EFL Teachers' Conceptualizations of Well-Being: Enhancers and Threats Across Educational Contexts in Iran

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Article info	Abstract
	This qualitative study utilized a grounded theory approach to examine how Iranian English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers perceive and navigate their well-being within the diverse contexts of high schools, language institutes, and universities. The primary objective was to identify the factors that impact and challenge their well-being. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 31 EFL teachers across these contexts, and data analysis was carried out iteratively until saturation was reached. The results highlighted that EFL teachers' well-being is a complex, multifaceted construct influenced by both personal and contextual factors. While certain factors were common across the contexts, their manifestations varied depending on the unique demands of each teaching environment. Additionally, specific contextual factors were found to either enhance or hinder well-being. The study suggests that improving EFL teachers' well-being requires addressing threats and amplifying positive factors, with pedagogical adjustments tailored to each context. Future research could benefit from combining various data collection methods, such as observations, and examining EFL teachers' well-being across different career stages to explore how perceptions evolve over time. ***Keywords***: Enhancers of well-being, teacher's well-being, teachers' emotional lives, threats to well-being

1. Introduction

Teaching, including teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) is "a profession in crisis" (Hiver & Dornyei, 2017, p. 2). As Maslach and Leiter (1999, p. 303) state, "the most valuable and costly part of an education system are the people who teach". Evidently, these valuable stakeholders in this crisis-afflicted profession need focused attention. While the specific sources of teacher stress may differ internationally (Borg, 2006), a substantial body of research highlights numerous factors that negatively impact EFL teacher well-being (henceforth TWB) across contexts. These well-documented stressors include, but are not limited to, unreasonable workloads, excessive administrative duties, unproductive school cultures, strained relationships with colleagues, autocratic leadership, student discipline challenges, inadequate resources, and the pressures associated with standardized testing and performance evaluations (Borg, 2006; Cosgrove, 2001; Gkonou & Miller, 2017; Horwitz, 1996; Mercer & Gregersen, 2020; Mercer et al., 2016; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016; Wieczorek, 2016). Language educators particularly face the added stress of emotional labor, language anxiety, intercultural interactions, and demanding language teaching methodologies (Borg, 2006; Gkonou & Miller, 2017; Horwitz, 1996; King & Ng, 2018). King and Ng (2018) also argue that due to the interwoven nature of language and the self, teaching a language may involve more extensive emotional labor compared with teaching other disciplines.

A good number of studies indicate a causal connection between TWB, student performance, and quality of teaching (e.g., Bajorek et al., 2014; Caprara et al., 2006; Day & Gu, 2009; Klusmann et al., 2008). From the psychological perspective, too, TWB is correlated with student well-being (Harding et al. 2019). These findings suggest that fostering a positive environment for teachers not only enhances student outcomes but also promotes a symbiotic relationship where TWB positively influences student well-being (Harding et al. 2019).

A growing body of research suggests that TWB is intertwined with teachers' performativity in terms of teaching, building positive relationships with various individuals, teaching creatively, having fewer discipline problems and positively contributing to student learning (Bajorek et al., 2014; Gregersen et al., 2020; Kern et al., 2014). Given that Mercer (2021) "urges" the EFL community to "make well-being a priority for research and practice" (p. 14), Sulis et al. (2023, p. 3) further contend that TWB research is "gaining momentum" and research on language TWB "has only recently come more notably into focus". Thus, there remains a pressing need for further inquiry into the conceptualizations, challenges, and enhancers of TWB, especially in EFL instruction. TWB becomes even more vital in the EFL context, where the English language might be regarded as a means of career success (Yuan, 2018)

and non-native English-speaking teachers are required to work under demanding and competitive conditions to improve students' performance.

Moreover, Hiver (2015) emphasizes the importance of investigating teacher resilience mechanisms, proposing that understanding how teachers develop resistance to stress and emotional overload can help achieve optimal teaching effectiveness. Furthermore, the conceptualization of language TWB itself seems to be an issue worthy of attention and further exploration. In addition to identifying the threats to EFL TWB, the enhancers to EFL TWB need to be identified. There are a multitude of activities that can be done to enhance EFL TWB on personal and professional levels (Gregersen et al., 2020).

Despite ongoing efforts by scholars across disciplines to establish a more coherent framework for well-being (Liu et al., 2017; MacIntyre, 2016; Mercer, 2015; Mercer, 2020), the context-specific nature of well-being, particularly for language teachers (Mercer, 2020), necessitates further research into Iranian EFL teachers' conceptualization of this construct. In light of the unique challenges faced by Iranian EFL teachers, exploring the nuanced dynamics of well-being within this demographic becomes imperative for developing tailored support systems and interventions to enhance their overall professional satisfaction and effectiveness. Although some studies have been conducted in Iran (Ebadijalal & Moradkhani, 2022; Greenier et al., 2021; Pourbahram & Sadeghi, 2022), the context-specific aspects of well-being such as its conceptualizations, enhancers, and threats, need further exploration. Hence, this study seeks to investigate EFL TWB in the context of Iran and its likely variations in the contexts of high schools, institutes, and universities, as perceived by EFL teachers working in the aforementioned micro-contexts. Thus, this study aims to qualitatively address these research questions:

1. How do EFL teachers in different educational contexts (i.e., language institutes, universities, and high schools) conceptualize language TWB?

2. How do EFL teachers in different educational contexts (i.e., language institutes, universities, and high schools) make sense of the enhancers of their well-being as language teachers?

3. How do EFL teachers in different educational contexts (i.e., language institutes, universities, and high schools) make sense of the threats to their well-being as language teachers?

2. Literature Review
2.1. Well-being: Definitions and Conceptualizations

Well-being is a complex concept with multiple layers of meaning intricately linked to various theories and practices (Du Plessis & McDonagh, 2021). The conceptualization of well-being dates back to the Aristotelian era

and the teleological notion that human life and well-being revolve around the fulfillment of nature, with individuals driven by an internal dynamic of optimal functioning (Nafstad, 2015). The hedonic perspective, emphasizes pleasure as the quintessential component of a fulfilling life (Compton & Hoffman, 2013), highlighting positive emotions, satisfaction and pleasure in the immediate experience of well-being (Disabato et al., 2016). Conversely, eudaimonia concentrates on actualizing one's potential and prioritizing the comprehensive development of skills, talents, or personality traits (Compton & Hoffman, 2013), emphasizing a life well lived with a focus on social context and community contribution (Disabato et al., 2016).

While hedonic perspectives are worthwhile, some scholars critique the dichotomy between positive and negative emotions when characterizing individuals' well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Thus, self-determination Theory, proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985, as cited in Deci et al. (1991) highlights psychological growth and core emotional needs in driving self-motivation and personality integration. Central to this theory are the three fundamental needs of competence (mastery and effective environmental interaction), relatedness (supportive relationships) and autonomy (freedom to make significant life choices).

In a more comprehensive conceptualization, Seligman (2011) introduces the PERMA model to articulate well-being through five components: *positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning*, and *achievement*. *Positive emotions* cover feelings of pleasure and comfort, but Seligman notes that they alone do not define fulfillment. *Engagement* involves deep immersion in activities, echoing Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of flow. *Relationships* are essential for adding meaning and purpose to life, emphasizing the importance of human connections. The element of *meaning* entails finding a purpose beyond oneself, while *achievement* focuses on the intrinsic rewards of mastering skills and attaining goals, highlighting the significance of personal accomplishment beyond material success.

A review of the existing literature highlights various factors compromising both general teacher and EFL TWB, emphasizing the blurred lines between personal and professional lives among EFL teachers (Day & Gu, 2013). Mercer (2020) further underscores the importance of personal characteristics as key mediators in EFL teachers' professional well-being. Furthermore, excessive workload, demanding administrative responsibilities, unproductive working atmosphere, malfunctioning relationships with colleagues, autocratic managerial styles, discipline problems, and evaluation pressures (Gregersen et al., 2020), chronic or personal life event stressors, personal health and context (Gregersen et al., 2020) can exacerbate these challenges.

Particularly, volatile employment arrangements, lack of collective union representation, and the low prestige associated with teaching in the private sector negatively impact EFL TWB (Mercer, 2020; Walsh, 2019; Wieczorek, 2016). Mercer (2020) also identifies administrative problems like inadequate salary, poor job security, insufficient resources, understaffing, and excessive working hours as significant concerns affecting their well-being.

Proactively managing potential threats can boost EFL TWB. Key enhancers include fostering positive relationships with colleagues (Gregersen et al., 2020; Mercer, 2020; Mairitsch et al., 2021) and feeling a sense of autonomy (Gregersen et al., 2021). Peterson (2006) posits that both individual and institutional factors contribute to well-being, particularly when institutional characteristics fulfill member needs. Lastly, Mercer and Gregersen (2020) highlight the significance of focusing on motivation to enhance TWB.

Various lines of enquiry have been adopted to put the above theorizations into practice. For instance, Gregersen et al. (2020) investigated language teachers' stressors and positive influences, examining their impact on professional and personal well-being. Their study, using both qualitative and quantitative data, highlighted the interconnectedness of stress, well-being, and health across work and home contexts. They emphasized the significant role of the professional environment in shaping stress factors and enhancers for teachers, advocating for prioritizing TWB within the educational system.

The Iranian EFL context has received attention with respect to the study of teacher psychology (Soozandehfar, 2021), teacher burnout (Bagheri et al. 2024), and job motivation (Ashkani et al., 2024) to mention only a few studies.

Greenier et al. (2021) explored the impact of emotion regulation and psychological well-being on work engagement among EFL teachers in both British and Iranian contexts. Through a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach and multi-group structural equation modeling they found that emotion regulation and individual well-being significantly influenced work engagement levels in both groups Personal well-being emerged as a stronger predictor of work engagement, with the relationship being more robust for British teachers compared to Iranian teachers.

Finally, Ebadijalal and Moradkhani (2022) as well, employed activity theory to examine EFL TWB. Utilizing semi-structured interviews and narrative analysis with 15 in-service teachers, their study revealed several factors that significantly impact EFL educators' well-being, including interactions with learners, colleagues, and institutional authorities, as well as institutional regulations, workload, and the status of EFL teachers.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

Adopting an interpretive qualitative approach, the study employed constructivist grounded theory (GT) to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of well-being across the three contexts: language institutes, high schools, and universities; as well as the threats and enhancers of TWB in these settings. This approach enables the researchers to explore the experiences of the participants, while recognizing their intrinsic "entanglement", as described by DeMarrais and Tisdale (2002). Constructivist GT represents a flexible, methodical, and comparative approach for developing theories from data, facilitating the examination of social and socio-psychological phenomena (Charmaz et al., 2018). GT's primary aim is to generate a theoretical construct that provides a nuanced interpretation of key phenomena within the study (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020).

3.2. Context and the Participants

The education system in Iran is bifurcated into primary and secondary levels, with English instruction compulsory at the secondary phase (i.e., high school) where teaching often emphasizes **grammar and test preparation** for national examinations. Additionally, a robust network of private and semi-governmental language institutes offers diverse, often **more communicative-based courses** language courses to students across various ages and backgrounds, further enhancing the language education available in high schools. Moreover, Iranian universities provide both general and specialized language courses within their undergraduate curricula typically focusing on **academic reading and writing**. The participant teachers in this study come from these three contexts for cross-contextual comparative reasons.

In order to collect the required data, 31 in-service EFL teachers participated in the study. As Meyer and Mayrhofer (2022) elaborate, while the first sampling step in GT might be purposeful and criterion-based, subsequent steps are guided by the theory in progress, hence theoretical sampling (Charmaz et al., 2018). The criterion against which the participants were selected was having at least 5 years of teaching experience in their respective contexts, as it was believed by the researchers that they would have adopted a comprehensive understanding of their teaching context during this time span. Data collection started with interviewing one teacher from each teaching context and continued until theoretical saturation of data was achieved (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013), meaning no new information emerged from further data collection and analysis.

The participants in this study were aged between 26 and 52 years. Of the 31 teachers, 15 held PhDs or were PhD candidates, 14 held or were

pursuing Master's degrees, and two possessed Bachelor's degrees. Although the participants' fields of study were not a criterion for selection, the majority specialized in Applied Linguistics (N = 25), while the remainder focused on English language translation and English literature. Their teaching experience ranged from 8 to 25 years. Among the participants, 12 taught at private language institutes, 7 at high schools, and 12 at universities. Geographically, 20 participants were based in Tehran, Iran, while the remaining teachers were located in other regions: 5 high school teachers from Isfahan, Shiraz, and Yazd, and 6 language institute teachers from Tabriz, Lahijan, Yazd, and Kish.

3.3. Data Collection

The qualitative data required for this study were gathered via semi-structured exploratory interviews (Oppenheim, 1992) informed by a thorough literature review on theoretical aspects of well-being and EFL TWB, incorporating elements like emotion regulation, meaning and teaching philosophy, relationships, achievements, satisfaction, motivation, experience, expertise and autonomy. Unlike traditional and Glaserian methods, constructivist GT involves an initial literature review to aid the researcher to position oneself within the research context (Thornberg & Dunne, 2019), leading to identifying existing research gaps, refining research problems, and establishing a solid rationale for the study, crucial for research and ethics applications (Thornberg & Dunne, 2019).

The semi-structured interview questions (N = 10) were examined for content and face validity by three experienced Ph.D. holders in applied linguistics specialized in EFL teacher education and three EFL teachers with 5 years of experience. Following expert feedback, minor adjustments were made to the questions. The semi-structured nature of the interview questions allowed the interviewer to insert short face-feet, informational, reflective, feeling, and ending questions as suggested by Charmaz (1990). Since framing, pacing, and managing the interview questions can affect the type and quality of the obtained data, the interviewer/researcher tried to conduct each interview in the form of a "directed conversation" (Lofland & Lofland, 1983 as cited in Charmaz, 1990, p. 1167). This approach allowed for a structured yet flexible discussion, enabling the participants to freely express their thoughts and experiences while guiding the conversation towards the research objectives.

Due to the COVID-19 lockdown during the data collection period, interviews were conducted either online or via phone, based on the participants' preferences, and were conducted in English. Each interview lasted an average of 50-60 minutes. The interviewees were oriented to the interview's topic, purpose, and procedure and their consent was secured before audio-recording. The interview audio files, which totaled 1,705 minutes in length, were

transcribed verbatim by one of the researchers, resulting in a dataset of 255,493 words.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data analysis began with a preliminary sample of three interview transcripts, one from each teaching context, with data collection and analysis conducted concurrently. The analysis followed initial and focused coding stages (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg & Keane, 2022). During initial coding, the dataset was closely examined line by line, assigning gerunds as codes to capture key actions or processes (Charmaz et al., 2018). Themes such as autonomy, inclusion in decision-making, sense of belonging, and being valued emerged from the university instructors' data. In the focused coding stage, categories were refined and merged, with "Recognition and validation" identified as a key enhancer of EFL TWB in the university context.

Abductive reasoning (Thornberg & Keane, 2022) was employed to integrate unexpected findings, such as the nuanced effects of digital technology integration, which posed threats to well-being due to adaptation stress and blurred work-life boundaries. The constant comparative method (Thornberg & Keane, 2022) facilitated an iterative process, refining and grouping the codes, such as integrating digital technologies under "intensive occupational demands" as a threat to well-being. Through this process, a comprehensive, data-grounded portrayal of EFL TWB, including its threats and enhancers, was constructed.

To ensure the dependability of the analysis, disagreements were resolved through discussions among the researchers and an external PhD expert in applied linguistics with a focus on teacher education. When necessary, the interviewees were contacted for additional clarification.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

As mentioned previously, this exploratory study examined EFL teachers' perceptions of TWB, including its manifestations, threats, and enhancers across institutes, high schools, and universities. The results are laid out by category: well-being, enhancers, and threats, with teaching contexts (UT for university, IT for institute, ST for high school) as sub-categories for clarity.

4.1.1. Perceptions and Manifestations of EFL Teachers' Well-Being

Although all the interviewees taking part in this study perceived EFL TWB as having *occupational contentment* and *financial welfare*, instances of these two components varied in accordance with the teaching context of the participants.

This contentment is translated into *being happy with where you are, taking part in professional development courses, and having the autonomy to*

put into practice what one has learned in the TTCs as ST11, a high school teacher puts it. While for ST13, a part of this satisfaction is represented in how superior or inferior the teacher considers oneself in relation to teachers of other contexts in particular and other professionals in general, for UT2, occupational contentment is mainly associated with financial status and income.

Close analysis of the dataset revealed that similar, overlapping manifestations of well-being held true for the participants across the three teaching contexts. Hence, they stated that when teachers enjoy a sense of well-being, they possess *elevated motivational engagement, goal-driven disposition*, and *emotional equilibrium*. In addition, they tend to have *heightened resilience* in the face of challenges, yet accepting what they cannot control. Such teachers are *proficient in relational dynamics*. They are also *committed to professional growth.*

The following lines, extracted and summarized from the dataset, attempt to provide evidence on these components. The first theme emerging from the analysis was *elevated motivational engagement*. Emphasizing motivation and caring about professional development, IT1 said:

> *When EFL teachers have a sense of well-being, they're highly motivated, show strong commitment to teaching and ensure that learners grasp concepts thoroughly before moving on.*

On having a *goal-driven disposition*, ST13 said:

> *Teachers with well-being set and pursue goals, even if they're small, like maintaining a smile while giving feedback. They believe this goal-oriented approach can bring positive change.*

Further underscoring the *goal-driven disposition,* UT20 said: *With well-being, you're intensely goal-oriented and wholeheartedly pursue objectives, no matter what the background noise is.*

In terms of having *emotional equilibrium*, according to IT4, *a teacher with good well-being stays calm and doesn't act impulsively, whether it's being overly excited or getting upset. They're not like a big emotional explosion waiting to happen!*

On *heightened resilience*, IT3 said:

> *Teaching can be a rollercoaster, especially with kids and young adults. A teacher with good well-being can handle comments and criticism without falling apart. They bounce back strong!*

Participants in the study pointed to the significance of *relational dynamics and establishing rapport.* Hence, ST12 said:

> *An emotionally healthy teacher has good connections with everyone: students, colleagues, parents, and even society. And having good relationships with others starts with having a good relationship with yourself.*

Also, UT18 purported that TWB and *proficiency in relational dynamics* can be shown when *"teachers stay in touch with colleagues and students, even beyond the classroom, sometimes through social media."*

Finally, highlighting the significance of *commitment to professional growth,* IT2 said: *even if the institute doesn't have any plans for teachers ' training, the teacher himself will go for it.*

Figure 1encapsulates the various aspects of EFL TWB as identified by participants from the specified teaching contexts. It reveals that, across all three contexts, EFL teachers associate emotional equilibrium with their well-being. However, there was no consensus on all the themes among the representatives from these contexts.

Figure 1
Manifestations of EFL TWB as Identified by Participants From the Specified Teaching Contexts
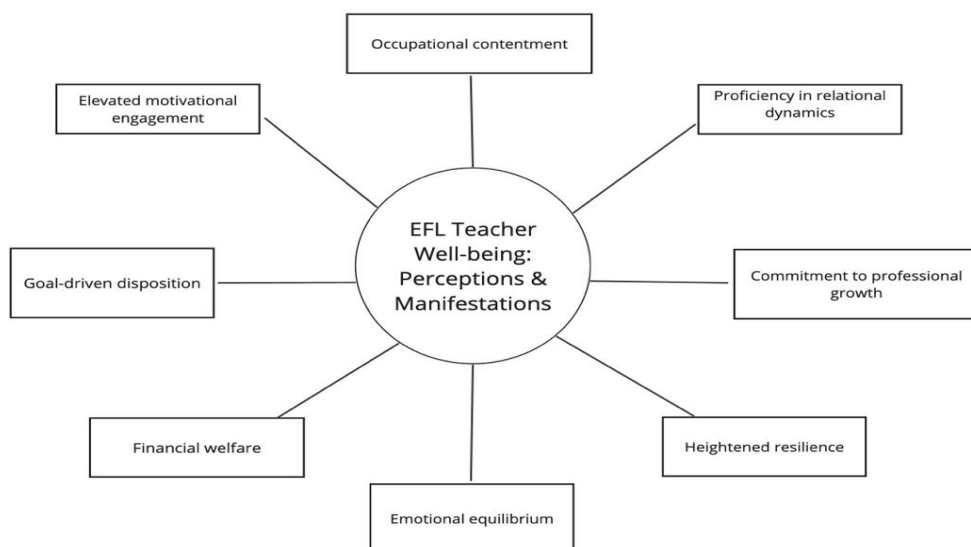
4.1.2. Enhancers of EFL Teacher Well-Being

All the 12 institute teachers participating in the interview phase, pointed to the significance of *introspection* as an important self-directed factor contributing to EFL TWB. Additionally, analysis of the dataset revealed that EFL teachers teaching at institutes consider *recognition and validation, healthy rapport,* and *tailored pedagogical alignment* as enhancers of their well-being.

Recognition and validation can have different interpretations for different EFL teachers. For instance, IT1 believed that receiving positive comments feels like being "seen" and influences her well-being.

The participants also unanimously pointed to the significance of *healthy rapport* with their past and present students, colleagues, managers, supervisors, community members and even their students' parents. Establishing this relationship is so critical that even if something is not working well, they should *"talk and try to solve the problem"*, IT3 said.

IT8 also said: *I really focus on getting to know my students well. I try to learn about their favorite artists, colors, and what they like, and I use that information to customize my teaching as much as possible.*

On *tailored pedagogical alignment*, IT10 believed that *when teachers teach a level or age group they enjoy, they feel happier particularly enjoy teaching children and young adults, but teaching adult classes is draining.*

Analysis of the data gleaned from the 7 high school teachers pointed to three main factors contributing to their sense of well-being. These enhancers are *professional esteem enhancement*, *recognition and validation*, and *quality enhancement initiatives.*

On the importance of *professional esteem enhancement*, ST11 said: *Media can significantly influence perceptions. Unfortunately, many portray teachers as financially struggling individuals needing extra jobs to get by.*

With regard to creating *recognition and validation*, ST14 purported: *Steps need to be taken to ensure teachers feel appreciated for their valuable work. Besides raising their pay, offering teachers perks like access to recreational centers, discounts, and travel opportunities can make a difference. It's not just about the benefits themselves, but about recognizing teachers' worth and contribution.*

Explaining *quality enhancement initiatives,* ST17 believed policymakers can enhance high school teachers' sense of well-being by *reducing the number of students in the class, having more realistic expectations from teachers, and improving workplace equipment such as the ventilation, especially in smaller cities."* He furthered: *"although this may seem irrelevant, it really matters.*

The researchers' in-depth familiarity with Iran's educational landscape validates the existence of the aforementioned issues, though not uniformly present across all high schools, particularly within non-governmental ones. Nonetheless, there is a consensus that the prevalence of these issues in certain educational settings should not be overlooked.

The university instructors (both tenured and non-tenured) who took part in the study referred to *recognition and validation and prospects for professional development* as two essential factors enhancing their sense of well-being.

On *recognition and validation*, UT18 said: *Improving TWB means more than just giving them higher pay or financial help. By letting teachers have a say in decisions, and keeping communication open,*

authorities can show that they recognize the important work teachers do. These actions send a clear message to teachers: We appreciate and respect your work.

Although UT22 thinks being valued can contribute to teachers' sense of well-being, he highlights that even being accepted and not necessarily appreciated can be *"good enough"*.

On the significant contribution of *prospects for professional development*, UT21 said: *I try to participate in conferences or online webinars. They help me remember my goals and why I began this journey.* UT23 also emphasizes that beyond self-driven professional development, universities should support mentoring groups and other forms of professional growth.

Figure 2 summarizes the enhancers of the EFL TWB across the three teaching contexts. As can be seen, teachers in all contexts believe being valued and appreciated can uplift their TWB, though the interpretation may vary by context. Additionally, they identify a number of context-specific factors that enhance their TWB.

Figure 2

Enhancers of EFL TWB as Identified by Participants From the Specified Teaching Contexts
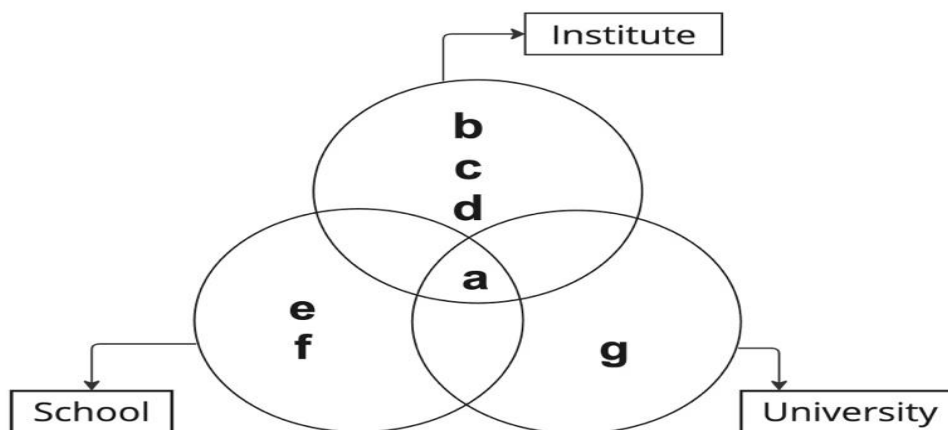
Note: In the figure above, letters a-d represent recognition and validation, healthy rapport, tailored pedagogical alignment, and introspection, respectively. Additionally, letters e and f represent professional esteem enhancement and quality enhancement initiatives. Finally, letter g represents prospects for professional development.

4.1.3. Threats to EFL Teachers' Well-Being

The participant teachers in the institute context referred to *lack of recognition and validation, intensive occupational demands* and *unfair organizational practices* as major factors threatening their well-being as institute teachers.

To explain this *lack of recognition and validation* in the institute, IT5 remembered a memory: *Our new managers don't notice all the work we do, unlike our old manager who used to thank us or send stickers in our WhatsApp group. Those little gestures meant a lot, especially when we were swamped with tasks.*

On *intensive occupational demands*, IT7 said that *getting a substitute teacher felt like a mission impossible. At times, I felt frustrated with the demands of being a teacher, especially when I couldn't take a much-needed day off.*

An instance of *unfair organizational practices* experienced as *having double standards* for T6 was when she had to fit herself in the political and religious requirements of her workplace: *Complying with the rules of the country is one thing, but imposing personal beliefs on others is another. It's unfair for my teaching performance to be judged based on criteria that align with my religious beliefs.*

The analysis of the data gathered from EFL teachers in the context of high schools indicated that the *social stigma attached to school English teaching* is the major factor threatening their sense of well-being. These teachers pointed to the additional macro-threats: *pedagogical mismatch, uninspiring learning resources*, and *unrealistic professional expectations of teachers.*

As emerged from the data analysis, the social stigma attached to school English teaching as a low-status and poorly-paid job is not desirable. Therefore, ST12 complained of this *distorted social image"* and said: *"Simply stating that you teach English at a school might lead others to perceive you as outdated, regardless of your young age or PhD. in Applied Linguistics.*

The *pedagogical mismatch* also negatively influenced EFL teachers' well-being in the aforementioned contexts. T11, an angry teacher with the methodology said: *…they [the officials] send me to a 45-person class with a textbook written based on CLT [Communicative Language Teaching] and ask me to teach speaking in a class which doesn't even have a CD player! Am I a magician or something?* Furthermore, on the negative impact of uninspiring learning resources, ST12 said: *I love teaching, but I literally hate the coursebooks. Many students don't like them either.* ST13 also said: *I believe I'm an effective teacher, but when I have to teach from these books, I feel inadequate and incompetent. I know many of my colleagues feel the same.*

Finally, *unrealistic professional expectations of teachers* contribute to EFL teachers' sense of well-being in the context of high schools, hence, ST13 said: *Many EFL teachers, including myself, aren't trained to handle teenage-related issues, yet both parents and school officials expect us to be. Ideally, I'm an expert in language, not a teen psychologist. This gap often leaves me feeling very bad about myself as a teacher.*

The university teachers who participated in the interviews pointed to a number of factors threatening their sense of well-being. These threats include *facility inadequacies, intensive occupational demands, unfair organizational practices,* and *lack of recognition and validation.*

Facility inadequacies mentioned by most participants had two sub-components: lack of personal and professional facilities. UT19 enumerated lack of professional facilities, such as overhead projectors and functional LCDs lack of a cafeteria or sitting area for teachers during their break times, and of course having overpopulated classes and small-sized areas as minor threats which leave lasting effects on their sense of well-being.

Overdue payments also emerged as a pivotal threat. The *intensive occupational demands* UT20 refers to results from the insufficient payment. *"If university teachers received an appropriate salary on time, they didn't have to moonlight as translators or text editors."*

As depicted in the data analysis, the presence of *unfair organizational practices* can become a threat. So, UT22 mentioned:

... publishing a paper in some fields may not be as demanding or time-consuming. In our field, you may spend two years editing a handbook which is a worthwhile contribution but as long as you haven't published a certain number of papers in a year, you wouldn't be promoted. Promotion protocols had better be customized for similar disciplines.

UT29 raised another concern in saying that *"When university instructors are under pressure to publish a certain number of papers each year for promotion, they may end up choosing research projects that are more about feasibility than passion."*

Although teaching at university is considered a highly prestigious profession, the university instructors do not believe they are receiving the respect and value they deserve. UT24 who is a seasoned university instructor also pointed out *When teachers aren't recognized with fair rewards and opportunities for growth, they may feel frustrated, leading to premature burnout.* UT20 too said: *As a non-tenured university instructor for over a decade, I've touched many lives, yet I also feel a lack of tangible outcomes from my work.*

Figure 3 illustrates the threats to EFL TWB in different teaching contexts, showing that teachers in institutes and universities share common concerns affecting their well-being. It also highlights unique, context-specific

challenges in each setting, emphasizing the complexity of addressing TWB across diverse educational environments.

Figure 3

Threats to EFL TWB as Identified by Participants From the Specified Teaching Contexts
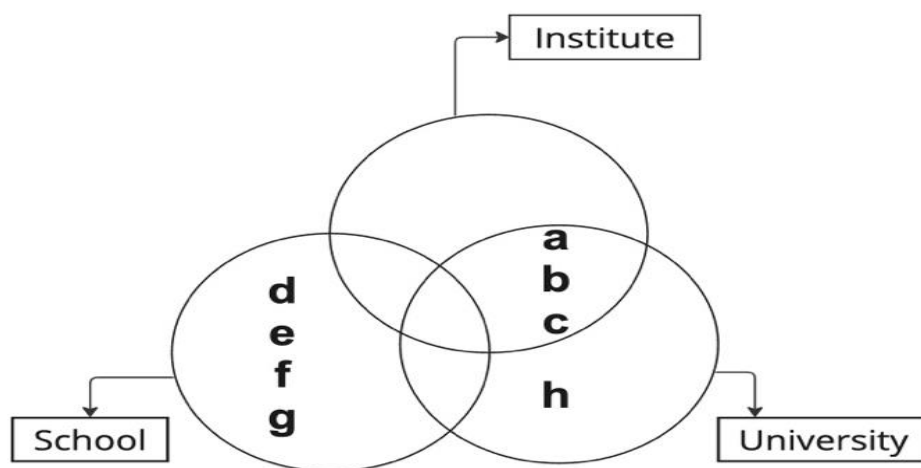
Note: In the figure above, letters a-c represent lack of recognition and validation, intensive occupational demands, and unfair organizational practices respectively. Additionally, letters d-g represent social stigma attached to high school English teaching, pedagogical mismatch, uninspiring learning resources, and unrealistic professional expectations of teachers respectively. Finally, letter h represents facility inadequacies.

4.2. Discussion

The present study sought to explore TWB as experienced by Iranian EFL teachers who teach in the three contexts of high school, institute, and university. As evidenced in interview excerpts from the participating teachers, various interactions and teachers' adeptness in establishing healthy rapport can significantly influence their well-being. These interactions encompassed their relationships with students, workplace officials, colleagues, and even society as a whole. This finding aligns with previous research by Jin et al. (2020) and Gregersen et al. (2020), where the importance of these interactions for TWB was highlighted. Mairitsch et al. (2021) also emphasized the significance of feeling valued and supported for TWB, further supporting recognition and validation as contributor to EFL TWB.

As argued by Ainsworth and Oldfield (2019) and Day and Gu (2009), unfair job demands and excessive workload can negatively impact EFL

teachers' well-being. The findings of this study demonstrate that intensive occupational demands, particularly in institutes and universities, can adversely affect TWB. Similarly, Gregersen et al. (2020) have highlighted unreasonable workloads and unproductive workplace conditions as threats to TWB. Furthermore, MacIntyre et al. (2019, p. 35) criticized the workload and financial challenges inherent in teaching, urging the institutions and professions to adopt a "wise" approach to address TWB, a recommendation also relevant to the Iranian context.

The interview excerpts clearly highlight intensive occupational demands as a significant threat to the participants' well-being, manifesting diversely across different teaching contexts. One context-specific threat identified by high school teachers was pedagogical mismatch where they face challenges in teaching the prescribed textbooks in typically **overcrowded classrooms**, compounded by **limitations in time and resources**. As Gkonou et al. (2020) contend, the emotionally-draining nature of EFL teaching methodologies can threaten EFL TWB.

While Mercer (2020), Walsh (2019), and Wieczorek (2016) emphasize the influence of context on TWB and perceive private sector employment as low-prestige and threatening to TWB, the social dimension of EFL teaching in Iran presents a contrasting perspective. The data analysis revealed that high school teachers identify the social stigma of high school English teaching as a low-status and poorly-paid job, threatening their well-being. This finding contradicts the assumption that private sector teaching is less prestigious compared to teaching at high schools within the context of Iran. As evidenced in the interview excerpts, EFL high school teachers identified professional esteem enhancement as a TWB enhancer, while the distorted image portrayed of EFL high school teachers is a threat. Addressing this involves a dual approach: Firstly, it is suggested that policymakers work to improve the living standards for all teachers, with a particular focus on those teaching EFL in high schools. Secondly, the power of social media and online platforms is recognized as instrumental in correcting the skewed perception of EFL high school teachers.

While the contexts of institute, high school, and university pursue different educational agendas, teaching at university is assumed to have a higher status. However, even within universities, lack of recognition and validation and the unfair organizational practices threaten the instructors' well-being. Mercer (2020) also points to perceived hierarchies across teaching contexts, course types, qualifications, and the positionality of the teacher (being a core or peripheral staff member) as influencing factors on well-being. In this study, tenured instructors experienced well-being more often compared with the probationary instructors teaching for more than five years on a contractual basis. Additionally, prospects for professional development as a

well-being enhancer in the context of university, found in this study, was also echoed in Mercer (2020), which argues that the absence of career progression opportunities can lead to teacher turnover and eventually leaving the profession. This emphasizes the critical role of continuous growth and advancement opportunities for fostering TWB and ensuring retention and sustainability in the academia.

As Hascher and Waber (2021) and MacIntyre et al. (2019) point to the relationship between EFL teacher autonomy and well-being, increasing teacher autonomy can mitigate threats to their well-being. For instance, EFL teachers in high schools pointed to coursebook quality as a threat. If teachers are provided with more autonomy to adapt the material to the needs of their learners, this threat can be neutralized. However, this focus on autonomy should not overshadow the crucial roles of policymakers and material developers in enhancing the quality of educational materials.

Additionally, the EFL teachers in high schools pointed to lack of preparation in pedagogy and psychology as a work demand that threatens their TWB. A feasible approach to address this can be holding on-job training courses, mentoring programs or other forms of teacher professional development to assist EFL teachers tackle this threat.

When analyzing the well-being of EFL teachers, Ebadijalal and Moradkhani (2022) discovered that the interactions between learners and the teacher, interactions among colleagues and institutional authorities, along with the workload, can influence TWB. Since their study was conducted within the context of high schools and institutes, their findings align with the findings of the present study regarding these contexts. Notably, whereas Ebadijalal and Moradkhani (2022) identified various variables affecting TWB without emphasizing the teaching context, our investigation aimed to delineate the specific factors that can enhance or undermine TWB within the aforementioned contexts.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Liu et al. (2017) argue that TWB is influenced by both personal and contextual factors, with context encompassing the immediate workplace environment as well as the broader societal framework. This study's findings reinforce that TWB encompasses individual and contextual dimensions, echoing Liu et al. (2017). Hence, while EFL teachers need to be made aware of their well-being and measures to improve it, policymakers must support teachers' emotional lives (Sulis et al., 2021). This view implies that improving EFL TWB is the responsibility of both the teacher and other micro and macro interactants including the supervisors, colleagues, managers, educational and social policymakers, and not only an individual responsibility, but primarily a systemic and contextual responsibility (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019).

Another practical approach to enhance TWB is through the implementation of well-being-oriented teacher education programs, which can help mitigate threats to EFL TWB and promote the enhancers. By integrating strategies that prioritize well-being into teacher education curricula, educators can cultivate a supportive framework that equips teachers with the necessary skills and resources to navigate challenges effectively while fostering a positive and sustainable teaching environment.

Various stakeholders can enhance EFL TWB by eliminating threats and increasing positive factors. Acknowledging teachers' contributions can counter feelings of being undervalued, while fostering supportive environments through collaboration and positive interactions is key, especially in language schools.

Context-specific pedagogical adjustments are also vital. For example, high school teachers in Iran face social stigma that affects their well-being. Granting more autonomy in curriculum design and teaching methods could alleviate stress caused by mismatched expectations.

As illustrated above, this study drew on one mode of data collection technique. Hence, to address this delimitation, it is suggested that interested researchers couple the interview protocol with observation or reflective diaries for a more in-depth view. Additionally, this study was cross-contextual. It is suggested that a cross-stage study explore EFL TWB at different career stages, ideally tracking the same group of teachers from pre-service to in-service stages to investigate the variations in their conceptualization of TWB.

To quote Gregersen et al. (2020, p. 2), well-being is not an "extraneous luxury". Hence, according to Mercer (2021, p. 21), It is crucial for the ELT community to prioritize well-being, understanding its significance for everyone involved, and identifying ways to promote it across various ecological levels and domains. This approach aims to cultivate well-being not just for individuals, but for the community as a whole, Mercer (2021) concludes.

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Appendix
Interview Questions

1. Generally speaking, what do you think about EFL TWB? What factors do you think can contribute to EFL TWB?
2. Do you think EFL TWB can be taught? If yes, how?
3. Do you think it can be improved? If yes, how?
4. How would you describe a teacher who seems to enjoy a sense of well-being?*)*
5. How would you describe an English teacher who doesn't feel a sense of well-being?
6. What factors (personal, contextual, & professional) would you consider significant in painting a vivid picture of EFL TWB?
7. What factors (personal, contextual, & professional) may threaten an English teacher's TWB?
8. Do you believe an EFL TWB can be influenced by his/her years of experience as a language teacher? If yes, how?
9. Do you believe an EFL TWB can be influenced by his/her expertise as a language teacher?
10. Could you describe a challenging or rewarding teaching experience that affected your sense of well-being?