

Caring and emotional labour: Language teachers' engagement with anxious learners in private language school classrooms

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Key words: language anxiety, language teacher, emotional labour, caring, teacher agency

Abstract

This study examines how a group of eight EFL teachers in Greece discuss their efforts to address their students' language anxiety (LA). We found that in most cases, these teachers' efforts are motivated by an ethic of care (Noddings, 1988, 2005, 2013) in which they seek to construct positive relationships with students in order to help mitigate their students' LA. Though desirable, such efforts often result in "emotional labour" as teachers suppress their own negative emotions while attending to those of their students. Adopting a dialogical perspective to teacher engagement with anxious learners, we analyse the affective or emotional labour that language teachers often undertake in responding to their students' displays of LA. Drawing on positioning theory, we explore these concepts through analysing these language teachers' interview accounts, produced in response to questions related to their students' LA.

I Language Teachers and Language Learner Anxiety

The now extensive body of research on language anxiety (LA) has demonstrated the deleterious effects of anxiety on learners' ability to acquire, retain and produce a language (Gkonou, Daubney, & Dewaele, 2017; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). For Gregersen and MacIntyre (2014, p. 3), "language anxiety reflects the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning and using a second language and is especially relevant in a classroom where self-expression takes place". Though often left implicit, much of the LA research typically casts the teacher as responsible for doing as much as

possible to reduce learners' anxiety in relation to language learning tasks and practices (Alrabai, 2015; Arnold & Fonseca, 2007). As MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012, pp. 112-113) contend in their recent overview of past and current research on LA, "the importance of [students'] affective reactions behoves teachers and researchers to elevate the importance of emotions to a prominent place on our agendas". Research has shown that students are likely to take more risks and engage in the interactional or learning practices that can promote their language proficiency when they can do so in non-threatening and friendly classroom environments (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). As Gregersen and MacIntyre (2014, p. 13) succinctly put it, "teachers who have the foresight to create a supportive environment, highlight achievement rather than past failure, and develop insight into the uniqueness of the individual learners in their care, transform blemishes into blossoms".

This now-common-sense view was first theorised as crucial for language learning and teaching by Krashen (1982) whose notion of the "affective filter" continues to impact how teachers work to construct classroom environments that will reduce students' affective inhibitions (see Benesch, 2012). Though Krashen's focus was on the cognitive benefits to language learning when LA is reduced, his metaphoric construct presupposes the desirability of having teachers purposefully create hospitable classrooms, an effort that could be regarded as enacting an ethic of care.

II Caring teachers and emotional labour

Nel Noddings' name is often invoked in scholarship on pedagogy that has been variously labeled as a pedagogy of care, the ethic(s) of care, the culture of care, or moral

education (Noddings, 1988, 2005, 2013). The ethic of care, when active in classrooms, leads to environments in which “students will feel accepted and will be comfortable taking risks as they learn” (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006, p. 121). Caring, from this perspective, is not regarded as “a psychological state or innate attribute” that can be attributed to the teacher but is rather seen as “a set of relational practices that foster mutual recognition and human community, culture, and possibility” (Gordon, Benner, & Noddings, 1996, p. *xiii*). Kumaravadivelu (2012, p. 67) has commented on the need for language teachers to adopt a “relational approach to caring,” which, he contends, is particularly necessary for teachers of *English* “because they are dealing with a language of globality and coloniality, [and] face numerous dilemmas and conflicts almost on a regular basis”.

However, the ethic of care, when practiced in classrooms, introduces new concerns. On the one hand, it can grant teachers deep satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment in their work because of their efforts to address students’ deep needs (Cowie, 2011; Zembylas, 2005). It also serves to maintain positive group dynamics, a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere, and healthy interpersonal relationships among classroom members, which are likely to lead to improved mental health and academic achievement. As Furrer, Skinner, and Pitzer (2014, p. 102) contend, “an extensive body of research suggests the importance of close, caring *teacher*-student relationships and high quality *peer* relationships for students’ academic self-perceptions, school engagement, motivation, learning, and performance” (italics in the original). However, this ethic of care can also lead teachers to focus on managing or suppressing their own emotions in order to not defy predefined norms regarding “appropriate” displays of emotion.

Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006, p. 132) note, for example, that “teachers are *expected to be* exemplary in controlling their negative emotions—e.g. their anger and frustration—in their desire to be better teachers and only display the positive emotions associated with caring” (italics added). The notion of emotional labour entails that teachers’ own affective displays need to conform to “both tacit and explicit feeling rules” (Benesch, 2012, p. 113) that hold sway in a particular context. These “rules” point to the normative aspect of teacher affect and the need for the “psychic and social dimensions” (ibid, p. 41) of teaching to “cohere in a certain way” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 231, cited in Benesch, 2012, p. 41) in order for teachers to claim and maintain a professional identity.

These expectations and the need for ongoing emotion management on the part of teachers often results in teachers experiencing additional stress that can lead to cynicism or even teacher burnout (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006, p. 123; see also Day & Gu, 2010; Frenzel, 2014; Tsang, 2011). This negative potential, labeled as emotional or affective labour, has been explored in a few studies focusing on language teachers specifically (see Benesch, 2012; King, 2015; Low & Liew, 2016) which have shown that it can influence teachers’ emotions and practices within their current teaching context but also their overall long-term well-being. As King (2015, p. 98) explains, “the effort required to express such organisationally desired emotions can be mentally exhausting and a dissonance between one’s true feelings and one’s sanctioned emotional displays may result in self-estrangement and depersonalization”. King (2015, p. 105) discusses the emotional labour of language teachers in Japan in terms of suppressing their negative emotions but also of “bearing the motivational burden” in the face of their students’ silence in the classroom. Likewise, Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006, p. 123) point to the

ever-present risk that caring relationships can “become a source of emotional strain, anxiety, anger, and disappointment”, and Collins and Ting (2014, p. 16) note that the “challenge of caring within the complexity of real social situations is demanding and can be overwhelming”.

In arguing that a new “affective turn” has developed in SLA scholarship, one which does not look for linear cause-effect relationships between individuals’ “affective factors” and learning outcomes, Pavlenko (2013, p. 22) instead focuses on the relational aspects of affect. She comments that recent research under this umbrella of the “affective turn”, though still under-theorised and still in development, has already “dramatically transformed and expanded the scope of research on the role of affect in SLA” (p. 5). She adds that rather than attempting to ascertain what emotions *are*, current researchers, particularly those aligning with critical theories, are more interested in understanding what emotions *do*. They pursue this interest by exploring the socio-political “conditions that produce particular affective regimes and discourses of affect” (p. 18). In exploring the discourses of caring and emotion produced by the teacher participants in our study, we recognize that we need to consider how emotions, including learners’ LA, emerge as relational constructs and how they are co-constituted by language teachers and students as well as informed by “discourses of affect” that influence and constrain classroom practices and relationships.

III Positioning theory

We find that positioning theory offers a useful approach for exploring how affective relations are dialogically mobilised in narrative accounts. Positioning is a

metaphorical term used to capture the dynamic processes by which identities are constituted in interpersonal encounters; i.e. how we position ourselves (reflexive positioning) and how we position and are positioned by others (interactive positioning) (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Harré and Moghaddam (2003, p. 5) define a position as “a loose set of rights and duties that limit the possibilities of actions.” Thus, the way in which positions are understood, interpreted, and/or enacted in discursive practices will constrain how people choose to act or speak—and even how they feel. Importantly, as Leander (2004, p. 210) indicated, positioning must be seen not only as locally organised but also as mediated by a “social/individual matrix” that links locally situated action to ideological and normative ways of being.

Though positioning theory was developed for the exploration of interaction, it has been adopted in interview and narrative research which primarily focuses on how interviewees, the language teachers in this case, discursively construct versions of self and others in their narrative reflections (see Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Trent, 2012; Yoon, 2008). As interviewees construct versions of their teacher selves in terms of classroom practices, they necessarily do so *in relation to* the kinds of student selves that they construct in their accounts. That is, a teacher inhabits a particular kind of teacher positioning through identifying a student’s positioning. The “material” used to construct relevant positions in teachers’ interview accounts includes students’ and teachers’ displayed behaviours and words and the sociocultural beliefs or norms that inform what such displayed actions mean.

One discursive and social resource that can be used in producing accounts of “teachers acting appropriately” is the discourse of caring, particularly when teachers

produce accounts of how they respond to students who are experiencing LA. Parrott (2003, p. 30) argues that emotions are integral to positioning and to establishing a “moral order” in interactional contexts. Emotions or affect cannot, as Parrott (*ibid*) argues, “consist merely of subjective feelings or ‘qualia’”, rather, they are always “about something.” When individuals position themselves (and are positioned by others) as teachers, they will often mobilise “emotion discourses” (Edwards, 1999) that are congruent with the “rights and duties” (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003, p. 5) of their teacher position. That is, they can perform empathy, anger, excitement, or any number of affective states, but they need to perform these emotions in ways that align with how teachers “should” enact them and assign targets for their emotions (i.e. what emotions are *about*) that are regarded as socially appropriate. Likewise, when teachers perform caring, they must be mindful of avoiding allegations of inappropriate displays of caring, of displaying favouritism, of appearing insufficiently empathetic, among other infractions of “feeling rules” (Benesch, 2012, p. 113). The particulars of how teachers inhabit the position of responsive, caring teacher will vary according to their subjective histories, and the degree to which they rely on social norms or construct themselves as partly or fully outside such norms. Researchers thus cannot know what teachers will say or do even if they pre-emptively construct them according to a social type such as “caring teacher”.

That is why we are compelled to engage in the research and learn about what language teachers who deal with anxious language learners believe about themselves and their students and how they choose to perform caring. The following research questions have guided our study:

1. In what way/s do the participating language teachers position their students as enacting LA?
2. How do they position themselves as appropriately responsive and caring in response to students' LA?
3. How do teachers' caring and responsiveness translate into emotional labour?

IV Background, study participants and data collection tools

The data presented in this article come from a larger mixed-methods project on the nature and impact of LA on English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learning and the emotion-regulation strategies used by highly anxious learners. In the study reported here we adopted a qualitative research design using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight EFL teachers who work in a private language school in Northern Greece. The instruction of English (and other foreign languages) in Greece is increasingly provided by a thriving private sector of language schools, which offer intensive foreign language tuition to students 7 years of age and older. Studying in these schools is not compulsory, but students (and parents) prefer them to public schools due to their higher quality of teaching and classes which target English language exams from acclaimed standardised examination boards (e.g. Cambridge English Language Assessment), or national standardised English testing centres (Angouri, Mattheoudakis, & Zigraka, 2010; Mattheoudakis & Nicolaidis, 2005; Sifakis, 2009). Certified knowledge of English is now inextricably linked to students' future career development and pursuit of academic goals abroad, thus making private language schools the norm rather than the exception within

the country's foreign language education system (Angouri, Mattheoudakis, & Zigrika, 2010; Mattheoudakis & Alexiou, 2009).

The demographic information about the eight EFL teachers is summarised in Table 1 (the teachers' names are pseudonyms).

Table 1. Demographic information about teachers

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Level of current students	Years as EFL teacher	Qualification (s)	Native speaker of English
Akrivi	54	Female	Advanced	25	BA English Language & Literature	Yes
Aleksandra	39	Female	Lower-intermediate, Intermediate	11	BA English Language & Literature Teacher Training Course, University of Stockholm	No
Antonis	35	Male	Intermediate, Upper-intermediate, Advanced	12	BA English Language & Literature	No
Argyris	42	Male	Upper-intermediate, Advanced	19	BA English Language & Literature MA Theoretical Linguistics	No
Bonnie	26	Female	Lower-intermediate, Intermediate	4	BA English Language & Literature CELTA	Yes
Eliza	30	Female	Lower-intermediate, Intermediate	8	BA English Language & Literature	Yes
Kiki	31	Female	Intermediate, Advanced	7	BA English Language & Literature	No
Linda	53	Female	Intermediate	23	BA English	Yes

The interviews varied in length, with some lasting up to one hour. All participants gave their written consent to participating. Teachers were asked whether they preferred to be interviewed in English or Greek; all of them chose English. An interview protocol was used but at the same time the design was deliberately left only partly structured to allow for additional questions on points that were important and meaningful for the participants. The interview guide included questions about teachers' understandings of LA and its effect on learners, differences among anxious learners at various proficiency levels, variations in anxiety levels according to language skills, anxiety-inducing factors in the classroom, teaching strategies, and teachers' perceptions of their role as teachers and how they deal with high anxious students. These questions were drawn from what previous research had revealed about aspects of learner LA and also the student data collected for the same project, which included questionnaires, diaries and interviews. Interviews were the only data collection tool used with teachers as the study was initially intended to look at highly anxious learners. However, as the data collection with learners was unfolding, the teacher perspective became particularly salient and it was felt that reconciling learner and teacher insights could account for a more rounded view of the topic under investigation. Although the teacher interview questions primarily targeted learners' LA and were not written to address the topic of teachers' positioning in response to learners' LA and their performance of caring and emotional labour per se, the

serendipitous nature of the data encouraged us to consider the interview conversations from these perspectives for the present study. Additionally, it is worth noting that the research questions guiding the present study were refined and finalised after the data were analysed. A more general research question was posed prior to the start of the data collection process, namely ‘What strategies do EFL teachers use to help their learners mitigate their anxiety?’

The interviews were audio recorded and digitally transcribed for thematic analysis. Each of the two researchers read the transcripts several times individually to identify significant and recurrent patterns in terms of how the teachers positioned their students through describing their displayed behaviours and attitudes and attributing these displays as indexes of students’ LA (or their lack of anxiety). We generated a set of eight codes, guided by the interview questions, that identified how teachers responded to topics such as the nature of LA, level of language proficiency and LA, language domain and LA, among others. However, in conducting this first step in the analysis, we noticed that teachers’ comments on their students’ anxiety were always accompanied by comments describing their own efforts to demonstrate care and responsiveness. This emergent theme of teacher caring and emotional work led us to return to the interviews and jointly analyse how teachers positioned themselves as inhabiting caring and responsive teacher selves and to analyse how such efforts translated into emotional labour. Our second round of analysis involved broader codes: students demonstrating LA, teachers responding to anxious students, and teachers demonstrating caring, but these codes were typically layered within the same segments of talk, pointing to the relational positioning work that emerged: teachers positioned themselves as they positioned their students.

V Findings

1 Positioning students as anxious and teachers as aware and responsive

We will begin by exploring how the teachers collectively and individually identified students' behaviours and words as indexical signifiers of their anxiety. Though the interview questions focused on students' LA, all of the teachers tended to treat that form of anxiety as part of more general student stress¹. We see, for example, in Excerpt 1, that Argyris treats LA as "the whole thing about stress in second language learning" and argues that it is a widespread problem (not peculiar to only some students) given the importance placed on English and in having a degree in Greek society.

Excerpt 1

I just think that the stress, the whole thing about stress in second language learning here in Greece is really, really high because English language in Greek society, it's very, you know, standard, and it's very important to have a degree here in Greece. (Argyris)

Teachers also positioned themselves as able to "read" the below-the-surface anxieties that manifest themselves in students' (sometimes inappropriate) actions. As shown in Excerpt 2, Eliza commented on her ability to "read" her students "very well and very easily."

Excerpt 2

I can read my students very well and very easily. It depends on your skills, I mean you are really, you know, like a person that can understand just by looking at someone, just by seeing the facial expressions or the way that they are looking at me. (Eliza)

More significantly, when asked how they recognised anxiety in their students, all of the teachers provided descriptions of student behaviours that they treated as symptoms

¹ Although the literature on general psychology and education distinguishes between stress and anxiety, in their interview accounts, teachers conflated the two terms. Thus, we sometimes refer to stress as if it represents anxiety because this is how our participants framed it.

or signals of anxiety, commenting on student behaviours such as challenging teachers' corrections of their mistakes, biting their nails, writing on their desks, being disruptive, getting fidgety, among many others. They also treated these behaviours as requiring them to respond. In Excerpt 3, Akrivi notes that some problematic behaviours are "easy to manage" and thus "you allow that to happen", whereas Aleksandra in Excerpt 4 suggests that students' displays of stress are bids for teachers to "show compassion".

Excerpt 3

They talk to the person next to them to explain it rather than ask me. And because this is a very small class and it's very easy to manage that, you allow that to happen...How else do they express their anxiety? By challenging you about their mistakes, yes, they challenge. I say this, that I think this is correct, you know, [and] in their anxiety to be right, that kind of thing, they challenge you. (Akrivi)

Excerpt 4

The way they speak, they stress their body language. They don't have to say it sometimes, the body language. Some of them of course show that they are stressed, because they want you to sort of, not, how to say it, not feel sorry for them, but sort of show compassion. "Oh may be I shouldn't give you that much". But they show it by just saying it. Some other students, you know, biting nails, that type of thing. (Aleksandra)

Though there is variation in what these teachers individually reported as the signals that they recognised to be symptoms of anxiety, it is telling that they all treated students' disruptive and problematic behaviours, not as indicators of "bad" students, but as indicators of the students' anxiety. At least in the interview account-giving, these teachers positioned themselves as non-reactionary to these difficult behaviours. In positioning themselves as aware of what such behaviours mean (as symptoms of anxiety rather than of character flaws), they also construct themselves as "caring" teachers who can control their own emotional responses to students' problematic behaviours, thereby constituting themselves as appropriately responsive in this positioning work.

Furthermore, the relational aspect of student anxiety is demonstrated in teachers' comments regarding their awareness of how they contribute to that anxiety. Akrivi noted, for example, that when her students do not understand what she is "talking about" in English, they feel "too embarrassed" to ask for help (Excerpt 5). In enacting what she assumes the students must be thinking in those moments: "Oh my god, I haven't understood this", Akrivi positions herself as both aware of and concerned about how her students feel when experiencing LA.

Excerpt 5

Generally now, what causes anxiety in the classroom would be the fact that they do not understand what I am talking about, and they feel they are missing out, and I've explained the grammar point on the board, and they haven't a clue of what I am talking about. This might cause anxiety. They are too embarrassed to ask me to repeat it, or they are too embarrassed to, to show that they don't understand. Then they think "Oh my god, I haven't understood this". (Akrivi)

Alexandra, in Excerpt 6, also commented on the degree of control she felt she had on her students' anxiety levels, explaining that teachers can manipulate students' behaviours and emotional reactions but added that it is not entirely up to the teacher to mitigate anxiety; instead, students need to be aware of their own emotions too because "if they're not confident enough, whatever I say won't change it".

Excerpt 6

I can't affect all the students, so it has to do both with them and with me, the teacher. A teacher does, we can make them feel as stressed as we want them, we can make them feel more relaxed if we want to...but it's a mixture of what we've said before, that if they're not confident enough, whatever I say won't change it.

Interestingly, all of the teachers also commented on the positive aspects of anxiety along with its more debilitating effects. They acknowledged the motivating role that anxiety can play through compelling students to finish their work, study a bit more and try harder, and be more careful, what one teacher called "creative stress" (Argyris). They

also indicated that the students who are not stressed are those who do not care, are “indifferent”, and appear to make no effort to learn English. It thus seems that these teachers regard “stress” or “anxiety” as a psycho-social commodity that must be managed, channeled, as well as mitigated. In doing so, they could position themselves as agentively working to contain and diffuse their students’ anxiety and as performing a responsible, caring teacher self.

Thus, it seems that the teachers easily inhabit the position of the knowing and actively responsive teacher who is able to recognise when their students are manifesting anxious behaviours. Furthermore, they displayed self-awareness in terms of how their teacher status and teaching practices often contribute to LA. In terms of positioning, we can argue that students’ behaviours and embarrassed or nervous reactions enable the teachers to position themselves as not only somewhat at fault but also as aware, responsive, and concerned about the repercussions of their actions on their students, and thus as teachers who orient to a caring identity. Teachers’ utterances and actions can be seen as caring “rejoinders” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 284) to their students’ behaviours even as students’ anxious behaviours are, in part, constituted through their teachers’ actions.

2 Performing caring teacher selves and undertaking emotional labour

In addition to positioning themselves as aware of and responsive to their students’ LA, the teachers all commented on the intentional anxiety-mitigating strategies that they regularly practiced in their classrooms. In so doing, they actively (even if perhaps only subconsciously) positioned themselves as caring teachers. Their responses point to a fairly broad range of teacher actions and include giving students time to “experiment” with language when writing (Akrivi), informing students of upcoming assignments so

that they can “plan” ahead (Aleksandra), changing “procedure” or activities on the fly in order to change to “something less stressful” for students (Antonis), and breaking larger assignments “into something smaller” to make them more manageable (Linda).

The following excerpts demonstrate that the interviewees positioned themselves as agentively working to create caring classroom environments. These comments emerged in the interviews, not in response to any direct questions, but usually as support for or as a rationale for their other comments. It seems that these unsolicited comments served as a resource for these teachers to position themselves according to the now normative assumptions regarding classroom environments best suited to reducing LA. Furthermore, they enabled the teachers to construct desirable identities for themselves as individuals who are appropriately responsive to their students’ needs and exercise their teacher agency in an appropriate fashion through using socially normative resources regarding appropriate “feeling rules” (Benesch, 2012, p. 113). The two excerpts shown below are indicative of an ethic of care as fundamental to these teachers’ professional identities and classroom practices. For example, as shown in Excerpt 7, Alexandra voices the truism that “all people want to be seen as an individual, as a person” and then describes how she attempts to orient to that need in her students by showing that she is “there for them...can listen to them, [and] that they can talk to [her]”.

Excerpt 7

All people want to be seen as an individual, as a person. So what I’m trying to do there is ...show that I am there for them, that I can listen to them, that they can talk to me...so that they can talk about it, and I think then they trust me...even a clap on the shoulder sometimes is enough to show them that okay, she is here, you know, she is looking, she is noticing. (Alexandra)

Eliza describes her caring teacher self in terms of having “a certain bond” with her students and indicates that she sees them “like her own children” in Excerpt 8.

Excerpt 8

I always talk to my students because I have a certain bond with them and I see them like my own children, so if I see a child start crying in my class, I will stop my lesson. I will take that student away from the other students and talk to him or her in a really calm way and try to reassure that everything is ok. (Eliza)

Though this kind of maternalistic stance has been criticised by some feminist scholars who contend that the research on ethics of care in teaching has tended to assume that women “naturally” adopt such values and practices (hooks, 1994; Lewis, 1992), teaching, by definition, is grounded in relational practice. It can thus be characterised as “emotional work”, which Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006, p. 123) describe as “the intention as well as the actions to improve how others (e.g. students) feel”.

Performing caring, along with the many other emotional aspects of teaching, can be highly rewarding and bring personal satisfaction to teachers (Cowie, 2011). However, even when teachers’ displays of caring are reciprocated or when they see evidence that their practices and strategies do, in fact, reduce students’ LA and thus lead to better learning, it is important to recognise that the emotional work of teaching “involves many emotional costs, and is often invisible, unacknowledged, or devalued” (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006, p. 123). For this reason, Isenbarger and Zembylas (ibid) argue that conceptualising caring “as a form of work challenges assumptions of care as natural or effortless”. While Alexandra and Eliza appear to be genuinely invested in working to reduce their students’ LA and to display themselves as caring teachers, these efforts do take their toll. Alexandra in Excerpt 7 positions herself as “so what I’m *trying* to do there is...show that I am there for them”. Eliza in Excerpt 8 indicated that she will “stop [her] lesson” in order to remove a distressed student from the classroom”. Such comments

point to the fact that managing the emotional texture of a classroom requires teachers to undertake intentional, strategic and persistent emotional work.

Other interviewees also reported on the things that they “try” to do which suggests that they view their efforts to care for students as carrying no guarantees about successful outcomes. Furthermore, the teachers demonstrated conscious efforts to try to strike a middle ground between fostering an environment that is too easy or too undemanding and one that is too rigid and impersonal. In demonstrating caring, teachers cannot simply make students feel better all the time. In Excerpt 9, Linda comments, “so I *try* really hard to be relaxed but firm”.

Excerpt 9

So learning by definition has some stress built in, so I try really hard to be relaxed but firm, you know, kind of laid back, that there are clear rules and this is what I want and when it’s time to work, it’s time to work.

Likewise, in Excerpt 10, Antonis discusses how he “tries” to talk to his students and reassure them that through “constant work and practice” they can “make it”,

Excerpt 10

Talking to them personally and trying to figure out what’s troubling them and trying to make them feel better about the fact....I think that’s the most common thing we do. We try to talk to them and try to tell them that whatever they have failed in or whatever they find difficult, through constant work and practice, eventually they are going to make it.

Similarly, Kiki, in Excerpt 11, comments, “I *try* to show understanding and stand by them”.

Excerpt 11

I try to show understanding and to stand by them....I say, “Don’t worry so much about that [a poor mark]. Focus on the, on how much you have improved compared to previous times. That’s what I tell them.

In each of these excerpts we see evidence of how teachers need to work within the tension of demonstrating care and empathy when confronting student LA while also

demanding that students work hard in order to learn and to achieve. Such tensions will likely ring familiar to most teachers given that they point to the mundane but ubiquitous emotional work that shapes teaching.

We found additional examples of how teachers' attention to creating a pedagogy of care in their classrooms simultaneously evoked tensions within such positive efforts. Antonis, for example, commented directly on the tension between fulfilling his role as a teacher to "make [his students] feel less stressed" and the need for his private school to "have a result" in terms of successful language learning outcomes. In describing her efforts to diffuse her students' anxiety by telling them to not "worry so much" about their mistakes, Kiki noted that she deliberately avoids focusing on anxious students' errors if "on that specific day...I am calm enough to do that. It's not always feasible." Her comments indicate that making on-the-fly judgments regarding when to focus and when to ignore students' language errors, a seemingly minor but also ubiquitous component of language teaching practice, take their emotional toll. It seems that on some days she feels she does not have the emotional fortitude (feeling sufficiently "calm") to overlook her students' language errors.

Eliza also commented on the difficulties of appeasing students' anxiety when the teachers themselves are stressed, a problem that can develop when the teacher "knows that she has to teach a certain amount of things during the year and she is pressured by this syllabus". Eliza added that she thought the teacher, in those circumstances, "might be the source of anxiety" for students. However, the vulnerability of the caring relationship emerges in yet another comment by Eliza. In describing a situation in which a young student started crying in her classroom, Eliza noted that after talking with the student, she

determined that the crying was motivated by a situation at the student's home. She said, "So it wasn't my fault or the students that were in the classroom's fault...it was something wrong that was happening in her family". The realization that the student's tears were not due to her "fault" came as a relief to Eliza, but it also points to the assumptions that teachers constantly work against—that students' demonstrations of anxiety are factors which they can and should do something about.

The interviewees also commented on other aspects of their teaching that lead to feeling pressure and anxiety, including the overwhelming work load. However, in focusing on how these teachers positioned themselves as needing to mitigate their students' LA and their orientation to caring for students as indicators of good teaching practice, we find evidence of how the necessary and even desirable emotional work of teaching can turn into emotional labour. The "discourses of affect" (Pavlenko, 2013, p. 18) that the teachers in our study drew on to discuss their students' displays of LA and to position themselves as good teachers, resulted in them describing their teaching practice as guided by strategic responsiveness to learner anxiety and, more generally, by an ethics of care which they actively cultivate in their classrooms.

VI Discussion

The emotional work of teaching clearly can have both positive and negative outcomes, for students as well as the teachers. Thus, as Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006, p. 133) contend, it is "often difficult to tell caring and emotional labour apart". The assumed and normative displays of caring in relation to students' LA are likely to go unquestioned if students demonstrate that it mitigates their anxiety and improves their

learning, but as Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006) suggest, this positive outcome can hide potential negative long-term effects. They note, for example, that “the lack of distinction between caring and labour may have important implications for teachers abandoning or remaining in the profession, because the emotional demands of teaching may often go unrealized” (p. 133). It is for this reason, that we have explored how this particular group of teachers of English in Greece positioned themselves as aware and responsive language teachers. In discussing their efforts to address their students’ LA, they simultaneously revealed how their language teaching practices are marked by persistent emotional labour. The likelihood that their experiences will resonate with those of many other language teachers points to the need for language teaching researchers to expose this important component of teacher practice and also to interrogate the implications of this emotional labour for language teachers’ professional development and career longevity.

The above analysis points to a number of interesting dimensions relevant to our understandings of language teacher caring and emotional labour in relation to their students’ LA. First, the teacher participants positioned themselves as caring and non-reactionary (“non” actions that required them to engage in emotional labour) to their students’ manifestations of LA. Likewise, they constructed themselves as responsive in addressing the need to pull their students out of difficult, anxiety-provoking situations or to create the conditions that would tone down the negative repercussions of LA. Teachers reported that they would explicitly teach cognitive and metacognitive strategies to their students (e.g. preparation, brainstorming, breaking down a task into manageable chunks) which they would then combine with a range of affective strategies (e.g. showing

compassion, consoling students, and even mothering them) to help them minimise their LA.

As the teachers discussed their ongoing efforts to understand their students and their emotional needs, reflect on their practice, and select appropriate strategies for mitigating their students' LA, they seemed particularly eager to discuss—unsolicited—their efforts to create caring, friendly, and comfortable classroom environments. Although the teachers produced varied responses when commenting on their students' anxiety-indicating behaviours, these teachers' awareness and individualisation of their teaching strategies in relation to students' anxiety management shows that they have considerable knowledge of and sensitivity to their students' negative emotions about classroom language learning. The teachers in this study seemed to constantly attempt to gauge what would affect their students emotionally and to intervene accordingly. And yet the constant need for reflection on self and others' emotional needs, and the constant need to judge how best to respond to individual students' anxieties come at a cost. Teachers' working conditions, their burdensome time schedules, along with caring for their students can be seen to result in emotional labour for themselves as well as on manageable levels of teacher anxiety (see also Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; Horwitz, 1996) which teachers explicitly commented on.

Given increasing levels of teacher burnout at an international scale, we agree with Low and Liew (2016) that language teacher education must do better in “acknowledge[ing] the role of emotions in the cognitive affairs of teaching” (p. 276) and in fostering critical awareness of the “emotional dimensions of teachers' practices,

behaviours, and beliefs” (p. 277) by promoting reflection, self-regulation, and the importance of positive psychology and professional well-being in the classroom.

VII Limitations and further research

This study attempted to understand how teachers position themselves in relation to anxious students. Though the original study was not designed with this scope in mind, the teacher interview data lent themselves to analysing these aspects of teacher practice by using positioning theory. Having said this, the sample in the present study was small and included teachers working in one language school only; therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution, ensuring that no trend is extrapolated from such a small sample. Reflecting on possible future directions in research that focuses on teachers’ caring and emotional labour within foreign language classrooms could take, we would encourage researchers to investigate, within diverse settings, how teachers position themselves among students with strong emotional needs and negative emotional reactions. Action research projects in wide-ranging cultural and educational contexts could also be undertaken. Another possibility concerns studies that would bring together, within a single study, teachers’ and students’ perspectives on the emotional labour of teaching and learning and on issues of learner and teacher agency. For example, teachers and their students could be asked what they believe the antecedents of LA are, in an attempt to see where perspectives converge and differ.

To conclude, looking at the dialogical constitution of language teacher caring and emotional labour in relation to student LA is a step towards advancing our understandings of the emotional labour of language teaching, but more research is needed. Also, the impact of focused interventions needs to be assessed. Such further

understandings could help improve teaching practices, teachers' emotional well-being, and student learning in low-anxiety classroom environments.

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