma that they may be processing and the emotional consequences of trauma associated with migration (Busch & McNamara, 2020). Refugee learners, in particular, reap additional benefits from the application of emotion regulation practices rooted in positive psychology. Building on this vibrant body of work, our empirical study investigates the use of emotion regulation strategies in ESL classrooms in two refugee ESL contexts in the U.S. Based on classroom observations, artifacts, and interviews with two focal participant teachers, we examine teachers' strategies to facilitate students' emotion regulation across contexts and the challenges teachers face in supporting these differing student populations. Our findings support the use of positive psychology strategies such as acceptance and mindfulness to enhance language learning outcomes, and the constructive impact of teacher actions with regard to situational control and modification. Pedagogical implications are also discussed.

Keywords: emotion regulation, ESL, refugee learners, mindfulness, wellbeing

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INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of the affective turn in second language acquisition (SLA), beginning with the work of Gardner and Lambert (e.g., Gardner & Lambert, 1972), the impact of emotional factors on language learning has been a subject of study within the field of SLA. The proposal of Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) posited that a high affective filter, characterized by emotions such as anxiety and self-doubt, could limit learners' processing of language input. In the years since, and following the conduct of empirical research, numerous emotions, ranging from anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986) to boredom (Li et al., 2025), have been shown to impact language acquisition. Notably, the role of positive and negative emotions in foreign language learning has garnered much interest (Resnik et al., 2025). Given the importance of emotions on students' success in language classrooms and as language learners, the ability to help students regulate their emotions is essential for language teachers.

The impact of emotions on language learning has been widely investigated in contexts ranging from undergraduate foreign language classes (e.g., Espinoza Marazo, 2023) to adult English as a Second Language (ESL) classes (e.g., Kiruthiga & Christopher, 2022) and heritage language classes (e.g., Liu, 2025). However, the majority of research related to ESL has focused on children and college students (Baynham & Simpson, 2010; Shepperd, 2022). Consequently, comparatively little research has been done on ESL education catering to adult learners outside of university settings. For the purposes of this study, we are particularly concerned with emotion regulation in ESL for adult immigrant and refugee learners, both of which have unique needs in the language classroom. For example, adult immigrant language learners may face higher barriers to acculturation due to their limited contact with host country nationals as compared to learners in academic contexts (Jasemi et al., 2025). Refugee learners also have a set of unique needs, including increased literacy instruction (Keller, 2017), compensation for interrupted education (Finn, 2010), and emotional needs related to the (often violent) circumstances that have made them refugees in the first place (De Costa, 2010). Globally, both the number of immigrants

total (de Haas et al., 2019) and refugees specifically (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025) have been increasing in recent years, making language education for these groups an increasingly salient concern.

Investigation into the strategies ESL teachers use to enhance emotion regulation in their adult immigrants and refugee learners allows the field a more nuanced view into emotion regulation overall and provides insight into how teachers and administrators can better support these students. Additionally, this line of research addresses the need to study communities outside of WEIRD – Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic – populations (Ortega, 2019). In light of the gap in research on the use of emotion regulation strategies in the language classrooms of adult immigrant and refugee learners, this qualitative study examines the strategies employed by two ESL teachers in the U.S. seeking to support student emotion regulation in refugee and community ESL classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotion Regulation and SLA

Emotion regulation is a process by which someone attempts to modulate the emotions they are experiencing and expressing in a given situation (Gross, 1998). In language classrooms, learners may practice emotion regulation strategies to heighten their experience of positive emotions like foreign language enjoyment and minimize negative emotions such as boredom (Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Bielak, 2024). Within SLA, emotion regulation strategies have been investigated as a means for students and teachers to modify their emotional experiences within the language classroom. There is a wide range of strategies that can be implemented, and several models (i.e., process, cognitive, behavioral) have been put forward to categorize these strategies, as represented in Nakamura (2023). The process model of emotion – specifically Gross's (1998) and Gross and Thompson's (2007) concepts of *situation selection*, *situation modification*, and *response modification* – is particularly relevant to the contexts explored in this study.

The process model of emotion regulation posits that there are several points where emotion can be regulated, such as before or during a stressful situation (Gross, 1998; Gross & John, 2003). Relatedly, Garnefski et al. (2001) focused on the cognitive aspects of emotion regulation and identified strategies such as *positive refocusing* (redirecting attention to more positive thoughts inspired by the current situation) or *acceptance* (being willing to experience emotions as they come, positive or negative). Other work (e.g., Kraaij & Garnefski, 2019) has focused on the behavioral aspects of emotion regulations, such as withdrawal or seeking social support. It is worth pointing out that there is overlap between these three frameworks (process, behavioral, and cognitive), and realistically, practitioners may be utilizing strategies that could fall under more than one of these umbrellas.

With the increased influence of positive psychology on the field of SLA, recent research has sought to examine how effective emotion regulation strategies may be in classroom settings. Zare et al. (2025) found that English learners who used cognitive reappraisal - the strategy of shifting away from negative emotions and towards positive emotions (Gross & John, 2003) - to regulate their emotions showed increased task engagement in their English classes. Zhang et al. (2022) reported that students in an online writing group experienced higher degrees of foreign language enjoyment when engaging in emotion regulation strategies, such as situation modification and cognitive change. Crucially, these strategies can be either student-initiated or teacher-initiated. For instance, a student may already practice mindfulness outside of class and use those skills to regulate their emotions in class. Alternatively, a teacher may introduce emotion regulation strategies to their class or intervene when they perceive that a student is having a negative emotional experience. This study focuses on teacher-facilitated emotion regulation strategies, that is, strategies that teachers embed into their instruction or classroom management in order to support students' emotion regulation.

Special Considerations for Adult and Refugee Learners

Adult learners, both refugee and non-refugee, face increased barriers to acculturation as compared to school-aged ESL learners. In a comparative study of adult learners in community ESL classes and learners in university-based English for Academic Purposes classes (EAP), Jasemi et al. (2025) found that learners in the EAP context experienced greater increases in proficiency and higher acculturation rates than students in the community ESL context, likely because of their reduced access to socialization with local native speakers of English. Adult learners outside of university contexts also do not benefit from the university-provided support structures designed to help international students with acculturative stress (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). While much research has shown that acculturation is important for learners' acquisition of their target language (e.g., Schumann, 1986), comparatively little research has examined the way in which barriers to acculturation may impact students' emotional experiences in the language classroom.

In addition, one major concern specific to refugee learners is that they are disproportionately likely to have experienced interrupted education. The UNHCR reported that as of 2023, approximately half of school-aged refugee children were not currently enrolled in school (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2025). Students with Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE) may have their education interrupted at any point over the course of their schooling. In extreme cases, SIFEs may have low/no literacy in their first language, exacerbating the difficulties they may face in their second-language classrooms (Custodio & O'Loughlin, 2023). Interrupted or limited education in an individual's first language can impact their experiences in a foreign language classroom in a myriad of ways. In a study in Australia, Benseman (2013) interviewed 36 refugee learners and 11 refugee tutors in order to assess the needs of refugee learners. More than half of the refugee participants had no or low literacy, which meant that they struggled with a range of classroom tasks including understanding the alphabet and the directionality of text. The interviews also highlighted trauma as a relevant barrier to refugee learners, impacting their concentration and comfort in the classroom, and feelings of independence and self-

efficacy both in and out of class. Building on this body of work on adult learners, we focused on one classroom of adult ESL learners and one classroom of adult refugee ESL learners. Both populations have unique needs that are not captured in studies of younger, more mainstream learners.

The Role of Teachers in Emotion Regulation

Teachers play a major role in supporting the emotional experiences of their students, both through their own self-regulation and by helping students regulate their emotions. Relatedly, teaching requires teachers to perform emotion labor (Gkonou & Miller, 2023; Song & Wu, 2024) both in terms of their self-regulation and the work they must do to regulate their students' emotions.

Teachers' self-regulation of emotion includes how they perform their emotions in the classroom, such as the decision to pursue emotional honesty (Gkonou & Mercer, 2017) or to project positive emotions in an effort to create a comfortable classroom environment (Gkonou & Miller, 2023; King, 2016). At the same time, teachers have the ability to encourage emotion regulation in their students by providing practical strategies that students can use in the classroom, thereby improving student experiences and reducing teacher burnout (English & Eldesouky, 2020; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). This pedagogical practice is in line with a growing trend of findings that suggest that because of the relational nature of classroom environments, emotion regulation on the part of teachers can positively influence the emotional experience of students (English & Eldesouky, 2020; Gkonou & Miller, 2023). These two techniques, teacher self-regulation and teacher-facilitated emotion regulation, both play a role in the creation of an emotionally managed classroom that supports emotional well-being and language learning outcomes. These concerns are particularly salient when considering the needs of adult and refugee ESL learners, in that they may help mitigate the acculturative stress and emotional challenges that these learners face while adapting to a new language and culture.

In this study, we focused on teacher-facilitated emotion regulation work in the two aforementioned ESL classrooms. In other words, we investigated the moves teachers make to assist students' emotional regulation. Given the relationship between a teacher's emotion regulation work and their students' experiences, our study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What strategies did the focal teachers use in their respective ESL classrooms to support refugee and immigrant learners' emotion regulation?

RQ2: What were the differences in each teacher's approach to emotion regulation?

RQ3: What challenges to emotion regulation were present in each classroom context?

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Sites

This study was conducted in a community ESL classroom and a refugee center that served newcomers from countries often experiencing war or political unrest (e.g., Myanmar, Haiti, Democratic Republic of the Congo). Our two research sites (see Table 1) were Horizon Community School and Pathways Refugee Center (pseudonyms), both located in urban settings in the Midwest region of the United States.

Students at Horizon Community School were required to take an English placement test at the beginning of each semester to determine the appropriate class for their level. However, students were also permitted to choose their class according to their comfort level. At the end of the semester, students took another language proficiency test to assess how much their English has improved. These results were reported to the state for funding purposes.

Table 1. *Overview of Research Sites*

	Research Site 1 Horizon Community School	Research Site 2 Pathways Refugee Center
Teacher	Mara	Reagan
Class Schedule	Monday to Wednesday evenings	Monday to Thursday mornings
Class size	5-8 students	17-22 students

Horizon Community School

At the time of the study, Horizon Community School offered three levels of ESL instruction—beginner, intermediate, and higher intermediate—on Monday to Wednesday evenings. Each class session lasted approximately one hour to one hour and fifteen minutes. Average attendance per level ranged from five to eight adult learners. The student population included employed men and women, a few housewives, and a retired couple, representing regions across Asia, Africa, Central and South America. Instruction centered on conversational English and workplace-related topics, supporting learners' communicative needs in professional and social settings.

Pathways Refugee Center

Pathways Refugee Center provided two-hour morning ESL classes from Monday to Thursday for adult learners. During our observation period, class attendance averaged between 17 and 22 students. Most students were women from Myanmar, Haiti, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Instruction in this setting focused on survival English, aiming to equip learners with essential language skills for navigating daily life in the U.S.

In addition to ESL classes, Pathways Refugee Center offered classes in computer skills and financial literacy and connected students to local resources to assist with food security, childcare, and housing. It also provided social opportunities for students through wellness activities (e.g., sewing, yoga) and programming for students' children, including childcare and career guidance. These auxiliary programs and resources

were in place with the hopes of supporting refugee students in all aspects of life in the U.S.

Participants

Our two focal teacher participants, Mara and Reagan, were White American women with graduate TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) degrees.

Mara

Mara, who taught at Horizon Community School, was a 25-year-old woman with two years of teaching experience. She held a master's degree and was a doctoral student at the time of the study. She brought a multilingual background to her classroom, speaking English, French, and Arabic. Her linguistic repertoire and academic training positioned her well to support diverse adult ESL learners.

Reagan

Reagan, who taught at Pathways Refugee Center, was a 27-year-old woman who held a master's degree in TESOL. Her first language was English, and she spoke intermediate Spanish and beginning Swahili. Her experiences as a language learner and her educational background in TESOL informed her pedagogical philosophy. Much like Mara, she was able to draw on her linguistic repertoire in order to engage with and relate to students in her classroom.

Data Collection

Three forms of resources were included in this study: observations, semi-structured interviews, and artifacts.

Observations

Each observation was conducted by a single researcher. Over the course of two months, Author 2 (Shannon) visited Pathways Refugee Center four times, Author 3 (Joanne) visited Horizon Community School five times, and Author 1 (Alex) visited

both sites on two occasions each. During these observations, the three field researchers took field notes and audio recorded the teachers' lessons with the intention of observing how the focal teacher participants approached emotional regulation.

At the beginning of each observation, each teacher introduced the researcher to the classroom and assured the students that the focus of the observation was solely on the teacher. The authors took field notes on verbal and nonverbal teacher actions related to emotion regulation (e.g., checking in with students' emotions, providing reassurance when students are nervous or uncertain), as well as information on the topics and activities of the lesson. Audio recordings of each lesson were transcribed and reviewed for teacher-student and student-student interactions involving emotion regulation.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each focal teacher participant after the observations were completed. Alex held a one-on-one interview with Reagan, and a one-on-two interview was conducted with Mara, mainly facilitated by Joanne while Alex provided follow-up questions. Both interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes each and were audio recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis. We designed the interview questions around the teachers' emotion regulation strategies and followed up with the teachers on phenomena from the observations and the artifacts (described below) that the teachers used to help students' emotion regulation processes. The interview questions can be viewed in the appendix.

Artifacts

With the teachers' permission, we captured photographs of classroom signs, PowerPoint slides, and handouts relevant to our research topic. We drew upon these resources during our interviews to further investigate teachers' classroom strategies and discuss how the teachers used these resources during our observations to support students' emotion regulation.

Data Analysis

After all observation and interview recordings were transcribed and uploaded to a shared Google Drive folder, the research team engaged in multiple rounds of review. Shannon initiated the first stage of analysis using open coding. Concurrently, Joanne highlighted transcript excerpts based on emergent patterns and applied inductive codes. She also cross-checked the coding system to ensure consistency across transcripts. Alex conducted deductive coding for both research sites using Nakamura's (2023) overview as a guide to categorize each emotion regulation strategy.

Throughout the asynchronous coding process, all researchers referred to field notes, artifacts, and prior meeting notes to ensure understanding of the transcribed interviews and observations. By integrating both inductive and deductive approaches to coding, the team developed a comprehensive understanding of the various data sources described earlier and their thematic contours.

Positionality of Researchers

All four authors have experience teaching and learning additional languages and can relate to some of the emotional challenges faced by the ESL students at the research sites associated with language learning and adjusting to immersion in a new country and culture. Both Alex and Shannon share a similar demographic background with the focal teacher participants. Alex and Joanne have participated in professional development related to emotion regulation as K-12 teachers. All authors knew Mara before the study. Author 4 (Peter) is a teacher educator who taught both focal teacher participants, in addition to the first three authors of this study. As students, both the teacher participants and the first three authors of this study (Alex, Shannon and Joanne) have also taken Peter's graduate seminar on identity, ideology, and emotion at some point in their academic careers.

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

As mentioned, our study sought to examine teachers in two adult ESL classrooms in order to investigate which emotion regulation strategies they were most likely to draw on in their teaching practices, how the teachers' approaches differed across contexts, and the challenges that these teachers faced in creating an emotionally regulated classroom environment. In both settings, we discovered that the teachers, Mara and Reagan, were aware of their students' backgrounds and potential trauma the students may have faced and therefore chose appropriate strategies to support them. Additionally, the materials collected for this study indicate that emotion regulation was a significant concern for both Mara and Reagan within their respective teaching practices.

Emotional Regulation Strategies Used by Both Teachers

Although students' backgrounds differed between the two research sites, we noticed that Mara and Reagan employed similar emotion regulation strategies to support their students. The strategies presented below highlight how teachers can equip students to become aware of their emotions, support one another, and develop a sense of agency.

Acceptance and Mindfulness

The primary strategy Mara and Reagan employed in response to negative student emotions was including conversations to promote emotional preparation and community sharing in order to guide students into exercising acceptance and mindfulness. We borrow the definitions of acceptance and mindfulness from Nakamura (2023), where *acceptance* is characterized as "being open to experiencing negative emotions regardless of their aversiveness and/or accepting the experience itself" and mindfulness as "focusing on the present moment and observing emotions and/or related thoughts in a non-judgmental manner" (p. 52). Both acceptance and

mindfulness require noticing and allowing space for negative emotions an individual may experience.

These strategies, acceptance and mindfulness, are accomplished internally as a form of self-regulation. As such, teachers can not directly cause these states in students. Instead, Mara and Reagan created routines and space in their classroom to allow students the opportunity to exercise acceptance and mindfulness. Rather than attempting to change or avoid these emotions, Mara and Reagan aimed to help students increase their own comfort and coping abilities when they perceived these emotions in their students. Mara and Reagan accomplished this through a combination of emotional preparation and community sharing.

Emotional Preparation

One key strategy employed by both teachers was the act of preparing students before situations that could provoke negative emotions. For example, Mara reported reassuring her students before a test by discussing their worries and the limitations of assessment:

> I wrote on the board, “Don't worry – you are learning.” Then we talked about what worry means, and what learning is ... I said, your English is big and the test is small; I tried to communicate that the test is just a really small measurement of [their] English (Mara, interview, May 12, 2025).

Additionally, both Mara and Reagan reassured their students multiple times throughout observed classes that it was okay if they did not understand the material or did not complete the assignment in time. They made these statements before assigning the work, rather than in response to such an event. This was a strategy Mara wished to build on in the future, as she disclosed:

> Something I didn't do this semester, but I've done in all my previous classes, is to have a handout on class expectations at the beginning of the semester. One of those expectations was, you should expect that your level of English will not always match the things we're doing in class, and so sometimes it might be…challenging, and that’s good (Mara, interview, May 12, 2025).

Emotionally preparing students before potentially negative events, such as lacking the linguistic skills to fully grasp or complete an assignment, gives students the opportunity to use coping strategies in advance. It also allows students more time to anticipate and process negative emotions they may experience. In this way, Mara encouraged the emotion regulation strategy of acceptance in her students by assuring them that their discomfort was an acceptable feeling in this context.

Community Sharing

The primary method that both Mara and Reagan used to facilitate emotion processing was community sharing, or allowing students the opportunity to share their emotions and experiences in the classroom community. This enabled students to acknowledge and identify their feelings (thus practicing mindfulness), and optionally share these feelings, with the intention of building connections in the classroom and preparing students to engage academically.

Both Mara and Reagan began their classes by asking students to share how they were feeling. These conversations went beyond the common American cultural formula of expecting and responding with a scripted, often untrue, answer (e.g., “How are you?” followed by, “Good, thanks, and you?”). Instead, they gave students the opportunity to answer honestly and discuss their personal lives. For example, Mara’s students often answered with “tired” or “exhausted,” accompanied by a description of their 12-hour shift at work (field notes, May 7, 2025). Reagan shared that many of her students appeared to process their trauma, such as the loss of family members to war, through conversation. Mara held similar views, saying that her students “need to talk about things that are hard,” referring to an instance when a student discussed issues in his home country, Venezuela (Mara, interview, May 12, 2025).

Both teachers believed that students want and need to share these experiences and hear from others who may have gone through similar difficulties. By giving class time to work through these emotions together, teachers can allow students to build connections, seek support, and hopefully process their emotions adequately in order to focus on the lesson.

Strategies to Prevent and Respond to Negative Emotions

While strategies related to acceptance and mindfulness are excellent responses to negative student emotions, Mara and Reagan also relied on strategies such as situation and response modification (Gross, 1998; Gross & Thompson, 2007) to prevent and respond to negative emotions.

Situation Modification

Mara and Reagan used situation modification to make on-line decisions in response to students' reactions, although both teachers reported planning this strategy into their lessons as well. *Situation modification* refers to instances when teachers adjust parts of their lesson, assignment, or classroom management to better serve students' needs in that moment (Gross, 2001). In Reagan's case, she relied on this strategy often in the observed classes. In one lesson, she taught common American 'small talk' questions, such as *What do you do in your free time?*, *Do you have any siblings?*, and *How old are you?* A few students laughed and exchanged glances when the latter question was posed, and Reagan acknowledged that it may not be an appropriate question in many other cultures. She told her students that they did not have to answer that question if they were uncomfortable and provided an alternative question from the worksheet (e.g., *What do you do for work?*). By providing students with a choice in what questions they could answer, Reagan made room for students to participate in the activity in accordance with their comfort level and cultural background. She also validated her students' discomfort and gave students the opportunity to make their own decision about how they would like to manage their discomfort; that is, they could accept it and answer anyway, or they could avoid the discomfort altogether.

We also observed Mara utilizing situation modification in some classes. In one lesson, she noticed a decline in student participation. Students progressively began speaking less as she reviewed the vocabulary words from the previous lesson. When she asked if students preferred taking the elevator or the stairs, no one responded. After confirming their understanding of the question and providing visual cues, the class was still silent. Finally, Mara modified the activity by asking students to raise their hands instead of providing a verbal response. This modification of the format provided

students with an alternative way of participation. She then replaced the whole-class discussion with partner-based activities to increase engagement and respond to what she perceived as student boredom. Importantly, Mara's situation modification increased participation and engagement. She responded in the moment to address what could have been student shyness, boredom, or tiredness. In sum, enacting this pedagogical decision allowed Mara to meet her students midway, which in turn made the lesson more accessible as this pedagogical pivot was executed in reaction to her students' emotions.

Response Modification

Another emotion regulation strategy Mara and Reagan encouraged in their classes was response modification – teaching or encouraging students to modify their response to the situation, rather than the situation itself. This often involved students' physical responses. In stressful situations, people typically experience physical symptoms such as a racing heart, elevated respiration rate, and sweating (Killu et al., 2016). The usual recommended response to these feelings is to engage in deep breathing, light physical activities like stretching, and meditation. These are common interventions even in U.S. K-12 classrooms as a form of teacher-led emotion regulation (for examples, see Calm Classroom, n.d.), and can be done in response to a stressful event or as a routine classroom activity.

Reagan utilized response modification during a stressful experience when a volunteer teacher suffered an injury during class that required medical intervention. She described the incident as jarring, and explained how she guided her students through this experience:

> We moved to a different classroom, and I was like, okay, we're just gonna do some stretching... We took some deep breaths…and we did some stretches, and then we played a game. So that felt like successful emotional regulation..... I think something I want to be better at is noticing when we're at a breaking point and deciding it's okay to stop ... instead of ignoring it and pretending like everything's good. (Reagan, interview, May 22, 2025).

Reagan recognized that this incident was difficult for her students and outside her and her students' control. She could not rely on situation modification strategies, nor could she have possibly prepared her students for an event like this ahead of time. She reacted to this stressful, unplanned event with a response modification strategy in order to help her students cope with the emotional reaction of seeing their volunteer teacher sustaining an injury. Encouraging her students to take deep breaths and stretch provided an opportunity for her students to regain control over their emotional reactions.

Mara and Reagan both expressed a desire to incorporate more of these techniques into their instruction, both in reaction to students' emotions and as a structured component of class. They shared the success of these strategies (specifically the use of deep breathing and stretching) in multiple anecdotes and felt that their students would benefit from an increase in these activities. However, they also disclosed their concern that students may react poorly to this type of intervention, as it may not be commonly practiced in their students' culture. Additionally, Mara and Reagan were unsure how to teach and explain this type of intervention when working with students with very low linguistic abilities.

An Alternative to Avoidance and Suppression

Mara and Reagan used the above strategies (acceptance and mindfulness, situation modification, and response modification) as alternatives to avoidance and suppression. While avoidance and suppression can be useful strategies in other contexts, Mara and Reagan reported that avoidance (e.g., avoiding specific topics, activities, or situations that may provoke negative emotional responses) and suppression (e.g., using words or actions to suppress students' emotions or expressions) were ineffective when negotiating their students' negative emotions. At best, avoidance and suppression seemed to be temporary measures that they used in resolving negative emotions. While avoidance and suppression can occur internally in students regardless of teacher intentions or actions, we focus here on an external instance that Reagan shared.

In comparison to Reagan's anecdote above, where she successfully utilized response modification strategies in the face of a stressful event, Reagan shared one attempt at suppression, which she found to be unsuccessful. She described a stressful day when there were 40 students in her classroom. While a large class size can be stressful on its own, this day was further complicated by distractions and chaos – students answered telephone calls in class, brought in crying babies, and struggled to stay engaged in the lesson. At the time, she did not want her students to see that she was upset; additionally, Reagan did not make room for students to express or share their own emotions. She felt that it was more important to suppress feelings of being overwhelmed and stressed in order to "get through" the lesson material. Upon reflection, she noted that if she had taken a deep breath and attempted to center both herself and her students, then the lesson would likely have been calmer and more focused.

The comparison of these successful and unsuccessful experiences helped Reagan realize her role in students' emotion regulation and the options available to her. When facing a negative situation outside of her control, such as an employee getting hurt, Reagan recognized that strategies like acceptance or situation modification might not be effective. Even in less urgent situations, such as classroom disruptions, she realized that her decisions play a large role in students' (and her own) emotion regulation. While avoidance or suppression may initially seem like the "correct" approach (e.g., in order to complete the lesson or stay on-pace with the curriculum), Reagan concluded that guiding students in emotion regulation via other strategies was more effective, for example, via response modification.

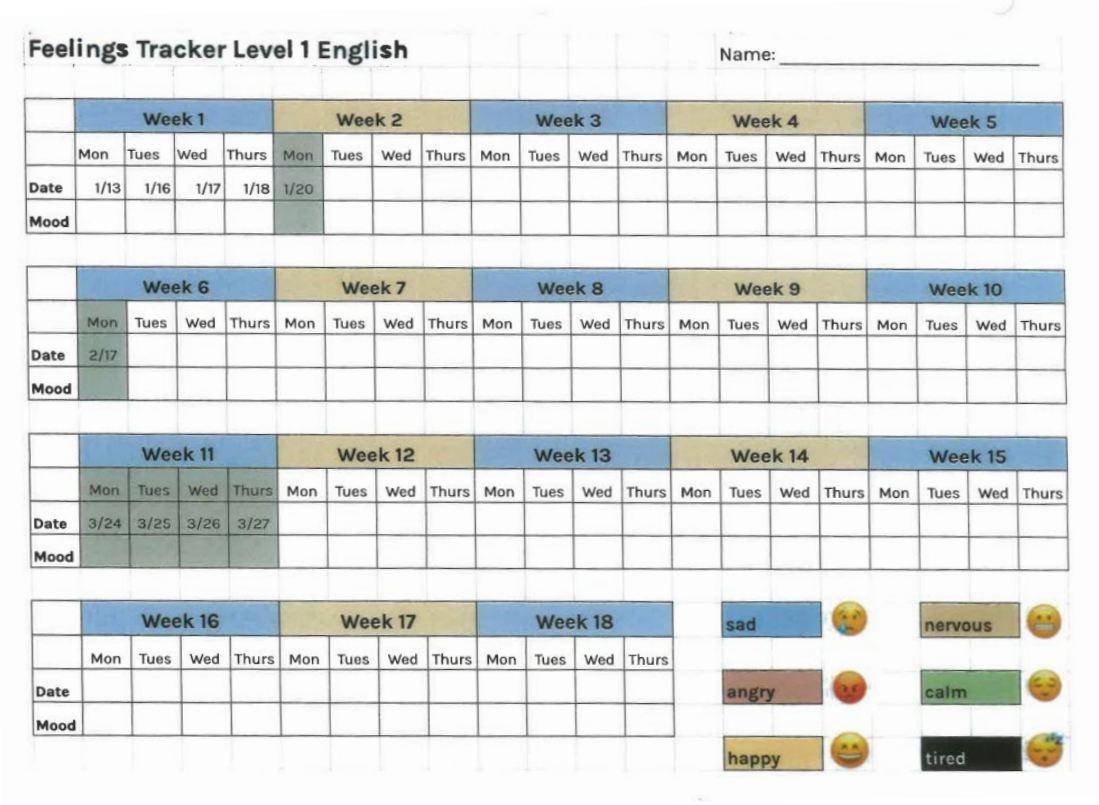
Different Strategies Used in Each Teacher's Approach to Emotion Regulation

In examining how Mara and Reagan responded to their students' emotional challenges in their classrooms, we observed differences in the strategies used to foster classroom communications and raise students' awareness of their own emotional journeys.

Emotion Tracking

Reagan used an emotion tracker (Figure 1), which she called a 'feelings tracker,' in her classroom, which featured a space for students to record and color-code the emotion they felt on a daily basis. Her class used the following system: yellow for happy, blue for sad, red for mad, orange for nervous, black for tired, and green for calm. In the case of the emotion tracker depicted in Figure 1, students colored each box and wrote the coordinating emotion in the column *Mood* according to the primary emotion they felt that day.

Figure 1. *Emotion Tracker*



Reagan asked students to complete their daily emotion square at the beginning of each lesson, and then students had the opportunity to share and discuss. She noted:

> I think [the emotion regulation strategy] I've been doing in class consistently is that *emotions tracker*... I try to get students thinking about, "How am I *feeling* as I'm coming into school?" And we always talk about it every time. ...And if students want to share, they can. I *feel like* in every class, I point out that

> everyone is different today, and that's okay – especially when most students say *happy*, but someone does say, I'm kind of *angry* or I'm *sad* today (Reagan, interview, May 22, 2025; *emphasis added*).

Crucially, Reagan reported that the emotion tracker allowed her to accomplish a variety of goals. First, the tracker afforded her the opportunity to check in with students every day and monitor their wellbeing. In addition, this tool allowed students to track their own emotional journey and foster awareness of their own mental health if they chose. Reagan also described how the tracker simultaneously reflected and motivated attendance:

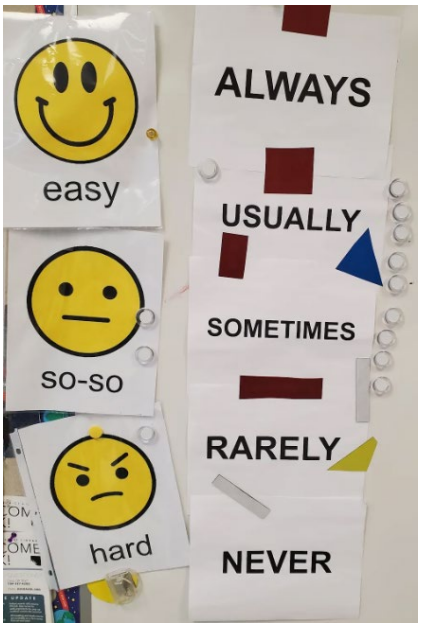
> Sometimes if we have a special day of class, where we didn't pull [the tracker] out, the next day, [the students will] get it out and try to remember what they were feeling yesterday. They want it to be filled out. For some of them, it's an incentive for showing up and marking attendance (Reagan, interview, May 22, 2025).

For an especially vulnerable population, such as the ESL refugee learners at Pathways Refugee Center, regular attendance at this center provides structure and access to resources that students need beyond English instruction, such as childcare, assistance applying for housing and medical care, and technical and vocational skills. Peripherally, these resources all influenced emotion regulation and students' ability to engage and learn from the English instruction provided.

Notice Checking

While Mara did not utilize this specific strategy of emotion tracking, she did use a series of visual prompts (Figure 2) to check students' reactions to class material and assignments.

Figure 2. *Visual Scales in Mara's Classroom*



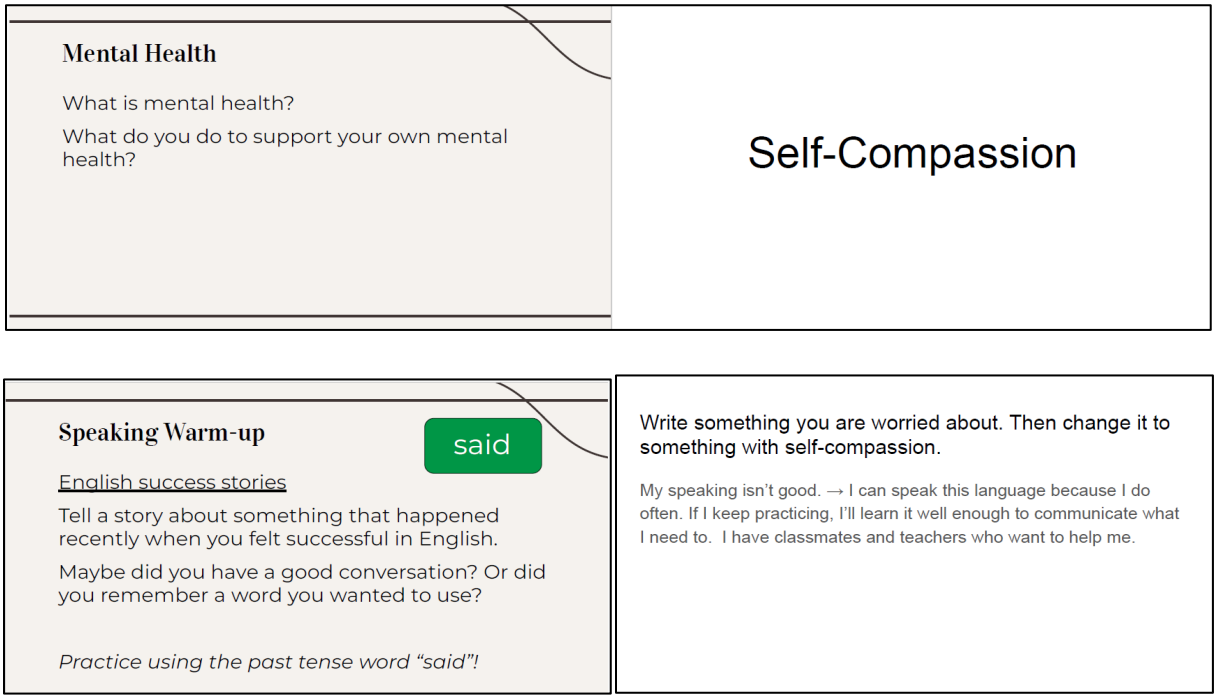
Mara generally referenced these scales (particularly the *easy*, *so-so*, and *hard* icon) when asking students to rate their understanding of a video or an assignment. Notably, these prompts are not emotions; however, they can serve as an indirect measure of student engagement and interest, as well as understanding. In one observation, Mara asked her class of two students how they felt about an activity on city vocabulary (e.g., bank, police station, grocery store). One student indicated *easy* and the other said *so-so.* In response, Mara reassured the *so-so* student that it was okay if he "didn't feel 100% about it" (field notes, April 23, 2025). Mara used information gleaned from examples like these in addition to students' comments to respond to potential emotions such as boredom, tiredness, and frustration.

Explicit Instruction on Mental Health Topics

Throughout the semester, Mara offered mini-lessons on mental health topics such as self-compassion in one observed class. During this class, Mara embedded a PowerPoint slide titled "Mental Health: Self-Compassion" into her higher-intermediate lesson (see Figure 3). As a warm-up activity, she invited students to share their successful stories from their English learning journeys. She then asked, "How do you feel after sharing about your success?" By doing so, students were encouraged to reflect on their progress and gain confidence in their abilities, underscoring the

importance of self-affirmation and peer support to a healthier mindset and emotional resilience.

Figure 3. *PowerPoint Slides about Self-Compassion Practice*



During the speaking practice activity, Mara wrote the following prompts on the board: "1. What's going on? 2. What would you do to have self-compassion? I would... 3. What would you tell yourself? I would tell myself..." She then invited students to share their thoughts, followed by another observed activity that involved rewriting negative sentences. After demonstrating an example on the PPT (shown in Figure 3), students engaged in individual practice where they wrote down their responses. Mara encouraged her students to switch their mindsets about how they viewed their English proficiency. Instead of saying “My speaking isn’t good,” they could think about what they had already been doing by saying “I can speak English” or “If I keep practicing, I’ll learn it well enough to communicate what I need to.” Mara reinforced their achievements and inspired the class to recognize their potential, fostering an atmosphere of encouragement and self-compassion. This exchange created a safe

space for expressing vulnerability, reminding students that acknowledging their progress is crucial for maintaining their mental wellness.

The strategies employed by Mara and Reagan illustrate different ways teachers can monitor and support students' feelings across different contexts. Table 2 presents the differences in strategies employed across two contexts.

Table 2. *Comparative Strategies for Addressing Student Emotion in two Contexts*

	Horizon Community School		**Pathway Refugee Center**
Teacher	Mara		Reagan
Strategies	Notice checking	Explicit instruction on mental health	Emotion tracking
Context for Application	During class		Start of class
Visual Presentation	Emojis with keywords (i.e., easy, so-so, hard) plus frequency terms	PowerPoint presentation; written sentence stems	Color-coded emotional tracking calendar
Purpose	Measure student comprehension of task at hand	Teach and encourage the skill of self-compassion	Monitor wellbeing and encourage student reflection

Mara and Reagan's strategies were effective for each of their respective student groups and needs. Because Mara's students had a higher proficiency level in English, she was able to provide explicit instruction on mental health topics – lessons that would likely be too advanced for Reagan's students. Similarly, Reagan's emotion tracker, which allowed students to practice basic vocabulary words (e.g., happy, sad), would likely not be challenging enough for Mara's students. Mara's and Reagan's students also had different emotional needs. Because Mara's students were more established

in the United States, their emotional needs were not as urgent as those of Reagan's students. To that end, Reagan needed the emotion tracker to gauge students' wellbeing quickly and to identify students who might need extra resources or support outside of class (e.g., housing). In sum, it is crucial to consider ESL students' language proficiency levels and emotional needs in order to employ suitable strategies that assist students in learning more effectively.

Different Strategies Used in Each Teacher's Approach to Emotion Regulation

Even though both Mara and Reagan were able to incorporate many emotion regulation strategies into their teaching, there were still several barriers they felt curtailed their instructional effectiveness in the classroom. We identified three categories of challenges: *confronting uncomfortable realities, challenges in working with recently arrived refugee newcomers,* and *limited resources.* Notably, Mara and Reagan both expressed a range of concerns that they felt made the process of emotion regulation more difficult for their respective students. Barriers may have been perceived as occurring on the end of both the students and the teachers. These barriers included cultural sensitivities around discussing mental health, and more logistical barriers, such as the teachers being spread too thin due to large class sizes or busy schedules.

Confronting Uncomfortable Realities

In describing her role as a language teacher, Mara stated that she felt it was her responsibility to create a safe, happy environment for her students to learn in; she noted: "One of my purposes for teaching is to have a happy place for them to come" (Mara, interview, May 12, 2025). Mara knew that, as immigrants, her students were likely to encounter hardship outside of class:

> Even if other things are hard, or when students say they're doing bad, that makes me sad, and I worry about that, but it also makes me glad that they're here in class, because I hope that class can be a positive thing, even if they're doing bad (Mara, interview, May 12, 2025).

The above excerpt strongly suggests that Mara wanted her classroom to be a space where students could distance themselves from some of the stressors that they may have to deal with outside of class. However, when trying to have a teaching practice that acknowledges learners' emotions, it was difficult to give students space to experience their negative emotions and discuss difficult experiences without imperiling the happy space that she sought to foster. Mara was also keenly aware that her emotional state influenced her students, which put her in a doubly difficult position as someone whose personal preference was to avoid confrontation. For example, when her students brought up uncomfortable topics like bad employers or the injustices they faced outside of class, her first reaction was to steer away from those topics, as evidenced by her own admission to us: "I think it's difficult for me as a teacher because I like to ignore difficult things" (Mara, interview, May 12, 2025). However, Mara emphasized in her interview that she wanted to be able to strike a balance between making space for difficult topics and maintaining a comfortable environment for other students in her class.

Reagan also had to navigate this tension in her classroom, and because she was working with refugee learners, her students carried even greater hardships with them to class. She noted that she was warned that talking about their family might be difficult for students in her classroom. Nevertheless, she still felt that teaching her students to talk about their families was necessary for their linguistic development. And even though she acknowledged that discussing this topic had gone over well despite her students' complicated pasts, Reagan conceded that she still had to handle difficult situations in class:

> I had a student come in and they had just learned the day before that their brother was on a boat trying to escape and the boat sank... [The student] was here and all his family's there. And so in that situation, I just talked to him and was like, I'm really, really sorry, I can't imagine how you're feeling. And again, [with] the language, I don't know if he understood everything I said, but [I said], That's really difficult. And thank you for coming to class. But if you need a break, you can go. One of my volunteers brought in a coloring worksheet so if he didn't want to

> participate in the regular class for that day, he had something that he could still keep his hands busy with (Reagan, interview, May 22, 2025).

Managing such a traumatic situation is something that is more likely to occur for language teachers working with refugees than it would be for teachers working in more mainstream education settings. This is especially true when ESL teachers work with students who have recently arrived in the United States as refugees, students who have just experienced difficult circumstances and are now entering a new country with limited English proficiency while navigating major life changes and processing what they have been through.

Challenges in Working With Recently Arrived (Refugee) Newcomers

Both Mara and Reagan worked with students who had just arrived in the U.S for the first time. Due to the language barrier and cultural differences between the teacher and their students, it could be challenging for the teachers to navigate. Reagan expressed that she was underprepared because she felt her previous educational training did not appropriately prepare her to deal with the daily realities of teaching newly arrived learners:

> It was like almost every single research paper was based on international students who obviously had already passed the TOEFL [...] and the English speakers here might not know how to write even their name (Reagan, interview, May 22, 2025).

Reagan's students were still acculturating to the U.S., and thus were often unfamiliar with American classroom cultural norms. For example, Reagan noted that her students were not aware that certain behaviors could be considered impolite, such as interrupting class when arriving late or taking phone calls during class. Combined with the need to manage large classes, issues like these were a major source of stress that she had to negotiate while teaching.

Limited Resources

Another barrier that both teachers faced was a lack of resources, including training, time, or support. For example, Mara had to create her own lesson plans for three different-level classes while staying on top of her own doctoral studies. This busy schedule meant that she often did not have time before or between classes to relax; she revealed:

> Sometimes I get there, like two minutes before I'm starting class, or the class is in transition, and there's no break between level one and two, so sometimes I just sit at my desk for a couple minutes, and I'm silent, and I'm not engaging with the students, or really bringing that positivity or whatever to class. Um, because I just need a minute to myself. (Mara, interview, May 12, 2025)

As demonstrated in the excerpt above, Mara felt that the time that she took to center herself before teaching was time that she could not be proverbially “on” with her students. And while she valued creating a positive classroom environment at Horizon Community School and felt like she should be smiling at students and greeting them to set that tone from the beginning of class, the material realities of her teaching load and schedule prevented her from pursuing this endeavor fully.

At Pathways Refugee Center, the issue of resources manifested differently for Reagan. One issue at this site was the class size. While Reagan reported improvement from previous years where she had classes of up to 40 students, her classes were still large and quickly became overwhelming. While the refugee center did connect its students to community resources, like job placement programs, it was limited in its ability to help students who had gone through traumatic experiences and thus needed mental health resources. Reagan shared:

> I've been through a couple trainings on [trauma] but still like there's just so much to unpack there [...] That's not something we offer; we don't have counseling… And I don't know if that's really something offered through [state benefits] .... I don't know if mental health is a focus [...] (Reagan, interview, May 22, 2025).

Circumstances like this put Reagan in a difficult situation. Though she knew that she could not be responsible for the ways that her students processed their trauma, Reagan was still confronted with the knowledge that many of her students needed additional support that she could not provide. Even more troubling was that she also knew that they were unlikely to gain access to such support outside of her class. In short, it was clear from the concerns raised by Mara and Reagan that better support, training, and the ability to connect students to resources outside of the classroom would positively impact their teaching experience working in their respective educational contexts.

DISCUSSION

These findings contribute to the literature on under-researched populations: adult ESL learners, including refugees, from non-WEIRD contexts outside of a university setting. Mara's and Reagan's schools served different, though overlapping, populations that required varying types and amounts of teacher-facilitated emotion regulation. The refugee learners tended to require more assistance in emotion regulation and were less familiar with Western educational expectations and customs. By contrast, Mara's non-refugee students struggled more with class engagement, tiredness, and boredom. While boredom can certainly negatively impact language learners (Li et al., 2025), the emotional needs of Reagan's refugee students were probably more immediately demanding because of their intensity and seriousness. In that respect, this finding was consistent with Smith and Khawaja's (2011) observation that refugee learners outside of university contexts do encounter different types of acculturative stress compared to international students in university settings. Importantly, our findings underscore the importance of providing teachers with professional development on emotion regulation strategies tailored to their student populations' needs.

In addition, this study applies emotion regulation work to classrooms that cater specifically to refugees, a research context that is not often discussed. Refugee

learners, in particular, encounter trauma (Busch & McNamara, 2020) as a result of displacement. As a consequence, they would benefit from specific emotion regulation strategies. As our findings revealed, emotion regulation strategies work differently in different contexts. Thus, more research is needed to better serve the refugee population. Finally, this study highlights the need for further research in similar contexts and the use of this research in teacher preparation programs. Both Mara and Reagan discussed lack of access to information and available training specific to their populations, especially regarding emotion regulation strategies that their students may prefer or respond better to. Looking ahead, teacher education programs need to rethink how to center emotions within their respective curricula. Specifically, they might want to consider adopting an emotion as pedagogy approach, as advocated by De Costa and Nazari (2024), in order to better equip teachers so that they, in turn, can meet the emotional needs of the learners within their classrooms.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Based on our findings, we would like to emphasize the importance of addressing the emotion regulation practices in the L2 classroom. For educators, we recommend actively acknowledging learners' emotional experiences and employing strategies that foster emotional regulation, resilience, and wellbeing in the classroom. Meanwhile, educational institutions play a critical role by offering resources that support teachers beyond professional development training or workshops to cultivate long-term pedagogical growth. Such institutional commitment can empower teachers to navigate the affective complexities of their work more effectively. For researchers, the current study highlights the need for multi-sited longitudinal investigations that capture diverse educational contexts. We recommend that future research explore effective emotion regulation strategies for refugee populations and students from non-WEIRD backgrounds. Ultimately, integrating emotional awareness into pedagogical and institutional practices is not a peripheral concern; rather, it is central to fostering inclusive, adaptive, and humanizing learning environments.

While this study focused on teachers' perceptions and experiences, the field would benefit greatly from investigations into students' perceptions of emotion regulation strategies and their effectiveness, particularly through action research conducted by teachers and researchers. Such collaborative work is important in bridging the researcher-practitioner divide (e.g., De Costa et al., 2022). This is especially needed in populations often excluded from research due to linguistic and communication barriers (e.g., students with limited English whose L1 is less commonly spoken in the Global North, such as Burmese, Kurdish, and Kinyarwanda).

The findings of this study are particularly relevant for teachers who work with refugees or students from similarly disadvantaged backgrounds. It is also relevant to researchers who wish to better understand the application and nuances of various emotional regulation strategies and their applications. These data can inform administrators and teacher-educators on topics and techniques that ESL teachers in multiple contexts would benefit from. They can also guide ESL teachers as well as teachers of other languages seeking strategies that may work across a variety of student populations.

Authors' Contributions

AH, SH, and JC participated in the study design, data collection, data analysis and interpretation and drafting of the manuscript. PDC conceptualized the study and refined the processes involved in the data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the draft and revision of the article. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Declaration of GenAI and AI-Assisted Technologies

Copilot and Grammarly were used for spelling and grammar check in the manuscript preparation.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study was approved by the Michigan State University IRB Office (study No. 00012078). Both participants provided written informed consent prior to enrollment and data collection in the study.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A. Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Teachers

- *What emotional regulation strategies are you aware of?*
    - *Which ones do you use?*
- *What emotions do your students feel most often during English class?*
    - *How do you respond to those?*
    - *What emotions do you think are easy for you to help regulate? Hard?*
- *What do you think should be the teacher's role in student emotion regulation, especially in your setting?*
- *What, if one exists, is the relationship between emotion regulation and learning?*
- *Do you think your students regulate their own emotions? If so, how?*
    - *Are there any barriers to students' emotion regulation?*