"I felt the need to hide how I felt": Affect and agency in teacher narratives of conflict in an L2 classroom

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The concept of teacher agency has received relatively little attention in applied linguistics research, with teachers being seen more in relation to learners than as "agents in their own right" (Kalaja, Barcelos, Aro and Ruohotie-Lyhty 2015: 14). Furthermore, despite ample anecdotal evidence that language instruction tends to generate a range of affective experiences for all participants, we have as yet relatively little situated understanding of teacher emotion, agency and agentive practices as interactional phenomena. Drawing on Ahearn’s (2010) notion of meta-agentive discourse, that is how people talk about the actions of themselves and others, how they attribute responsibility and how they describe their decision-making processes (and those of others), this paper analyses relationships between affect and agency in teacher narratives relating to incidents of conflict that occurred in their classes for migrants and refugees. The multiple accounts of the incidents were gathered initially through a written narrative, then revisited in an individual interview, and subsequently as part of a group discussion with other teachers. The analysis focuses on enduring, interrelated questions of affect and agency, particularly in terms of responsibility, answerability and critical reflexivity. In examining how affective orientations and responses to moments of interaction shape different dimensions of personal agency, it moves emotions from the margins to the centre of theorising of agency. The paper concludes with a discussion of the ways in which affect and agency can be seen as mutually constituted, with affect both enabling and constraining agency, and agency shaping the dynamics of affectivity within and across settings.


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