



English as a Foreign Language Teachers' Wellbeing amidst COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Teachers serving at the front lines of education during difficult times of the pandemic seem to have been forgotten in these bustling days around the world. While delivery of high-quality education is on the shoulders of these people, their life and wellbeing have been affected as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, there is little documented evidence on how the pandemic has impacted language teachers' wellbeing. To fill this gap, this qualitative study examines the wellbeing of English as a Foreign Language teachers in Iranian public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ten participants who attended in-depth interviews were found to have their wellbeing levels severely affected by the pandemic. Indeed, the newly emerged challenges have been added to the existing obstacles and augmented the already stressful teaching profession. Based on the findings, recommendations are provided for authorities and parents to be employed during the pandemic and afterward to help teachers flourish and subsequently improve quality education.

Keywords: EFL Teacher, Pandemic, Public Schools, Wellbeing.

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Introduction

Being overworked and underpaid, language teachers were already under a lot of stress and pressure before the COVID-19 pandemic (MacIntyre et al., 2019). Unstable job contracts, perceived lack of control, and role conflict were also prevalent in the language teaching profession worldwide. With the outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic and the quick steps that needed to be taken in all aspects of life, including education, life first converted to chaos, with a new normal afterward and a blurry future. Meanwhile, the need to adapt to online education and subsequently adjust to working on screen, different communication modes with learners and parents, the fluctuating balance between professional and personal life, the need to improve technological knowledge for efficient delivery of courses mixed with health concerns, social distancing, and restricted boundaries have multiplied the stress that teachers were already experiencing (MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer, 2020). Undeniably, this sudden change has complicated life for everyone in the world, including language teachers. But how has this lockdown influenced EFL teachers' wellbeing?

Wellbeing is considered a core concept of positive psychology, a new subfield of psychology, with the primary purpose of assisting people in experiencing a happier life. Positive psychology with regard to teachers could mean understanding what influences them negatively in terms of stressors and what elements create positive emotions in them, improve their wellbeing and help them flourish. Personal resources (resilience, self-esteem, self-efficacy) and also social perspectives (social support from colleagues and staff) are believed to enhance wellbeing (Jin, Mercer, Babic, & Mairitsch, 2021). Therefore, wellbeing emerges “when individuals have the psychological, social, and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social, and/or physical challenge. When individuals have more challenges than resources, the see-saw dips, along with their wellbeing, and vice-versa” (Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012, p. 230). This is clearly illustrated in Figure 1., which demonstrates wellbeing as a balance point between the individual's resources and challenges. Dodge et al. (2012) believe that there is a set point for wellbeing and an equilibrium/homeostasis, and also the fluctuating state between challenges and resources is essential.

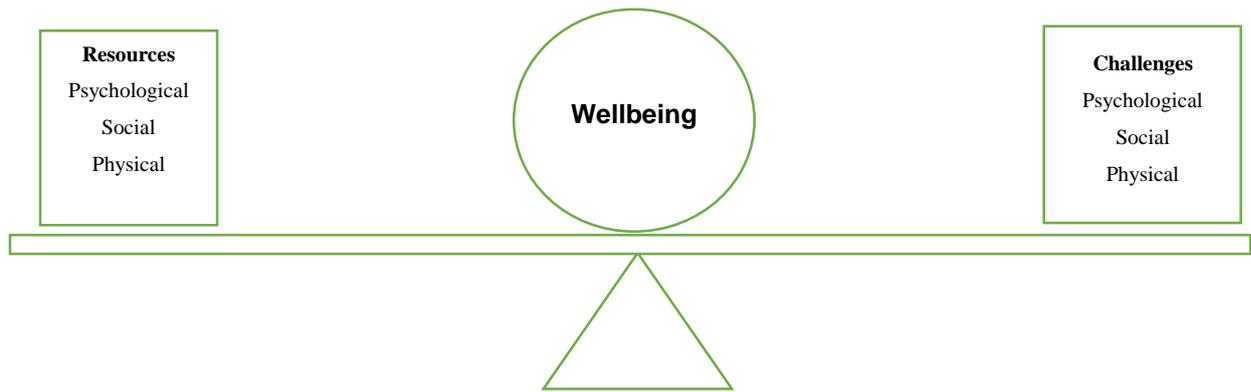


Figure 1. *Definition of Wellbeing (Dodge et al., 2012)*

Previous literature suggests the interrelatedness of teachers' professional and personal lives and the influence of personal factors (e.g., self-efficacy, identity, motivation) and contextual factors (e.g., workload, relationships, perceived status) on teacher wellbeing (Mairitsch et al., 2021). Therefore, to reach a holistic understanding of language teacher wellbeing, an ecological perspective including sociopolitical, institutional, cultural, personal, and interactional aspects must be considered. With the current pandemic, defined as “macrosystem disaster and time-specific event within our era – [which] affects our study and choices” (Wang & DeLaquil, 2020, p. 2) and therefore, with many new intertwined factors affecting the world, economics, emotions, and human beings, the situation has become much more complex nowadays. Hence, being an elusive and complex context-specific phenomenon, wellbeing is influenced by multiple factors. In their co-edited book about teacher wellbeing, Mercer and Gregersen (2020) recommended studying teacher wellbeing in the Asia Pacific region, where there is an imbalance between East and West education development and where such research is scarce, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. To answer their call for further research and to contribute to the very limited body of literature in this area, this project accordingly aims to examine EFL teacher wellbeing in public schools in Iran during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Literature Review

Studies on Teacher Wellbeing

Many studies have so far delved into the concept of wellbeing in different populations and contexts. Considering education, however, the focus has been on both learners and teachers. Regarding teachers, wellbeing has mostly been studied besides other teaching-related

psychological variables (e.g., burnout, self-efficacy, motivation). For instance, in a study by McKay and Barton (2018), teacher wellbeing was considered along with burnout in three cases. Teachers' personal and contextual resources that supported their wellbeing and resilience were measured by a range of art-based reflective practices. Using such techniques, teachers put a name to all the factors that created a challenge in their roles, and this awareness of challenges led them to self-regulation. Oral, written, and tangible methods of communication that allowed teachers to reexamine their thoughts and share their reflections, strengthened their collegiality. Art-based approaches indeed could improve the quality and depth of teacher thinking and reflection, which could finally help support their wellbeing and resilience, and this solution finding could help those teachers who were at the risk of leaving continue the profession. That is, reflection, using a range of modes, over a period of time, improved teacher resilience and wellbeing, and they did not try to survive independently. Similarly, in a Turkish context, Arslan (2018) examined the relationship between public school teachers' positive functioning at work and cognitive wellbeing. Two hundred ninety-five teachers were asked to fill in the Teacher Subjective Wellbeing Questionnaire (TSWQ) and Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). The correlational analysis manifested a positive and significant relationship between teachers' wellbeing and their overall teacher functioning. Indeed, the findings reveal that high levels of teacher wellbeing correlate with teachers' healthy and successful functioning at work. Later in England and Wales, another large-scale study was conducted by a group of researchers (Harding et al., 2019) on 3217 students and 1167 secondary school teachers. The study aimed at finding the possible association between teacher wellbeing, student wellbeing, and psychological stress. The results revealed that better student wellbeing and lower student psychological distress were associated with better teacher wellbeing. The researchers used Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) and Total Difficulties Score (TDS) to measure the relationship between the variables. Statistical analysis indicated that teacher presenteeism and the quality of student-teacher relationships were noteworthy. This cross-sectional study confirmed the relation between teacher wellbeing, student wellbeing, and psychological distress.

Likewise, in a large-scale study in Italy, Barbieri, Sulis, Porcu, and Toland (2019) used a questionnaire to find a possible relationship between high school teachers' wellbeing, socio-demographic and professional background. Seven thousand five teachers took part in the study, and teachers' working environment, career motivation and investment, and job satisfaction were among the examined factors. The findings indicated that older teachers possessed a lower

satisfaction level than their younger colleagues who took part in professional development activities. Results also suggest that access to human and physical resources in the workplace and professional development opportunities provide teachers with a good level of wellbeing, which is also related to their job satisfaction.

In Asia, Song, Gu, and Zhang (2020) examined the dynamic relationship between different aspects of state school teachers' subjective wellbeing: altruism and self-efficacy (psychological dimension) and work and income satisfaction (cognitive dimension). The study was conducted with 1500 teachers in the eastern areas of China over a period of three years. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) analysis of the possible interrelationships between the variables showed that teachers' opinion about wellbeing was not restricted to happiness only. Rather altruistic and academic values played a big role in their wellbeing, although their basic living standards highly influenced these values and efficacy. That is, the findings indicated that teachers' internal needs and values were interwoven with their external needs, and all could connectedly influence their overall wellbeing. A strong correlation was noticed between income satisfaction and satisfaction with work, and the study concluded that attractive salaries and a conducive workplace to effective teaching and learning are essential in quality teacher retention.

Studies on Language Teacher Wellbeing

In the United States, Japan, and Austria, Talbot and Mercer (2018) attempted to understand how language teachers experience emotional wellbeing and the techniques they employ to manage it. A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with language teachers in the three countries about the challenges and joys of teaching, factors that enhance or destroy their emotional wellbeing, and the related emotional strategies. The data showed that although there were some commonalities, each case was unique. People, specifically the learners, seemed to be the main trigger for language teacher wellbeing. The social nature of teachers' emotional experience and perceived competence of being a native vs. non-native teacher was also of high importance. Teachers in their study employed a set of strategies such as cognitive reappraisal, problem-directed action, and downward social or self-comparisons to manage their challenges.

Moreover, Mercer (2020) studied language teacher wellbeing in the private sector in Austria. Eight volunteer teachers attended two sets of semi-structured interviews, assisted by visual prompts and journals. It was found that in the private sector, concerning working conditions and status of ELT, language teachers wellbeing is defined by business model

character, and this usually led to unstable job and future prospects for teachers. Most of the teachers' problems stemmed from maximizing profits that consequently led to low payments, poor job security, understaffing, and lack of investment in teachers, which is termed 'precarity'. Downward comparisons in the institute also had a detrimental effect on teacher wellbeing and such focus on ranking hierarchies in school buffered their self-esteem. Time pressure due to intense and huge workload also threatened teachers' wellbeing. However, what teachers enjoyed most in their profession were positive relationships with colleagues and students and positive work environments which varied across different institutions and boosted their wellbeing.

Concerning other foreign languages, Jin et al. (2021) studied the wellbeing of 7 Mandarin Chinese language teachers in the UK. The analysis of semi-structured interviews identified four main ecologies that play an important role in language teacher wellbeing. The so-called ecologies are outlined as an ecology of school, ecology of work and life, ecology of the educational system, and societal ecology of teaching (specifically teaching modern languages). When encountering any challenges, teachers utilized psychological, social, and contextual resources to handle the situation and remain positive. In Italy, the relationship between language teacher wellbeing, resilience, and foreign language teaching enjoyment was examined. One hundred seventy-four Italian as foreign language teachers filled in the related questionnaires, and the analysis showed that the following resilience wellbeing was a strong predictor of foreign language teaching enjoyment. The research concludes that happy and resilient teachers provide the basis for student progress as a positive atmosphere in the classroom is the prerequisite for learner linguistic growth (Proietti Ergün & Dewaele, 2021).

Teacher wellbeing was also examined in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) teachers in Austria. Hofstadler, Babic, Lämmerer, Mercer, and Oberdorfer (2021) interviewed 16 teachers about their CLIL teaching experiences and perspectives. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was used in the analysis of the data. Hofstadler et al. (2021) found that language teacher wellbeing is influenced by factors at the national, institutional, and class levels, which can be interpreted in both positive and negative ways, depending on the individual. For instance, whereas for some teachers, autonomy was considered a kind of freedom; for others, it could mean a lack of orientation and uncertainty. Teachers also reported cases of change in wellbeing over the long/short-term. It seemed that their wellbeing was also influenced by perceived teacher status and perceived lack of appreciation, and those who perceived the importance of CLIL could actually flourish in their

profession. The positive influence of the teacher-student relationship on teacher wellbeing was also detected.

Studies on Language Teacher Wellbeing during the COVID-19 Pandemic

A very limited number of studies have examined EFL teachers' wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, in an international study with 47 language teachers from different countries, MacIntyre et al. (2019) utilized a specially designed smartphone app eMoodie, to assess different stressors, personalities, and wellbeing of teachers using Goldberg's (1992) Big Five Measurement tool, PERMA, and a questionnaire on chronic stressors during the COVID-19 pandemic. The statistical analysis of the Likert-scale items demonstrated that although stressors correlated negatively with teachers' wellbeing, it seemed that some personality traits could maintain teacher wellbeing. The study lists a number of stressors of teaching professions, such as heavy workload, financial problems, job insecurity, and role conflict, and highlights potential benefits of promoting teacher wellbeing. MacIntyre et al. (2020) later conducted an international study with over 600 language teachers, using an online survey (Google Docs), examining stressors and 14 coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The coping strategies were categorized into avoidant and approach. The analysis revealed that positive psychological outcomes such as wellbeing, happiness, health, and resilience had a significant positive relationship with the approach category and correlated negatively with the avoidance category.

In addition, Wong, Pompeo-Fargnoli, and Harriott (2022) studied eight primary ESOL teachers in New Jersey, the USA, during the pandemic. Their in-depth semi-structured interviews indicated increased stress levels of teachers during the pandemic. The reason was lack of communication between colleagues, lack of support by school administrators, insufficient technological devices by students, and teaching learners in a variety of proficiency levels. The perceived challenges were believed to mentally and emotionally influence the teachers and consequently their wellbeing level. Finally, in an international study during the pandemic, five language teachers were interviewed by Kwee (2021) about their online teaching experience. While uncertainty about learning outcomes was discouraging teachers from further online education, a high wellbeing level and positive learning environments functioned as a motivator to continue the profession. However, all the participants came from developed countries and their relatively high socio-economic background was noteworthy.

As the glance through literature reveals, studies on teacher wellbeing mainly focused on

finding the relationship between teacher wellbeing and other teacher-related variables using questionnaires and statistical analysis, without delving deep into the composing elements of wellbeing and asking ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions as the case is in qualitative research. Besides, the number of studies focusing on English as a foreign language teacher is scarce. This number is even more limited during the COVID-19 pandemic when EFL teachers face different stressors and challenges, with all the current studies focusing merely on teachers in developed countries, where there are possibly enough technological advances to adapt to online education conveniently. In fact, to date, no such studies exist in technology-deprived countries such as Iran. Therefore, the present study attempts to fill this gap and find the elements that contribute to or detract from teacher wellbeing; and to accomplish this, in-depth interviews are chosen to fully understand EFL teachers’ wellbeing in this context. Considering public school EFL teachers in Iran, the following research questions were posed:

- a) What factors contribute to or detract from the wellbeing of EFL teachers in the public sector during the global pandemic?
- b) What are the most common self-regulatory strategies used by EFL teachers to tackle the challenges to their wellbeing?

Method

Context and Participants

In Iran, foreign languages such as English are taught both in Public schools and Private language centers/institutes. Attending the public school system is obligatory for all students in the country. Students from all economic classes and backgrounds attend public schools. Therefore, the classes are usually crowded, with sometimes 30-40 students in one class. There is a segregated system of schooling based on student gender, and often, teachers of the same gender teach learners. The school curriculum and teaching materials for all courses in public schools (and private non-for-profit schools) are designed and developed by the Ministry of Education. English as a Foreign Language teachers in public schools are usually graduates of Farhangian University, with Bachelors’ or Masters’ degrees (and sometimes Ph.D.’s) in ELT, English Literature, or English Translation. They can teach at public schools after being accepted in a set of exams given by the Ministry of Education, and usually, a long contract (30 years) is signed as they enter the job. However, most of the teachers in this context have second jobs or at least teach in other contexts (private schools, private language centers, universities) in their extra time.

The study participants included 10 (male = 6, female = 4) EFL teachers in public schools in Iran. The participants' age range was 29-40, with 4-15 years of teaching experience. Except for 2 participants with Bachelor's degrees in English Literature, the rest of the participants were MA holders or postgraduate students in ELT.

Materials and Procedure

An interview protocol was designed for in-depth semi-structured interviews to be conducted with the participants. The questions were adapted from (Mercer, 2020), and validated by an expert, faculty in Applied Linguistics. Accordingly, the initial interview protocol was revised and piloted with three language teachers. Minor changes were applied to the interview protocol before the final implementation of the study. Some of the interview questions were as follows:

- *How do you feel about your workload? Has it changed during the pandemic?*
- *What causes you stress in your life at present – professional and personal?*
- *At work how often do you become absorbed in what you are doing?*
- *How happy are you at your job currently?*
- *How would you describe the relationships in your workplace? (With colleagues, learners)*
- *What aspects of your job do you love/dislike?*

An announcement was sent to telegram groups of EFL teachers inviting them to take part in an interview on language teacher wellbeing. In total, ten teachers opted-in, and a meeting time was arranged between each participant and one of the researchers for the one-to-one online interview. All the teachers were English language teachers in public high schools in Urmia, except for one who taught English in Zanjan. They were tenured teachers (with a contract of 30 years) and taught in grades 10, 11, and 12 in public high schools. The interviews were all conducted online through Skyroom. From among several available online options (i.e., Zoom, Skype, Adobe Connect, Google Meet, Skyroom), Skyroom was chosen as it did not require installing any application or registration by the users and the participants could quickly join the room through their smartphones or laptops, using the link provided by the researcher. Each interview lasted about an hour, ranging from 34 to 63 minutes (All the interviews were conducted in November 2021). The interviews were recorded through a screen recorder (ZD Soft Screen Recorder) after asking for the participants' permission. The participants were informed that they could express their ideas in English/Persian/Turkish. They were indeed

encouraged to use their mother tongue (Persian/Turkish), so language knowledge would not act as an impediment to conveying the message. However, all the participants preferred to talk in English, and they switched to using other languages occasionally when they felt a need. All parts of the interviews were later transcribed into English for further analysis.

Results

In this study, we adopt a general inductive approach to data analysis. In this approach, core meanings in the transcriptions which are relevant to research objectives are identified. Then themes and categories that emerge from the frequent core concepts are described (Thomas, 2006). To accomplish this, first, the interviews were transcribed, and then the transcriptions were read meticulously several times to identify categories. Later, each category was further refined in terms of sub-topics.

Teacher Wellbeing

In exploring teacher wellbeing, EFL teachers talked about perceived elements that contributed positively to their wellbeing and those that detracted negatively from their wellbeing. The findings are organized accordingly as follows.

Factors contributing to the wellbeing

A) Intrinsic motivation

The positive emotionality of the participants originated from their intrinsic feelings and emotions towards language and teaching. Most teachers in our study felt a passion for language and had inner motivation to continue teaching. Being a language teacher was often their dream as high school students. Almost all had a role model whom they wanted to become. The extract below clarifies the case:

Extract 1: I love languages. Unfortunately, I don't have enough time; if I had, I could learn many other languages. I feel good when I teach English. I can communicate with learners then and help them. It was always my dream to teach English.

B) Student achievement and social impact of teaching

Student achievement was one of the major elements contributing to teacher wellbeing in this study. All the participants mentioned their satisfaction when they witnessed their students' success. They also declared that 'helping others and society' pervades a teacher with positive

emotions. Teachers felt having meaning in their life when they could help learners as they grow, and this way, they were satisfied intrinsically. One, for instance, explained:

Extract 2: Actually, I was born a teacher and liked to help learners and society. I feel elated when I see their success. It fills me with joy. I don't teach them only languages. I am there to help them become a useful person in society and to make future society in correct way.

Factors detracting from wellbeing

A) Financial stressors and heavy workload

Teachers defined themselves as overworked and underpaid guys. They concluded they are not paid the amount they deserved. All the participants believed in the negative influence of payment on their wellbeing. The main obstacle to life-work balance (before and during the pandemic) was found to be the financial problem which led to overwork by a majority of language teachers, and the current national inflation augmented the problem. The extract below clarifies the issue.

Extract 3: There cannot be a balance. Because we need to work day and night to make ends meet. My wife always blames me because I work a lot and do not give her enough time. I am tutoring after school and that doesn't leave me any free time. I hear colleagues have their stores or drive taxis to help them support their families.

B) Technological stressors

Technological stressors during the pandemic seemed to function as a distractor, preventing the deep flow moment in teaching that is an essential element in wellbeing. The participants often experienced moments of flow and deep engagement while teaching in actual classes, which contributed to their wellbeing. However, the experience happened less frequently in the online version. Distractions such as unstable internet connections, power loss, and dying batteries of the required devices (of the teacher or the learners) sometimes interfered with deep engagement. An example of teacher engagement level before and during the pandemic is provided:

Extract 4: Before the pandemic, I was often absorbed in my job and lost track of time. I remember when the manager knocked on the door and asked us to leave the class because I had forgotten our time limit entirely. I always told my family that as soon as I entered the class and shut the door behind me, I forgot everything, even my wife and children. But I do not really remember so many cases like this in online classes. There are often connection distractions and you know, sometimes I feel like a robot and can't connect to my students emotionally.

C) Relationship between colleagues

There seemed to be a change in relationship patterns during the pandemic. Although teachers in public schools seemed to have a good community and circle of several teachers in schools, with supportive management and staff at school before the pandemic, the relationship had reached its minimum during the pandemic due to a lack of fruitful communication.

Extract 5: Before the pandemic, my colleagues were cooperative, and I liked working there, but I haven't talked to them for a long time. The principal in our school was really supportive; even when I had a problem with one of the students, he defended me; I hear this is not the case in private language centers. Money is more important to them. I wish we could experience being together at school again.

D) Student-teacher relationship

The interviews indicated a totally negative relationship between EFL teachers and students in public schools (before and during the pandemic). Teachers could not connect to learners in a positive way because a large percentage of them were demotivated and discourteous and did not meet teachers' expectations. This negatively constructed relationship damaged teacher wellbeing to a large extent. A teacher said:

Extract 6: Students are demotivated. They do not see the need to learn languages; they make me bored. Besides, they are naughty and rude. In in-person classes, most of my energy was wasted on managing them rather than teaching. Even in online courses, we face problems with such learners. I could say only 10 percent of learners are nice to be with. The rest is so cheeky and rude.

E) Social comparisons

Teachers seemed to be involved in a kind of social comparison process. Social comparisons in society seemed to harm teachers' self-esteem. As local/national media always focused on teachers' problems especially highlighting their financial issues, the perspective towards all public school teachers besides EFL teachers had degraded gradually in the last decade, which also influenced teachers adversely. Meanwhile, the hierarchal ranking of teachers in schools augmented the problem and influenced teacher wellbeing adversely.

Extract 7: They always talk about our problems. Everyone, even learners, thinks that we are poor and after school, we have to work a lot. This destroys the respect we expect from learners and their parents and also influences our self-esteem. I am sorry I am a teacher in this country.

F) Stress during the pandemic

Teachers seemed to be significantly stressed out at the beginning of the pandemic, worried about their families' health, and finding it challenging to adapt to online education without any support or assistance from any parties; however, in time, the situation seemed to

be more under control, with people getting vaccinated and teachers getting experienced in online education.

Extract 8: I was perturbed in the beginning; I kept thinking of my family, I could not imagine losing any of my dearest ones. I remember they suddenly asked us to convert to online classes. There was no preparation or assistance from any parties, and you know, everything seemed to depend on us only.

G) Teachers' dislike

Teachers were asked about what they disliked most about their profession. It was found that payment and service, students' discourtesy, inauthentic teaching material, lack of sufficient school facility, a high number of students in one class, and online assessment were the main elements disliked by language teachers in public schools. The extract below is an example of teachers' complaints.

Extract 9: Books are not well written/organized. Sometimes there is too much input; sometimes, there is no single activity to exercise a task. Also, the assessment was much better previously, but with online education, we know students are cheating, and we can't do anything to stop it. These are all demotivating.

H) Lack of a chance to improve

When asked about any chances of progress, nothing seemed to exist in this context. Professional development seemed to be one of the rare opportunities offered by the Ministry of Education, and whenever there was one, it was always fruitless such that no language teacher was willing to participate. Only three out of ten young teachers mentioned participating in online professional development webinars (provided by different universities, not the Ministry of Education) because of their inner motivation to progress. Indeed, the absence of career progression chances seemed to detract from teacher wellbeing. Besides, as there was no such thing as supervision or any motivating factor, teachers did not see the need to take steps for their own improvement.

Extract 10: Come on, they do not even think it is crucial for us to improve as teachers. They just offer some workshops that are not related to our professional field. The Ministry of Education never offers any fruitful workshops. I sometimes look for online webinars from around the world to take part in and learn something. There is nothing like professional development, support, supervision, or anything similar in public schools. They just say "it is what it is".

Strategies to adapt to negativity

A) Problem-directed action

Almost all teachers in this study employed the problem-directed action strategy to tackle challenges. Problem-directed action is a strategy that ‘involves thinking about and acting on the bad event to change the situation and thereby speed adaptation’ (Larsen & Prizmic, 2008, p. 272). For instance, a teacher who had issues with his students tried to ignore their disruptive behavior to avoid possible confrontations. Another teacher who was worried about an unstable internet connection prepared one extra internet connection at home to avoid potential disconnections during his class. Another teacher designed PowerPoint files to supplement dull teaching material and motivate learners.

B) Downward social or self-comparison

To enhance their wellbeing, some people compare themselves to less fortunate others; this strategy is called downward comparison (Wills, 1981). This was also noticed to some extent in our study. A teacher, for instance, compared himself with his counterparts in the private sector. He highlighted that teachers in the private sector have unstable contracts, and their payment is too low. He highlighted feeling fortunate, compared to them. Another teacher talked about his friend who had a better university degree than him and taught at a university but had a much worse situation concerning payment, insurance, and contract. A young teacher compared himself to what he was like when he began teaching and felt satisfied by his improvement during the years

Discussion

The current study aimed at understanding EFL teachers’ wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic in Iranian public schools. Accordingly, elements influencing teacher wellbeing positively and negatively are listed. With negative points outweighing positive contributing elements to wellbeing, the see-saw dips in our context and this imbalance is not a good sign.

Language teachers in this research were intrinsically motivated to teach English. Love of languages and teaching was the primary motive for them while being able to help learners and consequently society fueled their ambition of teaching. Before the pandemic, they seemed to be frequently engaged in their teaching task; however, due to some distractions (internet problems), this engagement occurred less in online classes. The pandemic seemed to have influenced relationship patterns as well. Although there was a positive and constructive relationship between teachers and school staff before the pandemic, the relationship seemed to be faded to some extent during the pandemic, detracting from teacher wellbeing. Indeed, it was

noticed that the interviews were converted into an opportunity for colleagues to open up as a way of compensating for all the support-less months of the pandemic and air their concerns. Learners, as other critical agents in the process of teaching, did not seem to play a positive role in teachers' wellbeing; instead, they augmented teacher anxiety and stress. Although the positive role of the constructive teacher-student relationship in boosting teacher wellbeing and job satisfaction has been proven in many studies (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012; Hofstadler et al., 2021; Talbot & Mercer, 2018; Veldman, Van Tartwijk, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 2013), rude and naughty students in the context of our study not only did create problems in actual classes, but their disruptive conduct was also prevalent in online classes, which had a detrimental influence on teacher wellbeing.

The participants mentioned increased workload during the pandemic, the main reason for which was attempting to make online classes less boring for learners and low payment during national inflation. The case seemed even worse at the beginning of the pandemic and quick conversion to online education, and such unanticipated challenges needed much work. Inundated by work, teachers seemed to be overwhelmed by having all the burden on their shoulders and having no support or training, which had a detrimental effect on their wellbeing, an observation that is in line with Wong et al.'s (2022) findings. Work-life balance, which was not stable before the pandemic due to financial problems, worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic by the new expenses and high inflation rate. Although imbalance between work and life was also found by Wong et al. (2022), teachers in their study seemed to suffer from perfectionism, whereas in our study, this imbalance was mainly due to the current economic situation in the country which was devastating for language teachers' wellbeing. This was also the main disliked element in teaching expressed by our participants. The low salary of teachers was also reported by Song et al. (2020) in the Chinese context, which led to a significant influence on teachers' happiness and general life satisfaction, consequently influencing the cognitive dimension of teacher wellbeing negatively. Juggling precarious work-life balance alone, teachers seemed to be strangers to professional development courses. Whereas in these times of difficulty, professional development courses/ activities could equip public school teachers with the required coping strategies to deal with their stress and problems during the pandemic and bring back teachers together to support each other, with its proven positive influence on teacher wellbeing (Barbieri et al., 2019), no such thing exists in the public schools of Iran.

The findings of our study seem to be different from that of Kwee (2021), who noticed teachers' positive wellbeing in online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants in his study believed that working from home provided them with life-work balance and more flexibility in teaching hours. Unlike previous years, they did not get exhausted due to management issues in actual classes, and all these factors motivated them to continue teaching online. However, this was not the case in our study, and teachers had to work more to manage and engage their demotivated learners and still had to deal with their disruptive behavior. The only impediment in Kwee's (2021) study was assessing learners as they could not be reassured about learners' integrity and honesty through online tests, and plagiarism could be a severe issue, which was the case in our study as well.

Generally speaking, low salary (Song et al., 2020), long working hours (Court, 1999; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011), excessive workload (Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua, & Stough, 2001), and the high number of students in a class (Kinman, 2001), unhealthy teacher-learner relationship influence teachers' work-life balance and seem to be the main factors influencing teacher wellbeing, documented in our study as well. These problems seem to be prevalent in different contexts and during different periods, as well as in the context of our study. However, issues such as job insecurity or unstable job contracts (Tytherleigh, Webb, Cooper, & Ricketts, 2005) do not seem to exist in our context (public schools in Iran) as teachers had tenured jobs. Moreover, degradation of teachers (Mercer, 2020), lack of sufficient school facilities, and lack of high-quality teaching material were found to also threaten language teachers' wellbeing. As such Barbieri et al. (2019) and Hapsari (2020) also highlighted the importance of having access to human and physical resources at the workplace in teacher wellbeing.

Adding all the mentioned problems to the stress and health concerns that teachers suffer during the pandemic leads to teacher burnout and lower wellbeing levels. This is also similar to the findings of Kotowski, Davis, and Barratt (2022) during the COVID-19 pandemic. In their study, teachers' stress and burnout level had significantly increased during the pandemic, and teachers were less able to handle stress and work-life balance during the pandemic. Likewise, the analysis of narratives of five university academics by Creely, Laletas, Fernandes, Subban, and Southcott (2021) during the pandemic indicated pressures of academic workload leading to emotional distress and fatigue. Work-life imbalance, being isolated from the groups of professionals, restricted by the lockdown and the growing uncertainty, created urgency for improving individual coping strategies.

Teachers with high wellbeing levels can influence student wellbeing (Harding et al., 2019) and achievement positively (Briner & Dewberry, 2007), enhance student progress (Proietti Ergün & Dewaele, 2021), improve their own healthy and prosperous functioning at work (Arslan, 2018), and advance in-class teaching (Barber & Mourshed, 2007); furthermore, high wellbeing level is a strong predictor of foreign language teaching enjoyment (Proietti Ergün & Dewaele, 2021) and is good for collective organizational health and wellbeing (Page & Vella-Brodrick, 2009). Strategies such as problem-directed actions and downward comparisons were employed by teachers in this study to improve their wellbeing. However, as mentioned, all the wellbeing detrimental elements are not under the direct control of teachers. To contribute to teachers' wellbeing, accordingly, urgent steps need to be taken to solve the teachers' financial issues that lead to increased workload since there is a proven significant relationship between income satisfaction and teacher wellbeing (Song et al., 2020). Moreover, it is up to the media to gradually change the view toward teachers' lives. Problems such as the expected value of and respect for teachers in the society need to be identified and resolved. Furthermore, the quality of foreign language education, including the quality of teaching material and school facilities for effective teaching of language skills, such as projectors/TVs, needs severe rethinking. Moreover, the importance given to ELT by the Ministry of Education and consequently families and parents should be revised. Next, there is a severe need for coping mechanisms that can assist teachers in the face of difficulties. For instance, art-based reflective practices can be used to help teachers express their emotions and feelings in their complex working situations, and such techniques could help improve their wellbeing by raising awareness of contextual and personal resources (McKay & Barton, 2018). Besides, professional procedures can be taken to improve language teachers' wellbeing, as by Zadok-Gurman et al. (2021), whose Inquiry-Based Stress Reduction (IBSR) intervention during the COVID-19 pandemic improved teachers' wellbeing and helped them flourish in the stressful days of the lockdown.

As the student-teacher relationship influences teacher wellbeing (Collie et al., 2012; Hofstadler et al., 2021; Veldman et al., 2013) and we did not find a productive relationship between the two parties, profound changes are also needed in the teacher-learner connection, the solution to which is in the hands of parents and authorities who need to respect teachers and their status more in the society and who need to trust teachers and support them in the way they are guiding their children in order to rehabilitate the unhealthy relationship pattern between teachers and students. School management and stakeholders are also responsible for

strengthening collegiality which is on the way to fading and helping teachers out as they survive independently. Teachers, as the lifeblood of any educational system, must receive the value and respect they deserve, and any hierarchal ranking and comparisons in the context of schools should be revisited (Mercer, 2020).

Considering the limitations of the current research, especially regarding the limited number of participants, it is recommended to replicate the study with a vast number of participants and also in different contexts as various contextual factors can influence teacher wellbeing. Professionals teaching subjects other than languages can also be the core of future studies as the status of the teaching content in the society and its importance in learners' life can create a different educational atmosphere. We have been able to present only salient factors of teacher wellbeing in this study; more details can be probed in longitudinal studies to focus on the change that happens during one's professional path. It is also suggested to consider wellbeing in experienced vs. inexperienced teachers as years of experience can influence one's wellbeing levels. It is hoped that by focusing on teacher wellbeing and subsequently helping them flourish, we can witness the improvement of high-quality education and, therefore, a brighter future for the inhabitants of the world.

Conclusion

This study investigated the wellbeing of EFL teachers in public schools in Iran during the COVID-19 pandemic. It revealed that the current conditions of language teachers were not contributing to their wellbeing. Rather, the economic conditions and inflation led to teacher overwork and affected life-work balance that is detrimental to their wellbeing. Besides, unproductive teacher-student relationships and also problems with technology frustrated the teachers. As high teacher wellbeing can influence learner achievement, learner progress, learner wellbeing, teacher job satisfaction, and collective healthy wellbeing in the workplace, teacher wellbeing should be on the agenda of all stakeholders. That is, steps should be taken to stop high teacher attrition and burnout rate, which are the results of low wellbeing levels. Besides the establishment of broader TEFL unions worldwide, a local community of teachers in cities or nationwide can be formed in developing countries to voice teachers' concerns and support them emotionally and academically to minimize the high turnover rate of language teachers in the years to come.

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