Do Teachers Matter? Investigating Language Teachers' Emotions and Well-being

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Abstract

Within the domain of language teacher learning and expertise, research has predominantly focused on the cognitive and pedagogical dimensions of teacher knowledge and skills. Affective and psychological aspects such as teacher emotions and well-being, though equally significant, are often downplayed, as these constructs—like teacher beliefs—are perceived as complex and 'messy'. This paper argues that teacher emotions and well-being deserve closer attention, given their intrinsic connection to teacher efficacy and overall effectiveness. The study explores how three tertiary-level teachers perceive and experience their well-being, the factors that enhance or hinder it, and the strategies they adopt to sustain and nurture it. Data was collected through a questionnaire. Findings reveal that teachers' well-being is deeply influenced by institutional culture, collegial relationships, perceived autonomy, and workload, with personal coping mechanisms and support systems playing a critical role in sustaining their emotional health.

Keywords: Teacher emotions, teacher well-being, occupational stress, tertiary education, PERMA framework

Introduction

Well-being is a complex, multifaceted concept lacking a universally accepted definition. It is generally viewed as multidimensional, including physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects. Jordan et al. (2017, cited in Cann, 2020) define it as "feeling good and functioning well" (p. 1), involving positive emotions, satisfaction, and effective functioning across life roles. Literature highlights key dimensions

such as happiness, quality of life, and life satisfaction (McCallum et al., 2017; Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). Psychological perspectives stress emotional intelligence and perceptions. As Brackett (2019) notes, well-being "depends less on objective events than on how those events are perceived, dealt with, and shared with others" (p. 63). Well-being is not to eliminate negative emotions but to maintain a balance where positive emotions are predominant (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). In the context of teaching, teacher well-being (TWB) is defined as "an individual sense of personal professional fulfilment, satisfaction, purposefulness, and happiness, constructed in a collaborative process with colleagues and students" (Acton & Glasgow, 2015, p. 101). In language education, this is crucial given its emotional and communicative demands. Acknowledging the complexity, Cherkowski and Walker (2018) emphasise self-care as a professional priority. Martínez-Alba et al. (2022) remark, "In the same way that teacher preparation and knowledge affect teachers' performance, so does teacher well-being" (p. 29) and that is affected by "different external factors such as colleagues and students" (p. 30). This paper investigates how tertiary-level teachers perceive and nurture their well-being through institutional support and personal investment.

Review of Literature

Jin et al. (2021b) explore the well-being of seven Chinese language teachers who teach Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) at secondary schools in the UK using semi-structured interviews. Findings show four interconnected ecological systems influence well-being: the ecology of the school, work and life, the education system, and the societal ecology of teaching generally and modern foreign languages (MFL) specifically. Babic et al. (2022) investigate institutional and personal factors that teachers perceive as influential. Insights from 15 teachers in 13 countries show that well-being is not only personal but also collectively and socially determined. Nwoko et al. (2023) investigate factors influencing the occupational well-being of kindergarten, primary, and secondary school teachers. From an initial pool of 3,766 peer-reviewed articles sourced from databases including CINAHL, Emcare, PsychINFO, Scopus, ERIC, and PsycARTICLES, 38 studies were reviewed. Their analysis highlights four central factors: personal capabilities, socio-emotional competence, responses to work conditions, and professional relationships. They argue that strong well-being and high self-efficacy are crucial for teachers to effectively

manage instructional and behavioural challenges. Dreer (2023) reviews 44 studies focusing on the outcomes of TWB. Findings emphasise its strong association with sleep quality, teacher retention, positive teacher–student relationships, and enhanced student performance.

Adding another perspective, Gregersen et al. (2023) explore stress and well-being among 47 language teachers worldwide, drawing on app-based data and six in-depth case studies. Findings reveal the dynamic interplay of stress, well-being, and health, showing how workplace stress frequently spills over into home life. Gregersen and MacIntyre (2024) combine survey data with positive psychology to show how teachers and institutions share responsibility for well-being. Teachers' advice centers on four themes of doing their best: good teaching, supportive leadership, positive attitudes, and gratitude, fostering more positive school environments. Mo (2024) reviews teacher well-being research, outlining four theoretical models, antecedents, outcomes, and interventions. Findings show teachers with a strong sense of well-being support professional growth, improve students' academic and emotional outcomes, and create positive classrooms. Training in class management, emotional regulation, and work-life balance skills is vital.

Theoretical Support

Seligman (2011) defined well-being through five pillars: Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (PERMA). Butler and Kern (2016) developed the 23-item PERMA-Profiler to measure well-being across these areas plus eight items on overall well-being, negative emotion, loneliness, and physical health. Tested on thousands, it proved reliable and provides a clear profile for tracking well-being. Collie et al. (2015) validated a 16-item Teacher Well-Being Scale assessing workload, organisational, and student interaction well-being with Canadian teachers, linking well with stress, satisfaction, and overall well-being. Viac and Fraser (2020) define teachers' occupational well-being as responses to cognitive, emotional, health, and social work conditions, identifying four dimensions: cognitive, subjective, physical/mental, and social well-being.

Jin et al. (2021a) propose an ecological framework for LTW, emphasising the interplay between professional and personal spheres and the influence of teaching contexts. They examine the stressors teachers face at different career stages—pre-service, early, mid, and late—highlighting variability across the span. A key construct is "social psychological

capital," referring to the collective social and psychological resources teachers draw on to sustain well-being. From this perspective, well-being emerges dynamically from "the interaction of multiple intrapersonal, and contextual factors and is constantly shifting and changing as it adapts to changes in the broader ecology" (Jin et al., 2021, p. 27). Well-being should not be viewed solely as individual responsibility. Penton Herrera et al. (2022) "hold that well-being is not an individual duty, but the responsibility of society and ecological systems where individuals reside as a whole" (p. 2). Promoting well-being, therefore, is not only a matter of individual self-care but also of systemic support and professional culture.

Aim and Rationale

While many teaching challenges are common across subjects, language teachers face unique pressures. They often manage high emotional labour due to the deep ties between language, identity, and self-expression. Language teaching methods demand considerable energy, and using a non-native language can lower confidence and increase anxiety. Additional challenges include inadequate mentoring for new teachers, mixed-proficiency classrooms and limited resources (Sulis et al., 2023). This study explores tertiary-level teachers' well-being and the factors that contribute to or restrict it. The following questions are addressed.

a) How do tertiary-level teachers perceive and understand their emotions and well-being?
b) What factors contribute to, or hinder their well-being?

Methodology

This qualitative study explores language TWB in tertiary contexts. Participants include three teachers—two females and one male—aged 35–40, with teaching experience ranging from three to twelve years, representing early to mid-career professionals. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire comprising two sections of eight open-ended questions each. The first examined teachers' conceptualisations of well-being, while the second identified key determinants influencing their professional and personal well-being.

Data Presentation and Interpretation

Section 1—Understanding and Defining Well-Being

Participants' understanding and perception of TWB are presented and

interpreted in terms of eight core themes: personal definition, thriving signals, weekly rhythm, peak experience, challenging experience, environmental fit, expectation pressure, and development over time.

Personal definition: The participants perceive TWB as a holistic construct that encompasses every aspect of their being. For Teacher 1, for instance, well-being entails taking care of "my mind, body, soul and heart (thoughts, emotions, feelings, actions, interactions, habits, character, personality, identity)". Teacher 2 defines well-being as "having a sense of calm, purpose and balance in both my professional and personal life. It is knowing that my work aligns with my values, and when I am physically, emotionally and mentally doing well, [I am] able to contribute meaningfully to my work. It's about being able to teach and care for students while also taking care of myself." Teacher 3 echoes the same sentiments when they define TWB as "the overall health, happiness, and balance of teachers in both their professional and personal lives. It's about feeling supported, valued, and respected in the workplace, having manageable workloads, and maintaining positive relationships with students, colleagues, and leaders. It also includes having the time and energy to care for one's own mental, emotional, and physical health."

Thriving signals: Teachers describe the signals that indicate well-being. Teacher 1 comments, "my preparation, lesson planning, lesson execution and feedback from my students and colleagues are the personal signs or feelings that tell me that I am thriving at work." Teacher 2 remarks, "I know I'm thriving when I experience a deep sense of fulfilment in my work and maintain a steady motivation that stems from a clear understanding of my goals." Teacher 3 indicates several signals: "When I feel genuinely excited to start the day and look forward to being in the classroom. I also feel confident and proud of my work, and I'm not constantly stressed or overwhelmed. Outside of work, I still have time and headspace to enjoy my personal life, which tells me I'm maintaining a healthy balance."

Weekly rhythm: A typical workweek can indicate how teachers experience well-being. Teacher 1 spends time preparing handouts, reading/working on research articles, and developing teaching-learning material. This schedule helps them achieve professional goals and strike a balance. Teacher 2 comments that while regular class work is manageable, "the challenge arises during certain periods of heavy

administrative load, which significantly affects my sense of balance and can lead to overload." For Teacher 3 the typical week involves teaching classes, planning lessons and marking, and preparing for the upcoming week. They feel overloaded when they have "less time to rest or be with family and friends."

Peak experiences: Teachers offer examples of experiences that signify their well-being. Teacher 1 describes positive student feedback as their peak experience: "my students told me how the course made a difference in [their] being a human more than being an intellectual human." For Teacher 2, "meaningful engagement with students beyond the classroom" offers satisfaction. They remark, "these moments remind me of why I teach and contribute positively to my sense of purpose and well-being." The experiences of Teacher 3 are similar. They feel rewarded when lessons go well and colleagues appreciate help: "It also strengthened my sense of belonging and support at work."

Challenging experiences: Examples of experiences that impede their sense of well-being are also described. While for Teacher 1 unfair judgment by those in power has deeply affected their well-being and confidence, a lack of collegial support emerging from a broader toxic work culture and institutional recognition made Teacher 2 feel disheartened. Teacher 3 felt overwhelmed and anxious because of a disrupted lesson and unexpected workload draining energy and shaking confidence, adversely impacting their well-being.

Environmental fit: Both Teacher 1 and 2 share how teacher autonomy is facilitated and encouraged by the head of their institution. The openness to dialogue and discussion not only 'takes away stress and pressure' but also contributes positively to 'their sense of being heard and supported'. Teacher 3 eloquently shares, "I find that having supportive colleagues and a sense of teamwork really boost my well-being. Also, our leadership team is approachable and open to feedback, which helps me feel valued."

Expectation pressure: Teachers comment that institutional expectations can impact their well-being positively and negatively. While the pressure to achieve targets is stressful for Teacher 1, emphasis on research output especially during evaluations and for promotions, often without equal consideration of other responsibilities creates pressure and negatively impacts Teacher 2's well-being. Teacher 3 comments that when institutional expectations are clear, fair, and realistic, they can be

motivating and accord a sense of purpose. But "if the targets feel too rigid or the pressure to meet certain outcomes is high, it can add stress and make me worry more about achieving numbers than focusing on meaningful teaching."

Development over time: Teachers state how their sense of well-being developed over time. Teacher 1 comments that learning to be balanced with personal, academic and professional life enhances their well-being. Teacher 2 remarks, "My understanding has shifted from wanting to excel in every professional domain to finding satisfaction in setting clear, achievable goals in areas where I want to grow and contribute. I've come to realise that my well-being is primarily my responsibility—not something the institution or others can be expected to provide." Teacher 3 offers an elaborate sketch of how their sense of well-being evolved over time—"When I first started teaching, I thought well-being simply meant not being overly stressed or exhausted. Over time, I've come to see that it's much broader—it's about feeling fulfilled, supported, and maintaining a healthy balance between work and personal life. I've learned that looking after my well-being isn't selfish; it's essential for being an effective teacher. I now pay more attention to setting boundaries, managing my workload, and making time for things outside of work that bring me joy and help me recharge."

Section 2—Factors That Promote or Hinder Well-Being

This section investigates the enablers and barriers to TWB in terms of six focus areas: supportive policies, obstructive policies, social climate, workload and time, material resources and student impact.

Supportive policies: All three teachers stated that policies supporting flexible course design, clear expectations, and simple approval processes ease stress and boost well-being. Supportive leadership, open dialogue, and regular check-ins make them feel valued. Reasonable workloads, protected non-contact time, and access to professional development help maintain balance. A culture respecting boundaries and promoting appreciation greatly enhances their well-being.

Obstructive policies: Unrealistic targets, policing, and backbiting can cause stress. Teacher 2 explains, "When heads of departments or deans do not follow fair, transparent processes in managing teams, it creates a toxic environment. Without accountability, certain actions go unchecked unless someone formally raises a complaint—which can be difficult and intimidating. This culture undermines morale and creates

an unsafe atmosphere for others doing their best." Excessive workload, last-minute demands, and poor communication make Teacher 3 feel undervalued and stressed.

Social climate: All three teachers emphasised that maintaining good and healthy relationship with colleagues and administrators is key to professional well-being. A collegial environment helps "manage challenges and do your work. It's reassuring to know there are people who can step in to support you or share the load when needed" (T2). Teacher 3 remarks, "having leaders who are approachable, respectful, and who listen to staff concerns helps me feel valued and secure. On the other hand, strained or unsupportive relationships can add stress and make work feel isolating."

Workload and time: All three teachers commented on how excessive work load negatively impacts their well-being. Teacher 2 comments, "When schedules are not well-planned, the pressure can lead to stress and burnout, making it harder to maintain motivation and emotional balance." Teacher 3 remarks that tight deadlines make them feel "anxious, overwhelmed, and more fatigued, which can spill over into my personal life. It also makes it harder to be fully present with my students. When the workload is manageable and I have enough time to plan and reflect, I feel calmer, more focused, and more effective."

Material resources: Teachers agreed on how availability of resources impacts their effectiveness and well-being as professionals. Teacher 2 comments, "When classrooms, materials, and technology are adequate and well-maintained, it feels like the institution values both my work and me as a professional." Teacher 3 remarks, "Having a clean, organised, and well-equipped classroom supports my well-being by reducing daily frustrations and helping lessons run smoothly. When resources are lacking or equipment frequently fails, it adds extra stress and can make me feel less capable."

Student impact: Teachers shared a balanced view on how students affect well-being. Teacher 2 states, "Student engagement and feedback influence my well-being, as the teacher–student relationship is central to my professional identity. However, I've come to see this is only part of the larger picture and not the sole indicator of my success or self-worth." Teacher 3 adds, "Students greatly impact my well-being. Engagement, respect, and growth are rewarding, while persistent behavioral challenges or lack of progress can be draining."

Findings and Discussion

The findings are presented in terms of the two research questions addressed in the study:

a) How do tertiary-level teachers perceive and understand their emotions and well-being?

Teacher well-being is a deeply personal and evolving construct shaped by individual experiences and institutional dynamics. The data illustrates that participants view well-being holistically, encompassing emotional, mental, physical, and professional dimensions. Their definitions emphasise alignment with personal values, a sense of purpose, and balance between personal and professional lives. Signals of thriving, such as motivation, excitement, and classroom engagement, reflect inner markers of well-being, reinforced by feedback and work-life balance. Weekly rhythms reveal that workload fluctuations significantly affect well-being, especially during administrative responsibilities. While positive peak experiences enhance teachers' sense of purpose and belonging, challenging moments—stemming from toxic cultures, unfair judgment, or overload—undermine confidence and morale. A supportive environment, both social and physical, bolsters well-being, with autonomy, collegiality, and approachable leadership playing critical roles. Conversely, institutional pressures and unclear expectations can harm well-being if unrealistic or punitive. Over time, participants' understanding of well-being matures—from avoiding stress to managing boundaries and pursuing fulfilment. Importantly, participants recognise their agency in safeguarding well-being, while also acknowledging the impact of systemic practices and leadership in either supporting or hindering this process.

b) What factors contribute to, or hinder teacher well-being?

The data highlights the complex interplay between institutional structures and individual experiences in shaping TWB. Supportive policies—such as flexible course design, fair expectations, and accessible professional development—create a positive framework, especially when reinforced by approachable leadership and respectful workplace culture. Conversely, obstructive policies, like unrealistic targets, micromanagement, and opaque leadership practices, foster toxicity and erode morale. The social climate plays a crucial role; collegiality, mutual respect, and open communication provide emotional safety and foster

collaboration, while strained relationships can lead to isolation and stress. Workload and time management emerged as critical factors: excessive tasks, poor scheduling, and tight deadlines negatively affect emotional balance, motivation, and even personal life. Adequate material resources reduce daily frustrations and support teaching effectiveness, signaling institutional respect. Finally, student impact remains significant—while positive interactions and feedback are fulfilling, ongoing challenges or disengagement can be emotionally taxing. Together, these factors create the ecosystem that either nurtures or impairs TWB.

Implications

TWB is an extremely important construct, not just for teachers but for all the stakeholders concerned. When teachers feel supported and balanced, it positively affects students, colleagues, and the overall learning environment. Sustainable policies, genuine appreciation, and a culture of trust can make a big difference in ensuring teachers do their best work and stay in the profession long term. Therefore, institutions should prioritise TWB as a key part of building a healthy, sustainable educational system. TWB is the personal responsibility of teachers in addition to it being the collective concern of institutions, parents and other societal agents. Therefore, teachers should actively nurture balance, boundaries, growth, and self-care practices.

Further Research

Further studies could investigate how teachers' professional identities and beliefs shape emotional experiences and influence well-being—how alignment or conflict between personal values and institutional expectations affects motivation, stress, and job satisfaction to deepen understanding of how identity and belief systems impact resilience and inform teacher development practices. Action research can design, implement, and evaluate well-being initiatives in higher education. Interventions like peer mentoring, time management support, and regular check-ins could be tested for effectiveness in enhancing morale and reducing stress, offering practical, context-specific strategies for well-being policies. A longitudinal study could examine how well-being evolves across career stages—entry-level, mid-career, and pre-retirement. By tracking changes over time, it would identify phases of vulnerability or resilience and inform stage-specific interventions supporting well-being throughout the teaching lifecycle.

Conclusion

Language teacher emotions and well-being merit investigation as teachers function not merely as professionals but as whole individuals whose personal and professional identities are deeply interconnected. Their emotional experiences influence not only their own sense of fulfilment but also affect student well-being and the broader educational environment. Given this, it becomes crucial for teachers to actively engage in practices that support their own well-being, even as institutional and systemic support remains important. A balanced approach that values both individual agency and collective responsibility can foster sustainable, emotionally healthy teaching communities and improve educational outcomes.

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