
Practice-Oriented Paper

Language Teacher Wellbeing in Times of Change

Derek J Herbert

Kanda University of International Studies

Wellbeing is a fundamental part of positive psychology and consistently acknowledging it is crucial. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit the education profession in 2020, it was a challenging time for related companies, institutions and teachers. Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) was introduced to institutions in Japan from the 2020 academic year and this brought much pedagogical change. Due to disruptions that the pandemic forced on to the teaching profession, being in an emergency remote teaching environment may have had a negative influence on wellbeing. This paper presents a study that compares language teacher wellbeing during ERT with the time of current teaching post-pandemic. Respondents (N = 22) were surveyed anonymously to gauge a generalized rating in different elements of wellbeing to determine which areas improved or declined between ERT and the current teaching context. Findings found a general decline in wellbeing in most areas at the time of ERT. Positive and negative emotions displayed clearer results, with feelings of anxiousness having a higher rating during ERT. Participants rated engagement, meaning and accomplishment more highly in the current teaching context, however, similar readings were shown in relationships and health for both contexts.

Wellbeing is defined as a state of being comfortable, healthy or happy but which is not static and that can fluctuate over time (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). It is known to be an essential element in living a happy and healthy life but also may help with thriving in a career, making social connections and enjoying life. According to Butler and Kern, (2016), factors impacting wellbeing can be defined and measured objectively (opportunities for education or environmental pollutants for example) and subjectively (terms such as ‘happiness’ and ‘flourishing’). One has to prioritize one’s own wellbeing before helping others and this applies to English language educators too. English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers for

instance are likely to have many responsibilities in the workplace. It may be a challenge to find time to work on their own wellbeing, which may have negative influences on their psychological state. Since a healthy and encouraging teacher is likely to promote a positive classroom environment for learners more than educators with negative states such as anxiety or stress (McCallum & Price, 2010), it seems important to help teachers to maintain higher levels of wellbeing.

Seligman (2011) suggested five measurable elements to wellbeing by creating the PERMA framework. These are: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment. The model was created to give a theoretical understanding of happiness. Positive emotion includes feelings such as joy and happiness and can enhance performance at work, strengthen relationships and can also create optimism for the future (Kun et al., 2017). One can often lose track of time when engaged or engrossed in something which can bring happiness to ourselves or others. Relationships bring social connection with others such as family, friends, organizations and communities, creating a sense of belongingness. To feel that one's life is meaningful and purposeful can contribute to self-fulfillment. People generally enjoy accomplishing something which can increase their self-confidence and self-esteem. In achieving wellbeing, it is important to consider the past, look back on our lives and think to ourselves whether we achieved something and did it well (Kun et al., 2017).

PERMA has been widely mentioned in literature and has played a part in research articles and frameworks. Notably, Butler and Kern's (2016) PERMA Profiler, which was developed as a model to measure flourishing in individuals. Their framework includes Seligman's (2011) five core elements but with two additional components: negative emotion and health. They view these as important aspects of wellbeing because they believe the framework should be more multidimensional in order to capture the complexities of wellbeing. The PERMA framework could be adapted easily for the purposes of this study as its content and questions are highly relevant to this research.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, teachers transitioned to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) in the 2020 academic year. Defined as a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis or emergency

circumstances (Hodges et al., 2020), ERT brought many difficulties and challenges. It entailed health concerns for many and additionally for language teachers it meant switching to unfamiliar platforms, underprepared with little or no training (MacIntyre et al., 2020). Studies found that teacher stress and burnout rose during the ERT period along with other concerns such as limited online teaching resources, workload and unreliable assessment tools and strategies (García-Álvarez et al., 2021). However, some positives may have come from ERT such as the development of new skills and greater flexibility with online formats (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021). Educator habits and behaviors were also rethought, reprioritized and reevaluated during the pandemic (Williams et al., 2021). Therefore, it could be said that ERT has had beneficial and/or adverse effects on teacher wellbeing. Educators have now transitioned back to a physical classroom with more conventional teaching approaches, but further attention on language teacher wellbeing should be prioritized in order for teachers to thrive post-pandemic.

Using the PERMA framework, this study asks: In which areas, if any, did language teachers' wellbeing improve or decline during the ERT and post-ERT periods?

Method

Timing

The study was conducted in July, 2023, just before the end of the spring semester. This was a time when institutions and companies had likely resumed the familiar teaching approaches that they had used before the pandemic began and ERT was introduced. Thus, the study was conducted at a time when individuals may still have clearly remembered how they had been affected during the period of change.

Participants

The main source of participants for this study was an online social media group called Online Teaching Japan (OTJ). It was chosen because it has more than 3,000 members, most of whom probably had experience of ERT in Japan, thus making it an appropriate target sample for this study. This is a very popular forum

in the English teaching community in Japan. The aim of the group is to act as a space for educators in Japan to share best practices and ideas related to teaching online. Educators may come from any teaching context such as university or high school. It was set up as a support network for English teachers in Japan during the ERT period and therefore provided a potentially valuable way for teachers to retain and improve skills and knowledge during ERT. Once permission was received from OTJ's owner to conduct the study, the survey was posted on the OTJ website. From the 3,000 members of the OTJ group, 22 participants responded (a response rate of around 0.73%) to the study.

Materials

A 40-item, quantitative Google Forms survey was used for this study. The survey's key objective was to obtain a generalized rating for each area in order to compare wellbeing during and after the ERT period.

The survey's first two questions collected demographic data including length of in-service practice in Japan and participants' teaching context(s) since April 1st, 2020 in Japan. This was the time when many institutions had already, or were transitioning to ERT. The remaining 38 questions were adapted from the seven areas of Butler and Kern's (2016) PERMA Profiler: positive emotion, negative emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment and health. Half (19 items) related to participants' experiences during the ERT period and the other half to their current teaching contexts. Each of the seven areas included three questions each, except health, which had only one. The health questions in the PERMA Profiler were all quite similar, so one question was favored here for simplicity. For example, the area of positive emotion had questions relating to joyfulness, positivity and contentment. Slightly re-worded equivalents were used for the current teaching context. Apart from the demographic questions, all incorporated an 11-point Likert scale ranging from '0' (not at all or never) to '10' (completely or always), as per the PERMA Profiler itself. This 11-point scale should yield higher resolution results making interpretation of those results easier and more meaningful.

Procedure

The survey was posted anonymously to the OTJ's website at the end of the 2023 Spring semester and remained open for data collection until early September, a span of approximately one month. It was hoped that the survey would collect many responses during this timeframe due to a fact that potential respondents would have more time while on vacation, but in retrospect this may have worked against the study. The survey was then closed.

Analyses

Data from the two demographic-related questions were analyzed manually then from question 3 onwards, data were analyzed using the Google Forms software which generated results as bar graphs. Those from both contexts (ERT and current teaching) were then compiled together and compared in order to view any emerging trends and to distinguish which areas received higher ratings.

Results

Of the 22 participants who took the survey, 15 had sixteen years or more teaching experience in Japan while another four had between ten and 12 years, showing that the respondents were experienced teachers. Figure 1 displays the breakdown of the teaching contexts which participants have experienced, with a very large majority indicating the university setting.

Table 1 shows the results for both *positive emotion* (*joyful, optimistic, content*) and *negative emotion* (*anxious, angry and sad*). The questions in the table are simplified to words or phrases. The ratings report which context rated more highly for each emotion. Comparing ratings for both contexts, where differences in ratings were not conclusive, they are rated as 'inconclusive'.

For the positive emotions, participants rated all three more highly currently. Conversely, the negative emotions of *sad* and *anxious* recorded a higher rating in ERT while feelings of *anger* had similar ratings overall in both contexts.

Figure 2 compares the results between the ERT and current teaching contexts in relation to the participants' frequency of anxiety. It shows that participants indicated feeling anxious more often during ERT.

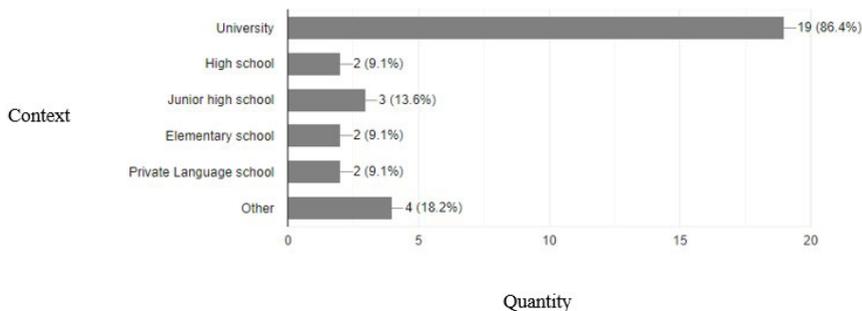


Figure 1. Context(s) taught in Japan since April 1, 2020

Table 1
Overall Ratings of Positive and Negative Emotion on ERT and Current Context Comparison

Area	Rating	Area	Rating
Positive emotion		Negative emotion	
Joyful	Higher currently	Anxious	Higher in ERT
Optimistic	Higher currently	Angry	Inconclusive
Contentment	Higher currently	Sad	Higher in ERT

Table 2 presents findings from areas *engagement* and *relationships*. All questions in both areas showed similar readings except for being excited and interested which showed higher ratings overall from respondents in their current teaching context.

Table 3 presents the results for the PERMA components of *meaning* and *accomplishment*.

For *meaning*, results are similarly inconclusive with respect to one’s work being purposeful and meaningful in both contexts. However, work that was valuable and worthwhile rated more highly currently, as did having a general sense of direction in one’s work. Regarding *accomplishment*, the progress towards accomplishing work-related goals and handling work-related responsibilities gave inconclusive findings although current context illustrates a higher rating for

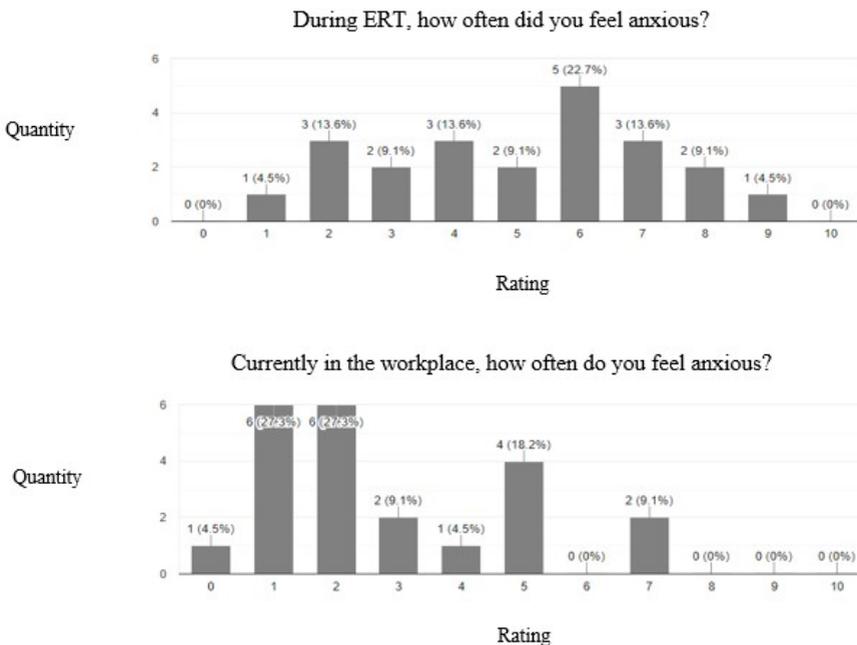


Figure 2. Ratings comparing anxiousness during ERT and current context.

Table 2

Overall Ratings of Engagement and Relationships on ERT and Current Context Comparison

Area	Rating	Area	Rating
Engagement		Relationships	
Become absorbed	Inconclusive	Receive help and support	Inconclusive
Excited and interested	Higher currently	Feel appreciated	Inconclusive
Lose track of time	Inconclusive		

achieving important work goals.

Ratings in both ERT and current teaching displayed an inconclusive result in the area of health.

Table 3
Overall Ratings of Meaning and Accomplishment on ERT and Current Context Comparison

Area	Rating	Area	Rating
Meaning			
Purposeful and meaningful	Inconclusive	Accomplishment	Inconclusive
Valuable and worthwhile	Higher currently	Progress towards accomplishing work-related goals	Higher currently
General sense of direction	Higher currently	Achieving important work goals	Inconclusive
		Handle work-related responsibilities	

Discussion

The study posited the research question: In which areas, if any, did language teachers’ wellbeing improve or decline during the ERT and post-ERT periods? The results will be discussed systematically and in relation to related literature, taking each context in turn. Reasons for the results will be suggested.

Emergency Remote Teaching Context

The large number of inconclusive results, as well as those that show an increase in *anxiety* and *sadness* during ERT (Table 1) are to some extent at odds with the results of other research which found positive outcomes for teachers during ERT. For example, the acquisition of new skills and new experiences through the novel use of online formats (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021) which might have warranted higher ratings in the areas of *accomplishment* or *meaning* than was found here (Table 3). Including survey questions related to skills acquired and how valuable they are may have yielded more positive results in those areas during ERT.

The higher levels of anxiety and sadness during ERT were likely the norm for so many during the pandemic due to bereavement, uncertainty and social

isolation. For example, Jerrim et al., (2022) found that teachers' work-related anxiety increased throughout the 2020/21 academic year with onsite instruction, longer working hours and live online lessons all attributing towards anxiety.

Furthermore, there were very likely opportunities for many teachers to reduce their commuting time and costs, so it is assumed that they could have refocused those resources more toward taking care of their health, generating another positive result for ERT. Some studies have found that stress decreased over time through ERT for teachers (Sacré et al., 2023) with work and family life becoming more balanced with a general feeling of optimism for ERT being likely factors for lowering stress. Therefore, some may have found working online during the pandemic a more positive challenge. This study's survey could therefore have benefited from the inclusion of additional items related to the extent to which ERT decreased stress, which might have highlighted some of the more positive aspects of the ERT period.

However, to keep the results in perspective, it must be pointed out that the higher ratings for *anxiety* and *sadness* were exceptional. The majority of the findings were either inconclusive, i.e., there was little discernable difference between the two contexts (Table 2), or there were higher ratings for participants' current teaching context.

Current Teaching Context

Comparing the respondent ratings in each of the seven elements in both contexts, Tables 1, 2 and 3 displayed either a higher or inconclusive rating for the current teaching context compared to ERT. Research has shown that teachers become energized after a face-to-face class (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021), thus participants in the study gave a higher rating for the specified positive emotions more frequently for their post-pandemic current context (Table 1). There may have been instances of more frequent stress and depression returning to on-campus teaching post-pandemic (García-Álvarez et al., 2021), but the majority of participants in this study more often responded positively. Being interested and feelings of excitement (Table 2), *joyful*, *content* and *optimistic* (Table 1) were positives rated more frequently post-pandemic.

Another area that participants rated more highly was *meaning* (Table 3). Going back to on-campus teaching after ERT may have promoted higher rates of feelings of value and worth in one's teaching. Much uncertainty came from teaching during the pandemic (Pourbahram & Sadeghi, 2022) thus, the majority of participants may have felt more certainty in the workplace post-pandemic with a perceived higher general sense of direction in their teaching. It may also suggest that educators may feel more comfortable with normal class approaches and surroundings that they were used to pre-pandemic rather than an emergency remote working environment.

Another finding showed that *health* displayed very similar ratings from respondents in both contexts. As previously mentioned, ERT may have been a good opportunity for some of them to devote more time to their health. To others however it may have been a barrier of disruption to their normal routine resulting in a more sedentary lifestyle.

From the results observed between the two contexts, it can be seen that experiencing a temporary shift away from usual teaching approaches can adversely affect language teachers' wellbeing in some areas but that a return to familiar surroundings and working practices may bring a wider range of positive affective outcomes.

Limitations

There were some limitations to this study which should be acknowledged here. Firstly, when the survey was distributed, it was anticipated before the study began that a higher return rate would have been achieved due to the large community of educators within the social media group targeted for this project. However, only 22 people responded, which may have made it difficult to separate out the two contexts more clearly.

Secondly, the survey lacked qualitative follow-up items to facilitate interpretation of the related quantitative results. Furthermore, the survey did not state a specific timeframe. Starting questions with "during ERT" denotes the entire duration of the remote teaching. As it is known, ERT was over a number of years for many and teachers' wellbeing may have been affected in different

ways at different stages of the pandemic. The initial stages for example may have seen more negative states, transitioning to more positive states in the final phases of ERT. The wording is therefore a confounding variable that makes interpreting the results more difficult. Following Jerrim et al., (2022), compartmentalizing the pandemic into four key stages and measuring wellbeing at each stage might have provided more definitive findings.

Conclusion

This study compared language teacher wellbeing during the time of ERT and teaching post-pandemic. The aim of the paper was to explore which of the seven elements (positive emotion, negative emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment and health) showed an increase or decrease in teacher wellbeing among the 22 participants.

The PERMA Profiler provided the framework for a 40-item quantitative Google Forms survey with participants giving generalized ratings. Results showed that participants were more *anxious* and *sad* during ERT than in their current teaching context. While ERT may have resulted in new, positive experiences for many, it also caused more anxiety and stress for others. Conversely, while a comparison of the results between the two contexts for some aspects of engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment and health were inconclusive, participants did report higher ratings for other aspects of engagement, meaning and accomplishment in their current teaching context.

Searching for ways to better ourselves as teachers should be an ongoing goal. It can foster more psychological states yet produce a positive teaching environment for learners. In addition, integrating more wellness practices into curricula for teachers is recommended in order to improve wellbeing across the education profession in post-pandemic times.

References

- Butler, J., & Kern, M. L. (2016). The PERMA-Profiler: A brief multidimensional measure of flourishing. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 6(3), 1–48. <https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v6i3.526>

- García-Álvarez, D., Soler, M. J., & Achard-Braga, L. (2021). Psychological well-being in teachers during and post-Covid-19: Positive psychology interventions. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 1–6. <http://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.769363>
- Hodges, C., Moore, S., Lockee, B., Trust, T., & Bond, A. (March 27, 2020). *The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning*. Educause Review. <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning>
- Jerrim, J., Allen, R., & Sims, S. (2022). *How did the Covid-19 pandemic affect the wellbeing of teachers at work?* Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities (CEPEO) Working Paper, 1(20), 1-20. https://johnjerrim.files.wordpress.com/2022/11/working_paper_pandemic_nov_22_v3.pdf
- Kun, A., Balogh, P., & Krasz, K. A. (2017). Development of the work-related well-being questionnaire based on Seligman's PERMA model. *Periodica Polytechnica Social and Management Sciences, 25*(1), 56–63. <https://doi.org/10.3311/PPso.9326>
- MacIntyre, P. D., Gregersen, T., & Mercer, S. (2020). Language teachers' coping strategies during the Covid-19 conversion to online teaching: Correlations with stress, wellbeing and negative emotions. *System, 94*, 102352. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2020.102352>
- McCallum, F., & Price, D. (2010). Well teachers, well students. *Journal of Student Wellbeing, 4*(1), 19–34. <https://doi.org/10.21913/JSW.v4i1.599>
- Mercer, S., & Gregersen, T. (2020). *Teacher wellbeing*. Oxford University Press.
- Moorhouse, B. L., & Kohnke, L. (2021). Thriving or surviving emergency remote teaching necessitated by COVID-19: University teachers' perspectives. *Asia-Pacific Education Researcher, 30*, 279–287. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-021-00567-9>
- Pourbahram, R., & Sadeghi, K. (2022). English as a foreign language teachers' wellbeing amidst COVID-19 pandemic. *Applied Research on English Language, 11*(4), 77–98. <http://doi.org/10.22108/are.2022.132648.1858>
- Sacré, M., Ries, N., Wolf, K., & Kunter, M. (2023). Teachers' well-being and their teaching quality during the COVID-19 pandemic: A retrospective

study. *Frontiers in Education*, 8, 1–13. <http://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1136940>

Seligman, M. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. Simon and Schuster.

Williams, T. K., McIntosh, R. W., & Russell, W. B. (2021). Equity in distance education during Covid-19. *Research in Social Sciences and Technology*, 6(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2021.1>

Author bio

Derek Herbert is a senior English lecturer at Kanda University of International Studies where he presently teaches EFL to university learners. His interests include learner L2 motivation, teacher wellbeing and teacher development. herbert-d@kanda.kuis.ac.jp

Received: March 11, 2023

Accepted: November 28, 2024