




Thriving or surviving? Language educators' post-pandemic health and wellbeing

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Abstract

Teaching is a stressful profession, with language educators more susceptible to emotional exhaustion, burnout, and attrition than their colleagues in other disciplines (Moser & Wei, 2024; Sulis et al., 2022). Novice language educators, in particular, are more affected by disciplinary stressors and require different support than experienced peers to attain workplace wellbeing (e.g., Babic et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic added emotional and professional stressors to language teaching (Crane, 2020), as the shift to emergency remote teaching (ERT) heightened care work and pedagogical demands (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Warner & Diao, 2022). While these challenges are well-documented, little is known about language educators' post-pandemic workplace wellbeing.

Adopting a career stage lens (Day et al., 2007), this study examined the emotional and psychological wellbeing, physical health, and emotion regulation capacity of 254 early and mid-to-late career language educators in 2023. While participants reported strong health and wellbeing overall, early-career educators (i.e., whose careers started in or after spring 2020) reported lower wellbeing and emotion regulation capacities than their more experienced colleagues. Given that workplace wellbeing can protect against stress and burnout, results point to the benefit of tailoring professional development programming to career stage-specific needs to support effective and sustained workplace wellbeing.

Keywords: *Language Educator Wellbeing, Career Stage Differences, Emotion Regulation, Hedonic Adaptation*

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Introduction

Teaching is considered a highly stressful occupation (Johnson et al., 2005). Educator stress is a high stakes concern that affects student perception of instructional quality, classroom engagement, and learning outcomes, as well as educator burnout and attrition (MacIntyre et al., 2019; Moser & Wei, 2024). In fact, up to 50% of educators leave the profession within five years (DeAngelis & Presley, 2011), often citing stress and burnout as driving factors in their decision (Ingersoll, 2012).

Notably, language educators, who experience additional domain-specific stressors, such as high emotional labor, the precarious state of the profession, job insecurity, and language anxiety (MacIntyre et al., 2019), are most susceptible to burnout, attrition, and turnover (e.g., Acheson et al., 2016; Moser & Wei, 2024). In response, research began to investigate language educator wellbeing as one possible variable to protect against adverse responses to workplace stress (e.g., burnout, attrition) and to create positive and sustainable workplace conditions that allow for effective classroom instruction (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2024; Mercer & Gregersen, 2020).

The teaching and learning conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic heightened awareness of and interest in factors affecting language teacher wellbeing, though research on the topic predates 2020. This pre-pandemic work focused on identifying profession- and domain-specific stressors (e.g., heavy workload), individual psychological correlates of wellbeing (e.g., personality), and resources to alleviate stress and build resilience (Babic et al., 2023; MacIntyre et al., 2019; Sulis et al., 2023). This work showed that language educators at different career stages had varying resources (e.g., self-efficacy, work-life balance, pedagogical competence, healthy lifestyle) and support needs (e.g., social networks) to effectively manage workplace stressors and achieve sustained wellbeing (Babic et al., 2022, 2023; Sulis et al., 2022, 2023). Especially novice language educators with less than three years of experience reported fewer resources and more support needs than their more experienced peers (e.g., Babic et al., 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic complexified the picture of (language) educator stress and wellbeing, as it forced most language instruction from physical classrooms to emergency remote teaching (ERT) in virtual environments. For language educators, this shift impacted (inter)personal relationships, affected learning and teaching routines, altered academic and career trajectories, and dissolved traditional communities of practice and learning (e.g., Crane, 2020). It also introduced new stressors, including inadequate workspaces, care-taking needs, (the loss of) health care coverage, financial losses, and technostress (Goertler & Gleason, 2024), which increased the already high stress levels and workload (MacIntyre et al., 2020). However, instead of recognizing and alleviating their multifaceted support needs, many institutions demanded that educators prioritize learners' (new) diverse emotional, interactional, academic, logistic, and technological support needs over their own (Benesch & Prior, 2023; Snow et al., 2023). Consequently, educators' pedagogical and administrative workload and (invisible) emotional labor increased further (Snow, et al., 2023; Warner & Diao, 2022), and their wellbeing declined as the pandemic continued (e.g., Katsarou et al., 2023; Wong et al., 2022).

Pandemic-era wellbeing research focused on identifying pandemic-related stressors (MacIntyre et al., 2020) and their impact on decisions to leave the profession (Moser & Wei, 2024), novice educators' identity construction and agency (Janes & Chen, 2024; Zhang & Hwang, 2023), and dwindling wellbeing and health resources (Wong et al., 2022). Notably, many language educators reported physical symptoms (e.g., exhaustion, fatigue, headaches, tension) as a manifestation of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001), which led to an unprecedented rate of early retirement and higher rates of attrition during and immediately after the pandemic (Moser & Wei, 2024).

While these adverse pandemic-era psychological and physiological effects are well documented, little is known about language educators' post-pandemic wellbeing and health. This gap is particularly pronounced for early-career educators, who are more vulnerable to workplace stressors, more likely to leave the profession, and whose career start coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. Socialized into the profession in a crisis context, this group of educators never experienced the shift from physical classrooms to ERT. Instead, they navigated the reverse transition between fall 2021 and 2022, requiring them to adjust their pedagogical practice, (re)construct their professional identity, and to develop novel classroom management skills (Janes & Chen, 2024; Wong et al., 2022; Zhang & Hwang, 2023). At the same time, mid-to-late career language educators, who returned to familiar physical classroom environments, reported post-pandemic policy- and teaching-related challenges relating to their instructional practice, role ambiguity, and a lack of support structures (Ahn & Chi, 2023), all of which have been identified as stressors that adversely affect educator wellbeing.

The objective of this article is threefold. First, I examine how the experience of a prolonged period of profession-, domain-, and pandemic-related stressors impacts language educators' post-pandemic wellbeing, including their physical health. Second, I explore to what degree emotion regulation capacity, which has been identified as an effective resource to manage the emotional exhaustion of language teaching (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 2020), is linked to language educators' post-pandemic wellbeing. Third, I investigate career stage differences in wellbeing, health, and emotion regulation capacity to shed light on educators' post-pandemic wellbeing support needs. I conclude by discussing how my findings can inform wellbeing-

focused professional development and other support structures that are tailored to language educators' career stages.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing (Language) Educator Wellbeing and Health

Educator wellbeing research, which is rooted in positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), is carried out in two main paradigms: hedonic and eudaimonic. The hedonic paradigm conceptualizes wellbeing as subjective happiness or pleasure (Ryan & Deci, 2001). This conceptualization is rooted in subjective wellbeing theory (Diener, 1984), which defines wellbeing as the perceived imbalance of positive over negative affect and satisfaction with accomplishing personal life goals. In contrast, the eudaimonic paradigm emphasizes self-actualization, which occurs when “people’s life activities are most congruent [...] with deeply held values” (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 146). This conceptualization aligns with psychological wellbeing theory (Ryff, 1989), which focuses on purposeful self-development in relation to one’s environment and individual, communal, and societal values (Jin et al., 2021). Ryff and Keyes’ (1995) Psychological Wellbeing Scale is a widely used self-report instrument to measure the six components of Ryff’s (1989) psychological wellbeing construct: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance.

In language education, wellbeing research often blends hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives, and many studies utilize Seligman’s (2011) integrated PERMA model. PERMA stands for **p**ositive emotions, **e**ngagement, **r**elationships, **m**eaning, and **a**ccomplishment, which are the essential elements of wellbeing (Seligman, 2018). The model’s measurement tool, the PERMA Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016), offers a general, workplace-specific, and adolescent version. However, its construct validity across diverse populations has yielded mixed results, particularly regarding factor structure and discriminant validity relative to subjective and psychological wellbeing (Goetze, 2025a). In a validation study, Goetze (2025a) found that the workplace-specific PERMA Profiler (Kern, 2014) and Ryff and Keyes’ (1995) scale required structural adjustments for a language educator sample. The adjusted PERMA scale emphasized social and emotion-laden dimensions, such as feelings of accomplishment, fulfillment, uplifting emotions, and relationships. In contrast, the adjusted Psychological Wellbeing Scale measured workplace-related self-constructs, such as self-esteem (i.e., self-acceptance and environmental mastery), purpose-driven growth, and self-determination (i.e., autonomy). The validity analysis also showed that both scales measure conceptually distinct constructs, despite the assumption that PERMA integrates hedonic and eudaimonic elements. These findings suggest that a holistic understanding of language educator wellbeing requires the use of multiple validated scales rather than reliance on a single integrated instrument.

An additional indicator of wellbeing is physical health. While it is widely studied in (occupational) medicine, public health, education, and psychology (e.g., Bogaert et al., 2014; De Simone et al., 2016; Madigan et al., 2023; Scheuch et al., 2015), physical health has received little attention in Instructed Second Language Acquisition (ISLA) contexts, and no standard definition exists. In educator-focused research, it is often operationalized as the presence or absence of physical symptoms (De Simone et al., 2016) and measured via self-report in the context of workplace stress, predominantly in K-12 settings (e.g., Madigan et al., 2023). Compared to the general public, educators experience higher rates of mental and psychosomatic conditions, including exhaustion, fatigue, headache, and tension (Scheuch et al., 2015), which have been characterized as physical manifestations of burnout (Madigan et al., 2023) that are caused by chronic workplace stressors (Maslach et al., 2001).

Only two pre-pandemic studies examined physical health in the context of language educator stress (MacIntyre et al., 2019) and wellbeing (Sulis et al., 2022). Both studies defined physical health as feeling good and healthy each day and measured it with the physical health subscale of the PERMA Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016). MacIntyre et al. (2019) found a significant negative correlation between chronic stressors and physical health ($r = -.36, p < .01$), while Sulis et al.’s (2022) cluster analysis showed that physical

health varied strongly between educators and significantly shaped their wellbeing profiles. This scarcity of data underscores the need for more research that systematically examines language educators' physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing to enable the development of effective wellbeing-focused supports.

Language Educators' (Pre)Pandemic Wellbeing and Health

Research on language educator wellbeing is still nascent, with empirical studies only emerging around 2016 (Mercer et al., 2016; Talbot & Mercer, 2018). Mercer and colleagues (2016) were the first to emphasize the importance of examining language educators' inner lives through a positive psychology lens and stressed the need to protect language educators' wellbeing in a high-stress profession. Talbot and Mercer (2018) investigated educators' wellbeing management, finding that positive emotions and meaningful student relationships enhanced wellbeing, while stress, workload, and low student enthusiasm undermined it. They highlighted the importance of emotions and emphasized participants' use of emotion regulation strategies (e.g., cognitive reappraisal) as one effective tool to manage stress and wellbeing.

Since then, research efforts have multiplied and diversified (e.g., Babic et al., 2022, 2023; Gregersen et al., 2023; Jin et al., 2021; Mercer & Gregersen, 2020; Sulis et al., 2022, 2023), making wellbeing a central focus in language educator psychology (Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018). One line of research examines wellbeing across the career span and investigates how educators leverage their individual- and workplace-level resources, conceptualized as psychological, social, human, and health capitals, to build resilience and wellbeing to effectively manage workplace stress (Babic et al., 2023; Mason & Poyatos Matas, 2016; Sulis et al., 2022, 2023). These capitals encompass self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism (i.e., psychological capital), professional networks and relationships (i.e., social capital), knowledge, skills, and practical experience (i.e., human capital), as well as physical health and wellness (i.e., health capital) (Luthans et al., 2004).

Pre-pandemic studies found systematic differences in how language educators develop and deploy these capitals across the career trajectory (Babic et al., 2023; Sulis et al., 2023). Early-career educators often face greater challenges with fewer resources due to their still developing professional identity and classroom competence. Despite potential advantages from younger age-related health capital, they require structured mentoring, pedagogical feedback, collegial networks, emotion regulation support, and work-life balance guidance (Babic et al., 2023). Without these structured supports, stressors like low self-efficacy, high emotional labor, and poor social or institutional integration, coupled with a lack of administrative support, increase the likelihood of burnout and early attrition (Moser & Wei, 2024) and can affect instructional effectiveness (e.g., Acheson et al., 2016).

In contrast, mid-to-late career educators generally possess greater psychological, social, and human capital, benefitting from higher pedagogical competence, resilience, and professional networks, alongside a sense of accomplishment (Babic et al., 2023; Sulis et al., 2023). However, they also face challenges, such as increased administrative duties (e.g., curriculum design), caregiving demands (e.g., childcare or elder care at home), age- or profession-related health issues, or feelings of career stagnation, that have been shown to affect their wellbeing (Babic et al., 2023). Accordingly, structural supports that foster social bonds, maintain work-life balance, and safeguard health are critical for sustaining workplace wellbeing for these educators.

Taken together, these pre-pandemic studies suggest that language educators at all career stages can achieve and sustain workplace wellbeing, if supports are tailored and needs-based (Babic et al., 2023; Moser & Wei, 2024; Sulis et al., 2023). However, data mainly came from secondary school teachers in Austrian English as a foreign language (EFL) and British world language (WL) settings. The authors caution that stressors and coping resources emerge from different layers in the ecology of the profession, including the individual educator, the immediate classroom, institutional or national policies, and structural conditions, and stress that outcomes will likely differ across contexts (Babic et al., 2023; Moser & Wei, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified research interest in (language) educator wellbeing, further diversifying its scope (Katsarou et al., 2023; Moser & Wei, 2024). In general education, studies documented novice educators' professional induction and socialization experiences and highlighted exacerbated stress

and insufficient supports during this period (e.g., VanLone et al., 2022; Webb & Baumgartner, 2023). Katsarou et al. (2023) reported “deleterious consequences” (p. 9) of the pandemic for educator wellbeing across educational levels and contexts, including language education. Language educator wellbeing research during this time shifted its focus to pandemic-specific stressors and coping strategies (MacIntyre et al., 2020), the impact of (lacking) support structures on retention decisions (Moser & Wei, 2024), experiences with emergency remote teaching (ERT) across career stages (Zhang & Hwang, 2023), and the emotional toll of instructional changes (Wong et al., 2022).

Zhang and Hwang (2023) found that early-career educators struggled with ERT and had difficulty building student relationships, which severely impacted their professional identity development and caused stress. Typical concerns of developing self-efficacy, classroom management skills, building networks, and mastering pedagogical and subject knowledge, were overshadowed by technological challenges. In contrast, mid-and-late career educators leveraged their resilience to (re)frame ERT as an opportunity for professional growth. Additional studies documented how a lack of (structured) support increased stress, undermined wellbeing, and contributed to attrition (Janes & Chen, 2024; Wong et al., 2022; Moser & Wei, 2024). For example, Moser and Wei (2024) identified the perceived lack of administrative support during the pandemic as the strongest predictor of teacher attrition, and advocated for concerted efforts to bolster human, social, and psychological capital of language educators. Wong and colleagues (2022) documented elevated stress and physical symptoms, including dry eyes, backaches, and daily headaches from increased screen time among ESL primary school teachers in the U.S., which were compounded by insufficient administrator support and compassion and a lack of collegial connections. Janes and Chen’s (2024) case study echoed these findings, highlighting the emotional toll of the pandemic and showcasing the value of emotion regulation support. MacIntyre and associates (2020) also highlight the value of emotion regulation, showing that some strategies, such as cognitive reframing, were positively correlated with language educators’ physical health ($r = .13, p < .01$) and holistic wellbeing operationalized as PERMA ($r = .30, p < .001$) during the pandemic.

Notably, multiple studies highlight the central role of emotions and the value of emotion regulation in supporting educators’ wellbeing. While wellbeing is multifaceted, educational research often emphasizes positive affect as its core element (Hascher & Waber, 2021). Language teaching, which is characterized by high emotionality (MacIntyre et al., 2019) and significant emotional labor (e.g., Benesch & Prior, 2023; Gkonou & Miller, 2021; Warner & Diao, 2022) due to its highly (inter)personal and social nature (Greenier et al., 2021), has long recognized emotional exhaustion as a chronic stressor linked to burnout and attrition (Acheson et al., 2016; Moser & Wei, 2024). The pandemic intensified this emotional toll, affecting support needs and wellbeing challenges (Janes & Chen, 2024; Wong et al., 2022). In this context, emotion regulation has emerged as a viable approach to counter stressors (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Zhao & Wang, 2024) and may play a critical role in language educator wellbeing (Chang & Taxer, 2021; Janes & Chen, 2024).

Emotion Regulation (Capacity) in Language Educator Wellbeing

This paper adopts a psychological stance to emotion regulation (Gross, 2014) and uses the term emotion regulation capacity to refer to two antithetical constructs: emotional intelligence (EI; Petrides, 2009) and difficulties in emotion regulation (DER; Gratz & Roemer, 2004). EI has been defined as a relatively stable personality trait that encompasses behavioral dispositions and self-perceptions of one’s ability to perceive, understand, discriminate, process, cope with, and utilize emotion-laden information (Petrides, 2009). Due to its inclusion of ability beliefs, some have argued that trait EI is related to Bandura’s (1997) self-efficacy concept and refer to it as emotional self-efficacy (Petrides et al., 2007), thereby framing it as an individual difference (Peña-Sarrionandia et al., 2015). However, others have argued that EI is less of an individual difference than it is a set of adaptive skills, including emotion recognition and emotion regulation (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), which can be developed over time.

Emotion regulation (ER) itself is understood as one of these malleable skills that can influence the type, intensity, duration, and quality of an emotional experience or expression (Gross, 2014). Gross’ (2014)

comprehensive taxonomy of ER strategies spans five broad groups that include situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, cognitive change, and response modulation, which can be used to up- or downregulate emotions. Importantly, ER strategy use can be adaptive or maladaptive (Peña-Sarrionandia et al., 2015), thereby either contributing to or alleviating wellbeing, emotional exhaustion, or worse, burnout, defined as an individual's "prolonged response(s) to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job" (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 397). Effective and adaptive ER strategy use depends on other emotion-related regulatory skills, such as emotion awareness, and on the goal(s) for emotional experience, expression, intensity, and duration (Gross & Jazaieri, 2014).

Utilizing this interconnected and complex set of regulatory skills, Gratz and Roemer (2004) introduced a multi-componential construct to capture difficulties in emotion regulation (DER). DER comprises six components that represent difficulties – rather than abilities – with distinct processes in *adaptive* or wellbeing-conducive emotion regulation, including awareness, understanding, and acceptance of one's emotions, the modulation of emotional arousal, and the ability to act in desired ways regardless of emotional state. The construct and its components are measured with the Difficulty in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004). While neither the construct nor the tool have been utilized in language educator (wellbeing) research, one recent study in general education found a moderate and significant negative correlation between educators' emotional wellbeing and DER ($r = -.34, p < .01$) and showed that DER moderated the relationship between profession-specific stressors like job insecurity and emotional wellbeing (Singh et al., 2025).

Empirical research on language educators' EI is limited, though some descriptive and correlational studies exist (e.g., Dewaele et al., 2023; Gkonou & Mercer, 2018, Gregersen et al., 2014). Gkonou and Mercer (2018) examined the links between trait EI and teaching experience through correlational and regression analyses, finding that EI increased over the career span, while Gregersen and colleagues (2014) found strong links between trait EI and ER skills in a sample of EFL pre- and in-service teachers using a qualitative design. More recently, Dewaele and colleagues (2023) explored the link between language educators' trait EI and wellbeing, which they defined as a composite of happiness, self-esteem, and optimism. They found that EI was one of many determinants of wellbeing, alongside other contextual and affective factors, such as "objective work environment conditions" (p. 110) and relationships with colleagues.

Building on this work, the current study investigates how EI and DER relate to language educators' post-pandemic emotional, psychological, and physical wellbeing, contributing to the understanding of whether emotion regulation capacity building could be an effective strategy to achieve and maintain workplace wellbeing.

Research Questions

To complement existing knowledge regarding career stage differences and the varying impact of workplace-related stressors on language educators' wellbeing (resources), this study offers insights into language educators' post-pandemic emotional, psychological, and physical wellbeing and emotion regulation capacity. It adopts a psychological stance and career stage lens and poses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do language educators perceive their post-pandemic wellbeing, physical health, and emotion regulation capacities?

RQ2: To what degree are language educators' post-pandemic wellbeing and physical health related to their emotion regulation capacity?

RQ3: To what degree do post-pandemic wellbeing, physical health, and emotion regulation capacity vary across language educators' career stages?

The objective of the study is to establish a baseline of language educators' post-pandemic wellbeing and regulatory capacities and to explore whether a relationship between them exists. Additionally, it investigates

differences between novice and mid-to-late career educators to explore what their post-pandemic wellbeing-related needs are and how they may be addressed through professional development programming or regulatory capacity building.

Methodology

Procedure

The study received approval from my university's institutional review board in September 2023. Data was collected between October and November 2023 in the context of a larger research project, via an online survey. Respondents were recruited via convenience and snowball sampling. The recruiting methods also included emails, listservs, and social media posts. Respondent identifiers were collected to compensate them for their participation, but all data were anonymized before data analysis in spring 2024.

Participants

A total of 254 language educators responded to the online survey. Their diverse characteristics mirror those of samples in previous language educator wellbeing research (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Sulis et al., 2022). Specifically, participants reported a mean age of 36.05 years ($SD = 10.74$) and had an average of 8.24 years ($SD = 6.67$) of teaching experience. The sample consisted of 168 female educators (66.14%) and 80 male educators (31.49%), as well as five educators who identified as non-binary (1.96%) and one educator who chose not to disclose their gender identity. Most of the participants ($N = 187$) had completed a graduate degree or graduate level work in education or world languages, while some ($N = 58$) reported the completion of a bachelor's degree or undergraduate level work in the same disciplines. Participants worked at all levels of education, including elementary schools ($N = 17$), secondary schools ($N = 25$), post-secondary schools ($N = 110$), and language institutes ($N = 11$). Approximately 25 % of the participants ($N = 56$) did not work as a language instructor at the time of survey completion but held the role in the past. They were included because their absence from the profession was temporary (e.g., parental leave), rather than permanent (e.g., retirement).

Respondents' target languages varied widely and included commonly taught languages (e.g., Spanish, French, German), as well as less commonly taught languages (e.g., Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, Hoocak, Lithuanian, Swahili, Turkish, Urdu, Yoruba). Their home countries spanned almost all continents, including Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, and Central and South America, but most educators ($N = 195$) worked in the United States during data collection.

Instruments

The Qualtrics survey was administered online and consisted of a background questionnaire that elicited respondents' demographic and employment-related information, which are reported above. The adapted and adopted rating scales that capture wellbeing, health, and emotion regulation capacity are described below. All scales have been validated with the current sample and validation results and instruments are published elsewhere (Goetze, 2025a).

Psychological Wellbeing

Psychological wellbeing was measured using Ryff and Keyes' (1995) Psychological Wellbeing Scale, which is commonly used in educational research (Hascher & Waber, 2021). The validated scale consists of three subscales, comprising nine items. The subscales measure (1) self-esteem, including self-acceptance and positive evaluations of one's ability to manage workplace tasks, (2) purpose-driven growth, which captures a sense of professional purpose and growth, and (3) self-determination, which captures a sense of autonomy. All items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." A sample item is "I'm good at managing the responsibilities of daily life."

Emotional Wellbeing

Emotional wellbeing was measured using a validated version of Kern's (2014) Workplace Wellbeing Survey (available at <https://www.peggykern.org/questionnaires.html>), which is a version of the PERMA Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016). The instrument was selected due to its common use in language educator wellbeing research and to enable comparative interpretation of findings. It consists of four subscales with 13 items, measuring (1) holistic positive fulfillment, which refers to a combination of joy, sense of purpose, and the ability to experience a flow state (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2005) at work, (2) uplifting emotions, defined as positive emotions generally and happiness specifically, (3) accomplishment, understood as subjective feelings of mastery and achievement at work, and (4) relationships, which denotes feeling connected, supported, and valued by others at work. The original instrument also includes a negative emotions subscale, which measures tendencies toward feeling sad, anxious, and angry in the workplace. The present study defined emotional wellbeing as experiencing happiness and pleasure at work and operationalizes it with the uplifting emotions subscale. All items were rated on a 10-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "not at all" to "completely." A sample item is "Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?"

Physical Health

Physical health was measured with the health subscale of the Workplace Wellbeing Survey (Kern, 2014). Like emotional wellbeing, this scale was selected due to its exclusive use for measuring language educator physical health in past research (MacIntyre et al., 2019; Sulis, 2022). It consists of three items that capture the extent to which respondents feel good and healthy each day. All items use the same 10-point Likert-type scale as the emotional wellbeing instrument. A sample item is "How satisfied are you with your current physical health?"

Emotion Regulation Capacity

Emotion regulation capacity was measured with two scales that capture respondents' trait emotional intelligence (TEI; Petrides, 2009) and their difficulty in emotion regulation (DER; Gratz & Roemer, 2004). TEI was captured with six items from the short form of Petrides' (2009) TEI Questionnaire (available at <https://www.psychometriclab.com/adminsdata/files/The%20TEIQue-SF%20v.%201.50.pdf>), which is the most used instrument to capture language educators' emotional intelligence. The items measure respondents' beliefs in their ability to adaptively use emotion expression, regulation, and perception and were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale that ranges from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." A sample item is "I'm usually able to find ways to control my emotions when I want."

DER was measured with a validated version of the Difficulty in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004). The DERS was selected as it is the most widely used instrument to assess DER in education and beyond (Burton et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2025). The validated version consists of 21 items across six subscales, including difficulty with emotional clarity, emotional awareness, impulse control, non-acceptance of negative emotions, goal-directed behavior, and accessing emotion regulation strategies. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "almost never" to "almost always." A sample item is "I experience my emotions as overwhelming and out of control."

Analyses

To answer RQ1, descriptive statistics were calculated for language educators' emotional and psychological wellbeing, physical health, and emotion regulation capacities. To answer RQ2, non-parametric Spearman's rho (ρ) correlation coefficients were calculated to investigate the relationships between language educators' emotion regulation capacity, their physical health, and wellbeing. Non-parametric correlations were chosen due to uneven sample sizes and the non-normal distribution of data. To answer RQ3, non-parametric Mann-Whitney U tests were performed to examine differences in physical health, emotional and psychological wellbeing, and emotion regulation capacity between early-career educators ($N = 58$) and mid-to-late career

educators ($N = 183$). This study adopts definitions of previous career stage-oriented studies and understands early-career educators as instructors of any target language at any educational level with up to three years of experience, whereas mid-to-late career educators are understood as having more than three years of experience (Day et al., 2007). As such, early-career educators in the present study commenced their careers during the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., spring 2020 onwards).

Results

RQ1 examined language educators' post-pandemic emotional wellbeing, psychological wellbeing, physical health, and emotion regulation (ER) capacity. Descriptive statistics (Table 1) indicate high emotional wellbeing ($M = 15.30$, $SD = 3.81$) and physical health ($M = 7.52$, $SD = 1.70$). Psychological wellbeing ($M = 49.20$, $SD = 7.55$) and emotional self-efficacy (i.e., trait EI) returned more moderate ratings ($M = 30.80$, $SD = 5.50$). ER difficulty was rated low ($M = 48.39$, $SD = 14.84$), although the score range indicates that some educators reported high ER difficulty. The Cronbach's alpha (α) reliability coefficients returned good or excellent values for all scales except for EI, which returned a lower albeit acceptable value.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Scale</i>	<i>Reliability (α)</i>
PWB	49.20	7.55	27	63	36	9 – 63	.76
EWB	15.30	3.81	1	21	20	1 – 21	.82
Physical Health	7.52	1.70	2.5	10	7.5	1 – 10	.90
TEI	30.80	5.50	13	42	29	6 – 42	.65
DER	48.39	14.84	26	100	74	21 – 105	.91

Notes. PWB – psychological wellbeing (i.e., self-actualization); EWB – emotional wellbeing (i.e., happiness); TEI – trait emotional intelligence; DER– difficulty in emotion regulation

RQ2 explored the relationships between language educators' emotion regulation capacity, wellbeing, and health, using non-parametric Spearman's rho (ρ) correlations. Results (Table 2) reveal large correlations between psychological wellbeing, emotional self-efficacy ($\rho = .533$, $p \leq .001$) and ER difficulty ($\rho = -.554$, $p \leq .001$), respectively. Somewhat surprisingly, emotional wellbeing only showed a negligible insignificant correlation with emotional self-efficacy ($\rho = .104$, $p = .124$) and only a small negative correlation with ER difficulty ($\rho = -.227$, $p \leq .001$). The correlation results for physical health show small to moderate positive and significant correlations with emotional wellbeing ($\rho = .389$, $p \leq .001$), psychological wellbeing ($\rho = .233$, $p \leq .001$), and emotional self-efficacy ($\rho = .253$, $p \leq .001$), as well as a moderate significant negative correlation with ER difficulty ($\rho = -.334$, $p \leq .001$). The results also show a strong significant negative correlation between language educators' emotional self-efficacy and their ER difficulty ($\rho = -.588$, $p \leq .001$).

Table 2. *Spearman's Rho Correlation Coefficient Matrix*

	EWB	Physical health	TEI	DER
PWB	.171*	.233**	.533**	-.554**
EWB		.389**	.104	-.227**
Physical health			.253**	-.334**
TEI				-.588**

Notes. PWB – psychological wellbeing (i.e., self-actualization); EWB – emotional wellbeing (i.e., happiness); TEI – trait emotional intelligence; DER– difficulty in emotion regulation

** $p \leq .001$ * $p \leq .05$

RQ3 investigated differences in wellbeing, health, and ER capacity between early and mid-to-late career educators. Since histograms indicated that the assumption of normality was violated, data was analyzed using non-parametric Mann-Whitney U tests. Results (Table 3) show significant group differences in psychological wellbeing, physical health, emotional intelligence, and ER difficulty. Specifically, mid-to-late career educators reported higher psychological wellbeing ($U = 3805.00$; $p = .003$) and greater physical health ($U = 4116.00$; $p = .043$) than early-career educators. Similarly, ER capacity differed significantly between groups, showing that experienced educators rated their emotional self-efficacy higher ($U = 3582.50$; $p < .001$) and their ER difficulties lower ($U = 2321.00$; $p < .001$) than their novice peers. Importantly, the comparison for emotional wellbeing did not yield a significant result ($U = 4472.50$; $p = .196$).

Table 3. Mann-Whitney U Tests

	N_{nov}	N_{exp}	M Rank _{nov}	M Rank _{exp}	U	p
PWB	57	181	95.75	126.98	3805.00	.003
<i>autonomy</i>	57	183	111.96	123.16	4729.00	.281
<i>self-esteem</i>	58	181	99.28	126.64	4047.50	.009
<i>purposeful growth</i>	58	183	94.22	129.49	3754.00	<.001
EWB (Happiness)	57	177	107.46	120.73	4472.50	.196
<i>positive fulfillment</i>	56	181	94.75	126.50	3710.00	.002
<i>accomplishment</i>	58	182	91.96	129.68	3607.00	<.001
<i>relationships</i>	58	181	111.72	122.65	4769.00	.294
<i>negative emotions</i>	58	183	150.98	110.07	3452.00	<.001
Physical Health	56	179	102.00	123.01	4116.00	.043
TEI	56	181	92.47	127.21	3582.50	<.001
<i>expression</i>	57	183	99.06	127.18	3993.50	.007
<i>perception</i>	57	181	99.05	125.94	3993.00	.009
<i>regulation</i>	58	183	101.98	127.03	4204.00	.016
DER	47	173	147.62	100.42	2321.00	<.001
<i>non-acceptance</i>	53	178	148.33	106.37	3003.50	<.001
<i>goal-directedness</i>	55	179	140.32	110.49	3667.50	.004
<i>impulse control</i>	54	180	146.06	108.93	3318.00	<.001
<i>awareness</i>	57	183	140.73	114.20	4062.50	.011
<i>strategy access</i>	52	180	146.26	107.90	3132.50	<.001
<i>clarity</i>	56	182	152.21	109.44	3264.50	<.001

Notes. PWB – psychological wellbeing (i.e., self-actualization); EWB – emotional wellbeing (i.e., happiness); TEI – trait emotional intelligence; DER– difficulty in emotion regulation
nov – novice / early career; exp – experienced / mid-late career

Comparisons for the subcomponents of psychological wellbeing showed no significant differences in autonomy ($U = 4729.00$; $p = .281$). However, early-career educators reported significantly lower self-esteem ($U = 4047.50$; $p = .009$) and purposeful growth ($U = 3754.00$; $p < .001$). Similarly, results for the emotional wellbeing subcomponents show that mid-to-late career educators reported significantly more feelings of positive fulfillment ($U = 3710.00$; $p = .002$) and accomplishment ($U = 3607.00$; $p < .001$). In contrast, early-career educators experienced more negative emotions ($U = 3453.00$; $p < .001$) and reported

significantly less emotional self-efficacy ($U = 3582.50$; $p < .001$) and more ER difficulties, both comprehensively and for each ER sub-skill.

Discussion

Language Educators' Post-Pandemic Wellbeing, Health, and Emotion Regulation Capacity

The first research question examined language educators' post-pandemic emotional, psychological, and physical wellbeing, as well as their emotion regulation capacity. Results showed that language educators reported feeling well, healthy, and confident in their regulatory skills. These findings contrast with pandemic-era research that documents historically low educator wellbeing (Katsarou et al., 2023) and suggest a return to a pre-pandemic baseline of wellbeing and health. In a pre-pandemic study, Sulis et al. (2022) found moderate ratings of positive emotions ($M = 3.52$, $SD = .72$), health ($M = 3.38$, $SD = .94$), and meaning ($M = 3.83$, $SD = .79$) in a diverse sample of language educators, utilizing the PERMA Profiler with 5-point Likert scale. While the current study used an adjusted workplace-specific PERMA instrument (Kern, 2014) and the PWB Scale (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) with varying scales, results also showed emotional, psychological, and physical wellbeing ratings above the scales' midpoints. This observation suggests that hedonic adaptation may have occurred, which refers to the idea that people return to their wellbeing baseline after a significant life event such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Gaskaree et al., 2025; Klausen et al., 2022).

Hedonic adaptation theory originated in philosophical psychology (Brickman & Campbell, 1971) and focuses on changes in wellbeing over time, as well as the psychological processes and mechanisms that underlie this change. Hedonic adaptation is defined as ceasing to notice particular stimuli over time, so they no longer have the (emotional) effect they once had (Sheldon & Lucas, 2014). Successful adaptation relies on coping strategies (Klausen et al., 2022) like emotion regulation, which can also explain individual differences in adaptation (Diener et al., 2006). The present findings of moderate-to-high wellbeing, high emotional intelligence, and low emotion regulation difficulties lend some support to the assumption of hedonic adaptation in the current sample.

Klausen and colleagues (2022) also explained that (hedonic) adaptation is a typical way for humans to restore a wellbeing baseline after significant (positive or negative) life events. At the same time, they emphasize the importance of social support to complete adaptation process successfully. Language educators resumed social and emotional interactions, with students, colleagues, and other stakeholders in-person, once the pandemic lockdowns and no-contact orders were lifted (Ahn & Chi, 2023). These social connections may have facilitated hedonic adaptation and impacted wellbeing ratings, though additional research is needed to corroborate this assumption.

The Relationships Between Emotion Regulation Capacity, Wellbeing, and Physical Health

The second research question examined the links between language educators' post-pandemic emotion regulation capacity, wellbeing, and physical health. Results showed that emotional wellbeing (i.e., uplifting emotions) and psychological wellbeing (i.e., self-actualization) were weakly related, suggesting that language educators may feel happy and content at work, without necessarily experiencing a strong sense of purpose and fulfillment. Wellbeing was also positively correlated with physical health, while difficulty in emotion regulation (DER) was negatively associated with all wellbeing and health indices. The strongest correlation was found for DER and psychological wellbeing ($\rho = -.554$, $p < .001$), suggesting that a lack of emotional clarity, limited access to regulatory strategies, or non-acceptance of emotions may be more detrimental to feelings of self-actualization than happiness at work, for which a smaller correlation was found ($\rho = -.227$, $p < .001$).

These findings confirm previous research that showed that ER capacity is a significant correlate of educator wellbeing (e.g., Hascher & Waber, 2021; Singh, 2025) and extend it by providing empirical evidence for the central role of ER capacity in regulating feelings of happiness *and* feelings of self-actualization (e.g., sense of purpose), which might be more difficult to grasp than better known emotion concepts (e.g.,

happiness, anxiety). While psychological wellbeing components, such as meaning at work, have recently been linked to emotional wellbeing (Chamani et al., 2023) and emotional resilience (Gaskaree et al., 2025) – the positive capacity to maintain effective functioning at work despite threatening circumstances (Hiver, 2018) – virtually no research has examined their relationship with (D)ER. The present results suggest that language educators' psychological wellbeing, including sense of purpose or meaning at work, may be susceptible to emotion regulation (Gross, 2014).

This interpretation is supported by pandemic-era research outside of (language) education, which used the same instruments as the present study and found a strong correlation ($r = -.64, p < .001$) between DER and psychological wellbeing (Matera et al., 2022). Matera et al. (2022) suggested that DER may also mediate the relationship between some elements of emotional wellbeing (e.g., relationships) and psychological wellbeing. More research is needed to clarify these complex links and the individual and contextual factors that shape them, especially in post-pandemic settings (Chamani et al., 2023).

The strong negative association between DER and psychological wellbeing (i.e., self-actualization) has practical implications for professional development programming (PDP) that is focused on regulatory capacity building and aims to cultivate a sense of purpose and fulfillment (Gaskaree et al., 2025; Jin et al., 2021; Mercer et al., 2016). PDP organizers could use the DERS as a diagnostic tool to assess language educators' local context-specific needs and tailor programming to effectively build select regulatory skills, (emotional) resilience, and ultimately (psychological) wellbeing. To make visible the role of emotions and their regulation in professional self-actualization, PDP could combine guided professional goal setting with regular emotion-focused reflection practices that connect workplace experiences to personal values and professional growth (Gaskaree et al., 2025; Gkonou & Miller, 2021; Goetze, 2025b). Additionally, structured and formalized social initiatives like mentorship programs and platforms for networking and best practice sharing can also foster self-actualization (Gaskaree et al., 2025). One accessible resource that can facilitate such PDP planning and implementation is Mercer and Gregersen's (2020) practitioner-focused book on teacher wellbeing, which emphasizes growth and empowerment across multiple wellbeing domains, including emotions.

However, for wellbeing-focused PDP to be effective, administrative and institutional support structures are essential and may require systemic changes at the institutional level (Dunn, 2023; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2024). The lack of such structured support remains one of the most prevalent workplace stressors that undermines wellbeing and retention (Moser & Wei, 2024). This is particularly critical for early-career language educators, who depend heavily on structured support to build their wellbeing resources (Webb & Baumgartner, 2023).

Career Stage Differences in Language Educators' Wellness and Physical Health

The third research question examined differences between early and mid-to-late career language educators' post-pandemic wellbeing, health, and emotion regulation capacities. Results showed no significant career stage difference for emotional wellbeing (i.e., happiness). However, novices reported significantly lower psychological wellbeing, physical health, and emotional self-efficacy, as well as greater difficulties in emotion regulation (DER) compared to their experienced colleagues. While the present study did not investigate the reasons for these differences, the finding of lower psychological wellbeing and physical health in early-career educators is noteworthy, considering that their entry into the profession coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. This unique historical context likely shaped their initial professional experiences. However, more research is needed to determine whether current findings are attributable to pandemic conditions, career stage differences, or a combination of both.

Educators' psychological wellbeing and physical health are closely tied to their human, psychological, and social capital, which evolve over the career trajectory, contributing to professional growth and resilience (Babic et al., 2023; Mason & Poyatos Matas, 2016; Sulis et al., 2022). Psychological wellbeing encompasses ability-related self-beliefs, including self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), which is a key component of psychological capital (Luthans et al., 2004). Self-efficacy develops through mastery experiences (e.g.,

classroom teaching), which builds pedagogical expertise (i.e., human capital), and through verbal persuasion, such as feedback from mentors and colleagues (i.e., social capital) (Bandura, 1997). As such, social and human capital contribute to psychological capital, strengthening educators' competence and resilience to effectively manage workplace stress (e.g., Babic et al., 2023). These forms of capital are particularly critical in the early-career phase, when educators frequently experience exhaustion, sensations of shock, and feel overwhelmed (e.g., Zhu, 2017). However, opportunities to develop human and social capital were severely constrained during the pandemic (Moser & Wei, 2024).

Human capital develops through pre-service training and in-service classroom practice, which fosters pedagogical skills and knowledge growth (Babic et al., 2023; Gaskaree et al., 2025; Mason & Poyatos Matas, 2016). Even under non-pandemic circumstances, early-career educators face challenges reconciling their expectations and classroom realities (Sulis et al., 2022). The pandemic likely exacerbated these challenges, as many educators were unprepared for the sudden shift to emergency remote teaching (ERT) (e.g., VanLone, 2022). Early-career educators reported more uncertainty about performance expectations and greater difficulty balancing pedagogical and technological demands than their experienced colleagues (Webb & Baumgartner, 2023; Zhang & Hwang, 2023). These challenges to building human capital may have, in turn, slowed the development of self-efficacy (i.e., psychological capital). Post-pandemic, many novice educators entered a physical classroom for the first time, grappling with the translation of ERT-based competences to in-person settings, the (re)building of pedagogical confidence, and the (re)construction of their professional identity (Ahn & Chi, 2023; Janes & Chen, 2024). These processes may have further impacted early-career educators' human and psychological capital building, which may partly explain their lower psychological wellbeing in the present study.

Social capital, developed through relationships (Luthans et al., 2004), is another essential wellbeing resource for (early-career) educators. Structured mentorship and collegial support strengthen confidence (i.e., psychological capital) and help novices navigate early-career demands (Babic et al., 2023). These opportunities were disrupted during the pandemic, as ERT limited social interactions and in-person support networks (Webb & Baumgartner, 2023). The physical separation from colleagues and students took an emotional toll on language educators (Wong et al., 2022) and led to a decline in social capital and wellbeing (Moser & Wei, 2024). Importantly, social capital is indirectly linked to physical health through its connection to health capital. For mid-to-late career educators, established professional networks often facilitate the setting of work-life boundaries (Babic et al., 2023), a component of health capital that supports sustained wellbeing (Luthans et al., 2004). Boundary-setting is a known challenge for novice educators (Babic et al., 2023), and without it, routines for physical activities, healthy living, and self-care (e.g., adequate sleep) are harder to develop and sustain. The shift to home-based work during ERT blurred work-home boundaries and could have made this process even more difficult. Consequently, many novice educators may still be working to set boundaries and establish a work-life-balance (i.e., building health capital), which may have caused them to report lower physical health. However, more research is needed to substantiate such a speculation.

Even though causal explanations remain to be investigated, the findings point to clear priorities in the fostering of language educators' sustained wellbeing. Novice language educators, particularly those whose careers started during the COVID-19 pandemic, may benefit most from support to grow their wellbeing resources. The supports could target social capital building, which plays a crucial role in developing psychological and health capital (Wong et al., 2022). Collaborative and supportive work environments can promote social capital growth through initiatives like peer support groups, collaborative teaching, community-building activities, and structured mentorship programs (Gaskaree et al., 2025). In such programs, mid-to-late career educators could guide early-career colleagues in their professional identity development, boundary-setting, network-building, and self-care routines. These competences strengthen multiple wellbeing resources that are critical for resilience, job satisfaction, and retention (Moser & Wei, 2024; Webb & Baumgartner, 2023; Wong et al., 2022).

Conclusion

This study used a career stage lens to examine language educators' post-pandemic health, wellbeing, and emotion regulation (ER) capacity. Results showed high wellbeing, health, and confidence in ER capacity overall. However, novice educators, whose careers began during the COVID-19 pandemic, reported significantly lower ER capacity and psychological wellbeing, which were found to be strongly linked. Findings suggest that hedonic adaptation (Klausen et al., 2022) may have occurred, in which the emotional and psychological impact of the pandemic diminished over time and language educators' wellbeing returned to a pre-pandemic baseline. They also indicate that psychological wellbeing may be responsive to ER strategies and could be developed through professional development that targets emotion-related regulatory skills (Gross, 2014). Career stage patterns highlight the value of professional development initiatives for early-career language educators that target social capital building, which in turn enhances other critical wellbeing-related resources (Luthans et al., 2004).

The current study has important limitations. The diverse sample, spanning various contexts, educational levels, and target languages, and including educators who paused their careers, limits generalizability. Additionally, wellbeing is dynamic (e.g., Babic et al., 2023), and the cross-sectional design only provides a snapshot. Moreover, without data on the reasons behind wellbeing, health, and ER capacity ratings, it remains unclear whether observed patterns are driven by pandemic-related factors, career stage, or both. Future research should examine these causal links, especially for early-career language educators, who reported more support needs and are historically more likely to leave the profession in the face of stress, lack of resilience, and burnout.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has passed, the profession now faces new crises: unprecedented budget cuts to the humanities, the defunding of language programs and closures of language departments (e.g., West Virginia University's Department of World Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics; see also, Morris, 2026) coupled with continued declines in enrollment (Lusin et al., 2023). Early-career language educators may be encountering these stressors for the first time, all while having fewer wellbeing resources and resilience to mitigate them. These circumstances underscore the value of socializing novice language educators into collaborative, supportive workspaces that help them articulate a healthy and meaningful vision for their careers. Such an approach can foster community, strengthen purpose, and help develop actionable steps toward individual and shared professional goals. Systematically cultivating a sense of community and purpose among language educators may not only improve their wellbeing but also equips the profession with resilient and thriving instructors prepared to sustain language education through future challenges.

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