

Article

“Sailing Together in the Storm”: Chinese EFL Teachers’ Trajectory of Interpersonal Emotion Regulation towards Well-Being

Jing Xiao and Guoxiu Tian *

College of Teacher Education, Capital Normal University, Beijing 100048, China; jane.xiao@cnu.edu.cn

* Correspondence: tgx37886@126.com

Abstract: Teaching is an emotion-laden process during which teachers are inevitably confronted with emotional disturbance. This study examines how Chinese EFL teachers transform emotional disturbance into well-being through interpersonal emotion regulation (IER). Previous research has examined teacher emotion regulation at an individual level, yet the interpersonal perspective has not been sufficiently adopted. In order to have an in-depth investigation of teachers’ IER, three Chinese EFL teachers were selected; qualitative data were collected from narrative reflections, interviews, class observation, and field notes. The findings reveal that (1) EFL teachers’ trajectory of IER moves from deconstruction of emotional blocks in companionship and re-construction of emotional strength through trust to co-construction of emotional pedagogy with dialogues; (2) Intrinsic IER of teachers’ own emotion and extrinsic IER of students’ emotion were not separate but dynamically interacted; (3) Effective IER entails the interplay between teachers’ readiness for reflective inquiry and learning peers’ capacity for emotional support; (4) Teachers’ IER is interwoven with ethical development. The study also suggests that effective teacher IER contributes to their professional learning in terms of triggering the revisitation of teaching conceptions and educational beliefs to better serve students’ learning. This study sheds light on the construction of a social support system for the sustainability of teachers’ emotional well-being as well as their professional development.

Keywords: teacher emotion; emotional trajectory; interpersonal emotion regulation; emotional well-being; teacher learning



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1. Introduction

Teaching is an emotional endeavor [1]. The crucial role of emotion in fulfilling teaching goals has been widely recognized [2–4]. Nias [2] accentuated three aspects of the critical importance of emotion for teaching. Firstly, teaching was proclaimed to inevitably include an emotional dimension since it involves social interaction. It was further observed that teachers’ emotional investment at work influenced their construction of personal and professional identities with a mixed sense of fulfillment and vulnerability. Emotion has also been found to shape teachers’ values, ethics, and moral purposes.

Teachers’ emotion-laden praxis entails the regulation of emotion, which is helpful in attaining professional goals. Emotion regulation, according to Gross [5], refers to a process “by which individuals influence which emotions we have, when we have them, and how these emotions are experienced or expressed” (p. 224). Emotion regulation contributes to effective job performance by inducing feelings that are beneficial to performance and reducing feelings that detract from it [6]. Sutton [7] argued that teachers often regulated their emotional experiences for the sake of improving teaching effectiveness. It was found that teachers’ effective emotion regulation was relevant to the regulatory strategies [8]. Yin [9] brought together emotion regulation and emotional labor [10,11], conceptualizing the process of teachers’ emotional labor as the regulation of feelings and expressions to

accomplish professional goals. Three categories and seven emotion regulation strategies used by Chinese teachers were identified [9].

Research on emotion regulation has shifted from a merely intrapersonal perspective to a social perspective [12]. Interpersonal emotion regulation (IER) is “an action performed with the goal of influencing another person’s emotion” [13] (p. 3). Researchers attempted to account for the social exchange of emotional experience and emotional modification of others [14,15]. The last decade has seen increasing research interest in IER [16–19]. A variety of IER strategies have been identified, such as enhancement of positive emotion, perspective-taking, social modeling, and soothing [20–22]. Yet, research on teachers’ IER is still in its infancy. The latest study has reported that strategies of ‘cognitive change’, ‘situation modification’, and ‘competence enhancement’ were used most often by language teachers [23].

Apart from a wide range of research on strategies, the communicative nature of IER has been examined. Zaki and Williams [16] integrated different descriptions of IER (e.g., desire to share emotional states with others, attenuation of negative emotion in the presence of others, motivation to change others’ affective states) into a systematic conceptual framework. IER was conceptualized by two dimensions: “(a) the target of regulation (the self in intrinsic regulation, and another person in extrinsic regulation), and (b) the type of process (response-dependent or response-independent)” [16] (p. 805) with the difference in whether regulatory goals are achieved with the other’s response or not. A 2×2 matrix of IER was therefore illustrated: intrinsic response-dependent, intrinsic response-independent, extrinsic response-dependent, and extrinsic response-independent regulation. Zaki and Williams, however, pointed out that the question of how “individuals monitor the extent to which their behavior is ‘getting through’ to others (e.g., serving as an efficient affective input for another person)” [16] (p. 808) remains unanswered. Though more recent studies have explored a handful of factors (e.g., empathy, personality, motives, and digital devices) [24–29] contributing to successful IER, attention to a more dynamic mechanism of effective IER is necessitated.

The rationale of the study is two-fold. First, this study attempts to explore the dynamic process of effective regulation based on receiving another person’s emotional input. As articulated by Zaki and Williams [16], an “especially interesting growth point is exploration of how individuals monitor each other’s states and adjust their behavior accordingly when pursuing interpersonal regulation goals” (p. 808). In other words, how individuals effectively make positive emotional changes in social interaction is yet to be examined. In addition, although previous studies have delineated static strategies of IER, it is indispensable to “capture the dynamic processes” [30] (p. 808) of IER beyond categorization. That is to say, the dynamics of effective IER are worth further investigation. Second, the study seeks to understand teachers’ IER in the light of social learning theories [31–35], emphasizing collective reflexivity and inquiry. The interpersonal dimension of social learning theories is conducive to understanding teachers’ emotion regulation beyond an intrapersonal perspective. Further, social learning theories offer an interpretation of the social nature of teachers’ work and can provide insight into understanding the domain-specificity of IER, which underscores the importance of the working context [36,37].

2. Literature

2.1. Emotion Regulation

Gross’ process model of emotion regulation [5] is composed of five strategies, namely, situation selection, situation modification, attention deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation. The first four strategies are ‘antecedent-focused emotion regulation’ (before the full development of an emotional experience), while the fifth strategy is ‘response-focused emotion regulation’ (after experiencing a discrete emotion). Following Gross’ model, more strategies of emotion regulation were proposed: reappraisal, suppression, acceptance, rumination, avoidance, and problem-solving [38,39]. Reappraisal, acceptance, and problem-solving contribute to the outcome of positive emotions and de-

creased distress [39]. By contrast, suppression, rumination, and avoidance lead to or maintain negative emotions like anxiety and depression [39–41].

Research on teachers' emotion regulation has received inadequate attention, though findings suggest its necessity. For instance, Brackett et al. [42] found that teachers' emotion regulation competence was related to their positive emotions, e.g., job satisfaction and personal accomplishment. Teachers believed that emotion regulation is conducive to teaching effectiveness, conforming to their idealized emotional image of a teacher [7]. Findings indicated that successful emotion regulation was associated with the employment of regulatory strategies [8]. Emotion regulation strategies used by teachers were generalized as avoiding situations, active modification, reappraisal, suppression, and tension reduction [43].

Empirical research on teachers' emotion regulation is at a relatively early stage [9]. On the contrary, teachers' emotional labor has attracted considerable research attention. Yin [9] linked emotion regulation to emotional labor, elucidating that the "process of teachers' emotional labor can be considered as the regulation of feelings and expressions to achieve professional goals" (p. 2). Emotional labor refers to "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" [10] (p. 7). It primarily involves two strategies: surface acting, through which the employees regulate their emotional expressions without altering their feelings; and deep acting, through which the employees modify their felt emotions to change their expressions [10]. Ashforth and Humphrey [11] argued for the third strategy—the expression of genuine emotion—which allows for the spontaneous experiencing and expression of organizationally desirable emotions, different from surface or deep acting, implying deliberate emotional management. By bringing together the two facets of teacher emotion, Yin [9] "identified three categories and seven emotion regulation strategies used by Chinese teachers: (1) surface acting, which covers pretending and restraining; (2) deep acting, comprising refocusing, reframing, and separating; and (3) genuinely expressing, consisting of releasing and outpouring" (p. 16).

2.2. IER

Researchers have argued over the past decade that emotion regulation is not a sole intrapersonal process but a process of social interaction [12–16]. IER has four key characteristics: regulation, having an affective target, having a social target, and deliberateness [44]. Two main lines of research can be identified. The first research line focuses on various IER strategies. These studies documented a broad range of strategies, including practical help, agreeing, listening, letting the person vent, mere presence, empathy, story-telling, humor, acting out stressful events, etc. [21]. Niven et al. [15] developed a classification of IER strategies, highlighting two main distinctions between strategy types. The first distinction concerned regulatory motives behind the strategy: to improve or worsen the other person's feelings; the second distinction addressed whether the strategy used cognitive or behavioral resources. Cognitive strategies involved the attempt (e.g., reinterpretation of a situation) to affect the other person's thoughts of his or her feelings or situation, whereas behavioral strategies involved using the agent's behavior (e.g., anger) to change the other person's feelings. Four key IER strategy types were thus mapped, which include cognitive improving, behavioral improving, cognitive worsening, and behavioral worsening. Twenty-two IER strategies, including calling out teammates, distraction, goal setting, and positive appraisal, were reported to be used in ice hockey to regulate teammates' emotions [22]. Kindergarten principals in Hong Kong were found to have used the IER strategies of soothing and modeling [45].

The second research line highlights the communicative nature of IER beyond strategies. The framework proposed by Zaki and Williams [16] explained the social process of affective message transmission between the sender and the receiver. Zaki and Williams [16] distinguished intrinsic and extrinsic forms of interpersonal regulation. They elucidated [16] (p. 804): "By intrinsic interpersonal regulation, we refer to episodes in which an individual initiates social contact in order to regulate his own experience; by extrinsic interpersonal regulation, we refer to episodes in which a person attempts to regulate another person's

emotion". They also illuminated two types of interpersonal regulation processes: response-dependent and response-independent. Response-dependent processes are dependent on the qualities of another person's feedback, whereas response-independent processes "occur in the context of social interactions, but do not require that another person respond in any particular way" [16] (p. 805).

One growth point in this budding research domain is the "exploration of how individuals monitor each other's states and adjust their behavior accordingly when pursuing interpersonal regulation goals" [16] (p. 808). The question of how "individuals monitor the extent to which their behavior is 'getting through' to others (e.g., serving as an efficient affective input for another person)" [16] (p. 808) is yet to be explored. Niven [24] identified three motivations for IER at work: autonomy (intrinsic vs. extrinsic), relatedness (prosocial vs. egoistic), and competence (performance- vs. pleasure-oriented). More recently, Zaki integrated IER and empathy, contributing to understanding how social emotions produce prosocial actions [25]. Recent studies also found that personality, underlying motives, and digital devices influenced the efficiency of IER [26–28]. In spite of the identified factors influencing the effectiveness of IER, the dynamics of effective IER remain opaque.

2.3. Social Learning and IER

Theories of social learning accentuate the collective attribute of learning as co-inquiry amid professional and emotional challenges and hence, shed light on understanding the social nature of teachers' IER.

Teacher learning is proclaimed to bear community property in relation to emotional needs. As Shulman [31] asserted, enduring teacher learning works best when emotionally supported, legitimated, and nurtured within "a community of culture" (p. 20). Likewise, Brookfield [32] contended that "knowing that we're not alone in our struggles is profoundly reassuring" (p. 36) for teachers. Nonetheless, Richet [46] disclosed that teachers seldom discussed the challenges and puzzles they were confronted with, and they were not used to sharing and caring about each others' teaching. Shulman [47] underscored the importance of "moving teaching from a mostly private enterprise, where what teachers know and do 'like dry ice', to teaching as 'community property,' which is documented, shared and built upon" (p. 7). Lave and Wenger [33] believed that "learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world" (p. 35). Wenger [48] further advocated that the essence of learning in a community of practice was the joint engagement in the pursuit of physical, moral, and emotional practices. The first research line on social learning carries implications for exploring IER from the perspective of learning communities where teachers are emotionally comforted and supported for meaning-making.

The second research line on social learning is reflective inquiry into community. As noted by Brookfield [32], "although critical reflection often begins alone, it is ultimately a collective endeavor", and "the intrinsic problem with approaches to private self-reflection is that when we use them, we can never completely avoid the risks of denial and distortion" (p. 36). Community inquiry is both intellectually and emotionally related. As pointed out by Macfarlan [49], "coping with complex reality of [teaching] is not reducible to an intellectually understanding set of skills of professionalism . . . It is also about getting in touch with one's own values and the emotional drives that lie behind these attitudes". (p. 21). From the perspective of community of practice, collaborative inquiry is about negotiating meaning, which is an evolving process containing "a flavor of continuous interaction, of gradual achievement, and of give-and-take" [48] (p. 53). Palmer [34] emphasized teachers' quality of non-judgmental dialogue in the 'community of truth', with a 'clearness committee' requiring "a way that does not presume to know what is right for the other but allows the other's soul to find its own answer at its own level and pace" (p. 151). The second research line provides insight into understanding teachers' IER by exploring their collective meaning-making beyond the limit of self-reflection. Reflective communal inquiry enables teachers to investigate the unexamined assumptions which may disturb them emotionally.

Studies following the third research line highlight the unique form of narratives in community inquiry. As put by Brookfield [32], listening to others' stories of the same crises and dilemmas enabled teachers to rethink their own way of practice. According to Clandinin and Connelly [35], narrative inquiry was "a kind of fluid inquiry, a kind of inquiry that challenges accepted inquiry and representation assumptions" (p. 184). Narrative accounts were supposed to dig into the event's emotional quality by questioning "why the event is associated with these feelings and what their origins might be" [50] (p. 11). The third line of research sheds light on the data collection method of this study in terms of using narrative inquiry to retrieve participants' past experiences of IER. Since participant teachers may not have written reflective journals, reflective narratives with a given topic on IER can help them recall and reflect on related emotional experiences.

3. Methodology

To explore EFL teachers' dynamic and effective IER, the research raised the following questions: (1) What emotional disturbance do EFL teachers encounter in their professional life? (2) What do EFL teachers learn through collective inquiry? (3) In what ways are EFL teachers supported emotionally? (4) How do EFL teachers make positive emotional changes according to the affective input? A qualitative case study was conducted for an in-depth investigation into how Chinese EFL teachers transform from emotional disturbance to well-being through IER.

3.1. Research Participants

In early 2021, the first author attended a ten-session workshop held by a university in North China on promoting EFL teachers' capacity for adopting narrative inquiry as a research method. On a Saturday morning, around 30 EFL teachers who had signed up for the workshop came to inquire into their education narratives. The earlier sessions focused on the introduction of theories of narrative inquiry incorporated with practical examples. In the latter sessions, the professor who ran the workshop dialogued with EFL teachers and helped them tell and retell their written narratives in the light of a theoretical lens. Every EFL teacher was invited to share retold narratives in public. These narratives teemed with vicissitudes of emotions.

As the workshop proceeded, several teachers displayed changes in perspectives, mentality, and emotions. The first author's research field in EFL teacher development gave her a great advantage in associating with teachers during the workshop, especially those who seemed to have the potential for positive emotional transformation through IER. The insider's position assisted the first author in building rapport with these teachers. Nine teachers willingly shared with the first author their stories about how IER helped their professional lives. Purposeful sampling criteria were laid out based on "conceptual grounds" [51] (p. 29). In describing IER, Zaki and Williams wrote that "individuals often turn to others for help in shaping their affective lives" [16] (p. 803). Following this description, two criteria were used. The first criterion was the predisposition for connectivity in response to emotional disturbances in teaching. In other words, teachers tended to seek out social contact under emotionally disturbing conditions so as to make IER possible. The second criterion was the experience of positive emotional transformation with learning peers; despite a tendency to seek emotional support from peers, teachers who had not experienced successful IER would not be selected. Accordingly, five female teachers were found suitable as research participants.

The sampling principle of maximum variation was further applied in case selection to present the complexity of individuals' worlds [52]. Individual differences in types of university (comprehensive, specializing in science and engineering, specializing in liberal arts) and years of teaching were taken into consideration for the sake of maximum variation. Among the five teachers, two worked at comprehensive universities, two at liberal arts universities. So, the difference in years of teaching was weighed to select two from the four teachers. Apart from the consideration of the difference in years of teaching, the selected

two participants appeared more receptive to learning peers' emotional input, which may enhance the possibility of effective IER. Eventually, three EFL teachers, Wang, Ma, and Xu (all pseudonyms), were purposefully selected as research participants for this qualitative study. Wang (20 years of teaching) worked at a comprehensive university, Ma (16 years of teaching) at a university specializing in science and engineering, and Xu (9 years of teaching) at a liberal arts university. All three teachers willingly participated in the study.

3.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through narrative reflection, face-to-face interviews, class observations, and field notes in the autumn semester of 2021.

Around one and a half months before the semester, the three participant teachers were invited to write a narrative about their most painful teaching experience and emotional transformation through IER. The purpose of writing narrative reflection was to articulate the meaning underlying human experience [53]. Careful exploration of stories creates an educative experience as "individuals find new and more expansive ways to interpret their own and others' experiences" [54] (p. 350). Since the four-month time span of data collection may not allow full observation of the complete processes of teachers' emotional transformation through IER, narrative reflection helped track down their past successful experience of IER to offer clues for understanding their current experience of IER.

Before the semester began, the first round of interviews with each participant teacher was conducted to revisit written narratives. Major interview questions included:

- Why do you think it makes the most painful experience in your teaching?
- What could be the metaphor for this emotional breakthrough?
- What caused your breakthrough concerning the emotional pain? What helped you most? Why?
- How did IER change you in this emotional event?
- In what ways did IER influence your teaching?

In this round of interviews, aside from the re-examination of each participant teacher's written narratives, each teacher was asked to orally narrate on themes emerging from the other two teachers in order to trace cross-case common themes. For instance, Xu wrote about emotional distress in her stagnancy of virtue growth, and the theme of stagnancy was then asked about in this round of interviews with Ma and Wang.

Classroom teaching was observed three times for each participant teacher: the first at the beginning of the semester, the second in the middle, and the third approaching the end. Classes were observed with an emphasis on teachers' verbal and non-verbal emotional expressions and as well as emotional interaction between teachers and students. Field notes were taken during class observations. Every class-observation was followed by a new round of interviews for participants to explain the observed emotion-laden episodes.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis went through five stages. The five-stage analytic process was ongoing and cyclical, with themes and patterns generated inductively [51]. The first stage was a chronological compilation of each case. In the second stage, themes and sub-themes were derived, clustered, and re-clustered within each case. The first and second stages addressed within-case analysis, whereas stages three to five handled cross-case analysis. The third stage was a re-construction of themes by identifying common themes across the three cases. In the fourth stage, the trajectory of teachers' IER was traced. The last stage allowed the distinctive features of teachers' IER to emerge.

A number of measures were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the data analysis. Interview transcripts were sent to participants for cross-checking. Revisions were made if participants raised any doubt about the content of the transcripts. The identified themes and sub-themes were given to participants to decide whether the meaning in their narratives and interviews was accurately portrayed. The analysis of data was also presented to two independent researchers, and opportunities were given to them to challenge data interpreta-

tion. Reliability was further ensured by the two authors' evaluation of the emerging themes and sub-themes.

The study used ethical safeguards as follows. The purposes of the study were explicitly introduced to the participant teachers. All three teachers voluntarily took part in this study. Furthermore, participants, assured of anonymity of personal information, were informed of data collection procedures.

4. Findings

The findings of this study show that seeking social support is of critical significance in sustaining teachers' transformation toward emotional well-being. Xu vividly depicted her benefit from IER:

The image I hold in my mind, when it comes to emotion management, is that I am sailing in the dark stormy night, and yet I believe that I will get through it because I am not alone. My learning buddies give me light and strength. (Reflection-X)

The study reveals the trajectory of EFL teachers' IER, i.e., deconstruction of emotional blocks in companionship, re-construction of emotional strength through trust, and co-construction of emotional pedagogy with dialogues. Collective quest with learning peers enables EFL teachers to securely identify emotional myths, which further deepens trust in their peers whose breakthrough stories enlighten EFL teachers and engender strength to embrace emotional disturbance. EFL teachers' construction of emotional strength through community learning thereafter triggers the integration of emotional education into subject teaching by ongoing dialogue with students, mutually empowering students and teachers towards emotional well-being.

4.1. Deconstruction of Emotional Blocks in Companionship

EFL teachers' IER starts with deconstruction of emotional blocks as they confide to trustworthy learning peers. Companionship gives teachers the feeling of security that they are not alone but are understood by those who have had similar experiences. Deconstruction of emotion accompanied by peers helps teachers open up themselves to misconceptions, complexities, and limitations. Community inquiry leads teachers to a buffering place where they distance themselves from negative emotions.

4.1.1. Awareness of Misconceptions about Students

EFL teachers' relief from isolated fragility keeps them from blaming students for undesirable teaching effects. Stories from peers shed new light on the causes of students' learning problems.

When Ma explained the meaning of her outstretched arms toward students after their long silence, regardless of her rounds of invitation for responsiveness (Observation-M-1), she told a story of change.

I have learned precious lessons in cultivating true tolerance of students' silence in class teaching. For a rather long period of time, I could not stand students' silence, which I considered as students' disrespect of me. I forced myself to tolerate class silence to appear as a nice teacher. [. . .] However, the more I coerced myself, the more I found myself blaming students' disengagement. (Interview-M-2)

Ma uttered that her confession of this trouble to a close friend, a female EFL teacher at another university, helped her gain a new perspective on class silence. She greatly appreciated this friend for genuine listening without rush judgment:

My friend kept nodding and hugged me several times during my storms of complaint. I felt secure, for I knew she understood me due to her similar pain. Yet she did not join me in blaming students. Nor did she blame me. She just shared her discovery. Her interview with students informed her of the causes of their silence; they were face-keepers, failure avoiders, and even English learning haters. [. . .] It suddenly dawned on me that it was not students' fault. I had long kept myself in bias. [. . .] That is the reason for my

outstretched gesture, showing that I understand my students and feel like hugging them.
(Interview-M-2)

Wang and Xu also benefited from IER. Fellowship with peers committed to serving students' growth helped Xu turn away from grumbling and groaning about students' learning. (Interview-X-3) Through listening to other teachers' painful teaching stories, Wang learned to inquire into the multiplicity of students' learning problems. (Interview-W-1)

4.1.2. Perception of Complexity of Problems

EFL teachers' co-inquiry with learning peers into emotional disturbance catalyzes the perception of the complexity of educational problems. Teachers jointly reflect on the appraisal system of EFL teaching quality and thereby seek attunement with the system.

Wang was agonized by curriculum experts' negative feedback on her course, advising her to reduce training students' critical thinking and focus more on language teaching. She felt that her effort to integrate language and thinking was disrespected. What disappointed Wang further was that her efforts to integrate thinking and language were considered by her colleagues to be distractions or even a hindrance to EFL learning. She found many only paid lip service concerning achieving educational goals of cultivating students holistically, leaving a huge gap between advocacy of education reform and implementation. Wang became a cynic in battling against ignorance. Overwhelmed by loneliness and victimization, she immersed herself in reading books and going to conferences to search for minds alike. She wrote:

Talking to teachers with similar views and experiences comforted and inspired me. I came to know that we are heading toward a new vision, one closer to the nature of EFL learning. Meanwhile, I realized that it is not a simple issue of disrespect or depreciation but a long-held view of EFL learning that the priority is to have a good command of the language, which is in discordance with the cultivation of students' humanity as a major curriculum goal. [. . .] Freely, I can serve what the system intends to serve. My conception of educational goals is in harmony with those of the system. I am mostly relieved by this discovery. (Reflection-W)

Conversing with other teachers awakened Wang's consciousness of her dichotomized mindset of self and system. As for Ma, through communal inquiry, she gained insight into a variety of causes underlying her low ranking in a department-initiated teaching competition. She learned to fit into the appraisal system. (Reflection-M) Xu, who suffered self-abasement from colleagues' disparagement of her teaching, turned to her critical friends for enlightenment, describing the process of individual-environment harmonization as a journey of turning prescribed accountability into authentic responsibility. (Interview-X-1)

4.1.3. Discernment of Blindness of Self

EFL teachers' collective deconstruction of emotional blocks facilitates their humbling of self and enables them to remove the blindness of self, which otherwise cannot be identified by themselves.

Xu said that the hardest lesson for her in managing negative emotions was humility. The distinction between humility and self-abasement, according to her, was whether a learning stance is involved. To her, self-abasement was closure for improvement, while humility was learning to confess, though very hard, her conceit through gentle reminders and admonition of learning peers at critical moments when the ego was too big to see its own problems. She added that once she was conscious of the ramification of arrogance in preventing her emotional and professional well-being, she stayed alert. Xu illustrated:

I wanted to improve students' capacity for knowledge construction, but they just wanted ready-made knowledge, distracted in the course. I was hurt. [. . .] I turned to a peer to seek comfort. She acknowledged the great value of my dialogical teaching, but she did not stop there. She gave me a gentle nudge that I needed to check out whether I was overconfident to conclude that my students actually needed what I thought they needed. [. . .] Honestly, it

is painful to look inside, but the crucial lesson I have learned is that it is conceit that hinders true healing. (Interview-X-1)

Likewise, Wang and Ma experienced the deconstruction of self-blindness through social learning. Wang had been fighting against her self-rightness, which she saw as a stumbling block to inner peace. Regular fellowship with learning peers pursuing virtues was conducive to her alertness. (Interview-W-2) Through extensive reading of spiritual works and discussion with peers, Ma's intellectual arrogance was gradually revealed to her, and she was convinced of its harm to her emotional well-being. (Interview-M-2)

4.2. Re-Construction of Emotional Strength through Trust

EFL teachers' deconstruction of emotional blocks in companionship paves the way for their re-construction of emotional strength. Secure and constructive companionship produces teachers' trust in their learning peers. Peers' sharing of emotional breakthroughs via positive self-deconstruction empowers teachers to reconsider emotional disturbance as an opportunity to grow rather than adversity to turn away from. The shift of perspectives, a joint discovery of blessing in loss, engenders teachers' inner peace to accept the limitation of self and uncertainty of circumstances, with the strength to transform negative emotions into growth and hope.

4.2.1. Facing Challenges for Competence Enhancement

Trust in learning peers' emotional breakthroughs propels EFL teachers to take heart in dealing with teaching challenges and enhance teaching competence instead of being overtaken by grudges.

Receiving experts' criticism on the cultivation of students' critical thinking capacity in EFL courses, Wang turned to peers for consolation and advice. The multiplicity of views offered by peers helped loosen up her self-defensiveness. When Wang learned to accept the limitation of her teaching, she was then freed to see a space for teaching improvement. She uttered:

Talking to peers not only gives me a feeling of security but also the power to change in teaching, for I trust that what has changed them will change me. [. . .] I was assisted in turning what prevented me into what improved me. When I was at peace with my limitation, recognizing that I am a limited human being with limited teaching competence, magically, self-knowledge freed me to transcend the current limitation of an awkward combination of thinking and language in my teaching. (Interview-W-1)

Ma and Xu shared a similar change from shunning teaching challenges to taking a learning stance, with the trust of peers' emotional growth in facing challenges. Ma said that her peers' positive attitudes toward teaching problems inspired her to see opportunities in challenges. (Interview-M-3) Enlightened by peers, Xu continuously renewed her strength in problematizing and improving her teaching. (Interview-X-2)

4.2.2. Recognizing Conflict for Virtue Growth

EFL teachers' negative emotions arising from conflict is appeased by trusting their learning peers who continuously learn to accept conflict in relationships. Teachers are enabled to view conflict as an opportunity for moral growth.

Ma was bothered by her examiners' criteria for teaching excellence in a department-initiated competition. The examiners' general impression of Ma's teaching was a shortage of activities designed to promote students' language learning, whereas Ma held that learning activities were to primarily serve the deepening of students' understanding of the text. According to Ma, China's EFL teaching overemphasized language knowledge and skills along with the bustle of class atmosphere, but students' progressive understanding of issues addressed in texts was left unattended. She wrote about how she rose above her agony:

I was irritated and frightened somehow, for the 'failure' belittled my very being. In bitterness, I was perplexed about where I was heading professionally. [. . .] Fortunately,

learning peers with ups and downs in their professional life told me that affliction in conflict was to shape teachers' virtues. [...] Talking to them greatly soothed me and created a new horizon for me. [...] I realized that I had highlighted conflict and neglected unity. The 'wall' between the examiners and myself was put up by myself! Students are supposed to experience both language learning and thought-provoking ideas. (Reflection-M)

Xu and Wang, with the help of peers, also gained the emotional strength to transform tension between self and others into acceptance of conflict. Peers helped Xu become conscious of the nature of conflict as narrowing the gap between a limited self and a more virtuous self. (Interview-X-1) Wang, through co-inquiry with peers, trusted that valuable lessons could be drawn from conflict for her moral growth. (Interview-W-1)

4.2.3. Embracing Uncertainty for Belief Reinforcement

EFL teachers' emotional strength is reconstructed by embracing uncertainty in their professional life. Teachers gradually believe in the certainty of their development out of the uncertainty, being convinced by their peers' authentic changes.

After years of endeavors to cease her judgmental mentality, Xu lost her heart in becoming a more tolerant teacher, for she only saw stagnancy along the way. Owing to ongoing support from her learning peers, Xu regained her hope for tolerance growth. Peers' breakthrough stories shed light on her path forward, strengthening her belief in the less visible growth of virtues.

The intolerance of both students' learning problems and my judgmental mentality distressed me greatly. Not until I heard stories alike from peers have I come to realize that it takes time for teachers to subdue harmful predispositions. [...] Story-sharing truly relieves my pressure of unrealistic wishes of speedy growth. More importantly, it gives me the hope that the growth of my virtues will come in due time, at its own pace, as I go on pursuing. (Reflection-X) I have come to believe that virtue is a fundamental truth for teachers, and the discourse of this truth will purify my heart and augment my virtue beyond analytical understanding, rational effort, and an expected timeline. (Interview-X-1)

Ma and Wang also encountered relapses and even backsliding in the process of virtue growth. In spite of Ma's consciousness of the necessity to endure conflict, she was rather frustrated that her bitterness was not decreased with increasing consciousness. Peers with breakthroughs in conflict gave her relief and hope. (Interview-M-1) In Wang's case, peers lessened her worry about her inability to reduce self-righteousness in her professional life, a predisposition to see herself as upright and others as wrong. She realized that putting self-righteousness under regular surveillance was indeed huge progress for her, and she believed that more progress was awaiting her. (Interview-W-1)

4.3. Co-construction of Emotional Pedagogy with Dialogues

EFL teachers' emotional healing from deconstruction of blockage and re-construction of strength via collective questing inevitably calls for serving students' emotional well-being through class teaching. Teachers interweave caring for students' emotional states with EFL subjects through dialogical teaching and knowledge co-construction with students.

4.3.1. Empathy for Negativity as Teaching Motive

Xu's emotional healing experience with IER enabled her to identify with students' problems. Xu recalled how the healing power of unconditional love helped her rise up from self-abasement in teaching and drove her to love students accordingly. A colleague denied the value of Xu's application of knowledge construction to EFL teaching, believing that students mostly need systematic knowledge by teachers' PPT demonstration in order to learn efficiently. Xu was hurt, feeling that she was ineligible for the job.

A close learning peer came to visit me the next day after she listened to me over the phone. I had nothing to hide before her. [. . .] Vehemently, I bombarded myself, displaying all my inadequacy in EFL teaching. She hugged me and even wept with me, with great sympathy for me. [. . .] As I calmed down, she told me that she loved me for who I am. My very weakness was precious in her eyes. She saw that my being was uniquely shaped by my limitation, believing that my imperfection cultivated me to become accepters and comforters of inadequate others. [. . .] Melting in the loving wisdom, I knew it was time for me to make peace with myself. My current 'limitation' was part of me, a blessing to me, not a shame. [. . .] At the moment I breathed in freedom from the pain, I was filled with empathy for students who suffer from low self-esteem. [. . .] The responsibility was right on my shoulders, feeling fulfilled as a teacher who can help with students' emotional well-being. (Interview-X-1)

Driven by empathy, Ma and Wang also regarded emotional pedagogy as a meaningful practice. Ma's affliction of sensitivity to external evaluations of her teaching was assuaged by her peers' help in reinforcing her self-worth rather than relying on external approval. The healing process, in turn, impelled Ma to help students deal with emotional problems through her courses. (Interview-M-2) Wang's experience of emotional healing through IER gave her an empathetic feeling for students' negative emotions. She realized that as a humanities course, EFL fell short of cultivating students' emotional competence for well-being, which she then incorporated into teaching objectives. (Interview-W-3)

4.3.2. Narrative of Struggles as Course Material

EFL teachers' breakthrough of emotional pain leads them to see the value of students' emotional grappling. Teachers publicly share in class their gain out of emotional pain, show sincerity in listening to students' stories, and identify the power of healing and growing through community inquiry. Teachers encourage students to share their stories of struggle, which are embedded into reading and listening texts pertaining to these stories, thus interweaving emotional education with EFL teaching.

At the beginning of a reading session, Wang told a story of how she suffered during her doctoral study, which shaped her uniqueness. She emphasized that she was not a goddess for students to worship but a limited human, a light-seeker, and a lamp-lighter. She asked students to narrate their most painful learning story, assuring them of their security in sharing, her eyes teeming with love and gentleness. Wang then raised a question to relate students' life experiences to the given text. (Class-observation-W-1)

Xu and Ma also demonstrated the incorporation of emotional education into EFL teaching. Xu attached importance to narratives from teachers and textbooks, which provides new light for students to reflect upon their narratives on emotional struggle. (Class-observation-X-1) Ma identified students' pain manifested in class expression and written assignments, created opportunities to address these issues (Class-observation-M-2), and highlighted the significance of cultivating students' self-esteem. (Interview-M-3)

4.3.3. Community of Inquiry as Learning Approach

EFL teachers make great efforts to build learning communities for collective inquiry into students' narratives of emotional struggles. Students as community members are encouraged and trained to support each other for an in-depth understanding of emotional problems so that their positive emotional changes can be communally sustained with a renewed multiplicity of perspectives from teachers, peers, and textbooks.

Throughout the reading course, Ma asked students to observe how she raised follow-up questions to approximate the nature of the issues being discussed and trained students to become inquirers. (Interview-M-3) Toward the end of the course, students became more engaged in co-inquiry with Ma and their peers, with more readiness to reappraise the negative emotional events. (Class-observation-M-3) Ma was delightfully fulfilled in witnessing students' improvement in IER. At the same time, Ma admitted that challenges in

promoting emotional education, including students' negative feedback and disengagement, disturbed her and pushed her into new rounds of IER. (Interview-M-4)

Likewise, Wang and Xu adopted community of inquiry into emotional education. Wang built a learning community in her courses for joint meaning-making of narratives involving emotional struggle. Once, she shared in class her painful problem concerning two cohorts' opposite performance in her course, one highly engaged, another highly disengaged. Her reflection and research into the problem greatly alleviated her affliction. Unexpectedly, a student wrote to her about deep reasons for his disengagement in some courses. Wang never looked at the issue this way, and her pain continued to die down accordingly. (Interview-W-4) Wang, however, admitted that challenges in promoting co-inquiry into emotional problems resulted in negative emotions, which triggered IER for well-being. (Interview-W-5) In the case of Xu, the learning community she tried to build for the reading course did not always delight her; rather, students' distraction in listening to peers' narratives and disengagement in discussion frustrated her. Nevertheless, her vulnerability led to IER, bringing a stronger sense of empathy and vocational calling. (Interview-X-5)

5. Discussion

In a nutshell, this study delineates Chinese EFL teachers' trajectory of IER, i.e., de-construction of emotional blocks in companionship, re-construction of emotional strength through trust, and co-construction of emotional pedagogy with dialogues. The following three issues, which emerge from the findings, are worth further discussion.

5.1. Dynamics of IER

Details of EFL teachers' IER trajectory are consistent with the targets of emotional regulation (i.e., intrinsic and extrinsic regulation) [13,16,55]. The concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic emotion regulation are useful to account for types of teachers' IER. The experience of emotional disturbance motivated teachers to turn to others for help in shaping their own emotions via intrinsic IER. In the presence of trustworthy learning peers, teachers deployed the "labeling" strategy and sought "safety signals" and "affiliation" [16] (p. 805). Accompanied by peers, teachers, through labeling, refined their appraisals of emotional events without peers' feedback, whereas teachers depended on peers' supportive response for event reappraisal (i.e., 'safety signals') or fulfillment of a deep-seated need for social contact (i.e., 'affiliation'). Meanwhile, extrinsic IER of "warm glow" (response-independent) and "vicarious affect" (response-dependent) [16] (p. 805) were also identified in the findings of the current study. Teachers' initiation of emotional pedagogy intending to help students' emotion regulation produced positive emotions for teachers with a sense of fulfillment as helpers of students' emotional well-being. Irrespective of students' response to their prosocial pedagogical practice, teachers achieved the regulatory goal of 'warm glow'. Students' improvement in emotion regulation brought about teachers' 'vicarious affect', reaching their regulatory goals of bolstering students' well-being.

With all intrinsic and extrinsic IER categories in the framework proposed by Zaki and Williams [16] found in the current study, findings on the trajectory of teachers' IER from emotional deconstruction, re-construction, and co-construction develop the framework by discovering the dynamic interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic IER. The present study reveals that teachers' experience of intrinsic IER with positive emotional changes engenders empathy which results in extrinsic IER with prosocial behavior to help students. The significant role of empathy in triggering extrinsic IER is in line with previous studies suggesting that extrinsic IER occurred as individuals recognized and understood others' emotional states [25,55,56]. The present study extends the existing research by a further discovery that empathy seems to mediate the link between intrinsic and extrinsic IER; empathy is cultivated through effective intrinsic IER in terms of experiencing positive emotional changes, which in turn generates extrinsic IER to improve others' well-being. Further, negative emotions arising from ineffective extrinsic IER become motives for in-

trinsic IER. A backward move from extrinsic to intrinsic IER has also been identified in the study, as teachers encountered setbacks and frustration in caring for students' emotional problems. Thereafter, teachers sought help for new rounds of intrinsic IER with a continually deepened understanding of education. The trajectory of teachers' IER confirms the reciprocity between intrinsic and extrinsic IER. Deconstruction and re-construction of teachers' emotional states led to co-construction of emotional pedagogy to bolster students' emotional wellness. At the same time, the unfavorable effect of co-construction of emotional pedagogy drove teachers to seek help from learning peers for emotional deconstruction and re-construction.

5.2. Effectiveness of IER

The study attempts to address the question of effective alteration of one's own and others' emotions through IER, which remains opaque in the existing research [16]. The findings reveal that efficient emotional input from IER hinges on the interplay between individuals' readiness to reflectively accept self-limits and peers' ability to provide secure companionship, patient co-inquiry, and persevering hope.

The results of this study show the significance of labeling in terms of reappraising affective events, which is in congruence with previous research [16,57,58]. This study further reveals that teachers' labeling in IER is manifested more as self-problematization and acceptance of self-limit amidst emotional disturbance, which differs from labeling with emphasis on others' limitations. EFL teachers' inward examination of limitation spurred them to go beyond the boundary of intrapersonal regulation for a broader and deeper understanding of their own problems and prepared them to make a positive turn in mentality and action based on receiving emotional input from learning peers. Teachers' trajectory of IER from the deconstruction of emotional blocks to the re-construction of emotional strength was a path of social transformative learning process characterized by meaning negotiation, narrative retelling, and identity re-construction through critical reflection and community inquiry [31–35,59]. Teachers' humble learning approach to knowing self-limit via IER did not trap them into self-abasement but rather opened up a co-inquiring space to embrace self-limit and challenging circumstances as opportunities for professional development [60].

Apart from individuals' readiness to accept self-limitation, effective IER toward well-being relies on the quality of social support. Research on IER has attached importance to the role of social support [61,62], and yet the nuance of efficient social support entails further exploration. This study suggests those who offer secure companionship, patient co-inquiry, and persevering hope sustain others' positive emotional changes. According to the findings, secure companionship is composed of empathetic caring and unconditional honoring. EFL teachers turned to peers who had empathy to understand their struggles and cared to help them deal with emotional problems. Unconditional honoring refers to peers' loving acceptance of teachers as valuable and unique beings regardless of their problems and failures. Patient co-inquiry involves non-judgmental listening and constructive dialoguing. Learning peers deferred hasty advice, allowing teachers to fully narrate their affliction, and thereafter directed teachers' attention from other-blaming to problem-understanding. Constructive dialogues offered new horizons, liberating EFL teachers from stereotyped thinking, through which teachers were enabled to pursue truth rather than receiving ready-made solutions. Persevering hope is offered as support when individuals hit the bottleneck in emotion regulation. The study indicates that rational thinking was less effective in regulating teachers' longstanding negative emotions like vulnerability and burnout, whereas learning peers' story-sharing about breakthroughs of emotional bottlenecks brought hope for EFL teachers who chose to trust their peers, persevere with emotional pain, and wait patiently for tangible growth.

A trusting relationship propels the interplay of individuals' readiness for self-examination and others' capacity for social support. As put by Little et al. [63], modulation of the emotional response was positively linked with trust in others. Trust is indispensable for effective

IER. Trustworthy peers created a secure learning space where teachers were encouraged and inspired to take an inward examination of their own limitations beyond moaning and groaning. As teachers experienced well-being in terms of limit acceptance and adversity embracement, they trusted their peers more and became more willing to receive peers' affective input and were more ready for emotional transformation based on self-reflection.

5.3. Teachers' IER and Ethical Development

The argument for exploring the domain-specificity of IER [36,37] is supported by the present study. The findings show that teachers' IER is oriented towards ethical development, which is in tune with the proclamation that teachers' emotion regulation is related to the caring ethic of teaching [64]. As professional caregivers, teachers are, by nature, pursuers of ethical development.

Teachers' intrinsic IER in the form of willingness to take an inward turn to examine their own professional and moral limitations is an indicator of ethical concerns. Teachers in this study, having internalized the caring ethics of teaching, tended to regulate their emotions for the sake of professional and ethical development. IER was not treated as mere emotional venting but as opportunities for reframing emotional problems, renewing attitudes towards professional challenges, and looking for hidden moral lessons. Dialogues with learning peers helped remove the emotional blindfold and enabled teachers to embrace self-limits and the seemingly unfavorable circumstances which they came to believe would nourish their professional and moral development. Yet, due to the intangibility and invisibility of growth of virtues (patience, tolerance, perseverance, forgiveness, etc.), teachers found their efforts futile to become more virtuous, in spite of mindful practice over a period of time. In frustration and distress, they kept seeking help from peers who experienced breakthroughs of stagnation in virtue growth. Teachers were gradually convinced by peers to trust that the pursuit of virtue in itself brought about virtue growth in its due time. By way of IER, teachers' belief in ethical development was reinforced.

Furthermore, ethical ends impact teachers' mode of IER. EFL teachers, led by the aim of improving moral quality, took a learning stance in facing emotional disturbance, proactively burrowing into the underlying causes with their learning partners. Persistent pursuit of ethical goals shaped teachers into inquirers amidst professional challenges and emotional disturbance. Belief in the relationship between afflicting circumstances and ethical ends assisted teachers in unpacking the positive meaning of emotional disturbance. Teachers were thereafter pacified to persevere with difficulties that they thought were meant to train and benefit them to become more virtuous professionals. The learning mode of IER shifted teachers' attention from indulgence in bitterness to engagement in co-inquiry into root causes of pedagogical, emotional, and moral problems with hope for new growth. By and large, teachers' concern for ethical development in the course of IER contributed to attenuating negative emotions by attending to acceptance of self-limit. The attention shift liberated teachers from being stuck in relentless blame of others.

6. Conclusions

The findings of this study reveal that EFL teachers' trajectory of IER moves from deconstruction of emotional blocks in companionship and re-construction of emotional strength through trust to co-construction of emotional pedagogy through dialogues. By collective pursuit with learning peers, EFL teachers identify misconceptions and blindfolds, bringing about emotional strength with renewed perspectives and empathy for others. Teachers' healing experiences trigger the integration of emotional education into subject teaching, which mutually empowers teachers and students towards well-being. Moreover, the intrinsic IER of teachers' own emotions and extrinsic IER of students' emotions are not separate but dynamically interacted. Furthermore, effective IER entails the interplay between teachers' readiness for reflective inquiry and learning peers' capacity for emotional support. In addition, teachers' IER is interwoven with ethical development. The study also suggests that effective IER of teachers contributes to their professional learning in

terms of triggering revisiting of teaching conceptions and educational beliefs to better serve students' learning.

The study provides two-fold implications. First, the value of experiencing emotional pain and making positive emotional changes via IER is worth recognizing. It is human nature to evade harm, including emotional pain. It is, therefore, natural for teachers to blame others when facing afflictions in their professional lives. If teachers learn with peers to see the value of pain, they will become more willing to accept it. According to this study, teachers' experiencing of emotional healing through IER produces empathy with others, an essential foundation for well-being. Further, the healing experience makes teachers qualified learning peers and comforters to those entangled in emotional struggles. Second, teacher education programs necessitate the inclusion of emotional education for in-service and pre-service teachers. Yin [9] pointed out that there is a remarkable lack of cultivating teachers' competence in emotion regulation for existing teacher education programs. Teacher education programs are in need of training teachers on how to regulate emotion at both intrapersonal and interpersonal levels, which will help them overcome emotional and professional barriers in the midst of work challenges.

One limitation of the study is the lack of gender variation since all three research participants are female. Another obvious limitation of this qualitative study is the number of participants. Although the principle of maximum variation has been adopted in case selection, the involvement of only three participants provides inadequate experience and perspectives and, thus, limits the breadth and depth of understanding how EFL teachers' IER effectively works towards well-being. We are aware that data collected from only three participants can lead to challenges concerning meaningful data analysis. We also recognize that the issue of generalization is apparent with only three participants, which limits the findings in particular groups and contexts. Therefore, we suggest that future research on teacher IER develop a mixed-methods design with both qualitative and quantitative data to gain a complete understanding.

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