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When emotions become shared: Emotional labour, identity, and collective wellbeing in language teaching

Language teaching is often examined through the familiar lenses of methodology, pedagogy, and assessment. Yet, this technical focus can obscure a central part of the profession: the emotional and identity-based experiences of those who teach. Language educators work in roles inherently and fundamentally connected to communication and human interaction, which means that emotions are not simply incidental but are embedded in day-to-day classroom practice and relational work.

In this keynote presentation, I draw attention to the complex emotional world of language teachers and the often invisible emotional labour they perform. Emotional labour involves commodifying and displaying emotions to meet professional expectations, whether projecting enthusiasm, maintaining composure, or managing frustration and fatigue. These expectations are not only internal pressures; they are socially and institutionally shaped. Teachers are frequently required to “perform” care, positivity, or authority even when it conflicts with their personal wellbeing. Recognising this tension is crucial for understanding the hidden and frequently undervalued emotional demands placed on educators.

To explore these dynamics, I draw on identity theory and emotional labour scholarship to examine how language teachers construct, negotiate, and sometimes protect their professional identities in emotionally charged contexts. Identity is not fixed; it evolves through interactions with students, colleagues, leadership, and wider institutional discourses. Teachers constantly balance what is expected of them with who they feel they are and want to become. Crucially, I argue that wellbeing should not be framed as an individual responsibility alone. Emotional experiences are collective, shaped by relationships, workplace cultures, and broader socio-political conditions in education. Therefore, we should move towards more supportive and collaborative systems that recognise teacher emotions as legitimate, shared, and worthy of care – and wellbeing as a collective health priority in language education. Ultimately, acknowledging and valuing emotional labour, identity, and wellbeing is key to developing more humane, sustainable, and authentic language teaching practices that allow teachers not just to cope, but to thrive together.