



The Well-being Disparity among Female and Male Expat English Teachers in Asia

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Introduction

Well-being has a well-established link to physical and psychological health across the lifespan of individuals (Steptoe et al., 2015). Occupational well-being has a well-known association with positive outcomes in the workplace, such as higher job satisfaction, lower stress, higher morale, higher employee retention rates, higher occupational commitment, and better performance (Cotton & Hart, 2003; Hascher & Waber, 2021; McNerny et al., 2015). It is also an important aspect of teachers' working lives, as indicated in a recent volume about professionalism in English language teaching (Coombe et al., 2020). Because of its importance, Mercer (2021) argued that well-being should become a priority in the research and practice of language teaching. However, despite some recent contributions (e.g., Gregersen et al., 2020), the impetus for the present study lies in the fact that there is still "very little research available that investigates language teachers' psychological health" (MacIntyre et al., 2019, p. 27). In order to help address this gap, the study will investigate the psychological well-being of expatriate English language teachers in Asia, that is, native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) who have migrated to the region to teach English.

Literature Review

With globalization came an increasing demand for English education across Asia, where language-in-education policy has widely encouraged the hiring of western-educated NESTs to fill positions in private academies, public schools, colleges, and universities (Copland et al., 2020). While research has investigated various aspects of this cohort, such as their experiences in co-teaching programs (Copland et al., 2020), leadership (Greenier & Whitehead, 2016), occupational commitment (Moodie, 2020; Moodie & Meerhoff, 2020), gender (Appleby, 2014), and ethnicity (Charles, 2019), there are currently no published studies available that explicitly measure the occupational well-being of expat English teachers in Asia.

Well-being, in an everyday sense, may not require a definition, yet in order to study well-being, researchers need a way to operationalize it. Well-being is a latent construct, so it cannot be measured directly; therefore, researchers generally assess it by gathering self-reported responses to scales measuring different components of it, such as affect, competence, satisfaction, relatedness, and autonomy (e.g.,



Stewart-Brown et al., 2009). Occupational well-being research is an extension of this work, but, as the name implies, is focused on well-being in the context of careers and workplaces.

One of the clearest and perhaps least surprising findings of occupational well-being research is that it is important, for both individuals and organizations. For one, well-being is positively associated with organizational commitment and job satisfaction and negatively related to turnover and turnover intentions (Morin et al., 2015; Wright & Bonett, 2007). The well-being of employees is tied to organizational performance (Cotton & Hart, 2003); employees with higher commitment and well-being tend to put more effort into working towards organizational goals (McInerney et al., 2015; Morin et al., 2015). As with general well-being (Steptoe et al., 2015), occupational well-being has a U-shaped association with age; middle-aged employees tend to have lower well-being than younger or older employees (Warr, 1992). Research has also shown how power imbalances and discrimination negatively influence women's well-being in the workplace (Sojo et al., 2015). However, a recent research review of teacher well-being has shown that gender is not a significant factor in most contexts (Hascher & Waber, 2021).

It is with these ideas in mind that the present project was conceived. This small study is the first from a project that will explore the link between well-being and other measures, such as self-efficacy and turnover intentions, among expatriate English teachers. When examining the preliminary well-being data, box charts and scatter plots made it clear that there were gender differences before any statistical tests were run. Given Mercer's (2021) call for prioritizing well-being in ELT, an important step is to provide empirical data as to the well-being of English teachers in different contexts. Thus, the aims of this study are to report the well-being levels of expat English language teachers in Asia and to see if any of their demographic factors are significant predictors of well-being. Given these aims, the research questions are:

1. Is the well-being scale used in this study a reliable measure of well-being at work?
2. What are the well-being levels of expat English teachers in Asia?
3. How much of the variance in well-being scores can be explained by demographic factors?
4. Which demographic factors, if any, are significant predictors of well-being scores?
5. Do female expat English teachers in Asia have lower feelings of well-being in the workplace than male expat English teachers?

Methods

Given the nature of the study, quantitative methods are applied in the collection and analysis of the data. A well-being survey was administered online through Google Forms, and the analysis was informed by recent recommendations for quantitative research in language teaching research, such as indicating confidence intervals, effect sizes, and adjusted alpha levels (Lindstromberg, 2016).

Participants: Recruitment and Sample

The target population is expatriate NESTs in Asia. The inclusion criteria included being a current full-time English language teacher in Asia and meeting the requirements for teaching visas regarding education and citizenship (i.e., being educated in and a citizen of a western English-speaking country). Sampling for the study was done online. Recruitment information was posted on relevant Facebook group pages and various message boards for English teachers in Asia. Additional participants were sought through contacting administrators of relevant programs involving expat teachers and forwarding them a link to the survey to pass on to potential participants. The survey was anonymous, so it did not collect any identifying information, such as the email addresses of the respondents. Because of these procedures, it is not possible to ascertain response rates, but the initial aim was to have at least 200 participants, which an initial power analysis indicated would be sufficient for a large power rating (95%) at a medium effect size for a multiple regression analysis.

There were 228 respondents, including 116 females (51.1%), 103 males (45.2%), 0 other (0.0%), and 9 who preferred not to state their gender (3.9%). Participants were between the ages of 20 and 61 ($M = 34.30$; $SD = 8.95$), and they had from less than a year to 27 years of English teaching experience ($M = 7.80$; $SD = 6.50$). Their countries of origin include the US ($n = 111$), Canada ($n = 36$), the UK ($n = 29$), South Africa ($n = 15$), Australia ($n = 14$), Ireland ($n = 8$), and New Zealand ($n = 6$) (9 participants did not specify a country of origin). Their highest levels of education were as follows: Doctoral Degree (6.6%), Master Degree (33.8%), and Bachelor Degree (59.6%). Eighty-four participants (36.8%) had either an Education Degree or a degree in Applied Linguistics or closely related field, 49 (21.5%) held teacher qualifications from their home countries, and 178 (78.1%) had ELT certificates. Their primary workplaces included (a) private academies ($n = 37$); (b) public or private schools ($n = 126$); and (c) colleges, universities, or government organizations ($n = 63$). The vast majority (92.5%) were teaching in South Korea ($n = 211$), with the remaining respondents in other Asian countries ($n = 17$).

Measures

The construct of interest is well-being at work, measured using the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS) (Stewart-Brown et al., 2009), adapted for the workplace. SWEMWBS, as the name implies, is a shortened version of the full-scale, designed to capture the latent variable of well-being across five components: affect, satisfaction, competence, relatedness, and autonomy. The seven items of the scale were used verbatim with an additional phrase ‘at work’ added to each (see Table 1 below). Participants marked responses across a seven-point scale (from ‘1 - Strongly Disagree’ to ‘7 - Strongly Agree’), so the range of possible scores is 7 to 49.

Although there are numerous measures of well-being available, this one was selected for its simplicity (seven easily understood items), high response rate, and the fact that it has undergone thorough validation and reliability testing. The short scale has a correlation to the full scale of over .95, and its reliability has been established at .84 (Ng Fat, et al., 2017).

Data Collection and Analysis

As indicated, participants were recruited online and through email. A link to a Google Forms page was included in the invitations. Upon clicking the link, respondents were directed to the information page with the well-being items appearing below. The next page included the demographic information and the submit button. After submitting, the respondents’ data were automatically saved to the researcher’s Google Drive account.

After the collection period ended, data were cleaned, uploaded to SPSS 27, and screened for unusual response patterns (five cases were removed). Next, to address RQ1, the descriptive results were generated for the scale and a reliability analysis was run. To address RQ2, a standard multiple linear regression was run with well-being as the dependent variable (DV) and gender, home country, teaching experience, teaching context, and education as the independent variables (IVs). In order to include people preferring not to state their gender in the analysis, pairwise deletion (as opposed to listwise deletion) was selected. Assumptions for multiple regression were checked, including the independence of errors, homoscedasticity, and a lack of multicollinearity.

Based on the results of RQ3 and RQ4, *t*-tests were run to investigate RQ4. Assumptions were checked prior to the analysis. Although the Shapiro-Wilk test ($0.98, p < .001$) indicated the distributions were non-normal, the sample size was large enough to overcome this aspect. *t*-tests were preferred over MANOVA because a one-tailed *t*-test will immediately show the direction of the difference, whereas MANOVA only indicates there are differences, something that will already be indicated by the regression analysis. The purpose is to see which subscales of the well-being survey show gender differences, so an omnibus test is not required.

In order to minimize the risk of Type 1 errors in the regression and *t*-tests, a Bonferroni correction was included ($\alpha = .05/5 = .001$). In order to address possible Type II errors, a post hoc power analysis was run for the multiple regression, indicating a power of 79%. The same was done for the *t*-tests, indicating a power of 97%. Effect sizes for the *t*-tests are given in Cohen's *d*, where .2 indicates a small effect, .5 a medium effect, and .8 a large effect.

Results

First, Table 1 displays the descriptive results for well-being item-by-item. The reliability analysis showed high internal consistency ($\alpha = .83$). In addition, deleting any one item would have lowered the reliability slightly, which attests to its efficacy as a measure of well-being. The response means show that the items for *relatedness*, or the feeling of having close relationships with colleagues (Item 6), and *optimism* (Item 1) had the lowest ratings, which is likely in part due to the fact that the data collection was done in mid-to-late 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when most schools in the region had moved to full or partial remote work.

TABLE 1

Descriptive Results: Well-Being Scale (SWEMWBS) Adapted for the Workplace

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α if deleted
1. I've been feeling optimistic about the future at work.	4.08	1.73	.80
2. I've been feeling relaxed at work.	4.29	1.75	.81
3. I've been feeling useful at work.	4.68	1.74	.79
4. I've been dealing with problems at work well.	5.08	1.43	.82
5. I've been thinking clearly at work.	5.13	1.43	.79
6. I've been feeling close to other people at work.	3.85	1.85	.82
7. I've been able to make up my own mind about things at work.	5.00	1.67	.81
Well-being at Work Total ($\alpha = .83$)	32.11	8.17	

Note. *N* = 228

Results of the multiple linear regression indicated that there was a small but significant collective effect between the demographic factors gender, home country, ELT experience, education, and type of school where employed ($F(5, 208) = 3.28, p = .007, R^2 = .073$). Table 2 displays the results from the regression analysis for each factor.

TABLE 2

Predictors of Self-Reported Wellbeing at Work for Expat English Teachers

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Constant	27.56	11.08	<.001	[22.66, 32.46]
Gender	3.44	2.81	.005	[1.03, 5.85]
Home Country	.25	.96	.337	[-.26, .76]
Education	1.89	1.60	.112	[-.44, 4.22]
School Type	.05	.45	.786	[-1.56, 2.06]
ELT Experience	1.89	1.60	.665	[-.16, .26]

Note: *N* = 228 (116 females, 103 males, 9 not stating gender). Education factor measured by 1 = having a degree in Education, Applied Linguistics, or closely related field; 0 = not having one. CI = Confidence interval [lower, upper].

The *R*-squared value of .073 indicates that these demographic factors explain a small but significant amount of the variance in well-being scores; however, examining the individual predictors shows that gender is the only significant factor in the model. The unstandardized regression coefficient ($B = 3.44$) is indicating that being female is associated with a 3.44-point lower well-being score than being male (when other factors are held constant). This is a meaningful and notable disparity, equivalent to being 7.0% lower on the well-being scale. Because of this, the next part of the study will look at a full-scale and sub-scale comparison of well-being among female and male expat English teachers.

First, Figure 1 presents the boxplot of well-being scores by gender. As can be seen, the median score, indicated by the black line, is also higher for the male cohort, although the female cohort had a higher range (indicated by the upper and lower lines) and two outliers with exceptionally low well-being scores.

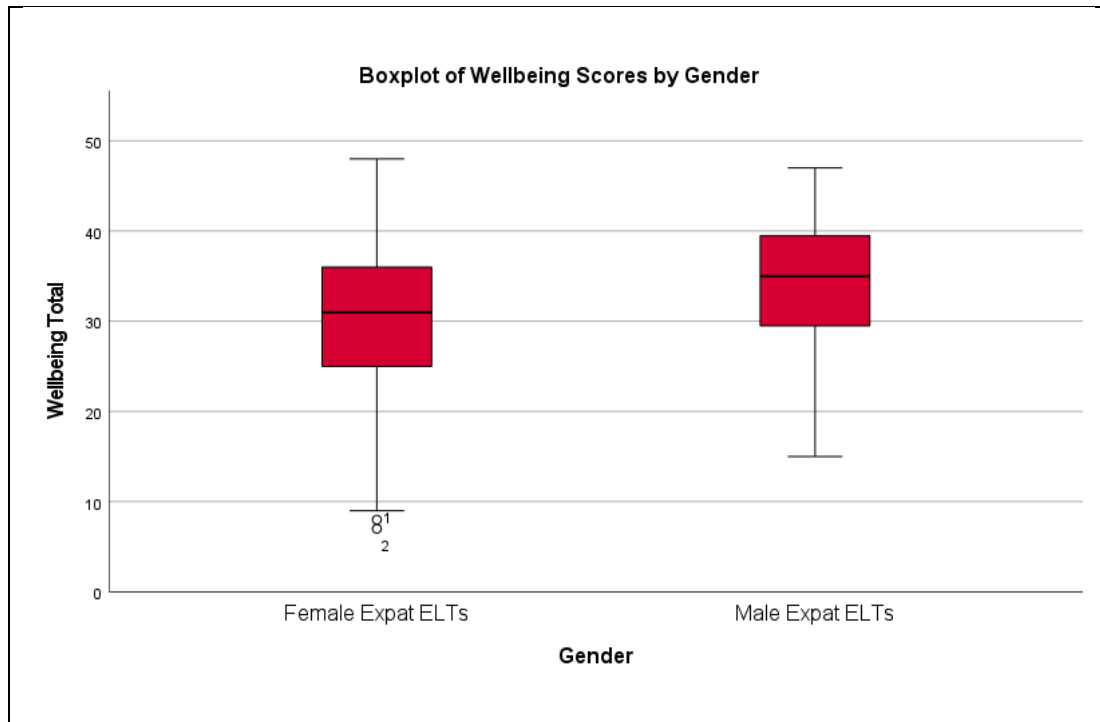


Figure 1. Boxplot of well-being scores by gender of expat English-language teachers in Asia.

Next, independent samples *t*-tests were run to establish how much lower female respondents' well-being scores were than male respondents across the scale. These results appear in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Comparison of Well-being Components among Male and Female Expat English Teachers

Well-being Component	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> (one-sided)	<i>M</i> Dif.	95% CI	<i>d</i>
Affect (Items 1 & 2)	-2.14	217	0.017	-0.85	[-1.63, -0.07]	-.29
Satisfaction (Item 3)	-2.50	217	0.007	-0.59	[-1.06, -0.13]	-.34
Competence (Items 4 & 5)	-3.47	217	<0.001	-1.15	[-1.80, -0.50]	-.47
Relatedness (Item 6)	-2.94	217	0.002	-0.72	[-1.21, -0.24]	-.40
Autonomy (Item 7)	-2.38	217	0.009	-0.54	[-0.98, -0.09]	-.32
Well-being Total	-3.55	217	<0.001	-3.85	[-5.99, -1.71]	-.48

Note: *N* = 228 (116 females, 103 males, 9 excluded for not stating gender). *M* Dif. = mean difference. *d* = effect size. $\alpha = .001$.

As can be seen, females rated their occupational well-being lower than males for all of the well-being components, and the effect sizes were medium-small to medium across all components. Although the affect component (Items 1 & 2) misses the adjusted alpha level, the Bonferroni adjustment is a conservative method, and the cutoff is somewhat arbitrary. Examining the confidence intervals and effect size suggest that this is also a meaningful difference between male and female levels of well-being. Notably, the total scale results show that female expat English teachers' self-reported well-being is nearly half a standard deviation lower than their male counterparts (Cohen's *d* = -.48).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored self-reported well-being at work with expat English teachers in Asia. The key result is the disparity found between female and male expat teachers, providing empirical support for Mercer's (2021) call to prioritize well-being in language teaching.

To answer RQ1, it can be confirmed that the well-being scale (SWEMBS), adapted for the workplace, is a reliable measure of occupational well-being, with a comparable reliability statistic ($\alpha = .83$) to the original ($\alpha = .84$) (Ng Fat et al., 2017). In regard to RQ2, descriptive results were provided, showing that the sample had lower levels of *relatedness* (Item 6) and *optimism* (Item 1) than the other items, something likely attributable to the fact that data collection took place in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, when presumably most participants were teaching remotely. As for RQ3, although the multiple regression showed that only a small amount of well-being is attributable to demographic factors, gender was explaining much of the variance. Regarding RQ4, the model showed that being male was associated with a 3.44-point increase in well-being, or the equivalent of being 7.0% higher on the 49-point scale. Answering RQ5 explored gender differences in more detail. *t*-test results showed that there were significant differences on each component of the well-being scale (affect, satisfaction, competence, relatedness, and autonomy). Thus, the study confirmed that female expat English teachers in Asia, as a group, are reporting significantly lower feelings of well-being in the workplace than male expat English teachers. Well-being for female expat teachers was approximately half a standard deviation lower than for male expat teachers, something which indicates a meaningful difference in their day-to-day experiences in the workplace.

The clearest implication from this study is that this well-being disparity needs to be acknowledged and addressed. Further qualitative and mixed-methods research is clearly warranted in order to explain the reasons further. For instance, it is necessary to see if this difference is due to power disparity, discrimination, and/or other factors (see Sojo et al., 2015), and if so, look for ways to address it, such as through national and/or institution-led interventions, ELT community-based initiatives, and professional development programs. Although efforts were made to include a cross-section of participants across Asia, the sample is strongly biased to those working in Korea. Thus, further research is needed to confirm whether this phenomenon is indeed apparent across Asia and the wider expat ELT community more generally, and also to see if the disparity remains after the COVID-19 pandemic has ended.

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