

Teachers' Productive Emotion Vocabulary: Frequency Effects and the Roles of Language Proficiency and Trait Emotional Intelligence

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This study examines ESL/EFL teachers' productive emotion vocabulary using a vignette-based task (Chee et al., 2025; Szabo et al., forthcoming). Findings show strong reliance on high-frequency emotion words, with reduced access to nuanced, lower-frequency vocabulary. Language proficiency is the strongest predictor, while trait emotionality contributes independently, highlighting constraints in teachers' affective lexical resources and implications for teacher education.

Teachers are expected to model emotional literacy and manage classroom affect (Teng, 2017), yet little is known about the linguistic resources underpinning these practices. While research on teacher emotions and emotional intelligence (EI) has expanded (Dewaele et al., 2018; Gkonou & Miller, 2020), it has largely overlooked the productive lexical dimension, specifically teachers' ability to access and use nuanced emotion vocabulary in context. From a theoretical perspective, emotion vocabulary is central to how individuals conceptualise and communicate affective experience (Barrett, 2017). In second language contexts, however, learners and even proficient users tend to rely on high-frequency, general emotion terms, with limited access to lower-frequency, more precise alternatives (Bazhydai et al., 2019; Ebert et al., 2014). This raises an important but underexplored question: do teachers, who are expected to model emotionally precise language, possess sufficiently developed productive emotion vocabulary?

Recent work using the Productive Emotion Vocabulary Size Test (PEVST) suggests that even advanced users struggle with nuanced emotion-word production (Chee et al., 2025; Szabo et al., forthcoming). However, teachers represent a distinct population whose language use is pedagogically consequential. Their ability to label emotions precisely shapes feedback, classroom climate, and students' emotional development. This study therefore investigates ESL/EFL teachers' productive emotion vocabulary across frequency bands and examines whether language proficiency and trait EI (Emotionality) predict performance. Specifically, this study aims to address the following questions: (1) To what extent do ESL/EFL teachers demonstrate productive emotion vocabulary across frequency bands? and (2) To what extent do language proficiency and trait Emotionality explain variance in this ability?

Data were collected via an online survey from 101 ESL/EFL pre- and in-service teachers. We administered a 25-item vignette-based productive emotion vocabulary task (PEVST; two responses per item) alongside LexTALE (Lemhöfer & Broersma, 2012; language proficiency) and the TEIQue-SF (Petrides, 2009; Petrides et al., 2018; trait EI). PEVST responses were scored using an accuracy-based method, with close synonyms included (see Chee et al., 2025; Szabo et al., forthcoming). Items were distributed across frequency bands (Nation, 2004), to examine lexical frequency effects.

Teachers demonstrated strong performance on high-frequency emotion vocabulary, with accuracy rates of approximately 78–81% in the 1k–3k bands, but performance declined substantially for mid- and lower-frequency items ($\approx 45\%$ at 4k/6k and 26% at 9k), indicating clear frequency constraints on accessibility and precision of lexical retrieval (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). This pattern suggests that even relatively proficient teachers rely heavily on general, high-frequency emotion terms, with limited access to more nuanced lexical items. From a psycholinguistic perspective, this aligns with Zipf's Principle of Least Effort, whereby speakers preferentially retrieve more accessible lexical forms (Zipf, 2016).

Correlation analyses revealed a moderate positive association between language proficiency and PEVST accuracy ($r \approx .41$ – $.43$, depending on the scoring method), consistent with research linking lexical knowledge and frequency sensitivity (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). Trait Emotionality showed a weaker but significant positive relationship, suggesting that emotion perception and expression may support emotion-word retrieval (Barrett, 2017). In OLS regression ($R^2 = .24$), LexTALE emerged as the strongest predictor, while Emotionality contributed a smaller positive effect. The LexTALE $\times$ Emotionality interaction did not improve model fit, supporting additive rather than moderating effects. The results suggest that even largely advanced teachers may have limited productive access to lower-frequency emotion vocabulary, motivating more explicit teacher education and curricular attention to nuanced affective labelling. Conceptually, these findings position productive emotion vocabulary as a linguistically constrained component of emotional competence, challenging assumptions that emotional intelligence alone ensures effective emotional expression in L2 contexts.

Pedagogically, this has important implications. Teachers' reliance on high-frequency emotion vocabulary may limit their ability to model nuanced affective expression and to scaffold students' emotional literacy. This highlights a gap between policy expectations for emotionally competent teaching, and the lexical resources teachers actually possess. The findings support calls for greater integration of emotion vocabulary instruction within teacher education, particularly focusing on lower-frequency, fine-grained emotion terms in contextualised use. Overall, the findings suggest that emotional competence in language

teaching is not solely affective but fundamentally lexical, requiring targeted pedagogical attention to the development of nuanced emotion vocabulary.

Emotion vocabulary, language teaching, language assessment, emotion recognition, emotional intelligence