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# EFL administrators' well-being and their professional resilience: Ecological insights for teacher training<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Language teacher well-being has been gaining a growing interest in educational research. This study has specifically explored the well-being of language instructors who had dual roles - as both teaching and administration- within the context of higher education. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study holds an ecological perspective, rooted in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, to explore what contributes to the well-being of administrators of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and what coping strategies they develop in professional life. By examining the challenges and experiences of these instructors, the research highlights the intersection among administrative responsibilities, teacher well-being, and teacher training. The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, and the results were presented through the combination of both deductive and inductive thematic analysis. From an ecological lens, the findings reveal that interpersonal dynamics, institutional alignment, and policy-related factors all interact together to (re)shape the EFL administrators' well-being at workplace. Also, the findings provide key insights into the complex, multi-layered nature of teacher well-being, emphasizing that professional development programs should not only include professional skills of instructors but also some coping strategies for them to foster their long-term resilience at professional life.

**Keywords:** Well-being, ecological perspective, language teacher, resilience.

## Introduction

The issue of language teacher well-being has been gaining a growing interest recently (Hofstadler, Babic, Lammerer, Mercer, & Oberdorfer, 2021; Mercer, 2020), aligning with the increasing incorporation of positive psychology in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) (MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer, 2019) and the expanding scope of research into teacher psychology (Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018). This interest in teacher psychology has come in sight partly with the fact that high levels of stress and low levels of well-being have become commonplace in the modern teaching profession nowadays (Johnson et al., 2005; Kidger et al., 2016). However, studies demonstrate that the teachers with higher levels of teacher well-being and a positive sense of professional identity are better at coping with the challenges at workplace, teach more

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affectively, and foster higher levels of student achievement (Briner & Dewberry, 2007; Day & Gu, 2010; Klusmann et al., 2008; Roffey, 2012). Hence, it is desirable for teachers to be well for both themselves and for their learners (Mercer, 2020). Like the parallelism between the teacher well-being and learner benefit, the present study hypothesizes that the teachers having administrative roles in their professional settings such as school principals, administrators or coordinators are at least as crucial as the teachers in determining the nature of the learning environment. They are believed to play a vital role in contributing to teacher success, which in turn affects student success (Ni, Yan, and Pounder, 2018). Their capacity to foster a climate of positivity and support for both teachers and students is strongly impacted by their general well-being and resilience. For this reason, the well-being of principals and administrators should get more attention within the context of teacher well-being (Sahlberg, 2015).

It is noteworthy that well-being of educators and administrators are impacted at several levels within their ecologies (Hofstadler, Babić, et al., 2020). More specifically, in the language teaching field, there are some context and domain specific stressors that educators experience such as low linguistic self-efficacy, high emotional labor, multicultural composition of students in the classroom, and high-energy methodologies (Borg, 2006; Mercer & Gregersen, 2020; Wieczorek, 2016). Despite the challenges that may cause teacher burnout, “these are teachers of hope and happiness, heroic in their resistance and resilience” (Bullough, 2011 p. 16). As a prestigious and important profession in society, it is important to promote language teachers’ well-being and their coping mechanisms.

While there are numerous studies dedicated on teachers’ well-being (e.g., Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Manuel & Hughes, 2006; ) and relatively limited number of studies on language teachers’ well-being (e.g. Ergün and Dewaele’s, 2021; Hiver and Dörnyei, 2015; Mercer, 2020; ), there exists a notable gap in the literature concerning the well-being of EFL administrators and their coping strategies. A comprehensive examination of their well-being can reveal the complexities of administrative responsibilities, point out possible stressors, and guide the future interventions to improve their general quality of life. In this sense, the present study aims to explore the factors shaping language educator administrators’ well-being and their way of resilience in the workplace by integrating the dynamic aspects of well-being from an ecological perspective.

## Literature review

### *Ecologies of teacher well-being*

To define well-being, Ryan and Deci (2001) approaches the term from hedonic and eudemonic perspectives based upon its goal and source. From hedonic perspective, well-being can be defined as avoiding pain and gaining pleasure for happiness. Eudemonic perspective, on the other hand, emphasizes a deeper sense of purpose and a kind of self-actualization. As an example for eudemonic definition of well-being, PERMA model suggested by Seligman (2011) is one of the most well-known and employed model for the research on teacher well-being (e.g. Goodman et al., 2018; MacIntyre et al., 2019). This model consists of five building blocks which stand for Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. In relation to the definition and measurement of well-being, “Evidence from a number of investigators has indicated that well-being is probably best conceived as a multidimensional phenomenon that includes aspects of both the hedonic and eudemonic conceptions of well-being” (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Both approaches to the conceptualization of well-being emphasize

personal factors and do not include any focus on the environment, which plays an important role in shaping a person's well-being. In this sense, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory can be adopted to understand teacher well-being from a broader and holistic perspective with a focus on dynamic and multidimensional aspect of this construct. Holding an ecological perspective goes beyond individual psychology and personal experience, it also considers the environment as a key determinant for well-being (Mercer, 2020). In other words, well-being is both an individual and also social from this framework (La Placa et al., 2013). Therefore, there are various factors which can be closely related to well-being in this ecology, and it is necessary to take a more holistic perspective to explore teacher well-being. Ecological system theory implies a focus on social context as an effective factor in shaping and conceptualization of well-being, which lacks in many well-being models (Mercer & Kostoulas 2018).

Some empirical research confirm that teachers have lower well-being when compared to those working in other professions especially due to the difficult work conditions (e.g., Grenville-Cleave & Boniwell, 2012). Some context specific factors such as unsupportive school leadership and challenging student manners can also be attributed to the low level of teacher well-being (Mairitsch et al. 2021). On the other hand, some studies illustrate that teachers taking support from their collegial community or the ones spending quality times with their pupils at their micro setting experience positive emotions at workplaces (Pekrun et al., 2002; Spilt et al., 2007). As specifically for language teachers, there are some particular factors affecting their well-being. To illustrate, King and Ng (2018) suggested that there is close connection between language and self, which is why teaching a language demands a high emotional labor. Similarly, Gkonou and Miller (2017) discussed that teaching language to the students with high level of anxiety in language use cause extra emotional labor for language teachers. Contrary to the other subject matters, language teachers are supposed to create an interactive and communicative learning environment where students can participate the tasks actively, which entails considerable time and effort (Borg, 2006).

The literature contributes to the deeper understanding why teacher well-being matters in educational research. While some studies demonstrate a positive correlation between teacher well-being and teaching effectiveness (e.g., 2007; Caprara, Barbaranelli, Steca, & Malone, 2006), some others highlight the point that teachers with high level of well-being have significantly affect their students' achievements (Briner & Dewberry, 2007; Caprara et al, 2006). Research has also shown a positive correlation between high teacher well-being and better work-life balance (Dreer, 2021). Thus, boosting teacher well-being is essential not only for language teachers but also for language learners, which also indicates that language teacher well-being should be explored more critically in educational domain. In this sense, Researchers suggest some practical routines to empower teachers' resilience strategies to increase their well-being. To illustrate, Lúzie Fofonka Cunha et al. (2019) studied on the effectiveness of practicing gratitude and suggested its boosting power on increasing participants' life satisfaction and positive emotions. On the other hand, practicing kindness is also suggested as an effective strategy to enhance individuals' well-being (Post, 2014). To contribute to the educational research in terms of exploring the factors affecting EFL instructors' well-being, this study aims to examine the key elements that influence their overall sense of well-being, with a particular focus on resilience-building strategies.

## Method

The present study follows a qualitative approach which refers to “inductive, with the purpose of describing multiple realities, developing deep understanding, and capturing everyday life and human perspectives” (Trumbull, 2005, p. 101). More specifically, it adopts descriptive case studies which offer a “rich, thick description of the phenomenon under study” (Merriam, 2009, p.43) to reflect the researcher’s understanding of the cases. In order to do offer an insightful understanding of EFL administrators’ well-being within the ecological framework, the following research questions were addressed in the study:

RQ1: From an ecological perspective, what factors impact the well-being of EFL administrators?

RQ2: What strategies can be identified to enhance their resilience in professional life?

## Context and participants

Data were gathered with three ELF instructors with administrative positions working at a state-run university in Türkiye. All participants are at mid-career EFL instructors and were selected from the same university to ensure contextual consistency and give an in-depth analysis of the intersection between the context and teacher well-being. By limiting the participants to a single university, the study aimed to examine how organizational and contextual structures, leadership dynamics, and institutional policies specifically shaped participants’ experiences.

A purposeful sampling strategy was employed for participant selection, which could provide rich information on the concept of teacher well-being in the context of higher education. The following criteria were chosen to ensure all participants were familiar with both the managerial and instructional dimensions of academic life. The criteria for the selection of participants included:

- working as a full-time English language instructor at the same university
- holding an administrative role
- having at least three years of administrative experience an addition to their teaching experience

**Table 1** Demographic characteristics of participants

Pseudonym	Current Position	Department	Teaching Experience	Administration Experience	Age
Sevgi	Head of Department	Translation and Interpretation	15	5 yrs	38
Adem	Vice Head of Department	Translation and Interpretation	13	6 yrs	40
Esma	Vice Head of Department	The School of Foreign Languages	13	3 yrs	37

## Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants. Each interview was conducted in participants’ mother tongue (Turkish), lasted approximately 60-70 minutes, and audio recorded with their consent. The interview protocol included both some predefined questions and emerging ones to explore the perceptions’ of participants’ dual roles in higher education context. Predefined interview questions were developed based on the dimensions of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2009), and some questions include: How would you describe your general wellbeing as a teacher and administrator? Do you think that relationships with colleagues, students, or administrative staff affect your wellbeing at your workplace? If so, how?.

As for the analysis of the data, semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim into a word document, and then thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data. A purposive selecting was used, focusing on “information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under the study” (Patton, 1990, p.169). The combination of deductive and inductive coding approaches guided the data analysis process. While the analysis was informed by Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory deductively with its three layers: micro-, meso-, and macro-, the themes were generated inductively within these layers.

## Ethics

The study raises some ethical concerns because of the academic positions of the participants and the sensitive nature of the topic. The interviews aimed to explore the issues relating participants’ micro and macro settings, including their relations with colleagues, upper directors, or some questions relating to the university policy. Hence, there was a risk for the participants that they might feel discomfort while discussing their negative experiences. Also, as all participants were working at the same institution while the data was collecting, it raised some concerns about the confidentiality. To address these concerns, the participants were entirely voluntary. They were informed about the content of the study, and consent form was obtained from each participant. Also, they were all sure that they can withdraw at any stage without consequences. Anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms. Lastly, the study was approved by Trabzon University ethics committee.

## Findings

The findings for the first research question exploring the factors shaping EFL administrators’ well-being were distributed across the three levels of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory: micro-, meso-, and macro-level dynamics- that played a key role defining the teachers’ well-being at the university ecology. Micro-level factors include the immediate context that the teachers operate at workplace. On the other hand, meso-level dynamics refer to the institutional elements like working hours or the facilities of the university. Lastly, broader systematic influences such as language policy were discussed within the macro-level dynamics.

### Micro-level dynamics: Relationship to colleagues and the management

Some factors that all participants explicitly referred to is the inter-personal relations with their colleagues and the director. Esma outlines the problem:

Although I have a management position in my department as a vice head of department, I often feel excluded from the outer decision-making system. All major or minor meeting are held without my presence and consultation. The department head and the director of the school don’t acknowledge my administrative role. It’s frustrating to be in such a position.

Adem, on the other hand, referred to the aspect relevant to his well-being as follows:

To me, one of the most important requirements of being a manager in a department is being fair. Although I’ve always made fair decisions, I realized how challenging it is to manage people. For example, during course allocation, no one wants to take the less popular courses—everyone prefers the tasks that serve their own interests. None of them is willing to make sacrifice for the team. Over time, this aspect caused some problems between me and other academics in the unit.

The clash of perspectives between Sevgi and her director was a notable factor in her immediate context to affect her well-being as an administrator:

There has been many times when my own understanding of leadership has clashed with that of my superiors. Even if I disagreed, I was often obliged to comply with their decisions due to institutional regulations. I am constantly in a position where I couldn't take decisions the way I believed in. I never had unconditional authority, and because of that, I feel I was never able to fully realize my potential. Whenever I tried to implement something genuinely positive, I was blocked by the director above me. What made things even more difficult was that my team assumed those decisions were mine, which caused tensions between me and my staff. I was caught in the middle, carrying the responsibility for choices I didn't actually make.

Collectively, the three participants' accounts demonstrate how limited authority, interpersonal conflicts, and lack of recognition as an administrator within micro level can significantly impact the well-being of academic staff in dual teaching and administrative roles at higher context.

### **Meso-level dynamics: Long working hours and physical atmosphere of the university**

Unlike the micro-level dynamics including the inter-personal relations at participants' immediate context, meso-level factors affecting EFL instructors' well-being are more about the organizational and structural elements of the institution. The data show that the limited physical resources of the university and the long working hours were one the recurring themes emerged within meso-level. Esma explains how the physical condition was a demotivating factor for her well-being:

A few of our colleagues don't even have an office to work. As an administrator, I can't do anything for them and I can't meet their expectations. The idea that our department may be relocated to a remote and boring campus, far from the university center, adds an extra dimension to our uncertainty. We still haven't settled to anywhere. Also, the university doesn't take any meaningful and logical steps to change this situation, which makes us feel like we aren't valued. It really affects your sense of belonging negatively.

In addition the physical environment, Sevgi reported how her dual responsibility as teaching and managing disturbed her work-life balance as follows:

As you know, you have to make preparation for the lesson if you are a lecturer. After class time, there is grading, paper works, meetings, and administrative duties. It's really hard to balance the work and life. As we're a newly established unit, we always have to deal with the procedural. I can't fully concentrate either on my work or my teaching staff, which makes feel stress.

Very similarly, Adem shares his feelings about the role overload:

It's really very demanding to deal with everything at once. I'm supposed to write articles, make research, teach, and also fulfill my administrative roles. Each roles demands an extra effort and energy, but I've difficulty in focusing deeply on any. It feels me like I can't do enough in any area.

The participants' experiences at meso-level reveal how overlapping responsibilities and the physical facilities can create a significant burden on EFL instructors' well-being. This level findings also demonstrate the multilayered aspect of well-being shaped not only by the interpersonal relations but also institutional arrangements that instructors operate.

### Macro-level dynamics: Policy-related demands

Beyond their immediate and institutional contexts, participants also referred to some top down decisions and policy-driven constraints as key factors that influence their professional experiences and well-being. To illustrate, Esma and Sevgi, respectively, describe how policy-related demands damage their sense of agency in a negative way:

The decisions that directly relates us are always taken by the people who have never taught English before. The vocational schools are very from the university campus, and the students profile there does not fit language learning. They lack of motivation, aptitude, and good manner. Instead of taken so many miles to teach them face to face, it would be very practical to offer remote classes, which can save time, energy, and money for us.

We have to align our teaching with the CEFR standards, but students' level don't match CEFR expectations. I'm in between matching students' real needs or meeting institutional requirements with the ineffective standard language teaching materials. These kinds of policies creates pressure on our shoulders.

In addition to the data emerged in response to the first research question, the study also sought to explore the resilience strategies of the participants to cope with the negative factors affecting their well-being at the workplace. Adem stated that there weren't any institutional initiatives to promote his well-being; instead, he had to develop personal strategies to maintain his well-being:

In my previous workplace, we used to organize happy hour gatherings with the academics every week. It helped us feel supported. Here, we don't have such events. I spend more time with my parent.

The two participants also mentioned the lack of institutional support and awareness of teacher well-being at the workplace:

Actually, I don't think that our university is doing anything to make us feel more belonged and engaged. Individually, I attempted to organize some events in my department such as celebrating birthdays of the academics or giving present for the ones who gain new academic titles; however, this culture didn't last long because of the weak and negative relationship among the colleagues. That's why, I usually come together with my friends and discuss our common problems together, which makes me feel more relaxed and energetic as a teacher (Sevgi)

I believe that universities should give some leadership trainings to its academics with administrative roles, and these trainings should include some strategies on how to maintain teacher well-being. However, the topic of teacher well-being is not in the agenda of our university due to the lack of awareness on this issue. Personally, I'm trying to get some online trainings on this topic. For example, Also, I keep gratitude journal to be more thankful (Esma).

## Discussion

The study highlights the significance of the multifaceted analysis of teacher wellbeing, which is not a fixed or static concept but is subjective to the personal, institutional and contextual dynamics (Gregersen et al., 2020; Ozturk et al., 2024; Mercer, 2020). Despite the EFL instructors' teaching and administrative experiences varied in the same context, the findings were homogeneous in terms of themes. While the positive interplay of these dynamics can support teacher well-being and student achievements indirectly (Aziz, 2024; Briner & Dewberry, 2007), the misalignments among these dynamics suggested in the present study- such as dual role complexity, lack of institutional or collegial support- can lead to demotivation, stress, or dissatisfaction at workplaces.

The qualitative analysis of the interviews led to the identification of interpersonal factors affecting instructors' well-being at their micro-settings. For example, Esma reflected on the lack of recognition of her administrative identity by her manager in the unit. This aspect highlights the importance of recognition either formal or informal at workplace. Some studies suggest that the acknowledgement of teachers' contribution at professional life plays a crucial role in decreasing burnout and stress (e.g., Kun & Gadanez, 2019; Sohail et al., 2023). On the other hand, Adem shared his negative relationships with the academics in his department because of the tensions caused by his administrative duties. This suggests that sense of "relatedness" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 73) can be fostered by the positive group dynamics and strong social relations within teachers' immediate context, which significantly contributes to the teacher well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Mairitsch et al. (2021).

The analysis of meso-level factors suggests that teacher well-being is also responsive to the physical space of the university and long working hours for the participating instructors in this study. Especially, Esma noted that not having a permanent office creates a sense of instability and worthlessness, which damages this participant to develop her sense of belonging to the university. Mercer (2020) also provides some evidence for the determining role of physical setting in shaping teachers' motivation with one the participants of the study reporting that limited office space in poor quality caused her ultimately to leave her position. It can be suggested that the lack institutional responds to these concerns negatively impacts teachers' professional well-being. As the other crucial theme emerging from the data at meso-level, two participants, Sevgi and Adem, shared that unclear role expectations –such as balancing teaching, research, and administrative roles at the same time- increases their professional stress. This point is in line with some research asserting that there is a negative correlation between teacher well-being and long working hours or excessive workload (e.g., Jin-ping et al., 2022; Mercer, 2020).

The most recurring themes on how well-being was experienced at macro-level ecologies of the participants were the policy-related issues of the university management and the participants' concerns about how to align their classroom practices and language teaching methodology to CEFR because of the student profile. For example, Esma criticized the top-down decisions made by the university management especially for the low-profile students at remote urban vocational campus. The physical distance of these campuses, combined with the students' lack of motivation, engagement, and aptitude, created a challenging situation for EFL instructors, which was neglected by the university management. She thinks that the refusal to implement online English courses instead of face-to-face ones disregarded their professional well-being. This is in



line with Elliott et al. (2023) and Ramberg et al. (2019) who discussed that having to teach at high-poverty urban school including students with management and behavioral problems contributed to the teachers' burnout and stress level. Sevgi, on the other hand, believes that standard teaching course materials cannot meet the needs of these students, which makes EFL instructors conscious about reaching the CEFR expectations. This finding suggests that EFL instructors even at the higher education context may struggle to adjust their methodologies in accordance with the beginner level students, and they may need external and ongoing professional development for CEFR standards. Providing them with adequate support is suggested to boost language teachers' well-being at professional context (Dwiwarna & Rahadian, 2018; Foley, 2019; Klusmann et al., 2016).

Regarding how these instructors maintain their well-being and develop resilience at workplace, they complained about the lack of well-being awareness at institutional level. Although Sevgi attempted to organize some unit-based gatherings, she stated that they did not last long-term because of the weak relationships among colleagues. Sema, on the other hand, developed some individual strategies such as keeping gratitude journal. Despite the effectiveness of practicing gratitude in terms of positive emotions, life satisfaction, and subjective happiness (Emmons & Shelton 2002; Layous et al. 2012), teacher resilience is not just a personal trait but a dynamic, context-dependent capacity that should also be supported at institutional level mentoring programs (Duong et al., 2023; Karanfil & Atay, 2020).

## Conclusion and implications

This study holds an ecological perspective to investigate the well-being of EFL administrators working at higher education context in Türkiye. The study highlights the point that for the well-being of ELT community, all stakeholders including language teachers, ELT instructors, ELT administrators working in different positions at universities should engage in the debates relating to the dynamics affecting language teachers' well-being level (Vu, 2016). I would like end this manuscript by stating that teacher training programs should explicitly address teacher well-being as a core component of professional development and prepare in-service teachers not only to manage language classrooms but also to navigate the interpersonal, institutional, and contextual dynamics with practical resilience strategy training. The study also takes attention to the teacher professional development programs which should place leadership trainings for the EFL instructors holding dual roles at their work life. These INSET programs should be designed in accordance with the language teachers' needs as well as the contextual realities (Atay, 2008; Mede & Işık, 2016).

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