

Research Article

Emotional experiences and caring practices of language teachers in a Turkish EFL context

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to investigate the prior emotional experiences of five English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in a Turkish environment and analyse the reciprocal interplay between their emotions and their caring practices. Following a qualitative methodology, the study used both multiple case study and narrative approaches. Data were gathered via semi-structured interviews, observation sessions, emotion diaries, autobiographies, and written statements about their teaching philosophy. The thematic analysis performed in this study yielded the following themes: (1) prior emotional experiences, (2) positioning self, (3) academic caring, (4) psychological caring, (5) social caring, (6) emotional gains of caring, and (7) emotional costs of caring. These themes illuminate the connection between EFL teachers' emotional experiences and their caring practices, in line with the study's aim. The EFL teachers had varying emotional experiences with different interlocutors, which affected their caring practice. When the teachers cared about their students, they experienced emotional gains such as motivation or satisfaction. When they could not, they experienced emotional costs, experiencing sadness, guilt, inadequacy or exhaustion.

Keywords: EFL teacher, language teacher education, teacher emotion, emotional experience, caring

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is a profession that requires “emotional labour” (Benesch, 2017; Zembylas, 2005) and language teaching is not an exception. In fact, language teachers may experience discipline-specific emotions (Loh & Liew, 2016) due to the presence of additional stressors in language education, as opposed to teaching other courses (King & Ng, 2018; Mercer, 2023). Language teachers are more susceptible to deep and intricate emotions compared to teachers of other courses due to the intimate connection between language and the concepts of self and culture (King & Ng, 2018).

Previously, emotions were not extensively examined in the field of language teaching and have been described by Swain (2013, p. 11) as “elephants in the room”. Prior (2019) observed that research primarily prioritized the examination of students’ emotions rather than the emotions of teachers. However, the subject of teacher emotions has garnered global attention in recent years. Prior (2019) has revisited the elephant metaphor to suggest that emotions are no longer disregarded, a shift that White (2018) describes as the “emotional turn” in the field of language teaching. Overall, language teacher education (LTE) has broadened its focus to include language teacher emotions, which has been a prominent topic in the field. In accordance with a social constructivist perspective on emotions, emotions are conceptualized in this study as “socially constructed, personally enacted ways of being that emerge from conscious and/or unconscious judgments regarding perceived successes at attaining goals or maintaining standards or beliefs during transactions as part of social-historical contexts” (Schutz et al., 2006, p. 344).

Despite the growing interest in the topic, LTE programs often neglect the emotional dimensions of teaching, and, therefore, teachers are not adequately informed or equipped for the emotional labour that their profession demands (Woolfolk-Hoy, 2013). Teacher–student interactions evoke a wide range of emotions (Ruohotie-Lyhty et al., 2018). From the perspective of care ethics, this relationship is fundamentally a caring one (Noddings, 1984) and, as such, is inherently accompanied by diverse emotional experiences. Although it is known that caring is a crucial part of teaching (Noddings,

1992), the examination of language teachers' emotions from a caring perspective has not received much attention in the realm of LTE in Türkiye and elsewhere (e.g. Gkonou & Miller, 2019; Karagöz-Dilek, 2022; Pereira, 2018). Hence, this research intends to fill this gap in literature by investigating language teachers' emotional experiences and their caring practice in a Turkish EFL context. In our study, caring can be seen as "a set of relational practices that foster mutual recognition and realization, growth, development, protection, empowerment, and human community, culture, and possibility" (Gordon et al., 1996, p. xiii). Teachers position themselves in relation to their interactions with others, particularly their students, in their conversations (Davies & Harré, 1999; Kayi-Aydar, 2021). Teachers' emotions and emotional experiences shape how they position themselves in these interactions, that is, their identity positioning (Kayi-Aydar, 2021; Xing et al., 2025). This positioning influences both the enactment of care and the emotional labor it entails (Gkonou & Miller, 2019). In this study, positive emotions could be regarded as emotional gains of caring, whereas negative emotions are considered emotional costs of caring.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. What are English language teachers' prior emotional experiences (as learners, as student teachers and as language teachers) in a Turkish setting?

RQ2. How do English language teachers care for their students in a Turkish setting?

RQ3. How does caring affect English language teachers' emotions?

RQ3.1. How does English language teachers' caring turn into emotional costs?

RQ3.2. How does English language teachers' caring lead to emotional gains?

RQ4. How do English language teachers position themselves in response to second language (L2) learners' needs and problems?

Theoretical Framework

A caring relationship is “always in disequilibrium, always unfolding” (Collins & Ting, 2014, p. 14) similar to the nature of emotions. Therefore, we adopted three theoretical frameworks for this research. This study employed sociocultural theory, specifically the concept of *perezhivanie*, along with ecological perspective and positioning theory to examine the emotional experiences of language teachers and their caring for L2 learners in a Turkish EFL context.

Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory posits that the development of the mind is influenced by social and cultural factors. According to this theory, cognition arises from and is shaped by social actions. Yet, it turns into an intra-psychological level from an inter-psychological level (Vygotsky, 1978). Here comes the importance of emotions in cognition development. Vygotsky employed the Russian term “*perezhivanie*”, which denotes the subjective experience of emotions, to underscore the significance of emotions and their interrelation with cognition (Vygotsky, 1994). *Perezhivanie* is “an indivisible unity of personal characteristics and situational characteristics” that are reflected in emotional experiences (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 342). An individual’s cognitive development is affected by his or her emotional experiences of his/her environment. The significance of *perezhivanie* in LTE can be justified by Shahri’s (2018) remarks that “it foregrounds teacher understandings of their past, which may vary for two teachers even if the actual experience or environment was the same for both” (p. 93). The concept of *perezhivanie* helped us to understand EFL teachers’ prior emotional experiences and how these experiences influenced their way of being or current experiences because *perezhivanie* highlights the dynamic interplay between past and present experiences. To clarify, it posits that an individual’s interpretation of a previous experience informs how they see their current experience, which in turn affects their interpretation of the previous experience (Golombek & Doran, 2014).

Another important theoretical perspective used in this study is the ecological perspective that emphasizes the importance of an individual’s interaction with their environment (van Lier, 2004). The study utilized Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) nested

ecosystems model to see where teachers' emotions came from. The ecological environment is characterized as "a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3). The structures consist of four environmental levels that impact an individual's development in varying ways, namely microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, arranged from the innermost to the outermost layer. A microsystem consists of the activities, roles, and relationships of the developing person in the immediate environment shaped by physical and material features of that setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Accordingly, the teacher-student relationship can be regarded as the microsystem in the current study. The mesosystem is the relationships or connections among the microsystems. The exosystem refers to settings that do not directly involve the developing person (teacher for this study), yet whose dynamics may nonetheless affect the development of the person. Lastly, macrosystem, which is the highest level, consists of the larger cultural contexts that are developed over time and may affect the developing person indirectly. For instance, the beliefs systems and ideology in a given culture can be regarded as the macrosystem. Like Mercer (2023), we did not use the exact terminology of microsystem, mesosystem, ecosystem or macrosystem for reporting the findings of the current study. Yet all the findings can be included under these nested ecosystems. Therefore, the ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) helped us identify where EFL teachers' emotions came from.

The final theoretical framework is positioning theory, which was introduced by Rom Harre and his colleagues in the 1990s (Davies & Harre, 1999) and, since then, it has caught a considerable amount of attention across many fields, including applied linguistics (Kayı-Aydar, 2019). Positioning refers to "the assignment of fluid 'parts' or 'roles' to speakers in the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts" (Van Langenhove & Harre, 1999, p. 17). People tend to assign positions to themselves and other people while they speak. It is vital to distinguish two types of positioning here: "interactive positioning" in which what one says positions another and "reflexive

positioning in which one positions oneself” (Davies & Harre, 1999, p. 37). For instance, one can position oneself or be positioned as powerful or not (van Langenhove & Harre, 1999). We can understand when individuals position themselves or others in their conversations through the language they use as their words tend to carry images and metaphors that reflect their identities or roles they are engaged in (Davies & Harre, 1999). Positioning is relational in this respect (Kayi-Aydar, 2021). Although the role of emotions is not adequately addressed in positioning theory, emotions are seen as important since individuals position themselves and/or others when they experience emotions during storytelling (Kayi-Aydar, 2021). Overall, this theory helped us understand whether the EFL teachers in our study positioned themselves, or were positioned by their students, as caring teachers. It also provided insights into how the EFL teachers viewed their past teachers as caring or non-caring, which in turn influenced their own way of being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Teacher Emotions

Research on teacher emotions emerged in the field of education around the mid-1990s (Hargreaves, 1998; Nias, 1996). Nevertheless, it was only in the early 2010s that researchers began to focus on the emotions of language teachers (Cowie, 2011; Golombek & Doran, 2014). Since then, numerous research has been undertaken regarding the emotional experiences of teachers within the domain of LTE (Tao et al., 2025). Research has shown that language teachers’ emotions have an impact on various aspects of their professional lives, including their sense of identity (Benesch, 2017; Shahri, 2018; Song, 2016; Yang et al., 2021; Wolff & De Costa, 2017; Zhang & Wu, 2025), professional self-adequacy (Karagöz-Dilek & Balçıkanlı, 2023), teachers’ cognition (Golombek & Doran, 2014) including their beliefs (Barcelos & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2018), teachers’ agency (Benesch, 2018; Tao et al., 2024), motivation (King & Ng, 2018), burnout (De Costa et al., 2020) and their pedagogy (Alzaanin, 2024; Hayik & Lewy, 2019). Richards (2020) argues that in the field of language teaching, teachers’

emotions may shape classroom practices, influencing factors such as the extent of English use, the choice of instructional activities, and the type of feedback provided. Apparently, language teachers' emotions affect teachers and their teaching practice in many aspects.

Emotional labour refers to the regulation of emotions to conform to the “feeling rules” associated with a professional role (Hochschild, 1983). In language teaching, emotional labour involves managing emotional expressions in ways that support teaching and learning while meeting institutional and interpersonal expectations (Benesch, 2017). Teachers enact emotional labour through strategies such as “surface acting”, by suppressing or masking their genuine emotions, and “deep acting”, by attempting to modify their internal feelings to experience emotions that are considered professionally appropriate (Benesch, 2017; Hochschild, 1983). Language teaching, as a caring profession, entails emotional labour that is deeply interwoven with teachers' caring practices (Blake & Dewaele, 2023; Gkonou & Miller, 2019; King, 2016). This emotional labour of language teaching is influenced by systemic and contextual challenges such as inadequate institutional support, excessive workload, the perceived low status of modern languages, limited student motivation, and instances of classroom misbehaviour (King et al., 2024). The emotional demands of teaching are reflected in the complex range of emotions teachers experience through their interactions with students, parents, colleagues, and school administrators (Cowie, 2011). Cowie's study of experienced EFL teachers in Tokyo revealed that while teachers generally expressed positive emotions toward their students, their collegial and institutional relationships were often characterized by negative emotional experiences. A study on female EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia (Alzaanin, 2024) revealed that teachers' passion, student engagement, and appreciation positively affected emotions, while misbehaviour and certain institutional policies led to negative emotions. Moreover, emotional labour extends to online education, where emotion regulation is still crucial (Liu et al., 2023). In an online setting, emotional labour can arise from the conflict between teachers' expectations and institutional demands

regarding student engagement, material use, and assessment techniques, as found by Nazari et al. (2024).

The effects of emotional labour on teachers are multifaceted. While some studies highlight its detrimental consequences, such as contributing to teacher attrition through heightened burnout and diminished well-being (Zhang & Zhang, 2023), other research suggests that emotional labour is “a potential source of activism” (Benesch, 2020, p. 31) fostering teacher agency, as teachers may take actions to change aspects of their professional practice with which they are dissatisfied (Benesch, 2018). Managing emotional labour in EFL teaching effectively might require emotional literacy (Rezai et al, 2024), defined as the ability to recognize and regulate one’s emotions to foster self-empowerment and positively influence others (Steiner, 2003).

Research on language teachers’ emotions suggests that being a non-native English-speaking teacher may evoke a range of emotions (e.g., Song, 2016; Wolff & De Costa, 2017). Wolff and De Costa (2017), for instance, examined the case of a Bangladeshi teacher whose initial lack of confidence as a non-native English-speaking teacher gradually transformed into positive emotions after her experiences in a U.S. MATESOL program during her first year. This shift enabled her to adopt a student-centered pedagogy and reconstruct her professional identity. On the other hand, Song (2016) found that Korean English teachers reported feelings of vulnerability when teaching early study-abroad returnees, and experienced anxiety and discomfort regarding their own language competence. Nevertheless, these challenges ultimately contributed to their self-transformation.

Ecological perspectives on language teacher emotions underscore the pivotal role of contextual factors in shaping both teacher identity and emotional experiences (Mercer, 2023; Nazari et al., 2023; Zhang & Yusuf, 2024). These influences occur across different ecological levels: the classroom at the micro level, the institution at the meso level, and the sociopolitical context of teaching at the macro level (Nazari et al., 2023). For example, Zhang and Yusuf (2024), adopting an ecological perspective, investigated Chinese novice EFL teachers at the tertiary level and found that students,

teachers' competence, and teaching activities affected EFL teachers' emotional experiences within the microsystem. Interpersonal relationships influenced emotions in the mesosystem, while cultural values and English curriculum reforms impacted the teachers at the macrosystem.

There is little research comparing language teachers' emotions across different career stages. Yang et al. (2021) investigated how EFL teachers' emotions were related to their identity formation over the course of their career paths. They found that language teachers' emotions were interrelated to their teacher identity development that followed a progression of three career stages: surviving, striving, and thriving (Yang et al., 2021). Caring for students led to both emotional labour (King, 2016) and emotional rewards for language teachers (Miller & Gkonou, 2018). King (2016) claimed that language teachers experienced emotional labour while caring about students because they went through a conflict between the care they were expected to show toward their students and their genuine feelings toward them. Eventually, L2 teachers hid their "non-caring emotions" (King, 2016, p.157).

Caring in Teaching

Teachers' caring can be explained with care ethics, which was developed as an approach to moral philosophy in the 1980s (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984) and which, in time, showed itself in various disciplines such as education (Acker, 1995; Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006; O'Connor, 2008). Caring is a crucial part of teaching (Noddings, 1992) and it is concerned with the relationship between the cared-for) and the carer. Some caring relations like the teacher-student relationships are not symmetrical. Therefore, the cared-for is not supposed to do what the carer does, yet they are expected to acknowledge the efforts of the carer (Noddings, 1984; 2013). Noddings (2013) views caring as a choice related to a moral aspiration. This type of caring is seen as "ethical caring" in that it is guided by an "ethical ideal", which is "our history of caring and the high value we place on ourselves as carers" (Noddings, 2013,

p. xxiii). To clarify, people's past experiences in which they cared for others and were cared for by others shaped how that person's ethical ideal was established (Kim, 2007). Therefore, we are interested in how EFL teachers' prior emotional experiences affected their caring practice.

Most research on teachers' caring has focused on primary school teachers (e.g., Acker, 1995; Vogt, 2002). In her ethnographic study of an English primary school, Acker (1995) examined teachers' caring activities and questioned whether "maternal imagery" (p. 21) was justified given that caring has been valued within certain feminist discourse. She described teachers as "a kind of reflective practitioner mother" (p. 23) and observed that they often faced challenges with their students in ways similar to the struggles mothers experienced. In contrast, Vogt (2002) argued that caring in teaching is not dependent on gender. Her study showed that both male and female teachers integrate an ethic of care into their reflections on teaching.

Isenbarger and Zembylas's (2006) study and O'Connor's (2008) study are important in revealing the emotional aspects of caring teaching. Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006) conducted an action research involving a teacher, Lynn, who found satisfaction in caring for her students. They identified three forms of caring in her practice: "pedagogical caring" (linked to students' academic expectations), "moral caring" (concern for values in learning), and "cultural caring" (reflecting classroom and school norms) (p. 132). They concluded that teachers' caring cannot be reduced to a single type, as it is affected by emotional labour and contextual features. O'Connor (2008, p. 117) defined caring as "those emotions, actions, and reflections that result from a teacher's desire to motivate, help, or inspire their students." She argued that caring sustains teachers' commitment to their profession and classified caring into "performative" (focusing on pedagogical goals), "professional" (linked to a professional role), and "philosophical/humanistic" (focusing on ethical principles) (p. 121).

Frisby and Martin (2010) investigated both student–teacher and student–student relationships in shaping a positive classroom environment. Their findings revealed that "instructor rapport" plays a crucial role in enhancing student participation and

supporting affective and cognitive learning. Similarly, Farmer (2018) examined whether student–teacher relationships influence student motivation. The study found that how students perceived effective teacher characteristics were closely linked to their motivation levels and self-efficacy beliefs. These results underscore the importance of teacher behaviors such as caring in fostering a positive classroom environment. Diert-Boté (2023) examined positive contact moments between teachers and students in English learning settings. The study found that such moments, which can take different forms, help build rapport, support language-related goals, and foster positive learning experiences. These contact moments appear to be closely tied to teacher caring, as they often involve behaviors that demonstrate genuine care for students. Some studies highlight the role of teacher support in fostering effective learning in various ways (e.g., Liu & Li, 2023; Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2021). In the Iranian EFL context, Sadoughi and Hejazi (2021) found that teacher support encourages student engagement by evoking positive emotions. Liu and Li's (2023) quantitative study that focused on Chinese EFL students' perceptions of EFL teacher support revealed that teacher support encompasses academic, instrumental, and emotional dimensions. Taken together, these categories provide a conceptual foundation for understanding teacher caring, yet their relationship to teachers' emotional experiences and positioning remains insufficiently examined.

Several studies have examined the topic of language teachers' caring (Gkonou & Miller, 2019; King, 2016; Pereira, 2018). Pereira (2018) discovered that language teachers in Singapore were involved in fake displays of caring. Gkonou and Miller (2019) revealed how EFL teachers' caring about anxious learners transformed into emotional labour for them within the context of Greece. With a broader scope, the present study intended to explore EFL teachers' prior emotional experiences, examine their caring practices, and analyze the emotional outcomes of teacher caring. It further sought to investigate how teachers position themselves in response to learners' needs, thereby offering a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between teacher emotions, caring, and positioning in the Turkish EFL context.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, we adopted a multiple case study, in which several cases could be examined to gain a richer understanding of an issue (Hood, 2009). In the present study, each language teacher was treated as a separate case because the teachers in the cases were at various stages in their careers and possessed diverse educational backgrounds and qualifications. They were teaching English to different grades in either lower secondary or upper secondary schools. This study also utilized narrative inquiry, which focused on “a conception of the phenomenal world in which experience is mediated by story” (Xu & Connelly, 2009, p. 221). The majority of the data set (e.g., the first interview and autobiographical writing) exhibited a narrative structure, as these texts emphasized participants’ emotional experiences across their roles as EFL learners, student teachers, and language teachers. Employing a multiple case study design allowed us to examine language teachers at different career stages and to analyze how their emotional experiences and caring practices were shaped within distinct ecological environments, consistent with the ecological lens (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) guiding this study. Narrative inquiry enriched this design by portraying teachers’ emotions as lived and storied experiences. Anchored in the Vygotskian concept of *perezhivanie* (Vygotsky, 1994) within sociocultural theory, the analysis illuminated how teachers constructed their identities as caring professionals in relation to students and former teachers, as further supported by positioning theory (Davies & Harre, 1999).

The present study draws on a PhD dissertation conducted by the first author in 2022. In the dissertation, each case was reported as a storied account organized under its own themes. In the present study, however, the findings were synthesized and presented the relevant themes, given the constraints of space.

Context and Participants

The study took place in a Turkish context, involving five female EFL teachers who were employed at two public schools, in Ankara, the capital city of Türkiye. The schools were a lower secondary school and an upper secondary school that were associated with the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). The schools are İmam Hatip schools, which are quite prevalent in Türkiye. Consequently, the pupils in these schools are required to learn Arabic, in addition to many other subjects. The upper secondary school was a project school and thus had a preparatory class where students had English lessons for more than 20 hours per week. The schools were densely populated.

Table 1. *Teachers' demographic and work-related information.*

Participant	Nationality	Gender	Experience	School type	Grade	Qualifications
Funda	Kazakhstani	Female	21 years	Upper Secondary School	Preparator, 9th, 10th	BA in ELT
Lale	Turkish	Female	12 years	Upper Secondary School	9th-, 10th, 11th	BA in English Language and Literature, Pedagogical training
İnci	Turkish	Female	5 years	Lower Secondary School	6th, 7th	BA in ELT, MA in psychological counselling and guidance
Aslı	Turkish	Female	7 Years	Lower Secondary School	5th, 7th	BA in ELT
Yasemin	Turkish	Female	13 years	Lower Secondary School	5th	BA in ELT

This study utilized convenience sampling, which is defined by Dörnyei and Csizer (2012, p. 81) as “the most common non-probability sampling type in L2 research,

where an important criterion of sample selection is the convenience to and resources of the researcher". The study was conducted with only female teachers, as they were the majority in the schools we visited and the only ones who volunteered to participate. Participant diversity was important for multiple case study design. The participants had varying educational backgrounds and teaching experiences and taught English to different grades at the school(s) where they currently worked. All participants taught English for approximately 20 hours per week. Participant demographic and work-related characteristics are presented in Table 1. In this study, the teachers are referred to by the pseudonyms Funda, Lale, İnci, Aslı, and Yasemin. Prior to conducting this study, official authorization was obtained from the University's Ethics Committee. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent.

Data Collection

The data for this study were gathered over the course of two semesters from multiple sources. The data collection started in February 2020 and finished in October 2020. Semi-structured interviews comprised the main data collection tool for this study since interviews can help us understand people's experiences and feelings, as well as their opinions and beliefs (Best & Kahn, 2006). Other sources of data included two observation sessions conducted with each participant, emotion diaries, autobiographical writings focusing on their language learning and teaching experiences, written statements regarding their teaching philosophy, and informal conversations held after the observation sessions or interviews.

Each participant was interviewed twice; however, with one participant (Funda), four interviews were conducted, as her responses were generally more extended. Funda's first interview lasted 74 minutes, the second 18 minutes, and the third and fourth approximately 40 minutes each. For the other participants, the first interviews ranged from 37 to 55 minutes, while the second interviews lasted about 40 minutes. The interviews were piloted with an EFL teacher who was not a participant in this study. The first interviews were conducted face-to-face in a meeting room at the schools

where the participants worked. The first interview questions were concerned with L2 teachers' prior language learning experiences, their past teachers, prior emotional experiences as learners, prior emotional experiences at university, and prior emotional experiences as language teachers. Through the initial analysis of the first interview data, the theme of teacher care was found. Therefore, in the second interview, the participants were asked about how they cared about their students and how their emotions were influenced by it. In other words, an iterative interview design was adopted to explore and extend the theme of teacher caring that emerged from the first interviews. This approach enabled us to gain deeper insights into the interplay between teacher emotions and care. It should be noted that the second interview was postponed due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and was conducted in October. For the same reason, the second interview was conducted by phone rather than face-to-face. The interviews were conducted in Turkish, the native language of four of the participants, so that they could express their emotions and experiences comfortably. One of the participants was from Kazakhstan, but she spoke Turkish at a native-like level, too. The interviews were recorded with the participants' permission.

Only two observation sessions were held for each participant due to the spread of coronavirus to Türkiye in March. They were held between the dates of March 10 and March 13 in 2020 (Funda, preparatory class; Lale, 10th graders; İnci, 6th graders; Aslı and Yasemin, 5th graders). Observation sessions were used to illustrate the emotions displayed by the teachers in class, their ongoing caring practices, and the nature of teacher–student interactions. They helped us see the link between EFL teachers' emotional experiences and their current classroom practice. The first author took notes to capture these aspects. As for the emotion diaries, the participants were expected to write about the critical incidents that happened in the classroom that week and the related emotions. Even though all of them agreed to write diaries at the beginning, only two of the participants (Lale, ten diaries; İnci, six diaries) submitted their emotion diaries due to heavy workload. While all data sets were utilized in this study, the

findings reported in this study primarily derived from the interview data. Nevertheless, the different sources were in alignment and supported one another.

Data Analysis

Many narrative studies use stories as “their object of inquiry or source of data and then subject them to some form of content or thematic analysis” (Benson, 2018, p. 597). In the same vein, the data obtained in the present study underwent a thematic analysis, which refers to “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data.” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). All the data were analyzed with thematic analysis without using any software. Since the focus of all the data collection instruments were on language teachers’ emotional experiences and their caring practice, all the data were analyzed with the same technique. In other words, all the data sources were coded and contributed to theme development, although interviews served as the primary source of data.

Six steps were suggested for conducting a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006): (1) becoming acquainted with your data, (2) creating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) evaluating themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the report. These steps were adhered to throughout the thematic analysis of the data collected in this research. To become familiar with the data, the first author transcribed the interviews word for word and engaged in repeated readings of the transcripts, the written data provided by participants, and the notes from observation sessions and informal conversations. The data were coded while reading the transcripts. The selection of narrative extracts containing critical incidents, particularly participants’ emotional experiences, was instrumental in the development of themes. Emergent themes were defined and named. It is important to note that the analysis of the first interview data took place before the second interviews were conducted, and the questions for these subsequent interviews were largely influenced by the analysis of the first data set. Therefore, it can be stated that the data analysis in this study was a

recurrent and iterative process, involving a continuous interplay between data collection and analysis.

We employed various strategies to establish trustworthiness, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1986). These strategies included giving “thick description of the study” (contextualizing the study), “methods triangulation” (triangulation of different types of data), and “member checks”, for which informal conversations were used. The data from different sources were compared to identify inconsistencies and to establish thematic convergence to operationalize triangulation. For member checks, additional questions were posed to the participants during informal conversations to clarify points that were unclear or lacked detail in the interviews.

FINDINGS

As a result of the thematic analysis performed in this study, the following themes emerged: (1) prior emotional experiences, (2) positioning self, (3) academic caring, (4) psychological caring, (5) social caring, (6) emotional gains of caring, and (7) emotional costs of caring.

Prior Emotional Experiences

This theme included the incidents that affected language teachers emotionally, both positively and negatively, at various stages: as learners, student teachers, or language teachers. These experiences related to their past teachers at school, university instructors, the parents of their students, or the administrators at the schools where they worked.

While encouraging feedback from past English teachers or instructors was reported as a positive emotional experience that motivated the participants to become English teachers, discouraging feedback was perceived as a negative emotional experience by the language teachers. For instance, Lale recalled being told by her mentor teacher

in her teaching practicum to quit teaching after her teaching performance, which upset her deeply:

He created such an image that you can't believe it. It was like I was the worst teacher in the world. Do you know what he told me? He said, 'Don't do this job'. 'You shouldn't be a teacher.' This is not even the last thing that a mentor can say to a mentee. (Interview 1)

The participants' negative emotional experiences as language teachers were primarily related to students' misbehaviour or negative attitude towards English, which caused negative emotions such as anger, sadness, exhaustion. For example, Aslı appeared exhausted after the first observation session. In the second observation session, she looked angry and raised her voice at the students, stating: "I'm tired of telling you to shut up. You won't even ask for an eraser. Be quiet, and raise your hand when you want to speak." Similarly, İnci reported that despite being idealistic and hopeful at the beginning of her career, she became disappointed and ended up being unhappier and angrier in time. Students' misbehaviour in class made her feel sad, exhausted, angry, and even hate her job. She had difficulty managing her negative emotions in class. She shared:

Do you know how I control my emotions? I can't. I really can't control my emotions at all. I get extremely angry, and sometimes when I am very angry, I even feel my cheeks turn red. That's how angry I get. My hands sometimes shake then. I say to myself, 'Take it easy and count from one to seven.' (Interview 1)

The language teachers' positive emotional experiences were mostly related to their students' positive attitudes or reactions in various situations. Aslı recalled her students showing empathy to her when she felt vulnerable due to her father's death. Returning to work after the funeral, she reported: "The topic was death. My father died of a heart attack. One type of death was a heart attack. I had a hard time describing it." She added: "The students noticed because my eyes were filled with tears. They said, 'teacher, let's skip the third unit, let's start from the fourth.'" (Interview, 1). Likewise, İnci felt proud when her students "hugged her" upon seeing puppets she brought to

class as she liked “to explain grammatical structures through materials or puppets”. She expressed that it was a “very motivating” moment for her (İnci, interview 1).

Beyond classroom interactions, participants’ emotional experiences were also affected by their relationships with students’ parents and school administrators. Funda experienced exhaustion and emotional labour after a misunderstanding with a student whose parents complained about her to the administration. She faked and suppressed her negative emotions in the classroom. In her third interview, she stated “that incident tired me a lot... and I could not love that student as much as I loved my other students.” In another incident, a parent blamed all English teachers in Türkiye for not being able to teach English effectively, making Funda offended and angry. Furthermore, administrators’ polite or impolite behaviour also influenced teachers’ emotions. In her first interview, Aslı reported an unpleasant experience in which her vice principal interrupted her lesson just to say, “What a noise is this? Is it a barn here?” during a speaking activity. She felt frustrated and disappointed but coped with her emotions by letting him know that his behaviour was not appropriate. Likewise, during the second observation session with İnci, the vice-principal of the school interrupted the lesson for nearly 20 minutes to warn students about a broken toilet. When İnci was asked about how she felt about this incident (informal conversation), she said she felt “nervous”, worried about falling behind her plan, and feared parents might complain.

Positioning Self

This theme referred to how the EFL teachers positioned themselves in relation to their students, and how they positioned themselves in relation to their past teachers and/instructors. To start with, all the teachers in this study positioned themselves as caring teachers and they viewed caring as a moral obligation and/or personality feature rather than duty. The participants positioned their students like their children. In her last interview, Funda remarked “being a teacher maybe makes things more professional, like how I should behave.” In addition, the participants positioned

themselves close to their favourite past teachers, but they tried to assign opposite positions from the ones they disliked. For instance, İnci stated that a previous English teacher she had at her school treated one of her classmates rudely when he did not do his homework, which made İnci feel sad and scared. She decided that she would not be like him if she became a teacher. Aslı, on the other hand, appeared to have drawn inspiration from her former English teacher, whom she portrayed as a caring teacher akin to a mother. Now she positioned herself as a caring teacher, showing affection and empathy to her students just like her own teacher. Yasemin was also under the influence of her previous teacher to become a resilient person in her life. She positioned herself close to her teacher and found strength and inspiration in her story:

Our teacher graduated from a respected state university in Türkiye. She pulled through four cancers. A thief shot his father when he came to the house. She lost her mother. She had been raising her son alone. In other words, she had a lot of difficulties, but despite that, the troubles of life never took her away. She still went to pilates and spent time with her students, and she gave us her energy in such a good way that whenever I go to class, my teacher Saniye (pseudonym) comes to mind. (Interview 1)

In short, all the participants positioned themselves as caring teachers in response to their students' needs; furthermore, they positioned their previous teachers as caring, which influenced their own self-positioning as caring teachers.

Academic Caring

This theme described how the L2 teachers cared about their students' academic needs in learning English. An example of her academic caring was that Funda used the similarities and differences between English and Turkish to teach English. Another example was that, believing that exposure to input was crucial in learning L2, she encouraged her students to participate in out-of-class activities in English by rewarding them with emoticons in a WhatsApp group she had formed for this purpose. As part of

academic caring, Lale shared anecdotes and videos demonstrating that everybody could learn English, aiming to create a sense of purpose for students with negative attitudes toward the language. She also considered her students' interests in her activity selection. She shared:

As I know that the boys' interests in the 11th grade are online games, I look at online games and want them to do something about them. Or the girls in the 9th grade love social media. They use it actively. I also have them make examples and activities related to social media. I try to focus on the activities that appeal to their interests (Interview 2).

Aslı's theoretical knowledge of the multiple intelligences theory and learner styles informed her caring practice and she chose her activities accordingly. She also cared about her overconfident students, whom she positioned as challenging, by motivating them to participate in speaking activities and by guiding them to scaffold their peers. İnci's academic caring included diversifying teacher questions, determining her students' needs, supporting her lessons visually, and using peer learning for low-level L2 learners. Yasemin cared about her students academically, providing them with examples and anecdotes from various cultures, which she believed was peculiar to the language teaching profession. She expressed:

I like opening the doors of other worlds to my students. I take them out of the stereotypes. Like what? For example, I talk about traditional ceremonies in Mexico or holidays in Norway [...]. It is very different to enlighten their world with different topics. You can't see that in a math book [...]. I have the opportunity to present anything from every language and every religion. This makes me happy (Interview, 2).

Academic caring was discipline-specific in terms of its goals and practices. It involves selecting suitable activities, materials, and feedback for L2 learners, as well as addressing their speaking anxiety and motivation to learn English.

Psychological Caring

This theme of psychological caring referred to how the L2 teachers cared about their students' emotional problems and/or their psychological well-being. All the participants reported that they cared about their students' well-being. Funda expressed that she managed to create an emotional bond with her students. For instance, she was positioned by one of her students like "a second mother", as she cared about him. Lale cared about her students' well-being by communicating with them. She stated that if one of her students behaved unusually, she would talk with her or him individually. Yasemin listened to her students, showed interest in them, and approved of their problems or ideas when they felt sad.

It is noteworthy that İnci's knowledge of positive psychology was useful for caring about her students' emotions. She had received a course on positive psychology in her MA education. She shared:

Positive psychology was a course I took last semester. In this course, I learned that students can be calmed in the classroom without punishment. For example, I had a student who complained about everything in the middle of the class [...] There is such a thing as gratitude..., gratitude scale, what can I call it? Gratitude chart. For example, I had the child complete it. I said, 'when you go home every day, you'll write down three things you're happy with at school.' [...] Now I can see that his positive attitude towards school has improved, his complaints have decreased (Interview 1).

Psychological caring referred to attending to students' psychological well-being, as teachers perceived their students holistically, including their backgrounds. It required a deliberate willingness to listen to and communicate with students about their feelings or moods.

Social Caring

This theme encompassed how the L2 teacher cared about their students' social problems such as adaptation to school or friends and peer bullying. For example, Funda cared about her students' adaptation problems and peer bullying, since she believed such challenges influenced L2 learners' readiness to learn English. Above all, she cared about them deeply as human beings. She felt upset when her students were exposed to peer bullying and believed that teachers should care about silent and vulnerable students as they were exposed to peer bullying more often. There was a case in which she used her students' support to help their classmate who had difficulty adapting to her class. Regarding this situation, she reported:

For example, I had a student in my preparation class last year. She was unbelievably struggling to adapt to things. She wished that all the children would agree with her. After she left the classroom, I would collect the kids and tell them 'this girl is in a difficult situation, don't leave her alone. If you are going to drink tea, take her with you.' [...] This year the child got better. We gave her a hand, and we saved her together with the class. (Interview 1)

Similarly, in her emotion diary, İnci shared an incident where she cared about one of her students who experienced such a problem. İnci asked her students "what is your dream school?" One of her students expressed that her dream school would house sincere friends who liked her. İnci invited other students to share their opinions about this and encouraged them to make friends with her, which pleased the student.

Emotional Gain of Caring

This theme pertained to the positive emotions experienced by L2 teachers when they cared for their students, particularly when their efforts made a positive transformation in their students' learning experiences or lives. This also addressed the appreciation of the students and the parents of the students, as well.

When the language teachers in this study cared about their students, they experienced emotional gains, feeling positive emotions such as happiness, joy, relief, satisfaction, self-adequacy and more motivation to care about their students. For instance, Lale felt satisfied and motivated. In her second interview, she also stated, “When you care about students, they start to care about you too. Care turns into a mutual exchange,” highlighting the reciprocal interplay between teacher caring and student caring. Likewise, when Funda cared about her students, she experienced emotional gains, feeling happy and relieved. She mentioned that her students also cared for her, implying that caring was reciprocal. Furthermore, she received the appreciation of the students’ parents in the form of a compliment or a present. All of these made her more motivated to care about her students. She expressed:

My efforts pay off. I get positive feedback from my parents [...] I am not trying to tell you that I am a very good teacher, but I am telling you that children feel it when you care about them, and share it with their parents (Interview, 1).

All in all, both students’ and parents’ appreciation of teacher caring motivated teachers to care more for their students, in addition to the positive emotions generated through effective caring practices themselves.

Emotional Costs of Caring

This theme encompassed the negative emotions experienced by the L2 teachers when they were unable to care for their students, or when their care did not lead to any observable positive change. Moreover, this theme addressed the emotional labour involved in the act of caring. When the participants of this study could not care about their students as they wished, they experienced emotional costs by feeling negative emotions such as guilt, sadness, exhaustion, and inadequacy. For instance, Funda experienced an emotional cost by feeling regretful or guilty and by questioning her professionalism when she could not care for a student. When Lale could not care about

her students, she felt sad, exhausted, helpless, and inadequate. Likewise, Aslı felt inadequate and exhausted when she could not care about her students. She shared:

Teaching is a profession in which we bring work home; sometimes we bring the exam papers; sometimes we bring our files; and sometimes we bring students' homework. But most of the time, we bring noise. The noise from that day is in your head. What did you experience that day? Why was one of your students so inactive? Did something happen? (Interview 2)

The emotional cost of caring for students was experienced by teachers as emotional labour. They often felt negative emotions—such as unhappiness, guilt, inadequacy, and exhaustion—and even critically questioned their sense of professionalism. At times, caring for students also required faking or suppressing negative emotions.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study showed how EFL teachers cared about EFL learners and how this caring affected and was affected by L2 teachers' emotions. The first research question in this study focused on EFL teachers' prior emotional experiences. For this study, L2 teachers' previous emotional experiences that they went through as learners, student teachers, or language teachers could be regarded as "perezhivanie," meaning lived or emotional experience (Vygotsky, 1994), within the frame of sociocultural theory. Research has shown how language teachers' perezhivaniyes (emotional experiences in this study) affect their cognition, identity, and teaching activities (Golombek & Doran, 2014; Shahri, 2018). In a sense, L2 teachers' emotional experiences influenced their language teacher identity and their current caring practices. These findings can be supported by what is called "apprenticeship of observation" by Lortie (1975), who argued that teachers do not start teaching with a blank mind but with some assumptions and ideas about how they should teach.

In the present study, L2 teachers reported having experienced unpleasant emotions when they received discouraging feedback from their prior teachers or teacher educators. Similarly, the research conducted by Karagöz-Dilek and Balçıkanlı (2023) in Türkiye found that student teachers of English language frequently faced negative emotional experiences, stemming from their interactions with their teacher educators, particularly when receiving feedback on their micro-teaching sessions. The authors explain that these issues arose due to the perceived status difference between teacher educators and student teachers, as well as the influence of peer pressure.

Building on existing scholarship on teacher emotions (Frenzel, 2014; Ruohotie-Lyhty et al., 2018), our study illustrates how language teachers experience a range of emotions in their interactions with students, particularly in situations such as student misbehavior. L2 teachers' caring practice requiring this teacher-student relationship can be seen as the microsystem in this study from the ecological perspective adopted in the study (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Emotional experiences in some situations involved other interlocutors, such as the students' parents or school administrators (Cowie, 2011), indicating that they occurred at the meso-level. Hargreaves (2001) suggests that emotions are intricately connected to individuals' experiences of power and lack thereof. Therefore, the power difference between teachers and administrators or the political distance between them might be seen as a threat by teachers (Hargreaves, 2001). Their negative emotional experiences with students' parents are understandable considering that "threat and anxiety emerge when teachers' and parents' purposes are dissonant, cultures are different, power relations are ambivalent, and interactions seem physically too close" (Hargreaves, 2001, p. 1075).

All the participants in this study viewed caring as a moral or humane obligation, seeming to act with their "ethical ideal" (Noddings, 2013). Aligned with the second research question, which explored how EFL teachers cared for their students, three types of caring that L2 teachers are engaged in for their students were identified in this study. These are academic caring, psychological caring, and social caring. Although these categories help understand EFL teachers' different caring behaviours, it does

not necessarily mean that they are comprehensive of all the caring types that EFL teachers use. Rather, they offer a descriptive view of EFL teachers' caring practices but not a prescriptive one. Several studies (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006; O'Connor, 2008) have endeavoured to categorize teachers' caring behaviours, however not in an EFL context. The concept of 'performative' caring described in O'Connor's (2008) study and "pedagogical caring" discussed in Isenbarger and Zembylas' (2006) study share similarities with the notion of academic caring identified in our study, since they all centre around the pedagogical dimensions of care. Yet, academic caring covers solely L2-related pedagogical goals. Academic caring is discipline-specific, as its focus lies in L2 learning. Consequently, its goals are tied to L2 development, and its practical manifestations are broad—ranging from the selection of suitable activities, materials, and feedback to addressing learners' speaking anxiety and motivation in English. Furthermore, our findings can be complementary to the findings of Liu and Li's (2023) study that examined Chinese EFL students' perceived teacher support and found that teacher support is 'tri-factorial structure' consisting of 'academic, instrumental, and emotional support'. Furthermore, the reason why the EFL teachers care about/for their students at such different levels might be related to their "emotional literacy" (Rezai et al., 2024).

The third research question examined the emotional gains and costs associated with L2 teachers' caring practices. The positive emotions that L2 teachers experience and the appreciation they receive from the students they care about or their parents are regarded as emotional gains of L2 teachers' caring in the present study. This can be supported by what are called "emotional rewards" of teaching, such as happiness and enthusiasm (Miller & Gkonou, 2018). Likewise, students' appreciation of teachers' effort were sources of positive emotions, impacting teachers' "occasional positive valence" in Alzaanin's (2024, p. 931) study. On the other hand, the negative emotions that the L2 teachers experience when they cannot care about their L2 learners and/or when there is a failure in the outcome are viewed as the emotional costs of L2 teachers' caring in this study. Caring can lead teachers to "guilt traps" (Hargreaves & Tucker,

1991, p. 496), subjecting them to vulnerability (Collins & Ting, 2014) or to a sort of emotional labour (Benesch, 2017).

In line with the fourth research question, which addressed how EFL teachers positioned themselves, all the teachers identified themselves as caring teachers in response to learners' various problems. Furthermore, the L2 teachers in the current study positioned themselves close to their favourite teachers but away from those they disliked due to the negative emotional experiences they had with them. They were engaged in both "reflexive positioning," in which they positioned themselves (Davies & Harre, 1999, p. 37), and "interactive positioning," in which they positioned their past teachers and/or teacher educators. L2 teachers' positive and negative emotional experiences contributed to the development of their caring identities. Similarly, in Hayik & Weiner-Levy's (2019) study, a prospective Israeli-Arab English teacher's childhood memories of suffering helped her to be an empathic teacher.

In short, our study highlights the reciprocal relationship between EFL teachers' caring practices and their emotional experiences. Three types of caring—academic, psychological, and social—emerged as central to teachers' interactions with their learners, with academic caring being discipline-specific to L2 learning. Teachers' caring practices led to emotional gains, such as motivation and appreciation from students and parents, but also emotional costs, including sadness, guilt, and exhaustion when the outcomes failed. All participants positioned themselves as caring teachers, and their caring identities were affected by prior positive and negative emotional experiences.

Implications, Limitations, and Directions for Further Research

The results of the current study have implications for LTE programs. The results of this study imply that L2 teachers are not prepared emotionally for the realities of teaching in their pre-service LTE programs, as the participants expressed difficulty in managing their emotions in the L2 classroom. Accordingly, LTE courses should

support future teachers in developing strategies to understand and regulate their emotions when confronted with challenging situations. Moreover, teacher training should incorporate an emotional dimension, with trainers demonstrating empathy toward the experiences of trainees (Morris & King, 2025). We suggest that LTE programs (ELT programs) should utilize “the case studies model” to complement other LTE models. The case studies model encourages student teachers to discuss and analyse the actual case histories of L2 teachers (their emotional experiences) with their trainers together (Day, 1993). Using the case study model could prepare the student teachers for the realities of language teaching and the related contextual factors before they start their profession.

The participants of our study expressed that just taking part in this study made them more conscious of their feelings and encouraged them to think about issues they had never intended before. In other words, the participants engaged in a self-reflection activity by participating in this study. For this reason, being involved in affective self-reflection activities can help L2 teachers cope with the emotional costs of caring in language teaching more effectively. They can keep emotion diaries to reflect on their emotions, for instance. Some of the activities used for teacher development might be helpful. “Teacher support groups” (Richards & Farrell, 2005) might be useful for coping with the emotional costs of caring. Furthermore, some opportunities of collaboration between language teachers and teacher educators for encouraging language teachers to reflect on their emotions might mitigate their emotional labour (Cinaglia et al., 2024).

To be caring, teachers need to be mindful of both their actions and their students’ needs. It is therefore essential that teachers engage in observation and reflection on their practices even before starting the profession, with teaching practicum offering opportunities for such development. Furthermore, experience with positive psychology courses and approaches helped one of the teachers in our study to develop psychological caring. This suggests that we could include courses in LTE that teach emotional literacy, emotion regulation, and how to better care for learners holistically.

While the current research makes valuable contributions, it is not without shortcomings. Collecting data retrospectively through interviews could be regarded as a limitation of this study since participants' recollections of past emotional experiences may have been distorted (Chen, Lee & Dong, 2020). Furthermore, the COVID-19 outbreak disrupted our planned data collection process. After we conducted initial interviews and two observation sessions, schools shifted to online education, preventing extended observations and making it hard to sustain participants' motivation. Despite these, we were able to complete our data collection process successfully during the pandemic. With this work, we have gained a new understanding of EFL teachers' emotions in a Turkish context and how they care for EFL learners. We have worked with female participants in this study, so male participants can be used in future studies to investigate gender differences in caring practices and emotions. Further research might use conversational analysis to examine how EFL teachers care for their students in the classroom. Finally, future research may consider cultural factors more deeply to determine how different cultures affect L2 teachers' caring behaviours and their emotions.

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Authors' Contributions

Tuba Karagöz Dilek designed the study, conducted the research, performed the data analysis, and structured the manuscript. Cem Balçıkanlı supervised the research process, provided critical feedback at all stages, and contributed to the editing and refinement of the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethics Approval & Consent to Participate

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Gazi University. (Approval No: 2020-032 Date: January 01, 2020). We adhered to all ethical principles in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. After participants were informed about the study in

detail, they volunteered to participate. They were assured that their participation was anonymous.

Declaration of GenAI and AI-Assisted Technologies

We did not use GenAI nor AI-Assisted Technologies at any stage of creating this manuscript.

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