



ISSN: 2617-6548

URL: www.ijirss.com



Ecological influences on the well-being of Vietnamese tertiary lecturers in English as a foreign language: A phenomenological study

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Abstract

Although extensive research has been conducted on teacher well-being in general education, this topic has received minimal attention within the field of English language teaching (ELT). This article reports a phenomenological investigation into the influences of ecological factors on the well-being of English as a foreign language (EFL) lecturers within the tertiary education reform system in Vietnam. Data were collected through narrative frames and phenomenological interviews conducted with 18 EFL lecturers from a public university. Grounded in ecological systems theory, this study found that the well-being of EFL lecturers is both dynamic and multifaceted. The findings illustrate how national factors (e.g., educational policies and professional development opportunities), institutional factors (e.g., workload, financial insecurity, and workplace culture), and individual factors (e.g., physical health, time pressure, and sense of meaning) influenced the well-being of EFL lecturers at different career stages, both positively and negatively. This research addresses a gap in the understanding of lecturer well-being in the ELT context in Vietnam and may offer insights applicable to other international settings.

Keywords: Ecological factors, ecological systems theory, English as a foreign language, English language teaching, tertiary lecturers, well-being.

DOI: 10.53894/ijirss.v8i1.4929

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

History: Received: 8 January 2025/**Revised:** 10 February 2025/**Accepted:** 14 February 2025/**Published:** 25 February 2025

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Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contributions: Both authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Transparency: The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study adhered to the guidelines of Lotus University (a pseudonym) Human Ethics Committee [Decision No. 3493-2024] in Vietnam. An official invitation letter and consent form were delivered to all participants who were informed in detail of the research aims and procedures, the use of audio recording and their right to withdraw from the study.

Publisher: Innovative Research Publishing

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, teacher well-being has received more attention due to high teacher turnover, growing teacher shortages, and the goal of enhancing the quality of teaching and student performance [Zhou, et al. \[1\]](#). [Granziera, et al. \[2\]](#) commented that the well-being of teachers is crucial not only for the educators themselves but also for the students, educational institutions, and the wider community. Well-being is important for teachers “to thrive, to stay in the profession, to be in good physical and mental condition, and needs to be guaranteed by policymakers and people in charge of educational institutions” [\[3\]](#).

Despite considerable dispute, well-being is generally divided into two primary perspectives: subjective well-being, which aligns with the hedonic perspective, and psychological well-being, which refers to the eudaimonic perspective [\[4\]](#). The hedonic approach emphasizes an individual’s emotional experiences and life satisfaction, while the eudaimonic approach focuses on self-actualization and the significance individuals attribute to their lives ([Mercer \[5\]](#)). [Seligman \[6\]](#) explained that well-being is a multifaceted construct consisting of physical, psychological, social, and emotional aspects. It demonstrates the complicated interactions between an individual’s overall health, satisfaction, and quality of life. [Seligman \[6\]](#) PERMA model of well-being integrates aspects of both hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives. PERMA represents Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. According to [Mercer \[5\]](#), well-being is not either hedonic or eudaimonic, but it represents a combination of both “feeling good” and “living well” (p. 15). The author defined well-being as the evolving sense of purpose and contentment that arises from an individual’s personal interactions with the opportunities and resources available within their social ecologies. Well-being is clearly considered multifaceted and dynamic, arising from the interplay between psychological and social factors that vary across different environments and over time. [Sulis, et al. \[7\]](#) stated that to understand well-being, it is essential to examine the individual embedded in their holistic personal and professional lives and understand how their well-being resources and needs can vary over time.

While previous research has emphasized the critical role of teacher well-being, there is a noticeable gap in empirical studies exploring the factors that facilitate or hinder it within the realm of English language teaching (ELT). [Jin, et al. \[8\]](#) suggested that it is crucial to identify the factors that support teachers in thriving professionally and the obstacles that may impede their well-being. This understanding should inform the development of guidelines for institutions and policymakers to ensure that teachers are optimally positioned to excel in their educational roles. By employing a phenomenological approach, this study sought to explore how ecological factors influenced EFL lecturers’ well-being experiences in the context of Vietnamese educational reforms. The research question of this study was:

How do Vietnamese tertiary EFL lecturers perceive the influence of ecological factors on their well-being experiences?

1.1. Ecological Systems Theory

The present study used [Bronfenbrenner \[9\]](#) ecological systems theory as its primary theoretical foundation. This model demonstrates the reciprocal influence between systems and individuals. In this model, “the environment is conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls [\[9\]](#).” As explained by [Sulis, et al. \[7\]](#), [Bronfenbrenner \[9\]](#) model consists of five interconnected systems. These include the microsystem (personal identities and relationships of individuals), mesosystem (interactions between different environments where people operate), exosystem (settings that indirectly influence a person), macrosystem (wider social and cultural contexts influencing all other systems), and chronosystem (the impact of time on an individual). In support of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, [Chong, et al. \[10\]](#) explained that this model offers an exceptional perspective on “contexts” (p. 333) because it adopts a more detailed and systematic approach for understanding contexts compared to other theories.

Within the context of ELT, a limited number of research efforts have applied [Bronfenbrenner \[9\]](#) framework to examine teacher well-being. In Austria, [Hofstadler, et al. \[11\]](#) conducted a qualitative study into the professional subjective well-being (SWB) of secondary school teachers involved in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). The data were gathered through a series of semi-structured interviews with 16 teachers. Grounded in [Bronfenbrenner \[9\]](#) ecological systems theory, the findings showed how teacher SWB was constructed by a variety of interwoven factors (e.g., national and institutional policy, societal feedback, student-teacher relationships, and personal conviction). This study has provided useful implications for CLIL teachers and education policymakers.

In Malta, [Mercer \[12\]](#) explored the well-being of eight English language teachers working in the private sector. The data were collected using two semi-structured interviews, supplemented by visual aids and journal entries. Drawing on [Bronfenbrenner \[9\]](#) ecological systems theory, the findings highlighted how the private sector’s business model influenced teachers’ well-being, particularly in terms of their working conditions and the status of the ELT profession. For the teachers, this very often means precarity regarding their jobs and future prospects. However, the findings demonstrated that educators appreciated their teaching roles, fostered positive interactions with both colleagues and students, and experienced a supportive work environment, even though these factors varied between different institutions.

Overall, these studies demonstrate that [Bronfenbrenner \[9\]](#) ecological systems theory can be effectively employed to explore and comprehend teacher well-being across different educational environments. Therefore, by drawing on this theory, the current study sheds light on how different ecological factors influenced the well-being experiences of Vietnamese tertiary EFL lecturers.

1.2. Ecological Influences on Teacher Well-Being

Although recent research has started to illuminate the ecological influences on teacher well-being, there remains a gap in empirical studies specifically addressing tertiary EFL lecturers. [Sohail, et al. \[13\]](#) carried out a scoping review to explore the factors that foster well-being among school teachers. The researchers collected studies that were published between 2016

and 2020. The review concluded that teachers' well-being is significantly enhanced by effective emotion regulation, a positive workplace environment, and teacher self-efficacy. More specifically, teachers with greater social support, strong self-regulation abilities, higher teaching self-efficacy, and greater compassion are likely to experience better well-being. This study suggests that an atmosphere of respect, inclusion, and mutual teacher support is important to foster well-being.

Dreer [14] conducted a systematic review to identify and evaluate the research on potential outcomes related to teacher well-being. A total of 44 studies were included in this in-depth analysis. The findings from this review highlighted the significant relationship between teacher well-being and different factors (e.g., teachers' sleep quality, teacher retention, teacher-student relationships, and student outcomes). Through a meta-analysis, Zhou, et al. [1] investigated the relative impact of primary antecedents, outcomes, and associated factors of teacher well-being. A comprehensive review and analysis were conducted on 173 studies. The findings from this meta-analysis indicated that the top four strongest positive predictors of overall well-being were hope, autonomous motivation, psychological capital, and job competencies, while the top two strongest negative predictors were neuroticism and disengagement coping. Additionally, occupational commitment emerged as the most significant positive outcome of overall well-being, while turnover intentions were highlighted as the most significant negative outcome. The findings indicated that burnout and work engagement were the most significant factors associated with overall well-being.

In the field of language teaching, Babic, et al. [15] examined institutional and personal factors influencing teacher well-being grounded in the three pillars of positive psychology. The data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 15 language teachers from 13 different countries (e.g., Argentina, Indonesia, Ukraine, Turkey, Slovakia, Belarus, Hungary, Poland, Serbia, Nicaragua, China, Japan, and Slovenia). The evidence from this study highlighted five key elements affecting teacher well-being: workplace environment, sense of purpose, social connections, physical health, and language teachers' status. The research revealed that well-being is not merely a personal and subjective experience but also a collective and social construct.

In Poland, Budzińska [3] investigated the systemic and contextual factors that contributed to the flourishing of teachers. Fifteen English language instructors and the director of studies took part in this study. Data were gathered through open questionnaires, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and participant observation. The findings from this study revealed how the institution fostered teacher success through its supportive culture, effective policies, well-structured organization, competent management, opportunities for professional development PD, social life, adequate resources, and favorable physical working conditions. This study signals useful insights for our research regarding the contextual factors that could affect the well-being experiences of EFL lecturers in the context of higher education in Vietnam.

In Iran, Sadeghi and Pourbahram [16] investigated the possible influences of the COVID-19 pandemic on EFL teacher well-being in private language centers. The data were gathered through online interviews with seven teachers. The findings of the study indicated that the comorbidity of the pandemic and the already-existing economic recession cast a dark shadow on teacher well-being. In addition, the financial challenges confronted by EFL teachers significantly impacted their work-life balance. The findings also highlighted that teachers' intrinsic motivation and the satisfaction they received from learner achievements fostered their well-being by creating positive emotions.

In conclusion, the comprehensive analysis of these studies highlights the multifaceted and dynamic nature of teacher well-being. It is evident that the ecological factors influencing teacher well-being expand from the macro-level of society and national policies to the micro-level of the institution and an individual classroom. Therefore, the well-being of teachers should be understood as how each teacher interacts with the different ecological factors in their lives. As suggested by Mercer [5], well-being should be conceptualized from both an individual and a societal perspective. Similarly, Sulis, et al. [7] stated that well-being is not an isolated psychological construct; it emerges from the individual's interactions within social environments, resulting in an emergent quality of well-being. However, this line of studies indicates that there has been limited empirical investigation into the factors that enable and hinder the well-being of EFL lecturers within the higher education context. It is important for this study to examine how the ecological factors influenced the well-being experiences of tertiary EFL lecturers in Vietnam.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This research employed a qualitative methodology within an interpretative framework to explore the well-being experiences of Vietnamese tertiary EFL lecturers. Particularly, a phenomenological approach was used in this study. Creswell [17] explained that a phenomenological study investigates the shared meanings that multiple individuals attribute to their lived experiences of a particular concept or phenomenon. Through phenomenology, the researcher's goal is to collect the shared experiences from a large group of individuals and distill the phenomenon of study [18].

2.2. Participants

In 2024, data were collected at a large public university in Vietnam. Participants for this study were selected through purposive sampling. Merriam and Tisdell [19] explained that "purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 77). In this study, participants were selected based on two criteria: (1) they must voluntarily respond to narrative frames and research interviews, and (2) they must be employed as full-time lecturers at the research site.

A total of 18 participants took part in this study, including 14 EFL lecturers and four academic managers. The presence of the academic managers was important for obtaining a broad range of insights into lecturers' well-being. Table 1 displays the gender, age, and teaching experience of the participants categorized into three main groups: early-career lecturers (1–7

years of teaching); mid-career lecturers (8–23 years of teaching); and late-career lecturers (20+ years of teaching) [20]. To ensure confidentiality, each participant was given a pseudonym, and their job titles were not included in this table.

Table 1.
Participants' background information

No.	Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Years of teaching experience
1	Lan	Female	26	2
2	Cuc	Female	29	4
3	Tuong	Male	31	5
4	Kiet	Male	33	6
5	Trinh	Female	33	7
6	Thinh	Male	34	7
7	Nguyet	Female	35	9
8	Kim	Female	38	10
9	Hao	Male	40	16
10	Thang	Female	42	17
11	Diep	Female	39	18
12	Toan	Male	43	22
13	Tuyen	Female	46	24
14	Luan	Male	50	27
15	Ngon	Male	52	29
16	Thoa	Female	52	30
17	Lien	Female	53	34
18	Thuan	Male	55	36

2.3. Data Collection

Data in this study were collected through narrative frames and phenomenological interviews. Initially, the participants were provided with a narrative frame regarding factors that were perceived to promote or inhibit their well-being in the workplace environment. [Barkhuizen \[21\]](#) explained that a narrative frame is “a written story template consisting of a series of incomplete sentences and blank spaces of varying lengths. It is structured as a story in skeletal form. The aim is for participants to produce a coherent story by filling in spaces according to their own experiences and reflections on these.” Therefore, the narrative frame employed in this study assisted the researchers in gaining a deep understanding of the context within which the participants experienced well-being.

After piloting interviews with three Vietnamese EFL lecturers who were not participants in the main study, data collection was undertaken at a Vietnamese university using a series of phenomenological interviews. The primary researcher conducted and documented all the interviews. Each interview lasted from 1 to 1.5 hours. [Cypress \[22\]](#) described phenomenological interviewing as an informal and interactive process designed to gather detailed accounts of a phenomenon from a small group of individuals who have individually experienced it. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and translated into English. During the interviews, notes were recorded, and the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim afterward. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the university where this study was implemented. In addition, this research was conducted in accordance with general ethical guidelines in psychology. A formal invitation letter and consent form were distributed to all participants, who were informed in detail of the research objectives and methods, the use of audio recording, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

2.4. Data Analysis

Regarding data analysis, this study employed the phenomenological steps proposed by [Moustakas \[23\]](#). First, the principal researcher read and reread the narrative frames and interview transcripts to draw out significant statements that provided in-depth information about how the participants experienced the well-being phenomenon. Secondly, these key statements were organized into themes that served as the basis for interpretation. Thirdly, by using these significant statements and themes, a description of “what” the participants experienced, named a composite textural description, was formulated. A detailed account of the context or setting that affected “how” the participants experienced the phenomenon, called a composite structural description, was also developed in this step. Finally, a compound description that presents the essence of the phenomenon, named the textural-structural synthesis, was established. [Creswell \[17\]](#) commented that Moustakas’ approach to data analysis is systematic and offers specific guidelines for gathering the textual and structural descriptions.

2.5. Trustworthiness

In this study, four strategies were implemented to ensure trustworthiness: (1) member checking by sending interview transcripts to participants for clarification; (2) method triangulation through the use of narrative frames and phenomenological interviews for data collection; (3) investigator triangulation by involving EFL lecturers and academic managers with diverse well-being experiences and at different career stages; and (4) thematic analysis to maintain consistency in emerging themes, supported by direct quotes to illustrate each theme.

3. Findings

This section reports findings regarding the ecological factors affecting the well-being of EFL lecturers at the national, institutional, and individual levels.

3.1. National Influences on EFL Lecturers' Well-Being

Through the narrative frames and interviews, eight of the 18 participants revealed that the national professional policies had influenced their well-being. The national plans offered EFL lecturers many professional development opportunities, but they also increased the pressure on lecturers to continuously engage in professional learning. Lan (*early career*) stated:

In accordance with the Higher Education Law, all university lecturers are required to obtain a doctoral degree soon. Without this qualification, we may be dismissed by the university. Most lecturers at my institution face significant challenges in pursuing doctoral studies, which are seen as detrimental to our well-being.

Luan (*late-career*) commented that in recent years, the Vietnamese government has proposed higher expectations for lecturers' professional qualifications and expertise as follows:

Alongside my teaching duties, I must continuously engage in lifelong learning to enhance my professional skills. Consequently, balancing work and life is quite challenging for me due to various professional responsibilities (e.g., developing textbooks and teaching materials, conducting scientific research, attending conferences and workshops, and maintaining educational standards).

As professional development (PD) is vital throughout the careers of EFL lecturers, it fosters a sense of purpose and achievement. Particularly, Nguyet (*mid-career*) revealed:

Since the launch of the national foreign language project in 2008, lecturers at my school have received more opportunities to engage in different kinds of professional development. These activities have provided them with greater motivation to enhance their professional skills and language proficiency. Therefore, lecturers gain more confidence and self-efficacy in their jobs.

Ngon (*late career*) stated:

Thanks to the national reform policies, I was awarded a scholarship to pursue my doctoral studies in an English-speaking country a decade ago. Upon finishing my studies, I returned to my university and have been working there ever since. I believe that holding a doctoral degree allows me to secure a stable position and earn a higher salary.

3.2. Institutional Influences on EFL Lecturers' Well-Being

Based on the narrative frames and interviews, most participants mentioned workload, financial insecurity, and workplace culture as the primary individual factors affecting their well-being.

3.2.1. Workload

Since excessive workload is a common source of stress in the workplace, it was identified by 10 of the 18 participants as the most significant factor inhibiting their well-being. Particularly, Tuyen (*late-career*) explained that the institutional policies concerning research, teaching, and service responsibilities exerted considerable pressure on EFL lecturers. She stated:

I must teach over 20 periods each week, which leaves me feeling drained by the end of the day. As a result, I always struggle to find time for research activities, and this has led to prolonged stress and tension.

Cuc (*early-career*) reflected:

In my department, early-career lecturers often have to teach more hours per week compared to our senior counterparts. I believe that the distribution of teaching hours is unfair among the teaching staff. My manager is aware that I am passionate and skilled at teaching, so she assigns me multiple courses each semester, and I find it difficult to decline.

Ngon (*late-career*) reported that the total hours allocated to teaching, research, and service activities for different groups of lecturers were categorized by their salaries, qualifications, and academic positions. This participant explained:

Lecturers with advanced qualifications are expected to dedicate more annual hours to research. However, the demanding teaching schedule leaves me with little time for research. This makes me feel demotivated and stressed.

Diep (*mid-career*) commented that it was quite challenging for female lecturers to balance their work and family duties:

Each semester, I am tasked with over 400 hours of teaching and various professional responsibilities. After school, I also care for my two young children. This overwhelming workload has resulted in burnout and has influenced both my physical and mental well-being.

3.2.2. Financial Insecurity

Together with the excessive workload, financial insecurity was the second negative factor influencing the well-being of lecturers, as reported by nine of the 18 participants. For instance, Hao (*mid-career*) complained:

In line with the university's work entitlements policy, lecturers are required to fulfill various professional responsibilities, including teaching, research, and additional tasks. As a result, they face significant work pressure; yet, the remuneration remains insufficient. As an EFL lecturer at a public institution, my salary is even lower than that of a housemaid.

In the same vein, Tuong (*early-career*) revealed that at the time of data collection, he had been employed as a full-time lecturer, but his salary was very low. Therefore, he had to teach many private classes and write journal articles to supplement his income. This participant explained: "I frequently stay up until one or two in the morning working on lesson plans and

research, and this has greatly influenced my physical health. Currently, my well-being is deteriorating, even though I'm just starting my career."

Nguyet (*mid-career*) reported that her low income often led to financial struggles. This participant recounted:

Every month, when I receive my salary, I need to send money to support my elderly parents who live in the countryside. I believe that a low salary can cause financial stress and disappointment. I wish the salary could be increased so that I wouldn't have to worry about financial insecurity and could focus more on my professional career.

3.2.3. Workplace culture

In this study, participants highlighted four key elements of workplace culture, including autonomy, physical space and resources, irrelevant institutional policies, and a lack of support from both managers and colleagues.

Lecturer career growth significantly benefits from the presence of autonomy. In the narrative frames and interviews, ten of the eighteen participants reflected that autonomy had affected their overall well-being. Diep (*mid-career*) explained autonomy as her main source of job satisfaction.

At the start of the semester, I can choose the days and times that fit my teaching schedule. While I need to adhere to the school's syllabus, I am allowed to modify the content as needed. Additionally, I have the right to decide on the number of assignments and the format of the final exam for each course. If a family matter arises, I can take a day off and arrange a make-up class with the students later.

Tuong (*early-career*) mentioned that after graduating, he taught English at a private language center but found the teaching duties monotonous. However, after being hired as a full-time EFL lecturer at this university, he realized how fortunate he was to be in such an ideal work environment. He explained the following:

I have the chance to enhance various teaching skills and competencies. Additionally, I have been given numerous opportunities to engage in research projects and publish journal articles. I can set my own agenda for doctoral study, which boosts my motivation and engagement in my work.

Together with autonomy, the quality of physical space and resources was mentioned by nine of the 18 participants as important for their well-being. Particularly, Hao (*mid-career*) commented: "Many of the classrooms at my school are outfitted with cable TVs, air conditioning, free Wi-Fi, and comfortable furniture. This setup makes the environment both comfortable and convenient for me."

Luan (*late career*) stated that he was very satisfied with the classroom facilities in his school for the following reasons:

All classrooms are well-furnished with new and modern facilities. They are convenient for delivering effective lectures without having technical issues. In addition, the schoolyard is always clean and covered with many green trees and beautiful flowers. I enjoy taking a short walk during break time to refresh my mind.

Another aspect of the workplace culture mentioned by seven of the 18 participants was the institutional policies. Kiet (*mid-career*) complained, "Despite my strong enthusiasm for research, I prefer not to engage in institutional-level projects because of the complicated paperwork procedures. I often find interactions with the financial department staff frustrating."

Similarly, Lan (*early career*) commented that the irrelevant institutional policies were a significant factor that hindered lecturers' well-being. She explained the following:

I had a paper presentation at an international conference last year. Unfortunately, due to the university's complex financial procedures, I was unable to get reimbursed. This left me feeling dissatisfied and demotivated. I believe that only lecturers with strong resilience and emotional regulation are inclined to participate in activities such as attending international conferences or training programs. I do not want to engage in any more professional activities in the future.

Through the narrative frames and interviews, *a lack of managerial and collegial support* was identified by six of the 18 participants as another important factor hindering their well-being. For example, Cuc (*early-career*) revealed:

I have been working as a full-time lecturer for over a year now. Despite this, I haven't met some of my colleagues due to our weak connections. As a new lecturer, I haven't received much support from others, and at times, I feel quite lost in this school.

Tuong (*early-career*) stated that at the time of data collection, EFL lecturers at his institution struggled to achieve a strong consensus. This led to a competitive and uncomfortable work atmosphere, adversely affecting the emotional well-being of the lecturers. Similarly, Kim (*mid-career*) reported that while her department had over 20 lecturers, she frequently interacted with just 3 to 5 colleagues at a similar career stage. She explained, "I find it challenging to communicate with my academic manager and certain senior lecturers, as they often lack the helpfulness and friendliness I need."

Ngon (*late-career*) commented that one of the most significant factors affecting lecturer well-being in the workplace is the connection among colleagues.

Everyone should show respect and care for one another. While professional relationships are crucial, I acknowledge that the teaching staff at Late-Career School currently lacks close connections. Personally, I do not have a strong relationship with the manager or my colleagues.

3.3. Individual Influences on EFL Lecturers' Well-Being

Through the narrative frames and interviews, physical well-being, time pressure, and a sense of meaning were reported by the majority of participants as the three main individual factors influencing their well-being.

3.3.1. Physical Health

Physical health is an important element of an individual's overall quality of life. In this study, 10 of the 18 participants acknowledged that this aspect remarkably affected the flourishing of their well-being in the workplace. Lan (*early-career*)

stated her reason as follows:

I spend most of my time on teaching and family duties and do not have time for any physical activities. Consequently, I am unable to maintain my physical health in good condition, and I am likely more susceptible to some common diseases such as seasonal flu, allergies, and digestive disorders.

Kim (*mid-career*) indicated that her physical well-being was not good: "Currently, I am undergoing treatment for thyroid and fatty liver conditions. I believe that prolonged work-related stress and pressure have caused me to suffer from a lack of sleep for an extended period." Thoa (*late-career*) also commented that her physical health and age had a significant impact on her job quality: "I live with diabetes and need to take medication daily. Consequently, I often feel fatigued and struggle to stay motivated at work. I believe that emotional, psychological, social, and physical well-being are deeply connected."

3.3.2. Time Pressure

Time pressure was identified as the second influential factor that nine of the eighteen participants experienced. For example, Cuc (*early career*) mentioned:

My parents are elderly and reside in a different city, quite far from where I work. Because of my demanding job, I often struggle to find time to visit them. Despite their need for my support, I am unable to go home. This situation sometimes leaves me feeling very stressed and anxious, especially when family and work problems arise simultaneously.

In the same vein, Kiet (*early career*) revealed that he was the only person who could earn money in his family.

Three years ago, I got married. My wife is unemployed, and we have a two-year-old son. To afford a small house in this city, I had to take out a loan. Consequently, I need to teach additional classes to increase my income. This leaves me with little time to relax or engage in physical activities, and my overall well-being is currently quite low.

Hao (*mid-career*) reported that female lecturers experienced more daily pressure and stress than their male colleagues because they had to be accountable for both work and family duties: "If female lecturers struggle with time management, they may quickly experience stress and burnout." Thoa (*late-career*) reported: "I have three children and devote a lot of time and energy to their well-being, which leaves me with little time for myself."

3.3.3. Sense of meaning

In this study, seven of the 18 participants identified a sense of meaning in their jobs. For example, Nguyet (*mid-career*) recounted: "Teaching has been my great passion ever since I was a child. I always feel happy and relaxed when communicating with my students. Participating in classroom activities helps me relieve stress and escape the monotony of everyday life."

Similarly, Diep (*mid-career*) mentioned that one of the happiest aspects of her teaching journey has been witnessing her students' success. She explained:

Last month, I received a thank-you card from a former student who shared the wonderful news of her successful scholarship application for a master's program in Europe. I felt incredibly happy and proud of her achievement. I always try to invest my best efforts in teaching and supporting my students to help them succeed.

Through a narrative frame, Luan (*late-career*) emphasized that upholding professional prestige and receiving recognition at work significantly contributed to his emotional and spiritual well-being. He explained: "The support and recognition from managers, parents, and students help me understand the significance and worth of my work. Consequently, I am committed to continuously fostering my professional skills and language proficiency to meet the needs of my students."

4. Discussion

This section offers an analysis of the findings derived from the narrative frames and phenomenological interviews conducted with the 18 participants. The analysis integrates literature on teacher well-being with Bronfenbrenner [9] ecological systems theory to propose a model identifying factors that facilitate and hinder the well-being of EFL lecturers. While Figure 1 does not encompass all influential factors, it provides an overview of the ecological factors that affected the well-being of tertiary EFL lecturers in this study.

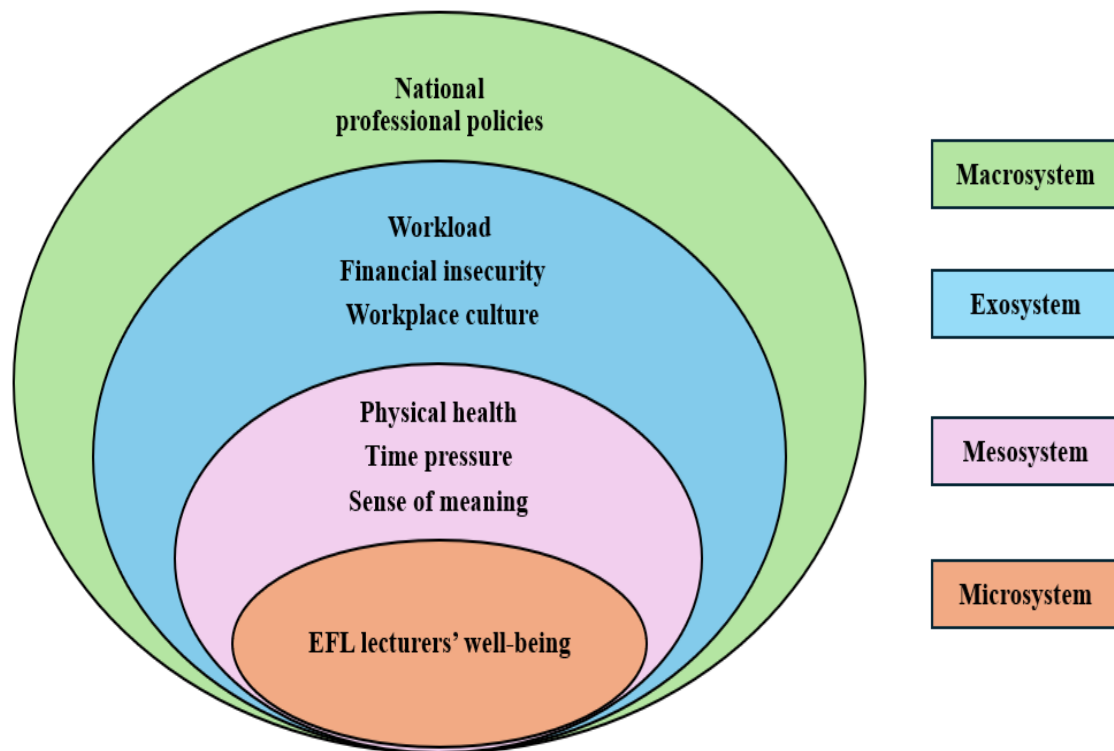


Figure 1.
The ecological influences on tertiary EFL lecturers' well-being.

At the *macrosystem* level, the findings from this study highlight both the positive and negative effects of the national reform policies on the well-being of the eight participants. It is evident that these initiatives have provided significant professional development (PD) opportunities; however, they have also placed remarkable pressure on EFL lecturers to constantly reinforce their qualifications and expertise. For example, Nguyet (*mid-career*) reported that since the launch of the national foreign language project in 2008, lecturers have gained more opportunities to participate in various PD activities. These activities not only contribute to their professional growth but also foster a sense of purpose and accomplishment. On the other hand, Lan (*early-career*) expressed concerns about the pressure to obtain a doctoral degree, as mandated by the Law on Higher Education. This requirement has created a stressful environment for many lecturers, who fear job insecurity if they fail to meet this criterion. The findings from this study are supported by other international scholars [2, 3, 24], who stated that the national policies have a significant impact on teacher well-being and job satisfaction. As Demir [25] argued, opportunities for growth, skill development, and achievement can foster a sense of purpose and satisfaction.

Due to Vietnam's highly centralized education system [26], educational reform policies have followed a top-down approach. Nevertheless, the evidence from this study reveals a common belief that integrating the top-down approach with a bottom-up strategy is essential when formulating national and institutional policies regarding lecturers' PD. This research suggests that while PD is crucial for the advancement of EFL lecturers, it is equally important to address the associated stress factors. The institution and academic managers should consider strategies to support lecturers in managing these demands. This could include providing more flexible PD opportunities, offering mental health support, and creating a more supportive work environment that acknowledges the challenges faced by lecturers.

At the *exosystem* level, excessive workload was reported by 10 of the 18 participants as the most outstanding stressor influencing their well-being across different career stages. For example, Ngon (*late-career*) indicated that the university's demand for lecturers with advanced qualifications to engage more in research activities was unrealistic due to their heavy teaching loads. This gap between institutional expectations and practical realities leads to frustration and stress among lecturers. Due to the heavy workload, EFL lecturers did not have much time to participate in physical and social activities, which easily led to burnout and stress in the workplace. These findings align with the existing body of international research. For instance, Mercer [12] stated that "long working hours and excessive workload are key contributory factors to teacher burnout and teacher attrition, directly and indirectly through emotional exhaustion." Similarly, Demir [25] explained that university instructors frequently experience high workloads and difficulty in attaining work-life balance. This study emphasizes that EFL lecturers should establish clear boundaries between their work and personal life to avoid burnout. In addition, the institution should provide lecturers with flexible teaching hours and support systems that could help lower their stress levels and enhance overall well-being.

Since the university was primarily overseen by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), its financial policies adhered to the regulations set forth by the Vietnamese government. Despite numerous positive reforms in professional policies for lecturers, nine out of 18 participants indicated that financial insecurity remained a significant demotivator for EFL lecturers' well-being. Particularly, EFL lecturers (Hao, Tuong, and Nguyet) at different career stages identified ongoing financial difficulties due to their low income. The data from this study are consistent with international literature. Sulis, et al.

[7] stated that “if one’s financial stability is shattered, or if one is financially disadvantaged, this can trigger serious health-related issues, such as stress and depression” (p. 26). Demir [25] also confirmed that low pay or disparities in pay can trigger financial stress and discontentment. In this study, the participants’ experiences highlight a common theme of inadequate compensation, which led to high stress levels, health problems, and demotivation. The data from this study offer insight into the significant effects of ensuring sufficient financial support from the government and the institution to promote EFL lecturers’ well-being and overall job satisfaction.

Given that autonomy is a key element of workplace culture, most participants (10 out of 18) reported that it had a positive impact on their well-being. The narratives and interviews demonstrate that autonomy is not only a significant factor in EFL lecturers’ job satisfaction but also in professional growth and motivation. Both Diep (*mid-career*) and Tuong (*early-career*) reported that while they had the freedom to make several decisions, they still had to adhere to the school’s syllabus and policies. The balance between autonomy and institutional guidelines empowered instructors to maintain educational standards while also allowing them the flexibility to innovate and personalize their teaching methods. These findings concur with those of Hofstadler, et al. [11], indicating that in the national framework, the Austrian educational system grants teachers some flexibility to tailor their classroom content. It is evident that autonomy is an important element in promoting EFL lecturers’ well-being, job satisfaction, and professional growth. Consequently, lecturers with more freedom to make decisions about their teaching practices and PD are more engaged, motivated, and satisfied in their work. These findings suggest that the institution should consider policies and practices that enhance lecturers’ autonomy. Providing EFL lecturers with the autonomy to shape their teaching methods and pursue their professional growth can foster a more nurturing and empowering workplace. This can enhance lecturers’ well-being and job satisfaction, improving student learning outcomes.

Another interesting finding from this study is that the majority of participants (nine out of 18) emphasized the importance of physical space and resources in their workplace. For example, Hao (*mid-career*) appreciated the modern facilities in classrooms, which contributed to a comfortable and convenient teaching environment. Similarly, Luan (*late-career*) expressed his satisfaction with the new and modern classroom facilities, indicating their role in facilitating effective teaching without technical issues. The findings from this study highlight the crucial role of physical space and resources in supporting EFL lecturers’ well-being. It is evident that modern and well-maintained facilities not only improve the teaching experience but also contribute to a positive and conducive work environment. This aligns with existing literature that suggests a well-resourced physical environment can significantly improve job satisfaction and overall well-being among educators [3]. This study indicates that investing in high-quality physical spaces and resources is important for the well-being of lecturers. Therefore, the institution should prioritize the maintenance and improvement of their physical environments to support the mental and physical health of their staff.

Furthermore, institutional policies emerged as another influential factor in workplace culture. Particularly, seven out of 18 participants expressed dissatisfaction with the current management practices, which they believed were irrelevant and inhibited their professional career and overall well-being. Kiet (*mid-career*) expressed his frustration with the bureaucratic obstacles he faced when implementing research projects at his institution. His enthusiasm for research was diminished by the complicated paperwork and the challenging interactions with the finance department staff. The findings of this research align with previous international studies that highlight the crucial role of institutional policies in enhancing teachers’ well-being [5, 27]. This study suggests that the institution’s management policies and procedures need a comprehensive review and restructuring. It is important for the institution to simplify administrative processes to enhance the overall workplace culture, reduce frustration among lecturers, and foster greater engagement in research and PD activities.

In this study, half of the participants identified the lack of managerial and collegial support as another negative factor influencing their well-being. The experiences reported by the EFL lecturers at different career stages illustrate a pervasive sense of isolation and lack of support within their academic environments. For example, Cuc (*early-career*) revealed feelings of being lost due to the lack of strong relationships with colleagues. This lack of interrelationship can be particularly detrimental for new lecturers who rely on guidance and support to navigate their roles effectively. Ngon’s (*late-career*) viewpoint adds another dimension to the discussion. He indicated the absence of respect and care among colleagues as a crucial factor affecting EFL lecturers’ well-being. The lack of close professional relationships, even at advanced career stages, suggests that the issue of managerial and collegial support is widespread and not limited to early-career lecturers. The evidence from this study is congruent with international literature that has emphasized the importance of collegial and managerial support in creating a positive workplace environment to foster the overall well-being of EFL lecturers Budzińska [3]; Ebadijalal and Moradkhani [28] and Dreer [29]. Pasca [30] stated that “social support at work represents an important mediator in mitigating the relationship between health and occupational stress” (p. 4457). This study highlights that because lecturers at different career stages have diverse professional backgrounds and experiences, they may perceive social support in the workplace differently. It is important for the university to foster a collaborative and supportive work environment. This could include implementing mentorship programs, encouraging regular team-building activities, and promoting open communication channels between EFL lecturers and academic managers. By addressing these issues, lecturers’ well-being, job satisfaction, and overall productivity can be improved effectively.

At the *mesosystem* level, 10 out of the 18 participants identified the vital role that physical health plays in their professional and individual lives. The experiences shared by Lan (*early-career*), Kim (*mid-career*), and Thoa (*late-career*) demonstrate that because of demanding work schedules, EFL lecturers struggle to maintain their physical well-being. The findings from this study support the argument made by Babic, et al. [15] that when workplace stress severely impacts one’s health, all other factors become insignificant; personal well-being is completely compromised. This study emphasizes the critical role of maintaining physical health to improve both overall well-being and efficiency at work. By addressing the

unique health challenges faced by EFL lecturers at different career stages, the institution can foster a healthier, more engaged, and productive workforce.

Together with physical health, time pressure emerged as another significant factor influencing nine out of the 18 participants. It is evident that EFL lecturers at different career stages faced many challenges when being responsible for different kinds of duties simultaneously. Particularly, Hao's (*mid-career*) narrative demonstrates the unique challenges faced by female EFL lecturers due to gender-specific pressures. It is evident that balancing the responsibilities of both professional and family life has imposed additional pressure on female lecturers, leading to higher levels of stress and burnout. This finding is supported by Granziera, et al. [2], identifying the significant impact of time pressure on the well-being of teachers. The evidence from this study sheds light on the unique challenges faced by EFL lecturers and the need for relevant strategies to support their well-being. It is important for the institution to implement flexible work arrangements and provide essential support that encourages work-life balance to foster lecturers' work performance.

In addition, seven out of 18 participants reported the crucial impact of perceived job meaning on improving their job satisfaction and overall well-being. For instance, Nguyet (*mid-career*) explained how individual passion and student achievements contributed to her sense of fulfillment and happiness. Luan (*late-career*) explained an aspect of meaning derived from professional prestige and recognition. His emphasis on the encouragement and appreciation from different stakeholders highlighted the role of social recognition in sustaining his commitment to professional growth and excellence. The evidence from this study is consistent with international literature Babic, et al. [15]; Talbot and Mercer [31] and Mercer, et al. [32]. Jin, et al. [8] highlighted the crucial impact of finding purpose in one's work on boosting job satisfaction and overall well-being among teachers. This study demonstrates the importance of addressing both individual and systemic factors to support EFL lecturers in finding and maintaining meaning in their work. It is important for the institution to consider strategies to enhance lecturers' intrinsic motivation, provide opportunities for PD, and recognize their contributions to create a more fulfilling and sustainable teaching profession.

At the *microsystem* level, this research highlights that the well-being of EFL lecturers is a complex and multifaceted construct shaped by different ecological factors from the mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem levels. Bronfenbrenner [9] ecological systems theory suggests that, at the macrosystem level, the national reform policies show a dynamic interaction with the institutional policies and the well-being of individual lecturers. As explained by Mercer [5], well-being is not just an individual experience but is also deeply influenced by social contexts. While EFL lecturers play a key role in maintaining their own well-being at work, it is essential for the university and academic managers to pay attention to lecturers' well-being when enacting significant policies and delegating professional responsibilities. Lecturers should be provided with appropriate and immediate support to improve their well-being. Academic administrators can collaborate with EFL lecturers to grasp the significant impact of well-being on their personal career growth, as well as on the success of their institutions and the nation. Herrera, et al. [33] stated that "well-being is not an individual duty, but the responsibility of society and ecological systems where individuals reside as a whole" (p. 2). Similarly, Mercer, et al. [32] suggested that teacher training programs, both pre-service and in-service, should focus on providing teachers with the self-regulation and socio-emotional skills necessary to effectively manage their stress, emotions, motivation, and overall professional well-being. This study highlights that since effective language learning largely relies on lecturers, their professional well-being should be a top priority.

5. Conclusion

The well-being of lecturers is important not only for their own health but also for the success of students, the effectiveness of schools, and the benefit of society as a whole. Talbot and Mercer [31] stated that teachers with high levels of well-being tend to be more successful, deeply engaged in their language teaching, and better equipped to overcome challenges that arise. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner [9] ecological systems theory, this study reveals how different ecological contexts, including national factors (e.g., educational policies and professional development opportunities), institutional factors (e.g., workload, financial insecurity, and workplace culture), and individual factors (e.g., physical health, time pressure, and sense of meaning), influenced the well-being of EFL lecturers in both positive and negative ways. As explained by Babic, et al. [15], well-being is not solely an individual and subjective experience; it is also shaped by collective and social factors.

In conclusion, despite the limited scope of this research, the findings highlight the complexity of well-being among Vietnamese tertiary EFL lecturers and the interplay of different ecological factors. The study offers a useful framework for educators and institutions to evaluate policies and practices and identify development opportunities and potential stressors. Understanding well-being through this framework provides a unique opportunity to empower lecturers to gain greater control over their work-related well-being. By shedding light on the multifaceted nature of lecturers' well-being, this research not only fills a critical gap in the literature in the field of English Language Teaching but also provides valuable insights that could inform policies and practices in similar educational contexts globally. This study also adds to an expanding body of empirical literature highlighting the significance of the phenomenological approach in exploring the well-being experiences of tertiary EFL lecturers.

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