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**We Teach Languages Episode 137: Emotional Labor with Elizabeth Miller**

**Stacey Margarita Johnson**:  [0:00] This is "We Teach Languages."

[0:02] [background music]

**Stacey**:  [0:02] A podcast about language teaching from the diverse perspectives of teachers.

[0:13] I'm Stacey Johnson. Today on Episode 137, I'm going to share an interview I conducted back in February with Dr. Elizabeth Miller. Liz and I were both at the same conference, the Duke University inaugural Language Teaching Symposium. I got to hear her give a talk about emotional labor and language teaching. It was awesome. [laughs]

[0:40] I made so many connections to the thing she was talking about and my own trajectory as a teacher, and my own research as well. I'm really excited to share this with everyone, particularly right now when most of us are going through some real emotional challenges and helping our students through similar levels of just emotional upheaval due to the pandemic and remote teaching and everything that's happening right now.

[1:13] For the last three weeks, we've been releasing episodes from our archives that specifically deal with teaching using technology, teaching in a fully online setting, or teaching through Zoom. This week, we're going to talk a little bit less about how to teach with technology and we're going to focus on teachers' emotional experiences and the emotional labor that is required of them.

[1:40] I think this episode will be particularly interesting for supervisors, coordinators, chairs, anyone who is helping language teachers to do their job better to think through what sorts of supports are language teachers going to need right now so that their emotional labor doesn't become overwhelming and they can do their best possible work.

[2:04] I would love to hear how you are managing the emotional labor of your work, how you're connecting with others, how things are going for you with remote teaching. After you listen to this episode, please go to our Web page or find us on social media. We would love to hear your reactions and your stories.

[2:23] [background music]

**Stacey**:  [2:24] And now, my conversation with Dr. Miller.

[2:32] Liz, it has been such a pleasure to meet you and listen to you talk today. I was hoping that you would just introduce yourself to our listeners and tell us a little bit about who you are and where you teach.

**Dr. Elizabeth Miller**:  [2:43] OK. I'm delighted to be here, delighted to meet you too, Stacey. I am an applied linguist. I work at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte in an English department. There is a small cohort of linguists in the English department.

[3:00] We teach undergraduate and master's level students linguistic‑oriented courses, which tend to take a more social turn. They tend to be less about structural linguistics. That's where I am.

**Stacey**:  [3:15] I've already told you how exciting your talk was. I could see everyone's faces in the room while we were listening to your talk. Let me just get the name right. It is The Emotional Labor of Language Teaching, Experienced Teachers' Accounts of Emotional Challenges, Rewards and Management Strategies.

[3:33] When I'm thinking hard during someone's presentation, I tend to get a real aggressive looking face, and I'm aware that I'm doing that. I kept catching myself scowling at you in thought, and then trying to nod or something so you'd know I was on your team.

[3:47] As you were talking about emotional management, I was trying [laughs] to manage my emotions because I could not stop making connections to my work as a teacher and to my work as a researcher.

**Dr. Miller**:  [4:00] That is so interesting.

**Stacey**:  [4:01] I know. [laughs]

**Dr. Miller**:  [4:02] I have to say, I don't remember focusing on your face during my talk, but I appreciate the labor you were doing in the talk.

**Stacey**:  [4:10] Do you think maybe we should start with some definitions of terms for people who are not as familiar with emotional labor and the terminology that goes with it?

**Dr. Miller**:  [4:19] Sure. In the talk that I did today, it's reflecting the work that I have done with language teachers in several different contexts. This is in collaboration with my colleague at the University of Essex, Dr. Christina Gkonou. I do want to do recognition to her work and her contribution.

[4:41] We have interviewed language teachers in the US, at the UK. I, last spring, interviewed language teachers in Germany and Norway. We now have a set of 50 interviews with teachers in across these different contexts.

[4:57] We were interviewing teachers to learn about their emotional experiences as language teachers and to learn about how they managed their emotions in their teaching practice, and how they performed something called emotional labor.

[5:15] The terms that you were asking about are not terms that we have developed. They were first introduced in sociology by a sociologist who is at the University of Berkeley, she's now Emerita, Arlie Hochschild. She was doing work in the service industry and trying to understand emotional labor in those contexts.

[5:39] There are three terms that she introduced and that have been used really widely in research across a wide spectrum of workplace context. The first of the terms was emotional management. This is something that is not exclusive to her. It's something that refers to the work that we all do as human beings in interaction with other human beings.

[6:04] We manage our emotions. We don't just express everything that we feel from moment to moment. We try to calibrate them to be appropriate to the situations. Which means that there are times when we are going to express anger because we feel that we need to or that it's OK, it's appropriate to do that. In other contexts, we would swallow our anger and not express that.

[6:25] This is something that is true for all human beings. She introduced a notion of emotional labor to really focus on how that kind of work happens in work context, and that it's absolutely central to work and that we have to calibrate, manage our emotions in those contexts to be appropriate for the situations that are true in those contexts.

[6:52] It's not as though every workplace context you need to be nice. She talked about bill collectors needing to be nastier than natural because that was part of what they needed to do for their work.

[7:06] That brings us into the third term, which is this notion of feeling rules. That oftentimes are not explicit, but that different context, different workplaces have social norms about the kinds of emotions that can be expressed, should be expressed, and the kinds of emotions that need to be managed, controlled, placated if you will.

[7:32] She was doing research in the early 1980s. The context for which she is most famous was done with flight attendants for Delta Airlines. These flight attendants, mostly women at the time, were explicitly trained that they needed to have a smiling face at all times. They needed to show calm and friendliness even when they were dealing with passengers who were anything but.

[8:03] It was in that context that she was able to see very explicit kinds of feeling rules, because that was part of their training documentation. It was part of the teaching.

**Stacey**:  [8:17] I'm already thinking about our work as language teachers, how emotional management, emotional labor and feeling rules play out there. I'm also thinking about my work directly with students, helping students understand how feeling rules might vary in different contexts where they're using different languages. There's just a lot of connections to the work we do with these terms.

[8:42] I've heard the term emotional labor, and probably even used it before. But until today, I'm not sure I really understood the complexity of that term and everything that implied. Thank you for bringing that to your talk.

**Dr. Miller**:  [8:56] When we think about feeling rules and emotional labor in relation to language teaching, we tend not to have these same kinds of really explicit rules about how to be. We all kind of have a sense of what is appropriate, and that's because we've all been students for a long time. We see emotional control or perhaps emotional reactions that we regard as inappropriate.

[9:21] This notion of being professional in the classroom is a way to think about the feeling rules in that context. Controlling our emotions in order to project a very admirable, desire, a goal to be professional.

[9:41] What we often miss is the fact that that is labor. In order to project that kind of energizing, supportive and enthusiastic teacher demeanor, it is not natural. It's something that we have to work at. Often, sometimes at least, we project those kinds of emotions even when we don't feel them at all. That is where we can understand how it's labor and not just a natural expression from the inside.

**Stacey**:  [10:16] I wonder, I imagine a lot of our language teachers who are listening might find themselves in a similar situation to me where I will listen to a podcast episode, or read a blog about some amazing teacher and think I'm just not as positive as they are. I'm not just caring about my students [laughs] such as they are, and misinterpreting the emotional labor they are doing for some inherent quality that I might be missing.

**Dr. Miller**:  [10:44] This notion of emotional labor does not mean that it's always all bad. It's work that we do not just because we want to professional, but we care about the context. Emotional labor can have a very positive effect in that if we're trying to create situations in which students feel comfortable, students are happy and engaged, then our life becomes easier too. There is a reward. There is a payback.

[11:10] What tends to get overlooked is that that is not just a natural expression [laughs] from the individual. That requires real effort. That effort and the processing we do when things are not easy, when students are difficult or when institutional practices are really difficult to meet, those kinds of reactions that we feel in our bodies are not just because we are weak somehow.

[11:38] That this is somehow a personal failing, but that it's a very understandable part of the context in which we are working. If we can think about it in that term, take it outside of just this private realm and see it as part of the context, it becomes completely understandable. I think it becomes easier to understand and to try to decide how we want to deal with it.

**Stacey**:  [12:03] Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe in your talk, you described emotions as not just internal, but as socially constricted. Am I using the wrong terminology?

**Dr. Miller**:  [12:13] Yeah, that is correct.

**Stacey**:  [12:15] Can you tell us a little more about that?

**Dr. Miller**:  [12:18] Emotions are clearly embodied. There is a body. There is a biological being. [laughs]

**Stacey**:  [12:23] There are actual impulses sent to your brain.

**Dr. Miller**:  [12:28] Exactly. We're not denying that. However, to locate emotions as only within the body ignores the ways in which the social world, the political context, the cultural context and so on elicits it and also makes them part of the interaction, if you will. When we are in a stressful situation, our bodily reactions are not just coming from within us, there is a reaction to that context.

[12:59] The context can either sanction them as appropriate or as not appropriate. This bodily feeling [laughs] makes sense in terms of what is allowed, what is regarded as appropriate. Language teachers can show excitement when students do well. But as some of the teachers in my study have talked about, they can't show too much excitement.

[13:23] No one has taught them that. No one has said, "You can only show this much excitement and then..." This is a very positive thing, and yet there is a sense in which we have to calibrate. We're always working to be the right kind of emotional being. Lots of variation among teachers. There's not just one way to be in the classroom.

[13:41] How we have learned that we cannot treat these emotions as just what the expressions are all just fly. We need to be appropriate. That's because of how we understand ourselves in the world around us. It's not just because this is me and my emotions is because I am an individual, but surrounded by social meaning and social interpretation of those embodied experiences.

**Stacey**:  [14:12] The concept of emotional labor. If I'm someone who's aware, as a language teacher I'm aware of the emotional labor I'm doing, to what degree do I need to manage my emotions in the classroom or attempt to manage my emotions internally to be the right kind of caring, enthusiastic, happy teacher? Where's the line there for how [laughs] much labor to do?

**Dr. Miller**:  [14:36] I don't have an answer for that. However, the research that I have done with my colleague, Dr. Christina Gkonou, we interviewed 50 teachers, different contexts. Part of our interview process with them involved them selecting 6 emotion words from a list of 20 emotion words. We asked them to select 6 emotion words that they felt best represented their emotional experience as language teachers.

[15:07] We were really surprised that 90 percent of them, 45 out of 50 teachers, chose the emotion word "happiness" as very representative of their emotional experience as language teachers. In the interview process, we asked them questions like what do you enjoy most about teaching? What do you enjoy least about teaching?

[15:34] Their reports of feeling happiness, feeling enthusiasm, feeling satisfaction very frequently in that first survey type question was then complexified in the interviews themselves where they talked about the hard work that they do that is part of creating the context in which they can be happy.

[15:56] These are experienced teachers who have tried various things. I don't think a lot of it was conscious that they were consciously thinking "I'm doing emotion labor now," but that they have done it. They have done the work of dealing with difficult students or really onerous work demands and so on, trying to become the best teachers that they can be.

[16:20] I think in that process, if they have or able to do that, they have developed strategies, emotion management strategies that allow them to keep on doing the hard emotional labor of teaching. They become better at it. It's not because they just have a bag of tricks up their sleeves now, but that they have figured out ways to get rewards from it as well.

[16:46] When you do emotional labor to create a better learning environment, then students will often respond. However, coming to that context, it's not just the teacher doing work on himself or herself. There has to be a context in which that labor gets rewarded to some degree. Students can reward it by learning, by being responsive to what the teachers do.

**Stacey**:  [17:11] At the college level with good course evaluations. [laughs]

**Dr. Miller**:  [17:13] That's right. By learning, by doing, showing that they're invested in the class. But there also has to be institutional validation of teachers too in order for this emotional labor to actually result in emotional rewards. It can't just be an individual teacher in a classroom. There has to be something that gives that matters more beyond that.

[17:40] That's where it becomes also social and political and economic. [laughs] This work is internal to a certain degree, but it has to also move outside of just thinking through the process. It has to involve work with other people in a context itself.

**Stacey**:  [18:00] I can definitely imagine a situation where this concept could be misapplied and say, "Well, you're just not doing enough emotional labor." [laughs] That's part of your job. When really there are institutional factors that are making the amount of emotional labor required from each individual teacher more than they can possibly extend.

**Dr. Miller**:  [18:20] That's exactly the problem. You've really put your finger on it.

**Stacey**:  [18:25] Well, I did just listen to your talk.

[18:27] [laughter]

**Stacey**:  [18:29] Because I think a lot of the research out there on emotion management is about you get yourself up to speed. You do the work. You figure out how to get your emotions under control, and then you will be a good teacher. You will be a good flight attendant, something.

[18:45] The thing is that emotion management always happens in a context. There are feeling rules. What kinds of emotions. Sometimes, those feeling rules need to be resisted. Sometimes change needs to happen.

[19:01] Happy teachers are people who have over time developed good strategies for themselves, but they are also people who probably have found ways to work within a system that is not soul crushing. They are in context where they can thrive. That's beyond what any individual teacher can do.

[19:21] There is responsibility beyond the individual. There is institutional responsibility. There is program‑level responsibility to create context in which, yes, students can thrive and learn but students will thrive and learn when teachers are also validated and supported and feel like their efforts are recognized.

**Stacey**:  [19:43] Last question. If there are listeners who are program directors or supervisors, or have some ability to influence the institutional norms or the institutional policies that might help teachers be more effective in their emotional labor, reduce the burden of their emotional labor, what kinds of things can a supervisor or a program director or coordinator do?

**Dr. Miller**:  [20:07] That's a really important question. I'm glad you asked it. One of the things that came through in our interviews is that one of the strategies, if you will, that teachers found really beneficial is talking with colleagues, getting support from colleagues.

[20:21] Sometimes it was just having a cup of coffee with a colleague and venting together. More productive where people were really very intentionally talking about the kind of work that they do, not just in terms of knowledge or competencies, but in terms of hey, this is a really difficult situation, how do you handle it?

[20:42] Those kinds of allowing oneself to be vulnerable because it's safe to be vulnerable, that caring for each other even in a very clinical sense. It doesn't have to be we are in a squishy feeling...

**Stacey**:  [20:57] We have to hug at the end. [laughs]

**Dr. Miller**:  [20:58] No, you don't have to. That environment where there is a sense of support, even when things don't go great, even when you fail sometimes. That is what program directors can do, is to nurture that kind of safety for their teachers. That's when teachers can thrive and can experiment, can take risks because they know that there will be support if they don't hit the mark every time.

**Stacey**:  [21:27] That's fantastic. I am really grateful for the message that you brought here today. Also, it's been such a fun day. All of these sessions were not necessarily planned to interlock, but it felt like they all interlocked. They had so many common themes. [laughs]

**Dr. Miller**:  [21:43] I agree. These people who were presenting this morning at the conference, they already know about how to create community and they were showing important strategies for doing that.

[21:56] [background music]

**Stacey**:  [21:53] If you have questions or comments related to today's episode, we would love to hear from you. You can reach out to us multiple ways. All of them are available at our website, weteachlang.com/contact. You can also find us on Facebook and Twitter, @weteachlang.

[22:18] We would like to say a very special thank you to the PEARLL Foreign Language Resource Center for partnering with us to provide transcripts and other professional development resources related to the episodes. You can learn more about PEARLL by going to pearll.nflc.umd.edu.

[22:46] Thanks so much for listening. Bye‑bye.

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