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Emotion Regulation and Stress Management Among Iranian EFL Teachers: A Qualitative Exploration of Adaptive and Maladaptive Strategies

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Abstract

Emotion regulation is essential for teachers' stress management and effective classroom performance. However, few studies have examined how teachers employ adaptive and maladaptive strategies to regulate their emotions in classroom settings. To this end, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the adaptive and maladaptive emotion regulation strategies used by Iranian English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers and examine how these strategies shaped their classroom practices and professional well-being. The participants were 20 Iranian EFL teachers who were chosen based on purposeful sampling. Data were collected through framed narratives, focus group interviews, and semi-structured interviews to ensure triangulation and enhance trustworthiness. Three main adaptive strategies were found through the thematic analysis of the data: emotional safety, efficiency, and mindfulness. These strategies helped teachers create a positive classroom atmosphere, enhance EFL learners' emotional stability, and improve classroom engagement. Meanwhile, maladaptive strategies like emotional suppression, rumination, and avoidance intensified teachers' negative emotions, psychological repercussions, and negative psychological attributes. The results showed that adaptive regulation is a mechanism of emotional scaffolding that fosters well-being, classroom harmony, and pedagogical resilience. In contrast, maladaptive regulation decreases teachers' emotional balance and self-efficacy. This study offers critical implications for EFL teachers, policy makers, and school administrators.

Keywords: adaptive strategies, emotion regulation, maladaptive strategies, stress management

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1. Introduction

Teachers often encounter a broad array of emotions in the classroom, and a main aspect of teachers' competency is their capability to effectively regulate these emotions (Frenzel et al., 2021). Emotion regulation is a behavioral and psychological process of monitoring, identifying, adjusting, and evaluating an individual's emotional reactions to both inside and outside circumstances (Richard-Sephton et al., 2024). Hence, it refers to the intrinsic and extrinsic processes connected with the management and the stimulation of an emotion over time (Costa Martins et al., 2016; Gross, 2014).

Emotion regulation is a central part of teachers' daily functioning, which mainly affects their well-being and teaching effectiveness (Jiang & Yin, 2025). According to Gross's (1998a) process model, individuals manage their emotions via a sequence of strategies that can happen at various phases of emotional generation. These strategies consist of attentional deployment, situation selection, situation change, cognitive reappraisal, and response modulation. Based on each strategy's context and implementation, each one of them can have adaptive or maladaptive outcomes. These strategies allow individuals to shape what kinds of emotions are generated, how they are expressed, and how they are experienced (Bagheri Nevisi & Heydarzadeh, 2025; Torrence & Connelly, 2019). Moreover, they are categorized into antecedent-focused regulation, which happens before the activation of an emotional response, and response-focused regulation, which is implemented after an emotion elicitation (Gross, 1998b).

Emotion regulation strategies might be adaptive, maladaptive, functional, and dysfunctional (Richard-Sephton et al., 2024). Functional and adaptive strategies are considered useful because they help individuals to effectively attend to their intended emotional state. In contrast, dysfunctional and maladaptive strategies are regarded as useless since they fail to bring about the desired emotional state and often cause emotional difficulties (Gross & John, 2003). Studies show that maladaptive strategies (e.g., expressive inhibition, disengagement, and rumination) are generally inefficient in altering emotional response in empirical settings and are linked to greater degrees of psychological symptoms (e.g., Aldao et al., 2015; Johnston et al., 2025; Sharabi & Roth, 2024).

Understanding the ways by which teachers control their emotions, the influence of their pedagogical attitudes on their instructional practices, and the collective effect of these factors on teacher-student engagement is critical for increasing educational effectiveness (Zhang et al., 2025). Although a large body of research has been implemented on teachers' strategies of emotional regulation and general effects on their well-being (e.g., Jiang et al., 2016; Vogl et al., 2025), few studies have investigated how Iranian EFL teachers use adaptive strategies to support students' stress management, and how

maladaptive strategies shape teachers' own emotions, behaviors, and personal functioning. Hence, the purpose of this study was to explore Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of their usage of adaptive and maladaptive emotion regulation strategies and to examine how their use of maladaptive strategies shaped their own emotional experiences in the classroom.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Emotion Regulation

The emotional aspect of teacher education is an important part of effective teaching (Bing et al., 2022). Hence, teaching is inherently an emotional trait, and teachers encounter different kinds of emotions, like anger, anxiety, and happiness (Sutton & Harper, 2009). Teachers' emotional experiences in the classroom mainly influence the learners' behaviors, instructional methods, and classroom management (Bodenheimer & Shuster, 2020). Therefore, researchers believe that teachers who maintain positive emotional states tend to adopt student-oriented approaches, while those possessing negative emotions might use teacher-oriented methods in the classroom (Martínez-Priego et al., 2024). Thus, emotion regulation comprises a variety of strategies people apply to manage their emotions (e.g., suppression, cognitive reappraisal, etc.), as well as a variety of objectives they try to achieve via these regulation strategies (e.g., facing a challenge, nurturing interpersonal relationships, increasing well-being, etc.) (Bing et al., 2022).

Teachers who successfully regulate their emotions are more effectively prepared to improve their well-being, manage their stress, and create a supportive classroom environment (Wang, 2024). Over time, various models of emotion regulation have focused on different strategies individuals use for regulating their emotions. According to Campos et al. (2004), emotion regulation is composed of two dimensions. The first dimension includes a set of procedures associated with the creation of emotions, and the second dimension pertains to another set of processes resulting from the generated emotion and involves its management or mismanagement. In the modal model, emotions involve the meaningful transactions between individuals and situations that occur because of some particular goals and cause the flexible and coordinated multisystem responses (Gross, 2014).

This study is grounded in Gross's (2014) extended process model of emotion regulation. According to this model, emotion regulation is not just a strategy selection, but it is a method of increasing motivation, awareness, and monitoring. Within this framework, emotion regulation is considered a goal-oriented and dynamic process in which emotions arise from the functioning of the valuation systems. Regulation happens when a higher-level valuation system evaluates the activity of a lower-level system, which is responsible for generating emotion, and initiates actions to modify it. In other words, it

involves activating an objective to affect an unfolding emotional response (Gross & Thompson, 2007). Meanwhile, to cultivate an in-depth perspective of teachers' emotion regulation, the present study also draws on complementary frameworks such as teacher emotional labor (Hochschild, 2012) and teacher self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). It should be mentioned that Gross' (2014) process model explains the mechanisms of emotional regulation, while emotional labor framework situates these processes within the sociocultural and institutional realities of teaching. Also, Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory shows the personal belief systems that influence teachers' regulatory choices. These frameworks collectively highlight how teachers' regulation of emotions interacts with their sense of efficacy and professional resilience, resulting in a more integrative understanding of adaptive and maladaptive emotional strategies in the EFL context.

2.2. Adaptive and Maladaptive Strategies

Mental health is closely associated with affective states such as impulses, moods, stress response, and emotion regulation. These states affect how individuals feel, behave, think, and often, they typically facilitate adaptive functioning (Gross et al., 2019). Therefore, the capability to regulate emotions successfully is important for adaptive health and functioning (Salimzadeh et al., 2020). The strategies of emotional regulation are typically classified into effective (adaptive) and ineffective (maladaptive) strategies depending on their long-term and immediate effects on cognition, behavior, and affect (Aldao & Hoeksema, 2012; Mohammadi et al., 2019; Mohammadi et al., 2023). Adaptive strategies are defined as those kinds of strategies that have negative connections with symptoms of mental disorder, while maladaptive strategies are those kinds of strategies that are linked to the maintenance and elicitation of psychological disorders (Aldao et al., 2015).

Adaptive strategies like acceptance, problem-solving, and cognitive reappraisal entail actively addressing the basic cause of distress or adjusting emotional experiences in different situations. These strategies are closely related to the greater positive effect, reduced psychopathology, and increased psychological well-being (Martínez-Priego et al., 2024). Thus, individuals' higher use of adaptive strategies is associated with their stress coping strategies, while more behavioral and emotional problems like depression, anxiety, and opposition are observed in societies in which people use fewer adaptive strategies (Goossens et al., 2016; Sharabi & Roth, 2024).

Affective states may become harmful to the mental health through maladaptive generation of emotions. Maladaptive strategies, like avoidance, suppression, and rumination include inefficient efforts to regulate emotions and often increase negative effects and psychopathological symptoms (Gross et al., 2019; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Contemporary models of emotion

regulation especially the flexibility model, suggest that there is no single connection between the utilization of particular strategies and their adaptive significance. Instead, the usefulness of each strategy relies on the particular regulatory objectives that support emotion regulation in a specific context (Boemo et al., 2022; Johnston et al., 2025). Flexibility, thus, refers to the capacity to adaptively select, apply, and adjust strategies according to the changing situational demands, thereby optimizing emotional and psychological outcomes (Adamczyk et al., 2024).

With the emergence of the affective turn, researchers have increasingly focused on teachers' emotion regulation, which significantly affects their well-being, work engagement, and professional development (e.g., Derakhshan et al., 2023; Han et al., 2024; Johnston et al., 2025; Shapouran et al., 2024). In a qualitative case study, Jiang and Yin (2025) conducted a thematic analysis to evaluate the adaptive and maladaptive strategies of 12 Chinese teachers. The results showed that teachers employed the strategies of suppression, venting, acceptance, and interpersonal regulation as adaptive emotion regulation strategies, while rumination was identified as a maladaptive strategy. Thus, they concluded that the flexible execution of the emotion regulation strategies can increase teachers' adaptability. In another study, Salimzadeh et al. (2020) analyzed the correlations between adaptive and maladaptive strategies of 414 faculty members in Canada. The findings demonstrated that using adaptive strategies positively affected teachers' well-being, while maladaptive strategies had a negative effect on it. Similarly, in a recent meta-analysis study, Wang et al. (2025) performed a study of quantitative synthesis to evaluate the effect of emotion regulation strategies on teachers' positive emotional consequences and well-being. The findings revealed that deep acting of the emotional regulation strategies significantly increased teachers' well-being. Conversely, surface acting was connected with inconsistent results, which were sometimes useful but most of the time did not promote effective teaching.

Many studies on teachers' emotion regulation are largely situated in non-EFL contexts and primarily rely on quantitative methods. Hence, teachers' personal understandings and reflections on their own regulatory practices have received little attention. Moreover, few investigations have explicitly identified the distinction between adaptive and maladaptive strategies or examined how these strategies function in managing classroom stress. Since emotion regulation is a multifaceted construct, a deeper and context-specific exploration is essential for understanding how teachers experience and apply these strategies in real classroom settings. Therefore, more phenomenological research is required to explore how EFL teachers experience and interpret adaptive and maladaptive emotion regulation in their professional lives. Based on the study's objectives, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How do Iranian EFL teachers use adaptive strategies to help their students manage their stress?
2. How do maladaptive strategies shape Iranian EFL teachers' emotional experiences and stress management in the classroom?

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative phenomenological design to explore Iranian EFL teachers' lived experiences of the adaptive and maladaptive strategies in stressful classroom situations. The data were collected through multiple qualitative data collection methods, including framed narratives, focus group discussions, and semi-structured interviews to acquire a holistic understanding of teachers' emotional regulation practices. The use of these methods was intended to enable methodological triangulation within a single phenomenological framework, thereby enhancing the findings' trustworthiness, and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.1. Participants

The participants included 20 Iranian EFL teachers (12 females and 8 males) selected through purposeful sampling from different language institutions in East Azarbaijan Province. This type of sampling enabled the researcher to include EFL teachers who had relevant experience with emotion regulation. The participants had either B. A (10 participants) and M.A. degree (10 participants) in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), and their ages ranged between 23 and 50. Seven participants had fewer than three years of teaching experience, while 13 had more than three years. All of the participants were actively engaged in classroom instruction during the study period, and their participation was entirely voluntary. Before data collection, voluntary consent was acquired from all of the participants. Meanwhile, they were assured that their identity would be held confidential and would be utilized solely for academic objectives.

3.2. Materials and Instruments

Three kinds of instruments were used in this study as follows:

3.2.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

In line with Creswell and Creswell's (2018) guidelines, semi-structured interviews served as the principal approach of data collection. This approach involved using an interview guide with eight open-ended questions related to the participants' emotion regulation strategies. Meanwhile, some follow-up questions were posed as required to allow the participants expand their experiences and enable the researcher to probe further when new insights emerged. Such flexibility was essential in a phenomenological design, as it

provided a deeper understanding of Iranian EFL teachers' adaptive and maladaptive strategies.

3.2.2. Focus Group Interviews

A focus group involves guided group discussions with a small sample of participants. The interactive nature of this method facilitates the emergence of common themes and also allows participants to elaborate on their practices by responding to their peers' comments (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Focus group interviews were implemented to get the collective perspectives of Iranian EFL teachers' adaptive and maladaptive strategies. The participants were assigned to four groups of five members, and every group was interviewed separately.

3.2.3. Framed Narratives

Framed narratives were used as a supporting data collection tool within this phenomenological study. Framed narratives do not constitute a narrative inquiry methodology; rather, they function as a structured elicitation technique that encourages participants to express specific experiences related to a predefined phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Specifically, framed narratives were used in which participants were invited to verbally narrate their coping strategies in stressful teaching situations. These framed narratives provided participants with a structured and flexible way to reflect on and share their specific adaptive and maladaptive strategies.

3.3. Procedure

This phenomenological study aimed to explore Iranian EFL teachers' adaptive and maladaptive strategies in stress management. Participants were chosen via purposeful sampling from several private language institutes. Teachers who met the inclusion criteria (i.e., being Iranian EFL teachers actively engaged in classroom instruction) were invited to participate, and those who agreed did so voluntarily. Prior to the data collection, participants were presented with some information about the purpose of the study, were assured of their privacy, and were apprised of their right to discontinue participation whenever they wished. Meanwhile, written authorization was received from all participants before the data collection.

Three qualitative instruments, including focus group interviews, semi-structured interviews, and framed narratives, were employed to triangulate the data and to increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the study. Semi-structured interviews were carried out individually with each participant. An interview guide, adapted from Creswell and Creswell's (2018) recommendations, was developed to elicit teachers' lived experiences of stressful classroom contexts and the strategies they used to control their emotions. The interviews lasted between 15 and 30 minutes and were

electronically recorded with the participants' authorization. Follow-up questions were utilized to ensure clarity in participants' responses. Meanwhile, four focus group interviews with five members in each were used to get the participants' collective perspectives. These sessions lasted approximately 30 minutes and encouraged teachers to reflect on and compare their experiences of emotion regulation. In addition, participants were invited to provide narratives of particularly stressful classroom situations and how they managed them. In these interviews, participants were presented with eight open-response questions regarding their lived experiences in relation to adaptive and maladaptive strategies and the way these strategies shaped students' learning and teachers' well-being. The interview questions were designed on the basis of the study's theoretical background, and their content validity was confirmed by three EFL teachers (see Appendix).

All interviews and narratives were conducted in Persian to ensure the participants' comfort and to get detailed expressions. The recordings and written interviews were subsequently transcribed word for word and, where necessary, translated into English for further analysis. Data collection proceeded until data saturation, when no new information or themes were recognized after the 17th interview. Additionally, the transcribed data was sent to the participants for confirmation, thereby enhancing the credibility of the data.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through a six-step process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), including data familiarization, initial code categorization, exploring patterns, reviewing themes, naming themes, and writing the final report. In the data familiarization, the semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the researcher studied the transcripts multiple times to get a comprehensive understanding of the narrated content. In the initial coding, the main parts of the participants' statements were identified and coded (e.g., staying calm, controlling anger, creating a safe space, feeling overwhelmed). In the third stage (exploring patterns), similar codes were gathered together and organized into broader categories. For example, codes such as friendly interaction, student voice, and emotional support were gathered under an emerging theme related to emotional safety. In the fourth stage (theme review), all quotations and codes associated with each theme were re-examined to verify thematic consistency. In the fifth stage (theme naming), each theme was precisely defined based on existing theoretical and empirical literature. Finally, in the report writing phase, the findings related to each theme were presented using illustrative quotations from the participants.

It should be mentioned that data analysis began concurrently with the interviews, starting from the first session (Holloway & Galvin, 2016). Meanwhile, an inductive thematic analysis was employed, meaning that themes and codes were generated explicitly from the data rather than following predefined theoretical categories. This approach was consistent with the phenomenological nature of the study, which seeks to obtain participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

To confirm the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis, this study carefully followed the four principles recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985): transferability, credibility, confirmability, and dependability. Transferability was improved by offering comprehensive explanations of the participants, research settings, and data collection procedures, so that the readers could evaluate the usefulness of the findings in different situations. Credibility was created through member checking, in which participants reviewed and verified the correctness of the transcripts. Confirmability was ensured through peer review, in which two external qualitative researchers examined the coding framework and thematic structure to reduce potential researcher bias. Moreover, any differences in the data coding were analyzed, and the refined coding scheme was applied to the remaining data. Dependability was supported by keeping a complete audit trail that captured each step of the coding process. Meanwhile to get intercoder reliability, two TEFL researchers independently coded 30% of the transcripts using the initial codebook. Then, Cohen's Kappa coefficient for coding consistency was calculated as 0.86, indicating a substantial agreement among coders.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Research Question 1

In answer to the research question one regarding the adaptive strategies teachers use to assist students cope with their stress, teachers reported that they used the three key strategies of emotional safety, efficiency, and mindfulness. These strategies reflected teachers' efforts to create a supportive classroom environment, manage instructional tasks effectively, attend to students' individual needs, and promote awareness and regulation of emotions.

4.1.1.1. Theme 1: Emotional Safety as an Adaptive Emotional Regulation Strategy. Emotional safety is considered an adaptive strategy that refers to developing a classroom atmosphere in which students feel secure and respected. The teachers reported that they used the strategies of establishing emotional safety to help students cope with their stress. This theme was supported by the subthemes of creating a positive classroom environment, friendly student-teacher relationship, learner support, and a respect for

students' voice and autonomy. Parisa, 33, responded to our questions in the following way.

I try to give my students a sense of security and peace in the class by trying to have a friendly relationship with them. I sometimes walk across the class and I ask my students some questions. Building relationships with students relieves their stress and enhances their learning.

The most important feature Parisa mentioned was creating a safe environment in the class and a feeling of security and peace in students. Parisa creates a safe space free from emotional harm for students, and she believes that students will learn better when their voice is heard in the class. In this environment, students feel confident to take risks and express their ideas and opinions clearly. She creates emotional safety in the class by building a friendly and positive environment for learning. It is in this environment that quality learning occurs. Ali (27) pointed out that:

Well, I regularly gather feedback from my students about the activities of the class by conducting surveys and asking them questions. In doing so, I create a comfortable environment in the class by welcoming any comments and feedback from my students. I believe that students are different in their learning styles; hence, I can make better teaching choices by matching my own teaching methods to students' expectations. Through these activities, I help students manage their feelings and reactions to classroom activities.

Ali's responsiveness to the students' needs is an example of adaptive emotion regulation because it creates emotional safety in students by engaging, motivating, and involving them in class activities. In this environment, the inside feelings of the students are attended to; hence, there would be a mutual respect among the teacher and the students because the students would feel that their voices are applauded. Hence, emotional care of the teacher for the students is as important as the academic instruction. Thus, teachers' adaptive regulation strategies not only decrease stress but also enhance deeper engagement and resilience in learning contexts. Amir (44) answered our questions in the following way:

I divide my students into groups of five or more and give roles to each member of the group. Then, I ask them to communicate in their group and answer the questions asked in the class cooperatively. By doing this, the full participation of all of the students in class activities is guaranteed, and the students themselves become responsible for their learning.

Amir plays the role of the facilitator in her classes. Assigning responsibility to students in the learning process improves students' self-efficacy, causes students to have a sense of identity in a group, removes their stress, and finally,

creates emotional safety for them. This is compatible with social emotion regulation, in which emotion regulation is co-regulated through group interaction.

4.1.1.2. Theme 2: Efficiency as an Adaptive Emotional Regulation Strategy. Efficiency is considered an adaptive emotion regulation strategy because it involves an appropriate use of cognitive and emotional resources in order to handle tasks and emotions in a balanced way. It involves doing things in an organized, purposeful, and time-effective manner without wasting effort or energy. The main subthemes included active engagement and responsibility, time management, and emotional well-being. Sima (38) had his voice in the following way.

In my classes, students have an active role in class performance. I give my students different kinds of responsibilities such as leading the class, hanging out instructional pictures and posters, calling the absent students, presenting the lesson, etc. Assigning different kinds of tasks to students increases their efficiency, improves their sense of responsibility, and reduces their stress.

Sima believes that efficiency functions as an adaptive emotion regulation in the classroom. In her opinion, students' active role in class management increases their efficiency and plays a major role in regulating their emotions. Sima's strategy also fosters cognitive reappraisal, which is another main element of emotion regulation. Hence when students take active roles, they reinterpret the classroom experience from being passive receivers of instruction to being active contributors. This shift in perspective encourages more positive emotional engagement and builds self-efficacy, which in turn improves efficiency. Mohammad, 45, responded to the questions in the following way:

One of the key and important skills in emotion regulation is knowing how to manage time. Students must learn to do things on time because those who have problems with time management may encounter emotional issues like increased stress, burnout, and anger. I teach my students the principles of time management, and I ask them to have a schedule in their lives. One of the main strategies of emotion regulation, therefore, is teaching students to manage their time efficiently. This strategy enhances productivity and helps them manage stress and solve problems more calmly.

For Mohammad, time management acts as an appropriate adaptive strategy. This is compatible with the emotion regulation's process model, in which individuals control their emotions via some strategies, like cognitive

reappraisal and situation modification. By teaching students to plan their schedule and complete tasks on time, Mohammad modifies the learning situation to reduce stressors. Meanwhile, he encourages students to view time-related tasks as manageable opportunities rather than sources of anxiety. This helps students to maintain emotional balance through the appropriate usage of their cognitive and emotional resources.

4.1.1.3. Theme 3: Mindfulness as an Adaptive Emotion Regulation Strategy. Mindfulness is a mental and educational construct that reflects individuals' awareness of the moment and their ability to observe emotions and thoughts without judgment (Phan et al., 2022). This theme was supported by the subthemes of emotional awareness, moment awareness, and self-regulation. For example, Hossein, 42, says that

I usually begin the class by asking students to reflect on the things in class that create different kinds of emotions in them. I encourage them to identify the specific feelings they experience in the class, and my students give me different answers. I also pay attention to their nonverbal behaviors to detect whether they are bored, happy, angry, stressed, or calm. Consequently, I teach them different kinds of mindfulness strategies, such as positive thinking, to help them appropriately manage their emotions.

Hossein's approach of teaching emotion regulation strategies to the students through mindfulness practices demonstrates how classroom activities can be used as a means of improving their adaptive emotion regulation. Hossein is an emotionally intelligent teacher who enables students to identify their emotions as they are occurring. He facilitates emotional awareness, which is a key element of Gross's process-based model of emotion regulation, by asking students to reflect on their emotions. Meanwhile, observing students' nonverbal behaviors allows him to monitor students' emotional responses and respond appropriately. By this, he modifies the classroom environment to reduce negative emotions such as boredom or stress. Shiva, 30, says that

Students must be able to control their emotions. I usually try to teach them to be mindful in their activities. I ask them to be happy in the moment and to pay attention to their senses and emotions while eating breakfast, walking, studying, taking an exam, etc. Mindfulness helps them to decrease their stress and improve their memory and academic performance.

For Shiva, mindfulness is the root of happiness. In order to be successful and free from stress, students must be able to have control over their emotions, their thoughts, and their actions; hence, it is the duty of the teachers to teach

mindfulness as an emotional regulation strategy to the students. Ali, 44, believes that

Students have a lot of stress while they are answering a question or while they are taking an exam. I reduce their stress by teaching them through using different kinds of games and puzzles. Games are an interesting and motivating way for students to learn a language, and they cause students to concentrate their minds on the present moment.

Ali adopts an adaptive strategy by using games and puzzles as a means of improving students' concentration. Concentration is a vital component of mindfulness practice, and it causes students to be interested in learning. For him, students will have a successful learning experience if they are free from stress, and it is the duty of the teachers to reduce this stress and to improve their concentration using different kinds of teaching methods.

4.1.2. Research Question 2

In answer to the second research question, teachers reported that the utilization of maladaptive strategies affects Iranian EFL teachers' emotions by intensifying their stress, emotional exhaustion, and psychological strain. They believed that when they respond to the stressful teaching situations with emotion-focused maladaptive strategies like avoidance, denial, rumination, or emotional suppression, they experience a range of emotional and behavioral outcomes.

4.1.2.1. Theme 1: Negative Emotions and Maladaptive Strategies. The theme of negative emotions and maladaptive strategies was supported by the following codes: anger, nervousness, stress, anxiety, despair, and depression. Samira, 32, answered our questions in the following way:

Once I did not manage to answer my students' questions appropriately, I suffered from a high level of stress for a week. Furthermore, I carried that stress and anxiety into my personal life. It affected my personal life negatively. It also affected my relationships with the family members.

The inability to regulate her emotions logically and positively brings Samira several negative consequences. The origin of the problem was a lack of preparation on the part of the teacher and a failure to decide logically and appropriately. Her insistence on her initial error and lack of preparation reflected a maladaptive coping style. This style increases self-blame and stress instead of encouraging reflection and problem-solving. Samira's reaction demonstrates emotional suppression and rumination, which indicate the harmful effects of maladaptive emotion regulation in professional settings. Javad, 50, responded to our questions as follows:

I had several overcrowded classes in which some of my students triggered anger in me. Sometimes I could not regulate my negative emotions. In so doing, I lost my way of doing personal chores, and even I felt some sort of pessimism towards my teaching. It also had a lasting effect on my mind and mental health.

Javad's expression is an example of the emotional strain experienced by teachers in overcrowded classes. The presence of disruptive students acted as a situational trigger that elicited feelings of anger and frustration. Instead of reinterpreting the stressful situation, Javad used a maladaptive strategy of emotional suppression to control her emotional responses after they had already been triggered.

4.1.2.2. Theme 2: Psychological Repercussions. The theme of psychological repercussions was supported by the following codes: insomnia, heartbeat, fatigue, absent-mindedness, and distraction. Reza, 28, a novice teacher, answered our question in the following way:

When you cannot manage a very crowded class, things will get challenging for you. As you try to take control of the class and you cannot do that, in that case, you should wait for negative consequences, such as disturbance in the way you think, inability to concentrate, and secretion of harmful hormones in your body.

This expression shows the psychological and physiological repercussions of classroom stress on teachers. Moreover, it illustrates the interconnected effectiveness of environmental stressors, cognitive functioning, and physiological responses on teachers' emotion regulation. The use of maladaptive strategies may create long negative effects on teachers' concentration and well-being. Moreover, the reference to the 'secretion of harmful hormones' emphasizes the embodied nature of stress. Hence, the emotional strain is not only psychological but also has physiological consequences. Nadia, 40, believed that:

After I gave a wrong explanation in class, I kept thinking about it all evening. When I thought that my students had lost confidence in me, I got anxious and worried. That night, I couldn't sleep well, and the next day I felt tired and distracted during teaching.

This excerpt shows how maladaptive coping with routine teaching challenges produces a range of psychological repercussions that can affect teachers' emotional, cognitive, and physical states. The incorrect explanation caused the teacher to be engaged in rumination or obsessive thinking. Hence, the teacher got anxious about losing her students' confidence. These emotional responses show the mental and emotional consequences of maladaptive

coping, which can negatively impact both the teacher's well-being and instructional effectiveness.

4.1.2.3. Theme 3: Negative Personality Attributes. The theme of negative personality attributes was supported by the following codes: feeling no self-efficacy, lacking self-esteem, lacking self-confidence, and not being effective. Yalda, 35, had the following to answer the interview question:

In the first years of my teaching experience, due to a large number of students in a class, I felt bored and fatigued. I had difficulty managing my classes. I had the feeling that I was not influential in my class. I mean, I felt that my presence or absence didn't make any difference in my classes. I thought that I was not made for teaching. I did not have enough self-confidence and self-esteem in my classes.

Inability to manage her classes, Yalda felt that she was not a qualified and effective teacher. Doing so and feeling so brought her several negative personality traits. Under such challenging conditions, she felt less self-confident and less self-efficacious. From an emotion regulation perspective, if Yalda was engaged in adaptive strategies like cognitive reappraisal and problem-based coping, she was able to decrease these negative emotions and preserve her sense of self-efficacy. Bahman, 43, answered the interview question in the following way: *As I become disappointed in my class management, I have feelings of being unworthy and lacking self-efficacy. Most of the time, I think that I was not made for teaching. I feel that I am not competent in teaching.*

Bahman's expression demonstrates how continual difficulties in classroom management create negative self-regulation emotions, such as feelings of unworthiness and incompetence. According to Gross's process model of emotion regulation, teachers who fail to regulate these negative emotions effectively are likely to rely on maladaptive strategies like rumination and self-blame. Hence, inadequate emotion regulation can decrease self-efficacy, which are the two important elements of teachers' emotional resilience.

4.2. Discussion

The focus of this study was to examine Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of their use of adaptive and maladaptive strategies and the consequences of using maladaptive strategies for students' stress management and teachers' emotional experiences in EFL classrooms. The results showed that teachers used a range of adaptive strategies, including emotional safety, efficiency, and mindfulness, to help their students manage their stress and increase their emotional engagement in the classroom. Meanwhile, teachers' use of maladaptive strategies like emotional suppression, rumination, and avoidance

intensified their negative emotions and psychological strain, and decreased their sense of self-efficacy. According to the emotional labor theory (Hochschild, 2012), teachers control their emotions through surface acting and deep acting strategies to deal with the professional requirements of their jobs. In this study, the adaptive strategies such as mindfulness and emotional safety can be viewed as deep acting through which teachers adapt their internal emotions with the desired emotional responses to improve their positive relationships with students. In contrast, maladaptive strategies like emotional suppression represent surface acting through which teachers merely fake positive emotions or hide negative ones to meet their professional needs. These kinds of emotional regulation might cause reduced job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion. Meanwhile, the findings support Gross' (1998a) model, which conceptualizes emotion regulation as a multi-stage process rather than a single act of control. Hence, emotion regulation is a dynamic practice that requires teachers to consistently regulate, control, and sometimes inhibit their emotions to maintain a positive classroom atmosphere (Yin et al., 2019).

Emotional safety was one of the adaptive strategies used by EFL teachers to help students manage their stress. Participants mentioned that they tried to ensure students' safety in the class by creating positive classroom environments, building supportive teacher-student relationships, and respecting learners' autonomy. Hence, consistent with the process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 1998b), teachers used antecedent-focused strategies such as fostering supportive relationships and positive classroom atmosphere to prevent negative emotional responses. Meanwhile, the findings of this study align with those of prior ones, showing the importance of emotional and social dimensions of teaching and emphasizes that teachers' adaptive regulation of emotions not only improves classroom atmosphere but also leads to learners' psychological resilience and well-being (e.g., Han et al., 2024; Jiang & Yin, 2025).

Efficiency was another adaptive emotion regulation strategy that was reflected in teachers' emphasis on organization, time management, and shared responsibility in classroom performance. According to Zhang et al. (2025), teaching strategies of efficiency not only affect the interaction efficiency between teachers and students but also directly influence students' learning outcomes. Furthermore, the findings indicated that mindfulness was a key adaptive emotion regulation strategy in EFL classrooms. Participants mentioned that they improved EFL learners' mindfulness by promoting their emotional awareness, moment-to-moment attention, and self-regulation strategies. Being fully conscious of the present moment and emotional awareness form the principles of emotional intelligence theory (Goleman, 1995). These results are compatible with the mindfulness-based approaches to education, which mention that mindfulness training can improve students'

resilience, stress management, depression, and anxiety (e.g., Phan et al., 2022). Overall, the adaptive strategies identified in this study underscore the teachers' proactive roles in co-regulating classroom emotions and constructing emotionally responsive learning environments (Mohammadi et al., 2019; Mohammadi et al., 2023; Richard-Sephton et al., 2024).

Regarding the way maladaptive strategies shape Iranian EFL teachers' emotional regulation and stress management, the findings showed that suppression, rumination, and avoidance led to negative emotions, psychological repercussions, and negative personality attributes. Teachers reported feelings of anger, anxiety, depression, fatigue, and lack of concentration. These symptoms reflected emotional exhaustion which is one of the main components of teacher burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Consistent with Gross's (1998a) model, suppression is a response-focused emotional regulation strategy that takes place after an emotional response has been created and often increases physiological arousal and reduces well-being. Meanwhile, the psychological repercussions, such as insomnia, fatigue, and distraction, demonstrate the mind-body connection in emotional regulation. Hence, chronic emotional dysregulation causes hormonal imbalances and cognitive impairments (Girotti et al., 2024). Meanwhile, the participants reported the symptoms of negative personality attributes, such as reduced self-efficacy, low self-esteem, and feelings of unworthiness, as the consequences of using maladaptive strategies. According to Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory, emotional regulation directly influences teachers' self-efficacy in managing classroom demands. Therefore, when teachers fail to regulate their emotions adaptively, they usually internalize negative experiences. This causes them to feel self-blame and decreased motivation (Sharabi & Roth, 2024). Thus, the persistence of the maladaptive strategies can create a cycle of stress and inefficacy that decreases teaching quality and professional identity (Johnston et al., 2025).

5. Conclusion and Implications

The aim of this phenomenological study was to examine Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of their adaptive and maladaptive strategies. The findings showed that the use of adaptive strategies, such as emotional safety, efficiency, and mindfulness, enabled teachers to create a positive classroom environment and promoted EFL learners' psychological well-being. Conversely, the utilization of maladaptive strategies created negative emotional experiences, psychological repercussions, and diminished self-efficacy. These results highlight the dynamic, multi-stage nature of emotion regulation and illustrate how teachers' adaptive practices can protect a person against stress, whereas maladaptive strategies may create inefficacy and psychological strain. As a result, the strategic use of emotion regulation strategies by teachers not only

affects their professional identity but also shapes their students' emotional and academic experiences (Shapouran et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2025).

This study has significant implications for EFL teachers, educational policy makers, and school administrators. In line with Gross' (1998a) process model of emotional regulation, teachers should focus on antecedent-focused strategies (e.g., establishing supportive relationships and maintaining positive classroom atmospheres) to prevent emotional tension. Being involved in continuous self-reflection, peer collaboration, and mindfulness-based practices can further strengthen teachers' emotional intelligence and self-efficacy. Meanwhile, educational policymakers should recognize emotion regulation as an important component of teacher competence. Therefore, they should incorporate emotional regulation instruction into the professional development programs for teachers. Policymakers are encouraged to promote workplace well-being policies that ensure teachers can utilize counselling, mental health resources, and professional support networks. Furthermore, school administrators play a major role in fostering a supportive and emotionally responsive school culture. Hence, they can provide teachers with some opportunities for emotional reflection and collaboration, such as creating stress-management workshops. Encouraging open conversations about teachers' emotional experiences can decrease stress and strengthen their capability to cope with stress.

Some limitations are imposed in this study. First, the findings derive from a relatively small sample of teachers from a small number of language institutes, which can limit the transferability of the findings to other instructional settings. Meanwhile, because the participants were selected through purposeful sampling, the findings may reflect the experiences of teachers with specific characteristics relevant to the study purpose. Further studies may use other sampling methods with a large number of participants to ensure greater diversity and representativeness. Second, this study employed a qualitative design to identify teachers' perspectives regarding the implementation of emotion regulation strategies in an EFL context. Further studies may use mixed-methods designs and longitudinal studies to deeply investigate how EFL teachers' emotional regulation strategies evolve over time. Third, this study made use of teachers' self-reported experiences and did not consider classroom observations and students' perspectives of their regulation strategies. Other studies are recommended to include EFL learners' perspectives and multiple data sources to develop a rich comprehension of the dynamics of teachers' emotional experiences and their influence on teaching and learning.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Can you describe a classroom situation where your students were stressed or anxious. How did you respond to help them manage that stress?
2. What kinds of emotional regulation strategies do you use to create a calm and supportive atmosphere in the classroom?
3. How do you encourage students to manage their emotions during challenging activities?
4. How does your own emotional regulation help students feel more comfortable and motivated in class?
5. In what ways do the use of maladaptive strategies affect EFL teachers' emotions and stress management in the classroom?
6. Can you share a story from your teaching experience where you faced a particularly stressful or emotionally challenging situation? How did you cope with it, and what did you learn from that experience?
7. What kinds of emotional reactions do you show when you feel frustrated, angry, or emotionally exhausted during teaching?
8. Have you ever tried to suppress or hide your emotions in front of students. How did that affect your mood or classroom performance?