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Exploring Iranian EAP teachers' well-being: an activity theory perspective

Mostafa Nazari¹ and Sedigheh Karimpour^{2*}

*Correspondence:
Sedighehkarimpour1367@yahoo.
com; S.karimpour@mazums.ac.ir

¹ Department English
and Communication, Hong Kong
Polytechnic University, Hung
Hom, Hong Kong

² Department of English
Language, Mazandaran
University of Medical Sciences,
Sari, Iran

Abstract

Despite the growth of research on EAP teachers in the past decade, little research has focused on their emotions and much less on their well-being. In response to this gap of knowledge, the present study draws on the theoretical framework of activity theory and explores the well-being of 13 Iranian EAP teachers. We collected data from a questionnaire, narrative frames, and semi-structured interviews. Data analyses revealed three themes in relation to the teachers' well-being: (1) content as a site of experiencing positive and negative emotions, (2) content and institutional contextualities as determinants of seeking purpose in EAP instruction, and (3) sociocultural parameters as shaping meaning in EAP instruction. We found that EAP teacher well-being functions as a layered construct that is influenced by various personal, institutional, and sociocultural dynamics, and substantially influences teachers' professional practices, identities, and emotions. Across these processes, content operates as the antecedent or consequence of the influence in EAP instruction. Based on the findings, we provide implications for teachers and teacher educators in how to employ professional alternatives that could effectively contribute to EAP teachers' well-being.

Keywords: EAP teachers, ESP teachers, Language teacher well-being, Activity theory, Iranian EAP teachers

Introduction

In the past decade, an increasing number of studies have examined English for academic purposes (EAP) teachers' professionalism (see Nazari 2020; Basturkmen, 2014; Ding, 2019; Du et al., 2022). Knowledge from this emerging body of scholarship highlights how EAP teaching is closely connected to the disciplinary, sociocultural, institutional, and personal factors. Relatedly, this knowledge base reveals that EAP teaching is not only a matter of mastery over content, but EAP teachers come to navigate emotions, identity construction processes, and levels of agency enactment (e.g., Derakhshan et al. 2023; Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2017; Du et al., 2022; Harwood, 2017; Kaivanpanah et al., 2021). The collective contribution of such professional competencies is how they define EAP teachers' instructional effectiveness and socialization processes (Campion, 2016).

A significant part of such effectiveness is how and whether EAP teachers feel (well) about their professional work (i.e., well-being). Despite the recent explorations of EAP

teachers' emotions (e.g., Etherington et al., 2020), the concept of well-being has been under-represented in scholarship on EAP teaching, although research has persistently argued for widening the landscape of EAP teachers' work, with a special focus on how context mediates their professional experiences and the quality of life they experience in light of such contextual ties (e.g., Basturkmen, 2014; Du et al., 2022). Considering that research (e.g., Atai et al., 2022; Derakhshan et al., 2023; Kaivanpanah et al., 2021) has extensively shown the profound effect of contextual factors on EAP teachers' emotions, identities, and professional memberships, such factors could also influence EAP teachers' well-being as well. However, it is not clear how context shapes the teachers' well-being, especially in the Iranian context where factors shaping well-being could function more substantially (see Derakhshan et al., 2023; Ebadijalal & Moradkhani, 2022). In response to the lack and significance of research on EAP teacher well-being, the present study draws on the theoretical framework of activity theory and explores Iranian EAP teachers' well-being. We will show that well-being functions as a determinant of factors shaping how the teachers navigate content and how it shapes other professional competencies of teachers, especially emotions and identities.

Literature review

EAP teacher professionalism

With the growth of English in academic communications, EAP has established itself as a branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) which has expanded rapidly over the past twenty years (Harwood, 2017). Attempting to prepare students for academic situations, a key participant in effective delivery of EAP knowledge is teachers. Basturkmen (2014) stressed the significant role of practice-oriented strategies and specialized knowledge in EAP teachers' professionalization (see Atai et al., 2022; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022). While EAP teachers contribute significantly to the growth of educational institutions (Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2017; Campion, 2016; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Kaivanpanah et al., 2021), their workplace environment can influence their roles, which consequently shapes their agency, identity, emotion, and their overall professionalism (see Bahrami et al., 2019; Ding, 2019; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Harwood, 2017).

Given the ample focus on specific characteristics of EAP teaching and instruction, research on EAP teachers' professionalism and practice has only recently gained increasing momentum (e.g., Bahrami et al., 2019; Ding & Campion, 2016; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Kaivanpanah et al., 2021). For example, reporting on a mixed method design, Fitzpatrick et al. (2022) explored EAP teachers' consideration of what constitutes expertise. Based on questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 116 teachers, the study findings indicated that there is no similar approach to EAP teachers' professional development. But, the nature of professional development is fluid and dynamic. Relatedly, Kaivanpanah et al. (2021) explored Iranian EAP teachers' professional development activities and challenges in teaching. Drawing on questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 105 teachers, the study findings indicated nine major categories of roles in EAP courses and seven major challenges.

The above body of knowledge highlights that the socio-economic and institutional particularities come to shape EAP teachers' personal, institutional, and disciplinary professionalism and professional practices (see Tao & Gao, 2018). In this vein, EAP teachers

experience emotional dynamics that may impact their institutional membership and instructional practices. Although such particularities significantly influence EAP teachers' professional practices (Basturkmen, 2014; Bocanegra-Valle & Basturkmen, 2019; Campion, 2016; Ding, 2019; Du et al., 2022), little research has focused on the emotional side of EAP teachers' professionalism (e.g., Etherington et al., 2020) and how such emotions interact with contextual parameters defining the teachers' work. More specifically, how context mediates EAP teachers' feeling well (i.e., well-being) in the face of contextual descriptions has conspicuously gone less-noticed, a concept that is closely connected to how context defines the push and pull of teachers' professional performances (Mercer, 2020).

Language teacher well-being

The teaching profession is often filled with stress and undesirable work conditions that can consequently lead to teacher attrition and burnout (see Greenier et al., 2021; Mercer et al., 2016). It seems that maintaining optimal levels of well-being is challenging for teachers worldwide (see Babic et al., 2022; Mairitsch et al., 2021). Generally, well-being has been defined as a person's evaluation of their sustained happiness, pleasure, and mental health, pertaining to psychosocial variables. Teacher well-being has been defined as teachers' satisfaction with their working environment, and can affect their professional behaviors (MacIntyre et al., 2019; Sisask et al., 2014). Two perspectives captured well-being, including subjective well-being and also psychological well-being. The first one focuses on hedonic perspectives and the second one focuses on eudemonic perspectives (Mercer, 2020, 2021). The hedonic perspective emphasizes subjective well-being, which includes the individual's perceptions of their emotions and satisfaction (Diener et al., 1999). The eudemonic perspective of well-being, on the other hand, focuses on individual's self-actualization and the meaning they give to their lives (2021).

In recent years, a growing body of research has explored language teachers' well-being in different educational contexts (e.g., Babic et al., 2022; Greenier et al., 2021; MacIntyre et al., 2019; Mairitsch et al., 2021; Mercer, 2021; Talbot & Mercer, 2018). Drawing on Seligman's framework of well-being, Babic et al. (2022) explored the institutional and personal factors that teachers perceive as influential in their well-being. The study findings highlighted that rather than being a subjective phenomenon, well-being is a social phenomenon. In addition, Mairitsch et al. (2021) investigated the well-being of 14 pre-service language teachers. Drawing on interviews, the study findings indicated that factors such as management of time and the specific social language had an important role in the teachers' well-being, a finding also reported in Ebadijalal and Moradkhani (2022) in the context of Iran.

Although the well-being of EAP teachers has not been studied focally, research has shown that context profoundly influences these teachers' emotional dynamics. For example, Atai et al. (2022) explored the identity construction of a novice EAP teacher (Alborz) and found that the teacher experienced severe emotional fluctuations that negatively influenced his longevity, belonging to EAP instruction, and career growth. Moreover, Tavakoli and Tavakol (2018) mentioned the challenges of EAP instruction in Iran and found that negative emotions were a significant dimension that shaped the teachers' feeling well as EAP teachers. Similar findings have been reported in Derakhshan et al.

(2023) who reported how contextualities of teaching in Iran negatively shaped the overall sense-making of EAP teachers' emotions and identities. Such findings reveal that the well-being of EAP teachers, as part of their emotions, could be significantly shaped by contextual particularities, an under-researched point that is explored in this study.

The above literature highlights that, as a complex phenomenon and as a foundation of language teachers' effective practice (Mercer, 2020), well-being is central to the quality of teaching and is shaped by the ecologies in which individuals are positioned (see Babic et al., 2022; Mairitsch et al., 2021). In this regard, it is significant to gain a more thorough understanding of the factors that contribute to language teachers' well-being to provide support for teachers in their developing their professionalism, especially among EAP teachers.

Conceptual framework

The present study uses activity theory (AT) as its conceptual underpinning in exploring EAP teachers' well-being because it facilitates capturing how systemic factors shape individuals' experiences and sense-making processes. Vygotsky (1978) and later Leont'ev (1978) initially proposed AT to explore the ways in which sociocultural contexts can (re) shape human activity. According to this perspective, the life of human beings roots in social activities and all the activities tend to orient toward the objects (see Feryok, 2012; Jenlink & Austin, 2013). In this study, our understanding of AT aligns with Engeström's (1987, 2015) second generation of activity model as shown in Fig. 1. According to Engeström (1987), the activity system consists of six key elements of the human activities, namely, subjects, object, rules, community, tools, and the division of labor.

From this perspective, subject refers to the individuals who are engaged in the activity system of the setting (here EAP teachers). Object refers to the purposes for which teachers engage in working toward fulfilling the curricular and institutional demands. Rules consist of the set of regulations set for individuals to adhere to accordingly, and community involves how different small- and large-scale communities form the professional membership of teachers. Tools are the artifacts that individuals use to propel themselves and the educational work through such as textbooks, overhead projectors,

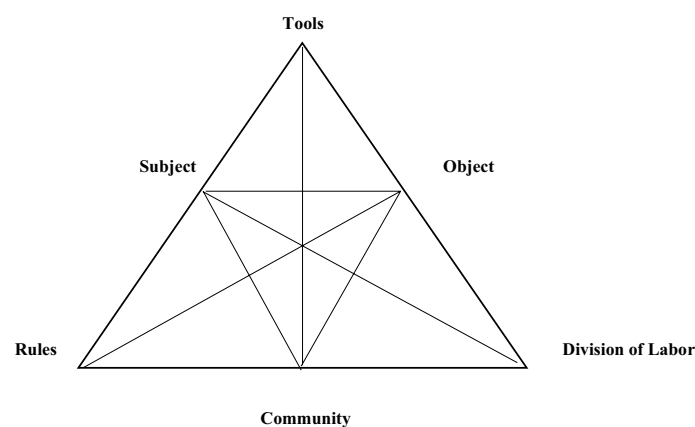


Fig. 1 The complex model of an activity system

etc., and division of labor includes how the task of educating is divided among different educational stakeholders such as teachers, head-teachers, policymakers, etc.

The significance of AT in examining teacher well-being is that it is the perspective of the subject (here the teacher) in the activity systems which gives meaning to it (Engeström, 2015); therefore, exploring the way teachers makes sense of their role within the activity is worth investigation (see Ebadijalal & Moradkhani, 2022). Moreover, considering that human activities must be investigated collectively (Leont'ev, 1981), examining teachers in their workplace environment provides a bigger picture of teachers' well-being. In addition, Leiter and Cooper (2017) argued the social relationships and the workplace environment influence the quality of individuals' sense of well-being, which resonates well with the conceptual tenets of AT in being intrapersonal and interpersonal. In this regard, AT can reveal the tensions within and between each component of the system and the factors affecting teachers' perceived well-being, which is the aim of the present study.

The present study

The literature has shown that teachers' well-being significantly contributes to the qualification of their instructional practices (Talbot & Mercer, 2018). However, the literature has also highlighted that the teaching profession is often imbued with abundant professional stressors that can consequently lead to teacher attrition (see Greenier et al., 2021; Mercer et al., 2016). Considering that teaching is an emotionally and challenging practice (Greenier et al., 2021; Mercer et al., 2016), teachers face higher levels of stress and various emotional tensions that jeopardize their well-being and thus their instructional effectiveness (Babic et al., 2022; Mercer, 2021). In this regard, teachers' well-being is shaped by the ecologies in which they live and work (Babic et al., 2022; Mairitsch et al., 2021; Mercer, 2021). Therefore, gaining a more comprehensive understanding of how individual, contextual, and sociocultural factors influence teachers' well-being and how educational systems assist teachers in their professional development merits focal attention.

AT can help researchers to explore and examine how external factors and internal factors influence teachers' workplace practices, thus it can increase our understanding of their well-being conditions. A close scrutiny of the literature of EAP teacher professionalism also reveals that these teachers may face a multitude of challenges that root in disciplinary, content, and sociocultural contextualities, and complicate their experiencing a favorable pedagogy and pedagogical context (see Nazari & Karimpour, 2022, 2023; Ding, 2019; Kaivanpanah et al., 2021). However, knowledge regarding EAP teachers' emotions and especially well-being is scanty and needs to start blossoming because the teachers are quite likely to become emotionally influenced by the wide range of contextualities that define their work. More importantly, content, as a key component of EAP teachers' work, is likely to profoundly shape EAP teachers' well-being. Yet, what such work involves and how it manifests in the activity systems of higher education institutes is open to scrutiny. The present study aims to fill this gap by addressing the following question: How does teaching EAP in the Iranian context influence the well-being of teachers who work in the activity system of the study?

Method

Context and participants

The present study was conducted in Iran where, like other contexts, EAP instruction is provided with the aim of preparing and assisting university students to communicate effectively in order to fulfill their academic and professional needs (Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2017; Soodmand Afshar & Movassagh, 2016; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018). In Iran, higher education is supervised and delivered by the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT). This ministry is in charge of legislating policies for state universities in which the candidates do not pay a fee for education. Thus, the Ministry determines the policy, planning, curriculum, and evaluation. As a major part of the curricula, university students in Iran are demanded to pass obligatory courses planned by the Ministry. Ministry of Health, Treatment, and Medical Education (MHTME) is another sector in which language education is delivered. Offering content courses to students of various medicine-related disciplines including Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy, etc., this sector is becoming an emerging sector in establishing EAP departments in the Iranian context; therefore, we chose this context as it has been underrepresented in many studies of EAP teacher education.

In Iran, undergraduate students are required to pass one general English course (EGAP), and two discipline-based EAP courses (ESAP) (Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018). It should be noted that the teachers of these sectors receive no formal education in medicine or related disciplines, and most of them are either visiting professors or faculty members. Moreover, a hidden agenda is that the teachers of EAP departments are not acknowledged adequately in comparison to professors of other medicine-related disciplines and these professors consider their own role as more important. Since there are no established teacher education programs for these teachers in Iran (see Kaivanpanah et al., 2021), this context has provided a suitable opportunity for focally exploring EAP teachers' well-being in the face of institutional, contextual, and sociocultural challenges and stressors. Thus, in line with Basturkmen's (2019) call for further attention on EAP teachers, this study attempts to focus on this area in the context of Iran.

The participants of the study were 13 EAP teachers (7 females and 6 males) working in different medical universities of Iran. Their age ranged from 34 to 38 years and their EAP teaching experience ranged between eight and 12 years. They taught ESAP courses to students of medicine, dentistry, and pharmacy in different universities. We selected the instructors through convenience and snowball sampling techniques. All of the participant teachers held PhD in Applied Linguistics and they were both visiting instructors and faculty members. In addition, the approval of the participants was obtained before starting data collection and they were ensured that ethical considerations of maintaining their anonymity are strictly observed to avoid subsequent problems.

Design and data collection

The study was methodologically informed by the narrative inquiry approach as it helps obtain a detailed understanding of teachers' historicity and present functioning (Barkhuizen, 2016, 2019) which fits well with exploring EAP practitioners' well-being because well-being is also connected to introspective, retrospective, and prospective dimensions

of teachers' emotional dynamics in both hedonic and eudemonic terms (Mercer, 2020; Talbot & Mercer, 2018). In this respect, we collected data from three sources: an open-ended questionnaire, a narrative frame, and a semi-structured interview. These sources aimed at exploring how individual, institutional, and sociocultural factors influenced and shaped EAP teachers' well-being within the activity system of their education setting.

The first step of data collection involved administering the questionnaire (Appendix A) to the teachers to explore the factors that influenced their overall well-being, both institutional and extra-institutional, in line with the AT principles. The questionnaire involved queries about the teachers' self-understanding and challenges of EAP teaching and their association with teachers' well-being, the frequent emotions that they experienced as EAP teachers, and individual, institutional, and societal factors that mostly influenced their well-being. We designed the questionnaire in an open-ended format because we asked them to list their responses. In designing the questionnaire, we drew on the body of knowledge in the Iranian context (e.g., Atai et al., 2022; Kaivanpanah et al., 2021; Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018), which highlights the role of higher-order, institutional, and interpersonal factors shaping EAP teachers' professionalism. Using the questionnaire was important in gaining an overall understanding of how different contextual factors shaped Iranian EAP teachers' well-being. As we collected the data during the COVID-19 pandemic, we forwarded the questionnaire to the teachers and they completed it. The teachers could respond to the questions either in Persian (L1) or English and they wrote their responses in Persian.

In order to expand on the data from the questionnaire, we designed a narrative frame (Appendix B) to elicit the teachers' concrete experiences. Using narrative frames, we could situate the teachers' well-being within its historical roots and factors, a point that has been deemed important in well-being research (see Mercer, 2020). Thus, we asked the teachers to share a narrative of their EAP instruction when their well-being interacted with personal, institutional, and sociocultural factors in line with the AT framework. Our understanding of narrative frame was in line with examining the critical role of context in influencing teachers' well-being and sense-making processes (see Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008; Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021; Kayi-Aydar, 2021). Likewise, the rigor of narrative frames lies in the point that they "provide guidance and support in terms of both the structure and content of what is to be written" (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008, p. 376). To this end, we designed the narrative frame, as an incomplete writing grid, around the EAP teachers' well-being challenges, and how contextual policies, discourses, participants, and expectations influenced their overall well-being. The teachers wrote their responses in Persian.

After the questionnaire and the narrative frame, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the teachers. The interview functioned as a retrospective-introspective source (Mann, 2016) in that we aimed to obtain detailed responses pertaining to the teachers' responses to the previous two research methods. Furthermore, using interviews could unpack the complexity of well-being in light of different activity system-related factors and contributors. In this sense, questions were asked from the teachers capturing how personal, institutional, and sociocultural particularities could play a role in their well-being (in line with AT components) in both hedonic (i.e., then-present emotions) and eudemonic (i.e., meaning and purpose created by those activity system-related

experiences) terms. The questions asked the participants to explain how they define their wellbeing and to elaborate on the factors that influenced their well-being, be it individual, contextual, or social. In fact, we used the interview questions to give EAP teachers opportunities to discuss additional factors that contributed to their well-being. The interviews lasted on average 50 min, were conducted in Persian, collected via WhatsApp, and audio-recorded. The second researcher conducted the interviews in that she shared the questions one by one for each teacher and asked the relevant follow-up questions. The whole process of data collection took around two weeks.

Researcher positionality

As researchers who resided in Iran, we were both familiar with the context of higher education in the universities. Additionally, we knew that EAP takes different forms such as English for general or specific purposes. We often faced the challenges that Iranian EAP teachers experienced and were aware of the contextual particularities as reported in previous research from this context (e.g., Atai et al., 2022; Atai & Nejadghanbar, 2017; Kaivanpanah et al., 2021; Tavakoli & Tavakoli, 2018). This theoretical understanding was mixed with our contextual awareness of challenges in teaching EAP, which motivated us to explore how the well-being of EAP teachers is influenced by such a setting.

Data analysis

The data were thematically analyzed to delineate the categories (Creswell, 2014) that could explain Iranian EAP teachers' well-being. Data collected through the questionnaires, narrative frames, and semi-structured interviews were transcribed. To this end, several steps were followed based on a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the transcribed data from the teachers' written responses were read several times to develop an initial understanding of their nature. Second, the initial codes emerging from the data were written down along with the specific extracts that reflected the code. Third, the initial codes were refined through constant-comparison and integrative/iterative engagement with the main data set to develop the major themes. Finally, after several rounds of theme refinement, the major themes per level were finalized after being reviewed. Across all the stages of the data analysis, we maintained how well-being is guided by the AT components and how they feature in the EAP teachers' well-being at personal and systemic levels.

The data from all the three data sources (i.e., questionnaires, narrative frames, and semi-structured interviews) were analyzed against each other to develop more inclusive themes. Both researchers read and coded the data individually and areas of discrepancy were discussed till consensus was reached. It must be mentioned that across the data analysis stages, the codes were cross-checked by the researchers, and also the researchers discussed various issues related to how to analyze the data to enhance the credibility of the interpretations. Additionally, further measures taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings involved memorandum note-taking (through color-coding and glossing the contents in a Word Document file) and member checking (as described above). Finally, three themes were developed from the data as explaining the well-being of Iranian EAP teachers: content as a site of experiencing positive and negative emotions, content and institutional contextualities as determinants of seeking

purpose in EAP instruction, and sociocultural parameters as shaping meaning in EAP instruction. In the following, these themes are presented and discussed.

Findings

Our analysis of the data revealed that Iranian EAP teachers’ well-being is influenced by various personal, institutional, and sociocultural particularities, with content featuring as a mediating factor in this process. More specifically, well-being was found to become influenced by such factors in both hedonic and eudemonic perspectives, which had ensuing implications for emotions and identity, as we explain below. In presenting the findings, we selected the most frequent extracts from the participants and then moved to less-represented statements.

The first stage of analysis was thematizing the patterns in the EAP teachers’ questionnaire responses. Table 1 shows that content featured as a key factor in how different factors influence Iranian EAP teachers’ well-being. In the following, these factors are incorporated into how they defined the teachers’ well-being in both hedonic and eudemonic terms.

Content as a site of experiencing positive and negative emotions

One of the major points in the teachers’ subjective well-being was how content shapes their emotions. In this regard, content was argued to constitute a major part of EAP teaching within the activity system of higher education and thus many of teachers’ emotions are related to content, as stated by T3:

In my opinion, most of what we do in the class focuses on content of medicine. So, I feel that this content acts as a strong tool in our emotions. (T3, Interview)

Content, however, was argued to contribute to teachers’ well-being through its both positive and negative sides. Regarding the positive side, the teachers argued that they could feel eudemonic perceptions of fulfillment by experiencing hedonic, momentary perceptions of happiness when they find students learning the content effectively, as the following extracts show. Such experiences were also associated with positive implications for the teachers’ identity construction:

Table 1 Factors influencing EAP teachers’ well-being

Content-related factors	Disciplinary terminology
	Mastery over the content
	Language proficiency
	Inadequate materials
Institutional factors	Lack of cooperation with general English teachers
	Curricular pressures
	Assessment problems
	Little voice for teachers in material selection
Sociocultural factors	Pressure from departments to give the courses to general English teachers
	Less establishment of English among EAP students
	Challenges created by the Ministry in effective coverage of contents
	Priority of content over language proficiency in public view

I really feel contentment when I see that my students can learn the content effectively. This gives me the feeling that I have done something helpful and gives me power in what I do as a content teacher. (T12, Interview)

I think that achievement for a teacher happens when you, irrespective of the many challenges, feel that you have done something. This gives my work meaning and makes me really happy. This way, I feel that my work is worthwhile and I think of myself as a competent teacher. (T7, Interview)

Content was also argued to function as a site of experiencing negative emotions when it became so demanding that the teachers struggled to teach. Interestingly and in well-being terms, such negativity shaped the teachers' identity construction in that they felt incompetent, as negatively influencing their perceptions of achievement and losing face in front of students, as the following extracts show:

It has occurred that I didn't know the meaning of some terminologies and this made me ashamed because I felt that I have lost my face in front of the students. This gave me negative feelings and I felt that I am incompetent to deliver the content effectively. (T8, Interview)

One of my negative experiences was when I wanted to cover a reading on the role of molecules in cell functioning. I didn't have the time to cover the text beforehand and when I entered the class to teach the text, I wanted to cover it the next session but one student insisted on reading it. And you can guess what happened as I didn't know the meaning of all the technical content. This gave me stress and feeling of incompetence and I felt that I have not achieved anything in that class, nor have the student achieved it. (T6, Narrative frame)

Thus, content was defining in the EAP teachers' accounts of well-being by creating positive and negative emotions that significantly influenced their professional identity construction.

Content and institutional contextualities as determinants of seeking purpose in EAP instruction

Another key element of the EAP teachers' well-being within the activity system of the university pertained to how content integrates with institutional dimensions to shape their emotions. In this regard, contextuality involved interpersonal relationships with colleagues and rules that guided the EAP teachers' performance in seeking differential purposes. Purpose, in this sense, was considered as key to effective navigation in the university setting in that it could define collective well-being of EAP teachers:

I think that we should engage in negotiating the content and our experiences with colleagues because this way we could feel more connected and it opens a space in which everybody grows and experiences positive emotions. (T5, Interview)

Content plays a central role in how we define our relationships and what we emotionally experience as physicians and teachers. Sometimes, the rules of the university complicate the issue of having shared understandings because professional forums to share our ideas don't exist, which can make us less connected to experience positive emotions. (T10, Interview)

Moreover, purpose was also argued to be defined in commitment terms as connected to the content of teaching. That is, beyond collegial ties, the teachers associated well-being with personal dimensions of fulfilling their responsibilities effectively. Commitment was also argued to be tied to the purposes that could redefine EAP teachers' identity construction positively and hence create positive emotions, as the following extracts show:

I feel that the technical courses we teach are strong tools to make us feel well in our work because they provide a space in which we can engage in peer interaction. This point makes us more committed to continuously update our knowledge and become more adherent to effective teaching (T4, Interview).

One of my positive experiences in teaching the content relates to my early-career experiences in different terms. I tried to cover the content, develop more vocabulary lists for the students, and design various tasks for them. I was really committed to what I wanted to do. This experience has remained in my mind because I had a purpose and that was how my students should become strong in their field. Such experiences always remind me of positive emotions and bring a smile to my face. (T1, Narrative frame).

Thus, the teachers believed that content can integrate with institutional (especially collegial) dimensions to shape their well-being in seeking purpose in their work. Essentially, such well-being was dominantly defined by collegial initiatives and commitment terms that could in turn create positive emotions in them.

Sociocultural parameters as shaping meaning in EAP instruction

The teachers also related well-being to the sociocultural parameters that define EAP instruction in the Iranian context. More specifically, they stated that such contextualities (e.g., assessment, perceptions about content and language, language learning in public view, and the role of the ministry in shaping teachers' voice) were significant in how EAP teachers define meaning in their work generally and in their instruction specifically. Meaning was defined by the teachers as a complex of personal value-labeling processes that EAP teachers attach to different dimensions and layers of their work.

For example, T2 shared a narrative about how he had become aware of the discourse of lack of criticism against policies as it could result in his exclusion. In the following narrative, he shares how he could become excluded due to his criticality against the policies. This experience made him rethink the way he understands collegial ties and critical visions, which had primarily been associated with negative feelings for him:

When I was younger, I would take issue with the inappropriate policies that extended to our work. For example, I could not assess the students' knowledge of the way I desired because the exam questions were sent to us by the higher-order decision-makers. Gradually, I realized that when I object to such policies very much, I become kind of excluded from my colleagues' get-togethers as they feel that I can jeopardize their work. This made me really sad I found that I should change my understanding of criticality. (T2, Narrative frame).

The other teachers also made reference to how the dominance of inappropriate policies and sociocultural visions change the concept of EAP meaning in well-being terms because they deflate teachers' current understanding and serve as a site of emotional and identity tensions by posing emotional tolls on them:

Sometimes, you have an idea in your mind about how something should be and you act on that basis, but other external issues make you change it. For example, I strongly believe that language and content should developed in parallel, but this is not what the public and even students think. Well, this may be good but it puts pressure on me as a teacher and I have to change the way I think and practice that idea in my classes. Actually, the meaning of what I think counters what they think and clearly this is a source of emotional tensions for me and I feel that I am the one who should surrender. (T3, Interview).

I don't know why or maybe it is the nature of it but there is always discrepancy between what I think should be the meaning of my work and what the policymakers think and do. I define meaning in my work as being constantly active in teaching work, research, partnership, and generally an active person. This gives meaning to me as a person to always grow. But when those inconsistencies happen, I feel that they dominate what I do and change the meaning of meaning of teaching in my mind. This is really challenging and bothering. (T11, Interview)

Thus, the teachers argued that meaning, as they understand it, may fall in contrast with the contextual definitions of EAP teaching and this could serve as a site of experiencing emotional and identity tensions.

Discussion

The data presented above show that EAP teachers' well-being is substantially influenced by a wide range of contextual parameters (see Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018 for similar findings), with content featuring as a strong determinant in their emotions and identity construction. It was found that content could bring about positive and negative emotions for the teachers so that they experience well-being or lack thereof in both hedonic and eudemonic terms. Scholarship on EAP teachers' professionalism (e.g., Basturkmen, 2014; Campion, 2016; Ding, 2019) and language teacher well-being (e.g., Babic et al., 2022; Gregersen et al., 2020; Mercer, 2020) has immensely discussed how context serves as a key inroad into better understanding teachers' professional performances and experiences (for a discussion on the relevance to AT, see Karimi & Mofidi, 2019). For our teachers, context was dominantly defined in content terms as manifesting in the activity system of the university setting. This finding adds clear heuristics to the discussion of language teacher well-being by highlighting how carrier content features in EAP teachers' work and shapes their well-being. Moreover, it adds to the literature of EAP teaching by not only unraveling how well-being comes to feature prominently in EAP teachers' work, but by showing how well-being connects to teachers' identity construction to shape their contextual performances. This finding shows how well-being interacts with positive/negative emotions to significantly shape EAP teachers' identity construction in feeling (in)competent regarding EAP instruction.

Well-being was also found to specifically feature in the eudemonic term of EAP teachers' content-institutional cognitions and emotions. In this regard, collegial relationships and commitment were argued to serve as the purposes that result in EAP teachers' well-being. Purposes could be defined based on teachers' personal sense-making (MacIntyre et al., 2019; Mairitsch et al., 2021; Sisask et al., 2014), yet how it shapes teachers' well-being and the associated consequences matters more (see Huppert, 2009; Mercer, 2021). Nazari and Karimpour (2022) and Karimi and Mofidi (2019) also discuss how teachers' identity within activity systems of schools are significantly influenced by such collegial relationships. For our teachers, purpose had two personal and interpersonal dimensions and, more interestingly, content was argued to be the defining factor in seeking these purposes in EAP teaching. That the teachers argued for collegial ties and commitment purposes clearly shows that well-being in EAP teaching is bound to institutional and personal factors, yet the catalyzing factor in promoting those purposes is the content that teachers work on. This finding opens new heuristics on the discussion of content in EAP teaching by subjectifying content beyond being merely an object that teachers work on; rather, content can now be treated as an agent in itself because it can promote the development of other EAP teachers' professional competencies. This discussion supports the argument by Harwood (2017) regarding the importance of redefining EAP teaching and taking it to novel levels, which our findings attest to in the content of EAP teacher well-being.

Finally, meaning was argued to be a source of emotional and identity tensions for the teachers because it countered the sociocultural descriptions of the Iranian (educational) context. In this regard, the way teachers defined meaning was chiefly based on their sense-making processes of effective EAP instruction, which contrasted the normative definition at a social level. Such a condition was also associated with identity and emotional tensions (see Etherington et al., 2020) for the teachers. However, the noticeable point in relation to our teachers' tensions was the relational and layered nature of the contributions of the tensions for their professional work. That is, the tensions extended to the content of teaching through which the negative consequences for teachers' well-being featured. This finding shows how well-being becomes influenced by the relational/layered, contextual factors, a process that is in turn fueled by the content of teaching, here medical education. Nevertheless, a central point here was that it was the teachers who should always surrender to the dominant culture. This point shows the discursive nature of well-being in that it becomes influenced not just by content or identity and emotions, but by the circulating discourses that feature significantly in (EAP) teachers' professional work. This dimension of EAP teachers' work, we believe, merits a devoted study, which could be pursued in future research.

These findings, overall, add novel contributions to how EAP teachers in Iran are influenced by personal, interpersonal, and sociocultural contextualities of teaching. In particular, the findings highlight how content plays a key role in EAP teachers' well-being, a point that has little, if any, been documented in previous research. Thus, the findings move the body of knowledge forward by showing less-trodden dimensions of language teacher well-being and EAP teacher professionalism.

Conclusion

Collectively, the findings of this study show that EAP teacher well-being functions as a layered construct that is influenced by various personal, institutional, and sociocultural dynamics and influences the professional practices, identities, and emotions. Across these processes, content operates as the antecedent or consequence of the influence in EAP instruction. These findings contribute to the body of knowledge on EAP teacher professionalism and well-being by showing how the two intersect to serve as key in the teaching of technical courses. Most notably, we learn from this study that despite being underrepresented in scholarship on EAP teaching, well-being should be of focal attention in the lives of EAP teachers because it connects to the multilayered nature of their work. In this process, using conceptual frameworks like AT facilitates understanding the teachers' professional experiences better and in greater depth.

The study offers clear implications for teachers and teacher educators. We believe that the participant teachers' arguments regarding the formation of collegial initiatives to experience heightened well-being is a sound suggestion. In this regard, professional partnerships (e.g., professional talks, mentoring sessions, online webinars) could be developed among content and language teachers so that they could share their understandings. These agenda could also be the focus of future research to see how they influence EAP teachers' professionalism and well-being. In so doing, teacher educators could play a key role in that they can tailor such initiatives into theoretically-grounded courses. Such courses could not only familiarize teachers with practical alternatives in how to enhance their collective well-being, but they can also involve theoretical contents so that teachers' conceptual knowledge of such professional constructs could be enhanced. The outcome of such courses, from an AT perspective, could be individuals who regard both personal and institutional standards to level up the conduct of EAP education.

We were interested in exploring how classroom ecologies contribute to the EAP teachers' well-being, especially because content featured as a key finding in their experiences. However, it was not possible for us to observe the teachers' classes because this is not easily allowed by the teachers themselves. We strongly encourage future researchers to pursue this aim as it could expose interesting findings about how in-class immediacies shape EAP teacher well-being. Acknowledging this point, we hope that this study could open new lines of thinking for the academic world of EAP teaching and more importantly, at the practical level, for teacher educators to start initiatives that could help EAP teachers experience a more favorable EAP context and pedagogy.

Appendix A: The open-ended questionnaire

Please list the contextual factors of teaching EAP in Iran that shape your well-being, perceptions about your work, and your relationships (both positive aspects and challenges).

Appendix B: The narrative frame

One of the most remembered experiences in teaching EAP as an Iranian teacher is This experience has a significant effect on my well-being by This experience also had a significant effect on my work by

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Author contributions

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Availability of data and materials

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Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interest

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no competing interest.

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