

The Intersection of Humor and Emotional Labor in Chinese Education: Perspectives from EFL Teaching

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Abstract

Humor is an essential yet underutilized pedagogical tool in language education, recognized for its potential to reduce stress, enhance engagement, and foster positive teacher-student relationships. However, the intersection of humor and emotional labor remains largely unexplored, particularly in the unique cultural and educational contexts of Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching. This theoretical paper examines the intersection of humor and emotional labor in the context of Chinese EFL teaching, focusing on how humor functions as a strategy for managing emotional demands and fostering positive classroom dynamics. By synthesizing theoretical perspectives on emotional labor and humor, this paper highlights how Chinese cultural norms surrounding authority and respect shape the use of humor in EFL classrooms. Drawing from literature on emotional labor and humor, this paper explores how humor styles, cultural norms, and emotional regulation intersect in Chinese EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Humor, Emotional Labor, Chinese Education, EFL Teaching

1. Introduction

Humor is an essential yet underutilized pedagogical tool in language education, recognized for its potential to reduce stress, enhance engagement, and foster positive teacher-student relationships. However, the intersection of humor and emotional labor remains largely unexplored, particularly in the unique cultural and educational contexts of Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching. Humor, as a universal yet complex phenomenon, serves as a vital component of social interaction, often reflecting the values and communication styles of specific cultures. While humor has been widely acknowledged as a powerful tool for enhancing relationships, reducing stress, and fostering positive emotional climates, the ways in which it is perceived, used, and valued can vary significantly across cultural contexts (Jiang & Leong, 2021; Qian, 2007; Yue et al., 2016). In educational settings, humor can be a strategic tool for teachers to establish rapport with students, create an engaging classroom atmosphere, and manage classroom dynamics (Pranoto & Suprayogi, 2021). However, these functions of humor—and the attitudes surrounding its use—are highly dependent on cultural norms and expectations. In the Chinese educational context, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, the role of humor is shaped by a unique blend of cultural, pedagogical, and institutional factors (Dai & Liu, 2018; Yue, 2011).

In Chinese education, humor is often approached with caution, as traditional values emphasize authority, discipline, and respect within teacher-student relationships. Such values may limit teachers' freedom to use humor in the same informal or playful ways seen in Western classrooms (Rao, 1996). Nonetheless, humor remains a relevant aspect of teaching practice, providing an outlet for emotional expression, relationship-building, and even stress relief. For EFL teachers, humor may serve additional functions, such as reducing language anxiety, bridging cultural differences, and fostering a more relaxed learning environment that encourages language experimentation (Jiang & Qin, 2023; Petraki & Pham Nguyen, 2016).

Within this context, emotional labor, defined as the regulation of emotions to meet social or organizational expectations (Hochschild, 2010), emerges as a crucial concept. Teachers, especially in the emotionally demanding field of EFL education, frequently engage in emotional labor to balance the needs of students with institutional expectations (Dewaele & Li, 2021b). As they adapt their emotional expressions to suit classroom situations, humor becomes a valuable strategy for navigating the emotional complexities of teaching. When used effectively, humor can enhance teachers' emotional resilience, helping them manage stress and align their emotional displays with the

positive, engaging demeanor expected in educational settings. Nevertheless, the impact of humor on emotional labor in teaching remains underexplored, particularly in culturally unique environments like China's EFL classrooms. In such contexts, humor serves not only as a tool for engagement but also as a potential mediator in managing teachers' emotional demands. Examining this intersection theoretically could reveal insights into how humor contributes to or alleviates the emotional strains teachers face, ultimately influencing both teaching efficacy and classroom dynamics.

2. Humor in Chinese Culture and Education

2.1 *Humor in Chinese Culture*

Rod A. Martin and Xiao-Dong Yue are pioneers of research on humor differences in Chinese culture (Liu et al., 2019). Martin and Chen (2007) researched to compare Chinese and Canadian participants by using the Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) and Coping Humor Scale (CHS). The study found that the Chinese have lower uses of all the four humor styles and Coping humor than Canadians, particularly on aggressive humor. The two countries are very similar in finding no gender differences in affiliative and self-enhancing humor. However, whereas males tend to be significantly higher than females in using aggressive and self-defeating humor in Canada, the Chinese sample disclosed no gender difference in these two forms of humor either. There is also a difference between the two cultures on the CHS. Chinese guys tend to utilize more humor to manage life push than do Chinese females, a contrast which was not found in their Canadian partners (Chen & Martin, 2007).

Chen, Watkins, and Martin (2013) investigated the relationships between humor styles, individualism, collectivism, and facework in mainland China. The research instruments were administered to Chinese university students, and the results showed that uses of humor were broadly related to the properties of cultural values and facework. Specifically, the two potentially beneficial humor styles (affiliative and self-enhancing humor) were positively related to horizontal collectivism and saving other-face. The two presumably detrimental humor styles (aggressive and self-defeating humor) were positively related to saving self-face (Chen et al., 2013). The comes about are reliable with the conception that individuals express their sense of humor in a certain way that reflects their identity characteristics, values, states of mind, and convictions.

Jiang, Yue, and Lu (2011) found that Chinese students, compared with American students, held a more negative implicit attitude toward humor. The foremost curiously finding was that unequivocally, the Chinese group appraised their humor appreciation nearly the same as the American group did, but verifiably they tended to depreciate humor (Jiang et al., 2011). They believed that humor had been valued since the era of Plato and Aristotle, as they both conceived that humor as a kind of natural expression could bring people positive emotions such as amusement, fun, and delight in Western society. However, because of Confucianism, Chinese people have become increasingly cautious with humor to conform to social formality and social status.

Yue (2010) manifested that humor was not valued by the Chinese even though they all loved it, and humor was often regarded as the least important factor in the ration to creativity and ideal Chinese personality (Yue, 2010). Westerners view humor as an ordinarily owned trait and a positive disposition for self-actualization. In contrast, the Chinese consider humor to be limited to humor professionals and less desirable for social interactions (Yue et al., 2016). Yue (2011) proposed that Chinese people have traditionally been ambivalent about humor. Chinese tend to value humor but consider themselves to lack humor. Chinese regard as being humorous is not associated with being an orthodox Chinese. Chinese consider that humor is important but not for everyone. Yue believed that the Chinese ambivalence toward humor is largely due to an appreciation-despising complex about humor deep-rooted in Chinese culture (Cheung & Yue, 2021; Yue, 2011).

Principally, collectivism, socialization for achievement, and high acceptance of power and authority are influentially characterized in Chinese culture (Rao, 2006; Yang, 2020). Thus, humor in China varies compared to humor in western culture. Previous research attested that the Chinese do not regard as positive an attitude toward humor as their Western counterparts do. This perception makes the Chinese less likely to use humor as a coping strategy than Westerners. Specifically, the apprehension–despising complex makes the Chinese have ambivalent attitudes toward humor. However, it is necessary to notice that culture is not a stable construct. Globalization has brought big changes in individuals' psychology and culture. Caution should be taken when concluding cultural differences in humor from a common perspective. In this way, it may not be that precise to ponder cultural differences in humor by comparing distinctive nationalities or geographic areas (Jiang et al., 2019a).

While Western comedy is increasingly becoming more popular, the stereotype that China is a place of devoiding humor has been rooted gradually. Some claim China lacks humor and comedy. For example, Jimmy O. Yang, a Hong Kong-born American comedian, and Russell Peters, a Canadian comedian of Indian roots, have both joked that China is a place devoid of humor (Piwowarczyk, 2019). However, their statements are not true. There is no

doubt that China has a rich culture of humor historically and currently, despite Confucianism's ambivalent or unfriendly stance. People interested in Chinese culture are familiar with Chinese crosstalk, also known as Xiangsheng. It is a traditional performing art in Chinese comedy and one of the most popular elements in Chinese culture. It is typically performed as a dialogue between two performers. According to Chinese Xiangsheng techniques of books and articles (Chen, 2006; Guo, 2018; Zhang & Chen, 2018) and Dymont's techniques of creating humor (Dymont, 2020), the Chinese Xiangsheng is also popular among Chinese audiences as same as western stand-up comedy shows. There have been two trends recently. One is Xiangsheng performances starred by Guo Degang and Yu Qian, the two famous Xiangsheng artists in China; another is the stand-up comedy series "Tuo Kou Xiu Da Hui (Rock & Roast)" planned and led by Li Dan.

In the past, people had fun in many ways we do today. They played games, told each other stories, and played music. Since humor in China dates back to ancient times, it is natural to be found in most periods and forms of Chinese art and literary texts, including scripts from classical Chinese drama (Davis & Chey, 2011). Different cultures and times have evolved a range of protocols and social conventions for channeling and containing humor-making and humor appreciation. In China or other countries, the types of humor are the same as those categorized by scholars, such as Teasing, irony, sarcasm, and satire. But it will take much effort to understand humor if you do not have the background. There are not many academic resources on Chinese humor in the present day. There are novels, comics, animations, cross talks (Xiangsheng in Chinese), excerpts, stage plays, talk shows, variety shows, New Year films, comedy movies, and Comedy TV series. According to the 2017 China Comedy Industry Research Report, in 2017, the total box office of comedy movies totaled RMB 7.3 billion, excluding cartoons and Hollywood blockbusters. The results of various calculation methods for the variety show market size in 2017 are different, but there are at least 40 billion, and the penetration rate of comedy variety shows 10%, which is 4 billion. The national theater box office has 800 million, and Mahua Fun Age (a cultural media company based in Beijing, China, established in 2003) accounts for 26%, which is about 200 million. The comedy movies mentioned above, comedy-variety shows, and the total market size of comedy is about 11.5 billion (Yin & Sun, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022).

2.2 *Humor in Chinese Education*

Traditionally, Chinese education has its characteristics and patterns rooted in Chinese philosophy, culture, and basic education concepts. Firstly, Chinese teachers and students take their teaching and learning quite seriously. Education has always been regarded as an important way of making a living and pursuing a superior position in Chinese society. So the teachers and students take it seriously because of the pressure of the traditional Chinese examination system, such as The National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), commonly known as Gaokao, which is crucial to senior high school students. Due to the examination system, teaching and learning emphasize repetition, reviewing, and rote memory, which is traditionally dominated by a teacher-centered, book-centered approach (Rao, 2006). Secondly, teachers are respected and regarded as authorities in the classroom. In the words of Confucius, teachers are "knowledge passers" and moral models for the students. Teaching has been advocated as a "sacred" occupation, and any argument with the teacher in the class is considered disrespectful to the teacher (Han & Han, 2019). Thirdly, the teacher-student relationship is a hierarchy formed because of maintaining teachers' authority and the discipline of students in the classroom. Most of the interaction in the classroom is from the teacher to the students. There is little student-initiated and student-student interaction in traditional Chinese classes (Hu, 2002).

According to the review of Chinese educational characteristics, it is obvious to observe and conclude that teachers used less humor and students behaved in less humorous ways than their western counterparts. Chen and Martin (2005) found that Chinese students tended to behave in less humorous ways than Canadian undergraduates and used less humor to cope with stress than their Canadian counterparts. Yue, Wong, and Hiranandani (2014) revealed that Hangzhou students used significantly more adaptive humor than Hong Kong students and that Hong Kong students used significantly more maladaptive humor than Hangzhou students. He believed that it could be attributed to the greater valuation of collectivism in Mainland China than in Hong Kong, such that interpersonal harmony, interdependence, and saving other-face are more prized in Hangzhou than in Hong Kong (Yue et al., 2014). Jiang et al. (2011) depicted that Chinese students, compared with American students, held a more negative implicit attitude toward humor (Jiang et al., 2011). Evidence suggests that instructors' use of humor has many benefits in learning and teaching (Bell & Pomerantz, 2016; Richmond et al., 2015; Zhang, 2005). Nevertheless, humorous/funny is always among these privileged characteristics of students' favored teachers (Wu & Huang, 2003). However, the effects of instructors' use of humor are underestimated, and very little research has been conducted on it in China.

In light of the suppression of humor in Chinese culture and education, it seems guaranteed to presume that the humor preference of Chinese instructors might be significantly lower than their western counterparts. A few

teachers do use canned jokes (Duanzi in Chinese) in their classrooms, but most of the canned jokes are from the internet. In China, “Duanzi” is often caused by a hot social event. A “Duanzi” can quickly spread across the internet, which can express people's ridicule of the event and release the catharsis of inner conflict (Lin, 2020). So, how to use “Duanzi” appropriately in the class needs a teacher's wisdom. Moreover, the “Duanzi” should be connected with the content of the classroom; otherwise, it will turn the classroom into an entertainment place, which goes against the classroom's basic educational purpose and will make it vulgar. Here below is a “Duanzi” popularized around ten years ago.

“Duanzi” example:

为缓解今后严重的就业压力，教育部出台新学位制度，博士学位毕业后可继续攻读壮士，四年壮士毕业可攻读勇士，勇士毕业可攻读猛士，读完还可攻读圣斗士学位，毕业后如仍找不到工作的，请攻读股市，然后直接拿烈士学位。

English translation:

To alleviate the serious employment pressure, the Ministry of Education has introduced a new degree system. After graduating with a doctorate (Boshi), you can continue to study for heroic men (Zhuangshi). After four years of graduation, you can study for warriors (Yongshi). After you graduate, you can study for Saint Seiya (Shengdoushi). If you still can't find a job, please study the stock market (Gushi), and then directly take the degree of martyrs (Lieshi).

The doctorate (Boshi) is the highest degree in the education system. Having a doctorate means that you can find a very good job. However, employment is becoming more and more difficult now, even after you finish a Ph.D. study. Then, you have to continue to study “Zhuangshi”, “Yongshi”, “Shengdoushi”, “Gushi”, “Lieshi” that do not exist in the education system. These words end up with the same word, “shi”, which makes them rhyme. It is a complaint made by netizens about employment difficulties. This “Duanzi” is popularized with the “education is worthless” trend, which could make students believe education is not useful anymore.

Recent research found Chinese university students utilize various humor styles in social interactions, some of which correlate with greater emotional intelligence and subjective well-being (Wang et al., 2019). However, perceptions and uses of humor also show cultural specificity among Chinese students (Jiang et al., 2019b). Comparisons indicate Chinese participants appreciate and employ humor aimed at maintaining group harmony, regulating face-threatening situations, and achieving in-group cohesion more so than Western counterparts. Nevertheless, trends point to an increase in Chinese students perceiving and producing humor similarly to peers in Western cultures. These findings around university students highlight how humor serves both cultural and psychosocial functions in Chinese education contexts. Continued analysis of humor style differences and their impacts may elucidate opportunities for fostering beneficial applications of humor among Chinese student populations.

2.3 Humor in Chinese EFL Teaching

English language learning in China begins formally in grade three of primary school and continues for six years throughout secondary education. In traditional Chinese English classes, teachers often give all students undifferentiated teaching according to the national prescribed teaching syllabus and tasks (Yang & Yeh, 2023). Most Chinese teachers are in favor of traditional pedagogical approaches like the grammar-translation method and audio-lingualism that offer teachers maximum control and opportunity to transmit knowledge (Barnard et al., 2002; Hu, 2002; Wen & Clément, 2003). Although the CLT and TBLT were introduced and advocated in China many decades ago, traditional Chinese education emphasizes maintaining a hierarchical but harmonious relationship between teacher and student in a general way (Liu, 2015; Zhang et al., 2013). Such a teaching approach will produce problems like a single teaching model and a dull classroom atmosphere. The traditional teaching model of “Teacher-centeredness” is far from meeting the needs of Chinese students in the new era.

The communicative approach has been introduced into Chinese EFL education recently because of the weakness of learners' communicative ability (Rao & Huang, 2019). Traditionally, due to the influence of Chinese philosophy, culture, and basic concepts of education, English teaching in China is dominated by a teacher-centered, book-centered, grammar-translation method and an emphasis on rote memory (Hu, 2021). Based on the Chinese centralized curriculum, almost all English textbooks are designed to teach writing and reading with little emphasis on speaking and listening, let alone activities such as games or role-playing (Zheng & Borg, 2014). The majority of the English teaching is still conducted by Chinese teachers (Fang & Liu, 2020), most of whom have never been outside of China or talked to a foreigner. Due to a lack of English proficiency, a few Chinese teachers are worried about not being able to respond to spontaneous questions related to the target language, sociolinguistics, or culture

from interactions in the classroom. So, it is difficult for Chinese teachers to use humor in a non-native language. However, with the promotion of the CLT approach, the Chinese curriculum and students are changing (Liu & Wang, 2020). In recent years, the spoken English test has been prepared to be added to the College Entrance Exam and College English Test. For this form of examination, it is assumed that teachers will pay more attention to the communication part, which may affect the use of humor. A thorough database search of CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) was conducted to retrieve and analyze articles related to using humor in EFL teaching. There are many studies on the differences in humor in the Chinese context (Jiang et al., 2011; Qian, 2007; Yue, 2010, 2011; Zhang, 2005), but none of them specifically focused on humor in the Chinese EFL classroom. While this research field has been done in other different contexts, which mainly discuss the benefits of language learning according to the studies reviewed (Bell & Pomerantz, 2014; Reddington, 2015). It is worthwhile to do studies in the China EFL context and may find different findings as schools are complex entities and classrooms are public spaces populated by different students with different values, attitudes, and world views. The use of humor in Chinese EFL teaching would gain more attention in future research.

Even though there are few academic papers on the application of humor in Chinese EFL teaching based on the CNKI database, it remains an area warranting further exploration. There are cultural considerations for introducing humor in Chinese learning contexts, requiring educators' sensitive discernment in employing humor effectively. Broad research on classroom humor usage indicates when adapted appropriately, humor engages students, reduces anxiety, and aids content mastery. As Chinese EFL explores students' responses to humorous techniques, findings may reveal implications for whether and how teachers incorporate humor in a manner aligned with Chinese cultural norms.

3. Teachers' Emotional Labor

3.1 Emotional Labor in Educational Settings

The concept of emotional labor in educational settings has garnered significant attention since Hochschild's (1983) seminal work was extended to the teaching profession. Teaching, as an emotionally demanding profession, requires educators to manage their feelings and emotional displays to fulfill institutional expectations and professional responsibilities (Yin & Lee, 2012). In educational contexts, emotional labor manifests through various forms of emotional regulation, display rules, and interpersonal interactions that characterize the teaching profession.

Teachers engage in emotional labor through three primary mechanisms: surface acting, deep acting, and genuine expression of emotions (Yin, 2016). Surface acting involves teachers modifying their external emotional displays without changing their internal feelings, such as maintaining a positive demeanor despite feeling frustrated. Deep acting, conversely, requires teachers to actively modify their internal feelings to align with expected emotional displays, such as genuinely trying to feel enthusiasm for student engagement. The genuine expression of emotions occurs when teachers' felt emotions naturally align with institutional expectations (Yin et al., 2019).

Research indicates that the intensity and frequency of emotional labor in educational settings are influenced by various factors. Institutional requirements often dictate specific emotional display rules, requiring teachers to exhibit patience, enthusiasm, and care regardless of their authentic emotional states (Nayernia & Babayan, 2019). Additionally, cultural norms and expectations, particularly in Asian educational contexts, may amplify the emotional labor demands on teachers through emphasizing hierarchical relationships and maintaining social harmony (Benesch, 2018).

The consequences of emotional labor in educational settings are multifaceted. While appropriate emotional management can enhance teacher-student relationships and classroom effectiveness, excessive emotional labor may lead to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and decreased job satisfaction (Rao & Chen, 2020). Studies have shown that teachers who frequently engage in surface acting are more likely to experience negative outcomes compared to those who utilize deep acting or express genuine emotions (Yin et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the emotional labor demands in educational settings vary across different teaching contexts and student populations. For instance, special education teachers often report higher levels of emotional labor due to the intensive emotional support required by their students (Wang et al., 2021). Similarly, language teachers face unique emotional challenges related to cultural differences and communication barriers (Dewaele & Li, 2021a).

The institutional context also plays a crucial role in shaping teachers' emotional labor experiences. School policies, administrative support, and organizational culture can either alleviate or exacerbate the emotional demands placed on teachers. Research suggests that supportive school environments that acknowledge the emotional aspects of teaching and provide appropriate resources can help teachers manage their emotional labor more effectively (Schussler et al., 2016).

The quality of student-teacher relationships is heavily influenced by teachers' emotional labor. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) argued that emotional labor can enhance relationships, as teachers who display genuine positive emotions foster greater trust and engagement among students. However, emotional labor also involves regulating negative emotions, which can be challenging in the context of classroom management. Recent studies indicate that teachers who invest in positive emotional displays experience better rapport with students but may also face emotional exhaustion if not adequately supported (Yin & Lee, 2012).

The expression and management of emotions in teaching are shaped by cultural norms, impacting how emotional labor is experienced in various educational settings. For example, Zembylas (2005) explored how emotional labor in education is shaped by societal expectations, with some cultures placing a high value on emotional restraint and others on emotional expressiveness. In East Asian contexts, teachers may experience heightened emotional labor due to cultural expectations of respect and authority, which constrain their emotional expression (Yin et al., 2019). These cultural influences suggest that emotional labor in teaching may require culturally specific approaches to support teacher well-being.

Teachers employ a range of strategies to manage the demands of emotional labor, such as seeking peer support, participating in professional development, and practicing self-care techniques (Hargreaves, 2000). Effective coping strategies can reduce the negative effects of emotional labor and improve resilience, underscoring the need for schools to implement support systems (Hakanen et al., 2006). Mindfulness practices have also shown promise in helping teachers reduce stress associated with emotional labor, enabling them to approach classroom challenges with greater emotional balance (Sharp & Jennings, 2016).

3.2 Impact on EFL Teaching

The emotional labor demands in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching present unique challenges and complexities that extend beyond those found in general education settings. EFL teachers face additional emotional burdens due to language barriers, cultural differences, and the specific expectations associated with language instruction (Alzaanin, 2021). These distinctive characteristics of EFL teaching create a multilayered emotional landscape that teachers must navigate skillfully.

In the Chinese EFL context, teachers experience emotional labor through multiple channels. First, they must maintain an enthusiastic and encouraging classroom atmosphere to promote language learning, often requiring continuous emotional regulation to create a low-anxiety environment for students (Mo, 2020; Shen, 2022). This is particularly crucial as many Chinese students experience foreign language anxiety, requiring teachers to carefully manage both their own and their students' emotional states during instruction.

Cultural differences amplify the emotional labor demands in EFL teaching. Chinese EFL teachers often find themselves bridging two distinct cultural contexts: maintaining traditional Chinese educational values while incorporating Western pedagogical approaches. This cultural mediation requires sophisticated emotional management, as teachers must navigate between different educational philosophies and communication styles (Chen et al., 2018). For instance, teachers might need to encourage more direct expression and classroom participation while respecting Chinese cultural norms of modesty and face-saving.

The linguistic aspect of EFL teaching adds another dimension to emotional labor. Teachers must constantly monitor and adjust their language use, not only for pedagogical effectiveness but also for emotional appropriateness. This includes modulating their voice, adjusting their speaking pace, and maintaining patience when dealing with language-related frustrations (Hu, 2002; Liu & Ren, 2021). The need to communicate complex ideas in a second language while maintaining emotional engagement can be particularly taxing for non-native English-speaking teachers.

The impact of emotional labor on EFL teachers' professional well-being is significant. Studies have shown that Chinese EFL teachers who engage in extensive surface acting report higher levels of emotional exhaustion compared to those who utilize deep acting strategies (Liao et al., 2020). This finding is particularly relevant in the Chinese educational context, where teachers often feel pressured to maintain a formal and authoritative classroom presence while simultaneously creating an engaging and interactive learning environment.

Moreover, institutional expectations in Chinese EFL settings can intensify emotional labor demands. Teachers are often expected to achieve high student performance outcomes while fostering positive attitudes toward English learning. This dual responsibility creates additional emotional pressure, particularly in examination-oriented educational systems (Yin & Lee, 2012). The pressure to prepare students for high-stakes English examinations while maintaining an emotionally supportive classroom environment can create significant emotional tension for teachers.

4. Theoretical Integration and Discussion

The relationship between humor and emotional labor in educational contexts represents a complex interplay of psychological, social, and pedagogical dimensions. While these two constructs have often been studied separately in educational research, their interconnection reveals significant implications for understanding teachers' emotional work and classroom dynamics (Karahan et al., 2019; Liao et al., 2020). Liao (2020) explores how humor can serve as a coping strategy for emotional labor among primary school teachers, a group known for facing high emotional demands. Through a survey of 302 teachers, her research examines the connections between three types of emotional labor (surface, deep, and genuine acting) and four humor styles: affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating. Key findings reveal that adaptive humor styles—affiliative and self-enhancing—positively correlate with emotional labor, while maladaptive styles—aggressive and self-defeating—show a negative correlation. This suggests that adaptive humor may help teachers navigate the emotional complexities of their roles by fostering positive self-evaluation, which could indirectly support psychological well-being.

The primary intersection between humor and emotional labor manifests in teachers' strategic use of humor as an emotional regulation strategy. When teachers engage in surface acting, a key component of emotional labor, humor can function as a cognitive reframing device that helps bridge the gap between felt and displayed emotions. For instance, teachers might employ self-deprecating humor to transform potentially frustrating classroom situations into opportunities for connection, thereby reducing the emotional dissonance typically associated with surface acting. This strategic deployment of humor represents what Hochschild (2012) terms "transmutation of emotional labor," where the professional requirement for emotional display becomes authentically integrated into one's teaching practice.

Furthermore, humor may serve as a buffer against the negative effects of emotional labor, particularly in the context of deep acting. Teachers who effectively incorporate humor into their pedagogical approach could experience lower levels of emotional exhaustion and higher levels of job satisfaction. This protective function operates through multiple pathways: humor can create psychological distance from stressful situations, foster positive emotional climates in the classroom, and facilitate genuine emotional expressions that align with professional expectations. The ability to generate and appreciate humor in challenging teaching moments may thus represent a form of emotional intelligence that enhances teachers' capacity for sustainable emotional labor.

The reciprocal nature of this relationship is equally noteworthy. While humor can facilitate emotional labor management, the successful performance of emotional labor often creates conditions conducive to appropriate and effective humor use. Teachers who have developed sophisticated emotional labor strategies may demonstrate greater skill in reading classroom emotional climates and timing their humorous interventions appropriately. This could suggest a synergistic relationship where proficiency in one domain reinforces competence in the other, contributing to what might be termed "emotional-humorous competence" in teaching.

However, this interconnection also presents potential challenges. The spontaneity often associated with effective humor use may seem at odds with the regulated nature of emotional labor. Teachers must navigate this tension, determining when and how to deploy humor while maintaining professional emotional displays. This navigation requires what Zembylas (2016) describes as "emotional wisdom", the ability to balance authentic emotional expression with professional requirements in ways that serve both pedagogical and personal well-being objectives.

Integrating humor into emotional labor frameworks can expand the understanding of emotional labor in educational settings, particularly in non-Western contexts like China. Current models often lack specificity on how humor functions as a tool for emotional regulation, so further research could examine humor's unique role as a form of "emotional display rule" that teachers enact. Studies focusing on humor styles, frequencies, and situational appropriateness could provide richer insights into the practical and psychological implications of humor as emotional labor.

Given the potential for humor to alleviate stress and support positive teacher-student relationships, future studies could examine the longitudinal effects of humor on teacher well-being and burnout prevention. Research that explores how humor influences job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion, and resilience could contribute significantly to strategies for reducing teacher attrition, particularly in high-stress educational environments like EFL teaching.

Conducting comparative studies across different cultural and educational contexts could reveal unique patterns in how humor is deployed as emotional labor. In Chinese EFL teaching, where societal norms shape classroom interactions, humor might serve different purposes than it would in Western educational contexts. Such comparisons could illuminate the role of culture in shaping emotional labor practices and offer insights for culturally responsive pedagogy that acknowledges teachers' emotional realities.

Training programs for EFL teachers could incorporate humor as a skill for managing emotional labor. Research could investigate how humor training impacts teachers' emotional labor, job satisfaction, and effectiveness in the classroom, offering practical recommendations for teacher education programs. Emphasizing humor's value in professional development might also aid in equipping teachers with adaptive coping mechanisms that align with the demands of their roles.

5. Conclusion

This study on the intersection of humor and emotional labor within Chinese EFL teaching contexts highlights the intricate ways in which humor serves as a vital tool for emotional regulation, relationship-building, and classroom management. Humor, as a multifaceted communicative tool, can serve as both a mechanism for emotional labor management and an outcome of successful emotional regulation in teaching contexts. Humor emerges not only as a strategy for reducing the psychological burden of emotional labor but also as a powerful medium for fostering positive teacher-student relationships and a supportive learning environment. Future research could deepen these insights by exploring the longitudinal impacts of humor on teacher well-being and by conducting cross-cultural studies to better understand how societal norms influence the emotional labor of educators across various educational contexts.

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