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The Chicken and the Egg: The Interplay Between Language Teacher Wellbeing and Learner Engagement

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the relationship between language teacher wellbeing and learner engagement and considers, if priorities need to be set, which should be addressed first for effective practice. Engagement is multidimensional, comprised of three core dimensions – affective, cognitive, and behavioural – and plays a key role in facilitating language use and learning. It is also dynamic over time in complex ways and directly linked to context – which is important for educators to understand for effective practice. In addition, we review conceptualisations of teacher wellbeing, contrasting hedonic and eudemonic perspectives and emphasising ecological approaches that account for the interplay of both personal and contextual influences. After reviewing the nature of these two central constructs in language education, the paper moves on to explore how they interconnect through processes of social contagion and the direct and indirect ways they impact each other. Finally, we conclude that while it would be important to attend to both teacher and learner engagement and wellbeing, if we had to set a priority, it would be teacher wellbeing. If teachers are able to flourish, they will teach in ways which are more likely to foster engagement and positively impact their learners. However, while most educational discourse is learner-centred, we argue that addressing teacher wellbeing would be beneficial for both parties simultaneously. Ultimately, effective language education depends on recognising and supporting the needs of all key stakeholders – both learners and teachers. We reflect, perhaps, that it is time to become a little more teacher-centred in our focus and discourse.

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1 Introduction

Two important topics in contemporary language education are learner engagement and teacher wellbeing. In particular, how do we keep learners engaged in language learning in the face of distractions and competing formats for language expression and communication? Secondly, how do we nurture and support language teacher wellbeing in the face of the increasing daily job demands, such as the introduction of AI (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2024), administrative and discipline issues (Aldrup et al., 2018), low learner engagement (Acosta-Manzano & Mercer, 2025), and the decreasing status of the profession (Mercer, 2023)? In this paper, we reflect on how these key topics are interconnected and discuss the implications of this for practice and research. When setting priorities, what should be addressed first for effective practice: the chicken or the egg – teacher wellbeing or learner engagement?

2 Understanding language learner engagement

Engagement has been famously labelled “the holy grail of learning” (Sinatra et al., 2015, p. 1) and is considered essential for facilitating positive student outcomes (Hiver et al., 2024). The importance of engagement for successful learning has been clearly established and has been correlated with many key variables in SLA and beyond, including higher motivation (Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2017), higher enjoyment (Guo, 2021), lower anxiety (Ismail, 2016), student wellbeing (Song, 2024), persistence in learning, and ultimate academic achievement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Hughes et al., 2008). It is perhaps an especially pertinent construct to understand in respect to language learning as it emphasises action and participation (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). In communicative language teaching and major models of second language acquisition (SLA), language skills are known to improve through repeated and sustained active use; in other words, through learning by doing (Larsen-Freeman, 2007). As Hiver et al. (2021, p. 3) state, “Without engagement, meaningful learning is unlikely”.

However, even highly motivated learners can become distracted (Hiver et al., 2024), which is why engagement has become such a central construct to understand in practice and in research, given contemporary demands on attention and decreasing ability to focus (Newport, 2016). A key distinction between motivation and engagement is the role of intention versus action. Even when students are motivated to learn, this may not automatically lead to active engagement (Oga-Baldwin, 2019).

Motivation is an intention to engage, and engagement is the manifestation of that motivation (Li et al., 2025; Philp & Duchesne, 2016). In other words, the learner may have good intentions, but the multitude of distractions in and beyond the classroom may divert their attention from the task at hand. This leads to lower levels of engagement in class – a situation which is an increasingly common problem facing many learners and teachers (Acosta-Manzano & Mercer, 2025).

Although engagement is difficult to clearly define, there is general agreement about its core components and multidimensional character, which include affective, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions (Fredricks et al., 2016; Sang & Hiver, 2021; Sulis, 2024). The dynamism and interaction of these three dimensions are complex. Although much of the focus of engagement has been on its behavioural manifestations (e.g. Dao, 2025; Hospel et al., 2016; Oga-Baldwin, 2019), it is vital that other dimensions are also considered to fully understand how engagement is experienced and enacted, and to avoid the pitfalls of observing only "fake engagement" behaviours (Mercer et al., 2021). Furthermore, opinions differ regarding whether additional dimensions of engagement should be included in definitions. For example, Svalberg (2009) includes a social component, which refers to when students use their target language for communicative purposes, but are not actively engaged with the language per se. In contrast, Mercer (2019) argues that social engagement is already embedded within one's cognition, affect, and behaviour, given that these components are all socially situated and language use itself is inherently social. However, social engagement as a shared collective construct is an avenue of scholarship yet to be explored more fully within SLA (cf. Ryu & Lombardi, 2015). An additional component of engagement suggested by Reeve and Tseng (2011) is an agentic dimension, which describes how students proactively contribute to the flow of instruction. However, considering that taking initiative can also be reflective of behavioural engagement, and that characteristics of agentic engagement such as purposefulness and autonomy are considered aspects of emotional engagement (Philp & Duchesne, 2016), there is considerable overlap with agentic engagement and the other more common core dimensions.

The three components of engagement, which are more universally agreed upon, have different profiles and are typically indexed through different factors. Emotional engagement refers to how emotionally invested a learner is in something and it is often indexed through measures of enjoyment, enthusiasm, or interest (Skinner et al., 2008). Cognitive engagement refers to the mental effort expended on learning and is typically manifested through attention, effort, and thinking or reflexive processes (Reeve, 2012). Behavioural engagement refers to participation and actions towards goals (e.g., Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). These three dimensions are interdependent and interlinked. For example, a student's emotional engagement may influence the way they cognitively and behaviourally engage (Svalberg, 2018). At present, there remains much to be clarified about how these dimensions interact with each other and the degree to which they are interdependent and under what conditions (Symonds et al., 2025). Nevertheless, it is widely agreed that, in practice and research, ideally, all three dimensions should be considered together when seeking to understand or promote authentic engagement (see, e.g., Sulis & Philp, 2020).

One criticism levelled against some engagement research is that it has sometimes been examined without attention to the context in which it takes place (Aubrey et al., 2022). Context is not only defining for the nature of engagement but is inherent to its definition (Xie et al., 2023). For example, it is important to be explicit about what the object of engagement is, whether this be at a global, language, class, lesson, or task level (Sulis, 2022). Similarly, the level of granularity and relevant time frame being discussed needs to be clear, such as engagement in a task over the timeframe of minutes versus engagement in school over the timeframe of months or years. Despite the ongoing dynamism of engagement as an action state, much research on engagement reports engagement from measures taken at a single moment in time (Hiver et al., 2021). More research is needed to understand how engagement develops over time, how the three different dimensions of engagement are dynamically related, and how engagement at different levels and timeframes is interconnected. Such work could offer teachers practical ideas of pathways to enhance learner engagement and sustain it over time.

In practical terms, it is also worth noting that learners may vary in the way they engage emotionally, behaviourally, and cognitively (Sinatra et al., 2015), possibly stemming from individual differences in their ability to self-regulate (Martin & Borup, 2022), their personality traits (Angelovska et al., 2021), or their ability to respond to differing task demands (Aubrey et al., 2022). Furthermore, Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) make a distinction between procedural and substantive engagement. When a student is procedurally engaged, they appear as if they are on task but may be merely going through the motions as a form of compliance without any deeper cognitive engagement. This type of superficial engagement is naturally less likely to have a positive impact on their learning in the long term. In contrast, those who are substantially engaged are more committed and invested on cognitive, affective, and behavioural levels. As educators, our goal is to maximise this second type of authentic engagement. Thus, Oga-Baldwin and Nakata (2017, p. 152) explain that the goal is ideally the integration of all three components of engagement, noting that "when students are optimally engaged in their studies, they are on task, thinking, and enjoying the learning process".

3 Understanding language teacher wellbeing

Wellbeing has been defined in multiple ways with the two main lines of inquiry taking either a hedonic or a eudemonic lens (Ryan & Deci, 2001). A hedonic understanding focuses more on the emotional perceptions of an individual and the relative positivity and sense of life satisfaction they experience (Diener et al., 1999). The most popular construct has been subjective wellbeing, which has typically been employed in more quantitative work (e.g., King et al., 2024; Wang, Y., et al., 2024). A eudemonic approach takes a more long-term perspective and places a greater emphasis on self-actualisation, sense of meaning, and purpose. The most common eudemonic construct employed in SLA, PERMA, was introduced originally as a framework for understanding flourishing (Seligman, 2011). PERMA is a multifaceted construct comprised of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Although it covers relationships as a social component, it focuses largely on the individual and pays relatively little attention to the social setting and structural conditions which shape and determine wellbeing.

In SLA, a more balanced perspective that integrates both human agency and social perspective and understands how wellbeing is shaped by context and social settings is found in research taking an explicit ecological lens (e.g., Pentón Herrera et al., 2023). An ecological lens explicitly seeks to understand the relational interplay between an individual and their perceptions of the affordances and constraints within their ecologies. This lens has been used by Sulis et al. (2023), who found that wellbeing

can be strongly influenced by factors such as the status of the language, pay, examination systems, and social processes. One other contextual dimension to wellbeing that remains in need of further work is the extent to which wellbeing is culturally shaped and understood (Mercer & Murillo-Miranda, 2025). There have been suggestions that many constructs have evolved from research in largely Westernised contexts and do not reflect the true diversity in conceptualisations of what contributes to and reflects wellbeing (see, e.g., Cummins & Lau, 2019; Lau et al., 2005). For example, Murillo-Miranda (in press) explored the wellbeing of language teachers in Costa Rica and concluded that their experiences of wellbeing were different from those of many Western contexts. One of the main differences was the impact of low salaries and having to teach multiple jobs, suggesting that material sufficiency is a key aspect determining and shaping language teacher wellbeing in Costa Rica. Consequently, questions have been raised as to whether in some settings, before models of eudemonic wellbeing and self-actualisation can be considered, basic needs have to be addressed first. In a study conducted in South Africa, Adedeji et al. (2023), drawing on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, found that for their participants' wellbeing, basic needs must be first met before growth needs are considered. They stress that wellbeing research needs to become more contextually and culturally sensitive. Combining Maslow's pyramid of needs with other models potentially offers a valuable avenue worthy of further exploration depending on country and profiles (see, e.g., Tay & Diener, 2011).

While both learner and teacher wellbeing are defining for successful education (Dreer, 2023) and ideally both will be addressed, in this paper, we focus on teacher wellbeing. There are multiple reasons for this focus. Firstly, quite simply, teachers themselves are valuable stakeholders who deserve wellbeing as a basic human right and should be enabled to flourish in their professional lives (Mercer, 2018). A second reason is that teachers act as the emotional "hubs" of the classroom and their emotions are centrally connected to those of their learners through processes of contagion (Sulis & Mercer, 2025). Teacher wellbeing is also a key determinant of other positive outcomes and has been linked to greater teaching effectiveness (Jones Kingsley, 2021), higher work engagement (Zhou et al., 2024), job satisfaction (Dreer, 2021), better student-teacher relationships (Aldrup et al., 2018), higher learner wellbeing (Harding et al., 2019) as well as higher learner motivation and achievement (Granziera et al., 2023). Naturally, learner wellbeing impacts teacher wellbeing, but there is an expectation that if we begin by attending to teachers, then the wellbeing and academic success of their learners will naturally follow via direct and indirect pathways stemming from teachers' actions in practice (Nalipay et al., 2024).

Attention to the topic of wellbeing has exploded with a shift from it being viewed as a fringe, marginalised topic to a core issue to address within education. The first shift stems from developments globally in education such as the OECD PISA studies which began to measure learner and then teacher wellbeing from 2018 onwards (OECD, 2019). The message was clear – the health and success of any education system cannot be measured by achievement scores alone but, in fact, possibly more revealing and more impactful is the wellbeing of the key stakeholders within that system – both the learners and their teachers (as well as leadership and administrative staff, among others). The second major development which impacted on this field of inquiry came from the unprecedented conditions of the global pandemic which affected all walks of life, but which had an especially profound, damaging, and lasting effect on those active in education (Kauhanen et al., 2023; Penninx et al., 2022). It led the European Commission to state that, "wellbeing must be put at the centre of educational policies" (2021). However, despite the increasing recognition of the centrality of teacher wellbeing for effective and successful education systems, deep sustainable actions at policy and structural levels to address teacher wellbeing needs and actively reduce stressors remain relatively rare.

Despite the increased attention given to the topic, the situation for teacher wellbeing is especially acute as the challenges teachers face daily in their professional lives have steadily been expanding and increasing (Aldrup et al., 2018; Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2024). The profession of teaching generally has intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal demands given its other-oriented focus which risks educators, leaders, and policy makers neglecting the needs of teachers as the focus is placed on learner needs. Other issues have exacerbated an already stressful job with increased problems in respect to pupil misbehaviour, expanding workloads and administration, decreasing autonomy and decision-making capabilities, societal changes, and new challenges triggered by rapid technological advancements (e.g., Aldrup et al., 2018; Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2024). It is perhaps of little surprise then that teacher attrition has also increased across the globe, with low wellbeing as one of the most commonly cited reasons for early-career teachers quitting within the first five years and older teachers choosing to take early retirement (Madigan & Kim, 2021).

4 Understanding the connection between teacher wellbeing and learner engagement

At present, there is little research explicitly investigating the connection between teacher wellbeing and student engagement. One exception is a study by Maricuțoiu et al. (2023), who found a moderate correlation between teacher wellbeing and student engagement. However, this may underestimate the true strength of the relationship, as the connection likely operates through indirect pathways given that research has established a link between teacher wellbeing and diverse positive student outcomes (see above and, e.g., Dreer, 2023; Nalipay et al., 2024; Song, 2024). For example, teacher wellbeing impacts the quality of student-teacher relationships and the provision of emotional support in the classroom (Dreer, 2023; Mercer & Murillo-Miranda, 2025), which, in turn, are key factors known to influence student engagement (Strati et al., 2017).

Therefore, rather than operating as separate variables, teacher wellbeing and student engagement are clearly interconnected and likely to mutually reinforce each other. While research generally focuses on the teacher's impact on the students, this connection works both ways. Studies have also shown students' engagement to impact their teacher's emotions and engagement (Solhi et al., 2024; Sulis & Mercer, 2025). Furthermore, student enjoyment and levels of willingness to communicate have been shown to enhance teacher enjoyment, in other words, when students engage positively in class, teachers also benefit and enjoy their teaching and time in class (Solhi et al., 2024). This suggests an interconnected upward spiral of positivity – teacher and student enjoyment feeding off each other, fostering greater engagement and enhanced wellbeing for both. Equally, when students are disengaged and expend low levels of effort, this can negatively impact teacher motivation and teaching practices, leading to more controlling teacher behaviours and teacher frustration (Zhou et al., 2026). This bidirectional relationship means that teacher and student emotions and engagement have the potential to reinforce each other over time in an ongoing cycle. Understanding

how this reciprocal relationship operates in practice requires an examination of the processes through which teachers and students influence each other in the classroom.

One way to explain the processes through which teacher and student psychologies are connected is the notion of social contagion. Social contagion describes the processes whereby affect, attitudes, and behaviour are transmitted from one individual to another, without a deliberate attempt to exert influence (Levy & Nail, 1993; Nalipay et al., 2024). The teacher's emotions and energy brought into the classroom may shape students' emotions and engagement, while students' responses in class may further reinforce or alter the teacher's experience. These processes often happen below the level of consciousness and are mediated through factors such as type of emotions being communicated, degree of enthusiasm, forms of non-verbal communication, and homophily among others (see, e.g., Chancellor et al., 2017; Frenzel et al., 2009). Various studies have provided evidence of teacher to student contagion, particularly with respect to the contagion of emotions in the classroom. For example, teachers with higher levels of wellbeing may be more emotionally available and display more enthusiasm in class, which has been shown to improve students' enjoyment and engagement (Dewaele & Li, 2021). Furthermore, Solhi et al. (2024) showed that teachers' initial levels of positive emotions positively impacted learners' enjoyment and willingness to communicate, which in turn further elevated the teachers' teaching enjoyment. In addition, a study by Sulis and Mercer (2025) provided evidence of contagion between learner and teacher engagement. Teachers can impact student engagement through the planning, design, and execution of lessons, while subsequent student engagement with the lessons can in turn impact the teacher as they teach. Together, these findings highlight the importance of both teacher wellbeing and student engagement as interconnected and continuously influencing each other to shape classroom experiences through processes of contagion.

As teachers with higher wellbeing have the capacity to be more effective and enthusiastic in their teaching (Dreer, 2023; Jones Kingsley, 2021) and are able to foster stronger student-teacher relationships (Aldrup et al., 2018), they are deemed to be in a better position to promote student engagement through these core determinants of student engagement (Mendoza & King, 2020). High teacher wellbeing may serve as a catalyst for initiating and sustaining reinforcing cycles of positive emotion and engagement in the classroom. Consequently, seeing high levels of engagement among students may further boost the teachers' engagement and positive emotions, creating a positive upward feedback loop between students and teachers (Sulis & Mercer, 2025). Hence, efforts to enhance student engagement may be most effective when they begin with supporting teacher wellbeing, which functions as a key leverage point in the classroom, with effects extending beyond the teachers themselves and transferring to their students via social processes of contagion and enhanced teaching practices. However, work in this area in SLA remains sparse and underdeveloped, leaving a large terra incognita for scholars wishing to specifically understand the connections between engagement and wellbeing but also the processes of contagion across constructs and stakeholders.

5 Implications for practice

Traditionally, implications of a paper such as this would focus first and foremost on the learners and how to boost their engagement. Indeed, there have been several approaches and ways of doing this (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020), such as adjusting classroom tasks so they are challenging, interesting, and meaningful (Fredricks et al., 2016) and ensuring students have adequate teacher support and strong in-class relational quality (Song, 2024). While these are important aspects to consider in terms of improving student engagement, in this paper, we suggest that another effective pathway is to begin with a focus on the teachers and critically reflect on how to best support them to ensure they flourish in their jobs. Teachers with higher wellbeing are more likely to have the capacity to adjust their teaching to promote engagement and positively impact their students (Nalipay et al., 2024). Given the contagion between teacher and learner emotions and engagement (Burgess et al., 2018), this is a key pathway through which learner engagement can be enhanced indirectly. Ideally, in practice, both would be addressed – teacher and learner wellbeing as well as teacher and learner engagement. However, if forced to set priorities – choosing between the chicken or the egg – we argue that prioritising teacher needs and attending to their wellbeing ultimately benefits both teachers and learners. It means teachers can flourish, teach to the best of their unique, creative abilities, and will facilitate more socially connected, enjoyable, cognitively challenging and ultimately engaging lessons and classroom communities. Attending to teacher wellbeing is win-win – for the teachers themselves and also for their learners and their engagement and, indeed, wellbeing.

In practical terms, structural support and policy changes would be a critical first step to ensure that teachers are supported and given the best conditions to carry out their professional practice (Barbieri et al., 2019; Mercer & Murillo-Miranda, 2025). However, changes are slow to happen and, at worst, may end up being mere superficial, lip-service action – a kind of "wellbeing-washing" which does nothing to address the deeper-level problems threatening teacher wellbeing. Although teachers do have agency to address some aspects of their own wellbeing and some individual-level interventions offer some degree of benefits, such as through job crafting (Wang, C. et al., 2024), or increased autonomy (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014), these approaches are only meaningful when accompanied by changes to core organisational issues, school practices, and policies that significantly shape teacher wellbeing (Barbieri et al., 2019; Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). As such, our current plea in this paper is to advocate for teachers and their wellbeing through discussions, awareness-raising, research, writing, or active lobbying of leadership and policy makers – whatever every individual feels they can do to make language learning a more ethically supportive context for teaching and subsequently learning (Mercer, 2023). We all have the power to effect change, even if we start within our own immediate sphere of influence, and, through even small steps, we can change the discourse, the thinking, and the structures.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, we have reflected critically on two main challenges facing language education: learner engagement and teacher wellbeing. We have shown how these two seemingly distinct problems are closely interconnected. Teachers who feel supported and find their work meaningful and satisfying are more likely to create engaging classrooms with creative teaching, while engaged learners, in turn, boost teacher motivation and contribute to a sense of purpose and meaning in their work. While considering both teacher and learner needs is equally important and ideally both should be addressed simultaneously, we hope

to have shown that, in fact, starting with the needs of the teacher would ensure they have the capacity to support learners as well as address their own needs in practice. At present, most educational discourse and policy are typically learner-centred, which is valuable and understandable. Learners should be the ultimate beneficiaries of the education system and teachers typically plan their lessons with learners and their engagement in mind. However, we suggest that teacher-centred policies would also be valuable in benefitting both parties.

In terms of future research, we have shown throughout the article various gaps that require further inquiry including looking at the different strands of engagement (affective, cognitive, and behavioural) and how they may be dynamic across learners and time. We explained how engagement needs an object and how this can vary – notably, at present, there is a need for research to consider how learners and teachers engage with AI and how this affects their wellbeing in both the short and long term. Indeed, perhaps most notable is the absence of studies looking explicitly at the interconnections between wellbeing and engagement. Despite engagement being defined as a contributory component of wellbeing in the popular PERMA model, there is little work looking more closely at this relationship within or across stakeholders in SLA. A related line of inquiry is how processes of contagion and interconnection function in the language classroom. Work on contagion in engagement and/or other constructs in SLA is scant and, yet, we know that there is much to be gained by understanding how emotions and attitudes "spread" among a group of individuals – among learners and/or between teacher and learners. This helps explain emergent states and also group dynamics. We believe that this relational perspective on engagement and wellbeing promises to be a vital future direction for work in this area, in order to benefit both teachers and learners.

Ultimately, the future of language education depends on our ability to recognise that education systems should see both teachers and learners as part of a shared ecosystem. If only learner needs are attended to, we will be doomed to fail. The teachers and their needs are also central to a successful and effective system. Educational systems and institutions should care for all the key stakeholders, including both teachers and learners. The effectiveness of teaching and learning is dependent on the wellbeing and engagement of all involved – let's make sure research and practice reflect these dual concerns and priorities.

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