

# Examining the Wellbeing of In-Service EFL Teachers in a Spanish Context

## Análisis del bienestar de los docentes de inglés en un contexto español

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This paper aims to extend our understanding of the factors underlying teacher wellbeing and the stress-coping mechanisms that professionals from the field use in their daily lives. The study focuses on the point of view of EFL teachers working in Andalusia, the southern region of Spain. Through semi-structured interviews and using Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory for the content analysis of data, the project identifies the primary sources of distress and growth that participants link to their profession. Key among them are emotional competence, the school environment, legislation, and boundaries. The study also pinpoints the main stress-coping strategies participants were already implementing in their lives to fight against feelings of burnout. Especially relevant is the practice of hobbies, professional training, and establishing boundaries.

*Keywords:* secondary education, second language instruction, English language teachers, teacher burnout, teacher welfare

Este artículo pretende ampliar nuestro conocimiento acerca de los factores subyacentes al bienestar docente y sobre los mecanismos que estos profesionales usan para lidiar con el estrés. Se analizan estos aspectos desde la perspectiva de los profesores de inglés de Andalucía, región sur de España. Mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas y usando la teoría ecológica de Bronfenbrenner para el análisis de contenido de los datos, el proyecto identifica las fuentes de malestar y bienestar que los participantes ligan a su profesión. Entre ellas, destacan la competencia emocional, el ambiente escolar, la legislación y los límites. Además, se enumeran las estrategias implementadas por los participantes para combatir el síndrome de desgaste profesional. Son especialmente relevantes las actividades deportivas, el desarrollo profesional y los límites.

*Palabras clave:* bienestar docente, educación secundaria, enseñanza de lenguas, profesores de inglés, síndrome del desgaste profesional

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This article is based on the thesis completed by Carvajo Lucena (2022) carried out in the framework of the Grant PID2021-128341OB-I00 funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and, as appropriate, by "ERDF A way of making Europe," by the "European Union" or by the "European Union Next-GenerationEU/PRTR."

How to cite this article (APA, 7th ed.): Carvajo Lucena, C., & Guijarro Ojeda, J. R. (2024). Examining the wellbeing of in-service EFL teachers in a Spanish context. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, 26(1), 15–30. <https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v26n1.105783>

This article was received on November 13, 2022 and accepted on November 3, 2023.

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## Introduction

For the past sixty years, researchers in the field of education have explored the concept of teacher wellbeing, aiming to maximize it so that professionals can have more rewarding personal and professional lives (Aelterman et al., 2007; Cardoso Pulido & Guijarro Ojeda, 2020; McCallum & Price, 2010; Mercer, 2018). Research has proven the topic's relevance at a personal, institutional, and even political level. However, little research has been done, specifically in Spain, on the wellbeing of in-service teachers (Guijarro Ojeda et al., 2021; Pérez Valverde et al., 2016) rather than preservice teachers (Cardoso Pulido, 2018; Cardoso Pulido & Guijarro Ojeda, 2020; Pérez Valverde, 2006, 2017). Thus, the present study aimed to focus on EFL teachers at the secondary level in Andalusia, a region in the south of Spain, to understand their awareness of the topic better, concentrating on the factors affecting their wellbeing, both positively and negatively, and the strategies they implement in their daily life to avoid feelings of burnout. We aim to offer a holistic approach, differentiating between those factors and strategies that depend on participants as individuals and those depending on institutional or political authorities.

## Literature Review

### Teacher Wellbeing

Since the 1960s, the idea of wellbeing, in general, has gained momentum (McCallum et al., 2017), motivating a still-growing body of research focused on what it is, how to achieve it, and how to maintain it over time (Brown & Ralph, 1992; Dewaele et al., 2023; Ebadijalal & Moradkhani, 2022; McCallum & Price, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Van Petegem et al., 2005; Weinstein, 1988, 1989). The World Health Organization (1947) defined wellbeing as a “state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (p. 1).

Within the research field, many classifications have been made. From them, and for the present study, two

subcategories are especially relevant: subjective wellbeing and eudemonic wellbeing, which will be analyzed in the field of teacher wellbeing. On the one hand, Diener and Ryan (2009) defined subjective wellbeing as “judgments and feelings about life satisfaction, interest and engagement, affective reactions such as joy and sadness to life events, and satisfaction with work, relationships, health, recreation, meaning and purpose, and other important domains” (p. 391). On the other hand, eudemonic wellbeing, according to Ryan and Deci (2001), would entail pursuing the development of our potential and feeling that, although unpleasant circumstances may surround us, we are making the most of them and thriving to the possible extent.

Finally, teacher wellbeing refers to the levels of satisfaction reported by those in this profession and the incredibly detrimental feelings of burnout that tend to arise among them (Gruber et al., 2020). Numerous studies have dealt with the concept of teacher wellbeing, all of them highlighting the existence of burnout and its consequences (Aelterman et al., 2007; Austin et al., 2005; Butler & Kern, 2016; Gruber et al., 2020; Harmer, 2017; McCallum & Price, 2010; Mercer, 2018, 2020; Pérez Valverde, 2006). Furthermore, much research explores the attitudes or strategies that may enhance the sense of wellbeing among teachers (Aelterman et al., 2007; Macías, 2018; McCallum et al., 2017; Mercer, 2020), while others provide the factors that could be a detriment to it (Austin et al., 2005; Butler & Kern, 2016; Cardoso Pulido & Guijarro Ojeda, 2020; Dang, 2013; Gregersen et al., 2020; McCallum & Price, 2010; Pérez Valverde & Ruiz, 2014). Overall, the increasing interest in the field proves its relevance in society and the pertinency of the present study.

### The Distinctiveness of Teaching English as a Foreign Language

As a discipline, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) has characteristics that suggest the need to consider it separately from others. Borg (2006,

p. 5) summarizes it in five factors: (a) the nature of the subject matter itself, (b) the interaction patterns necessary to provide instruction, (c) the challenge for teachers of increasing their knowledge of the subject, (d) isolation due to the absence of colleagues teaching the same subject, and (e) the need for outside support for learning the subject. Hence, the already existing complexity and expectations put upon teachers seem to be amplified when the subject they teach is a foreign language.

Consequently, the present project aims to complete the field of language teacher wellbeing by addressing some gaps that require further study. Firstly, the study of foreign language teachers as a collective is still in its early stages, being especially relevant to the work of Mercer (Cardoso Pulido, 2018; Cardoso Pulido & Guijarro Ojeda, 2020; Gregersen et al., 2020; Guijarro Ojeda et al., 2021; Jin et al., 2021; Johansen & Pérez Valverde, 2017; Mercer, 2018, 2020; Mercer & Gregersen, 2020; Pérez Valverde, 2006, 2017; Pérez Valverde et al., 2016; Pérez Valverde & Serrano Gallardo, 2019; Sulis et al., 2021), although it is mainly focused on preservice teachers (Cardoso Pulido, 2018; Cardoso Pulido & Guijarro Ojeda, 2020; Pérez Valverde, 2006, 2017) or teacher trainers (Guijarro Ojeda et al., 2021). Therefore, contributions exploring how in-service language teachers interpret and manage their wellbeing are still needed to consolidate our knowledge of this topic. The present project aims to address that gap in the context of TEFL inside the educational system in Andalusia by taking a group of EFL teachers with several years of experience as participants.

### Factors Affecting Teacher Wellbeing

Regarding the factors that may affect teachers' wellbeing, researchers coincide in the following as being crucial: the school environment (Aelterman et al., 2007; McCallum et al., 2017; Mercer, 2020), legislation in the area (Brown & Ralph, 1992; McCallum et al., 2017), resilience (McCallum et al., 2017), self-efficacy

(McCallum et al., 2017), emotional competence (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; McCallum et al., 2017; Mercer, 2020), individual personality (McCallum & Price, 2010; Mercer, 2020), and boundaries between personal and professional life (Mercer, 2020).

All those factors can play a role when teachers try to achieve and maintain a stable state. Thus, when such factors are positively managed and work correctly, teachers report high levels of wellbeing; conversely, if those factors are not adequately handled, this may negatively affect the teachers' wellbeing. Then, whenever teachers face burnout and discontent, or their wellbeing is at stake, they need to know what steps to follow to return to balance. Identifying what is affecting their wellbeing is essential, but so is discovering what coping strategies could allow them to regain their sense of physical, social, and mental stability.

### Coping Strategies

Several studies have explored what practices are already available for teachers to cope with stress (Aelterman et al., 2007; Austin et al., 2005; Brown & Ralph, 1992; Butler & Kern, 2016; Cardoso Pulido & Guijarro Ojeda, 2020; Harmer, 2017; McCallum & Price, 2010; McCallum et al., 2017; Mercer, 2020). Austin et al. (2005) identify palliative strategies to reduce emotional discomfort to make it more bearable. Some include recommendations for teachers to manage their free time, such as physical exercise (Austin et al., 2005) or hobbies (Austin et al., 2005; Harmer, 2017). Other strategies are concerned with the work environment and with attitudes teachers could adopt to reduce their stress levels and feelings of burnout; habits like delegating responsibility (Austin et al., 2005; Brown & Ralph, 1992), self-reflection to identify their limitations (Austin et al., 2005; Brown & Ralph, 1992; Harmer, 2017), or cultivating their interest in a continuous professional development that helps them rekindle their interest in their profession (Mercer, 2018; Harmer, 2017). Finally, there are other strategies that the school

should promote at large. These include programs to train communicative skills and assertiveness (Austin et al., 2005), building networks within the school and the educational community (Aelterman et al., 2007; Mercer, 2020), or promoting positive psychology (Gable & Haidt, 2005) within the institution to help teachers focus on “what’s strong” instead of “what’s wrong” as professionals (Aelterman et al., 2007; Butler & Kern, 2016; Cardoso Pulido & Guijarro Ojeda, 2020; Gregersen et al., 2020; McCallum & Price, 2010; Mercer, 2018).

However, it is worth highlighting that much of the research on these strategies is focused on preservice teachers (Cardoso Pulido & Guijarro Ojeda, 2020; McCallum & Price, 2010;) or reports quantitative studies (Aelterman et al., 2007; Austin et al., 2005). Thus, there is a need for more extensive research carried out with in-service teachers and for a qualitative methodology that could allow us to analyze the outcomes of each strategy over time.

## Method

The present study followed a qualitative methodology, with an initial close-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview as data collection instruments. The study aimed to address three different aspects of the field:

1. What are the primary sources of distress for secondary school EFL teachers in Andalusia?
2. What are their primary sources of professional and personal flourishing?
3. What are the primary tools secondary school EFL teachers in Andalusia have to manage situations where their wellbeing could be at stake, and how did they acquire them?

## Context and Participants

Eight secondary school teachers (seven women and one man) from seven Andalusian schools volunteered to participate in the study. They were contacted via people in common with the principal researcher, and the criterion for selection was that the participants had to work as EFL secondary education teachers in Andalusia. There were no criteria for the type of school (private, semi-private, or public), even though we will state later the general importance this can have on teachers’ work. There were no criteria for the specific year they were teaching or the number of years they had been teaching English. Six participants taught in semi-private institutions, and two in public ones. Semi-private schools in Spain receive public and governmental funding, whereas public schools’ incomes come entirely from the Spanish government. The age of the interviewees was relatively homogenous, ranging from 31 to 47 years. The participants’ teaching experience ranged between three and 20 years (see Table 1). Five were married, two were single, and one was in a relationship, although all reported having solid social and family support. All participants’ first language was Spanish.

The type of school (private, semi-private, or public) was significant as, in Spain, they tend to be organized and managed differently in terms of their approach to issues like spiritual life and relationships among the teachers. Generally, teachers in semi-private schools have more extended contracts and are surrounded by an institution with some religious leaning (typically catholic). In contrast, teachers in public schools earn higher salaries while belonging to more individualistic working environments.

Table 1. Interviewees and Interview Information

	Age	Gender	Type of school	Teaching hours per week	Extra working hours per week	Length of the interview
P1	35	Female	Semi-private	9–11	11–15	46 min
P2	31	Female	Semi-private	18–21	11–15	85 min
P3	43	Female	Semi-private	18–21	16–20	57 min
P4	46	Female	Semi-private	18–21	11–15	45 min
P5	47	Female	Semi-private	4	0–5	68 min
P6	46	Male	Public	11–15	6–10	66 min
P7	38	Female	Public	15–18	11–15	53 min
P8	46	Female	Semi-private	18–21	6–10	37 min

### Data collection instruments and research process

Data for the research were gathered through a sociodemographic data questionnaire and an in-depth, semi-structured interview per participant.

All the participants filled in the questionnaire about their professional experience, their civil status, the number of hours they taught English, and the amount of time devoted to extra work. After completing the questionnaire, participants took part in a semi-structured interview.<sup>1</sup> The semi-structured interviews were conducted over two months; their length is included in Table 1. They were held in Spanish to guarantee that participants felt comfortable expressing their opinions without linguistic limitations. Three interviews were held in person, and five took place online. The format of the interview resulted from the mix of those used in Gruber et al. (2020), Mercer (2020), and Butler and Kern (2016). It was divided into four dimensions:

1. The evolution of the participants' EFL secondary school teaching career in Andalusia included information about their general feelings toward their profession and their main challenges and motivations.

2. Feelings and opinions about the EFL subject in secondary schools in the Andalusian context. Here, the participants were asked about their opinions on the Andalusian EFL curriculum and general guidelines, whether they considered them appropriate, and the reasons behind their answers.
3. Relationship with their department, the management of their schools, and the institution. First, the participants were asked to analyze their opinions about their colleagues in their department, collaboration or differing opinions, and what impact they felt that had on their wellbeing. They then analyzed these aspects about the rest of the school faculty and management team members.
4. Personal and professional balance and wellbeing. This last section included questions regarding the participants' ability to differentiate between their persona at school and at home. They were asked about their relaxation habits and feelings toward their social capital.

Only qualitative data were gathered since qualitative research enables exploring and understanding “the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Almalki, 2016, p. 291). Furthermore, we concluded that creating a semi-structured interview to gather the data from the participants would be the most appropriate method to proceed as it gives

<sup>1</sup> The structure of the interview could be accessed for research purposes by consulting the researchers of the present study.

participants the freedom to add any relevant information while the researchers remain passive.

### Data Analysis

The content analysis model was followed to analyze the data from the interviews, a method of great importance within social science research (Prasad, 2008). In general terms, “content analysis may be seen as a method where the content of the message forms the basis for drawing inferences and conclusions about the content” (Prasad, 2008, p. 2).

The first stage of the content analysis consisted of creating the categories into which the data would be classified. To create such categories, we followed Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory systems (Härkönen, 2007; Mercer, 2020). It allows a more holistic and organized analysis of the source of distress and flourishing that participants identify in their professional and personal lives while making it easier to relate answers to one another to find social patterns that could be addressed. Each system contained the following information:

- **microsystem:** individual qualities (strengths and weaknesses), self-control, self-knowledge, identity, continuous professional development (CDP), psychological and social capital;
- **mesosystem:** institutional relationships, personal relationships, and sense of community within and outside the school;
- **exosystem:** the school, its rules, its functioning, and how it affects teachers;
- **macrosystem:** social, educational, political, and economic context, and teachers’ opinions on them;
- **chronosystem:** life events and their sequence and influential life-turning points in a career.

The second stage entailed the application of these categories to each piece of data, that is, to each transcript of the interviews. After that, each category was analyzed again to collect the most recurrent topics among the answers. They are included in the Results section and a comparison with previous research in the Discussion and Conclusion sections.

### Validity and Reliability

To verify the validity and reliability of the present study, we worked with a research specialist on qualitative research and the topic of teacher wellbeing on coding and categorizing data, and we verified that we had obtained the same results.

Interviewing teachers from different regions of Andalusia (Seville, Jaén, and Granada) also contributes to the validity and reliability of the study since it helps draw conclusions that could be generalized to the whole region.

### Ethics

All interviewees were contacted via e-mail. Through a consent form, they were informed about the study’s aims and the implications of their participation. All participants signed the form before the interview and gave explicit permission to record, transcribe, and utilize their data for the study. All their personal and institutional information was assured to remain anonymous.

### Results

The analysis revealed several contributors and detriments to wellbeing and common coping strategies among participants. A summary of the participants’ answers is included in Table 2, followed by an analysis of the most salient ones.

**Table 2.** Participants' Most Salient Answers to the Questions of the Semi-Structured Interview

Subsystem	Themes	Values	Participants
Microsystem	Vocation to work in secondary school	It was their initial vocation	All but P6
		It emerged after they began to work	P6
	Perceived strengths	Well-organized	P2, P3, P6
		Patience	All but P6
		Resilience	P4, P7
		Empathy	P1, P2, P4, P7, P8
		Emotional commitment	P1, P4, P7, P8
		Professional commitment	P1, P3, P6, P7, P8
		Flexibility	P4
	Perceived weaknesses	Lack of boundaries	P2, P7, P8
		Lack of self-assessment	P3, P4
		Taking things personally	P2
	Interest in continuous professional development	Strong value	All
	School mode vs. home mode	It is easy to go from one to the other	P1, P4, P6
		Not being able to divide fully	P2, P5, P7, P8
		Constantly feeling in school mode	P3
	Stress-coping strategies	Hobby	P2, P6, P7
		Psychological tools	P5, P7
		Setting boundaries	P1, P2, P4, P7
		Other strategies	P4, P6, P8
None		P3	
Sources of distress	Lack of time	P2, P3, P4, P7, P8	
	Perfectionism	P2, P3	
	Profession demands	P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8	
	Other	P6	
Sources of flourishing	Assuming imperfections	P1, P2, P4, P7, P8	
	Boundaries	P1, P2, P4, P7	
	Evolution as a teacher	P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7	
	Personal situation	P2, P4, P5, P7	
	Professional aspects	P3, P6, P7, P8	
Perceived level of wellbeing	Strong wellbeing	P1, P4, P7	
	Burnout from work	P2, P3, P6, P8	
	Burnout for other reasons	P5	

		Optimism	P1, P4, P5, P7, P8	
	Psychological capital	Self-esteem	P1, P4, P6	
		Accepting limitations	P2, P7	
	Social capital	Satisfactory family life and support	P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8	
		Satisfactory social life and support	P1, P4, P5, P6	
Mesosystem	Relationship with students	Positive	All	
	Relationship with the families	Strong value	P4, P5	
	Relationship with colleagues in general	Feeling support	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P8	
		Feeling isolated	P6, P7	
	Relationships within the department	Methodological support	P4, P5, P8	
		Psychological support	P1, P3, P4, P5, P8	
	Relationship with the school management	Feeling isolated	P2, P6, P7	
		Feeling support	All but P6	
	Exosystem	School professional support	Feeling support	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P8
			Feeling isolated	P6
School psychological support		Feeling support	All but P6	
		Feeling isolated	P6	
School guidelines for the subject		There are strict guidelines to follow	P4, P6	
		Teachers have flexibility and freedom	P1, P2, P8	
School programs for continuous professional development		Programs oriented to professional issues	P2, P4, P5, P8	
		Programs oriented to personal issues	P1, P4, P5, P8	
		No particular concern with continuous professional development	P6, P7	
Macrosystem		Regional English curriculum	Appropriate	P8
	Unrealistic		P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7	
	Regional English teaching guidelines	Well-designed	None	
		Incoherent	P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8	
	Sources of distress	Student ratio	P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8	
		Bureaucracy	P1, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8	
		Diversity	P5, P6	
	Role of the inspection	Teacher role	P3	
		Indifference	P2, P4, P8	
	Social factors affecting education	Negative opinion	P6, P7	
Positive opinion		P4, P5		
		Negative opinion	P3, P6	



Chronosystem	Feelings toward their present situation	Motivated	P1, P2, P4, P5, P7
		Burnout	P3, P6, P8
	Past events that could affect them	Personal issues	P2
		Professional issues	P5, P6
	Future events that could affect them	Personal issues	None
		Professional issues	P6, P7

### Factors Perceived as Promoting Wellbeing

The first factor participants identified as necessary was their emotional competence (microsystem), which includes empathy, patience, and resilience. Those participants who claimed empathy and emotional commitment, good organization, and flexibility upheld them as supporting their professional wellbeing as secondary school EFL teachers. They agreed that emotional stability benefits not only them as teachers but also their students and professional lives at the school: “If you are emotionally steady, the class will be emotionally steady, and you’ll be more prepared to deal with any challenge”<sup>2</sup> (P7).

The participants mentioned taking part in courses devoted to the development of the skills mentioned above (P4 and P5), mindfulness activities organized by their schools (P2 and P7), or using prayer as a means to achieve that steadiness (P3, P4, P5, and P6).

Empathy and patience were the most consistently mentioned emotional qualities, and participants deemed them essential to thrive in teaching. However, they also agreed on the need to set a limit to avoid diving too deep into their students’ lives, to the point that it could negatively affect them: “You must set a limit not to get too involved, as it can contribute to your feelings of burnout” (P1).

Secondly, the participants mention the need to have and maintain a strong professional commitment

(microsystem and exosystem). All participants reported a strong professional commitment through CPD and an awareness of how necessary it was to fight against feelings of burnout.

As a teacher, you must be aware of the constant need to recycle yourself. (P4)

New problems need new solutions; past ones are no longer valid. (P6)

All the participants were enrolled, had been enrolled, or were about to enroll in a course that would expand their teaching knowledge (either from a professional or personal perspective), keeping them motivated and engaged with their profession. Furthermore, those participants whose schools actively invest in their CPD as teachers or as people through courses or funding for courses (P1, P2, P4, P5, P8) assessed this as one of the aspects of their institution they valued the most and identified it as a contributor to their feelings of belonging and wellbeing.

The school environment (mesosystem) was also regarded as highly influential. Most participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P8) reported a strong feeling of community within their schools due to good relationships with colleagues and school managers. As the primary motivation behind their sense of community and connection, they emphasized having good personal bonds and opportunities to share personal information regarding their feelings in informal or formal contexts during working hours. Most importantly, they all regarded this sort of relationship as essential for their later development as teachers within the classroom.

<sup>2</sup> Interviews were held in Spanish, but quotes have been translated into English.

If we didn't have this support from colleagues and the school, our job would be tough. We wouldn't be able to do it since our daily work is already demanding; we need this sense of family inside the school, not feeling isolated. (P4)

Finally, some participants mentioned their capacity to set boundaries (microsystem) as necessary and advisable. Those participants who reported an ease to go from "school mode" to "home mode" also assessed that ability as the reason behind their feeling of balance and stability: "I used to take things personally, but not anymore. I don't even wait until I am home, once in the car, I am a mum and not a teacher" (P4).

The participants emphasized that teachers must accept that success in their profession not only relies on them as teachers, but there are also other factors out of their control that must be acknowledged: "You must learn that learning involves both you and your students, and you can't be constantly thinking or blaming yourself at home for something that may not be going well at school" (P6).

Interestingly, P1 stated that setting boundaries was something she had taken up recently and identified it as one of the reasons that she no longer feels the urge to quit her job. However, initially, it provoked her feelings of guilt and unprofessionalism.

### Factors Perceived as Diminishing Wellbeing

Most participants mentioned a lack of boundaries (microsystem) as detrimental to their wellbeing. Five participants reported having difficulties or being unable to separate their "school mode" from their "home mode" and perceived this as damaging their wellbeing both inside and outside the school: "You are more tired and irritable. You are even unable to perform with your students" (P2).

Interestingly, although all of the participants linked this fact to feelings of burnout, two of them assumed

this was part of their personality and faced this obstacle with a different outlook:

I never disconnect, but because I am a very creative person. I pick up my girl, and when helping her with her homework, I may see something I want to try myself as a teacher. (P7)

Mirroring what was mentioned above, the school environment (mesosystem) also could harm wellbeing. The two participants who reported feeling isolated inside their institution (P6 and P7) identified this as one of their sources of professional distress: "It has really affected me, up to the point that I no longer want to get involved in any project at the school" (P6).

However, individual personality proved again to play a role in how much this could negatively affect wellbeing since P6 approached it from a more pessimistic point of view. At the same time, P7 saw it as a source of learning: "It teaches you how to set limits; you learn to differentiate between what should worry you and what shouldn't."

Finally, all participants agreed on the negative impact of legislation and curricular aspects (macrosystem) on their wellbeing. All teachers worked in Andalusia, which meant that all had to follow the curriculum and guidelines established by the regional government (the 15th of January 2021 order by the *Junta de Andalucía*). They all agreed on the extreme ambition of the curriculum in terms of the amount of content given the weekly time they had to teach. All of them mentioned at some point during the interview not having enough time to cover everything, mainly when they also must devote time to develop what has been labeled as "competencies": "It affects negatively as you often find yourself wasting time on things that won't directly affect your classroom, instead of devoting that time to preparing useful materials. It is frustrating and time-consuming" (P3).

The participants also mentioned the methodological guidelines included in the order, which defends active

methodologies and innovative approaches to teaching and learning that are incompatible with the evaluation demands and the books teachers are made to use: “The methodological proposal is contradictory since books don’t include active methodologies as the law requires, nor does it offer activities to attend diversity. Books focus on grammar, not skills” (P2).

### Most Prevalent Stress-Coping Strategies

Three strategies prevailed among participants: hobbies, CPD, and boundaries. On the one hand, five participants named hobbies like running, playing a musical instrument, or hiking as their way to disconnect from work. Although they all expressed satisfaction with practicing them, it is worth mentioning that only P7 affirmed doing hers consistently. “I do feel better doing it, but normally, two months after the beginning of the school, I lack time, and I give it up” (P3).

On the other hand, as previously mentioned, all teachers were engaged in CPD and perceived this as a means to maintain their professional motivation. By learning something new, they recovered their perspective and overcame feelings of burnout. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that those teachers who did not feel they could share this growth with their faculty reported frustration because they felt they were not contributing to the school but to their classes.

Finally, the need to set clear boundaries between their personal and professional lives was a staple among the answers for those who already did it and those who knew they had to improve. Some of the participants defined boundaries as differentiating their “school mode” from their “home mode,” leaving behind preoccupations that could interfere with their wellbeing in either of those spheres: “I enter the school, and I fully become a teacher; my business remains outside, and nobody needs to know about it” (P1).

Others defined setting boundaries as establishing a moment when they stopped working to devote

themselves to people or activities unrelated to their profession. Interestingly, P2 reported feeling guilty when first doing this but acknowledged that it had had an incredibly positive impact on her overall wellbeing.

### Discussion

Results indicate that secondary school EFL teachers in Andalusia are experiencing feelings of burnout at work and are aware of the need to cultivate their wellbeing in order to improve their professional performance. Given the importance of education and the impact of teacher wellbeing on its quality (McCallum & Price, 2010), identifying the factors that improve or diminish teachers’ wellbeing seems essential for schools and their administrative staff to improve our overall educational standards.

As presented in the revision of previous literature on teacher wellbeing, several aspects were identified as essential when determining sources of either fatigue or growth: the school environment (Aelterman et al., 2007; McCallum et al., 2017; Mercer, 2020), legislation (Brown & Ralph, 1992; McCallum et al., 2017), resilience (McCallum et al., 2017), self-efficacy (McCallum et al., 2017), emotional competence (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; McCallum et al., 2017; Mercer, 2020), individual personality (McCallum & Price, 2010; Mercer, 2020), and boundaries (Mercer, 2020). The data collected in the present study contribute to a more specific understanding of four: school environment, legislation, emotional competence, and boundaries.

Regarding the school environment, these results build on existing evidence of how having welcoming and supporting relationships with colleagues and leaders correlates to higher levels of wellbeing among teachers. Even when feeling stressed or drained, participants felt that sharing and receiving support from those who work with them immensely positively impacted their overall professional and personal satisfaction. On the contrary, those who felt isolated (P6 and P7) mentioned how this was detrimental to the quality of their professional life.

They could feel motivated by their students, classes, and performance. However, the feeling of solitude could eclipse all that and leave them with burnout, as they feel unsupported and undervalued.

Secondly, the data affirm that teachers perceive legislative issues like the EFL curriculum, methodological guidelines, and bureaucracy as sources of distress. None of the participants mentioned anything related to the Spanish or Andalusian legislation regarding EFL education as positive; they described it as unrealistic and distant from the reality of a classroom. Student ratios, the amount of content they must cover, and the disparity between a curriculum based on competencies and an assessment system still focused on a numerical grade all burned participants out. They demanded more freedom to adapt to their classes, fewer students so they could effectively attend to the diversity of levels and abilities in the classroom, and a closer relationship between teachers and lawmakers to create a framework that converges with professionals' and students' needs.

Additionally, participants' answers demonstrate that they were aware of the benefits of being resilient and emotionally intelligent for their professional and personal lives. Interestingly, many (P2, P4, P5, P7) reported doing courses to improve their emotional competence and shared skills essential for their wellbeing. These results concur with the previous research on the connection between emotional intelligence and resilience and teachers' personal and professional wellbeing.

Finally, the study's results prove that boundaries between teachers as individuals and their professional lives are a source of flourishing for EFL teachers, and the lack of those limits is a source of distress.

The final aim of the present study was to collect information about the coping strategies participants knew and practiced when fighting against stress and burnout. As mentioned above, the focus would be on palliative strategies that minimized the effect of these two factors instead of on direct action strategies (Austin et al., 2005) that aimed to eliminate them. Previous

studies identified six practices that would enhance teachers' wellbeing: taking up activities such as physical exercise (Austin et al., 2005) or a hobby (Austin et al., 2005; Harmer, 2017), delegating responsibility (Austin et al., 2005; Brown & Ralph, 1992), self-reflection to identify your limitations (Austin et al., 2005; Brown & Ralph, 1992; Harmer, 2017), cultivating CPD (Harmer, 2017), and strategies that should be promoted from both the school as an institution and the administration (Aelterman et al., 2007; Austin et al., 2005; Mercer, 2020).

The data of this study indicate that participants are aware of those strategies, as they mentioned hobbies and CPD. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the most prevalent among all participants was CPD, as they all referred to training courses they were doing, had done, or were planning on doing. Participants' reports about the level of satisfaction produced by this type of professional education were highly positive overall. However, the extent to which CPD could sometimes contribute to the sense of burnout when used as the only strategy could be debated and explored, as it does not imply doing something unrelated to work. Further research is needed to test the outcomes of implementing CPD as the only coping strategy as opposed to combining it with another one, such as practicing a sport, which is more related to taking time out and self-care.

The other prevalent coping strategy was setting boundaries, which agrees with the conclusions of previous research in the field (Austin et al., 2005; Brown & Ralph, 1992). All participants upheld the need to differentiate between "school mode" and "home mode" and to establish a limit of extra time devoted to work at home. Those who reported struggling to do it (P2, P3, P4, P7, P8) identified it as one of their primary sources of distress and accepted having to improve on it to decrease their fatigue and burnout. Nonetheless, as they all mentioned their lack of time to deal with their professional demands (preparing lessons, bureaucracy, attending to students' issues, etc.), it is customary to witness struggles to maintain their boundaries. These

results are evidence that Andalusian lawmakers and schools should consider the need for their professionals to have time out for themselves. Given the benefits that free time, hobbies, and boundaries have proven to have on teachers' wellbeing (and consequently on the overall quality of education), it seems logical to take them into account when establishing what being a teacher involves.

## Conclusion

The topic of teacher wellbeing is gaining momentum, and the research body is proliferating (Aelterman et al., 2007; Austin et al., 2005; Butler & Kern, 2016; Cardoso Pulido & Guijarro Ojeda, 2020; Gruber et al., 2020; McCallum & Price, 2010; Mercer, 2018, 2020; Pérez Valverde, 2006). Overall, the present study contributed to this body of research by revealing the main factors affecting EFL teachers' wellbeing in Andalusia. Among the detriments were fostering negative relationships at the workplace (with colleagues and leaders), demands and expectations from lawmakers, and teachers' perceived emotional competence and personal weaknesses. On the other hand, they perceived it as beneficial to have a sense of community at the school, feel professionally supported by those managing the school, have constant professional development, and be able to set boundaries between their personal and professional life.

In addition, the participants conveyed knowing some strategies they could implement to boost their wellbeing, such as hobbies, motivating their interest in their profession, and, interestingly, establishing limits between their work and themselves as human beings. Nevertheless, they were only committed to their professional growth and were not as consistent when including other stress-coping strategies in their lives.

Consequently, further research could be done to test the impact of solely applying a practice like CPD, which is still related to work, in contrast to combining it with a more leisure-based one. Also, although the study aimed to test the distinctiveness of EFL (Borg, 2006; Gruber et al., 2020; Mercer, 2020) compared to other subjects

of Spanish secondary education, participants' answers were not specific to the topic, as they considered their answers applicable to any other teacher. This suggests that further research is needed to emphasize questions about this distinctiveness in order to test how it is perceived by teachers in this context. Finally, due to the size of the study, we could not go much deeper into the impact that individual personality could have on the answers. However, based on the answers and how one particular aspect could sometimes be regarded as an obstacle or an opportunity to grow, we recommend further research on that correlation, as it could result in more specialized action plans to improve teachers' wellbeing in Spain and in general.

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### **Acknowledgments**

The first author of this manuscript would like to express her deepest gratitude to her tutor, professor Guijarro Ojeda, for his patience and support throughout the study. She also would like to thank the teachers who participated in the study for their time, honesty, engagement, and daily commitment to their job.