Research Article

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Teaching English in an engineering international branch campus: a collaborative autoethnography of our emotion labor

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Abstract: While a number of studies have documented the significant role of emotions and the emotion labor produced in English language teaching, research exploring English instructors’ emotion labor in transnational higher education contexts such as international branch campuses (IBCs) and within Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) programs is lacking. Arguably, these neoliberally-driven and educational neocolonialist endeavors can produce intense emotion labor for English instructors. This study employs a collaborative autoethnography (CAE) methodology to investigate what provoked emotion labor for expatriate instructors, who teach English courses to Qatari national students at an IBC in Qatar. Taking a poststructural approach to emotion labor as our theoretical framing, we collaboratively examined our emotion labor in audio-recorded weekly meetings and then engaged in further dialogues and writings about our emotion labor. We reflect on two themes that produced emotion labor as well as emotional capital for us: 1) navigating our purpose teaching English to engineering majors and 2) confronting our roles as English instructors within a context of educational neocolonialism. Our study adds to the knowledge base of English teachers’ emotion labor in transnational and STEM spaces, while also showcasing CAE as a transformative methodology to explore language teachers’ emotion labor.

Keywords: emotion labor; emotional capital; collaborative autoethnography; English language teaching; engineering; transnational higher education

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1 Introduction

While a number of studies have documented the significant role of emotions and the emotion labor produced in English language teaching (Benesch 2017; De Costa et al. 2020; Nazari and Karimpour 2022; Song 2016), research exploring English teachers’ emotion labor in transnational higher education contexts such as international branch campuses (IBCs) and within Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) campuses is limited. An IBC is defined as “an entity that is owned, at least in part, by a foreign higher education provider; operated in the name of the foreign education provider; and provides an entire academic program, substantially on site, leading to a degree awarded by the foreign education provider” (Cross-Border Education Research Team 2017: para. 2). The largest exporters of academic programs are the United States and the United Kingdom, and numerous IBCs have been established in the Middle East and Asia. Arguably, these “neoliberal-driven” (De Costa et al. 2022a: 81) and educational neocolonialist endeavors (Romanowski 2022) can produce intense emotion labor for English instructors (e.g., Rudd 2018).

English instructors in IBCs face a complex environment characterized by a “hybrid scene of institutional cultures and practices” (Small 2022: 21). Instructors are required to navigate between the policies, attitudes, and ethics of the home campus, the branch campus, and the host country. This navigation is often complicated by the sense of contributing to the neocolonialism of education, or the one-way transfer of educational theories and practices from the global north to the global south (Romanowski 2022). As Rudd (2018) argues, IBCs are often more international than transnational in the sense of a “one-way movement from home campus to satellite school rather than a back-and-forth movement of information and decision-making” (658). IBCs have been critically analyzed for the ways in which they accommodate and normalize U.S. imperialism (Al-Saleh and Vora 2020) and contribute to the neocolonization of the education sector. Romanowski argues that “under the guise of globalization... educational neocolonialism is a form of domination that propagates Western ways of thinking and forms of knowledge” (201). Rottleb and Jana (2022) address the potential for conflict to arise in IBCs due to the fact that importing Western campuses also means importing institutional, social, and cultural identities. These points of tension are exemplified in Rudd’s (2018) examination of what happens when a Western-centric honor code, originally developed at a U.S. home campus, is introduced to an engineering IBC located in Qatar. In Rudd’s (2018) discussion of teaching at an IBC, she asserts that IBC students “are expected to take up and adhere to the traditions” (658) of the home institution and how she is still uncovering ways that her teaching, research, and service “do more to colonize than to liberate” (656).
Moreover, English instructors at IBCs, often expatriate residents in the host country, may experience a sense of privilege and disadvantage in these transnational higher education contexts. Alshakhi and Phan’s (2020) study found that expatriate teachers of English in Saudi Arabia “felt ‘uncomfortable’ about being ‘privileged’ as White native teachers of English yet ‘inadequate’ and ‘monolingual’ at the same time” (314). They also experienced emotion labor in response to social, religious, and cultural differences. Similarly, Hopkyns and Gkonou (2023) found that expatriate English instructors working in an English-medium instruction (EMI) university in Dubai recognized that they benefited from the phenomenon of EMI, but also experienced guilt that their livelihood depended on a system that did not provide students the choice to pursue a college degree in their first language (Arabic). Putting the IBC within a larger context of cultures being contested and concerns about the erosion of local values and practices in the Gulf (Hillman 2022), this creates a very emotion-laden environment for teaching English language, but also one that can arguably be rich for developing “new agencies and belongings” (Vora 2019: 29).

Recognizing these various tensions, we employed a collaborative autoethnography (CAE) methodology (Chang et al. 2013; De Costa et al. 2022b; Yazan et al. 2023) to investigate what provoked emotion labor for us, expatriate instructors from both the global north and south, who teach English courses to Qatari national students at an IBC in Qatar. In this article, we first theorize emotions, emotion labor, emotional capital, and transformative CAE. We then discuss our process of engaging in CAE work. In our findings section, we reflect on two themes that provoked emotion labor for us within our specific context, and how we managed our emotions. We also consider how engaging in CAE work was transformative for us and gave us emotional capital. We believe that our study adds to the knowledge base of English language teachers’ emotion labor in transnational and STEM spaces, while also showcasing CAE as a useful and transformative methodology to explore English language teachers’ emotion labor (Yazan et al. 2023). We are heeding the call of Cowie (2011) for teachers to talk collaboratively about the emotional landscape of teaching in a way that we hope is accessible to readers.

2 Theorizing emotions and emotion labor

Emotions play an important role in how instructors navigate and interact with colleagues, students, and their institution, influencing thoughts, actions, and decisions. According to Miller and Gkonou (2022), the substantial growth in studies related to language teacher emotions in the last decade highlights the crucial function that emotions play in shaping teacher practices and their career longevity. While much of the research on language teachers’ emotions has been cognitively
oriented (Her and De Costa 2022), there are a growing number of studies focused on language teacher emotions and emotion labor from poststructural and critical perspectives (e.g., Alshakhi and Phan 2020; Benesch 2017; De Costa et al. 2018, 2020; Her and De Costa 2022; Hopkyns and Gkonou 2023; Hillman et al. 2023; Miller and Gkonou 2022).

Although there is no agreed-upon definition of emotion, we view emotions as responses to an event or phenomenon that can lead to feelings (Barrett 2017) and feelings can lead to action (Her and De Costa 2022). Coming from a sociocultural and poststructuralist perspective, we are less interested in what emotions are and whether, for example, they are negative or positive, but rather what emotions do socially (Ahmed 2004; Benesch 2017) and how we manage them. We do not view emotions as simply the product of individual psychological processes, but as influenced by the larger social, political, and cultural context in which they are experienced. Emotions may be influenced by individuals’ personal histories, social identities, collective cultural contexts, and power dynamics (Benesch 2019). In this view, emotions are also not fixed entities, but are constantly changing and evolving. Benesch and Prior (2023) argue that “emotions are discourses that circulate in societies; those supportive of the status quo are elevated to dominant status and rewarded in various ways” (5). The emotions that are favored and rewarded as a teacher in a university context, for example, are often those that align with or serve the interests of those in power, such as the administration. Emotions that challenge or question that status quo may be marginalized or devalued. In other words, emotions have social meanings and consequences, and these meanings and consequences can reflect and reinforce power structures in society.

The theoretical concept of emotion labor refers to the emotional work that individuals, such as teachers, are expected to perform as part of their professional role. Teachers “actively negotiate the relationship between how they feel in particular work situations and how they are supposed to feel, according to social expectations” (Benesch 2017: 37–38). How they are supposed to feel or what is considered appropriate and professional has been referred to as feeling rules (Zembylas 2006, 2007). For example, Benesch (2017) describes how universities often have plagiarism policies or honor codes that have guidelines for identifying and reporting instances of plagiarism committed by students. Teachers are expected to be constantly aware and on the lookout for instances of plagiarism and if they find it, they are supposed to feel indignant and punish students. While feeling rules often affect teachers’ responses to and decisions about pedagogical matters, teachers’ feelings are often not in line with institutional expectations. Teachers may feel differently or even resist imposed rules by finding alternative solutions such as mentoring students who plagiarize instead of punishing them. This tension or
conflict between implicit institutional feelings rules and teachers’ professional training, experience, or ethics creates emotion labor.

While exhibiting various forms of care toward students as a teacher can be a significant source of emotion labor (Isenbarger and Zembylas 2006), teachers can also accrue emotional capital or resources that they can use to manage their emotions through “teacher caring” or “ethos of caring” (Benesch 2017; Miller and Gkonou 2022; Nazari and Karimpour 2022). Teachers may also draw on values, such as religious values (Her and De Costa 2022) to mitigate emotion labor or try to “listen rhetorically” (Rudd 2018) by actively and empathetically engaging with their students’ perspectives and experiences. In this study, we use Benesch’s conceptualization of emotion labor to guide our understanding of how we negotiate teaching English in a context where the ideologies, values, and mission of our institution, the home campus, and our host country – in other words, the feeling rules – do not always align with our own.

3 Transformative collaborative autoethnography

Examining our emotion labor formed the basis of our CAE. As described by Chang (2008) and elaborated on by De Costa et al. (2022b), autoethnography is a qualitative research method in which researchers collect, analyze, and interpret their personal experiences as part of an interrogation of self in relation to others. In other words, individuals “attempt to gain a sociocultural understanding of their lived experiences in relation to others and their contexts” (Hernandez et al. 2022: 3). Self-reflexivity is the central process of investigation in autoethnography. Autoethnography has grown in applied linguistic studies, partly “as an act of epistemological resistance” over the past decade and established itself as a credible methodology (De Costa et al. 2022b: 550; Keleş 2022; Yazan et al. 2023).

While autoethnography involves a single individual as both researcher and participant using their autobiographical experiences as their data, CAE does the same but in the company of others. It is “a multivocal approach in which two or more researchers work together to share personal stories and interpret the pooled autoethnographic data” (Lapadat 2017: 590–591). It is common to mix styles or elements of writing in presenting a CAE. For example, in our findings, we mix an “authoritative researcher’s voice” with our own “everyday ‘feeling’ voices” (Choi 2017: xxv), which includes excerpts of oral and written narratives.

Much has been written about autoethnography as a process that is critical, vulnerable, agentive, emotionally engaged, self-reflective, and transformative (Hernandez et al. 2022; Yazan 2020; Yazan et al. 2023). In interrogating our emotion labor collaboratively, our goal was not only to understand what provokes emotion
labor for us and how we manage our emotions, but for this experience to also be transformative for our own self-discovery, for our scholarship and practice at our institution, and for readers of this article to “experience the transformation of their own perspectives, insights, knowledge, and behaviors” (Hernandez et al. 2022: 18). We wanted to understand our own teaching ideologies and identities better, enhance our teaching and our connection with our students, and help bridge the disciplinary and researcher-practitioner divides among the four of us. As Hernandez et al. (2022) note, “the result [of collaborative autoethnography] can be profound transformation for individual participants, the inquiry group, and ultimately the contexts they inhabit” (133). As such, we desire for our research to be accessible and to make a difference (Lapadat 2017). In order to delve deeper in the understanding of our emotion labor and the transformative nature of collaborative autoethnography, our methodology led us to explore two primary research questions:

1. What provokes emotion labor for us and how do we manage our emotions?
2. How was engaging in collaborative autoethnography to understand our emotion labor transformative for us?

4 Methodology

4.1 Introducing ourselves

All four of us came to Qatar, a Muslim country on the Arabian Peninsula, because we were offered jobs teaching English at an engineering IBC. We are part of an influx of expatriate workers to Qatar who have been recruited to work in sectors such as energy, education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Our residence and employment are in a country where Arabic is the only official language, though English is widely spoken as a lingua franca. This is largely because foreign nationals in Qatar constitute approximately 89.5% of the population (Snoj 2019). Thus, we teach in a context where Qatar’s demographic imbalance contributes to “real and imagined threats” to Qatari citizens’ national identity and Arabic language (Belkhiria et al. 2021: 126).

We are sponsored by a state-led non-profit organization in Qatar that has partnered with a number of American universities. Each of these English-medium IBCs is recognized for an academic specialization and degree. Our university, for example, offers only engineering degrees. These IBCs confer the same degree in Qatar as a student would receive if they studied at its home campus. Thus, our professional practice is situated within a transnational, liminal space. In the next part, we describe our individual positionalities more.
4.1.1 Sara

Sara is originally from the United States, where she also completed her Ph.D. in Second Language Studies with a focus on Arabic heritage language learners. She is White of Mediterranean, English, and Eastern European roots, and grew up in a middle-class, Christian family. She speaks English and has learned Arabic as a second language (Egyptian dialect) as an adult. Sara has been working in Qatar for almost nine years and previously lived and studied in Egypt for approximately two years. She is an associate professor of English at the IBC where she teaches communication, composition, and developmental English courses and is actively engaged in applied linguistics research.

4.1.2 Aymen

Aymen is originally from Sudan and from a Muslim family. He completed his Ph.D. in Literacy, Culture, and Language Education at Indiana University-Bloomington with a focus on teacher identity. He speaks Arabic (Sudanese dialect) and English and has worked in the Gulf, both UAE and Qatar, for over 14 years. He is an instructional associate professor of English at the IBC where like Sara, he mainly teaches communication, composition, and developmental English courses. Aymen has experienced different educational systems as both a student and a teacher and is active in developing language teacher associations in Africa and in teacher educator research more generally.

4.1.3 Naqaa

Naqaa immigrated to Canada when she was nine years old and grew up in an Iraqi, Muslim immigrant family. She completed her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at Western University with a focus on representations of Islam and the Other in nineteenth-century European Romanticism. She speaks English, Arabic (Iraqi dialect), and is proficient in German and French. Naqaa has a rich background in international study and teaching, having lived in England, Quebec Canada, Germany and Switzerland prior to relocating to Qatar six years ago. She is an instructional assistant professor of English at the IBC and teaches composition, technical writing, and developmental English courses. As a teaching professor, she has not been able to pursue research as much as she would like, but is interested in writing communities and writing pedagogy.
4.1.4 Bryant

Bryant is originally from the United States, where he completed his Ph.D. in English Literature at the University of Miami. He grew up in a working-class family, though he acknowledges his Whiteness and privilege. He speaks English and has studied a little bit of Arabic, French, and Mandarin Chinese. He has been working in Qatar for three years, but also previously spent a year teaching English in Saudi Arabia. He is an instructional assistant professor of English at the IBC where he teaches literature, film, writing, and developmental English courses. His main research interests include the role humanitarianism and human rights play in contemporary literature, media, and film. Bryant describes himself as someone who initially found navigating college life difficult due to a lack of structural and parental support, and so he finds it particularly important to reach students who feel marginalized and/or excluded.

In terms of intragroup characteristics, we would describe two of us (Sara and Aymen) as coming from “lang” backgrounds (applied linguistics/language education) and two of us (Naqaa and Bryant) as coming from “lit” (English and comparative literature) backgrounds. We also bring a mix of global north and peripheral global south (Heugh et al. 2021) perspectives and racialized experiences. In terms of our teaching philosophies, our practices vary, but we are all in support of multilingual approaches and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris and Alim 2017; Raza et al. 2021). We try to provide a supportive space where our students’ cultural and linguistic identities are valued, validated, and positively shaped and advanced by their learning experience at the IBC.

4.2 Engaging in collaborative autoethnography work

Our reflections on our emotion labor occurred over the course of approximately one year, from June 2022 through May 2023, including 5 months of writing and revising this manuscript. Before we started working on this research project, we were meeting weekly to conduct a program evaluation of our developmental English courses. Sara was audio-recording our face-to-face (and sometimes Zoom) conversations with a digital recorder during these weekly meetings. While emotions about teaching English were not the focus of these meetings, she observed that emotion labor came up regularly during our informal conversations. When Sara was invited to contribute an article to this special journal issue, she suggested that our group could collaboratively examine our emotion labor further. Thus, we became a research team with a particular research focus, as we continued to work on the program evaluation.
The audio recordings and transcriptions of our meetings were put into a shared Google document as well as our e-mail exchanges and WhatsApp conversations related to issues that were happening in our classrooms (see Figure 1 as an example).

Figure 1: Example of our WhatsApp correspondence related to an issue of suspected student plagiarism.
We also uploaded relevant articles about emotion labor and CAE and spent time discussing these theoretical and methodological approaches, as they were newer concepts for most of us. Taking a poststructural and discursive approach to emotion labor (Benesch 2017; De Costa et al. 2018), we individually and collaboratively examined the transcripts of our conversations and then through thematic analysis and group reflective dialogues, we identified nine broad areas that provoked emotion labor for us. These related to:

- teaching English to engineering majors
- students’ motivations
- students’ attendance
- students’ negotiation of grades
- students’ college readiness skills
- giving feedback on student writing
- navigating educational neocolonialism
- our positionalities as expatriate professors
- monolingual biases and language policies

We then engaged in further reflective dialogues related to these themes and each wrote a summary (500–1,000 words) of our emotion labor in January, 2023 and shared these with each other through e-mail. The process was iterative between data generation and analysis and involved much agency. As Yazan (2020) states, “selecting what to include in the autoethnography and determining how to recount and analyze various elements involve series of other acts of agency that require continuing commitment/investment” (para 8). Ultimately, considering the space constraints of the manuscript and what unique insight we could add to the scholarship of teachers’ emotion labor, we chose to focus on only two sources of our emotion labor that we felt were salient: 1) navigating our purpose teaching English to engineering majors and 2) confronting our roles as English instructors within a context of educational neocolonialism. It was at this point that we generated the two previously-mentioned analytical questions to approach our data:

1. What provokes emotion labor for us and how do we manage our emotions?
2. How was engaging in collaborative autoethnography to understand our emotion labor transformative for us?

We further refined our summaries and we also returned to the transcripts of our meetings to select relevant excerpts on these themes that we could interweave with our written summaries. Importantly, we viewed the process of shaping our manuscript as data collection and data analysis too, which informed one another (Keleş 2022), and we continued to gain insights into ourselves and each other as we completed the initial draft of the manuscript and the revisions. It should be noted
that while all of our voices are heard in the findings, we decided that we did not need to include excerpts from all four of us related to all sections of our findings. As we crafted the manuscript and confronted the challenge of limited space, we arrived at a decision to carefully choose a limited number of narratives that we felt best exemplified the two salient areas of our emotion labor and the transformative nature of our engagement in CAE.

5 Findings and discussion

In this section, we weave both a researcher’s voice and our own everyday voices (Choi 2017) in excerpts of our oral and written narratives. We encourage readers not to skip over the excerpts in search of finding the analysis only in the sections of the researcher’s voice. The narratives provide important insights as well as analysis about our emotion labor.

5.1 The emotion labor of teaching English to engineering students

One of the main themes related to emotion labor that continually came up in our discussions and later in our written reflections was the tension between how our institution viewed our purpose as teachers of English for engineering students and how we viewed our purpose. According to our institution, we are there to “educate exemplary engineers” and “develop engineering leaders in Qatar.” These discourses are in our university’s mission and vision and are also regularly repeated by our administration. The engineering education is also tailored to meet the market needs of the host country. As Al-Saleh (2022) states, producing engineers is “central to the development of oil and gas, the military and logistics infrastructures across the Gulf” (2). Our institution’s mission is “to be the premier provider of engineering education in the region...an essential resource to the State of Qatar.” As faculty at this institution, the mandated feeling rule is that we are supposed to feel proud of developing great engineering leaders for Qatar and this is the emotion that is valued by the power dynamics (Her and De Costa 2022); however, the constant focus on engineering has generated much emotion labor for us.

As English faculty, we provide English language development support and teach core writing, communication, and other elective courses that our students need for their engineering majors. While we teach many students who are enthusiastic about studying engineering and becoming engineers, we also teach many students who are less enthusiastic – who we would describe as apathetic. They may have been
pressured by family or their education sponsors to study engineering or just want the high status that comes with having an engineering degree in the region (Hillman and Salama 2018).

As we were working on our program evaluation, we discussed how much we should focus on engineering topics and genres in our English courses, and this came up as an area of emotion labor for us. For example, one discussion point was whether we should move to a language for specific purposes (e.g., English for engineering purposes) model or continue to have diverse themes and topic units in our English classes. Bryant found it emotionally taxing that his purpose according to the institution was to serve the engineering programs and help students succeed in their engineering majors, when as disclosed in Excerpt 1, he did not feel that this was necessarily in all of the students’ best interests.

Excerpt 1 (Bryant, E-mail exchange, 21 August, 2022)
I’m still trying to understand our students’ lives and where they’re coming from, but I know that there seems to be more pressure from a range of influences to become engineers.
Even in my short time here, I’ve had many students tell me they aren’t sure about engineering, and that they’ve had teachers and family members and parents who pressured them into enrolling. I have a female student currently in English whom I’m having trouble motivating. I’ve talked with her a bit, and I got a similar story from her last week. Her dad wants her to be an engineer because she can have a good salary and so on. I’m not sure she’s into it; she may have other ambitions, goals, desires, interests that are suffering. So, in my class, I want to get her through and see her do well, but also: do I want to push her to get motivated to do something that maybe for her own happiness and wellbeing, she would be better off not doing? How do you figure out how to motivate a student while also completely understanding the reasons why they may not be motivated to succeed (and understanding that maybe “success” here isn’t what they need or want)?
It’s been emotionally taxing in the work I’m trying to do and in trying to figure out how to meet my students’ needs and best interests beyond engineering.

For Naqaa, meeting the needs of students who do not necessarily want to be engineers was also an emotionally draining process, but she did not feel it was her place to challenge cultural perceptions about obtaining an engineering degree as a status symbol or to please one’s family. As an Iraqi, she understood the cultural and family pressures to study engineering or medicine, even though she herself chose a
different academic path. She felt that her purpose was simply to “motivate, care, mentor” and in the end, students would figure it out. In Excerpt 2, Naqaa responded to Bryant’s e-mail from Excerpt 1 and described the emotion labor of caring (Isenbarger and Zembylas 2006) for a student at her previous university who had no interest in studying English. She used this anecdote to illustrate how she currently manages her negative emotions while teaching students at the IBC who may lack intrinsic motivation to study engineering. For Naqaa, this happens through expressing care as an educator or “teacher caring” (Miller and Gkonou 2022).

Excerpt 2  (Naqaa, E-mail exchange, 21 August, 2022)

Three years ago, I taught English literature and writing classes to female students at the national university. One student, let’s call her Maha, took a writing class and did really well. Then, she took English literature and just didn’t seem to care or lost interest in her studies. She came to my office one day upset.

It turns out that Maha got accepted to an IBC in Qatar but was not allowed to go. Maha hates English and doesn’t want to become an English teacher. She loves art and drawing, and she wants to pursue her studies in visual art and design. She couldn’t go to her dream university because of cultural restrictions and family expectations; they did not want her in a co-educational environment.

If some students are forced to study engineering at an IBC because ‘that’s where the money is,’ Maha had to study English and education at the national university because that’s where good, dutiful daughters go to get a safe and respectful job (no need to mix with men, no need to work long hours).

What to do? This student is crying in my office because she believes her life is being dictated to her. I cannot ask this student to go against her parents’ will. I understand the parameters with which many Muslim Arab females have to work. I understand the baggage. But, it is not my job to start a revolution. It certainly isn’t my job to get her to ‘rebel’ against her parents. But, I regularly talked to this student and suggested ‘safe’ ways in which she could still pursue her interests.

A year later Maha comes into my office looking radiant. Maha is a full-time teacher now AND she is a part-time art instructor at an art gallery. She says “the most important thing is that everyone is happy. My mom is happy about my career and I get to do what I want in the end, and the brainstorming sessions I had with you helped me a lot.”
I’m not sure how to answer your question Bryant, but I’ve learned to remember Maha as an example for whenever I feel emotionally taxed. She figured it out, and so will our students forced to be engineers. I haven’t met that many who are really passionate about engineering but our job is to try to work with the parameters specific to culture, tradition, and gender. The process is draining, of course, and I feel sad or bad or angry about this or that student’s story, but, for my mental wellbeing, I have to keep saying, I’ll do my best to motivate, care, mentor, but in the end, they will figure it out.

When our group met face-to-face a week later, we found ourselves further discussing the two e-mails that Bryant and Naqaa had exchanged and the emotion labor of motivating our students within the context of an engineering school. It is also a context in which most of our students receive government or industry sponsorships for their education and are then required to work for their sponsors for a period of time upon graduation. Aymen commented how he felt that many of his students were not motivated to pursue their studies due to a passion for engineering, but like Naqaa, he understood the cultural pressures to pursue engineering. He managed his emotions by trying to empower students to understand the importance of education in general and to have a goal in mind to work towards. As an immigrant from Sudan who moved to the United States after completing a degree in teaching English, he could not find a job teaching because his Sudanese degree was not recognized or valued in the United States. Eventually, he decided to pursue graduate studies and got his Ph.D. He felt proud of his accomplishment and he wanted his students to understand the privilege they have to receive an education and not waste it. In Excerpt 3, Aymen discusses how he wants students to value the importance of being educated in general.

Excerpt 3  (Aymen, Face-to-face meeting, 28 August 2022)
Undergraduate education for me in Sudan meant moving up the socioeconomic ladder because it was viewed that the only way to get out of poverty was to have an education; you graduate and then that will facilitate employment. It was also about status. This has implications for what I do with my students in the class to try and motivate them because I know their background and that they’re not motivated simply because of a love of engineering. I don’t even think excelling in order to get a job is that big of a concern to them. So, I try to talk to them about the importance of being educated in general. Although I went to the United States after graduating in Sudan, I couldn’t find any job teaching English even though that was my training, so I assumed different jobs.
I was there thinking, how long will I be doing this as an immigrant in the United States and what can I do in order to elevate myself? Education was the answer. When I started doing my graduate studies, I changed professions and started working as an ESL instructor and then immediately thought about Ph.D. and so on and so forth. Sometimes I share that with my students—that this is my background, that this is what shaped me as a person and it’s important, no matter which context you are in, to have a goal, and to work hard towards achieving that goal. I feel a sense of pride because I worked hard. I achieved the goals that I set for myself, but how that makes my students feel, I don’t really know. Maybe they feel sympathetic towards me, or maybe they feel empowered that they have to follow this example.

Thus, while the IBC emphasized the development of exemplary engineers and engineering leaders, we recognized the diverse motivations and pressures faced by our students, and grappled with balancing institutional expectations and student well-being. We also recognized the importance of empathy, mentorship, and helping students discover their own paths within the parameters of culture, tradition, and gender; this seemed to be our way of combatting negative emotions and wrestling our emotion labor.

5.2 The emotion labor of confronting our roles in educational neocolonialism

In addition to the emotion labor of navigating our purpose teaching English to engineering majors, another area of emotion labor for us was confronting our role in educational neocolonialism (Romanowski 2022), or how we are shaping and influencing students’ education and thinking in ways that are largely based on Western paradigms. In Excerpt 4, Bryant describes the tension of the premise, the implicit feeling rules, that we are delivering unbiased knowledge in our English classes, and the emotion labor that is provoked in knowing that there are biases and uneven balances of power. Bryant also expresses how he feels that he should know more about his students’ cultures than he does; Bryant’s expressions of his “shortcomings” are similar to sentiments expressed by the transnational teachers in Alshakhi and Phan’s (2020) study in Saudi Arabia. While this lack of knowledge causes Bryant to feel guilty, he manages his emotions through agentive reflexivity and critical awareness to change the pedagogical norms.
Excerpt 4  (Bryant, E-mail exchange, 16 January 2023)

I don’t believe you can delink this branch from the histories and legacies of colonialism and neocolonialism, and the power/knowledge imbalances contained within those systems. We have inherited these imbalances, which are very much alive and well today as many of our students know, even if they can’t necessarily articulate them in terms we would recognize. For me, *feeling rules* is the underlying assumption that we are transmitting universal, unbiased “knowledge,” and emotion labor is understanding that there are clear biases, inherited and uneven imbalances in knowledge and power contained within the transmission of “knowledge.”

I think students are often skeptical because they know, at some level, something is amiss. They know we are teaching very specific behaviors, expectations, ways of knowing, ideas about knowledge and knowledge production, and so on. I also think there are ways around this, ways to opt out, ways to grapple with it, and ways to give students the language and tools to think about some of the things that they seem to sense and some of the things that I think cause them emotion labor.

I also believe that I owe it to my students to know more about their culture than I do. I should know about them, about their lives, about their languages. Our students have so much knowledge of culture and literature, and often, in their classes, this goes unacknowledged and unappreciated, and, as a result, undervalued, devalued (I think insultingly so, and I think they feel it). They assume that what I am doing and what they are close to culturally, emotionally, and linguistically are disconnected. I find this not only sad but a huge failure.

But what I think that I can do, which I think is a good marker of critical thinking in general, is to try and talk about the friction. In writing classes, we discuss: “Is this a writing class or a *writing in English* class? Or a writing in college English class? Do the skills transfer to Arabic or other languages? Why or why not?” It’s also a good exercise in critical thinking to discuss these things and a place where students can discuss, challenge, and re-envision everything about the course with the instructor: “This is a problem? Okay, what’s the solution? If we imagine this course as your course, not mine (because it’s not), then what can I do for you? What can you do for you?”
I feel guilt not knowing more about their worlds, so I build lots of stuff into my syllabus that I don’t know about, that give them a chance to teach me. I use it as a place where students can teach me about their worlds, cultures, languages, families (often), and lives. They’re the experts, not me.

I think building in that sort of strategic vulnerability into a classroom gives them ownership, defuses the artificial power imbalance in a classroom, and shows them that this—I hope—can be a collective, collaborative experience where their knowledge and expertise builds a new environment that is multisided and has much less to do with me or the peripheral knowledge that I bring to the class. I think that’s, in part, how I deal with some of the specific emotion labor inherent in our system here, in our unique position here in a strange “Western” campus bubble in a rich yet developing multicultural environment.

Similar to Bryant, in Excerpt 5, Sara also expresses the emotion of guilt about participating in “cultural and linguistic imperialism” and tries to manage and mitigate these tensions through exercising agentive powers to change the pedagogical norms.

Excerpt 5   (Sara, E-mail exchange, 16 January 2023)

I often feel guilty that I am participating in cultural and linguistic imperialism as a White, American instructor at a branch campus of an American university in an Arab country. As someone who researches the social and ideological aspects of English as a medium of instruction and transnational higher education in Qatar, I know that IBCs are contested spaces and that they can be viewed as an extension of an imperialistic agenda and as something that perpetuates cultural biases and dominant Western educational models. I’m acutely aware of a broader debate about the loss of language, values, and practices in the region and how some of my students navigate shaming from family and community members for using English too much or presenting undesirable Westernized identities in their communities. As an instructor at this institution, I often feel that I am expected to immerse our students in English and socialize them into “Aggie” values and traditions—a culture that comes from a home campus that is largely White, conservative, and Christian. I often reflect on what is being lost when academic spheres of knowledge are only produced in English.
I try to mitigate this tension I feel in all sorts of ways. I try to create many opportunities to rhetorically listen to my students. I try to design assignments that help me better understand my students’ beliefs, values, worldviews, identities, emotions. I am also very committed to using multilingual approaches in both my language and content courses. For example, I show videos in class that are in Arabic with English subtitles and have them discuss the video in English or I encourage them to use Arabic or other language resources for their papers and presentations. I now do a semester-long translingual literacy narrative project in my developmental English class. The project encourages my students to reflect on the emotional impact of global English and language policies and of being an IBC student. It encourages them to reflect on their emotions related to their linguistic and cultural identities (such as sometimes being called a “chicken nugget” for using English more than Arabic) and to think critically about the macro-, meso-, and micro-contexts in which they are situated and how these contexts and the power dynamics shape or underlie their emotions. Toward the end of the semester, students transform their literacy narratives into a multilingual, multimodal product of their literacy journeys, which I think captures a much more holistic view of their lived experiences, and teaches me a lot about their lives. My goal is not to help students be more monolingual or more Western, but to expand their communicative and cultural repertoires.

In an earlier face-to-face meeting in which this topic of neocolonialism had also come up, Aymen had discussed (see Excerpt 6) how he managed his emotions about teaching English as “an arm for imperialism” by countering “native-speakerism” ideologies (Holliday 2006) in his classroom and the underlying hegemonic discourses; he also doesn’t police translanguageing (García and Li 2014) or learners shuttling between English and Arabic or other languages in his classrooms.

Excerpt 6 (Aymen, Face-to-face meeting, 11 September 2022)
For me, what makes me feel better that we might be an arm for imperialism is raising students’ awareness that they don’t have to master English as “native speakers.” They don’t need to feel emotionally burdened themselves that they must be like native English speakers.
I tell them that comprehensibility is really what matters and that they can also use their first language—it’s not something that I ask them to keep out of the door. I tell them that it’s important, and that it can help them with learning the second language. This reassurance is solidified by the translangugaging activities we conduct in class. It makes me feel better when they see their first language as valued in the learning process and hopefully makes them also feel better about their development in the language. I think it creates a more positive environment in the classroom.

Similar to Aymen, Naqaa discussed with us how she has begun to embrace translanguaging and more culturally sustaining pedagogies in her language classrooms since she has moved to Qatar and started to work at an IBC. Previously, language immersion and Eurocentric teaching materials had been an important part of her language teaching philosophy. This change was a result of her managing the emotions that were provoked by teaching English in a neocolonialist educational context. In Excerpt 7, Naqaa reflects on how her language teaching philosophy shifted.

Excerpt 7  (Naqaa, E-mail exchange, 16 January 2023)
When I was a nine-year-old immigrant trying to integrate and settle in a small Waspy city in Canada, I did everything I could to accelerate my English so as not to be labeled an ESL student. This meant that I needed to think, dream, breathe English. I didn’t even speak my mother tongue at home with my siblings – I am still called a bad influence to this day because of that. As I got older, I took classes, traveled for immersion programs, and lived in remote parts where I was forced to practice only that language that I was learning at the time. For me, that was the best way to learn a language. I immersed myself in the culture, tradition, and history of the language I was learning. I lived with exchange families, made local friends, traveled around the country, and took everything in. Friends and colleagues called me the most ‘non-Arab’ Arab they knew. To me, that was a good thing!
I then became a language teacher of English, Arabic, French, and German. And, throughout my teaching career, my pedagogical practices recreated my own past experiences – immersing oneself into a discourse community. In my classes, only one language could be spoken, and if students tried to express themselves in their mother tongue, I would force them to find the words in the language we were learning. My assignments, in-class activities, artefacts, videos, songs, and art were Eurocentric for the most part.
The composition of my students and the context changed when I moved to the Middle East and started teaching students from my own religious and linguistic background in an English-medium instruction context. Here in Qatar, I do use a bit of Arabic in the class, and I see that my students feel a little bit relaxed, as it breaks that barrier between me and them. When they’re comfortable with me, they’ll say a few Arabic words here and there, or when I’m explaining something, I’ll explain it to them in Arabic to make sure that they understand. I would say definitely a mix of English and Arabic is helping us get through the class and taking away some of their discomfort. It has brought me closer to my students and it also makes me feel better, like I’m acknowledging their full identities as well as my own.

Although we experienced emotions such as guilt and emotion labor in confronting our roles in educational neocolonialism, we found that we actively managed and mitigated these tensions through rhetorical listening, multilingual approaches, and culturally sustaining pedagogies. We saw the “agentive power of teacher emotions” (Benesch 2018; Her and De Costa 2022: 2) and how our emotions influenced our actions, decisions, and interactions.

5.3 How was exploring emotion labor together transformative for us?

In thinking about what emotions do socially and what emotion labor does, a CAE focus on emotion labor allowed us to critically reflect on our own ideologies, identities, and practices, both individually and as an inquiry group in a shared context. We came to view both our methodology and our exploration of emotion labor as “resource[s] for reflection and ethical agency” (Miller and Gkonou 2022). We have become more aware of our own positionalities as expatriate instructors, the biases we bring, and how we each manage these in our classrooms. As Her and De Costa (2022) argue, emotion labor can be sites where teachers can “develop, reuse and strengthen their emotional capital” (9). We came to an important realization that addressing what is often left unsaid – the feelings rules and our emotion labor – can be transformative for our students and us, and help us thrive in this liminal space we share.
As a group, we came to see how emotion labor is not only something burdensome or a problem to overcome, but also something engaging and enriching for us that helps us accrue emotional capital and helps us “explore and negotiate new dimensions of our identity as we work toward resolving these tensions” (Yazan et al. 2023: 142). Bryant reflects on the emotional capital gained from emotion labor in Excerpt 8.

Excerpt 8  (Bryant, E-mail exchange, 16 January 2023)
In a sense, I feel lucky to be able to have these sites of friction and to be able to confront them with a diverse body of students. I really appreciate this friction as a space of personal development and critical inquiry into my own practices and assumptions about what I’m doing. I think these contentious and conflicting sites can actually be positive and rewarding sites to dwell in and they can be opportunities for real, critical, deep learning in a classroom.

Teachers and students may have deep emotions and feelings about teaching and learning English, or being in an IBC or language policies in the classroom. These tensions can be critical sites for students and instructors to think through complex and important issues and face them together and figure them out together (Pentón Herrera and Martínez-Alba 2022). Benesch (2017) suggests that “English language teachers can draw upon emotion labor as a signal of disharmony and therefore a tool for collaborating with students and colleagues to achieve greater understanding and possible reform” (182). Similarly, Alshakhi and Phan (2020) in writing about transnational teachers’ emotions in the context of Saudi Arabia note: “through engaging with these dialogues and conversations, hidden nuances of emotion(al) labor in transnational mobilities [can] be revealed” (323).

We found that we manage our emotions through agentive reflexivity, honest engagement with students, and “teacher caring” (Miller and Gkonou 2018; Nazari and Molana 2022). In exploring the transcripts of our conversations, we realized that each of us engages in critical discussions with our students that relate to our own emotion labor. Naqaa explores with her students the emotion labor of teaching English to engineering students: What motivates me/you to be here? Do you want to be an engineering leader? What do I/you see as the purpose of an undergraduate degree? of studying English? How important are individual happiness and wellbeing to me/you? Aymen explores with his students the emotion labor of underlying hegemonic discourses of English: Why are we teaching/learning English? Which English are we teaching/learning? Whose English are we teaching/learning? Does English belong to all of us? What does English mean to you? Similarly, Bryant explores with his students the emotion labor of giving feedback on student writing: What is corrective feedback? What is correct? Where does correct come from? Who
say what’s correct? Sara explores the emotion labor of monolingual biases in IBCs: 
How do we feel when we mix languages in different contexts? How do others react when we mix languages? How do we use different languages to express ourselves and make sense of the world? We felt we were able to effectively manage our emotions and gain emotional capital (Her and De Costa 2022) through these critical discussions with students.

Another transformative aspect of our CAE work was “bridging the researcher-practitioner” divide (De Costa et al. 2022b; Yazan et al. 2023). Naqaa expressed that she had not been able to pursue research since joining the IBC and missed being part of an intellectual community. She also became aware that she was already enacting pedagogical practices recommended by applied linguist researchers, even if she could not “pin a theoretically oriented label” to them (De Costa et al. 2022b). In Excerpt 9, Naqaa discusses how engaging in CAE work was transformative for her.

Excerpt 9 (Naqaa, E-mail exchange, 16 January 2023)
When we are so focused on our teaching and classroom management, we often lose touch with current research. Having a working group of teachers and researchers has been a very enriching experience, one that is greatly contributing to my professional development. I realized I have already been applying some theoretical concepts with which I was not that familiar before, like translanguaging, in my classroom. I have become a better instructor, and a more conscientious teacher since I joined this discourse community. As we meet regularly throughout the term, and as we talk through issues and challenges, share our thoughts or vent on WhatsApp, and collaborate on conference presentations and research papers, this community has not only directed my research and readings, but has helped me become better towards my students, and towards myself.

Thus, Naqaa’s reflection highlights the significance of having a community of teachers and researchers who collaborate and share their experiences, thoughts, and research findings. This is similar to De Costa et al.’s (2022b: 13) findings, in which they discovered a “collective power of collaboration” between researchers and teachers in their study. Naqaa’s reflection emphasizes how being a part of such a community can enrich professional development by helping teachers stay current with research and apply theoretical concepts in their teaching. When Naqaa submitted her edits on our second revision of this article, she expressed over e-mail to Sara how grateful she was to be included in research projects (Excerpt 10). Being part of a collaborative and communal research environment invigorated and energized her personally and professionally. It should be noted that the experience equally enriched those in our
group who have been more involved in research projects and as emphasized by De Costa et al. (2022b), there was “knowledge sharing and not unidirectional knowledge transfer” (13) between us.

Excerpt 10 (Naqaa, E-mail exchange, 29 May 2023)
…thank you for including me in your research projects; this collaboration and community is what keeps me invigorated and excited about my teaching and pedagogy!

In considering overall how exploring emotion labor together was transformative for us, we found that, similar to Yazan et al. (2023), that engaging in CAE allowed us to develop much more emotional awareness and identify some of the often unspoken and “invisible” sites of friction that we all feel working in a transnational higher education landscape and an engineering context. We agree that we would not have gained the same insights working on this project in isolation. During the presentation of an earlier iteration of our CAE work at a conference, a member of the audience remarked that the collaborative aspect of our study was its true strength and we indeed felt this.

6 Conclusions

In this CAE study, we have collectively examined our emotion labor as expatriate English instructors in an engineering transnational university context in Qatar. One area of emotion labor for us was our institution’s discourse about developing and producing engineers and our own encounters as English instructors with students who were not that motivated to study engineering. We had to constantly mediate the institutional discourse with our own experiences with students, and this led to emotion labor (Her and De Costa 2022). Another area of emotion labor was confronting our role in contributing to the neocolonization of the education sector in Qatar and the tensions of knowing there are biases and uneven balances of power. We also developed emotional capital though in relation to feelings rules and emotion labor (Her and De Costa 2022). Moreover, the methodology of CAE helped us to critically reflect on our own ideologies, identities, and practices and view emotion labor as a resource for reflection and ethical agency (Yazan et al. 2023). We hope our readers are inspired by our narratives and our accessible methodology to examine their emotion labor collaboratively with their colleagues or students or other stakeholders in their contexts – and to consider how their emotion labor is shaped by their own social, political, and cultural contexts. We believe that addressing unsaid feelings, emotions, and emotion labor can be transformative for language teachers and their students by leading to a more vulnerable, collaborative, and equitable classroom space.
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