

From Burnout to Wellbeing in Foreign Language Teaching: State of the Art in Theoretical and Applied Research

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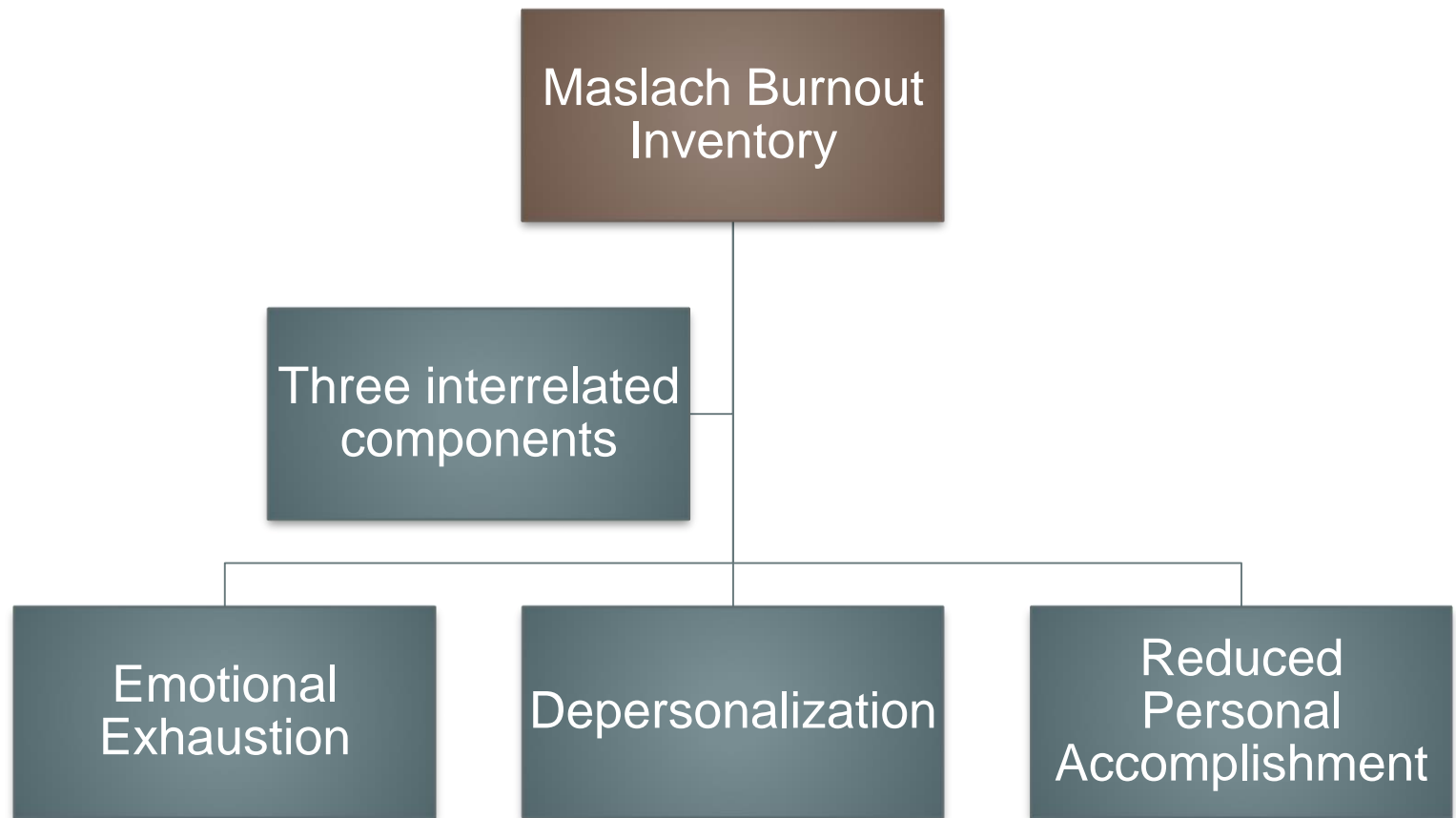
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Introduction

- As the first step in our study of foreign language teacher wellbeing, in the next slides we provide an overview of literature on burnout and wellbeing, together with an analysis of the distinctiveness of foreign language (henceforward FL) teachers.
- Previous work on in-service teacher training and wellbeing will be also reported, since they form the starting point of our theoretical framework.
- We offer a review of the experimental studies that have served as the basis for the devisal of our methodological approach, which entails a combination of qualitative and quantitative instruments, namely narrative analysis, discussion groups, interviews, and questionnaires.

Studies on the Condition of Burnout

- The burnout syndrome was first approached in the 1970s, envisaged as a crisis of overextended and disillusioned human service workers (Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999).
- The initial studies did not particularly focus on the teaching profession, but –more generally– on people-oriented occupations in which (a) the relationship between providers and recipients was central to the work and (b) the provision of education, service, or treatment could be a highly emotional experience, and was defined as a type of prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job occurring among individuals engaged in public dealing (Maslach 1976, 1999).



- In as much as teaching is one of the most stressful professions, it was not long until the first studies addressing teacher burnout appeared, particularly so in the 1980s, when the work on burnout entered an empirical period.

Current and Past Studies on Wellbeing

- In the 1980s a new line of research emerged, concerned with the wellbeing of teachers. Instead of focusing on the negative aspects influencing practitioners, this approach is aimed at preventing resilience through the enhancement of human strengths.
- The question of subjective wellbeing was thus ushered in by Diener (1984), who a) devised a theoretical model of subjective wellbeing, b) developed instruments for its assessment, and c) studied its conditions and consequences. Following his track, other scholars (Larsen & Diener 1987; Eid & Larsen 2008) have also committed themselves to identifying and measuring the emotional states of individuals.
- In the field of educational research, the issue of wellbeing has been the object of both theoretical and applied studies (Marchesi, 2007; Verhoeven et al., 2003; Ribes et al., 2008; de Pablos et al., 2011). For García Carrasco & Bernal (2008), there is a clear correlation between good practices and wellbeing, hence the need to devise innovative, rewarding practices in order to foster positive emotions.


The framework of our project

- The model of wellbeing adopted in our project derives from that of Van Horn et al. (2004). Following Warr (1987) and Ryff (1989), who conceived wellbeing as a multidimensional phenomenon, Van Horn et al. distinguish five components of teacher wellbeing. They construe occupational wellbeing as a positive evaluation of various aspects of one's own functioning at work, including an affective, motivational, behavioural, cognitive, and psychosomatic dimension.
- Another research that has served as the basis for the development of our methodology is that of Aeltermann et al. (2007), who define wellbeing as “expressing a positive emotional state, which is the result of harmony between the sum of specific environmental factors on the one hand, and the personal needs and expectations of teachers on the other hand” (Aeltermann, 2007: 286). Their study assessed the school's contribution to the teachers' well-being. To this end, and prior to the elaboration of a questionnaire, they held panel discussions with teachers and principals. Their results show that some of the most significant variables influencing wellbeing are self-efficacy, experienced pressure of work, support from principal, support from colleagues, attitude towards innovations, strong pupil centred orientation and relationship with parents.



The Specificity of Foreign Language Learning and Teaching

“As foreign language learning is a unique and ego-threatening experience, different from other school subjects, [...] the teaching of this subject at school may require skills uncommon elsewhere” (Piechurska-Kuciel 2011: 211-212).

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- In a study oriented to bring to the fore FL teachers distinctiveness, Borg (2006) gathered information from different groups of participants (FL teachers, delegates, subject specialists, pre-service teachers of English, undergraduates in English).
 - One of the most cited reasons for the uniqueness of language teachers was that of the subject matter, including both the unity and content of medium, and the variety of the content (Borg, 2006: 13).
 - Some practitioners claimed making an extra effort while preparing and delivering their lessons, since they must focus on how they were saying what they said.
 - The issue of the status of the teacher as a non-native speaker of the language being taught was also mentioned, since the ability of FL non-native teachers is often equated with their proficiency in the language relative to native speakers.
 - This fact, according to our own observation and experience, may become a factor adding strain and raising the anxiety levels of teachers, since they feel constantly evaluated.

Anxiety and sense of identity

- Guiora argued that language learning is a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition, because it directly threatens an individual's self-concept and worldview (1983: 8). Likewise, Horwitz et al. (1986) related the particular distinctiveness of learning a foreign language to the vulnerability experienced by students, who may feel their own self-concept and self-expression threatened. For these scholars, the fact that the learners must rely on unskilled language abilities, together with the intrusion of elements from other culture, produces a considerable threat to their self-perception of genuineness in presenting themselves to others (Horwitz, 1999: 22).

[...] while learning target languages, L2 or FL identities are developing, and L1 identities are reconstructed. Language learners may feel the loss of L1 Identities in a target language context or may feel that they are not able to express their thoughts in a target language. When learners feel the loss of L1 identity, feel limited or broken, this may be language anxiety arising. Huang (2014: 66).

Complexities involved in the learning and teaching processes

- It is worthwhile paying attention to the manner in which Hammadou & Bernhardt (1987: 302) refer to what they term ‘the unique art of being a foreign language teacher’:

Being a foreign language teacher is in many ways unique within the profession of teaching. Becoming a foreign language teacher, too, is a different process from that which other future teachers experience. This reality is rooted in the subject matter of foreign language itself. In foreign language teaching, the content and the process for learning the content are the same. In other words, in foreign language teaching the medium is the message.

Our project: Preliminary Steps

- The research being conducted by our team in the Andalusian context purports to elicit the perceptions and views of FL teachers in relation to their own wellbeing, through a combination of qualitative and quantitative instruments, namely narrative analysis, discussion groups, interviews, and questionnaires.
- The project will conclude with the design of a training and assessment model focused on wellbeing.
- In a first phase of the research we asked ten Secondary FL teachers to write a narrative commenting on the following: factors pertaining to their own practice that contribute to personal satisfaction (at present and throughout their career); factors generating frustration or burnout; factors hindering their wellbeing and the development of their career; aspects in their working environment that should be improved.
- The teachers were also requested to answer the following questions: Does your job influence in a positive or negative manner your personal wellbeing? In what ways? What would you need to feel professionally fulfilled? What measures are you taking to fulfil those needs? If given the chance, what would you require from the educational administrators? If your current circumstances at work remain unaltered, how do you imagine yourself in a few years regarding both professional and personal wellbeing?

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