



Hugging the Cactus: The Impact of Daily Gratitude on Language Teachers' Well-being and Ill-being

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Abstract

Existential positive psychology (EPP) views hardship and tension as inseparable from life. However, majority of the interpretations in language teaching context pertain to the bivariate view of well-being and ill-being, advocating that positivity and negativity are entirely distinct factors. Furthermore, most studies on teachers' psycho-emotional variables are theoretical, creating an urgent need for practical, action-based solutions. Addressing these gaps, researchers utilized an EPP perspective and investigated the effectiveness of a 14-day gratitude-based program on the fluctuations of 42 Iranian EFL teachers' existential gratitude, well-being, and ill-being through the Repeated Measures design. For 14 days, respondents practiced expressing gratitude to themselves, their learners, and others. At the end of each day, they filled out three questionnaires. The results of Repeated Measures ANOVA revealed that gratitude interventions could play a significant role in enhancing teachers' well-being by helping them control ill-being and be grateful for their lives. Thus, the study evidenced the efficacy of gratitude, as a practical means of tending to teachers' mental health. The study also contributed to EPP and L2 teaching by profiling the dialectical and co-valence relationship between teachers' well-being and ill-being. Several theoretical and pedagogical implications and suggestions for future studies were also discussed.

Keywords: Existential Positive Psychology, Gratitude, Ill-being, Positive Psychology, Well-Being.

Maintaining happiness and confronting life tensions requires a mindset equipped with actualized inner strengths, including hope, motivation, grit, resilience, and similar notions, which have been the topic of recent studies in language teacher education ([Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2024](#); [Wang et al., 2021](#); [Zhang et al., 2024](#)). The current literature suggests that language teachers might suffer from heavy workloads, interpersonal conflicts with students,

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classroom management issues, and many other constraints ([MacIntyre et al., 2019](#); [Zhang et al., 2024](#)). This psychologically demanding context fosters ill-being, allowing associated issues like anxiety and depression to overshadow teachers' well-being. As a higher-order variable, well-being entails one's positive psychological state resulting from stabilized happiness, vitality, optimism, and similar notions ([Longo et al., 2018](#); [Ryan & Deci, 2001](#)). Accordingly, teacher well-being has been described as a critical notion not only for educators' personal health and job satisfaction but also for promoting effective classroom environments, student engagement, and overall educational outcomes, as it enables teachers to model positive behaviors, build stronger relationships, and sustain motivation despite professional challenges ([Gregersen & Mercer, 2022](#)). Several factors contribute to language teachers' well-being, including grit, resilience, self-efficacy, stress-coping strategies, and positive interpersonal relationships with learners ([Gregersen et al., 2020](#); [Oxford, 2016](#)). On the contrary, ill-being functions as an umbrella under which depression, anxiety, helplessness, and burnout dwell ([Ryan & Deci, 2001](#)).

Both concepts (i.e., well-being and ill-being) and their subcomponents have been discussed in L2 contexts mainly through the scope of positive psychology (PP). As the name implies, PP emphasizes the role of positive notions (e.g., motivation, hope, enjoyment) while discussing individuals' well-being ([Ryan & Deci, 2001](#)). PP has shown that language teachers' well-being correlates with their grit, engagement, job satisfaction, self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, teaching experience, and instructional practices ([Derakhshan et al., 2022](#); [Dewaele et al., 2018](#); [Greenier et al., 2021](#); [Liang et al., 2022](#)). Thanks to PP, we also know that students' misbehaviors, classroom management issues, low proficiency, and organizational factors have been discussed as predictors of teachers' ill-being ([Gregersen et al., 2020](#); [Hiver, 2017](#); [MacIntyre et al., 2019](#); [Zito et al., 2024](#)), especially in Iranian context where low income, interpersonal conflicts with colleagues, strict institutional rules and relations, and stakeholders' high expectation might psycho-emotionally overwhelm the teachers ([Seyri & Ghiasvand, 2024](#)). However, several metatheoretical criticisms have been posed against PP in recent years. For instance, based on the bivariate view of well-being and ill-being, as advocated by PP, positivity entails the absence of negativity. The view prioritizes the perfectionist interpretation of happiness and well-being, which neglects life realities ([Iasiello et al., 2020](#); [van Zyl & Rothman, 2022](#)). Further, it has been argued that PP is extensively focused on establishing theoretical links between different variables. Such claims have triggered scholars to question the credibility and practicality of PP ([Derakhshan et al., 2023](#); [Klein et al., 2018](#); [van Zyl et al., 2023](#); [van Zyl & Rothman, 2022](#)).

Broadening the scope of PP, researchers have suggested relying on existential positive psychology (EPP), which addresses the theoretical and methodological shortcomings of PP. The core premise underlying EPP is that hardships, unwanted thoughts and experiences, and disturbing moments are inevitable aspects of the life essence ([Wong et al., 2021, 2022](#)). From

the lens of EPP, suffering contributes to well-being promotion through (a) motivating people to search for meaning rather than response, which primarily leads to unfavorable consequences (e.g., aggression, depression, suicide), (b) educating people to manage and endure painful experiences and emotions, and (c) evoking curative, redemptive, diagnostic, and growth-promoting reactions which serve as transformative functions ([Wong et al., 2021, 2022](#)). Thus, EPP offers a more reality-based view of human experiences by noting that (a) positivity (i.e., well-being) and negativity (i.e., ill-being) are inseparable ([Klein et al., 2018](#); [van Zyl et al., 2023](#); [van Zyl & Rothman, 2022](#)) and (b) well-being promotion depends on one's capability to transform negativity into positivity through action and mere reliance on theory fails to foster growth ([Wong et al., 2021, 2022](#)). In this vein, language teachers might rely on gratitude as an overlooked yet operable concept. Gratitude entails appreciating others or the self in response to a pleasant occurrence ([Goodenough, 1998](#); [McCullough et al., 2001](#)). If interpreted through the EPP perspective, gratitude denotes being grateful and content despite tense situations ([Jans-Beken & Wong, 2021](#)). Studies on this concept has discussed the effectiveness of gratitude-based interventions, as evidenced by [Dickens \(2017\)](#), where the researcher's meta-analysis of 38 studies with 282 effect sizes showed that such interventions positively contribute to happiness and well-being.

Research on EPP and gratitude in applied linguistics remains scarce. The field has predominantly focused on theoretical studies with emphasis on establishing links between various well-being- or ill-being-related concepts. Although insightful, such studies remain questionable regarding credibility, generalizability, and practicality ([Derakhshan et al., 2023](#); [Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2024](#); [Wang et al., 2021](#); [Zhang et al., 2024](#)). Further, the links between gratitude and well-being have been established in various domains ([Newman et al., 2023](#)); however, the field of language education has overlooked this concept in either its general or existential interpretations. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the impact of a 14-day gratitude intervention on Iranian EFL teachers' well-being, ill-being, and existential gratitude. Notably, the significance of the study is justified by its manifold purposes, including the simultaneous examination of teachers' well-being and ill-being; testing actionable strategies for promoting well-being and controlling ill-being; and highlighting the role of gratitude in managing language teaching challenges. Utilizing a repeated measures design, the study tests the following null hypotheses:

H₀₁: Daily gratitude practices have no significant impact on L2 teachers' well-being.

H₀₂: Daily gratitude practices have no significant impact on L2 teachers' ill-being.

H₀₃: Daily gratitude practices have no significant impact on L2 teachers' existential gratitude.

In what follows, we first review the literature on EPP and gratitude. We then detail the methodology of our intervention study, present the results, and discuss their implications for teacher education and well-being research.

Review of Literature

Existential positive psychology

Existential Positive Psychology (EPP) advocates that “positivity is not defined in terms of a positive to negative ratio but is based on one’s ability to transform negatives into positives” (Wong et al., 2022; p. 7). Theoretically, EPP rests upon two premises, (a) life involves suffering and experiencing unpleasant situations is inevitable, (b) individuals flourish if they learn to embrace the darkness of ill-being-related factors such as anxiety and depression and ascend towards light and peace (Wong et al., 2021, 2022). EPP emphasizes the role of self-transcendence. The notion refers to building upon limitations and conflicts through bridging a balanced, harmonious, and dialectic pathway between suffering and growth. The idea of growth despite accepting the hardships and tensions have been mainly neglected in majority of PP-laden studies due to the dominance of bivariate view of well-being and ill-being. This view indicates that well-being and ill-being are entirely distinct variables (See Iasiello et al., 2020 for a review). Nearly two decades ago, positive psychology (PP) emerged as an underlying trend in general psychology and has flourished in various disciplines, including language education (Wang et al., 2021). PP seeks to detach from negative-laden movements that focus on studying the negative factors and highlight the significance of positive notions such as flourishing, joy, perseverance, and meaning of life to promote one’s well-being (Seligman, 2011). PP asserts that one’s well-being can be addressed from two vantage points. The hedonic view highlights the importance of happiness and satisfaction in life, while the eudaimonic view focuses on self-actualization and high performance (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Based on Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model, notions such as positive emotions, relationships, meaning in life, and accomplishment are fundamental layers of one’s well-being. The model also indicates that the absence of the positive factors provokes tensions, anxiety, and disturbing feelings and thoughts. Similar assertions can be discussed relative to Oxford’s (2016) EMPATHICS model, which tried to provide a basis for studying positive factors within the L2 domain by elaborating on the epistemology of a number of key concepts like motivation, agency, intelligence, empathy, and self-related factors.

On the contrary, based on EPP, positivity starts from embracing the dark aspects of life, maintaining engagement despite pain, forgiving others to hone relationships, self-decentralizing and transcending egotism, along with accomplishing through sacrifice and overcoming failures (Kaufman, 2020; Kjell, 2011). According to EPP, negative factors may contribute to one’s well-being by (a) triggering people to pursue meaning as a more pleasant option than unwanted consequences such as hatred and bitterness, (b) teaching them to manage and alter the stressful thoughts and experiences for the sake of a happier and healthier life, and (c) providing diagnostic, redemptive, curative, and growth-provoking responses serving as transformative and protective functions (Wong, Mayer, et al., 2021).

In recent years, language teachers' well-being has been the topic of PP-laden studies. Based on the evidence, we know that notions like engagement ([Greenier et al., 2021](#)), grit ([Derakhshan et al., 2022](#)), and self-efficacy ([Liang et al., 2022](#)) are influential factors in language teacher's well-being. Likewise, notions such as anxiety, depression, burnout, and distress have been considered maladaptive and detrimental factors that threaten the teachers' well-being and make room for the emergence of ill-being symptoms ([MacIntyre et al., 2019](#); [Mercer et al., 2016](#)). Specifically, [Wang et al. \(2022\)](#) modeled the interplay of EFL teachers' well-being and immunity among 1135 Asian language teachers, and their results showed that investment in teachers' immunity would be beneficial for nurturing well-being. Similarly, [Talbot and Mercer \(2018\)](#) studied the well-being of 12 ESL/EFL teachers, and their analyses showed that interacting with students, meaning, and belief in their work would affect their well-being. Also, there have been several studies that support EPP. Recently, [Esmaeilee and Hassaskhah \(2023\)](#) showed that language teaching enjoyment correlates with teachers' well-being. Further, their qualitative analyses based on an interview with 40 EFL teachers showed that the presence of psychological distress as a negatively-branded notion would trigger several positive outcomes such as efficacy enhancement, utilization of stress-coping strategies, and promotion of an emotionally-supportive classroom climate where the distressed teachers share their feelings with the students and in light of the increased understanding between teachers and students, a sense of relief and peace emerges as an outcome. Their findings were in line with studies that reported that stressful situations would enhance one's goal accomplishment ([Martin, 2001](#)), effort ([Eysenck et al., 2007](#)), motivation, performance, and attention ([Strack et al., 2017](#)). Recently, [Zhao and Tay \(2023\)](#) analyzed the data obtained from 7,448 participants worldwide, and their findings confirmed the idea that well-being and ill-being are, in fact, bipolar and complementary aspects of one's mental health.

Gratitude

Closely connotated with morality and ethics, gratitude denotes a positive emotion arising from a sense of appreciation of self or others in response to positive experiences ([Goodenough, 1998](#); [McCullough et al., 2001](#)). The notion is among the highly prized concepts in Abrahamic religions. However, the interpretations and conceptualizations of the term in the scientific milieu call for more caution. Etymologically, the Latin *gratia* implies grace, kindness, generosity, and "getting something for nothing" ([Pruyser, 1976, p. 69](#)). The expression of gratitude can be directed towards oneself, others, and non-human sources (i.e., God) ([Newman et al., 2023](#)). Through expression of gratitude, "People recognize that they are connected in a mysterious and miraculous way that is not fully determined by physical forces but is part of a wider, or transcendent context" ([Streng, 1989, p. 5](#)). In psychological domains, gratitude has been discussed relative to self-actualizers which provoke and satiate higher-order values and needs such as happiness, pride, and hope ([Maslow, 1970](#)). From a social vantage point, gratitude is among the behaviors the expression of which occurs when receiving a benefit from others

([Heider, 1958](#); [Klein, 1957](#)). Further, based on [Ortony et al.'s \(1988\)](#) goal-based model of appraisal, gratitude entails a sense of admiration and joy caused by acknowledging goodness and praiseworthy actions. From the opposite view, ingratitude has been considered among the primary sources of one's depression, anger, anxiety, and guilt ([Heilbrunn, 1972](#)). In a broader scope, gratitude has been discussed as an integral aspect of one's virtues network. Accordingly, virtues like gratitude are essential for flourishing and moving toward completeness and wholeness ([Hursthouse, 1991](#); [King et al., 2023](#)).

Empirically, the results of Gallup (1998) showed that over 90% of American teens believed that expressing gratitude makes them feel somewhat/extremely happy. Likewise, [Emmons and Crumpler \(2000\)](#) noted that conscious investment in gratitude would lead to an amplified sense of fulfilling and meaningful life. Studies also indicate that gratitude makes the experiences of a day more salient ([Watkins, 2013](#)) and leads to the recollection of more positive memories ([Lambert et al., 2012](#)). Gratitude also influences peace of mind, physical health, and interpersonal relationships ([Emmons & McCullough, 2003](#)).

A meta-analysis of 38 randomized controlled trials demonstrated that gratitude-based interventions lead to improvements in well-being, happiness, positive affect, and reductions in depression ([Dickens, 2017](#)). Similar results were obtained by [Diniz et al. \(2023\)](#), where they focused on 64 randomized clinical studies through a meta-analysis and found that patients who underwent gratitude interventions experienced greater feelings of gratitude, better mental health, and fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression. Likewise, recent action-based interventions such as mindfulness programs, cognitive-behavioral training, and stress management workshops have shown promise in reducing burnout and enhancing psychological health among educators. The result which was reported by [Beames et al., \(2023\)](#), where they reviewed 88 studies and analyzed 46 of them meta-analytically. Similarly, [Newman et al. \(2023\)](#) studied the interplay of general and God-affiliated gratitude, and their analyses of the data obtained from 1398 participants revealed that both types contribute to individuals' well-being. Additionally, [Zhang et al. \(2023\)](#) studied gratitude among 363 individuals for 14 days and found that gratitude predicts the respondents' next-day hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Recently, [Li et al. \(2024\)](#) investigated the overall effect and comprehensiveness of interventions on teacher well-being. In this vein, the researchers focused on 176 effect sizes and included 44 of them for further analyses. The results showed that the study quality, intervention type, and intervention duration were the top determinants respectively. Their results also confirmed by the synthesis conducted by [Choi et al. \(2025\)](#), who focused on the data from 145 studies spanning 28 countries.

In 2021, Jans-Beken and Wong approached gratitude from an existential vantage point by positing that most gratitude-based studies have focused on the phenomenon from a general and positive angle. In other words, the literature needed more evidence to discuss the role of gratitude behaviors within hardships and tense situations. In this regard, they hypothesized that

existential gratitude proclivity is associated with spiritual well-being, which needed to be reflected in previous studies. The results supported the researchers' hypotheses and signaled that an existential view of psycho-emotional strengths such as gratitude would help individuals endure hardships and seek the bright side of their experiences. Consequently, gratitude has received no attention in L2 teacher emotion literature and the studies in this regard have focused on gratitude from the scope of pragmatic studies concerned with students' gratitude expression strategies (e.g., [Bakirci & Özbay, 2020](#)). Therefore, studying gratitude efficacy among teachers becomes a vital point in the literature that requires more attention, especially in high-stakes contexts like Iran where teachers might feel overwhelmed by interpersonal conflicts with colleagues, strict institutional rules and relations, and stakeholders' high expectations ([Seyri & Ghiasvand, 2024](#); [Mahdian Rad & Baleghizadeh, 2025](#))

Present Study

This study contributes to the field of L2 teachers' well-being and mental health from several vantage points. Current literature has mainly treated teachers' well-being and ill-being as two opposing and distinct concepts. The simultaneous study of both concepts through repeated measurements permits comparisons and aligns with EPP principles, indicating that the two notions coexist alongside each other and that ill-being functions as the basis for growth. Also, the study responds to the shortage of experimental and practical studies in the field, where majority of inquiries have been correlational or cross-sectional in nature, leading to possible underrepresentation or oversimplification of the concepts ([Derakhshan et al., 2023](#)). Additionally, this study would be among the first trials which evidence the effectiveness of gratitude in L2 teaching context. Noteworthy, gratitude and its ill-being management possibility has not been discussed elsewhere. The notion has been discussed by focusing solely on its linguistic and pragmatic realizations, and studies which address it within the emotional network of language teachers are non-existent. To address these issues, we designed a set of gratitude practices which reflect several EPP-driven themes like acceptance of failures, radical appreciation of life challenges, self-worth, and mindfulness.

Method

Design

A repeated measures design was employed to assess the psycho-emotional fluctuations of 42 Iranian EFL teachers' well-being, ill-being, and existential gratitude over 14 days, offering greater statistical power and sensitivity to change compared to cross-sectional designs ([Charness et al., 2012](#); [Clifford et al., 2021](#)). This design was chosen to capture the dynamic nature of emotions, which cross-sectional studies might fail to represent ([Derakhshan et al., 2023](#)) and aligned with Bolger and Laurenceau's (2013) framework for studying intra-

individual variability and change over time, grounding the approach in a theoretical model of emotional processes.

Unlike post-test-only designs, repeated measures collect multiple data points per participant, enhancing accuracy of the results ([Körner et al., 2022](#)). To address potential demand characteristics, participants were blinded to the study's hypotheses, and questionnaires were administered at consistent times to minimize order effects. Carryover effects were mitigated by standardizing intervention delivery and excluding responses with odd patterns (e.g., consistently increasing, decreasing or neutral responses). The absence of a control group was due to practical constraints, including limited access to a comparable sample and ethical concerns about withholding a potentially beneficial gratitude intervention from high-stress teachers ([Charness et al., 2012](#)). Randomization was not feasible due to purposeful sampling, which prioritized teachers with specific characteristics; however, selection bias was reduced by applying strict inclusion criteria and comparing baseline data from a pilot phase. To enhance internal validity, data collection occurred at fixed intervals, allowing monitoring for history effects, and reliable measures were used.

Context and participants

Forty-two Iranian EFL teachers (20 male, 22 female; M age = 26, SD = 2) were selected via purposeful sampling ([Ary et al., 2019](#)) to ensure alignment with the study objective, i.e., EFL teachers as representatives of individuals working in stressful occupational contexts. Inclusion criteria were: (a) private-sector teachers preparing for the Iranian Education Ministry Entrance Exam (IEME), a high-stakes process with low acceptance rates and intense competition; (b) early-career teachers, who face elevated stress and attrition risks ([Casely-Hayford et al., 2022](#)); and (c) teachers with high ill-being and low well-being/gratitude scores, hence, vulnerable to psycho-emotional strain. Purposeful sampling increased ecological validity but introduced potential selection bias, as non-random selection may reflect pre-existing differences. To mitigate this, baseline scores were compared to pilot phase data to ensure representativeness. All the respondents were fully briefed on ethical notions and anonymity, confidentiality, and safety of their participation prior to the study.

Instruments

Well-being

Our understanding of well-being aligned with [Longo et al.'s \(2018\)](#) interpretation of the concept, which is based on extensive literature review and assessment of well-being theories (e.g., [Longo et al., 2018](#); [Ryan & Deci, 2001](#)). Accordingly, teachers' well-being in the present study represented their happiness (i.e., cheerful & pleased), vitality (i.e., energetic & lively), calmness (i.e., serenity & peacefulness), optimism (i.e., positive outlook for future), awareness (i.e., knowing oneself), acceptance (i.e., embracing one's past, personality & feelings), involvement (i.e., engaging in focused tasks), self-worth (i.e., positive evaluation of oneself),

purpose (i.e., having clear goals & directions in life), connection (i.e., feeling of belonging, mutual caring & love), congruence (i.e., alignment of thoughts & actions), competence (i.e., feeling capable of overcoming challenges), development (i.e., experiencing continuous growth), and significance (i.e., valuing one's actions). For measuring these constructs, we used the 14-item Likert scale developed and validated by [Longo et al. \(2018\)](#), which is a 5-point Likert ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (very true). The 14-item scale was selected for its psychometric validation across diverse populations, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the multidimensional well-being constructs, as listed earlier. Further, the brevity of the scale minimized respondents' fatigue, making it suitable for repeated measures studies.

Ill-being

The present study operationalized ill-being as an umbrella term for anxiety and depression. The rationale for this integration is justified relative to the literature of the concepts. Accordingly, anxiety denotes the subjective feeling of apprehension, tension, nervousness, and worry associated with autonomic nervous system arousal ([Dewaele et al., 2022](#)). Meanwhile, depression entails feeling sadness, hopelessness, helplessness, worthlessness, and the loss of interest in daily activities and life experiences ([Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995](#)). In the L2 context, the concepts are believed to be among the highly detrimental saboteurs for teachers and learners ([Dewaele et al., 2022](#); [Horwitz et al., 1986](#)). L2 teachers might suffer from anxiety and depression for several personal and occupational reasons. Accordingly, teachers' language proficiency, attitudinal factors, lack of self-confidence, students' misbehaviors, students' demotivation and disengagement, time restrictions, syllabus coverage, and classroom management issues have been among the discussed sources ([Ghanizadeh et al., 2020](#); [Horwitz et al., 1986](#); [Kyriacou, 2001](#)). To address these components, six items from Lovibond and [Lovibond's \(1995\)](#) Depressive Symptoms Scale was utilized along with seven items from [Spitzer et al.'s \(2006\)](#) Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale. Both scales measure the components on a 4-point Likert ranging from 0 (not at all) to 3 (almost always). The combination of these scales permitted measuring a wide range of ill-being symptoms including anxiety, dysphoria, devaluation, self-deprecation, lack of involvement, anhedonia, inertia, stress, agitation, and impatience. The scale underwent content validity check by an applied linguist and its reliability was tested through the pilot phase.

Existential gratitude

Existential gratitude and general gratitude are conceptually similar, except that the former counts blessings in both good times and bad ones as well ([Jans-Beken & Wong, 2021](#)). Constructed and validated by [Jans-Beken and Wong \(2021\)](#), Existential Gratitude Scale (EGS) measures gratitude despite hardships and negative moments of life on a 13-item Likert ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). The scale rests upon EPP premises and

its connection to gratitude, resentment, appreciation, trauma tests, and spiritual well-being has been evidenced through the validation process ([Jans-Beken & Wong, 2021](#))

Daily Gratitude Practices

Table 1 summarizes the gratitude practices the participants focused on for 14 days. Notably, the following list is based on the theoretical foundations of gratitude, where the concept denotes a sense of appreciating oneself and others ([Goodenough, 1998](#); [McCullough et al., 2001](#)). Also, some of the practices were focused on existential gratitude; hence, focusing on good and bad times simultaneously ([Jans-Beken & Wong, 2021](#); [Wong et al., 2021](#)).

Table 1.

Daily gratitude practices

Practice	Description
1. Start a gratitude journal	Write down a list of challenges of each day and three things for which you have been grateful that day. Write down how life contradictions (e.g., success and failure) have been influential in shaping your personality and worldview
2. Express (radical) appreciation	Tell your students, friends, parents and others that you appreciate their presence in your life even if their actions disturbed and hurt you psycho-emotionally. Negotiate how their presence made you tougher than before
3. Write a letter to yourself	Practice self-compassion by writing a thank you letter to your body and mind that kept you going despite happy and sad moments. Reflect on the choices you've made in your life, even the difficult or painful ones. Appreciate your life for the freedom it provided to choose your path, and acknowledge how your choices shaped your life today
4. Keep a gratitude jar/box	Find an important or positive aspect in your life and write it on a piece of paper and add it to the box. Keep writing the blessings one at a time and review them daily
5. Do a voluntary work	Try an activity which makes you feel good or donate blood, money, or even a smile.
6. Nature appreciation	Take a walk, count your breaths, be thankful to your surroundings, and note that many people wish they could walk like you.
7. Remember your kindness	Try remembering the times where you could act harshly or angrily, but remained calm, positive, and forgiving
8. Hug the cactus	Look for strength in your life adversities. Be thankful to your stressors and remember that they make you stronger and that shadows are needed to understand the light. Appreciate your uniqueness by focusing on the fact that there is only one version of you in the whole world
9. Embrace the imperfection	Learn to love your life despite all shortcomings. Perfectionism makes you obsessive and unsatisfied with life realities.
10. Celebrate the accomplishments	Buy yourself a gift, order your favorite food, and celebrate your life achievements. No matter how big or small.
11. Stop self-blame	Remember that you are not responsible for everything. There are some inevitable failures and experiences in ever one's life
12. Light a candle	Sit in the darkness and light a candle. Remember that candle burns not because of fire, but for the thread within.
13. Be helpful	Find someone whom you can help. Share your gratitude strategies.
14. Reflect on the journey	Write a summary of gratitude-practices that served you the best and decide whether you would continue being grateful to yourself and life or not.

Data collection and analysis procedures

Sixty individuals sharing a similar status with the research sample participated in the pilot phase, where the scales underwent a reliability check. Accordingly, Cronbach's alpha method showed that Existential Gratitude, Well- and Ill-being scales enjoyed the reliability estimates of .840, .871, and .828, respectively. Notably, we used these scales for they have been consistent in showing robust psychometrics and validity across studies with varied sociocultural contexts. After the pilot phase, teachers were contacted through Telegram groups exclusive for language teachers and those willing to involve in the study were identified via purposeful sampling, which led to inclusion of 50 individuals. Using Google Forms, the researcher designed an online version of questionnaires for each respondent. Before the data collection, all participants were briefed about the study objectives, researcher expectations, and ethical consideration like anonymity and confidentiality were fully explained to them. Participants were permitted to leave the process on will without explanation; however, 42 of them remained willing and consistent throughout the experiment which lasted 14 days. The participants were expected to enact each item described in Table 1 and reflect on their well-being, existential gratitude, and ill-being by completing the questionnaires at the end of the day for 14 consecutive days. Ensuring the completion of data at the end of each day, we notified the respondents and observed their participation by checking the data pool. For checking the odd patterns, we monitored the data on a daily basis and focused on non-serious or inconsistent responses by checking identical answers across days. Participants who showed such patterns were contacted for clarification, and their answers were either resolved through discussion or excluded in case of unreliability. The obtained data from each respondent was transformed into an Excel file and combined to be analyzed by SPSS26. The initial analyses included checking the reliability and normality of the data. Further, each variable (i.e., well-being, ill-being, and existential gratitude) was separately analyzed by Repeated Measures ANOVA to unravel the fluctuations over 14 days.

Results

Repeated Measures Multivariate ANOVA (MANOVA) followed by Repeated Contrast were employed to analyze the present data. Repeated Contrast is a type of post-hoc comparison which compares means on a successive manger (i.e., 2 with 1; 3 with 2; 4 with 3, etc.). Normality of the data, was verified by checking the skewness and kurtosis indices which were below ± 2 (Bachman, 2005). Cronbach's alpha reliability indices for the well-being ($\alpha = .86$), ill-being ($\alpha = .88$), and gratitude ($\alpha = .89$) questionnaires showed that the scales enjoyed appropriate reliability (Geroge & Mallery, 2020). In the present report, M represents mean scores and MD stands for mean differences. Notably, effect sizes are reported based on Cohen (1988) who suggested "small $d = .10$ to $.29$, medium $d = .30$ to $.49$, and large $d = .50$ to 1.0 " (pp. 79-81). Before discussing the results, it should be noted that the assumptions of homogeneity of

variances of groups, and homogeneity of covariance matrices are not reported due to the fact that the present study included a single group of EFL teachers, and the mentioned assumptions are required for multiple group comparisons.

The first null-hypothesis stated that there were not any significant fluctuations in EFL teachers' well-being during daily gratitude practices. Table 2 shows the main results of MANOVA. The results ($F(3, 29) = 82.72, p < .05$, partial eta squared = .974 representing a large effect size) indicated that there were significant differences between the EFL teachers' means on well-being measured during 14 sessions.

Table 2.

Multivariate Tests for Well-Being on Fourteen Sessions

	Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Well-being	Pillai's Trace	.974	82.729	13.000	29.000	.000	.974
	Wilks' Lambda	.026	82.729	13.000	29.000	.000	.974
	Hotelling's Trace	37.085	82.729	13.000	29.000	.000	.974
	Roy's Largest Root	37.085	82.729	13.000	29.000	.000	.974

In case of MANOVA significance in repeated measures, a multiple comparison problem might occur, which is tended typically through post-hoc tests (e.g., Scheffe, Tukey, Bonferroni) to have a detailed view of significant differences between measurements (Juarros-Basterretxea et al., 2024). The results of the Bonferroni post-hoc comparison tests (Appendix, Table 3) indicated that the daily gratitude practices significantly improved teachers' well-being from sessions one ($M = 32.90$) to 13 ($M = 47.52$) ($MD = 2.54, p < .05$); thus, rejecting the first null-hypothesis indicating no significant impact of gratitude on well-being. Results showed that the intervention explained a large proportion of the variance in well-being scores.

The second null-hypothesis stated that there were not any significant fluctuations in EFL teachers' ill-being during daily gratitude practices. The results ($F(3, 29) = 122.58, p < .05$, partial eta squared = .982 representing a large effect size) indicated that there were significant differences between the EFL teachers' means on ill-being measured during 14 sessions (Table 4). Bonferroni post-hoc comparison tests (Appendix, Table 5) revealed that the intervention was significantly effective in reducing teachers' ill-being from sessions two ($M = 29.95$) to 13 ($M = 14.19$) ($MD = -2.83, p < .05$). Thus; the second null-hypothesis was rejected and gratitude practices impacted teachers' ill-being to a large extent.

Table 4.

Multivariate Tests for Ill-being on Fourteen Sessions

	Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Well	Pillai's Trace	.982	122.568	13.000	29.000	.000	.982
	Wilks' Lambda	.018	122.568	13.000	29.000	.000	.982
	Hotelling's Trace	54.944	122.568	13.000	29.000	.000	.982
	Roy's Largest Root	54.944	122.568	13.000	29.000	.000	.982

Finally, the third null-hypothesis stated that there were not any significant fluctuations in EFL teachers' existential gratitude during daily gratitude practices. Table 6 shows the main results of MANOVA. The results ($F(3, 29) = 76.62, p < .05$, partial eta squared = .972 representing a large effect size) indicated that there were significant differences between the EFL teachers' means on existential gratitude measured during 14 sessions (Table 6). Bonferroni results (Appendix, Table 7) showed that the intervention was effective in promoting teachers' gratitude from sessions one ($M = 33.81$) to 14 ($M = 57.69$) ($MD = 4.26, p > .05$). Thus; the third null-hypothesis was rejected and the results showed that the intervention was largely effective on teachers' existential gratitude.

Table 6

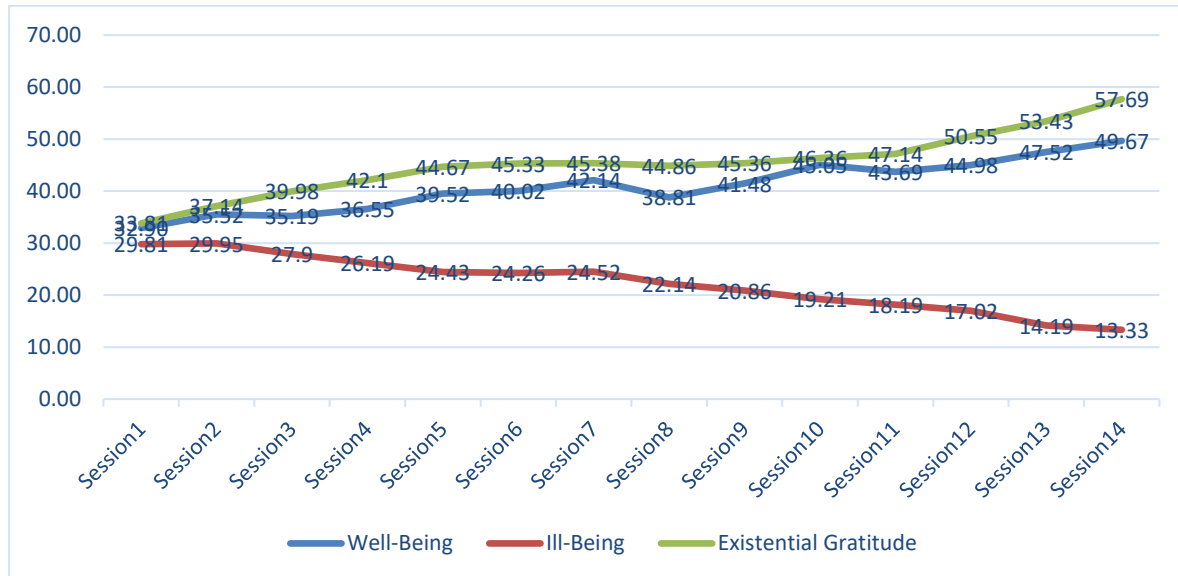
Multivariate Tests for Existential Gratitude on Fourteen Sessions

	Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Well	Pillai's Trace	.972	76.622 ^b	13.000	29.000	.000	.972
	Wilks' Lambda	.028	76.622 ^b	13.000	29.000	.000	.972
	Hotelling's Trace	34.348	76.622 ^b	13.000	29.000	.000	.972
	Roy's Largest Root	34.348	76.622 ^b	13.000	29.000	.000	.972

Figure 1 shows the trend of mean scores on well-being, ill-being and existential gratitude.

Figure 1.

Comparing Means Trends on three Variables across Fourteen Sessions



Alt Text: Illustration of the rising trends of well-being and existential gratitude and falling trend of ill-being throughout 14 measurement points

Discussion

The present study examined the impact of daily gratitude practices on EFL teachers' existential gratitude, well-being, and ill-being. Results showed that enacting gratitude positively impacts the EFL teachers' well-being and existential gratitude and lowers their ill-being levels.

We argue that the increase in well-being results from an interplay of variables like pride, hope, and joy, which are linked to gratitude and constitute higher-order needs (Maslow, 1970). Thus, envisioning gratitude as an integral part of one's psycho-emotional domino, we pose that practicing gratitude provokes several other notions contributing to well-being, including vitality, calmness, optimism, self-worth and acceptance, competence, congruence, and awareness, as theorized by Longo et al. (2018). Further, based on the results, we argue that daily gratitude cultivates several positive feelings and thoughts in EFL teachers. The claim is supported by Hursthouse (1991), McCullough et al. (2001), Newman et al. (2023), Ortony et al. (1998), and others who discussed the benefits of gratitude by pinpointing its correlations with life satisfaction, peaceful mind, physical health, enhanced interpersonal relationships, and spirituality (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Lambert et al., 2012; Newman et al., 2023; Watkins, 2013; Zhang et al., 2023). Further, the results align with Emmons and Crumpler (2000), who believed that gratitude amplifies the sense of fulfillment and meaning in life—the claim that can be discussed relative to the EPP framework. As noted earlier, daily gratitude practices indirectly hone the individuals' awareness. The present results contribute to the literature by suggesting that gratitude in EFL teachers' lives can provide them insight and

awareness despite tensions. Specifically, gratitude may provide teachers insight into life realities, suggesting that embracing stressors and confronting depressive thoughts can build resilience, tenacity, and happiness. In this vein, we argue that the present results provided more support for [Lomas and Ivtzan's \(2016\)](#) elaborations on the EPP, who proposed a dialectic interplay between well-being and ill-being. Accordingly, negativity can coexist with growth. Our results exemplified this dialectic by showing that over the 14-day intervention, EFL teachers' well-being and existential gratitude increased, while ill-being declined, yet the trajectories revealed no complete eradication of negativity. Therefore, we note that gratitude practices did not suppress ill-being entirely but facilitated its integration into a broader emotional landscape. The idea which reflected the principle of co-valence, according to which “many aspects of functioning and flourishing involve a complex balance of positive and negative elements” ([Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016, p. 14](#)).

As the results denote, daily gratitude practices increase the EFL teachers' existential gratitude. In other words, we claim that grateful teachers are not only positive about the pleasant experiences of their lives but are also capable of maintaining a sense of life appreciation, transcendence, and happiness despite hardships. In this vein, the present study contributes to the literature by signaling that gratitude benefits EFL teachers' well-being and enables them to transform negativity into positivity. Results manifested that positivity does not entail the complete eradication of negative factors, as advocated by traditional PP trends. Instead, it involves acquiring a more flexible and responsive mindset. In this vein, the present results added to EPP by evidencing the effectiveness of daily gratitude practices on the teachers' well-being and existential gratitude while proposing that ill-being-related symptoms neither fade away nor function as ever-negative factors. In other words, the results highlighted that happiness and suffering are residents of one's psycho-emotional boundaries, and one's joy and fulfillment cohabit with anxiety and depression; however, being grateful towards oneself, others, and life can help to achieve a more balanced, enduring, and reliable well-being and happiness.

Thus, gratitude would help language teachers stay safe from several negative notions, suggesting the stress-coping potentialities of gratitude. Precisely, supporting previous findings and in line with current literature (e.g., [Heilbrun, 1972](#); [Hursthouse, 1991](#); [King et al., 2023](#)), we argue that teachers' gratitude contributes to their resilience, which serves as a buffer against unwanted or disturbing emotions like anxiety and depression. By enacting gratitude daily, teachers can enrich the quality of their resilience and help them approach their occupational stressors mindfully.

Also, results align with EPP principles by showing that that negativity is not an ever-fixed notion and there might be several positive outcomes in the heart of the darkness ([Esmaeilee & Hassaskhah, 2023](#); [Martin, 2001](#); [Strack et al., 2017](#)). Specifically, the study showed that being a grateful language teacher would open the window to happiness, competence, development,

and similar feelings and thoughts. Further, the study evidenced the efficiency of gratitude practices in the L2 domain and a justification for including gratitude-laden teacher education programs where the EFL teachers become aware of gratitude as an actionable and practical ill-being coping strategy. Also, L2 teachers could also consider the benefits of gratitude in their teaching contexts. As the results indicated, gratitude not only promotes teachers' well-being but can also be recognized as a means of responding to classroom dynamics. Specifically, teachers can encourage the learners to enact gratitude, which deepens teacher-student rapport and positively impacts students' engagement, motivation, and social harmony ([King et al., 2023](#)).

Statistically, sessions seven and eight were among the notable intervals, where all three variables showed significant improvements. The seventh session, entitled 'Remember your Kindness,' encouraged the teachers to remember the moments when they chose to remain calm, forgiving, and positive over anger and bitterness. Arguably, the seventh session provided a means of self-reflection and obtaining emotional harmony since it triggered the teachers to detach themselves from negative thoughts of the irreversible experiences and appreciate their personal growth by reflecting on their inner strengths. Likewise, 'hugging the cactus' was the primary purpose of the eighth session, where the teachers tried to reframe difficult moments and practice a sense of acceptance and self-worth, contributing to well-being ([Longo et al., 2018](#)). Similarly, from the ninth session onwards, teachers reported the most significant improvements in their well-being (i.e., 3.57-point increase), ill-being (i.e., 2.83-point decrease), and existential gratitude (i.e., 4.26-point increase). This increase in teachers' well-being and existential gratitude despite ill-being reduction can be discussed by reflecting on the intervention session.

Typically, sessions nine to 14 were designed based on four major themes, including gratitude, mindfulness, self-compassion, and self-reflection, which are discussed to be influential in well-being promotion and ill-being reduction ([Emmons & Crumpler, 2000](#); [Emmons & McCullough, 2003](#); [Gallup, 1998](#); [Watkins, 2013](#); [Zhang et al., 2023](#)). Precisely, the ninth session, entitled 'Embrace the imperfection,' tried to reduce the pressure of unfulfilled expectations and goals, hence promoting the sense of contentment and appreciation of life the way it flows. The session could motivate the teachers to see beauty in their flaws and ignore self-blaming, self-criticism, and unrealistic expectations. Celebrating the accomplishments in the tenth session could lead to reduced ill-being and increased well-being and existential gratitude through focusing on small achievements, reduced ruminations, and negative self-talk. Self-blame, an underlying depressive symptom, trauma indicator, and suicidal intentions ([Duncan & Cacciatore, 2015](#)), was focused in the session 11, which helped the teachers to unload their thoughts from excessive thoughts in favor of emotional stability and freedom. Symbolizing hope and inner strengths through mindfulness, searching for meaning in moments of serenity, enacting altruistic behaviors and benevolence, and establishing a sense of agency and control through evaluating the gratitude practices were among the endeavors which were

focused on by the teachers in these sessions. Thus, our study provided support for previous meta-analytic studies, which evidenced the effectiveness of gratitude-based interventions on individuals' well-being (e.g., [Dickens, 2017](#); [Diniz et al., 2023](#); [Beames et al., 2023](#); [Choi et al., 2025](#); [Li et al., 2024](#)). However, the present study was among the first attempts in our field that empirically profiled the efficacy of a gratitude-based intervention through multiple measurements, showcasing its potential to enhance well-being, and existential gratitude, while controlling ill-being among EFL teachers.

Considering the Iranian EFL context, the present study provided quantitative support to [Karimi and Mofidi's \(2019\)](#) activity theoretic analysis of L2 teacher identity development, where the researchers relied on [Engeström's \(2001\)](#) activity theory to discuss how teacher negotiate and shape identities through tools (e.g., pedagogical practices), rules (institutional norms), community (colleagues/society), and divisions of labor. Specifically, increased existential gratitude and well-being paralleled to Karimi and Mofidi's findings that prolonged engagement in reflective practices (e.g., gratitude enactment) resolves identity tensions, transforming ill-being into agentic growth. Sessions like "*Remember your kindness (7)*" and "*Embrace the imperfection (9)*" seemingly increased "the possibility of expansive transformations in activity" ([Engeström, 2001, p. 137](#)).

Collectively, the results revealed that gratitude helps teachers if enacted daily and longitudinally, and its impact strengthens over time, implying that the positive impacts of gratitude are not fleeting but rather sustained and deepened over time.

Conclusion

The study yields some implications for L2 teachers and teacher educators. Firstly, integrating gratitude into teacher education programs can provide long-term benefits, including enhanced well-being, reduced ill-being, and a more sustainable teaching career. Teacher education programs can focus on training courses focused on the psychological benefits of gratitude and strategies for integrating gratitude into teachers' daily routines on- and off work. In such courses, teachers can be encouraged to start their day by reflecting on what they are grateful for in their personal and occupational lives. Expressing gratitude to their students, even those who cause various troubles, teachers can infuse a sense of social harmony and shared understanding into their classroom. In our study, gratitude was highlighted as a preventive factor against ill-being; however, it is equally essential to consider the potential detrimental effects of ingratitude on teachers' well-being. The study also implied that gratitude can help teachers have a more nuanced view of the ambivalence between peace and conflict in life by reminding them that past experiences are irreversible, that they are not responsible for many things, and that hardships are the starting points of growth if seen as blessings. Teachers who regularly enact gratitude are more likely to sustain a balanced emotional state where they appreciate both the joys and challenges of teaching.

Future researchers can expand the present study by addressing its limitations. One possibility is replicating the study with a larger sample size in favor of improved generalizability and applicability to a larger population. Also, researchers can consider gratitude and its application in L2 teaching by considering teachers' backgrounds and the role of sociocultural norms in shaping their understanding of gratitude. Further, some of the results might be due to carry-over effects. Thus, future studies can approach gratitude and related concepts by addressing the limitations of Repeated Measures design. Daily diary methodologies, like the one we operationalized, while offering ecological validity and real-time insights into psychological processes, are prone to several challenges including participants' fatigue, attrition, missing data, and measurement reactivity ([Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013](#); [Connor et al., 2012](#)). To address these issues, future replications could also consider control groups in favor of stronger robustness.

We conclude by noting that gratitude, although having a quiet presence in one's life, serves as a motive in happiness and a shelter in turmoil. While challenges like stress and anxiety may cast shadow over one's psycho-emotional health, gratitude functions as an opportunity for self-reflection and growth, hence, fueling the inner peace and optimism. We hope our study inspires the teachers to rely on this neglected yet game-changing inner strength as a lantern in their occupational and professional journey.

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Appendix

Table 3.

Bonferroni Post-Hoc Comparisons Tests for Well-Being on Fourteen Sessions

(I) Session	(J) Session	MD (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
2	1	2.619*	.630	.015	.257	4.981
3	2	-.333	.458	1.000	-2.050	1.384
4	3	1.357	.530	1.000	-.629	3.344
5	4	2.976*	.542	.000	.946	5.006
6	5	.500	.823	1.000	-2.585	3.585
7	6	2.119	.950	1.000	-1.442	5.681
8	7	-3.333*	.812	.017	-6.377	-.290
9	8	2.667*	.605	.007	.397	4.936
10	9	3.571*	.509	.000	1.663	5.480
11	10	-1.357	.697	1.000	-3.968	1.254
12	11	1.286	.698	1.000	-1.330	3.902
13	12	2.548*	.596	.010	.312	4.783
14	13	2.143	.636	.151	-.242	4.528

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 5.

Bonferroni Post-Hoc Comparisons Tests for Ill-being on Fourteen Sessions

(I) Session	(J) Session	MD (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
2	1	.143	.392	1.000	-1.328	1.614
3	2	-2.048*	.449	.004	-3.733	-.363
4	3	-1.714*	.401	.010	-3.217	-.212
5	4	-1.762	.579	.372	-3.933	.409
6	5	-.167	.550	1.000	-2.230	1.897
7	6	.262	.434	1.000	-1.364	1.888
8	7	-2.381*	.385	.000	-3.826	-.936
9	8	-1.286	.466	.789	-3.034	.463
10	9	-1.643*	.428	.038	-3.248	-.038
11	10	-1.024	.302	.141	-2.156	.108
12	11	-1.167	.400	.522	-2.667	.334
13	12	-2.833*	.466	.000	-4.580	-1.087
14	13	-.857	.460	1.000	-2.583	.869

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 7.

Bonferroni Post-Hoc Comparisons Tests for Existential Gratitude on Fourteen Sessions

(I) Session	(J) Session	MD (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
2	1	3.333*	.549	.000	1.275	5.392
3	2	2.833*	.456	.000	1.125	4.542
4	3	2.119*	.511	.015	.202	4.036
5	4	2.571*	.387	.000	1.120	4.023
6	5	.667	.510	1.000	-1.244	2.577
7	6	.048	.527	1.000	-1.927	2.022
8	7	-.524	.506	1.000	-2.420	1.372
9	8	.500	.423	1.000	-1.087	2.087
10	9	1.000	.538	1.000	-1.016	3.016
11	10	.786	.659	1.000	-1.683	3.255
12	11	3.405*	.642	.000	.998	5.812
13	12	2.881*	.656	.007	.423	5.339
14	13	4.262*	.682	.000	1.707	6.817

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.