



Exploring the emotional labor of Iranian English language teachers in digital learning environments: a self-determination theory perspective

 ISMAIL XODABANDE^a  

 ALI BASARATI^b  

 BEHZAD MANSOURI^c  
^a*Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran*
^b*VIZJA University, Warsaw, Poland*
^c*Lakeshore Foundation, Birmingham, AL, USA*

Abstract

The study explored the emotional labor of Iranian English language teachers in digital learning environments, drawing on self-determination theory (SDT) as the theoretical framework. Emotional labor, encompassing surface acting, deep acting, and naturally felt emotions, is essential for managing interpersonal dynamics in teaching. This qualitative study examined how the satisfaction or frustration of basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) influenced teachers' emotional regulation strategies during online instruction. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 mid-career Iranian English language teachers, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicated that autonomy enhanced emotional authenticity, with teachers who felt empowered in their teaching methods displaying naturally felt emotions or engaging in deep acting. Competence was a significant determinant of emotional regulation, as teachers with higher technical and pedagogical confidence were more likely to express authentic emotions. Relatedness, though challenging in virtual environments, emerged as crucial for fostering meaningful teacher–student interactions and mitigating emotional dissonance. However, institutional policies and technological constraints often frustrated these psychological needs, compelling teachers to rely on surface acting. By extending SDT to the domain of emotional labor in online language teaching, this study contributes to a theoretically grounded understanding of how basic psychological needs shape teachers' affective experiences during digitally mediated instruction. Additionally,

the findings underscore the complex interplay between emotional labor and motivation in digital contexts, offering insights into supporting teachers' well-being and enhancing their professional efficacy in online teaching.

Keywords: Emotional labor, self-determination theory, autonomy, competence, relatedness, online teaching, language teacher education

Introduction

The rapid integration of digital technologies into education has transformed the teaching and learning landscape, with language education being no exception (Moser et al., 2021; Steinmayr et al., 2021). Online learning environments, facilitated by platforms such as video conferencing tools, learning management systems, and interactive applications, have reshaped how language teachers engage with their students. These digital spaces offer flexibility and accessibility, yet they also bring unique challenges, particularly in managing emotional dynamics (Janes & Chen, 2024; Karimi & Ashkani, 2025; Nazari, Karimpour & Xodabande, 2023). Unlike traditional face-to-face classrooms, where teachers' and students' physical presence allows for nuanced interpersonal interactions, the digital contexts often require teachers to adapt their emotional expressions and strategies to foster engagement and to maintain a supportive learning atmosphere (Nyanjom & Naylor, 2021). This adaptation is not merely technical but deeply emotional, underscoring the importance of understanding how teachers navigate the affective/interpersonal demands of online teaching (Song, 2022).

Despite growing recognition of emotional labor as a critical aspect of (language) teaching, limited attention has been paid to its manifestation in digital learning environments (Naylor & Nyanjom, 2021; Nazari, Karimpour, & Xodabande, 2023; Nejadghanbar et al., 2024). Emotional labor refers to the effort involved in managing emotions to meet professional display rules (Benesch, 2019; Grandey et al., 2020; Hochschild, 1983). In traditional classrooms, teachers often rely on emotional regulation strategies, such as surface acting, deep acting, or the expression of naturally felt emotions, to align their interactions with institutional expectations. However, the transition to digital platforms has introduced additional layers of complexity, including technological constraints, physical isolation, and the challenges of sustaining meaningful connections through screens. As a consequence, these factors may exacerbate emotional dissonance, where a gap exists between the teachers' true feelings and the emotions they are expected to display. While the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital platforms and triggered a wealth of research on online teaching (Bashir et al., 2021; Rodriguez-Segura et al., 2020; Tinjić & Nordén, 2024), most studies have prioritized learner-centered outcomes, instructional effectiveness, or digital pedagogy. Far fewer have examined how teachers themselves experience and manage the emotional demands of teaching in digitally mediated contexts. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the emotional labor of language teachers in online learning environments through the lens of self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2017). As a motivational framework, SDT offers valuable insights into how the satisfaction or frustration of basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) shapes individuals' emotional experiences and regulatory strategies. By focusing on the motivational underpinnings of emotional labor, this study aims to uncover how different forms of motivation, ranging from autonomous to controlled, influence the adoption of strategies such as surface acting, deep acting, and naturally felt emotions. Through qualitative interviews

with 10 language teachers, this study aims to provide a theoretically grounded and empirically informed account of the emotional and motivational challenges of online teaching. In doing so, it offers an integrative perspective informed by SDT into emotional labor and advances our understanding of how teachers' emotional experiences are mediated by fulfillment of psychological needs in digital educational environments.

Literature Review

Emotional Labor

Emotional labor, a concept introduced by Hochschild (1983), describes the process by which individuals regulate their emotions to meet the demands of their professional roles. In the workplace, especially in roles requiring frequent interpersonal interactions, employees are often expected to adhere to organizationally prescribed "display rules" that govern how they should express or suppress their emotions. Hochschild emphasized that this process is not merely about external behavior but also involves aligning one's internal emotional state with these external expectations. Building on this foundation, Grandey (2000) integrated emotion regulation theories, such as Gross's (1998) framework, into the study of emotional labor, conceptualizing it as the effort to manage emotions through both surface and deep acting to comply with workplace norms. This dynamic process is central to understanding the emotional demands placed on professionals, including teachers, whose roles require the frequent modulation of their emotional expressions (Benesch, 2017).

There are three primary strategies of emotional labor: surface acting, deep acting, and naturally felt emotions. Surface acting involves modifying outward emotional expressions to align with organizational display rules while internal emotions remain unchanged (Grandey et al., 2020). For example, a teacher may feign enthusiasm during a lesson despite feeling fatigued or unmotivated. This strategy, however, often leads to emotional dissonance, where a gap exists between felt and displayed emotions, potentially resulting in stress, burnout, and reduced job satisfaction (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). In contrast, deep acting entails efforts to genuinely align internal emotions with external expectations, such as reappraising a situation to evoke authentic positive feelings (Grandey et al., 2020). Deep acting is generally associated with more authentic interactions and better psychological outcomes than surface acting. Finally, naturally felt emotions occur when individuals express emotions that genuinely align with both their internal states and organizational expectations. This strategy requires minimal emotional regulation and is often associated with greater authenticity and well-being (Diefendorff et al., 2005). The role of emotional labor in teaching is particularly significant, as teachers must consistently regulate their emotions to create a positive and engaging learning environment (Benesch, 2020b). They may use surface acting to suppress frustration or deep acting to cultivate genuine concern for students.

Self-Determination Theory

SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017) is a prominent motivational framework that explores the factors influencing human behavior and well-being. SDT distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, emphasizing the importance of the quality of motivation rather than quantity. Intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in an activity for its inherent enjoyment or interest, whereas extrinsic motivation involves performing an activity to achieve external rewards or avoid punishments (Baard et al., 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Within SDT, extrinsic motivation is further divided into controlled and autonomous forms (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Controlled motivation arises from external pressures or obligations, whereas autonomous motivation stems from internalized values and goals. This continuum of motivation provides a nuanced

understanding of how individuals engage with tasks, particularly in emotionally demanding contexts like teaching (Hein et al., 2012).

A central tenet of SDT is the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Autonomy refers to the sense of volition and self-direction in one's actions (Chen et al., 2015). When teachers feel they have control over their teaching methods and emotional expressions, they are more likely to experience autonomous motivation. Competence involves the perception of effectiveness in achieving desired outcomes (Ryan & La Guardia, 2000). Teachers who feel confident in their ability to navigate the technical and pedagogical demands of online teaching are more likely to thrive. Relatedness pertains to the need for meaningful connections with others (Chen et al., 2015). In digital learning environments, where physical interactions are replaced by virtual ones, maintaining a sense of connection with students and colleagues becomes a critical factor in supporting motivation and well-being (Nazari, Karimpour, & Xodabande, 2023).

Understanding Emotional Labor from a SDT Perspective

Motivation plays a critical role in shaping how individuals engage in emotional regulation strategies, particularly in professional contexts that demand adherence to emotional display rules. SDT provides a robust framework for understanding these motivational dynamics by distinguishing between autonomous and controlled forms of motivation (Cossette, 2014). Autonomous motivation, which arises when individuals fully endorse and internalize the value of a task, is associated with deep acting and naturally felt emotions (Mouratidis et al., 2021). These strategies reflect genuine alignment between internal feelings and external emotional expressions, leading to greater authenticity and psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2019). Conversely, controlled motivation, driven by external pressures or obligations (Slemp et al., 2020), tends to promote surface acting—a strategy in which individuals modify their outward emotional expressions without changing their underlying feelings. Surface acting often leads to emotional dissonance, which has been linked to adverse outcomes such as burnout, job dissatisfaction, and reduced well-being (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011). Motivational quality, therefore, is a decisive factor in determining how teachers regulate their emotions and the subsequent consequences for their emotional health.

Prior research has empirically validated the connection between SDT and emotional labor in various teaching contexts. For example, Sutton (2004) conducted a qualitative study exploring how teachers regulate their emotions in response to classroom demands. The findings revealed that teachers with autonomous motivation—those who identified strongly with their role as educators and internalized the value of emotional regulation—were more likely to engage in deep acting. These teachers reframed challenging situations, such as managing disruptive students, as opportunities to foster personal growth and maintain professional integrity. In contrast, teachers with controlled motivation, driven by external pressures such as fear of administrative reprimand or maintaining classroom order, were more likely to employ surface acting strategies, suppressing their genuine emotions to meet institutional expectations. This divergence underscores the critical role of motivation type in shaping emotional labor strategies. Similarly, Brotheridge and Lee (2002), who explored the link between role identification and emotional labor strategies, found that teachers who strongly identified with their professional roles experienced lower levels of emotional dissonance and were more inclined to adopt deep acting as a strategy, facilitating a sense of authenticity in their interactions with students.

Further evidence of the interplay between motivation and emotional labor in teaching can be found in the work of Hargreaves (2000), who examined how the emotional dimensions of teaching affect educators' motivation and emotional regulation. The study highlighted that

teachers who perceived their work as meaningful and connected to their personal values were more likely to experience satisfaction and resilience, even in the face of emotional challenges. These findings suggest that the internalization of professional goals—a hallmark of autonomous motivation—buffers against the negative effects of emotional labor, promoting sustainable emotional regulation strategies like deep acting. Conversely, teachers who felt compelled to comply with institutional norms or parental expectations without internalizing these demands reported higher levels of stress and emotional exhaustion, often relying on surface acting as a coping mechanism.

Collectively, these studies underscore the importance of self-determined motivation in shaping emotional labor strategies and outcomes. Autonomous motivation not only facilitates deeper alignment between internal emotions and external displays but also fosters resilience and well-being in emotionally demanding roles (Salmani Ghasemzadegan et al., 2025). By applying SDT to the study of emotional labor in online teaching, the present research builds on this foundation, aiming to uncover how digital learning environments influence the motivational mechanisms underlying teachers' emotional regulation strategies. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of how educators navigate the emotional complexities of their profession in an increasingly digitalized context.

Previous Studies on Language Teachers' Emotional Labor

Over recent years, scholarly interest in emotional labor among language teachers has expanded significantly, highlighting the role of emotional regulation as a key component of effective teaching and professional well-being (Lotfi Gaskaree et al., 2025; Nazari, Seyri, et al., 2023; Sadraei et al., 2024; Shakib Kotamjani et al., 2025; Taati Jeliseh et al., 2025). In particular, research focused on language teachers has provided insights into how the specific demands of language education shape teachers' emotional experiences and professional practices (Benesch, 2018, 2020a, 2020b; Kiyanfar et al., 2025; Nazari & Karimpour, 2023; Nazari, Karimpour, & Ranjbar, 2023; Nazari & Molana, 2023). The rise of this research area is evident in bibliometric analyses, which have documented an increasing number of publications exploring the emotional dimensions of teaching and their critical implications for teachers' job satisfaction and well-being (Wu & Wei, 2022). Central to these investigations is the acknowledgment that emotional labor does not merely involve superficial emotion management but is deeply tied to teachers' identities, professional agency, and motivational states.

One significant theme emerging from this body of research is the emotional labor associated with navigating institutional mandates and policies. Benesch (2018), for instance, investigated English language teachers' emotional responses to institutional plagiarism policies in a university context. Her analysis showed that teachers often experienced complex emotional reactions, such as frustration, uncertainty, empathy, and even resistance, as they navigated tensions between institutional demands and their pedagogical beliefs. Crucially, these emotional experiences frequently influenced teachers' decision-making processes, revealing their strategic use of emotions as forms of professional judgment and agency. Similarly, Benesch (2020a) explored language teachers' emotional labor in relation to institutional mandates on high-stakes literacy testing, demonstrating that teachers' emotions, especially ambivalence, were critical in motivating collective activism aimed at policy reform. These studies underline the significance of autonomy—one of the core psychological needs within SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017)—by showing how restrictions on professional agency can intensify emotional dissonance and how opportunities for autonomous decision-making can mitigate negative emotional outcomes.

Another central theme is the intersection of emotional labor, institutional assessment policies, and teachers' professional identity. Nazari and Molana (2023), studying Iranian English

language teachers, demonstrated how top-down institutional assessment policies intensified emotional labor by constraining teachers' assessment practices and agency. Teachers frequently experienced emotional conflict as a result of misalignment between institutional expectations and their professional beliefs and judgment. Nonetheless, despite institutional constraints, teachers demonstrated resilience by creatively adapting assessment strategies to align more closely with their pedagogical values and their students' needs. This adaptation process can be closely linked to the psychological need for competence, as outlined in SDT, whereby teachers strive to maintain effectiveness and a sense of professional efficacy in the face of challenging institutional expectations (Chen et al., 2015). The findings underscore the importance of supporting teachers' professional competence and validating their emotional experiences in order to sustain their motivation, professional satisfaction, and well-being.

Recent studies have also illuminated the complexities of emotional labor within digital and professional development contexts, particularly as teachers negotiate multiple and often conflicting emotional demands across various ecological levels. Nazari, Karimpour, & De Costa (2023) examined English language teachers' emotional experiences from a critical-ecological standpoint, showing that teachers faced situations bearing an emotional load related to classroom management, institutional policies, and broader societal expectations. To cope, teachers resorted to both surface and deep acting strategies, depending on the situational demands. These findings highlight relatedness—the third basic psychological need in SDT—as critical in managing emotional labor, since supportive relationships within professional communities and with students can substantially alleviate emotional burdens (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In another related investigation focusing explicitly on digital teaching contexts, Nazari, Karimpour, & Xodabande (2023) explored emotional labor among Iranian English language teachers who rapidly transitioned to online teaching. Their findings underscored the significant emotional strain resulting from conflicting expectations regarding student engagement, instructional delivery, and assessment practices. Here, emotional labor intensified as the teachers sought to reconcile institutional expectations with their professional identities and values, underscoring the profound motivational implications associated with autonomy, competence, and relatedness in digital environments.

Collectively, this expanding body of literature provides robust evidence that emotional labor significantly shapes language teachers' professional identities, pedagogical practices, and motivational dynamics. Research has consistently demonstrated that language teachers encounter distinct emotional challenges related to institutional demands, professional agency, and digital transformation of teaching contexts. Crucially, these studies emphasize the critical role of satisfying psychological needs, suggesting that supporting teachers' autonomy, competence, and relatedness can significantly mitigate emotional dissonance and foster authentic emotional engagement. Therefore, a nuanced understanding of emotional labor through motivational and psychological lenses offers valuable pathways for enhancing teachers' well-being, professional resilience, and educational effectiveness in diverse teaching contexts.

The Current Study

The shift to digital teaching has introduced significant changes in how language teachers experience and manage emotional and motivational dynamics in virtual classrooms. Teachers working in online environments encounter distinct emotional challenges caused by reduced physical presence, limited nonverbal communication, and the continuous need to maintain student engagement through digitally mediated interactions (Naylor & Nyanjom, 2021; Nazari, Karimpour, & Xodabande, 2023). These challenges often necessitate increased emotional regulation efforts, such as suppressing the frustration caused by technological disruptions or projecting

heightened enthusiasm to sustain learners' motivation (Song, 2022). Despite recognition of emotional labor as an integral aspect of teaching (Benesch, 2018; Nazari & Molana, 2023), research exploring emotional labor in digital contexts remains relatively limited, leaving notable gaps in our understanding of how virtual teaching environments specifically shape teachers' emotional experiences and regulatory practices.

In particular, existing research has rarely explored emotional labor in online teaching through the lens of established motivational frameworks such as SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Most prior studies on emotional labor within language teaching contexts have either been conducted in traditional face-to-face settings or have adopted primarily descriptive rather than theoretically driven approaches. Thus, little empirical insight exists into how the satisfaction or frustration of teachers' basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—influences their emotional regulation strategies in online environments (Cossette, 2014). Clarifying these motivational underpinnings of emotional labor is crucial, as it can provide targeted avenues for supporting teachers' well-being and promoting authentic emotional engagement in virtual educational settings.

Addressing this theoretical and empirical gap, the present study investigated language teachers' emotional labor in online learning environments through the framework of SDT. Specifically, this study examined how the fulfillment or obstruction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness shapes teachers' decisions to engage in surface acting, deep acting, or expressing naturally felt emotions. By using qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews with Iranian English language teachers, this research aimed to generate a nuanced, motivationally grounded understanding of the emotional challenges teachers face in digital spaces. By doing so, it contributes to the existing scholarship by extending SDT into a relatively unexplored domain and providing empirical insights into the motivational mechanisms underlying teachers' emotional labor in online teaching contexts. Ultimately, the findings offer implications for institutional practices and professional development initiatives aimed at enhancing teachers' emotional and professional efficacy. To guide the investigation, the following research question is posed: What role do autonomy, competence, and relatedness play in shaping Iranian language teachers' emotional labor strategies in digital learning environments?

Methodology

Research Design

This study took a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews to explore how autonomy, competence, and relatedness shape the emotional labor strategies of Iranian English language teachers in digital learning environments. A qualitative design was chosen to gain a deep understanding of the teachers' lived experiences, allowing for rich descriptions of their emotional and motivational dynamics. Semi-structured interviews provided a flexible yet structured means of eliciting detailed responses, enabling the participants to share their perspectives while addressing the key focus areas of the study. Moreover, the researchers' positionality and reflexivity were integral to the design of the study. Recognizing the potential influence of personal experiences and professional background on the research process, the researchers' maintained a reflective journal to document biases, assumptions, and decisions throughout the study.

Participants

The participants in this study were 10 Iranian English language teachers in their mid-career stage with relatively the same levels of experience in online teaching. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure homogeneity. The inclusion criteria required the

participants to have at least five years of experience in online teaching, to be in the mid-career stage (i.e., 10–20 years of experience), and be actively engaged in teaching English to Iranian learners. The teachers were provided with detailed information about the study’s objectives and procedures and signed written consent forms before participation. To ensure confidentiality, the participants were assigned anonymized codes (T1 to T10). A summary of the participants’ demographics is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants’ information.

Participant	Gender	Educational degree	Online teaching experience (years)	Teaching experience (years)	Age
T1	Female	MA (TEFL)	6	12	32
T2	Female	MA (TEFL)	5	10	30
T3	Male	PhD (TEFL)	8	14	36
T4	Female	MA (TEFL)	5	11	34
T5	Male	MA (English literature)	6	12	38
T6	Male	MA (TEFL)	9	14	35
T7	Female	PhD (TEFL)	7	17	40
T8	Female	MA (translation studies)	5	12	35
T9	Female	MA (TEFL)	6	11	33
T10	Male	MA (TEFL)	5	12	37

TEFL, teaching English as a foreign language.

Data Collection

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted face to face, ensuring convenience for the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants’ consent. The interviews were guided by a protocol designed to explore emotional labor strategies and the influence of autonomy, competence, and relatedness on the teachers’ experiences in online teaching (see the Appendix). The interview questions were based on the theoretical constructs of emotional labor (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983) and the core psychological needs outlined by SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Specifically, the questions were designed to probe the teachers’ emotional experiences, strategies for regulating emotions, and their perceptions regarding autonomy, competence, and relatedness in online teaching. To ensure clarity, relevance, and content validity, the interview protocol underwent an expert validation process by two scholars specializing in research into language teachers’ emotion (labor). Additionally, the protocol was pilot-tested with two online language teachers, and minor adjustments were made on the basis of their feedback, thereby enhancing the reliability and appropriateness of the interview questions for addressing the study’s research objectives.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach allowed for the systematic identification of patterns and themes within the qualitative data. The analysis began with familiarization, during which the audio recordings were transcribed, and the transcripts were reviewed multiple times to develop a comprehensive understanding of the data. The researchers then coded the transcripts systematically, identifying segments of data that are relevant to emotional labor, motivation, and the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The codes were grouped into preliminary themes, which were refined through an iterative process to ensure coherence and alignment with the research focus. The themes were reviewed and adjusted to avoid redundancy and capture the most salient aspects of the participants' experiences. For example, one participant stated, "I always feel anxious before starting a class because I'm not confident that everything will work smoothly. Sometimes, I have to pretend I'm calm even when I'm burning inside." This excerpt was initially coded as "anxiety over technological competence," which was subsequently grouped under the broader theme of "competence (frustration affecting emotional regulation)". Once finalized, each theme was defined and named to reflect its core essence. Throughout this process, the researchers maintained reflexivity, ensuring that their interpretations remained grounded in the participants' narratives. To further enhance reliability, intercoder reliability was calculated using percentage agreement. Two independent coders analyzed approximately 30% of the dataset (i.e., data from three participants), achieving an intercoder agreement of 78%, indicating high consistency in the coding process. Discrepancies between coders were discussed until a consensus was reached.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study, organized around the three core aspects of SDT (autonomy, competence, and relatedness). These psychological needs emerged as central to understanding how Iranian English language teachers undertake emotional labor in digital learning environments. The findings highlight how the satisfaction or frustration of these needs shapes the emotional regulation strategies adopted by teachers, influencing their use of surface acting, deep acting, or naturally felt emotions, underscoring the motivational underpinnings of emotional labor.

Autonomy

Autonomy emerged as a central theme in the participants' experiences of emotional labor in digital learning environments. Teachers expressed that their sense of autonomy was closely tied to their ability to make decisions about their teaching methods, lesson design, and interactions with students. Several participants highlighted the empowering effect of having control over how they structured their online classes. For example, T3 noted:

"One of the things I value the most about my online classes is my freedom to work with new ideas and instructional methods or even new tools. It feels like I have more control over my lessons to suit my students' learning needs."

This sense of autonomy enabled the teachers to align their teaching practices with their personal values and professional goals, fostering authenticity in their emotional expressions. However, the participants also identified significant constraints on their autonomy, particularly from the institutional policies and technological limitations that they face. For example,

T6 described how a prescribed syllabus and a prescriptive use of specific platforms for online teaching restricted his abilities:

“The institution I am working with insists that we stick to their lesson plans and use their platforms, even when we know there are better tools out there. This is really annoying and frustrating. It feels like as a professional, my judgment and expertise doesn’t matter.”

Such restrictions often led to surface acting, as teachers felt compelled to display enthusiasm for approaches they did not fully endorse.

Moreover, the findings also revealed that teachers used various strategies to deal with the limitations on their autonomy and maintain a sense of control. One common approach was finding creative ways to adapt within the constraints imposed by technologies or institutions. In this regard, one of the participants noted:

“Even when the curriculum is so rigid, I always try to make it my own by making some adjustments! These might include adding examples or activities that resonate with my students and with my own preferences. It’s not much, but it helps me feel more connected to what I’m doing” (T8).

This adaptive behavior allowed teachers to engage in deep acting rather than surface acting, as they could find personal meaning in their work. Another strategy that the teachers reported using involved setting personal goals that aligned with institutional requirements but also addressed their own philosophies of teaching. For example, T1 explained:

“I know I have to follow the guidelines imposed by the school, but I always try to add my own signature to what I am teaching! This can be something extra that reflects my own values and ways of teaching.”

By integrating their personal goals into mandated tasks, teachers were able to reduce emotional dissonance and maintain a sense of agency. The findings also indicated that autonomy is not only instrumental for professional satisfaction but also serves as a buffer against emotional strain. Teachers who experienced higher levels of autonomy felt more confident and less emotionally exhausted. In this regard, T9 mentioned:

“When you have the freedom to decide how to approach a lesson, you feel energized. It’s like teaching from the heart, not just going through the motions.”

This sense of autonomy often translated into naturally felt emotions, which enhanced their interactions with students and reduced the need for emotional regulation.

An important dimension of autonomy in digital teaching environments was the role of technology. The participants expressed mixed feelings about how technology influenced their sense of control. On the one hand, some teachers viewed technology as an enabler of autonomy, providing them with tools to create engaging and personalized lessons. T5 noted:

“I love using technology as it enhances my lessons and my teaching overall. It gives me so many options to make learning more interactive and more fun.”

On the other hand, technological issues, such as platform restrictions or unreliable internet connections, were frequently cited as barriers to autonomy. T7 explained:

“Sometimes during the online sessions, the platform we’re required to use is so limiting and frustrating. It doesn’t support the activities I want to do [such as all webcams on], and that makes me feel powerless to teach in a more effective manner.”

Additionally, institutional policies were another significant factor affecting teachers’ autonomy. Many participants expressed frustration with top-down approaches that prioritized administrative convenience over pedagogical effectiveness. T6 observed:

“The policies seem more about meeting institutional goals than supporting teachers or students. It’s hard to feel valued when your values and identity are ignored.”

This lack of autonomy often forced teachers to adopt surface acting, displaying enthusiasm for policies they privately resented.

Competence

Teachers’ confidence in their technical abilities and pedagogical skills significantly shaped their emotional labor strategies in digital teaching environments. Participants who felt more competent in using online platforms and integrating digital tools into their teaching reported a greater sense of control and alignment with their professional goals. This competence enabled them to engage in deep acting or express naturally felt emotions, reducing emotional dissonance. For example, T5 said:

“When I know how to use a platform well, I feel at ease and can focus on my students rather than worrying about the technical side of things.”

Similarly, T2 emphasized the importance of familiarity with digital tools in fostering authentic emotional engagement:

“I’ve learned how to use interactive features effectively, and when I see my students responding well, I feel genuinely happy.”

These teachers described how their confidence in managing online interactions allowed them to maintain a positive emotional climate in their classrooms, enhancing both their teachings’ effectiveness and emotional well-being.

For some participants, technical challenges created a significant emotional strain, leading to feelings of inadequacy and surface acting. Teachers who encountered frequent technological issues described how these barriers undermined their confidence and increased their emotional labor. T4 shared the following:

“I always feel anxious before starting a class because I’m not confident that everything will work smoothly. Sometimes, I have to pretend I’m calm, even when I’m burning inside.”

This emotional dissonance often translated into surface acting, as teachers suppressed their frustration or anxiety to maintain a professional demeanor. Similarly, T7 recounted how limited training on institutional platforms left her feeling unprepared:

“After the COVID-19 pandemic and forced online teaching, we were just handed the tools and expected to figure them out on our own. It was hard to manage my emotions when I was constantly worried about things going wrong.”

These experiences highlight how a lack of competence can exacerbate emotional challenges, forcing teachers to expend additional energy on managing their emotional displays. Despite the initial challenges, many teachers described how they developed competence over time through practice, self-directed learning, and peer support. This growth not only enhanced their technical skills but also reduced the emotional demands of online teaching. T8 explained:

“At first, I felt overwhelmed with the demands of online teaching, but over time, I learned to deal with problems and even found ways to make my classes more fun and interactive.”

Such experiences helped teachers shift from surface acting to deep acting or naturally felt emotions, as their increased competence allowed them to focus on meaningful interactions with students. T3 noted the role of experience in fostering confidence:

“The more I teach online, the more comfortable I feel. It’s like I’ve built a toolbox of strategies that work for me.”

These findings underscore the dynamic nature of competence, highlighting how teachers’ proactive efforts to build their skills can lead to more authentic emotional engagement and a reduction in emotional strain.

Relatedness

Maintaining a sense of connection with students was a vital aspect of teachers’ emotional labor in digital environments. Teachers who successfully established meaningful relationships with their students described experiencing naturally felt emotions that reduced the emotional burden of their work. These connections often stemmed from personalized interactions and efforts to understand their students’ needs. T3 noted:

“When my students actively participate and engage with the lessons, I feel a genuine sense of joy and pride in myself. It reminds me that I love teaching and even in an online setting you can be so connected to the class and the students emotionally.”

Similarly, T8 mentioned an experience where a student expressed gratitude for her support after 2 years of online classes:

“That moment made me realize the impact I could still have, even through a screen. I was skeptical about the long-term effectiveness of online education,

but when I saw my student succeeded in [the International English Language Testing System] exam, I really like the outcome and valued the experience.”

For many participants, fostering strong student–teacher relationships was a source of emotional authenticity, enabling them to express their emotions naturally rather than relying on surface or deep acting. These relationships also provided a sense of fulfillment, reinforcing their commitment to the teaching profession despite the challenges of digital platforms.

Although connection with students could be a source of emotional authenticity, the lack of face-to-face interaction in digital environments often left teachers feeling isolated and emotionally strained. The participants highlighted how reduced nonverbal cues, such as body language and eye contact, made it difficult to gauge the students’ reactions and engagement levels. T6 described this as a persistent challenge:

“In a physical classroom, I can read the room from the students’ faces and reactions. Then I adjust my approach based on students’ reactions. Online, I feel like I’m teaching in an empty room.”

This sense of disconnection frequently led to surface acting, as the teachers suppressed feelings of frustration or uncertainty about maintaining a professional demeanor. T4 also mentioned:

“There are days when I feel like that none of the students are really listening to what I’m teaching! It’s like I’m just talking to myself. I try to act energetic, but it’s hard to feel connected when the cameras are off.”

Beyond student interactions, the digital teaching context also created a sense of professional isolation from colleagues. Teachers who previously relied on in-person interactions with their peers for emotional and professional support found themselves left to face these challenges alone. For example, T7 noted:

“In the past, I could talk to a colleague after a tough class while drinking tea together! Now, I don’t have that immediate outlet and that space to talk about what is difficult; this makes the hard days even harder.”

This isolation not only exacerbated emotional dissonance but also increased emotional exhaustion, as teachers lacked the social support networks that often buffer against stress in traditional teaching settings. For many, the absence of such connections underscored the limitations of digital platforms in fostering a sense of relatedness within professional communities.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlighted the central role of SDT in understanding the emotional labor of Iranian English language teachers in digital learning environments. The study’s findings shed light on how the satisfaction or frustration of autonomy, competence, and relatedness shaped teachers’ emotional regulation strategies. Teachers who experienced a high degree of autonomy and competence were more likely to express naturally felt emotions or engage in deep acting, reflecting authentic and adaptive emotional regulation. In line with previous research that emphasized the motivational roots of emotional labor (Cossette, 2014; Mouratidis et al., 2021), this study further underscores the intricate relationship between

fulfillment of psychological needs and emotional authenticity among teachers. Specifically, teachers experiencing higher degrees of autonomy and competence were more inclined towards authentic emotional expression or deep acting, reflecting alignment with their internal motivational states. Conversely, frustration of these psychological needs often led to surface acting, amplifying emotional dissonance and strain. These findings resonate with prior research highlighting how autonomy and competence act as buffers against emotional exhaustion in teaching contexts (Benesch, 2020a; Nazari & Molana, 2023).

Autonomy emerged as a pivotal determinant of teachers' emotional labor strategies. Teachers who enjoyed autonomy in designing lessons, selecting instructional methods, and managing interactions reported more authentic emotional experiences. This aligns closely with SDT's assertion that autonomy enhances emotional authenticity and well-being by allowing individuals to align their actions with their personal values (Ryan & Deci, 2017). However, consistent with Nazari, Karimpour, and Xodabande's (2023) recent findings in Iranian English as a foreign language contexts, the institutional constraints typical in online environments—such as rigid curricula and prescriptive digital platforms—often limited autonomy, compelling teachers to engage in surface acting to comply with institutional expectations. Interestingly, many teachers demonstrated resilience and agency by creatively adapting the prescribed curricula to better align with their professional philosophies and personal teaching styles. This adaptive process supports earlier findings that suggest teachers' emotional agency and resilience in restrictive contexts are crucial to sustaining their professional identities and reducing emotional strain (Benesch, 2018; Nazari & Molana, 2023).

Teachers' perceptions of their competence emerged as a significant determinant of their emotional labor strategies. Those who felt confident in their ability to navigate online platforms and deliver effective instruction were more likely to express genuine emotions or engage in deep acting, as this sense of competence reduced emotional dissonance and enabled them to focus on fostering meaningful interactions (Chen et al., 2015). In contrast, technological challenges and inadequate training often undermined teachers' confidence, forcing them to mask their frustrations through surface acting (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). Over time, many teachers managed to enhance their competence through experience, self-directed learning, and collaboration with peers, which shifted their emotional regulation strategies toward more authentic expressions (Sutton, 2004). Furthermore, the proactive strategies teachers used to enhance their digital teaching competencies, such as self-directed learning and peer collaboration, echo prior research underscoring development of competence as being critical for adaptive emotional regulation (Nazari & Xodabande, 2022). Such findings correspond closely with previous studies suggesting that insufficient professional development and a lack of technical competence can significantly increase the demands of emotional labor, particularly in digital teaching contexts (Naylor & Nyanjom, 2021; Nazari, Karimpour, & De Costa, 2023).

Relatedness emerged as a particularly complex yet vital factor in the emotional labor of online teachers. Teachers who successfully established connections with their students reported naturally felt emotions that reduced emotional dissonance and enhanced their teaching experience (Ryan & Deci, 2017). However, the virtual nature of online teaching often created barriers to fostering meaningful relationships, as the absence of face-to-face interaction and nonverbal cues limited opportunities for connection (Nyanjom & Naylor, 2021). This lack of relatedness frequently led to surface acting, as teachers suppressed their feelings of frustration or disengagement to maintain a professional demeanor (Song, 2022). Additionally, the transition to digital teaching often reduced opportunities for peer interaction and professional camaraderie,

further intensifying feelings of isolation (Hargreaves, 2000). Despite these challenges, teachers used strategies such as personalized feedback and rapport-building efforts to strengthen their connections with students (Nazari, Karimpour, et al., 2023). These findings underscore the essential role of relatedness in supporting teachers' emotional well-being and the need for institutional support to promote community-building in virtual environments.

The findings of this study offer several implications for teacher education, institutional policy, and online teaching practices. First, fostering autonomy through more flexible institutional policies and greater teacher agency in lesson planning and instructional design could significantly reduce emotional dissonance and enhance authentic emotional engagement. Institutions should consider involving teachers in decision-making processes related to curriculum design and the selection of digital tools, ensuring alignment with their professional values and needs (Freeman, 1989; Khatib & Saeedian, 2021). Second, the results highlight the necessity of targeted professional development programs to enhance teachers' technical and pedagogical competence (Karimi & Nazari, 2021; Nazari & Xodabande, 2022). Such initiatives could provide training on effectively navigating online platforms and managing the unique challenges of virtual teaching, thereby enabling teachers to engage in more authentic emotional regulation. Third, promoting relatedness within digital environments is critical, given its central role in teachers' emotional well-being. Institutions can support this by encouraging practices that foster stronger teacher–student connections, such as incorporating interactive and personalized teaching strategies. Additionally, creating opportunities for peer collaboration and professional support networks in online contexts could alleviate feelings of isolation and strengthen community-building among teachers. In the Iranian context, given the hierarchical and policy-driven educational environment that is often characteristic of language schools (Nazari & Molana, 2023), addressing these psychological needs becomes especially critical for sustaining teachers' motivation, professional identity, and overall well-being (Chamani et al., 2023; Ebadijalal & Moradkhani, 2022; Lotfi Gaskaree et al., 2025; Sadraei et al., 2024). Collectively, these implications underscore the need for a holistic approach to supporting teachers' emotional labor in digital learning environments, with a focus on addressing the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as identified in this study.

Conclusion

This study provided a nuanced understanding of the emotional labor of Iranian English language teachers in digital learning environments, using SDT as a framework to explore how autonomy, competence, and relatedness shape emotional regulation strategies. The findings underscored the critical role of satisfying these psychological needs in promoting authentic emotional engagement while highlighting the challenges posed by institutional constraints, technological issues, and the relational limitations of virtual teaching contexts. Although the study offers valuable insights, its reliance on a homogenous sample of mid-career teachers in a specific cultural and educational context may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations or settings. Future research could extend this work by exploring the emotional labor of teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds, those teaching younger learners, or those engaging in hybrid modes of instruction. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how teachers' emotional labor evolves over time and how interventions, such as professional development programs, influence their emotional regulation strategies. By addressing these areas, future studies could further enhance our understanding of the interplay of motivation, emotional labor, and well-being in increasingly digitalized educational contexts.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. Can you describe your emotional experiences while teaching online?
2. Have you faced any significant emotional challenges in online teaching, and how have you dealt with them?
3. How do you regulate your emotions during online classes?
4. Can you provide examples of situations where you had to modify your emotional expressions to align with your professional role?
5. To what extent do you feel you have control over how you teach and interact with students in the online environment?
6. Are there any restrictions or institutional policies that affect your sense of autonomy in online teaching?
7. How confident do you feel in your ability to manage the technical and pedagogical aspects of online teaching?
8. How connected do you feel to your students during online classes?
9. How would you describe your sense of connection with your colleagues or professional community in the online teaching context?
10. How do you think managing your emotions during online teaching affects your overall well-being?