TESL-EJ Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language
The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language

EFL Teachers' Emotions at Online Teaching throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic: Changes and Coping Strategies

February 2023 – Volume 26, Number 4
https://doi.org/10.55593/ej.26104a13

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Abstract

The outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 put the education system worldwide in a critical situation with a sudden shift from the traditional face-to-face to the online mode of instruction. Many studies have been conducted over the past two years to investigate teachers' struggle with this abrupt transition; however, a complete picture of their emotional battle throughout the whole pandemic has not yet been depicted due to the short study durations. By analyzing rich datasets collected from semi-structured interviews with nine EFL teachers working at the tertiary level, we were able to outline their emotional changes and coping strategies for emotional regulation throughout the span of two years, from the beginning to the end of the mandatory online teaching period. It was found that, in general, the participants' changes in emotions can be illustrated with a wave curve, which is divided into five phases with quite distinctive characteristics. The findings also highlighted the complexity and changeability of teachers' emotional experiences, as well as the five major coping strategies utilized by the teachers to enhance their emotional well-being. Finally, several recommendations applicable for both teachers and stakeholders in future crises are proposed.

Keywords: teachers' emotions, online teaching, emotional changes, coping strategies

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 led to unprecedentedly disrupted education with sudden school closures all over the world, affecting over 1.5 billion students and youngsters (UNESCO, 2022). In an attempt to curb the spread of the disease, social-distancing policies were enforced on global and regional scales, entailing a shift from traditional offline teaching

to online teaching. Regrettably, this sudden switch occurred regardless of teachers' and students' readiness, their technological competence, and the technological infrastructure of universities (Çamlıbel-Acar & Eveyik-Aydın, 2022), and it was characterized by three features (Hodges et al., 2020). First, it was an abrupt process, happening within a few days. Second, it placed both teachers and students in a passive situation with a strong feeling of uncertainty and insecurity. Third, it gradually became mandatory as the only feasible alternative for the whole education system, although it was originally perceived as a temporary coping strategy.

It has been acknowledged that teachers' psychological states have a significant impact on their learners' feelings and experience in the classroom (Becker et al., 2014). In the realm of online education, despite growing research into computer-assisted language teaching and learning in recent years, teachers' emotional changes, especially the stages they underwent in transitioning to teaching online during crises (Yan & Wang, 2022), remain largely under-researched. Not until recently did researchers turn their attention to examining language teachers' psychological changes, specifically in the COVID-19 stricken periods. On the one hand, some authors listed mental challenges experienced by teachers, as well as proposing solutions to tackle those, but failed to link them to different phases of the pandemic, or see the bright side of the struggle. Therefore, a complete depiction of teachers' emotional processes has not been created. On the other hand, other authors were able to fill that gap by outlining the main stages in teachers' emotional reactions to online teaching. However, those studies just focused on how teachers felt from the beginning of the online teaching period to the time when they seemingly became acquainted with the online procedures, which spanned over a semester at most, so they failed to take into account the long duration of the pandemic. The issue of whether teachers could maintain a positive mindset in the following phases is, for the most part, neglected.

This research project was undertaken to fill the gaps identified above by outlining and describing specific stages of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' emotional changes from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, when they reluctantly embarked on online teaching, to the end of the lockdown periods, when students were compelled to return to offline classes. The whole period of the pandemic, which lasted over two years, was under investigation. Following that, solutions employed by teachers to tackle arising negative emotions were investigated and discussed. The researchers then drew several implications for teachers to be better equipped and supported to deal with possible abrupt changes in the future. The two research questions are worded as follows:

1. What were the changes in teachers' emotions at online teaching throughout the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What coping strategies were adopted by teachers to overcome emotional hurdles of online teaching throughout the COVID-19 pandemic?

Literature Review

Teachers' Emotions

A migration to online teaching platforms has a significant impact on teachers' "emotional experience, identity change, and pedagogical competence" (Tao & Gao, 2022, p. 3), which, in turn, can leave significant influence on teachers' professional performance and identity (Cheng, 2021). Unhandled negative emotions directly reduce teachers' efficiency, professional well-being, and sense of belonging in the institution (Frenzel et al., 2015). Therefore, emotion

regulation techniques need to be utilized to enhance different aspects of teaching and learning, such as teaching effectiveness, student rapport, teacher image, well-being, motivation, engagement and discipline (Greenier et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2016; Sutton, 2010).

Factors which affect teachers' emotions have been identified and listed by previous researchers. Cheng (2021) mentions four key elements, namely *pedagogical beliefs*, *experiences*, *environmental and cultural factors*, as well as *perceptions and expectations*; three of which originate from the teachers themselves. Obviously, although teachers play the prevalent role in controlling their own emotions, external factors should also be taken into consideration. For example, institutional support, such as training and infrastructure, may also influence teachers' readiness and emotional experiences (Tajuddin et al., 2021).

Teachers' Emotions and Online Education

Regardless of the potential benefits created by online education, the majority of related studies detected negative emotions experienced by EFL teachers during their compulsory switch of instruction mode. These emotions may include unwanted emotional experiences (Liu, Yuan & Wang, 2021), "anxiety and self-doubt" (Song, 2021, p. 77), increased marginalization (Song, 2022), or feeling of being "untrained, marginalized, and emotionally overworked" (Moser & Wei, 2021, p. 26). Ngo (2021) created a list of five emotions attached to online teaching, namely "restricted, stressed, devalued, validated, and rejuvenated" (p. 83). Identifying these mental challenges could be helpful for teachers to make suitable adjustments for themselves, and for institutions to provide timely and practical support for their teaching staff. Nevertheless, one shortcoming of those studies is that they mostly neglected the positive emotions and, thus, failed to provide a full account of how teachers perceived the conversion to online teaching, or how they overcame those difficulties.

In a recent study by Pham and Phan (2022), a spectrum of emotions that teachers underwent during the shift in teaching mode was proposed, tackling the weakness of the previous studies. These emotions included "confused, overwhelmed, frustrated, and excited" (p. 161). Although three out of those four adjectives featured negative feelings, the positive side was also taken into consideration. This finding is quite similar to a conclusion by Çamlıbel-Acar and Eveyik-Aydın (2022), who found that the majority of their participants showed a low level of satisfaction with online teaching, and a strong preference for the conventional face-to-face form of delivery. With regard to variations in teachers' emotional experiences during the migration of classroom instructions to online platforms, it was noted that female teachers were more susceptible to negative emotions, such as anxiety and anger than their male counterparts, and senior teachers tended to suffer from a higher level of stress due to their lack of technological knowledge (An & Chua, 2021).

There might be a link between teachers' emotional struggle and growth, resulting from the shift in teaching mode (Pham & Phan, 2022; Song, 2022). The emotional struggles prompted teachers to find ways to turn online teaching into a new normal practice (Pham & Phan, 2022), and to undergo a rigorous self-reflection and adaptation process, which supported their personal and professional development (Song, 2022).

Teachers' Emotional Changes during the COVID-19 Pandemic

There have been a growing number of studies on EFL teachers' process of emotional adaptation to the offline-online transition during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ngo, 2021; Pham & Phan,

2021; Yan & Wang, 2022). Adopting different approaches and methods, they all came up with a procedure of emotional changes experienced by language teachers.

Ngo (2021) conducted a case study of six teachers to identify changes in their emotions over a 10-week semester. The author adopted an emotion regulation model to analyze the collected data and came up with a process of emotional changes in teachers with three stages. Initially, in the *Honey Moon* period, teachers felt excited about online teaching because of its instant personal benefits, such as reduced traveling time, or increased comfort. However, in the next phase named *Troubles in Paradise*, they underwent more complex states of mind, such as confusion, disorientation, or stress, when challenges in handling a totally new teaching mode arose. At the end of the journey, they reached the *Road to Recovery* or *Emotion Regulation* stage when their reintegration, autonomy and interdependence were fostered, or they could completely adapt themselves to the change.

Yan and Wang (2022) used the boundary-crossing theory to conduct a multiple-case study of three experienced secondary Chinese teachers of English to examine the early online transition period from February 5 to April 20, 2020. These authors proposed that teachers went through three major stages, and described the emotions in detail with further justifications. The first one was the *Preparing stage* with initial shock, worries, and confusion, when teachers seemed resigned to the mandatory online mode as an alternative to maintain the continuation of teaching and learning. This stage also featured a high level of uniformity in the content and loyalty to the prescribed curriculum. In the following phase, teachers confronted more challenges, such as network collapse, social distancing, or work-family struggle. This required more proactive pedagogical and technical explorations, and as a result, a higher level of anxiety was recorded. Finally, teachers reached the *Stabilizing stage* when they established a comfort zone with clear objectives, content, structure, pacing and assessment. In addition, they started to pursue more distinctive teaching styles and practice certain health and emotional healing techniques to cope with stress and pressure.

Last but not least, Pham and Phan (2021) adopted the poststructuralist perspective in understanding emotions to conduct a case study which highlighted "the link between the self and the social, cultural, and political structures of schooling" (p. 2). According to them, teachers underwent four different phases of emotional fluctuations. When COVID-19 turned up, teachers "welcomed" the shift with mixed feelings of "curiosity, anxiety, and a degree of acceptance" (p. 4). However, later they had to endure both physical and mental health issues, mostly due to heavy work pressure and insufficient interactions with learners. As time passed, increasing professional support and familiarity with the electronic mode of delivery helped facilitate teachers' adaptations, and trigger in them positive feelings. Finally, after undergoing a wide range of emotions, teachers learnt to control themselves better.

In summary, despite differences in the number of stages, most studies managed to identify teachers' main emotional changes in response to the suddenly-implemented online teaching mode. Those fluctuations could be illustrated by an inverted up-down-up bell curve (Ngo, 2021; Pham & Phan, 2022) or a down-up-up positive slope (Yan & Wang, 2022), in which ups and downs refer to positive and negative emotional experiences respectively. However, they tended to scrutinize teachers' emotional changes over a short period of time, either a semester or a few weeks, whereas the COVID-19 pandemic crisis lasted more than two years. Such a limited time span may have prevented the previous authors from taking into account teachers' capacity to maintain their emotional balance in online teaching. Another question lies in the

sustenance of teachers' flexibility and resilience when their classes were reversed to the face-to-face mode again at the end of the pandemic as this post-pandemic period went beyond the scope of previous research. Specific feelings, or mood shifts experienced by EFL teachers throughout, and after the crisis, have not been thoroughly studied. The current study targets at bridging these gaps by investigating changes in EFL teachers' emotions throughout a longer time span, from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic to the end of the lockdown period when mandatory offline classes were imposed.

Teachers' Coping Strategies

Coping strategies are defined as cognitive and behavioral changes for managing "specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Folkman et al., 1986, p. 572). They involve problem-focused strategies, which address environment-related roots of stress, and emotion-focused strategies, which aim at regulating stress-related emotions (Folkman et al., 1986).

There has been a thick body of research into teachers' coping strategies in response to arising emotional issues in their classrooms. Those strategies could be used in different steps of emotion regulation, such as "perception, expression, modification, maintenance, and development" (Zhao, 2021, p. 2). Different authors proposed ways of categorizing those coping strategies. One method is to divide them into approach-oriented and avoidant-oriented strategies (Carver, 1997), of which the former tended to bring more positive results than the latter (MacIntyre et al., 2020). The approach-oriented strategies include *developing a sense of acceptance* to live with the reality*, obtaining emotional support, seeing the positive side, focusing efforts on solving issues, browsing instrumental support, and planning ahead*. Meanwhile, the avoidant set has six techniques, namely *behavioral disengagement* or showing no effort to cope with the problem, *denial of its existence*, *self-distraction* to neglect it, *self-blaming, use of substances like alcohol or drugs,* and finally *venting or expressing negative feelings*. Apart from those, there are two other strategies which belong to none of these two groups, namely *developing a sense of humor* or *finding peace in religion*. Another approach is to group the coping strategies into *reappraisal* and *suppression* ones, of which the former proved to outweigh the latter in effectiveness (Ngo, 2021). According to the author, actively fostering students' understanding, achievement, and compliance with class rules, as well as receiving support from institutions and colleagues, can arouse teachers' feelings of happiness and satisfaction.

Techniques for addressing teachers' negative emotions and promoting positive ones have been suggested in previous literature (Pham & Phan, 2022; Santihastuti et al., 2022; Song, 2022). Santihastuti et al. (2022) listed three ways teachers can project their negative feelings in the online classroom, including *surface acting* (generally suppressing real inner feelings and focusing more on task fulfillment), *deep acting* (showing empathy towards students' difficulties), and *genuine expressing* (showing true feelings when seeing rude behaviors from students). Another technique is for teachers to update themselves with technological skills, as this helps ensure a stimulating, engaging and effective lesson and, as a result, trigger positive emotions in teachers (Pham & Phan, 2022). Teachers are also encouraged to practice self-reflection on their emotional experiences, as it will enable them to make suitable adjustments in their teaching (Santihastuti et al., 2022; Song, 2022). For instance, they could use a diary to record their self-observed emotions and adjust their teaching methods accordingly. In addition, there are some other techniques which assist teachers with their reflection and adaptation, such

as *reducing expectations of themselves and their students*, *noticing students' emotions and making appropriate pedagogical changes*, *understanding students' perspectives to reduce anxiety and self-doubt*, and *building professional networks for mutual support* (Pham & Phan, 2022; Song, 2021, 2022; Tao & Gao, 2022).

In general, review of relevant literature shows that coping strategies have a strong theoretical base in the field of psychology and education. However, there seemed to be limited research into EFL teachers' coping strategies to deal with their emotional crisis during the COVID-19 times, especially in the context of Vietnam, not to mention the fact that many of the proposed solutions just addressed pedagogical challenges, for example, to tackle students' boredom (Pawlak et al., 2021), rather than improving teachers' emotional well-being. As the utter chaos caused by social distancing policies undoubtedly left detrimental effects on both teachers' and students' mental well-being even up until now, it is worth investigating how they managed to overcome such a critical two-year period of the pandemic.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative retrospective design (Creswell, 1994) with the aim of gathering rich data about EFL teachers' emotional changes and coping strategies in the COVID-19 times, thus narrowing the gap between research and reality (Cohen & Manion, 2007). Although most previous studies on EFL teachers' emotional changes during the COVID-19 pandemic adopted the qualitative design with interviews as the main data source (Ngo, 2021; Pham & Phan, 2021; Yan & Wang, 2022), they were only conducted in a short period of one or two semesters, and they did not investigate teachers' emotions upon their return to normal face-to-face teaching practices when the pandemic had supposedly settled. This research fills the gaps by employing available frameworks of teachers' emotional processes as a foundation to further explore EFL teachers' emotional changes over two years, taking into consideration a wider range of phases.

Participants

Purposive sampling methods were employed to recruit nine EFL teachers from two institutions, one state-owned, and the other private-owned, to investigate the experience of not only Vietnamese teachers (in the state-owned university), but also native English-speaking ones (in the private-owned university), who might enjoy different levels of institutional support in terms of technology and finance. In this study, all participants had experienced online teaching for around two years of the pandemic, before they officially returned to offline classrooms from March, 2022.

Table 1. Demographic information of participants

Name of participants (pseudonyms)	Teaching experience
Hung	9 years
Phu	8 years
Chi	4 years
Tam	5 years
Lan	12 years
Thao	14 years
Sam	15 years
Binh	9 years
Ron	12 years

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine EFL teachers to examine their emotions at online teaching, as well as the strategies they applied to regulate their emotions. Certain levels of flexibility were allowed during the ongoing discussion with both pre-designed and spontaneous extra questions, and therefore, this format of interview facilitated deeper and more personalized interactions (J. McDonough & S. McDonough, 1997).

The interviews were conducted in the participants' first languages, which were Vietnamese (for seven teachers) and English (for two teachers). For ethical considerations, participants reserved the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and they could decline to answer any questions they found inappropriate. Whenever they were referred to in this paper, pseudonyms were used to protect their anonymity. Participants were also given the chance to double-check either the translated transcripts (in case they agreed to be recorded), or the field notes (in case they declined to be recorded), and they could retain any information revealed in the interviews.

Data analysis

Our research adopted the grounded theory, a qualitative method for generating new theories based on the collection and analysis of real-world data (Glaser, 2009) because it helps examine theoretical codes (Chametzky, 2016). Firstly, the participants' reflections on their emotions and coping strategies throughout the pandemic were chronologically listed, and similarities and differences among individuals were identified with their justification or explanation. Based on the analysis of our datasets and the emotional frameworks proposed by previous researchers, we then categorized teachers' emotional changes into different periods, and their coping strategies were also grouped into themes. Following that, each stage of teachers' emotional changes was labeled with a fictional name featuring the key vibe of that phase because fictional names are believed to combine both social and psychologistic meaning, as well as "scaffolding for the construction of intersubjective meaning" (Salis, 2020, p. 1).

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings gleaned from thematic analysis of the participants' responses. By comparing and contrasting our results with those from other studies, we managed to highlight the changes in the Vietnamese EFL teachers' emotions at online teaching and their coping strategies throughout the pandemic.

Changes in Teachers' Emotions at Online Teaching

Changes over the Pandemic

The variations in teachers' emotions were categorized and arranged into five stages titled as follows: (1) *the Back-up Plan*, (2) *the Sidekick Mate*, (3) *the Only Option Left*, (4) *the Full Integration*, and (5) *the New Normal*. As shown in *Figure 1*, the whole process of EFL teachers' emotion fluctuations could be illustrated by *a wave curve,* consisting of multiple bell curves and inverted bell curves. A bell curve is a mathematical curve of a bell shape or an "inverted U-shaped gong" which shows normal distribution, and its structure proves to be helpful to explain various aspects of our lives (Satra & Lathabhavan, 2020, p. 1), especially in the field of psychological research (Sartori, 2006). However, it should be emphasized that the stages are by no means mutually exclusive, even though they feature some distinctive emotional processes. In addition, the different heights of peaks and troughs indicate the various levels of

emotional extremities experienced by the interviewed EFL teachers.

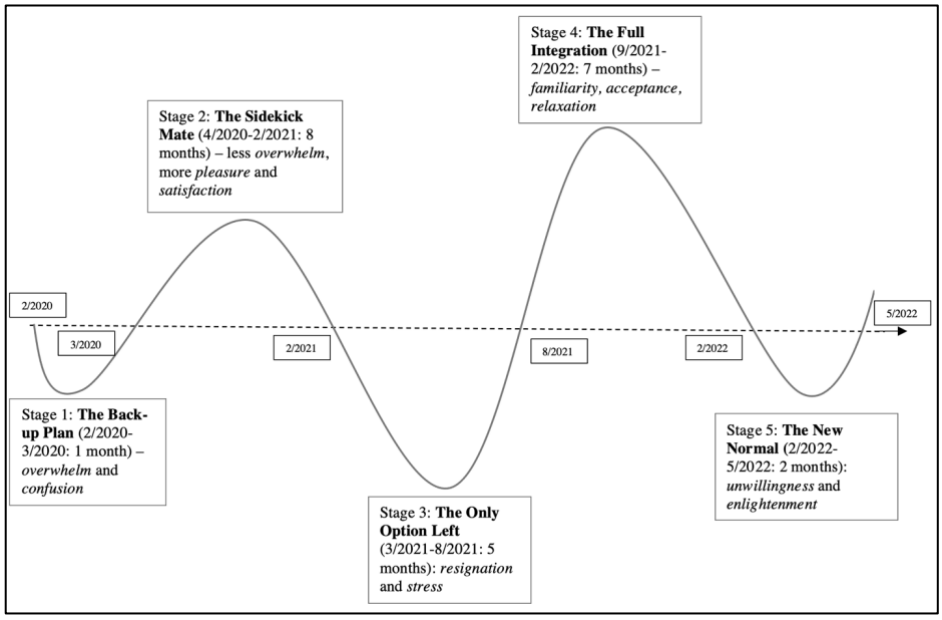

Figure 1. Changes in EFL Teachers' Emotions at Online Teaching throughout COVID-19 stricken periods

Stage 1: The Back-up Plan (February, 2020 – March, 2020). The first phase lasted about one month, starting when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in Vietnam. The name *Back-up Plan* takes its root from an atmosphere of *uncertainty*, *abruptness*, and *novelty* by which this stage was characterized. Hung shared:

> All of a sudden, there was a panic attack due to the emergence of a COVID-19 case. We were all required to stay at home after the Tet holiday. This went on for about two weeks, and we just waited for new notices from the university. (Interview with Hung, 2022)

As can be seen from the excerpt, both teachers and students were caught unawares. They were not given any previous warnings or notices by their universities, and perhaps even the government had not gained a full understanding of the scope and the fatality of the virus. At the onset of the pandemic, no one knew how long the stay-home policy would last, and no further action was taken to keep the classes going uninterrupted for about two weeks.

> A situation like this was unprecedented. Nobody knew what to do and how long this would last. (Interview with Thao, 2022)

Confusion was another shared feeling among the interviewees at this initial stage. As reported by Hung, after the two-week close-down period, there was a further announcement from the university about resuming the lessons online. This was just viewed as "a temporary alternative" (Interview with Hung, 2022), and teachers were encouraged to make use of online platforms, not forced to. After this, teachers had to fend for themselves, using any available online tools and platforms, as shared by Tam:

> I adopted a "go-with-the-flow" attitude, and made use of whatever available to me. (Interview with Tam, 2022)

Tam also admitted not being able to clearly define her own emotions during this period because she was *bewildered* and *unsure* whether she was doing the right things, but slightly *happy* about working from home and *excited* about designing new activities and teaching materials. These mixed feelings of *disorientation, excitement* and *optimism* were in line with the findings by some other authors (Ngo, 2021; Pham & Phan, 2022; Yan & Wang, 2022), who explained that the positive feelings detected in some teachers might be attributed to instant benefits brought about by online teaching, and their level of readiness and willingness to change would vary in accordance with teachers' technological competence and external support.

Stage 2: The Sidekick Mate (April, 2020 – February, 2021). The next stage, *Sidekick Mate,* took place when synchronous online teaching assumed a more significant role, but there were still intermittent periods during which parts of the course and formal assessments were conducted on site because the pandemic let up. According to Tam, online teaching in this stage was viewed as the primary tool of instructions, but not of formal assessments, which were delayed until it was safer to return to normal classes. She also expressed her concerns about the fairness of online assessments to justify teachers' common preference for face-to-face assessments.

The officialization of online classes required teachers to digitalize paper-based materials and update themselves with online teaching tools through both official training by the institutions and informal sharing with their colleagues. As shared by Hung, *Skype*, *Zoom* or *Microsoft Teams* were among the most common platforms, and teachers just chose one randomly based on their own experience, reviews, or introductory workshops.

As regards emotional changes, during this stage, the teachers felt more *familiar* with online teaching, which resulted in their *elevating motivation* and *excitement*. The realm of online tools was lying unexplored at the time; therefore, teachers reported feeling *excited* at experimenting with those tools. Furthermore, although at the beginning they reported feeling overwhelmed at the sheer amount of workload, gradually that feeling phased out, as said by Phu and Lan in the interviews:

> After about two months I became used to the amount of workload. More materials were getting digitalized for online classes. Things were getting into planned directions. (Interview with Phu, 2022)
>
> Of course, it is such an exhausting job since there are too many online applications and platforms to surf through and get familiar with their functions. (Interview with Lan, 2022)

The interviewees were also *pleased* with short intervals when they could switch between online and face-to-face teaching, as they were able to enjoy the benefits of both. However, this period was when the negative effects of online teaching on their emotions "were more clearly felt" (Interview with Tam, 2022).

This second stage, which featured opposite feelings, was also described and given some other names like "*Troubles in Paradise*" (Ngo, 2021, p. 84) or "*Adapting stage*" (Yan & Wang, 2022, p. 6). It could be further divided into two sub-steps, the first of which marked a high level of frustration and exhaustion, while the second was featured by improved adaptation and positivity (Pham & Phan, 2022).

Stage 3: The Only Option Left (March, 2021 – August, 2021). This stage took place when COVID-19 was spiraling out of hand, and a strict social distancing policy was being implemented nationwide. All schools and universities were forced to physically close down, and online teaching became mandatory for all education levels. As a result, all the participants were deprived of the benefits of the face-to-face interaction they had been used to. On the bright side, by this time, teachers had gained more experience of online teaching after over one year. Additionally, as e-materials and online activities had been completed and piloted for at least one semester, they were ready for use on a larger scale. Teachers also received more offers of online tools and platforms from technology companies.

> The situation became so serious that we completely gave up hope of having offline classes. We started to update ourselves with more online tools to increase students' interactions and stimulate their interest. We also began to design alternative testing instruments to replace traditional paper and pencils. (Interview with Hung, 2022)

Along with an increase in *confidence*, a slight emotional transformation was reported by the participants. They gradually accepted that there were no other choices but to teach online, despite their former strong desire to resume offline classes. They started to find more *enjoyment*, and took the initiative in enhancing their teaching efficiency. Simultaneously, *boredom* and *stress* were also more clearly felt due to longer "teachers' monologues" (Interview with Tam, 2022) compared to face-to-face classes. In addition, the inability to observe student's reactions or emotional states made it hard to adapt the lessons accordingly. Chi's sharing revealed that social distancing and stay-home policies partly contributed to teachers' *deteriorating emotional states*, besides the impersonal online teaching tools.

> I think social distancing at that time was also a negative hindrance. We couldn't go out much to change the atmosphere after hours of staring at the laptop. Things were even worse when you became the sole presenter, as there was little response from students. (Interview with Chi, 2022)

In brief, this stage featured a combination of various feelings, such as *confidence* and *enjoyment*, because of teachers' complete *resignation* to their situation, as well as *boredom*, *fatigue* and *stress,* due to prolonged online time. As previously reviewed, most of the current literature showed that teachers' emotions followed a procedure of initial confusion or excitement, on-going adaptation, and then stabilization with a clearly-felt sense of positivity or negativity (Ngo, 2021; Pham & Phan, 2021; Yan & Wang, 2022). However, interviews with our respondents showed that the teachers did not express a single distinctively positive or negative emotion at a time, but a mixture of feelings. This new finding about teachers' mixed emotions points out that human's psychological processes are very complicated.

Stage 4: The Full Integration (September, 2021 – February, 2022). This fourth stage coincided with the beginning of the academic year 2021-2022, when a strict social distancing policy was being implemented by the government, and it had become mandatory for all courses to be conducted exclusively online. As a result, all of the interviewees had resigned themselves to this only option. By then, they had obtained ample experience with the new teaching mode, and become fully aware of its merits and demerits..

> The pandemic situation was so chaotic at the time, with tables of death counts making headlines of almost all online newspapers. It had become natural that we started the new semester online, and assessments, which used to be reserved for offline intervals,

were also conducted online using a variety of tools. (Interview with Hung, 2022)

By this stage, teachers had familiarized themselves with online classroom procedures, developed their personal online teaching style, and figured out their own optimal methods to overcome challenges.

> I believe I have developed an online teaching style, knowing how to make the most of it, for me, and for my students. For example, I devised a procedure of "when should who do what", and created groups on applications like Zalo and Messenger for both students and parents to make sure that new notices were timely announced. (Interview with Phu, 2022)

> …I think that was when I had fully embraced online teaching, and maybe I also acquired a consistent teaching style across the classes, and this style was not so like the one I took on in the traditional offline classrooms. (Interview with Tam, 2022)

The interviewed teachers expressed full *enjoyment* and *comfort* with online teaching in this stage probably because they had gained better control of their teaching styles, methods and techniques. Tam commented that she was totally *content* with adjusting her teaching practices for online classes (Interview with Tam, 2022). In addition, the teachers started to hold a more positive attitude towards this mode as they were reaping more benefits from it. Hung listed some practical advantages of online teaching, such as the ability to multitask, keeping an eye on his stay-home children and teaching online simultaneously, the potential of utilizing high-tech applications and platforms, such as *Quizizz* to create interactive and fun learning activities to be reused many times, and the possibility of recording lectures on *Zoom* or *Google Meet* for absentees to watch later (Interview with Hung, 2022). Although certain levels of *boredom* and *stress* were still present, teachers had developed *acceptance* and *resilience* to cope with those negative feelings directly.

This phase has been discussed in previous studies with different titles, such as "Regulation" (Pham & Phan, 2021), "Adapting stage" (Ngo, 2021) or "Stabilizing stage" (Yan & Wang, 2022); however, some authors integrated it into the previous stage without acknowledging teachers' changing level of adaptation over the time (Ngo, 2021; Yan & Wang, 2022). All of the mentioned believed that this phase marked the end of teachers' struggle with online teaching, and only positive outcomes would be generated afterwards. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the online mode of instruction did not last permanently, and teachers' emotional state upon their return to offline practices at the end of the pandemic should be taken into consideration.

Stage 5: The New Normal (March, 2022 – May, 2022). As the COVID-19 pandemic had generally been put under control, social distancing policies were lifted. Following that, face-to-face teaching was resumed in most institutions in Vietnam, but face masks were still a must in public places. In this period, some universities enforced compulsory offline classes, while others opted for the hybrid mode, which involved conducting online lessons from offline classrooms, to accommodate COVID-19 infected students. In either case, it was a bit hard for teachers to resume their offline teaching after being so accustomed to online classes as shared by Hung and Tam:

> I was so used to the benefits and flexibility provided by online learning that I was quite hesitant at first. Besides, there was still fear of contracting the diseases, though its

> effects would not be so serious. (Interview with Hung, 2022)
>
> I felt tired when having to cope with students on campus and off campus at the same time. Some learning activities required me to move around the classroom to monitor students, but at that time students who were attending lessons online would feel neglected, so some of them even turned off their camera and microphone to do their own things at home. (Interview with Tam, 2022)

It could be seen that the *hesitation* of teachers stemmed from the health risks and the increasing workload they might face, especially when they had to manage different groups of students in the hybrid classes. In addition, in the excerpt above, Hung raised concern about the instant disadvantages of his return to face-to-face classes, such as reduced flexibility, possibly that of location and time, and other abandoned benefits of online teaching. However, as time passed, the role of offline classes and direct assessment was more clearly perceived, and the teachers could adapt themselves again to their previous teaching mode. At the end of the interview, both Hung and Tam said that they could gradually adjust themselves to face-to-face teaching again, and they even felt more *confident* of the reliability and validity of assessing students in offline classes (Interview with Hung and Tam, 2022).

Compared with previous studies on teachers' emotions, this stage could be considered a new contribution because the majority of previous researchers stopped at the previous phase, when teachers had completely been able to engage in online teaching. Our fifth stage shows that changes of any type always stirred up teachers' emotions for a while. It is their resilience, flexibility and adaptability that would help them endure the challenges and stabilize themselves.

Changes in Each Lesson

One of the main objectives of the study was to investigate teachers' emotional changes over two years of COVID-19. However, besides all those major changes in EFL teachers' emotions throughout the period, an interesting theme that emerged is the variations in teachers' emotions before, during, and after an online lesson, as shared by Tam and Chi. Prior to the lessons, the overall feeling was one of *overload*, possibly due to the significant amount of workload and preparations needed.

> There were so many things I needed to take care of to make sure that the online lesson ran smoothly, all kinds of paper work and design of online tools [...]. I think it was like I was under a panic attack! (Interview with Chi, 2022)

During the lesson, however, things began to look up as all the well-thought-out preparations seemed to pay off. As reported by Tam, this was evident in the fact that things were going as planned, and that the students were actively engaged in the classroom activities. As a result, the feeling of *overload* and *overwhelm* had now been replaced by that of *relief* and *satisfaction*.

> I feel relieved that my lesson was going in the right way [...] that my students were responding actively to all the tasks. I think during the online lesson was when my spirits were the highest. (Interview with Tam, 2022)

After the online lesson, sadly, things took a turn for the worse, and the overall emotions that were experienced were, again, *overwhelm* and *misery*. As explained by Chi, she was inundated with all kinds of assignments and learning products. Tam provided further elaboration as follows:

> As a result of the maximal-interaction approach, there were a ton of learning products after each lesson that needed marking. I was so stressed just thinking about the time spent toiling over those assignments. What's even worse is that most of them were in the form of short answers or paragraphs to avoid copying! (Interview with Tam, 2022)

It could be concluded from Tam and Chi's sharing that teachers experienced diversely fluctuating states of feeling throughout an online lesson, which is a new finding, as in the previous literature, there has been no reference to teachers' emotional processes in a single online lesson. What is available is suggestions on how some changes could be made to the lessons in order to trigger positivity in teachers, which ultimately brings about significant transformation in teachers' emotional states. For example, teachers were likely to feel happy and content if they succeeded in making students understand the conveyed information, perform tasks well, and obey the rules (Ngo, 2021).

EFL Teacher's Emotional Coping Strategies

Turbulence caused by the abrupt switch from offline to online teaching unfailingly disturbed teachers' emotional well-being. Emerging from the datasets are five categories of coping strategies that interviewees reportedly adopted to regulate their emotions during the two-year online teaching period (See *Figure 2*). In the following sections, these measures are arranged in the order from when they were conceptualized to when they were materialized.

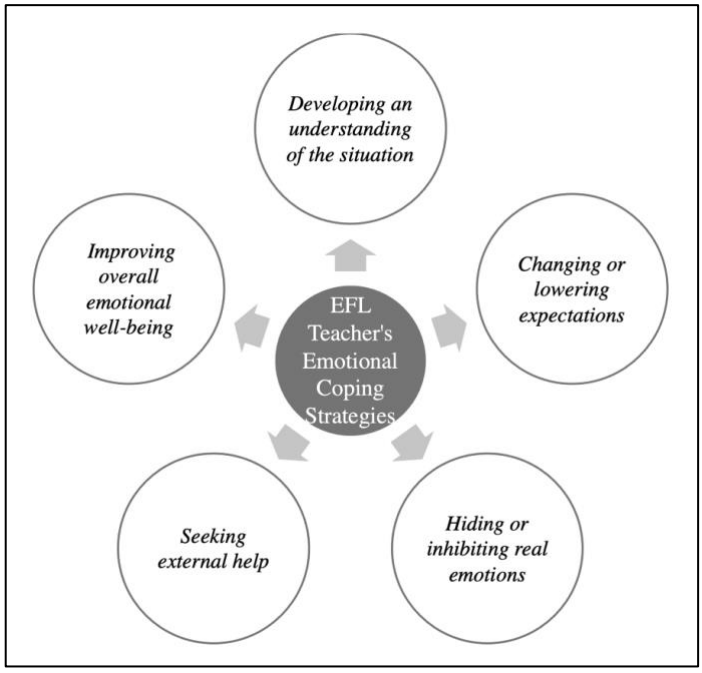

Figure 2. EFL Teacher's Emotional Coping Strategies

Developing an Understanding of the Situation

In order to better control their emotional states, many of the interviewed teachers stressed the importance of grasping a thorough understanding of what was happening and why it turned out that way.

Lan mentioned a technique she used to get more clues of her students' feelings and reactions during the lesson:

> I just wanted to chat, make eye contact, see my communicating partner's face and laugh my head off. [...], I encouraged my students to make more frequent use of emoticons in the chat box or to be better, just raise their hand, turn on their microphone and talk to me. (Interview with Lan, 2022)

By encouraging students to interact with in-class activities through functions of the online platforms, Lan aimed at tightening the gap between the online class and offline class, or making the online classroom resemble the offline one. She also emphasized acknowledging the causes of her students' lack of concentration:

> …I understood that students stopped engaging in my lessons due to two causes: either they might be busy with their personal interests or I had made them lose interest. (Interview with Lan, 2022)

Hung held similar belief with Lan when stating that:

> …my students are grown-up adults and they should take responsibility for their own learning. If a student refused to respond to me, that might be due to objective factors, like weak connection, or subjective factors like personal affairs [...] (Interview with Hung, 2022)

After having gained more insight into students' situations, the teachers tended to accept them, and more importantly, stopped taking the problems personally. For example, Lan said:

> I have come to terms with the fact that if students don't want to show their face or their voice, I will move on with the next student. It's their own choice and I don't think I need to trouble myself with the negative thought that they hate me or something. (Interview with Lan, 2022)

> I must accept that in some cases, there is not much I can do. (Interview with Hung, 2022)

With that new perspective, as shared by Lan, and the acceptance of the out-of-control situation, as shared by Hung, the interviewed teachers believed that their risks of being filled with negative emotions could be minimized.

Teachers' attempts to understand their circumstances and to come to terms with negative issues were listed as an approach-oriented strategy (Carver, 1997) or the "perception" strategy (Zhao, 2021, p.2). It was even considered the most commonly used technique for dealing with arising unpleasant emotions (MacIntyre et al., 2020).

Changing or Lowering Expectations

This coping strategy was not something that came naturally to the interviewees; on the contrary, some of them initially believed that they could compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction simply by increasing the workload - assigning more home reading, in-class quizzes, and mini-tests.

> At first, some teachers, in an attempt to offset the lack of control over their students' learning, set more assignments with stricter deadlines. (Interview with Thao, 2022)

However, it was not long before they realized that increased workload was causing more harm than good. In the case of Hung, there were even students' complaints posted on social networking sites. Increasing the number of assignments meant that teachers had to spend more

time designing and virtualizing the materials, not to mention the marking they needed to do afterwards. Students also felt exhausted, being bombarded with endless deadlines (Interview with Hung, 2022). This was when the teachers realized that "critical times require different treatments and expectations" (Interview with Tam, 2022), and one of the most frequently cited strategies was to lower expectations. This coping strategy involved making changes in the course goals, the lesson objectives, and the expected outcomes, which would consequently lead to adjustments in teaching styles or chosen pedagogies. Lan said:

> Thus, it is essential to make my lessons livelier and more interesting to them. Like, I had to trim my lesson plans [...], divide items into chunks and change the learning outcomes into something more realistic and achievable. (Interview with Lan, 2022)

Lowering expectations also facilitated a more comfortable and interactive virtual teaching environment. In the face-to-face classroom, the teacher-directed approach still exists due to the physical classroom setting, where everyone sits facing the board at the front. However, in the virtual classroom, students' engagement in "every single activity" is fundamental to the class atmosphere (Interview with Tam, 2022). Elaborating on a similar point, Hung mentioned that in his courses, the Head of the Division decided to abolish all kinds of standardized multiple-choice assessments, and replaced them with project-based assignments.

> We decided to do away with all kinds of objective quizzes, and introduced more group work and project-based assignments. [...]. I gave them a lot of freedom in choosing the topics and approaches. They seemed to feel positive about that, and in return, this lifted my spirits. (Interview with Hung, 2022)

When students were working in groups online, Hung said that he would not interfere as much as he used to in the face-to-face classroom. He would give guidelines instead of regulations, and would let students work together in "breakout rooms" [he was conducting online classes via Zoom] almost on their own, except for some random checks.

> [...] I let them decide their own courses of action, as long as they were not doing something unethical academically and morally. And I must say that their creativity never ceased to amaze me. (Interview with Hung, 2022)

Nevertheless, lowering expectations was not equal to "dumbing down everything" (Interview with Hung, 2022). Sometimes, a little bit of challenge would help to motivate learners. For example, a teaching technique reported by Lan was setting an "extra challenge" for those students who were interested in getting bonus points.

> What's more, students cared about credit and bonuses so I often had an "extra challenge" for them in the middle of the lesson. In this way, being engaged grants them more chances to score higher. (Interview with Lan, 2022)

MacIntyre et al. (2020) advised language teachers to set moderate expectations in chaotic situations, which indicates that lowering expectations serves as an effective coping strategy during the remote teaching period. This strategy could be considered an active one as teachers took the initiative in bettering their teaching practices (Carver, 1997), or a "modification" one in Zhao's view (2021, p. 2). In a study on coping strategies among English for Academic Purposes teachers (Nazari & Atai, 2022), setting realistic expectations was believed to be conducive to a considerate and supportive teaching style.

Hiding or Inhibiting Real Emotions

Hiding real emotions was also mentioned as a coping strategy by some interviewees. Being aware that students' motivation might be affected by her exhaustion, Binh turned off the camera whenever feeling unwell, but she admitted that she no longer felt wrong when she was occupied with negative feelings like frustration or sadness. Instead, she now acknowledged the validity of harboring those feelings.

> I sometimes even turn[ed] off the camera when I don't feel ok.[...] as it'd allow me time to be "not ok", and it would not affect the students as well as the class atmosphere. [...] I mean if I feel sad or angry or frustrated or any of the negative ones, I'd accept them all.[..] That is to say, instead of beating myself up for feeling angry or frustrated, I'd recognize that my emotional reactions are totally normal and valid. (Interview with Binh, 2022)

Despite being frustrated and "disheartened" (Interview with Ron, 2022) by students' low effort, Ron tried to maintain his positive attitude as he was conscious of the negative outcome caused by his showing frustration directly with students. He focused more on the positive side by giving students instant compliments and offering timely support to help them correct their mistakes.

> In terms of coping mechanisms, I try to adopt an outlook of constant positivity. Allowing myself to become frustrated never seems to elicit positive results. I often remind myself that the students are doing their best and I need to approach my feedback positively. (Interview with Ron, 2022)

There is some controversy among previous authors regarding this approach. While Ngo (2021) believed that concealing emotions might not be as effective as confronting them directly, Santihastuti et al. (2022) considered it a good surface acting strategy, as teachers could shift the focus from their own anger to real reasons behind students' poor participation or performance. In fact, these two approaches are not completely contradictory because teachers can follow both simultaneously. For example, in Ron's case above, he managed to foster his positivity by acknowledging students' effort, but at the same time, he hid his frustration behind the screen. In Carver's view (1997), Ron was adopting the positive reframing approach, which highlighted the significance of seeing something good in every situation.

Seeking External Help

Another coping measure mentioned by the EFL teachers is seeking support from people working in either the same field - their colleagues - or in other lines of employment.

Firstly, obtaining help and consultation from colleagues who had more online teaching experience seemed a brilliant idea, as mentioned by many of the interviewees. Hung said that in his faculty, there were workshops organized voluntarily by teachers who had a wealth of experience with online teaching platforms, and this helped alleviate a lot of his confusion at the beginning of the switch to online teaching. Thao, coming from the same faculty, also mentioned that experience in her response:

> There was a teacher in my faculty who had been a Microsoft expert for quite some time. She helped to create emails with the ending ms.edu.vn for us free of charge to use MS Teams. This really helped a lot [...] (Interview with Thao, 2022)

Secondly, joining communities of practice was another way to gain sympathy and assistance so that teachers felt less isolated in their struggle.

> Rather than handling all the negative feelings alone, I'd turn to some of my close colleagues to share my experiences. With these lovely people, I have my feelings validated, better still, some of them would offer me useful pieces of advice to manage my emotions better. At the end of the day, I know I'm not alone in the battle of 'fighting against' negative emotions. (Interview with Binh, 2022)

Similarly, but more informally, an interviewed teacher mentioned his need to have a companion to share with him different aspects of the teaching process; for example, discussing experiences with a colleague, or a co-teacher, helped him confirm his evaluation of the situation, e.g. class issues or student discipline.

> After teaching extensively online this summer, I can say that it really helps me to have a colleague who is also teaching online to talk to. We can vent our frustrations together and share our experiences with one another. [...] I can ask about a student's behavior and see if it's a discipline issue in my class or if it is a student motivation issue. (Interview with Ron, 2022)

Besides learning from workmates, asking for help from people outside the education field also proved useful as in the case of Lan:

> I called the Internet technician in my condo, gave him some "thank you" money and asked him to do something about my Internet connection. He changed the connecting device and yes, after 1 hour, my Wi-Fi galloped through any obstacles. (Interview with Lan, 2022)

In Lan's circumstance, the improved network quality and external technical support indirectly boosted her confidence in delivering better lessons. This result is in line with the recommendation that technology can arouse positive emotions in teachers (Pham & Phan, 2022). In general, desirable kinds of assistance for teachers can fall into two types, namely emotional support and instrumental support (Carver, 1997), which were confirmed to be effective measures (McIntyre et al., 2020).

Improving overall Emotional Well-being

Some teachers referred to non-teaching measures as the way to combat negative feelings. Binh said that joining in leisure activities, such as reading books, drawing, or cycling helped her recharge energy and regain mental balance to eliminate negative thoughts. Similarly, Sam chose to immerse himself in nature to escape his work for a while and enjoy the mental and physical relief.

> … so I take some time to go for a walk and try to go outside. I like to look at the horizon and try to focus on [the] landscape in the distance. This helps me cope with the mental and physical pressures that result from online teaching. (Interview with Sam, 2022)

This strategy could be categorized as an active coping one according to Carver's classification (1997). This finding shows that even simple actions or activities may bring about significant transformation in teachers' emotional states.

Conclusion

Thematic analysis revealed that the participants' emotional experiences throughout the pandemic could be subdivided into five major stages. The commencing phase, lasting for a month, was titled *The Back-up Plan*, and featured some negative feelings including *overwhelm* and *confusion*. The next stage, *The Sidekick Mate*, spanning over a course of eight months, was characterized by a reduction in *overwhelm* and an increase in *pleasure* and *satisfaction*. In the following five months, the teachers underwent the third stage named *The Only Option Left* with signs of *resignation* and *stress*. *Familiarity*, *relaxation*, and *acceptance* came in the next stage, *The Full Integration.* Finally, when face-to-face teaching was resumed, the teachers reached *The New Normal* period with mixed feelings of *unwillingness* and *enlightenment*. The findings also demonstrated constant changes in teachers' emotions in different phases of the pandemic, as well as in a single lesson.

In addition, the findings shed light on the strategies adopted by the respondents to regulate their feelings and ensure their emotional well-being. Specifically, five strategies were utilized by teachers in their emotional control and management, including (1) *developing an understanding of the situation*, (2) *changing or lowering expectations*, (3) *hiding or inhibiting real emotions,* (4) *seeking external help*, and (5) *improving overall emotional well-being*.

There are several implications derived from these findings. First of all, teachers' emotions could be characterized by complexity and changeability; however, as resilience and flexibility are teachers' strengths, the role of the authority is to provide teachers with timely and sufficient support to maximize their power for enduring and overcoming turbulence in future crises. Teachers themselves should be aware of their own strengths and their situation to adopt suitable adjustments. Another suggestion is that teachers should take the initiative in engaging in suitable communities or organizations to seek mutual empathy, encouragement, and assistance. In that way, positive emotions could be nurtured and negative ones could be eliminated.

This study is qualitative and retrospective in nature, and we aimed at obtaining findings which were transferable rather than generalizable to other EFL teacher communities. Additionally, it was conducted with a narrow scope of teachers at the tertiary level. Therefore, future research could employ quantitative methods, and expand to a more diverse population across various education levels in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of the subject matter, and enhance the generalization of their results.

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Funding

This research has been completed under the sponsorship of the University of Languages and

International Studies, Vietnam National University (ULIS, VNU) under the Project No. N.21.05.

To Cite this Article

Nguyen, H. H. & Pham, T.T. (2023). EFL teachers' emotions at online teaching throughout the COVID-19 pandemic: Changes and coping strategies. *Teaching English as a Second Language Electronic Journal (TESL-EJ), 26* (4). https://doi.org/10.55593/ej.26104a13

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