



Exploring the relationship between meaningful work and subjective well-being among language teachers: a mixed method study

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Abstract

The concept of meaningful work has gained significant attention in organizational psychology. As teaching is a profession often associated with high levels of emotional investment and personal engagement, understanding how the perception of meaning in work influences teachers' well-being is crucial. This study aimed to explore the relationship between meaning in work and subjective well-being among Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. It sought to quantify this relationship through regression analysis and further elucidate it through thematic analysis of qualitative interview data. The study involved 65 EFL teachers, with data collected via the Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI) and the Subjective Well-being Scale. Linear regression analysis was used to examine the relationship between meaning in work and subjective well-being. Additionally, in-depth interviews with 12 teachers provided qualitative insights, analyzed through thematic analysis to identify emergent themes relating to meaning in work and its impact on well-being. Regression analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between meaning in work and subjective well-being ($R^2 = .394$, $p < .001$). The thematic analysis of interview data yielded four main themes: personal fulfillment and job satisfaction, professional growth and self-realization, sense of purpose

and contribution to society, and connection and relationships. These themes underscored the multifaceted ways in which a sense of meaning in work contributes to language teachers' well-being. The study highlights the profound impact of meaning in work on EFL teachers' subjective well-being. The findings emphasize the importance of fostering meaningful work environments in educational settings to enhance teacher well-being, with implications for teacher retention, job satisfaction, and overall school climate.

Keywords: Meaningful work; teacher well-being; EFL teachers; subjective well-being; teacher psychology; positive psychology

Introduction

The pursuit of well-being in the workplace, particularly within educational settings, has increasingly become a focal point of scholarly discourse (Carolan et al., 2017; Harter et al., 2003; Nielsen et al., 2017; Sojo et al., 2015; Sulis, Mercer, et al., 2023). Central to this discussion is the concept of meaningful work, a construct that holds profound implications for well-being (Misha & van Dijke, 2023; Rosso et al., 2010). Research in organizational psychology posits that when individuals find meaning in their work, it correlates positively with higher levels of job satisfaction, engagement, and overall well-being (Borst et al., 2019; Charles-Leija et al., 2023; Corbeanu & Iliescu, 2023; X. Lu et al., 2022; Sypniewska et al., 2023). In line with these developments, research on language teachers' well-being is gaining momentum (Chamani et al., 2023; Gregersen et al., 2020; Hofstadler et al., 2021; MacIntyre et al., 2019; Mercer, 2020; Shin et al., 2021). However, the dynamics of meaning and its impact on subjective well-being among language teachers remains an underexplored area. This gap is noteworthy, considering the stressors, challenges, and rewards inherent in language teaching, which range from cultural considerations to the challenges of teaching in a multilingual and multicultural classroom (Farrell, 2015; Richards & Farrell, 2005). This study aims to address this research gap by exploring how Iranian language teachers perceive and derive meaning from their work and how this perception influences their subjective well-being. By gaining a deeper understanding of this issue, educational leaders and policymakers can develop targeted interventions to enhance language teachers' well-being.

Literature Review

Meaning at Work

The concept of meaningful work is a fundamental aspect of organizational psychology, encompassing how employees perceive the significance and purpose of their work (Misha & van Dijke, 2023). In recent years, this topic has gained significant attention, reflecting a shift in the values and priorities for the workforce (Bailey et al., 2018). Meaning at work refers to the extent to which employees find their work to be significant, purposeful, and aligned with their personal values and beliefs (Martela & Pessi, 2018; Misha & van Dijke, 2023). Accordingly, this concept is multi-dimensional, encompassing aspects like the sense of purpose, value congruence, and a feeling of contributing to something larger than oneself. Scholars such as Rosso et al. (2010) have emphasized that meaning is not just about the work itself but also about the broader context in which the work is performed. This context includes the organizational culture, leadership, and the social and environmental impacts. The concept also aligns closely with positive psychology and its focus on what makes life and work fulfilling (Charles-Leija et al., 2023).

Although some studies have referred to the “meaning of work” (Rosso et al., 2010) or “work meaningfulness” (Steger et al., 2012), we adopt the term “meaningful work” as it is the most widely recognized construct in empirical research. In this regard, the concept of “meaningful work” is used in the current study refers to the work that provides individuals with a sense of fulfillment, aligns with their intrinsic motivations, and fosters psychological well-being (Martela & Pessi, 2018; Steger et al., 2012).

The presence of meaning in work has profound implications for both employees and organizations. Empirically, it has been linked to higher levels of job satisfaction, engagement, and organizational commitment, as well as lower levels of absenteeism and turnover intentions. Research indicates a significant positive correlation between meaningful work and job satisfaction, as well as employee engagement, suggesting that employees who find their work meaningful are more likely to be satisfied and actively engaged in their roles (Jones et al., 2009; Lu et al., 2016; Yang, 2010). Additionally, a strong link exists between meaningful work and organizational commitment, with evidence showing that employees with a sense of purpose in their work exhibit a deeper commitment to their organization, positively affecting job performance and reducing turnover intentions (Mashal & Irfan, 2015; Tufail, 2013). Furthermore, meaningful work inversely relates to absenteeism and turnover intentions, implying that employees who perceive their work as meaningful are less likely to exhibit withdrawal behaviors such as absenteeism or intentions to leave the organization (Borst et al., 2019; Cohen & Golan, 2007). These findings collectively underscore the importance of meaningful work in fostering a positive, engaged, and committed workforce, while also reducing negative outcomes like absenteeism and turnover.

Subjective Well-Being

Subjective well-being (SWB) is often defined as a broad category that includes individuals' emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgments of life satisfaction (Das et al., 2020; Diener & Ryan, 2009; Proctor, 2014). According to Diener (1984), SWB encompasses three primary components: the presence of positive mood, the absence of negative mood, and cognitive judgments of life satisfaction. This definition underscores the subjective nature of well-being, implying that it is not merely the absence of mental illness but the presence of positive mental health indicators (Seligman, 2011). SWB is inherently subjective, varying significantly between individuals based on their personal experiences, values, and cultural context (Magyar & Keyes, 2019). It emphasizes the importance of personal agency and the subjective evaluation of one's life circumstances (Grosz et al., 2021).

Several psychological theories underpin the concept of SWB, however, hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives are two fundamental approaches to understanding this concept (Diener & Ryan, 2009). One of the most influential perspectives has been the set-point theory, which suggests that individuals have a baseline level of happiness, influenced by genetics and personality traits, to which they eventually return following life's ups and downs (Headey, 2014b). Another critical perspective is the hedonic adaptation theory which posits that people tend to adapt to life events, both positive and negative, returning to a stable level of well-being over time (Brickman et al., 1978; Headey, 2014a). More recently, the broaden-and-build theory by Fredrickson (2013) has highlighted the role of positive emotions in broadening individuals' thought-action repertoires and building their personal resources, both of which contribute to higher SWB. These theories collectively emphasize the dynamic nature of SWB and its dependence on a combination of internal dispositions and external circumstances.

The significance of SWB extends into the workplace, impacting various outcomes. Research indicates a strong correlation between high levels of SWB and desirable workplace behaviors,

such as increased creativity, higher productivity, and better problem-solving abilities (Bryson et al., 2017). For instance, research indicated that happy individuals are more successful across multiple life domains, including work (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). This connection can be partly attributed to the positive affect component of SWB, which enhances cognitive processes and broadens individuals' perspectives, making them more open to new experiences and ideas. Furthermore, high SWB can also act as a buffer against workplace stress and burnout, enhancing employees' ability to cope with challenging work environments (Khalid & Syed, 2023).

Meaningful work and well-Being

In examining the relationship between meaningful work and SWB, a substantial body of research has consistently demonstrated a positive correlation between these constructs. Various studies across different professions and contexts have explored this relationship, highlighting how finding meaning in work contributes significantly to well-being. The seminal study by Steger et al. (2012) serves as a cornerstone in this field, revealing that employees who perceive their work as meaningful report not only higher levels of life satisfaction but also exhibit reduced signs of depression and enhanced psychological well-being. This finding underscores the broader implications of meaningful work, extending beyond mere job satisfaction to encompass overall mental health. A study by Fisher (2014) examined the concept of eudaimonic well-being, which includes engagement, growth, and intrinsic motivation as its components. The research posits that meaningful work is an integral part of this form of well-being. When employees find their work meaningful, it aligns with their personal development goals and intrinsic motivations, thereby enhancing their overall well-being. This study underscores the importance of finding purpose and value in one's work as key drivers of employee satisfaction and well-being. Veage et al. (2014) examined the concept of value congruence, highlighting the relationship between life values and work-related values. The study found that congruence between these values is associated with well-being and perceived accomplishment at work. When individuals feel that their personal values align with their professional environment, it leads to a heightened sense of well-being and achievement. This suggests that workplaces that respect and align with employees' personal values can foster a more fulfilling and satisfying work experience, contributing to overall well-being (Veage et al., 2014).

In a specific professional context, Utriainen et al. (2015) explored the well-being of hospital nurses, linking it to their work environment. The study concluded that factors such as quality patient care, collegial relationships, supportive leadership, challenging and meaningful work, and opportunities for professional development are crucial for nurses' well-being. This research highlights that an environment providing meaningful, challenging, and supportive work is vital for the well-being of employees in demanding professions like nursing (Utriainen et al., 2015). Guidetti et al. (2019) focused on the impact of mindfulness at work among teachers. The study discovered a negative association between mindfulness and workload stress, with mindfulness positively influencing work meaning. This, in turn, mediates the relationship between mindfulness and burnout, indicating that finding meaning in work can significantly mitigate stress and prevent burnout. This study underscores the protective role of mindfulness and meaningful work in high-stress professions (Guidetti et al., 2019). Mohamed Tharikh and Hamzah (2020) applied the Five Pillars of Wellbeing Theory to the context of air traffic controllers, emphasizing the role of supporting and empowering well-being at work. The pillars, which include positive emotion, engagement, relationship, meaning, and achievement, highlight the multifaceted nature of well-being. The study demonstrates that an environment fostering these elements, particularly meaning, benefits both employees and organizations by enhancing satisfaction, performance, and overall well-being (Mohamed Tharikh & Hamzah, 2020).

The literature on language teacher well-being also increasingly emphasizes the critical role of finding meaning in work as a significant contributor to overall well-being. In this regard, studies shown that a sense of meaning and purpose in their professional lives empowers teachers to direct their energies towards valuable goals, enhancing their overall well-being (Sulis, Mercer, et al., 2023). This is not simply about feeling good, but about “doing well” and experiencing self-actualization (Babic et al., 2023). Research also indicates that language teachers who find their work meaningful are often more motivated and engaged, which in turn, boosts their self-worth (Ebadijalal & Moradkhani, 2022). Furthermore, the capacity to derive meaning from their professional lives is seen as a core component of psychological well-being of language teachers (Ashegh Navaie et al., 2024; Chamani et al., 2023). This relationship between meaning and well-being highlights the importance of providing opportunities for teachers to find purpose in their work, which is crucial for supporting their overall health and professional satisfaction (Babic et al., 2022). Moreover, the perception of meaning in work is closely associated with other positive aspects of language teachers’ professional experience. Teachers who find their jobs meaningful are better prepared to manage professional challenges and a strong sense of meaning acts as a buffer against stress and burnout, enabling teachers to persevere despite difficulties (Shin et al., 2021). Additionally, teachers who experience a high level of meaning in their work often demonstrate greater emotional control, which fosters a positive classroom environment and enhances student outcomes (King & Ng, 2018). The ability to find meaning is also linked to a stronger sense of agency, helping teachers to identify pathways toward their goals and cultivate a more positive outlook on their future (Sulis, Mairitsch, Babic, Mercer, & Resnik, 2023). This connection underscores the need for educational institutions to acknowledge and support teachers in their quest for meaning in their work.

The emotional demands of language teaching suggest that teachers need to establish a strong connection between their work and a broader sense of purpose (Greenier et al., 2021). When teachers find that their work aligns with their values and provides a sense of personal and professional fulfillment, their well-being is more likely to improve. This is why teachers often engage in “job crafting,” actively adjusting their tasks and roles to align with their sense of meaning (Alqarni, 2021). Therefore, understanding how language teachers create meaning in their work is vital to understanding and enhancing their overall well-being. Relatedly, the existing literature suggest that institutions and policymakers have an essential role in fostering a sense of meaning for language teachers. Schools can promote a sense of purpose by involving teachers in curriculum development and decision-making, and by creating a supportive and respectful work environment where teachers feel valued (Greenier et al., 2021; Jin et al., 2021; Mairitsch et al., 2021). In this regard, providing opportunities for professional growth and development can also help teachers strengthen their sense of competence and meaning (Sulis, Mairitsch, Babic, Mercer, Shin, et al., 2023). Prioritizing meaning in teacher well-being requires a shift towards creating educational contexts that support both the professional and personal growth of teachers (Mercer, 2021). This can be achieved through various approaches, such as professional development programs, mentorship, and the development of supportive school cultures. By emphasizing these areas, stakeholders can create conditions that help language teachers not only survive, but also thrive in their profession, enriching their lives and the lives of their students (Sulis, Mairitsch, Babic, Mercer, & Resnik, 2023). Collectively, these studies present a comprehensive view of the relationship between meaningful work and well-being. They illustrate that meaningful work is not just about job satisfaction; but it is deeply intertwined with personal values, professional development, workplace environment, and mental health. The research collectively emphasizes that meaningful work is a key determinant of well-being, impacting employees’ sense of purpose, achievement, and overall life satisfaction.

This body of work provides valuable insights for organizations and individuals alike, stressing the importance of creating work environments that are not only productive but also fulfilling and aligned with employees' intrinsic values and goals.

Current Study

The current literature provides a substantial foundation for understanding the relationship between meaningful work and SWB in general contexts. However, it lacks specific insights into how this relationship plays out in the setting of language education. The nuances of the language teaching profession, including the cultural, communicative, and pedagogical complexities, present a distinct environment that may influence how meaningful work is experienced and its consequent impact on well-being. Additionally, while previous studies have explored the relationship either through quantitative or qualitative lenses, there is a need for a more integrated approach that combines these methodologies to capture a more comprehensive picture of this phenomenon. The current study aims to build upon the existing body of literature by exploring the specific relationship between meaningful work and SWB among language teachers. This study seeks to address these gaps by employing a mixed-method approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. In doing so, the study is guided by two primary research questions:

1. To what extent does meaningful work predict the subjective well-being of language teachers?
2. How do language teachers describe the ways in which meaningful work influences their subjective well-being?

Method

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the relationship between meaningful work and subjective well-being among Iranian EFL teachers. Mixed-methods research is widely recognized for its ability to provide a more comprehensive understanding of complex social and psychological phenomena by leveraging the strengths of both numerical data analysis and in-depth qualitative insights (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The rationale for selecting a mixed-methods approach is grounded in its capacity to not only quantify the strength of the relationship between meaningful work and subjective well-being but also explore the lived experiences of language teachers, offering more detailed perspectives on how they derive meaning from their profession. This study follows an explanatory sequential design (Creswell, 2014; Hashemi & Babaii, 2013), in which the quantitative phase (survey and regression analysis) was conducted first, followed by the qualitative phase (semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis). The quantitative phase involved administering validated instruments to measure the relationship between meaningful work and well-being, while the qualitative phase sought to deepen our understanding of this relationship through interviews with a subset of participants. The qualitative findings served to contextualize and explain the statistical insights identified in the quantitative data, ensuring a richer, more contextually grounded interpretation of the results. The combination of these methods enhances research validity by allowing for triangulation—cross-verifying findings from multiple data sources—thus reducing potential biases inherent in a single-method study (Haynes-Brown, 2022; Ivanova et al., 2006). Given the complex and subjective nature of meaningful work, relying

solely on quantitative or qualitative methods would have been insufficient in capturing the depth and complexity of how teachers perceive and experience meaning in their work. By employing a mixed-methods approach, this study provides a holistic understanding of meaningful work’s impact on teacher well-being, contributing both empirical evidence and rich qualitative narratives to the discourse on language teacher psychology and professional fulfillment.

Participants

The study sample comprised 65 Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, selected through convenience and availability sampling methods. This approach was chosen due to its practicality and ease of access to participants who were readily available and willing to participate in the study. While convenience sampling does not allow for systematic representativeness, it is commonly used in educational research where access to participants is constrained by institutional or logistical factors (Dörnyei, 2007). The study was conducted by inviting language teachers working in various private language institutes in Tehran. This context is particularly relevant for this study, as language teachers in the private sector often face professional challenges, such as job insecurity and limited professional development opportunities which can influence their sense of meaningful work and overall well-being (Ebadijalal & Moradkhani, 2022; Greenier et al., 2021). The participants’ demographic information is summarized in Table 1 below:

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the participants

Demographic Category	Range/Categories	N	Percentage (%)
Age	23–30	48	73.8%
	31–35	10	15.3%
	46–45	7	10.7%
Teaching Experience (Years)	5–10	30	46.2%
	11–15	20	30.8%
	16–20	15	23.0%
Highest Educational Qualification	BA/BSc	22	33.8%
	MA/MSc	35	53.8%
	PhD	8	12.4%
Teaching Level	Beginner	20	30.8%
	Intermediate	25	38.5%
	Advanced	20	30.8%
Institution Type	Private Language Institutes	65	100%

To comply with ethical standards the Helsinki Declaration, prior to the commencement of the study, informed consent was obtained from all participants. This process involved providing detailed information about the study purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequences. Confidentiality and anonymity were also guaranteed to all participants, ensuring that their responses would be used solely for research purposes and any identifying information would be removed from the final report.

Materials

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative instruments to measure meaningful work and subjective well-being among Iranian EFL teachers. The quantitative phase used standardized self-report instruments in English, while the qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews conducted in Persian to gain deeper insights into teachers' experiences. The details of these materials, their reliability, and their application in this study are discussed below.

Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI)

The study utilized the Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI) developed by Steger et al. (2012) to measure the extent to which teachers find their work meaningful. The WAMI consists of 10 items, rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "absolutely untrue" to "absolutely true", with a neutral midpoint. The scale includes three subscales: positive meaning, meaning-making through work, and greater good motivations.

The positive meaning subscale assesses whether individuals perceive their work as meaningful and fulfilling (e.g., "I have found a meaningful career"). The meaning-making through work subscale measures the extent to which work contributes to personal growth and self-understanding (e.g., "My work helps me better understand myself"). While these subscales are conceptually related, they capture distinct psychological processes; positive meaning reflects the sense of fulfillment derived from work, whereas meaning-making through work emphasizes personal transformation and self-discovery (Steger et al., 2012). The greater good motivations subscale evaluates the extent to which individuals view their work as contributing to a larger societal purpose (e.g., "The work I do serves a greater purpose"). The WAMI has been widely validated in various professional contexts. In this study, its internal consistency was examined using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.76, which indicates acceptable reliability. The original English version of the WAMI was used in this study without translation, as all participants were proficient in English, given their profession as EFL teachers. This decision was made to maintain the original psychometric properties of the instrument and avoid potential inconsistencies introduced through translation.

Subjective Well-Being Scale

Subjective well-being was assessed using the Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF), developed by Keyes et al. (2008). This 14-item scale evaluates three dimensions of well-being: emotional well-being (hedonic dimension), social well-being, and psychological well-being (eudaimonic dimension). Responses are measured on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from "never" to "every day", indicating the frequency of positive emotional and psychological states over the past two weeks. The emotional well-being dimension assesses the presence of positive affect and life satisfaction (e.g., "During the past two weeks, how often did you feel happy?"). The social well-being dimension measures the respondent's perceived social integration, contribution, and coherence (e.g., "During the past two weeks, how often did you feel that you had something important to contribute to society?"). The psychological well-being dimension includes aspects such as self-acceptance, autonomy, and personal growth (e.g., "During the past two weeks, how often did you feel that your life has a sense of direction or meaning to it?"). The scale demonstrated strong reliability in this study, with Cronbach's alpha = 0.81, which is consistent with previous research using this instrument. The MHC-SF has been extensively validated across different cultural contexts, including among educators (Keyes, 2005). As with the WAMI, the original English version of the MHC-SF was administered to participants, as their English proficiency was sufficient to understand and accurately respond to the scale items.

Interviews

To supplement the quantitative findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of 12 teachers to gain deeper insights into their experiences of meaningful work and well-being. The subset was selected purposefully to include teachers with varying levels of experience, ensuring diverse perspectives across different career stages. This approach aligns with best practices in qualitative research, where diversity in participant backgrounds enhances the richness of thematic analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Unlike the quantitative instruments, the interviews were conducted in Persian, the native language of the participants. This decision was made to allow teachers to express their thoughts more naturally and comprehensively, reducing potential language barriers that might limit the depth of their responses. The interview guide was designed to explore aspects of meaningful work and subjective well-being that could not be fully captured through standardized surveys. Sample questions included:

Can you describe a moment when you felt your work had a strong sense of purpose?

How do you think your work as a teacher contributes to your personal growth?

What aspects of your job make you feel most satisfied and fulfilled?

Interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes and were audio-recorded with participant consent. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Data Analysis

The study was conducted in two distinct phases: a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase. In the quantitative phase, the 65 participating EFL teachers were administered two instruments: the Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI) and the Subjective Well-Being Scale. Care was taken to provide clear instructions and to reassure participants about the confidentiality of their responses. Following the quantitative data collection, the qualitative phase involved conducting in-depth interviews with a subset of teachers. To ensure a diverse range of insights, 12 teachers were randomly and purposefully selected from the larger group of participants. The selection criteria were based primarily on their varying levels of teaching experience, aiming to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives. These interviews were designed to delve deeper into the themes explored in the quantitative phase, particularly focusing on aspects related to meaningful work as assessed by the WAMI. The quantitative data obtained from the WAMI and Subjective Well-Being Scale were analyzed using linear regression analysis in SPSS. This statistical method was chosen to determine the strength and nature of the relationship between the sense of meaning that teachers derive from their work (as measured by WAMI) and their overall subjective well-being. The linear regression analysis allowed for an assessment of how variations in work meaning are associated with changes in the teachers' well-being scores.

The qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach was chosen because it allows for a systematic and flexible exploration of patterns within the data while maintaining both inductive and deductive elements in theme generation (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The analysis began with familiarization with the data, where interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim in Persian and subsequently translated into English for analysis. The next stage involved generating initial codes, which were derived both inductively from the data and deductively based on existing literature on meaningful work and subjective well-being. Following this, themes were identified by organizing codes into broader conceptual categories, ensuring that themes remained grounded in participants' experiences rather than imposed from pre-existing theories. In this hybrid approach, the research team remained open to emergent themes while also being informed by prior research on teacher well-being and meaningful work. These themes were

then reviewed and refined, ensuring consistency and coherence across the dataset. During this phase, we re-examined the coded extracts within each theme to verify their representativeness and collapsed or separated themes where necessary to better reflect the underlying data. Once refined, themes were defined and named, ensuring that they were clearly distinguished from one another and accurately encapsulated the underlying patterns in the data. In the final step, exemplary quotes were selected to illustrate each theme, and the findings were integrated with the quantitative results to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the relationship between meaningful work and subjective well-being among EFL teachers. To enhance the credibility and transparency of the qualitative analysis, researcher triangulation was employed, whereby two independent researchers cross-checked the coding process and theme development. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus, ensuring that the thematic structure accurately represented the participants’ perspectives rather than the researchers’ assumptions.

Results

Quantitative Data Analysis Findings

The results of the descriptive statistics indicated that the average score for subjective well-being among the 65 EFL teachers was 52.48 (SD = 6.055). For meaningful work, the average score was 34.26 (SD = 5.877). These results pointed to a moderate level of subjective well-being and perceived meaningful work among the participants. Moreover, the results of the Pearson correlation analysis showed that there was a significant, positive correlation between subjective well-being and meaningful work, $r(65) = .628, p < .001$. This strong correlation suggests that, as EFL teachers perceive greater meaning in their work; their subjective well-being also tends to be higher.

The results of the linear regression analysis, presented in Table 2, indicate a significant relationship between meaningful work and subjective well-being. The model summary shows that meaningful work explains 39.4% of the variance in subjective well-being ($R^2 = .394$). The adjusted R square value, which accounts for the number of predictors in the model, was slightly lower at .385, still indicating a substantial amount of variance explained in subjective well-being by meaningful work.

The ANOVA results, as presented in Table 3, indicate that the regression model with meaningful work as a predictor of subjective well-being is statistically significant. The model

Table 2 Linear regression analysis summary for meaningful work predicting SWB

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.628 ^a	.394	.385	4.750
a. Predictors: (Constant), Meaningful work				

Table 3 ANOVA results for regression analysis with meaningful work predicting SWB

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	924.923	1	924.923	40.998	.000
	Residual	1421.292	63	22.560		
	Total	2346.215	64			

Table 4 Coefficients of regression analysis predicting SWB from meaningful work

	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	95% CI for B
(Constant)	30.315	3.511		8.634	.000	[23.299, 37.331]
Meaningful work	.647	.101	.628	6.403	.000	[.445, .849]

explains a significant portion of the variance in subjective well-being, $F(1, 63) = 40.998$, $p < .001$. This significant F-test suggests that meaningful work is a significant predictor of subjective well-being among EFL teachers.

The results from the regression analysis, shown in Table 4, provide detailed insights into the relationship between meaningful work and subjective well-being. The unstandardized coefficient (B) for meaningful work was .647, with a standard error of .101, indicating that for each one-unit increase in meaningful work, there is an associated .647-unit increase in subjective well-being. The standardized coefficient (Beta) was .628, signifying a strong positive effect of meaningful work on subjective well-being. This relationship was statistically significant, $t(63) = 6.403$, $p < .001$. The 95% confidence interval for B ranged from .445 to .849, further confirming the robustness of this relationship.

Qualitative Data Analysis Findings

Theme 1: Personal Fulfillment and Job Satisfaction

Our analysis indicated that personal fulfillment and job satisfaction were among the key factors mentioned by teachers in the interviews, showcasing how EFL teachers experience profound gratification and contentment through their roles. This theme underscores the intrinsic satisfaction derived not only from immediate classroom interactions but also from broader professional impacts and personal achievements. In this regard, many teachers expressed that the sense of personal fulfillment they experience is a critical motivator in their profession. For example, one participant noted:

I feel a deep sense of accomplishment when I see my students grasp a new concept. It's more than just a job; it's about making a difference. (Teacher 1)

This sentiment illustrates how teachers perceive their influence as extending beyond routine teaching tasks, emphasizing the emotional and intellectual satisfaction gained from witnessing student growth and success. Teachers also highlighted that personal gratification comes from making a lasting impact on students' lives. As one participant stated:

There's nothing more fulfilling than a former student telling me how I positively influenced their life. It validates my choice of being a teacher. (Teacher 4)

This reflection suggests that teachers derive long-term satisfaction from knowing they have contributed positively to their students' personal and academic development, reinforcing their commitment to the profession. Additionally, the daily experiences in the classroom were also reported as key contributors to job satisfaction. One teacher mentioned:

Every day, I find small victories in my classroom that add up to a lot of personal satisfaction. (Teacher 7)

These small but meaningful moments provide continuous reinforcement of the teachers' sense of accomplishment and contentment, accumulating over time to shape a more positive pro-

fessional identity. Moreover, participants described teaching as an opportunity to nurture and inspire students, rather than simply imparting knowledge. This perspective was vividly captured by a participant who shared:

For me, teaching is not just about imparting knowledge; it's about nurturing minds. The satisfaction I get from this is unparalleled. (Teacher 12)

This view emphasizes the nurturing role of teaching and how it contributes to a deeper, more fulfilling professional experience. The ability to inspire, support, and positively shape students' lives appears to be a core source of job satisfaction for many EFL teachers.

Collectively, these narratives highlight the profound sense of fulfillment and satisfaction that EFL teachers derive from their work. They illustrate how personal gratification and a sense of making a difference are interwoven into the fabric of teaching, contributing significantly to their overall well-being and job satisfaction.

Theme 2: Professional Growth and Self-Realization

The theme of *professional growth and self-realization* illustrates how teaching contributes to EFL teachers' ongoing personal and professional development. Participants described their roles as not only impacting students but also serving as a catalyst for their own learning, self-discovery, and continuous growth. For example, one participant talked about this theme by emphasizing how teaching is an ever-evolving process:

Every lesson is a learning opportunity, not just for my students, but for me as well. I've grown so much professionally since I started teaching. (Teacher 2)

This statement reflects how teachers perceive their profession as a journey of continuous improvement, where each classroom experience contributes to their professional development and skill enhancement. Participants also highlighted the transformative nature of teaching, noting how it challenges them to constantly evolve. One teacher shared:

Teaching challenges me in ways I never expected. It pushes me to constantly evolve, both in my teaching methods and in my understanding of my students. (Teacher 5)

This reflection suggests that teaching is not a static profession but a dynamic process that requires adaptability and a willingness to grow, fostering a sense of professional resilience and innovation. The theme of self-realization was further elaborated by a participant who described how teaching facilitated her own personal growth:

I've discovered parts of myself I never knew existed since becoming a teacher. It's like uncovering new layers of my personality and capabilities. (Teacher 8)

This insight reveals that teaching can be a profound journey of self-discovery, allowing teachers to explore new aspects of themselves and develop greater self-awareness. Participants also spoke about how their teaching experiences contributed to broader cognitive and emotional growth, as one teacher noted:

Being in this profession has made me more self-aware and reflective. It's a process of continuous self-improvement. (Teacher 10)

This reflection emphasizes how teaching fosters a reflective practice, encouraging teachers to engage in introspection and personal development. Moreover, teachers expressed how their interactions with diverse student populations expanded their worldviews and cultural understanding. One teacher summarized this experience by stating:

My teaching experiences have shaped my worldview and understanding of different cultures, making me a more rounded individual. (Teacher 11)

This indicates that teaching provides a platform for broadening perspectives, enhancing teachers' appreciation of diverse cultural contexts, and shaping their identity as educators.

These accounts collectively demonstrate that the teaching profession serves as a powerful means for both professional growth and self-realization. By continuously challenging themselves, reflecting on their practices, and engaging with diverse student populations, EFL teachers experience a transformative journey that enriches their professional and personal lives.

Theme 3: Sense of Purpose and Contribution to Society

The theme of *sense of purpose and contribution to society* highlights how EFL teachers perceive their work as extending beyond the classroom to influence broader societal contexts. Teachers shared that their professional efforts contribute to shaping responsible citizens, fostering global awareness, and promoting societal cohesion, thereby instilling a strong sense of purpose in their professional lives. One participant eloquently captured this sentiment by stating:

Teaching goes beyond the classroom walls. I feel like I'm contributing to society by shaping informed and responsible citizens. (Teacher 3)

This statement reflects how teachers view their role as pivotal in preparing students not only for academic success but also for becoming engaged and responsible members of society. The sense of purpose derived from this broader impact appears to enhance their professional identity and motivation. Another teacher emphasized the societal significance of their work by saying:

My job isn't just about teaching language. It's about preparing students for global challenges, making my role pivotal in societal development. (Teacher 6)

This perspective highlights the multifaceted nature of teaching, where imparting language skills is intertwined with preparing students to navigate complex global issues. The teacher's role is seen as essential to equipping students with the knowledge and attitudes necessary to engage with a rapidly changing world. Teachers also articulated how their sense of purpose is rooted in the opportunity to make a tangible difference in students' lives and, by extension, in society. As one teacher put it:

I see teaching as a way to make a real difference. It's not just about individual student success, but about contributing to the betterment of society. (Teacher 8)

This view aligns individual success with societal progress, suggesting that the fulfillment derived from teaching comes from the broader impact of nurturing future generations to contribute positively to society. Another participant emphasized the role of teaching in fostering social values and cohesion:

In my classroom, I'm not just teaching language; I'm fostering understanding, tolerance, and open-mindedness. It's my contribution to a more cohesive society. (Teacher 10)

This reflection underscores the importance of teaching as a platform for promoting values that are critical to societal harmony and progress. Teachers see their classrooms as microcosms where important social skills and attitudes are cultivated, contributing to a more tolerant and understanding society. The sense of responsibility associated with this impact was articulated by another teacher, who noted:

Every lesson is an opportunity to instill values that students will carry into society. This responsibility gives my work immense purpose. (Teacher 12)

This statement captures the weight of the responsibility felt by teachers in shaping the values and attitudes of future generations. It highlights how this sense of purpose sustains their professional commitment and deepens their sense of fulfillment.

Overall, these narratives reveal that EFL teachers derive a profound sense of purpose from their perceived contribution to societal development. Their reflections illustrate that teaching is not viewed merely as a job but as a vocation with the potential to impact society positively. This sense of purpose fosters a strong professional identity, motivating teachers to persist in their efforts to nurture not only academically successful but also socially responsible students.

Theme 4: Connection and Relationships

The theme of *connection and relationships* highlights the critical role that interpersonal interactions play in fostering EFL teachers' sense of satisfaction and purpose. Participants emphasized that the relationships they build with students and colleagues serve as a key source of emotional support and professional fulfillment, significantly contributing to their overall well-being. One participant expressed this sentiment:

The relationships I've built with my students and colleagues are the most rewarding part of my job. They provide a sense of belonging and mutual respect that's invaluable. (Teacher 2)

This statement underscores the value of supportive interpersonal connections in creating an enriching work environment. The sense of belonging and mutual respect cultivated through these relationships appears to sustain teachers' motivation and deepen their sense of purpose. Teachers also reflected on the personal dimensions of their connections with students, often extending beyond academic interactions. One teacher noted:

My connections with students go beyond academics. It's about understanding them, their challenges, and being a part of their growth journey. (Teacher 5)

This perspective reveals how meaningful teacher-student relationships are not confined to classroom instruction but involve a deeper engagement in the students' personal development. These bonds contribute to the teachers' sense of fulfillment and purpose, as they become active participants in their students' journeys. In addition to student relationships, participants highlighted the importance of collegial support. One teacher shared:

The camaraderie among us teachers is something I deeply value. We share, learn, and grow together, which enriches my experience as a teacher. (Teacher 6)

This reflection illustrates how collegial relationships provide a supportive network that enhances teachers' professional experiences. Collaborative learning and shared experiences with colleagues help mitigate stress and promote professional growth, thereby contributing positively to their well-being. Teachers also spoke about how these relationships influence their broader personal development. As one participant explained:

These relationships aren't just for the classroom. They've taught me about empathy, patience, and understanding different perspectives, enriching my personal life too. (Teacher 9)

This account suggests that the benefits of strong interpersonal connections extend beyond the professional realm, positively affecting teachers' personal lives by enhancing their emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. The emotional bond that develops with students and colleagues emerged as a key motivator for many participants. One teacher described:

There's an emotional bond that forms with students and colleagues. It's these relationships that often keep me motivated and invested in my work. (Teacher 11)

This reflection highlights how emotional ties can serve as a source of motivation, helping teachers navigate the challenges of their profession and remain engaged in their roles.

Collectively, these narratives reveal that relationships are at the heart of the teaching profession. The connections formed with students and colleagues provide a sense of community and support, which are essential for maintaining teacher well-being. The strong emotional bonds and mutual respect that develop in these relationships not only enhance teachers' job satisfaction but also contribute to their overall personal and professional growth, making the teaching profession deeply meaningful and rewarding.

Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to explore the intricate relationship between meaningful work and subjective well-being among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. Our research unveiled a significant positive correlation, as revealed through regression analysis, indicating that the degree to which EFL teachers find meaning in their work is strongly associated with their levels of subjective well-being. Additionally, qualitative interviews highlighted emergent themes, including personal fulfillment, job satisfaction, professional growth, self-realization, a sense of purpose, societal contribution, and the importance of connection and relationships. These findings collectively underscore the vital role that perceived meaning in the workplace plays in shaping the well-being of EFL teachers.

In this study, we observed a strong positive relationship between the sense of meaningful work and subjective well-being among EFL teachers, aligning with existing literature emphasizing the importance of meaningful work in fostering overall well-being (Fisher, 2014; Steger et al., 2012; Utriainen et al., 2015; Veage et al., 2014). For instance, our findings resonate with those of Steger et al. (2012), who reported a similar association in various occupational groups, reinforcing the idea that finding meaning in work is a universal contributor to employee well-being. The congruence of our results with prior studies suggests that despite the challenges and contexts of EFL teaching, the fundamental human need for meaningful work as a source of well-being remains consistent. This consistency might be attributed to the intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017) and job satisfaction derived from meaningful work, as theorized in previous research (Barouch Gilbert et al., 2014; Borst et al., 2019; Misha & van Dijke, 2023; Saks, 2006). Theoretically, our findings contribute to the literature by integrating concepts from positive psychology and organizational behavior, particularly in the context of EFL teaching, a field not extensively covered in this regard. By demonstrating the direct impact of meaningful work on subjective well-being among EFL teachers, this study advances our understanding of how job satisfaction and personal fulfillment are derived from work-related meaning.

Addressing the second research question, the findings revealed four dominant themes: personal fulfillment and job satisfaction, professional growth and self-realization, a sense of purpose and contribution to society, and the importance of connection and relationships. These findings are largely congruent with the previous studies. Studies like those of Baumeister et al. (2013) and Rosso et al. (2010) have similarly emphasized the role of meaningful work in enhancing employee well-being, highlighting aspects like personal fulfillment, sense of purpose, and the significance of relationships at work. Our results align with these studies, reinforcing the notion that meaningful work goes beyond mere job satisfaction, weaving into the deeper fabrics of personal identity, social contribution, and professional development. However, the specific emphasis on aspects like the societal contribution and professional self-realization in the context of EFL teaching adds a novel dimension to existing knowledge. This specificity might stem from the characteristics of the EFL teaching profession, which inherently involves complex social interactions, continuous learning, and a significant cultural and communicative impact on students. Unlike other professions, language teaching requires teachers to not only impart linguistic knowledge but also foster cross-cultural understanding and student

engagement in ways that contribute to both their own and their students' sense of purpose (Mercer, 2021). Furthermore, language teachers in private institutions, such as those in Iran, often face additional challenges, including job insecurity, performance-based contracts, and limited professional development opportunities, all of which influence their perceptions of meaningful work (Ebadijalal & Moradkhani, 2022; Greenier et al., 2021). These contextual factors must be acknowledged when interpreting the findings, as they suggest that the relationship between meaningful work and well-being is not uniform but rather shaped by institutional and sociocultural elements.

Building on the qualitative insights from our study, the findings offer a more nuanced understanding of theoretical frameworks surrounding meaningful work and subjective well-being, particularly in the context of EFL teaching. The emergence of themes such as personal fulfillment, professional growth, societal contribution, and relational connections aligns with and extends Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Chen et al., 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2017). According to SDT, intrinsic motivations such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness are key to psychological well-being (Ryan et al., 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Our findings underscore this, suggesting that EFL teachers derive a sense of well-being not just from external job satisfaction but also from internal fulfillment and professional identity development, aligning with the competence and autonomy aspects of SDT (Nazari & Xodabande, 2022b). Moreover, our findings align with research emphasizing the role of meaning in buffering against stress and burnout among language teachers (Shin et al., 2021). Teachers who view their work as meaningful often report higher emotional resilience, which allows them to navigate professional challenges more effectively. Additionally, the ability to derive meaning from work fosters a greater sense of agency, reinforcing teachers' commitment to their professional development and long-term career engagement (Sulis, Mercer, et al., 2023). In this regard, policymakers and educational leaders must recognize the importance of creating work environments that promote meaningful engagement, offer professional development opportunities, and provide institutional support that aligns with teachers' values and aspirations (Greenier et al., 2021; Jin et al., 2021; Mairitsch et al., 2021).

The study have some implications for the field of second language teacher education. At its core, this research underscores the profound impact of meaning in work on language teachers' well-being, a factor that has far-reaching consequences in language education (Mercer, 2021). Firstly, the strong positive correlation between meaningful work and subjective well-being among EFL teachers highlights the importance of job satisfaction and personal fulfillment in the profession (Chamani et al., 2023). This finding is crucial for teacher training and development programs, suggesting that enhancing the meaningfulness of work can lead to improved teacher well-being. In second language teacher education, this implies integrating training components that not only focus on pedagogical skills but also on cultivating a sense of purpose and fulfillment in teaching (Jin et al., 2021; MacIntyre et al., 2016; Mercer et al., 2016; Rusu & Colomeischi, 2020). Programs could include modules on career development, personal goal setting, and reflection practices that help teachers connect their work to their personal values and aspirations.

Furthermore, the themes emerging from the qualitative interviews – personal fulfillment, professional growth, sense of purpose, societal contribution, and connection with others – provide a detailed map of what might constitutes meaningful work aspects for EFL teachers. These insights can inform the design of teacher education curricula by emphasizing the holistic development of language teachers (Golombek, 2015; Golombek & Doran, 2014; Johnson & Golombek, 2018). For instance, professional growth and self-realization can be fostered through continuous professional development opportunities, mentorship programs, and platforms for teachers to share

best practices and innovations in language teaching. Language teacher education programs can capitalize on this by highlighting the broader social and cultural impact of language teaching, thus enhancing the perceived value and meaningfulness of the profession.

Moreover, the importance of connection and relationships identified in the study points towards the need for fostering collaborative and supportive teaching environments (Nazari & Xodabande, 2022a). This has implications for how teacher workspaces are structured and how teacher communities are developed. Encouraging peer support groups (Richards & Farrell, 2005), collaborative teaching strategies (Pischetola et al., 2023; Pozas & Letzel-Alt, 2023), and community engagement activities (Coombes & Ponta, 2023; Rubin et al., 2012) can help in building these vital connections. In terms of policy implications, the findings of this study suggest that educational institutions and policymakers should prioritize creating work environments that support meaning and well-being for teachers. This could include policies that promote work-life balance (Lee et al., 2021; McDaniel et al., 2021; Silva & Fischer, 2020), provide adequate resources and support for teachers (Gesel et al., 2021; Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al., 2021), and recognize and reward meaningful contributions in teaching. Such initiatives not only benefit teachers but also have a positive impact on student outcomes, as teacher well-being is closely linked to teaching effectiveness and student engagement (Babic et al., 2022; Hascher & Waber, 2021; Spilt et al., 2011). Lastly, the study contributes to the broader discourse on teacher well-being in the field of education. By providing empirical evidence specific to EFL teachers, it extends the conversation to the challenges and rewards of language teaching (Mercer, 2021). It calls for more research in diverse educational contexts to understand the universal and context-specific aspects of meaning in work for teachers.

Conclusion

In this study, we sought to illuminate the intricate relationship between meaning in work and subjective well-being among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, uncovering insights that contribute significantly to the field of second language teacher education. The key findings reveal a substantial positive correlation between the sense of meaning that EFL teachers derive from their work and their subjective well-being. This relationship is underpinned by various factors, including personal fulfillment, job satisfaction, professional growth, self-realization, a sense of purpose and contribution to society, and the importance of connection and relationships. These findings are pivotal in understanding the multifaceted nature of teacher well-being and the critical role that meaning in work plays within it (Babic et al., 2023; Gregersen et al., 2020; MacIntyre et al., 2019; Shin et al., 2021; Sulis et al., 2021). From a practical perspective, our findings highlight the need for educational institutions and policymakers to actively support initiatives that enhance teachers' sense of meaning at work. One actionable strategy involves fostering professional development programs that not only enhance pedagogical skills but also provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on their purpose and long-term career aspirations. Schools and language institutes should encourage mentorship programs, allowing experienced teachers to guide and support early-career educators, reinforcing a shared sense of purpose and professional identity. Additionally, institutions should create collaborative work environments where teachers can engage in curriculum development and decision-making, which can strengthen their sense of autonomy and investment in their profession. These strategies align with prior research indicating that when teachers have greater control over their work environment, their well-being and job satisfaction improve (Greenier et al., 2021; Jin et al., 2021). Furthermore, recognizing and celebrating teachers' contributions through institutional support, such as fair compensation, job security, and well-structured career advancement pathways, can further sustain their motivation and well-being (Mercer, 2021; Sulis et al., 2023).

However, the study is not without its limitations, which must be acknowledged for a comprehensive understanding of the findings. Firstly, the sample size and demographic limitations raise concerns about the generalizability of the results. The study primarily focused on a specific group of EFL teachers in Iran, which may not fully represent the diverse range of experiences and contexts in which EFL teaching occurs globally. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported measures for assessing subjective well-being and meaning in work could introduce biases and limit the objectivity of the findings (Latkin et al., 2017). While self-reported data provide valuable insights into participants' perceptions and experiences, social desirability bias and individual differences in self-reflection may have influenced the responses. Future research could incorporate alternative data collection methods, such as observational studies or triangulation with student feedback, to enhance the robustness of findings. Another notable limitation pertains to the qualitative analysis. Although thematic analysis provided rich insights into teachers' lived experiences, the coding and theme identification process inherently involves researcher interpretation. While we followed established procedures to enhance credibility, such as reflexivity and peer debriefing, the possibility of subjective bias in coding decisions cannot be entirely eliminated. Future research could address this limitation by incorporating inter-rater reliability checks or adopting a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative sentiment analysis of interview transcripts. Additionally, given that the qualitative data were collected in Persian and translated into English for analysis, minor nuances of meaning may have been lost in translation. Employing bilingual coders or conducting back-translation procedures in future studies could enhance the linguistic accuracy of the data interpretation. These limitations suggest that the results should be interpreted with caution, especially when considering their applicability to broader, more diverse populations of EFL teachers or other teaching disciplines.

Looking forward, there are several promising directions for further research. Future studies should aim to replicate this study across different educational contexts, particularly in countries with varying institutional structures and sociocultural expectations for teachers. Expanding the sample to include teachers from public schools and university language programs would provide a broader understanding of how meaning in work is shaped by different teaching environments. Additionally, longitudinal studies would be valuable in understanding how the relationship between meaningful work and subjective well-being evolves over time, especially considering the dynamic nature of the teaching profession and the changing educational landscapes. Examining how specific policy changes—such as teacher workload reduction, enhanced professional autonomy, or structured career progression—affect EFL teachers' sense of meaningful work could offer valuable insights for institutional reforms. Finally, exploring the impact of institutional policies and practices on this relationship could also offer practical insights for educational leaders and policymakers. A deeper examination of how cultural and systemic factors interact with teachers' personal motivations could further clarify how to sustain meaningful work in education, ultimately benefiting both teachers and students.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent To Participate

All data collection procedures were in agreement with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and the 1964 Helsinki Declaration. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Informed Consent

Written informed consent was obtained from all the participants for being included in the study.

Data Availability

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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