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“I’ve just lived inside a tumble dryer”: a narrative of emotion labour, (de)motivation, and agency in the life of a language teacher

Abstract: Tensions between external sources of power and internal feeling rules in the workplace, i.e., emotion labour, can have a profound effect on professional dimensions. The purpose of this article is to report on a study that explored a secondary language teacher’s emotion labour and its influence on her professional (de)motivation and agency. Framed in narrative inquiry, this longitudinal study collected data through narrative interviews and drawings between February 2020 and March 2022. The participant was an EFL (English as foreign language) teacher who held teaching posts at three different state secondary schools and a private language centre in Argentina. During this period, the teacher grappled with emergency online teaching due to the Covid-19 pandemic and lengthy teacher strikes. Drawing on analysis of the short stories constructed from the narrative interviews, the tensions between external and internal feeling rules and their interplay with (de) motivation and agency are chronologically mapped out.

Keywords: emotion labour; demotivation; motivation; agency; narrative inquiry; short stories

1 Introduction

Let me start this narrative inquiry-based paper with a short story recreated from narrative interviews I had with Silvia (pseudonym) between February 2020 and March 2022. This is my attempt to respond to Barkhuizen’s question: “Can we include a story in the introduction of an article?” (Barkhuizen and Consoli 2021: 3).
Un placer si estás leyendo mi historia [A pleasure if you’re reading my story]. My name is Silvia. I am 43 years old. I live in a gorgeous city in southern Argentina, and I’m a teacher of English as a foreign language. I’ve been teaching since early 2000. I’m originally from Córdoba (Argentina), where I completed a 5-year English language teaching (ELT) degree at the Universidad Nacional de Córdoba. I was married until 2020 (gone with the pandemic!) and I have two teenage boys. Because it’s not easy to be the main source of income in my household, and because teacher salaries are calculated on the number of teaching hours (40’ each) you deliver (forget about planning, meetings, marking, more meetings), I work at three different state secondary schools, that’s 35 teaching hours. I also work at a private English language institute where I teach two groups of teenagers, twice a week in the evening. That means that I work like crazy. I am tired. I love my job. I need the money.

In the province of Chubut, Argentina, the educational system couldn’t go any lower than this. A fourth-month strike in 2019, countless asambleas [general teacher assemblies to discuss actions against the government], followed by a 2-month strike in the same year. 2020 begins with a 5-month strike. Hello Covid-19, so a mixture of no classes, another long strike mixed with chaotic emergency online teaching in 2021. And on top of that, the government being unable to pay our salaries on time, two, three and even four months behind. It’s 20 February 2022 today and as you know there’ll be another strike in March so classes will not start. I wouldn’t go on strike, but I would feel forced to strike by colleagues or some school principals. Insane. A contradicfest that took its toll on me.

(The Short Story 1)

The big short story above, which conflates Silvia’s lived experiences throughout the duration of this study (February 2020 – March 2022), has the core elements of a story: a main character (Silvia), a time period (August 2019 – February 2022), a place (Chubut, Argentina), a series of events (industrial action, Covid-19 lockdown, and emergency online teaching), and the protagonist’s evaluation/reflection (“the educational system couldn’t go any lower than this”, “contradicfest” in relation to her divergent responses to industrial action). Bolstered by this prelude, the purpose of this article is to explore Silvia’s emotion labour and its influence on her professional (de)motivation and agency. As discussed in the literature on second language teaching (e.g. Benesch 2017, 2019; De Costa et al. 2018; Nazari and Karimpour 2022), language teachers’ emotion labour and how they regulate/manage their emotion in the workplace deserve critical scrutiny as language teachers navigate different discourses and power relations not only in connection to their teaching practice but to their positionality and actions in the institutional and societal contexts of the profession.

Regarding my own positionality, I conducted this study because I had been in a similar situation to Silvia’s in the same institution, and I know the wider narrative behind Silvia’s experiences. I was part of it between 2001 and 2019 and I could see the pernicious effects that government mismanagement and poor leadership had on the professional fabric of teaching and teachers. During that period, I worked as a
teacher of English in secondary state schools. I then became involved in initial English language teacher education, and joined the Ministry of Education as a curriculum developer. In my case, my emotion labour pushed me to leave the institution in 2019.

2 Conceptual background

Three potent and multifaceted constructs converge in this study: emotion labour, (de)motivation, and agency. They highlight the affordances, constraints, drives, and tensions that influence language teachers’ affective contours in the ecology of language teaching. These constructs respond to individual (micro), institutional, governmental (meso), and societal (macro) conditions, expectations, demands, discourses, and behaviours (Douglas Fir Group 2016). In this study, I combine a post-structuralist view of emotions, i.e. emotions as discourses as proposed in Benesch and Prior (2023), and emotion regulation with ecological perspectives of agency and motivation to offer a holistic view of Silvia’s short stories. If emotion labour refers to teachers’ managing emotions as they grapple with discourses and feeling rules against power relations (Hochschild 2012; Nazari et al. 2023), then teachers need to display agency to navigate such tensions and power relations (Miller and Gkonou 2018) in relation to their internal feelings. Their agency will be driven by their motivation to direct their actions in alignment with their goals. Thus, these three constructs can be treated as triad of relational phenomena (Kayi-Aydar 2019) operating in synergy across time and context (Figure 1). Below, I further discuss how they coalesce.

![Figure 1: A triad of emotion labour, teacher agency, and teacher motivation.](image-url)
Emotion labour has gained traction in (language) education given its impact on institutional policy (e.g. Nazari and Karimpour 2022), wellbeing (e.g. Yin et al. 2022, coping mechanisms (e.g. Talbot and Mercer 2018), or teachers aligning their emotions with institutional feeling rules (e.g. Gkonou and Miller 2021). Benesch and Prior (2023) remind us of the feminist roots of emotion labour since Hochschild (2012) original study exposed the commodification of women’s emotion work to conform to feeling rules and power relations.

Benesch (2019) advances a poststructural-discursive perspective of emotion labour since emotions need to be understood as dynamic cultural practices across time and space which are effects of human encounters with objects, peoples, ideas, beliefs, and experiences. From this perspective, emotion labour represents the “conflict between institutional regulations/feeling rules and discourses” (Benesch 2019: 1117) and highlights the power imbalance in the workplace. The author adds that when a conflict occurs, teachers may feel confused about how to act and the consequences of succumbing or resisting the dominant feeling rules and power relations. In other words, teachers manage their emotion labour “to align feeling rules with social and institutional expectations or to bypass and even defy them” (Benesch and Prior 2023: 3).

Emotion labour needs to be seen as agency since it impacts on teachers’ decision-making (Benesch 2018). It may prompt teachers to engage in agentic and goal-oriented actions driven by their motivation. These may include teachers’ control, inhibition and/or generation of emotions that conform to or disrupt an environment in which they grapple with tensions between institutional, societal, and broader hegemonic discourses, power relations, and their own emotions (Benesch 2017; Ding et al. 2022). Teachers can manage their emotion labour through (1) surface acting, i.e. the exteriorisation of an emotion that is contrary to their internal feelings or the lack of emotions, which requires a conscious agentic act, but the lack of emotions can be seen as another type of emotion management, (2) deep acting, when teachers change their internal feelings from performing emotion labour, and (3) genuine emotions, i.e., the unequivocal expression of emotions in response to institutional and macro-norms (Benesch 2017, 2020; Ding et al. 2022; Zembylas 2003). A few scholars (e.g., Benesch 2018, 2019; De Costa et al. 2020; Miller and Gkonou 2018) suggest that emotion labour has agentive potential as teachers can use it not only to react to and improve working conditions, but also to destabilise power relations and discourses through which they are oppressed.

Within the triad, agency and motivation are approached in this study from an ecological perspective to understand the temporo-spatial, dynamic, and relational nature of teachers’ practices and emotion labour. According to Priestley et al. (2015a; also et al. 2015b), teacher agency can be minimally defined as a teacher’s capacity to do or not do something to achieve a goal in a given context. From an ecological approach, agency is a temporo-spatial and dynamic process as teachers develop their
agency over time and in response to situated circumstances that occur in specific settings. Teacher agency influences and is influenced by, for example, policy, curriculum, working conditions, personal and collective biographies, access to (im)material resources, emotion labour, and power relations. Tao and Gao (2021) underscore that from an ecological perspective, agency emerges from within and in response to a particular environment. The extant literature signals that teachers’ agentive moves are symbiotically connected to emotions and their regulation (e.g. Miller and Gkonou 2018, 2022; Nazari and Karimpour 2022). These connections are pushed by their drive to move in a certain direction over time.

Teacher motivation, agency, and emotion labour are in constant synergy since there is a strong relationship between the desire to carry out something and the sense of progression to achieve what is desired. The desire and capacity to carry out something can be a manifestation of teacher agency, which is informed by teachers’ emotions and their performance of emotion labour (Dewaele 2020) in the process. Teachers’ motivation is driven by an array of intertwined drives such as (1) intrinsic factors connected to the act of teaching, subject-matter (teachers’ in their identity as L2 users of English themselves), and altruism (contribution to society), (2) sociocontextual factors bound to career progression within or across institutions, and (3) the temporal dimension, i.e., teaching as a lifelong career (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2021; Kubanyiova 2019; Lamb and Wyatt 2019). Dewaele (2020) notes that an understanding of teacher motivation cannot ignore teachers’ emotions in relation to, I shall add, the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-systems of the ecology of language education. Teacher motivation cannot be detached from an examination of agency and emotion labour as these operate directly on the quality and quantity of student learning.

In sum, we can understand Silvia’s narrative and lived experiences by underscoring the agentive potential of emotion labour as a powerful and existing discourse (Benesch 2019) and its connections to motivation. Against this backdrop, this study addresses the following research question: What is the relationship between emotion labour, teacher (de)motivation, and teacher agency?

3 Methodology

Silvia’s initial contact with me revolved around Short Story 1 and her need to describe and evaluate a series of events derived from performing emotion labour. Hence, I selected the cosmos of narrative inquiry as a pertinent methodology given its focus on stories. According to Barkhuizen (2022: 3), narrative inquiry is a methodology “that engages with stories in one way or another to investigate matters relevant to the experiences of language teachers and learners”. In this study, short stories, in a Barkhuizean sense, are used to understand Silvia’s meaning making and her lived experiences in relation to the difficult professional times she lived between 2019 and 2022.
Following Barkhuizen’s (2016, 2020) core dimensions of narrative inquiry (narration of an experience, reflective and evaluative comments on it, temporal dimension, action, and reference, i.e. who, when, and where), I adopted narrative as a method to understand the content and context of Silvia’s short stories. Such stories were obtained through narrative interviews (Chase 2003). Silvia and I met via Zoom between February 2020 and March 2022 (Table 1). In total, we had two interviews in 2020, three in 2021, and one in 2022 (mean length: 47 min).

Table 1: Data collection timeline.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative interviews (mean length: 47 min)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The aim was to explore Silvia’s emotion labour, (de)motivation, and agency in her identity as an English language teacher during periods of economic and institutional (strikes) unrest and uncertainty (Covid-19 emergency online teaching) and in relation to overall power relations, working conditions, understood as access to resources, stability, wellbeing, workload, salary, support, as well as environmental and relational dynamics (Geiger and Pivovarova 2018). I carried the interviews in Spanish and I recorded them using Zoom’s videorecording functionality. I then transcribed them orthographically and shared them with Silvia for member-checking. The interviews led to data in story form as I asked Silvia to share something that had happened to her, and then I asked her to evaluate it. However, this does not mean that the stories were always orderly articulated in the traditional sense of a story. These were messy, with several digressions, and flashbacks among other features. In addition, some of the events recounted occurred before February 2020.

For procedural transparency at the macro substratum of narrative inquiry (De Costa et al. 2021), let me explain a few steps. First, I obtained ethical clearance from the university I was working at in 2020. I then circulated an invitation among my professional contacts in southern Argentina. Those interested in becoming part of the study had to match the following criteria: (1) be working as an L2 teacher in the province of Chubut (Argentina), and (2) have experienced tensions as a result of industrial action. Four teachers responded, whom received a participant information sheet with details about the study and what was required of them and a consent form. Only Silvia returned the consent form signed. By email, she first explained to me that she thought this study was a cathartic opportunity, with the added benefit of talking to someone who was aware of the context but was not part of it anymore in a
formal sense. Micro-ethics (De Costa et al. 2020) also played a pivotal role in this study. With the aim of building rapport and creating a safe space, I also shared with Silvia my own struggles and some deplorable experiences. Sharing my own stories provided balance to the narrative interviews as it demonstrated my engagement and positionality. Above all, it allowed me to be a researcher-former colleague who prioritised respect and care.

In terms of data analysis, I carried out three steps. In Step 1, I first conducted thematic analysis of the interviews. The process included reading and re-reading the data to engage in the sequence of initial coding, axial coding, and elaboration of themes. Drawing on the themes I identified in connection to emotion labour and its links to (de)motivation and agency, I constructed five short stories (Step 2) using English instead of Spanish as the goal was to include them in an English-medium journal article. For the construction of the context of these stories, I adopted Barkhuizen’s (2016) three-level approach to story: (1) story: Silvia’s personal emotions and thoughts, (2) Story: Silvia’s interaction with institutional members such as school principals and teacher union representatives, and (3) STORY: the broader socio-political context in which Silvia’s teaching took place. Step 3 consisted of analysing the content and context of those stories by means of short story analysis, which included identifying Barkhuizen’s (2016, 2020) core dimensions of narrative inquiry as mentioned above.

I shared the five constructed short stories with Silvia to allow her to make any changes to them. Given the sensitive and personal nature of one of the stories, she asked me not to use it even though she asked me whether she could keep it. Although I could have decided not to forward this specific story to Silvia to safeguard her, I also felt that out of respect I had to represent all the edges she had confided. I did not wish to engage in any a-priori editing which could have been interpreted as story sanitisation or a manifestation of (male) power abuse. In the end, I felt that it was Silvia’s right to decide which stories could be included/dismissed. The other four stories (Stories 1–4 in this article) were edited together as Silvia felt that at times the English version did not do justice to the original meaning she had articulated in Spanish. This exercise helped me reflect on the role of translation in narrative inquiry; however, this methodological layer exceeds the scope of this paper.

Last, the study included drawings spontaneously produced by Silvia after I shared the constructed stories with her. Silvia drew a series of figures (see Findings section) which she asked me to include to “de-dramatise the whole telenovela [soap opera]”. This action may indicate Silvia’s reflective attitude towards the 2019–2021 period as well as her ability to perform emotion labour in 2022. In her attempt to “de-dramatise” the stories, she characterised the events and her emotions through the use of simple lines and florks, i.e., MS-Paint drawn sock puppet characters popularised in memes.
4 Findings

This section contains three short stories and three drawings. To protect Silvia’s dignity, I should stress that she supported the demand for a fair and dignifying salary, but her reservations were linked to the, in her view, questionable attitudes and acts among staff in the workplace.

While other narrative inquiry-based studies have carried out a planned utilisation and detailed analysis of visuals (e.g., Greenier and Moodie 2021, Sarasa 2022), I have opted for an impressionistic analysis of Silvia’s drawings. It is worth noting the contrast between the dramatic narratives depicted in Stories 2–4 and the design of the accompanying figures even when the feelings portrayed are aligned with those in the stories.

4.1 “Me hice la boluda” [I played fool]

Short Story 2 reflects Silvia’s emotion labour, agency, and (de)motivation when teachers’ industrial action occurred vis-a-vis discontinuous emergency online teaching and/or blended learning throughout the 2020 school year in Chubut.

(1) With the lockdown and the chaotic migration to online/distance teaching in the background,
(2) it was difficult to know who was on strike and who wasn’t.
(3) The Ministry of Education support during the height of the pandemic was simply a bad joke,
(4) and together with the lack of payment and the like, the situation wasn’t the best.
(5) Even though I did want to teach because I just love the act of teaching,
(6) the reality was that I just couldn’t because I didn’t have the resources to do it online,
(7) and not every student had wifi,
(8) so when the schools began to ask who would be going on strike,
(9) I said I would because not getting paid and not being supported at all with online teaching
(10) was too much.
(11) In this instance, me hice la boluda [I played fool] and I went with the flow (Figure 2)
(12) even when I wasn’t 100 % convinced,
(13) but I didn’t want to antagonise either
(14) as I didn’t have the time or energy.
(15) In this case, my motives were plain survival and peace of mind during such complicated times!

(Short Story 2)
In Lines 1–2, Silvia contextualises her acts. She is the protagonist of this story that took place in 2020 as teachers were working from home. The details provided reinforce the contextual problems surrounding emergency online learning, which included lack of institutional support (Line 3), unpaid salaries (Line 4), and students’ inequitable access to Wi-Fi (Line 7). In Line 5, Silvia articulates her intrinsic motivation to teach. On this occasion, she decided to join in the industrial action in response to the difficult circumstances (Line 9) which she evaluated as “too much” (Line 10).

There are no other characters in the story; school authorities are metonymically referred to as “the school began to ask” (Line 8), i.e., a building/institution for its people. Between Lines 11–14, Silvia supports her decision by recognising her emotion labour. She underscores that her motivation was wellbeing-oriented (“plain survival and peace of mind”, Line 15) given the overall environment, which she assesses as “complicated” (Line 15). In line with the story, Silvia portrayed herself in Figure 2 as absent due to joining the industrial action. She has a happy facial expression that may indicate (1) positive feelings in alignment with the feeling rules in the meso-system, (2) her individualistic motivation, and (3) the enactment of an agentic move in response to the dominant feeling rules and preservation of her wellbeing. However, from Story 2, we understand that at a deeper level this is a visual representation of surface acting as Silvia is conforming to the dominant discourse in the meso-system.

Figure 2: Silvia’s students are online but she is on strike.
Silvia performed emotion labour by agentively carrying out, as discussed in the literature (Benesch 2017, 2019; Ding et al. 2022) different actions. As a sign of the confusion created by the clash between her contextual self and the discourse in the meso- and macro-systems, Silvia gravitated between surface acting and deep acting as her emotion labour shifted slightly in response to internal feelings and against power relations (Nazari et al. 2023), even when these may seem contradictory. Silvia’s performativity of emotion labour in support of the broader discourse was influenced by two core factors. From an agency perspective, her regulated actions integrated her being unable to teach with the surrounding socio-political-economic tensions. In a context of institutional paralysis, her agentic move was not to act, that is, not to teach or confront. She went “with the flow” in an attempt to conform despite her lack of convincement. From a motivation perspective, in Line 5 she voices her intrinsic motivation, but her decision to submit to the norms and structures was closely associated to maintaining her wellbeing. In this case, she protected her wellbeing by joining those teachers who were on strike. Albeit submitting to the prevailing norms, structures, and feeling rules entrenched in the dominant discourse, Silvia avoided (in)direct confrontation, which was the “inevitable result of unequal workplace power” (Benesch 2019: 1117).

4.2 You shall not teach!

Story 3 illustrates one of the many situations that Silvia endured as she wrestled with the emotion labour derived from (not) going on strike. This particular incident took place in May 2021 when classes had progressively returned to face-to-face delivery but the industrial action continued due to the government’s inability to pay salaries or offer a pay raise to mitigate the high inflation rate in Argentina.

(1) When the strikes became the new normal, I resisted.
(2) In one of the schools, the principal knew that it was a right, but she wouldn’t hide her disappointment and fury with those striking.
(3) That motivated me not to strike, so that was fine,
(4) but in another school I also decided not to strike.
(5) But here the scenario was different.
(6) The principal came to tell me that since I was the one wanting to teach, unlike almost everyone else, then I had to get in touch with the students myself to tell them that my lessons would be delivered “as normal”.
(7) Imagine the stress and how uncooperative everyone was.
(8) I managed to create a WhatsApp group and have student reps from each class.
(9) When Monday came, the students, some of their parents, and myself started to gather outside the school entrance waiting for someone to let us in.
(10) The school was fucking closed! Locked! It was empty! (Figure 3)
(11) I called the principal and other people and no one answered.
(12) It was demoralising at so many levels.
(13) Of course, the students and some of the parents were upset, some with me, some with the school principal, I could see that in their faces.
(14) In front of the students I tried to remain calm,
(15) but once I got home I cried out of impotence.
(16) Above all, this situation was so demotivating to me.
(17) I’m not interested in getting a better post or becoming a leading teacher or principal.
(18) I just love teaching! I love my students and I know that I can contribute to society by teaching, by helping students develop tools that will make them critical and independent citizens.
(19) I was robbed of this opportunity when I wasn’t materially allowed to teach, to exercise my right and duty to work.
(20) What’s worse, on that day the students were also robbed of their right to learn.
(21) I felt punished by the principal. The message was like “If you don’t adhere to my norms, you have no rights.”

(Short Story 3)
The story starts with the *when* of the situation (“When the strikes became … ”), and the protagonist’s (Silvia) stance on it. Between Lines 2–5, Silvia recounts different attitudes towards the teacher strikes. She also acknowledges that the school principal’s (a minor character) position on the strikes acted as a motivation factor because, we may interpret, it aligned with Silvia’s own view. From this perspective, the way Silvia managed emotion labour was positive. However, her same agentic move in another school led to a conflicting outcome. In summarising the exchange with the school principal, Silvia stresses that her stance was singled out and, judging by the decision made by the principal, condemned by some of the staff. Silvia was simply tasked with the responsibility of contacting the students herself to arrange her lesson delivery. Since this is an activity outside her regular job profile, this stressful act leads to negative emotions resulting from performing emotion labour, which she acknowledges (Line 7) as her behaviour and values are in stark contrast to those of the school principal. This situation is a strong manifestation of unequal power in the workplace and its effects on teachers’ emotions. Despite the lack of cooperation from the school, she succeeds in contacting and meeting the students (Line 8).

In Line 9, the story introduces a new event, which takes place at the beginning of the week and outside the school. New characters are included: the students and some of their parents. The new event, which again illustrates unequal power relations, is an incident for which some key characters should be made accountable. Silvia’s expletive in Line 10 exhibits her surrender to emotion labour, which she further unpacks in Lines 14–15. The unresponsiveness from the school (Line 11) and the frustration noted in the faces of those around her at the school entrance had a damaging effect on her emotions (Lines 12, 14–16). Although Silvia evaluated the incident throughout the story, she recognises that not being allowed to teach is a demotivating factor since her teacher motivation resides in what has been termed intrinsic motivation (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2021) in relation to the act of teaching and contributing to society (Line 18). The story ends with a metaphor (not being allowed to teach/learn as robbery, Lines 19–20) through which Silvia synthesises her defeat and loss (Line 19). She is fully aware that teaching and learning are rights, and from that perspective, the conflicting discourses between the government and the teachers, and the tensions between institutional (meso-system) and societal (macro-system) expectations (e.g., parents’) have a clear victim: the students. In her final evaluation of the incident (Line 21), Silvia languages the consequence of defying the hegemonic discourse.

This story shows that the main incident which had Silvia as the protagonist at the mercy of the dominant institutional discourse embodied in the principal’s words and actions had an effect on her emotion labour, motivation, and agency. While the first principal mentioned acted as a source of motivation, the second principal’s actions
interrupted and altered the motivation flow in the opposite direction. At a deeper level, the source of Silvia’s demotivation was the threat to her professional agency. In this specific incident, she had intentionally triggered a course of actions in response to two incompatible elements: (1) what she perceived as her right to work and her students’ right to learn, and (2) the hostile environment at the school influenced by unwritten norms and structures around industrial action. Against the second element, her agency was thwarted, and she was placed in a position of inferiority in terms of the power struggle at the institution.

Becoming aware of her demotivation, loss of agency, and even loss of rights as a worker, she articulated how she tried to manage her emotions. At the school entrance, she displayed surface acting and inhibited her emotions as she tried to remain calm (Line 14) for the sake of her students (and possibly the parents). Nevertheless, In Figure 3, Silvia depicts her genuine feelings by looking perplexed. Her facial expression and her arms hanging as if representing powerlessness reveal her emotion labour, diminished agency, and demotivation. The difference between Story 3 and Figure 3 may be attributed to Silvia performing genuine emotions when she finds herself in a safe and private environment: her home.

4.3 Enough is enough

This last short story represents Silvia’s most dramatic incident. By the time this event occurred, lessons had returned to in-person delivery. However, the conflict between the teachers’ union and the provincial government had not been fully resolved.

(1) I said enough when at the beginning of November 2021,
(2) in one of these asambleas at one of the schools where I work,
(3) one of the teacher union reps yelled at me
(4) “That’s because you’re a capitalist, a mercenary,
(5) you think you’re better because you teach English,
(6) because you work in a private institute”
(7) in front of everyone
(8) after I said that I wasn’t going on strike again
(9) because some students have had virtually no classes in 2020 and 2021.
(10) I didn’t react quite well.
(11) First, I froze. I was stunned. Paralysed.
(12) But then I may have said something too awful to repeat now
(13) and left the assembly crying.
(14) This is why I’ve been part of this project,
(15) to tell the story of how I have and haven’t grappled with all these tensions
between the institutions, the union, parents, colleagues, and the students themselves.

I’ve just lived inside a tumble dryer (Figure 4) and

I’m sick and tired of this pushing and pulling with my colleagues, parents, school principals, etc.

I’ve even felt like quitting.

I’ve felt like fighting back.

I’ve felt completely numbed, unable to do anything,

and I’ve felt ready to do more for my students,

but it’s just too exhausting and I wonder whether I’m really contributing to society.

Perhaps I can contribute by doing something different instead of teaching.

(Short Story 4)

Figure 4: Silvia inside a tumble dryer.

Short Story 4 begins with a remark (“I said enough”) which acts as a preamble to a major shift in emotion labour. Silvia is once again the protagonist of the story, and in Lines 1 and 2 we find contextual information regarding time (“beginning of
November 2021”) and place (Line 3). It can be speculated that by November 2021, Silvia had endured several difficulties at work. This may explain why the story starts with the protagonist marking a breaking point.

In Line 3, the (male) “teacher union rep” is the antagonist in the story; however, given the collegial nature of an *asamblea*, we need to imagine other teachers in the background, which is confirmed in Line 7. It should be noted that the chronological order of events is altered because Silvia wishes to emphasise the magnitude of the representative’s actions. The act of being the victim of verbal abuse (“yelled at me”) in the workplace is a serious issue which can affect a teacher’s emotions. In this case, it was a man directing his abuse to a female teacher, which seems to perpetuate the power imbalance against women. According to the representative’s view (Line 4), being a teacher of English seems to be equated to endorsing neoliberal ideologies and practices associated to hegemonic English-speaking countries. In addition, in Line 5, the assumption is that Silvia perceives herself as someone of a superior status because she teaches a language that seems to represent so-called “first-world” countries. Line 6 refers to the fact that part of Silvia’s income does not come from the Government but from a private language school, which to some degree places her in a different and perhaps more independent position compared to teachers of other areas of the curriculum. While the representative’s voiced beliefs about the identity of being a teacher of English are concerning, they exceed the scope of this article. This was the representative’s reaction to Silvia’s decision not to go on strike given the limited learning opportunities the students had had in 2020 and 2021.

Lines 8–9 show Silvia as being able to perform emotion labour as she is capable of voicing her own positioning. Line 10 is Silvia’s self-assessment of her reaction to being abused in public in front of her colleagues. She recognises that her management of her emotions did not align with the feeling rules. Line 11 may indicate that Silvia’s first reaction was that of inhibiting her own emotions as a defence mechanism not to expose herself again in a context where she felt disempowered after feeling empowered to voice her personal stance on the issue in focus. However, the following event demonstrates the opposite of inhibition as surface acting; she articulated phrases she refrains from sharing with me and left the place crying. The events narrated in Lines 12 and 13 provide the climax and ending to the event, and reveal Silvia’s genuine and negative emotions as a result of performing emotion labour in distressing circumstances.

From Line 14 onwards, Silvia explains the effects that such an appalling event had on her. On the one hand, she accepted to be part of this narrative inquiry, probably to share her downward journey in terms of her emotion labour (Lines 15–18). The metaphor of the tumble dryer not only manages to capture the tensions among her own and different actors’ norms, it also shows that in the case of Silvia, emotion labour exercised a destabilising centrifugal force. Line 19–22 refer to Silvia’s agency through engaging (Lines 20 and 22) or ceasing to engage (Line 21) in...
intentional moves. The story ends by Silvia linking emotion labour and (lack of agency) to demotivation. Despite showing a tragicomic style, Figure 4 coheres with Short Story 4 by portraying Silvia’s negative emotions and genuine acting. It is also worth signalling that while in Figures 2 and 3, Silvia depicted herself together with other people and in teaching spaces (online, outside a school), in Figure 4 she is alone in a tumble dryer, as a metaphor of the personal and dramatic tenor of her emotion labour, threatened wellbeing, and little agency and motivation.

The environment has become so hostile that her intrinsic motivation to teach and contribute to society is removed to the extent that she questions herself, thus doubting of her own abilities (“whether I’m really contributing to society”). Against this complicated panorama, the alternative is, as she mentions in Line 19, to leave her teaching post. At point, I must disclose the following event: Silvia was on sick leave for two weeks as she started to experience severe anxiety in the workplace. However, by February 2021, she did not leave her teaching posts. This may exhibit her resilience together with the necessity of maintaining her level of income.

5 Discussion

Short Stories 2–4 demonstrate how emotion labour, agency, and motivation became a powerful discursive site in Silvia’s professional biography. From a chronological perspective, Stories 2–3 can be understood as “chronicle of a sick leave foretold” (in allusion to Garcia Marquez’ novel Chronicle of a Death Foretold) since they depict Silvia’s deterioration as she performed emotion labour at the meso-(schools), exo-(teacher unions) and macro- (social norms and values) levels in her context.

In Short Story 2, Silvia recognises her intrinsic motivation and how this is a drive to exercise her agency. Although she displays surface acting to deflate tensions, she agentically manages her emotions to protect her wellbeing by avoiding conflict. The gravitation between surface and deep acting may be linked to the fact that joining the strike was “online” and therefore Silvia may have felt that there was less investment and exposure. In this story, it appears that emotion labour had limited impact on teacher agency and motivation. In Short Story 3, emotion labour changes with the return to face-to-face teaching, situation which makes (not) being part of the industrial action visible. This spatial shift also shows that emotion labour is institution-dependent as it varies according to the schools where Silvia works. In this story, Silvia’s agency and motivation drove her to challenge the norms. Nevertheless, the outcome of her intentionality translated into a negative impact on her motivation and agency. In the incident narrated in Short Story 4, Silvia starts by being in control of emotion labour, which prompts her (as in Short Story 3), to share her genuine emotions in public. However, her resistance to the dominant norms triggers a violent
response, when compared to Short Story 3. In this case, emotion labour has a dramatic effect on her motivation, agency, and wellbeing.

Overall, the short stories portray Silvia as a resilient teacher, who, despite difficult circumstances, wants to see herself (and perhaps be seen as) an educator who values the acts of teaching and learning above other issues. This aligns with feeling rules at the macro system, which, based on my experience, may expect teachers to embrace teaching as a purely altruistic activity regardless of financial and structural constraints. Therefore, while Silvia’s motivation (micro-system) and the broader social context (macro-system) are orientated towards teaching as altruism, the meso-(institution, principals) and exo-(teacher union representatives) systems activate emotion labour through unequal power relations. This system confirms that emotion labour functions as an existing discourse in the broader educational and social context.

The emotion labour connected to teachers’ industrial action was difficult to manage since it created a whole array of conflicting positionings among peers and people in leadership roles (e.g., union representative, school principal). To her, guaranteeing teaching and learning opportunities is an act of social justice even in suboptimal conditions (e.g. job precarity, under-resourced settings). From this angle, her intrinsic motivation to stay in the teaching profession, as explored in the literature (e.g. Lamb and Wyatt 2019), drives her to deploy intentional actions in response (as conformity or as disruption) to a rather volatile environment. Thus, Silvia’s triad of emotion labour-agency-motivation can be understood as her capacity (or not) to respond to challenges (Kayi-Aydar 2019) guided by her motivation and emotions. The short stories also demonstrate how identity and agency are inseparable from emotions and emotion labour (Nazari and Karimpour 2022) since how she constructs her identity and actions is influenced by the tensions between her own ethos and that of the institutions where she works.

Figure 5, which represents Silvia’s trajectory, illustrates a potential progression of dissonance between emotion labour, motivation, and agency over time as a teacher may move from surface to genuine acting at the seams of the micro-, meso-, and exo-systems.

Figure 5: A representation of emotion labour, motivation, and agency over time.
Figure 5 depicts that when emotion labour is performed through surface acting, motivation and agency, when specifically oriented to the acts of teaching and learning, are not severely affected. Teachers may experience demotivating episodes, but their capacity to engage in purposefully oriented actions fluctuates. However, this is a short-term response when the tensions between individual and institutional norms are maintained and worsen over time. Eventually, when the individual recognises that the tensions are at a critical stage, there are two agentic pathways for release: conformity or challenge. In Silvia’s case, she opted for the latter, which resulted in a decrease of motivation and agency, even when the latter still exhibited episodes of intentionality. However, we may venture that the former may also carry negative consequences since sustaining surface untrue emotions may, over time, increase demotivation and stress. Regardless of the pathway taken, Silvia’s stories illustrate the impact that emotion labour has on teachers’ wellbeing, which confirms previous studies (e.g. Yin et al. 2022).

6 Conclusions

This narrative inquiry has probed into a language teacher’s emotion labour during difficult circumstances in Argentina between 2019 and 2022. Short story analysis of three episodes in the life of Silvia demonstrates that studies on emotion labour and its impact on different dimensions of a teacher’s professional and personal life cannot be only in relation to micro-(personal), meso-(an institution), and macro-(social values, parents’ expectations) systems (Douglas Fir Group 2016). In Silvia’s case, exo-systems such as the discourse from a teachers’ union may exercise a set of centrifugal and disruptive forces.

To counter tensions, emotion labour can become a tool of activism (Benesch 2019) to boost teacher agency, motivation, and positive emotions. For example, schools could hold informal staff gatherings to boost trust. Also, they could organise staff meetings for which teachers submit anonymised/fictionalised stories that are discussed in groups with the aim of creating context-sensitive courses of action that legitimise diverse views and support teacher motivation and agency. School authorities may wish to ensure that meetings and other types of institutional activities include members who could act as moderators to guarantee a culture of dignity and respect. Along these lines, institutions could reinforce/create related policy through workshops that support such a culture. They can also provide clear guidelines regarding, as in Silvia’s stories, industrial action and the respect of different views and activities. These implications initially require institutional (schools, unions) leaders who create a positive and ethical environment and become champions of diversity and equality.
Since the issue of identity in terms of how others perceive teachers of English exceeds the scope of this paper, future studies can delve into the granularities of identity and emotion labour in situations of unequal workplace power.

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References


