

Foreign Language Teacher Well-being: Challenges, Strategies and Aspirations

Agnieszka Strzałka

UNIWERSYTET KOMISJI EDUKACJI NARODOWEJ

Keywords

teacher development, teacher well-being, focus groups, well-being strategies

Abstract

The importance of teacher well-being in language education is gaining attention. Effective teaching goes beyond technical skills, requiring emotional engagement and a supportive environment. Well-being influences teachers' ability to connect with students and manage stress. Researchers emphasize emotional balance, work-life integration, and institutional support to prevent burnout. This study explores language teachers' experiences and challenges related to well-being, focusing on pre-service and in-service teachers. It highlights strategies like mindfulness, gratitude practices, and work-life boundaries, alongside institutional support, emphasizing the need for systemic changes to support teacher well-being for both educators and students.

Introduction

In a study of over 7000 Polish teachers of all school subjects, its authors pointed to a definite need for change in teacher functioning in Polish schools, concluding their report with a recommendation to strengthen resources of well-being as well as lower the sense of teacher ill-being¹. Many teachers are overworked, often demotivated, and prone to professional burnout. It seems necessary for teachers to understand the role of their inner resources in sustaining their well-being, but also for employers, who have a direct impact

¹ M. Paliga, *Raport. Badanie dobrostanu zawodowego nauczycieli*, 2023.

on creating comfortable good working environment, to hear the voice of teachers and become their supporters in both nurturing their well-being and minimising their ill-being.

It seems that universities, as institutions which educate future teachers, bear significant responsibility for providing support mechanisms for both pre-service and active in-service ones. By doing so, these institutions can empower educators to nurture their own well-being while advocating enhanced institutional resources and reduced impediments that detrimentally affect the well-being of teachers. Echoing the sentiments articulated by Martinez-Alba et al.², it becomes evident that prioritizing the exploration of strategies to facilitate teachers in attaining equilibrium between their personal and professional domains is imperative for ameliorating their overall well-being and, concomitantly, enhancing the efficacy of their pedagogical practices.

This article is to present some teacher well-being aspects and well-being instructional solutions, based on a study conducted among in-service and pre-service teachers – postgraduate students at UKEN in Cracow.

Teacher well-being – a new trend in language education studies

Language education scholars have recently drawn attention to the importance of positive emotions and well-being of students and teachers. Rokita-Jaśkow, for example, quotes Agoda³.

Good teachers are not well-oiled machines, and good teaching is not just a matter of knowing the subject matter and being able to use all the latest techniques while teaching or even being efficient. Good teaching is an emotionally charged event where teachers connect with each student as they passionately deliver their lesson in a pleasurable environment.

The affective dimension of language teaching and learning refers, among other things, to the way teachers experience their work and the way they feel, which translates into how they work with and relate to their students and other people in their workplaces. As stressed by scholars, inter alia Sulis and colleagues⁴, well-being is essential for language professionals to teach well, to be active, resourceful and to provide best quality teaching to their students. Hence their direct recommendation that teachers take a closer look at their

² G. Martinez-Alba, 2022

³ J. Rokita-Jaśkow, *Emotions at work: Call for investigation of the affective side of teacher*, “Konin Language Studies” 2018.

⁴ G. Sulis, S. Mercer, S. Babic, A. Mairitsch, *Language teacher wellbeing across the career span*, Bristol 2023.

well-being. Martinez-Alba et al (ibid.) present specifically the ELT professionals in the context of three domains of well-being, emotions, work-life balance, and services and support. While emotions concerning their students and their problems, own ability to face the workload (teaching hours and preparation/correction time) definitely impact teacher's well-being (when negative, teachers experience stress, depression and burn-out), work-life balance is crucial for teachers to take care of themselves. Finally, services and support also constitute a part of teachers' well-being, where providing teachers with guidance, help, administrative support, organising peer circles and space for teacher self-care are important topics.

The classroom environment, with its often-problematic students, and sometimes, problematic parents, the school, or schools, is seldom well prepared to offer well-being resources for teachers. In many countries, including Poland, the society often underestimates teachers, demanding them to work more, do more, faster and better, without necessarily caring for them.

Teacher Development courses might be a good opportunity for young teachers to learn how to actively counterbalance the challenges offered by the environment and achieve their well-being, despite those challenges.

Teacher well-being as a topic of a Teacher Development course

Although well-being as a concept is broad and difficult to define, Sulis et al.⁵ quote a number of definitions of well-being. From the hedonistic perspective, the predominance of positive over negative affect is the essence of the definition offered by Bradburn in 1969. Subjective well-being as a perception of balance between positive and negative emotions was suggested by Diener et al. in 1999. On the other hand, the eudemonic approaches show well-being as an art of leading a purposeful life, as defined by Ryff in 1989, who enumerated six elements, such as positive relationships, self-acceptance and personal growth, or Seligman in 2011, in his PERMA model, focusing on positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment. From an ecological perspective, Acton and Glasgow in 2015 defined teacher well-being as “an individual sense of personal and professional fulfilment, satisfaction, purposefulness and happiness, constructed in a collaborative process with colleagues and students”, concluding that it is “a collective responsibility in the ELT community” (Sulis et al., *ibidem*).

This idea of collective responsibility makes it important to work with young teachers on the topic of well-being in a collective learning process,

⁵ *Ibidem*.

where research, practice and reflection are both individual and group activities, supervised and supported by the teacher trainer, who takes the position of an older colleague, and shows the way.

Well-being resources and challenges

According to Dodge et al.,⁶ stable well-being is “when individuals have the psychological, social, and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social, and/or physical challenge”. Mercer⁷ calls to adopt an ecological perspective, as “well-being does not reside solely within the individual but is socially situated as well”. Both remarks are important in understanding how the environment of the teacher influences their resources and challenges.

The challenges in the teaching profession include, among others, emotionally supporting the students. Listening to a student who may be going through problematic situations at home, among peers, or simply problems with their mental and physical health, the teacher may achieve the secondary trauma state. As mental health of school and university students steadily declines, teachers more and more often work with students who struggle with emotions, experience depression, suicidal thoughts, are often demotivated.

Another example of a challenge is the planning and organization of their teaching, where the expectations from the schools, the students, and their parents make it hard to do things slowly and demand always being in a hurry. Organizing materials and equipment often in their free time, leaves the teacher with very little leisure, time to live the life of a person, not just a teacher.

Facing the challenges of the job, the teacher needs resources, such as professional help from a pedagogue or psychologist, the support of supervisors and colleagues, as well as parents (social resources). They need time and space to relax after a hard day at work, or during the weekend, as well as isolate themselves from the world of the school, often changing their harmful beliefs and thinking habits and using positivity, empathy, and self-compassion to live and teach better (psychological resources). Teachers need physical, social, and psychological resources to take proper care for their health, relationships, and their interests, which all make them interesting and happy teachers. It is such teachers who work effectively and also care about their students' well-being.

⁶ Quoted by G. Martinez-Alba et al, *Situating teacher well-being in English language teaching*, 2022.

⁷ S. Mercer, *Teacher wellbeing: A SMART approach*, “Oxford ELT”, 2020.

Well-being strategies

The existing literature is rich in examples of successful well-being strategies, applied by teachers participating in a number of interventions. Those originating from the realm of Positive Psychology have been mindfulness-based, multimodal programs, and gratitude interventions. The results of the interventions conducted on teachers were positive. It is important to mention that the content of the interventions was as important as their structure. Among the elements which characterized successful PPI were the use of multiple methods, professional instructors, and weekly sessions. It shows that positive psychology interventions can be effective in supporting teacher well-being, which can be used by the schools, teacher education, and policy-makers⁸.

In 2020 Nowak and Szulc-Kurpaska⁹ conducted an intervention in which 68 students of English preparing to become teachers learnt how to achieve well-being with the use of three selected strategies, gratitude, sport activity and performing/observing small acts of kindness. All the student teachers who persisted in their strategy felt proud and happy to have achieved higher levels of well-being, mainly through overcoming one's weaknesses. The results also showed that the growth mindset was a predictor of successful strategy learning and willingness to continue with it in the future.

Not all teachers of English, however, have been lucky enough to participate in a course of well-being, or a research intervention. Not all of them have a natural predisposition to care about themselves. Mercer and Gregersen claim, that a majority of teachers feel guilty to look after themselves¹⁰.

It is, according to the authors, important for teachers to recognize their own needs and maintain a healthy balance to enhance their effectiveness in the classroom. They emphasize the well-being of teachers and its impact on effective teaching. In the book, which is a collection of reflection-based activities, teachers are advised to practice a number of different strategies, grouped around the workplace, thinking habits, motivation, emotions, relationships, and stress.

⁸ V. Duyen T., A. Kelly, *A systematic review of school-based positive psychology interventions to foster teacher wellbeing*, "Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice" 2022.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ S. Mercer, T. Gregersen, *Teacher wellbeing*, Oxford 2022.

Methodology

This study explores the challenges young teachers face and the well-being strategies they use. It focuses on pre-service day students of English and in-service extramural students who have been working as teachers of English for as long as three to 17 years.

Research questions

The aim of the classroom research conducted on future and practicing teachers of English in Polish schools was to develop a better understanding of their experience of being a teacher, the factors that put their well-being at risk, as well as the resources that the teachers use or might use effectively to become better teachers. Below are the research questions that the author aimed to answer in her role of instructor and researcher:

- How do pre-service and in-service student teachers assess their own well-being?
- What challenges do the young teachers see and experience on a daily basis?
- What personal well-being strategies do student teachers know and use?
How do pre-service and in-service teachers of English care for themselves?
- Are students willing to incorporate new strategies to foster their well-being? If so, what are they?
- What institutional strategies for teacher well-being do teachers a) recognise being implemented b) suggest that should necessarily be introduced?

The sample and procedure

The study involved 32 teachers: 11 pre-service teachers (9 females, 2 males) and 21 in-service teachers (20 females, 1 male), aged 22-45, who attended a Teacher Development course during the 2022/2023 academic year. Pre-service students met weekly, while in-service students met bi-weekly.

Focus group elicitation

Focus groups are an effective method for collecting qualitative data on attitudes, experiences, and challenges. The students participated in a variety of activities, including brainstorming, small group discussions, individual

reflections, and Google search projects. The goal was both to engage them in understanding well-being and to collect data for the research.

Activities

The Teacher Development course was designed around main topics found in Mercer (ibid). activities that encouraged reflection on teacher well-being during several weeks of classes, focused on one, extended activity. The topics of the activities are given below.

Activity 1: Defining teacher well-being

Activity 2: Self-assessment of well-being

Activity 3: Identifying challenges and resources

Activity 4: Exploring strategies to improve well-being

Activity 5: Personal well-being strategies

Activity 6: Institutional strategies for teacher well-being

The instructional/elicitation tools used for each activity are to be found in the Appendix.

Results

Self-Assessment of Well-Being

Students were asked to rate their well-being on a 1-10 scale. The majority of extramural students rated their well-being above 5, citing motivation, satisfaction with teaching, and positive relationships with students as key factors. Day students, however, reported lower well-being, often due to emotional exhaustion and stress from balancing teaching, studying, and preparing for graduation.

Daily Challenges

Students identified both personal (“inside me”) and sociocontextual (“outside me”) challenges affecting their well-being. Personal factors included stress, burnout, and low self-esteem, while external factors involved issues like low salaries, time pressure, lack of support from schools, and difficult student situations. These challenges were often interconnected, with external stressors exacerbating internal struggles. Elicitation results are given in the Appendix (Table 1)

Well-Being Strategies

In response to these challenges, both pre-service and in-service teachers employed various self-care strategies to protect their well-being. These included maintaining a growth mindset, improving time management, developing supportive relationships with colleagues, and engaging in physical activities to reduce stress. Teachers also emphasized the importance of maintaining motivation and focusing on positive aspects of teaching. Elicitation results are given in the Appendix (Table 2).

Willingness to Incorporate New Strategies

Many students expressed openness to adopting new strategies to enhance their well-being. These included mindfulness practices, regular exercise, better work-life balance, and taking time for personal reflection. Students shared their experiences through presentations and posters, demonstrating how these strategies positively impacted their well-being. Elicitation results are given in the Appendix (Table 3).

Institutional Strategies for Teacher Well-Being

Students were asked about institutional strategies for teacher well-being. Many felt unsupported by current school systems, particularly in terms of salaries, work organization, and professional development opportunities. Suggestions for improvement included better support for teachers, organising relaxation spaces, higher salaries, and more organized work environments. There was a strong consensus that teacher well-being needs to be prioritized at the institutional and national levels. Elicitation results are given in the Appendix (Table 4).

Conclusions

This study highlights the importance of teachers' awareness of their well-being in fostering a positive learning environment. While many young teachers reported satisfaction with their work, challenges like emotional exhaustion, stress, and lack of institutional support were prevalent. Teachers employed various personal strategies to manage these challenges and expressed a willingness to adopt new ones. Institutional support, including better work conditions and professional development, is crucial for improving teacher well-being. Recognizing and addressing these issues can lead to a more positive and sustainable teaching environment.

References

- Duyen T. Vo, Kelly Allen, *A systematic review of school-based positive psychology interventions to foster teacher wellbeing*, "Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice" 2022, 28(8), p. 964-999. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2022.2137138>
- Luke Melissa, Goodrich Christopher, *Focus group research: An intentional strategy for applied group research?* "The Journal for Specialists in Group Work" 2019, 44(2), p. 77-81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2019.1603741>
- Martinez-Alba Gilda, Penton Herrera Luis Javier, Trinh Ethan, *Situating teacher well-being in English language teaching*, [in] *Teacher well-being in English language teaching: An ecological approach*, ed. G. Martinez-Alba, L. Penton Herrera, E. Trinh, New York and London 2022, p. 29-42. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003314936-4>
- Mercer Sarah, *Teacher wellbeing: A SMART approach*, "Oxford ELT", 2020. <https://teachingenglishwithoxford.oup.com/2020/03/09/teacher-wellbeing-a-smart-approach-sarah-merc> HYPERLINK "https://teachingenglishwithoxford.oup.com/2020/03/09/teacher-wellbeing-a-smart-approach-sarah-mercer"/
- Mercer Sarah, Gregersen Tammy, *Teacher wellbeing*, Oxford 2022.
- Nowak Sabina, Szulc-Kurpaska Małgorzata, *W kierunku dobrostanu przyszłych nauczycieli języków obcych*, "Języki Obce w Szkole" 2022, 66(2), pp. 93-106. <https://doi.org/10.47050/jows.2022.2.93-106>
- Paliga Mateusz, *Raport. Badanie dobrostanu zawodowego nauczycieli*, Librus, 2023. https://files.librus.pl/art/23/03/4/Raport_dobrostan_zawodowy_nauczycieli_Librus_marzec2023.pdf
- Rokita-Jaśkow Joanna, *Emotions at work: Call for investigation of the affective side of teacher*, "Konin Language Studies" 2018, 6(3), p. 265-280. <http://ksj.pwsz.konin.edu.pldoi>
- Sulis Gulia, Mercer Sarah, Babic Sonja, Mairitsch Astrid, *Language teacher wellbeing across the career span*, Bristol 2023.

Appendix

Classroom research activities

Activity 1. Establishing understanding of the concept.

Question: How do you understand teacher well-being?

Task design: Student teachers spend a few minutes in small groups reflecting on their understanding of the term "well-being" and teacher well-being. The next step is sharing the ways they described this concept/state and, finally, comparing with some established definitions.

Activity 2. Temperature taking

Question: How do pre-service and in-service student teachers assess their own well-being?

Task design: Based on the definitions (constituent parts) of TBW, every teacher evaluates their well-being on a scale 0-10. Answers are collected anonymously, to give the researcher a general view of the tendencies among the group, who will later work on the strategies of improving TWB, sharing good practices and learning collaboratively from their peers.

Activity 3. Working with challenges and resources.

Question: What challenges do the young student teachers see and experience on a daily basis? How can challenges be balanced with resources teachers have?

Task design: brainstorming in teacher circles in order to share the main problems (challenges to teacher well-being) and finding solutions (resources teachers have).

Activity 4. Strategies to improve teacher well-being.

Question: Are student teachers aware of different areas where caring for TWB is important and possible? The SMART approach.

Task design: reflection, focus group discussion, the “Smart Teacher” chart completion

Activity 5. Caring for ourselves as teachers

Questions: What personal well-being strategies do the student teachers choose to develop? How do pre-service and in-service teachers of English plan to care for themselves in the future?

Task design: survey, Web quest, poster/video/audio presentation in class.

Activity 6. Our schools, our second homes

Questions: What institutional strategies for teacher well-being do teachers a) recognise being implemented b) suggest that should necessarily be introduced?

Task design: students work in two groups, discussing question a or b, listing what is currently being done to improve their comfort at work (noticing change), or what they think is necessary to schools to adopt before more and more good teachers leave the profession.

Results

“inside me”	“outside me”
low motivation	time pressure
procrastination	not much support in school,
not caring for ourselves	atmosphere in the workplace
health problems	low salaries
low self-esteem	
uncooperative colleagues	
bureaucracy	
perennial system reforms	
stress	
discipline problems	

Table 1. Personal and socio-contextual factors that endanger student teachers' well-being

maintaining physical fitness through activities such as gym workouts
seeking guidance and support from senior colleagues or mentors
engaging in leisure activities, such as travel and social gatherings
cultivating positive rapport with students and parents
implementing effective classroom management techniques to minimize stress
prioritizing student well-being, deriving satisfaction from their happiness
leveraging technology to enhance teaching effectiveness and student engagement

Table 2. Strategies promoting well-being which student teachers know about

gratitude
enjoying simple things
switching off from work issues at weekends
reading around
cognitive behavioural therapy
regular walking/running
travelling/enjoying life

Table 3. Strategies which teacher students want to foster to stay well

teachers should receive a decent salary (at the moment it does not allow to sustain oneself in a big city like Cracow on one's own)

organisation of work should be improved (at the moment teachers often have to change schools during the week, "hopping" from one to another in order to have a sufficient number of hours)

more time and space should be given at school for teachers to relax (sometimes there is no time to have a drink, use the restroom, or talk to colleagues, not to mention sit quietly and recharge batteries). Schools need to employ staff who will overlook students during breaks, so that teachers could really use the time for themselves

real opportunities to develop professionally should be offered (presently teachers are sometimes forced to participate in training which they do not find useful; on the other hand, attending workshops/conferences they need is not always possible)

Table 4. Institutional teacher well-being strategies student teachers aspire to see in their workplace