

A Case Study on the Emotional Experiences of a Pre-service EFL Teacher in China

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Abstract: *This study revolves around the emotional experiences of an EFL student teacher in China during his participation of an activity. Data from narrative frames and interviews are used to re-story what emotions he experienced and the findings reveal the participants' emotions, both positive and negative ones, were inherently connected with motivations, beliefs and identities with implications for professional development activities for student teachers.*

Keywords: Emotions, Teaching contests, Student teachers.

1. Introduction

In recent years, teaching contests have become increasingly popular in China for both pre-service and in-service teachers. Primarily functioning as professional development activities for teachers, teaching contests have drawn scholarly attention from primary, secondary and post-secondary education. Much empirical researches have been focused on the development of the participating teachers' knowledges and skills during teaching contest. Having been participants in teaching contests, I have personally enjoyed such development. But during the contests, I have also experienced and observed intense emotions, positive and negative, in myself and other participants, which are severely understudied. Therefore, this study, in an attempt to understand the emotions participating teachers experience in teaching contest, investigates a student teacher who has recently participated in a teaching contest, re-stories his emotional experiences in the contest and explores what factors were at play in his emotional experiences.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teacher Emotions

Teacher emotions are significant to their teaching and lives (Hargreaves, 1998). A complex set of feelings that teachers experience (Yip et al., 2022), teacher emotions are "intimately involved in virtually every aspect of the teaching and learning process" (Schutz & Lanehart, 2002: 199). With the growing recognition of the importance of teacher emotions comes an increasing body of research in this area, especially after the "affective turn" (Pavlenko, 2013). A considerable number of studies have been carried out to examine the relationship between teacher emotions and their identity development and practice (O'Connor, 2008; Lee & Yin, 2011; Loh & Liew, 2016; Song, 2016; Yang et al., 2021; Yip, et al., 2022;). At the same time, studies specifically targeting student teachers or pre-service teachers are also drawing more attention (White, 2009; Yuan & Lee, 2015; Zhu, 2017). The various emotions student teachers experience, both positive and negative can influence their interpretation of various learning experiences (Timošćuk & Ugaste, 2010, Yuan & Lee, 2015). Therefore, more research needs to be done on student teachers' emotions to better understand how their emotions bear on their learning and on how they become teachers (White, 2009, Yuan & Lee, 2016).

2.2 Teaching Contests

Teaching contest (TC) originated in China in the early 1980s, when many primary and secondary schools started to advocate and held open classes in the form of contests to standardize young teachers' teaching performance. Nowadays, TC has become a very popular form of professional development activity in China for both in-service teachers and pre-service teachers in all educational settings.

TC can be conceptualized around five characteristics: 1) Teaching-reform-embodied: TC is usually a kind of top-down activity initiated by a certain level of authorities, with the purpose of advancing the teaching reforms. Therefore, the winners are usually those who not only can perform skillful teaching but also well embody the advocated teaching philosophies in their lessons; 2) Competitive: given its competition-like nature, TC is usually highly competitive, with several rounds of high-elimination-rate selection. 3) Rewarding: winning awards of TCs can be a huge impetus for both in-service teachers' (e.g., job promotion or titles) and pre-service teachers' (e.g., further education or employment) future professional development, and thus teachers are highly agentive and active in preparation for TCs; 4) Cooperative: awards of TCs are not only honors for teachers but also for their institutions. Therefore, it's common for the schools to provide contestant teachers with an advisory team, which usually made of expert teachers, former awards winners, higher-education based or non-higher-education-based teacher educators; 5) process-based: TC is not only about the on-spot demonstration, but more about the preparing process, during which contestant teachers and their teams usually systematically conduct joint lesson planning, critical dialogues, rehearsals, reflective writing and reflective practices cyclically and iteratively until "ultimate possible perfection".

Majority of literature focuses on the in-service teachers, probing into the process of contestant teachers' learning or non-learning in TCs (Xu, 2017), the motivations of the contestant teachers, or the teaching competencies of the winners of TCs (Wang & Xia, 2020). Despite the potential of TC facilitating student teachers' learning to teach, how student teachers' engagement in TCs influences their learning to teach has been extremely understudied empirically. Considering that the research on in-service teachers'

participation in teaching contests have yielded valuable insights for their ongoing development, more empirical studies are needed to better understand pre-service students in their participation of teaching contests so that different stake holders can gain more insights into the nature of such activities and further contribute to the development of pre-service teachers.

Informed by our own experience and the existing literature, we proposed the following research questions:

- 1) What kind of emotions does the participant experience during teaching contests?
- 2) What factors are at play during his emotional experiences during teaching contests?

3. Methodology

3.1 The Setting

The present research took place during and after a teaching contest held in the fall semester of 2022. The teaching contest was a nation-wide activity for student teachers from a variety of majors including English, math, Chinese, biology and so on. Student teachers at both undergraduate and graduate level could sign up for this contest.

At the school (School of Foreign Languages) where this research was carried out. Student teachers had to go through two rounds of selection before the national final. In the preliminary round, student teachers submitted only a written teaching plan based on a given material. Students received the notice on September 26th and were required to submit their written works by September 28th. In the second round, student teachers gave a 5-min presentation of their teaching plan with PowerPoint demonstration. The presentation was based on their own choices instead of the given material in the preliminary round. Those who made it to the second round were notified on October 9th and the selection was held on October 14th. From the 16 student teachers who participated, 8 were selected to represent the school in the national final. The choice was made collectively by 6 faculty members. Among the chosen 8 final contestants, 5 were undergraduate students and 3 were graduate students. All of them were notified of the results on October 14th.

To help the student teachers prepare for the national final, the school assigned several faculty members to serve as mentors. For the 5 undergraduate students, 3 faculty members were chosen with one of them mentoring one student and the other two each mentoring two students. While for the graduate students, their supervisors automatically became their mentors in the contest.

In the national final. The contestants needed to first choose a teaching material themselves and design a 45-min class based on the material of their choice. Their written teaching plans were submitted to the committee before their presentation. Different from the second round held at the school. The presentation at the national final consisted 3 parts. A 3-min presentation of the teaching plan, an 8-min teaching demonstration of the designed class and a 2-min Q&A with

the judges. In the teaching demonstration, each contestant invited 3-5 of their fellow classmates to play the role of students so that student-teacher interactions could be observed. The national final was held from November 26th to 27th.

Under the impact of COVID-19, both the second round of selection and the national final were held online. There was a 2-week period in late October when the contestants and their mentors could meet on campus for discussion and rehearsal. After that, all the contestants and their mentors did most of the preparation work online.

3.2 The Participants

A convenience sampling approach was mainly adopted for participants selection. Among all the students in the university who participated in the teaching contest, the student teacher was selected for this study for the following two reasons. Firstly, the student and the researcher have a good relationship. Secondly, the participant finally won the first prize.

3.3 Data Collection

The majority of the data for the present study was collected after the teaching contest through narrative frame (Barkhuizen, 2014) and in-depth interviews. First, the researcher designed a narrative frame with a focus on the contestants' emotional experience during the whole process of participating in the teaching contest. The frame was designed in Chinese, the participants' native language. The researcher sent the frame to the participant in digital forms. Explicit instructions were made in the frame as well as during the communication of the researcher and the participant, including reading the whole frame structure first to get a general idea of the narrative and expanding or reducing the blank space when necessary.

After collecting the participant's narrative frames, the researcher conducted a semi-structured interview with the participant. Two types of question were put forward. The first type of questions focuses on his previous teaching experience and the support he received during the contest. The second type of questions are based on careful reading of his storied experience in the narrative frames. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and online due to COVID-19 and lasted 50 minutes.

3.4 Data Analysis

The interview data was transcribed automatically by using Tencent Meeting. The researcher read the transcripts and verified the accuracy of the information according to the recordings. The researcher then applied a selective reading approach (Van Manen, 1990). The analysis took place in three stages. In the first stage, the researcher carefully read through all the data to get a general picture of the participant's storied experience, then the parts that highlight the participant's emotions were selected and re-storied into "mini-stories" to offer a holistic picture of his emotional experiences. Lastly, data that emerged as the cause or the results of the participant's emotions were coded and categorized into three themes: motivation, beliefs and identities. Early drafts of the study were sent to the participant for member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and revisions were made based on his

feedback to guarantee the trustworthiness of the interpretation and analysis.

4. Findings

David felt “nervous and excited” upon receiving the notification for the preliminary selection.

“I felt nervous and excited because I had always wanted to take part in some teaching contests. I could learn from the other brilliant future teachers, and I also wanted to put what I had learned in school into practice in my own way. But I had never taken part in such contests and I was a little introverted. So I was a little hesitant about it.” (Narrative frame – David)

“I decided to take part in it because on the one hand, my teacher in the micro teaching class had given me a lot of encouragement. He recommended me for this contest and he believed in my capacity; on the other hand, I was a junior now and I had always stayed in my comfort zone. It might be too late if I didn’t start making some changes. It was a great chance, and the contest was what I had always wished for, so I decided to take part in it. I wasn’t thinking about getting any prizes, I would give it my best shot whatever prize I might get.” (Narrative frame – David)

David was assured in his identity as a future teacher as he sought ways to practice that identity.

“The form [of the preliminary selection] made me feel relaxed a little, because I only needed to submit the material in electronic forms without showing up, and at the same time, I could carefully design my teaching plan and make repeated revisions to fully show my own ideas in it.” (Narrative frame – David)

The relative ease David experienced during the preliminary selection led to his evaluation of the difficulty of this round as “moderate”. While designing the class, David also had a focus.

“I chose to design the activities based on TBLT. When I was designing the class, I had this assumption that I was going to deliver a real class. So, I was visualizing a real class in my head when I designed these activities.” (Narrative frame – David)

When asked about the choice of TBLT, David showed initiative in applying what he learned in class into practice, which corresponds to his statements about his motivation in taking part in the contest.

“Because it was a contest and I was thinking maybe I should do something that’s a little different from traditional teaching. And that semester, I learned about TBLT in the Teaching Methods class. I didn’t know about it and find it quite novel. I felt TBLT was conducive to improving the students’ interest for its focus on the situation. And it was just what I needed for my design.” (Interview – David)

Such an accordance between David’s motivation and his action generated more positive emotions, which is interlinked with his strong identity as a future teacher.

“During the whole process of preparing for the preliminary selection, I felt rather at ease because I could take it slow, think on my own and continuously perfect my teaching design. What made me the happiest was that I put my ideas (which might be different from traditional teaching) into my teaching design and imagined that I could practice it someday in the future. Because I thought it was a very important step I took as a future teacher.” (Narrative frame – David)

The self-identification as future teacher further fostered David’s learning to teach during the preparation. This learning-oriented mindset was in action even when few negative emotions emerged. In such case, David took an active role in dealing with the issue and challenges. When confronted with the issue of students’ interest and the teaching aims, David designed group work to motivate the students, and when faced the challenges about the design of a complete teaching plan and proper use of language in the plan, he also put a more positive spin on it.

“These challenges made me feel that experience was very important and that I still had a lot to learn. So I felt this contest was really worthwhile, at least I can gain valuable experience.” (Narrative frame – David)

However, during the second round, David started to experience negative emotions like uncertainty and nervousness after the initial expectation, which could be triggered by his high expectation for the contest and the short time for preparation.

“Because at school, teaching contest is the best form [of practice]. Other than in the micro teaching classes, where one only gets to practice 3-5 times a semester, we don’t have any other chances where you can prepare a whole class and present it in front of people and everyone will take a look at how this class works. This kind of opportunity is really precious before my teaching practicum or my real job. So I just wanted to seize this kind of opportunity the best I could.” (Interview – David)

Later, David shifted his focus back to learning, highlighting multiple times how the experiences he gained were valuable, which relaxed him before the actual online presentation. As for the successful advance to the national final, David said he was “very astonished and surprised”, which led to his high expectation for the national final.

“As for the next round, I would go all out, because that was my first time in a teaching contest and I really wanted to improve my teaching through it.” (Narrative frame – David)

Despite his high expectation and motivation, David soon felt lost and anxious as he perceived the final round to be “very difficult”.

“I felt lost and anxious because although I had mentally prepared myself, to present an actual teaching design and a class, there were just so many details to look into.” (Narrative frame – David)

At this stage, David seemed to have run into a bottleneck. But he went on to explain how his mentor helped him dig deep

into the material and guided him to better understand and enjoy teaching.

“We would often dig deep into an activity, to look for different perspectives, to see the implication of some seemingly simple words. We would strive for a thorough understanding of the text and gained much profound understanding of some sentences, which laid a more solid theoretical foundation when we designed the activities. In order to make my teaching stand out, we have made numerous modifications to the activities. We got new ideas from each rehearsal and each rehearsal was more complete and better than the last one.” (Narrative frame – David)

“During the preparation for the national final, what made me the happiest was that I could get new ideas from each rehearsal with the teachers, I guess I have seen the joy of teaching. The teachers were all patient and good at guiding, which made me feel more relaxed when completing the teaching design and the PPT. and I also enjoyed the collision of our minds, I was amazed by the profound meaning behind one sentence and I was amazed by every new perspective we found.” (Narrative frame – David)

Driven by these positive emotions, David started to reflected on teaching in general and regained confidence in his own works and performance.

“These challenges made me feel that it was so difficult to present a good class. Sometimes it might be a very simple activity, but behind it, the teacher had to spend a lot of time and effort to think in order to achieve good teaching results.” (Narrative frame – David)

“When the final was just around the corner, I felt satisfied about the work I was going to present, because we had invested so much time preparing for it. I believed the class, which had been carefully designed and rehearsed, would surely stand out.” (Narrative frame – David)

Again, David was surprised by the prize he got as he reported not performing so good in the Q&A session. Reflecting on the whole process, David said it was “too exciting and thrilling, a combination of nervousness and excitement”, and that he has become “more respectful” to English teaching.

“After this contest, I became more respectful to English teaching. Teaching is not easy, giving a class is not easy. We teachers have to spend more time and effort to think, to listen to others’ opinions.” (Narrative frame – David)

The positive emotions generated during the whole process and the prize David earned in the national final contributed to his re-identifying him as a teacher instead of a future teacher as evidenced by his wording of “we teachers”. And when asked whether he would take part in teaching contest again in the future, he answered yes and added “it all about becoming a better teacher”.

5. Discussion

The above section reveals the emotional experiences of the participant during a teaching contest. The complexity of his

emotions warrants further comparison and discussion. Therefore, this section presents discussions on the factors interacting with the participant’s emotions during the contest.

1) Motivations: what to expect from the contest?

Before the preliminary round, upon receiving the notification for the contest, the participant experienced nervousness and excitement. While his nervousness could be attributed to the nature of the contest, his excitement emerged form and led to his motivations. Drawing on the theory of Possible Language Teacher Self (Kubanyiova, 2009), we first discuss how the participants’ possible selves predict his emotional experiences in the context.

According to Kubanyiova (2009), Possible Language Teacher Self is operationalized in three types: ideal language teacher self, ought-to-be language self and feared language teacher self. Ideal language self refers to a teacher’s “identity goals and aspirations” (ibid: 315). David’s focus was mainly on either improving or practicing their own teaching skills through the contest. During the contest, David was on the way to achieve his ideal selves, either by actively applying more student-centered teaching methods or designing his own activities without the constraint of the textbook.

When David encountered challenged during the contest, the discrepancy between their actual self and ideal self motivated him to make self-regulatory efforts and reduced the gap. Such efforts include actively seeking help from outside sources and lowering expectations for the results, which helped generate more positive emotions in them during the whole contest.

“I ran to my student counsellor one day, and he helpfully answered my questions and offered me some new ideas. Later I took some of his advice and found a solution to my problems about the time limit.” (Narrative frame – David)

“... these challenges made me feel I am still inexperienced. In the future, there will be many online tests and auditions, so I should be more familiar with these operations. So I have gained valuable experience in online testing with the camera on.” (Narrative frame – David)

2) Beliefs: what and how to teach in the contest?

Teacher beliefs are crucial to understanding teachers’ practice as “these might be reflected in their practices not only in classrooms contexts but also in out-of-classroom contexts with possibly far-reaching consequences” (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2013: 1). According to Barcelos & Ruohotie-Lyhty (2018), the tension between teachers’ beliefs and actions is a key aspect to investigate. During the teaching contest, the participant’s emotional experiences have also offered possible clues to examine his beliefs about teachers and teaching, which could in turn help us better understand how his emotions and beliefs interact during the contest.

First of all, in a teaching contest, the participants’ beliefs about teaching are evidently essential to his actual practice. David’s focus on students’ interest and motivation was present in his choice of trying to apply TBLT in the preliminary section, which reflects his belief of student-centeredness in teaching.

When teachers' actions are in line with their beliefs, they will experience more positive emotions while negative emotions will be produced if teachers' beliefs are in dissonance with their actions. David's experiencing positive emotions during the contest was because his beliefs and actions were in accordance.

"... it's different from normal discussions. And what you could think of was suddenly broadened. There were so many things you could come up with and none of them were nonsense. It felt really good. Not just me, everyone in the discussion felt the same. So I was thinking, if the students could have such a group of teachers who can give you something after such discussion, this kind of teaching is really meaningful." (Interview – David)

The overall positive emotional experiences of David during the contest transformed his belief of teachers as learners and collaborators.

3) Identity: before, during and after the contest?

The above sections have provided discussion on how the participant's motivations and beliefs interacted with his emotions. While motivation and belief are essential elements in teachers' identity construction (Kumazawa, 2013; Burri et al., 2017), emotions can inform and define teachers' professions and professional identities, identity can in turn guide and shape teachers' emotional decisions and reactions (Zembylas, 2003).

David started this contest with a clear position, identifying himself as a student teacher who needs more teaching experience and better teaching skills (identity-in-discourse). His actions in the preliminary round highlight his strong identity as a teacher-to-be, evidenced by his focus on improving students' interest and statements like "it was a very important step I took as a future teacher". Another identity David also displayed a identity of an agentic non-traditional teacher. This identity is more persistent in David throughout the whole contest.

"Later in the second round and the national final. I wasn't thinking about it in particular. But I think, when designing activities, different from some very traditional ways, I did my best to consider if how I would teach the students if I was to give a real class." (Interview – David)

David's identity gradually transformed to a real teacher and a highly-motivated young teacher, the result of the positive emotional experience during the teaching contest.

"When I become a real teacher, if I have the chance, as a highly-motivated young teacher, I will surely take part in these teaching contest. because I can observe the other teachers and learn. I can learn how they teach. Otherwise, you will be stuck in your thinking pattern. I don't like that." (Interview – David)

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study examines the emotional experiences of the student teacher of English in a teaching contest. Drawing on data

collected through narrative frames and interviews, this study unveils the complex emotions the participants experienced and how his emotions interacted with factors like their motivations, beliefs and identities, adding to the existing literature about teaching contests and pre-service teacher development.

The findings of this study offer several implications in terms of teaching contests as well as pre-service teacher development. First of all, for the organizations and institutions holding teaching contests, a more explicit and articulate focus on the learning and researching purposes of such activities should be highlighted, drawing participants who are more internally motivated; second, for participating schools, the administrators and mentors should also take into consideration the participants' motivations, beliefs and identities during the selection as they could predict the participants' emotional experiences and possibly the outcome; third, during the contest, both the mentors should become more aware of the participants' emotions and make the best of transformative functions; lastly, a focus on the student teachers' emotional experience should be advocated in more professional development activities.

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