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TEACHERS' VIEWS ON STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: A PILOT STUDY

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Abstract: This pilot study investigates the role of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers with a special interest in promoting students' mental health, a relatively unexplored topic. Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three experienced EFL teachers. The research aimed to uncover their beliefs about their teaching role, and their perceptions of the EFL classroom as a space for fostering mental health. Another aim was to validate the efficacy of interview questions. Data analysis revealed that participants valued humanistic teaching practices and fostering a supportive, trusting environment. They highlighted the unique potential of language learning for self-expression, noting that EFL classes facilitate deeper interpersonal connections compared to other subjects. Teachers also viewed themselves as role models, influencing students' empathy, self-confidence, and character development through their attitudes and behaviours. The study found that teachers associate mental health primarily with addressing mental difficulties rather than general well-being. The findings suggest that EFL teachers can play a significant role in promoting mental health through humanistic practices and positive psychological principles; however, gaps in explicit recognition and intentional application of these principles occur. Therefore, implications include incorporating mental health as a theme in teacher training and early-career mentoring. Future research should involve larger teacher and student samples, develop quantitative instruments, and explore students' perspectives on teachers' practices to deepen insights into the intersection of EFL teaching and mental health promotion.

Keywords: *EFL mentoring, directiveness, collaboration, speech acts, post-lesson conversation*

1 Introduction

The first two decades of the new millennium have been marked by significant crises, including economic instability, a global pandemic, and the expansion of armed conflicts, all of which have profoundly impacted societies all over the world. In this time of turmoil, it seems that investigating issues regarding our mental health has never been more relevant. Humanity had faced numerous difficult and transformative times throughout history. However, it seems undebatable that at the beginning of the 21st century, despite (or, as some would even say, as a result of) all the technological and scientific development, we still desperately need to focus on the fundamental aspects of human nature.

There has been a long tradition of a humanistic view in pedagogy ever since ancient times when the personal relationship between master and disciple

was at the core of the teaching – learning process. For the past few centuries, we seem to have forgotten this aspect as education became institutionalized and a matter of methodology. Of course, nobody has ever denied that, as the participants of education are human beings, the ‘human factor’ is important: the quality of student-teacher relationships or the sense of community within schools have long been central concerns in education. Education has always had two aspects: the transmission of knowledge and the development of character with varying emphasis on each and a great variety of methods, approaches and ways to achieve the goals set forth by the given ideology. Nevertheless, the ideas of humanistic psychology (e.g. Maslow, 1970 and Rogers, 1961) starting from the 1950s-60s have entered pedagogy and have even made their way into official documents like curricula in the form of such ideas as the development of soft skills (e.g. communication skills and ability to cooperate) and personal qualities like self-confidence and self-awareness as a key goal of education.

The role of the teacher has also changed. Nowadays, there is a trend to view the teacher, and especially a FL (foreign language) teacher as a facilitator rather than an authoritarian source of knowledge. With the development of positive psychology and its application in education (known as positive education, e.g. Seligman et al., 2009), there is rising interest in whether the teacher as a facilitator (besides supporting the learning process) might also act as a promoter of mental health in the foreign language classroom (Mercer, 2017). Part of teachers’ job might be to facilitate the process of students’ individual personality development as well as cooperation, communication, community building within the group which contribute to fulfilling the role of school as a support system (Caplan, 1974).

These considerations are relevant both internationally and within the Hungarian context. However, this study will focus on the Hungarian context; therefore, it needs to be pointed out that in this country, many people live with a mental health deficit. There are high rates of mental and emotional disorders like depression (see the results of the series of the Hugarostudy surveys: Kopp, 2008, Kopp et al., 2009, Susánszky & Szántó, 2013, Tóth et al., 2022). For example, the prevalence of severe depression increased to 11% by 2021 compared to 7.6% in 2002, 10.7% in 2006, and 9.9% in 2013 (Tóth et al., 2022). I strongly believe that education could and should contribute to the prevention of mental illness by promoting mental health in the classroom.

Therefore, the purpose of the study is to:

- explore what beliefs and views Hungarian secondary school EFL teachers have regarding their own role as a classroom teacher,
- what role(s) of the language teacher they identify with, see if they consider themselves facilitators in the sense mentioned above,
- explore how the secondary school EFL classroom can be an ideal terrain to preserve and promote students’ mental health,
- and to validate the interview questions.

2 Literature Review

This section outlines the theoretical framework that forms the background of the study. Firstly, the humanistic approach in education is discussed, and then the concept of mental health is explained. Next, positive psychology and its application in pedagogy, especially language pedagogy is presented. In the last part of the section, earlier empirical research regarding teacher roles and positive psychology is also reviewed.

2.1 The Humanistic Paradigm in Education

The humanistic approach in education builds on the ideas of humanistic psychologists like Maslow and Rogers. Carl Rogers, primarily known as a psychologist and therapist, developed person-centred therapy, and he also contributed to the theory of humanistic pedagogy with his book *Freedom to learn* (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994) first published in 1969. Some of the key features of the humanistic approach are (1) student (or learner)-centredness, (2) the teacher being a facilitator, (3) freedom to learn and (4) personal growth (DeCarvalho, 1991).

As for English language teaching (ELT), learner-centredness got special emphasis in communicative language teaching. Tudor (1993) lists three basic roles a teacher has in a learner-centred classroom: the knower, the activity-organizer and the learning-counsellor. As taking student needs and intentions into consideration is central to the approach, being a learning-counsellor involves getting a deeper understanding of what learners need and would like to do and what they can do, that is, getting to know them personally.

In the Hungarian context, following the Rogersian path, there has been a movement in the direction towards person-centred pedagogy (Klein, 2012). Sadly, it seems that although some elements have percolated into state policy and mainstream pedagogy and, therefore, the actual practices of teachers in general, most of the programmes that did take revolutionary steps have remained separate “islands” bearing the label “experimental” and “alternative”. The Appendix of the Hungarian edition of *Freedom to learn* (Rogers & Freiberg, 2013) and a second volume (Klein & Soponyai, 2011) give account of several of these programmes ranging from general primary or secondary education to the teaching of specific subjects like mathematics, literature, music and arts. *Alternatív Közgazdasági Gimnázium* (Alternative Secondary School of Economics) and *Carl Rogers Személyközpontú Óvoda, Általános Iskola, Gimnázium, Szakközépiskola és Alapfokú Művészetoktatási Intézmény középiskolai tagozata* (Secondary School of Carl Rogers Person-centred Kindergarten, Primary School, Secondary School, Vocational Secondary School and School of Arts), since 2012 known as *Rogers Akadémia* (Rogers Academy) are two examples of such alternative schools. All of the

programmes presented in Rogers and Freiberg (2013) and Klein and Soponyai (2011) are examples of bottom-up type of innovation, many of them taking place in private or foundation funded institutions (the only ELT programme is of a private language school).

According to the document that is used for grading teachers in the relatively new promotion system for teachers, five out of the nine teacher competences listed in the document include elements that relate to concepts known from humanistic pedagogy. For example: supporting autonomous learning; considering students' initiative; respecting students' personality; having an accepting attitude; consciously facilitating the development of students' personality; respecting diversity; treating errors as part of the learning process; applying adaptive, personalized assessment; and encouraging self-reflection, self-assessment (Oktatási Hivatal, 2013, pp. 23-24).

Considering what has been said, it seems that the ideas of humanistic pedagogy have not been able to take root in public education in Hungary in the past 60 years and still appear somehow novel to teachers. The reason for this might be that our education system is characterized by a strong top-down approach, and although state policy does recognize some humanistic views, other aspects of the system (group sizes, heavy workload, teachers' resistance, centralized curriculum) might prevent teachers from realizing them. Nevertheless, another feature of the top-down approach is that the voice of those at the "bottom" is not often heard. This present study is an attempt to find out exactly what teachers think about their role and, possibly, whether they see themselves facilitators in the sense humanistic pedagogy views teachers.

2.2. Mental Health

Defining *mental health* is complex due to the variety of existing definitions. Manwell et al. (2015) highlight the challenge of defining mental health through their study, which aimed to establish a consensus among international experts. In the study, fifty purposefully selected professionals from eight different, mainly English-speaking countries were asked to list or describe the core concepts of mental health and rank four existing definitions according to their preferences, with a fifth option that none of these are satisfactory. These four definitions were the following (as cited from Manwell et al., 2015, p. 3):

Public Health Agency of Canada (2006)

"Mental health is the capacity of each and all of us to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. It is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections and personal dignity."

WHO (2001)

“Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.”

McKenzie, K. (personal communication, 2014)

“A mentally healthy community offers people the ability to thrive. It is one in which people feel a sense of connectedness and there are also networks which link people from all walks of life to each other. There is a strong community identity but despite this the community is welcoming of diversity. People participate in their community, organize to combat common threats and offer support and aid for those in need.”

Huber et al. (2011)

Mental health is the “ability to adapt and self-manage.”

The most preferred definition (46% of participants) was that of the Public Health Agency of Canada while 30% of participants indicated that none of them was satisfactory.

Applying thematic analysis, the authors identified the following core concepts of mental health in the participants' descriptions:

- Free from symptom burden
- Balance / Stability / Preparedness
- Connectedness
- Contribution / Giving back
- Empowerment
- Identity
- Hope / Optimism for Future
- Realise Potential
- Agency / Autonomy / Control
- Coping, Adapting to change, Symptom Management, Healing
- The Self
- Awareness, Confidence, Determination, Esteem, Fulfilment Dignity
- Enjoying life
- Life satisfaction, Pleasure
- Insight / Mindfulness / Rational thought
- Vitality / Energy
- Meaningful participation
- Valued Roles

(Manwell et al. 2015, p. 4)

Based on the findings of their study, Manwell and her colleagues proposed the Transdomain Model of Health (Figure 1). It draws on the WHO definition of health as in the Constitution of WHO (“a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”, Constitution of the World Health Organization, 1946) including three domains of health: physical, mental and social. The model illustrates the interrelatedness of the domains and shows that mental health does not only mean a “standard level of cognitive-emotional functioning and adaptation”, in other words, well-being but also incorporates a social (“capacity for relating to and with others”) and a physical (“capacity for control over one’s self”) aspect, as well as “the highest degree of integration” (Manwell et al., 2015, p. 9), and Agency, the “ability to choose one’s level of social participation”.

The Transdomain Model of Health is particularly relevant to education, offering insights into the interplay between mental health and pedagogical practices. All of the core concepts identified in the study (with a possible exception of free from symptom burden) are of relevance to pedagogy. These core concepts can be used to define the “four dynamic areas of integration or synergy between domains” (Manwell et al., 2015, p. 9, original emphasis).

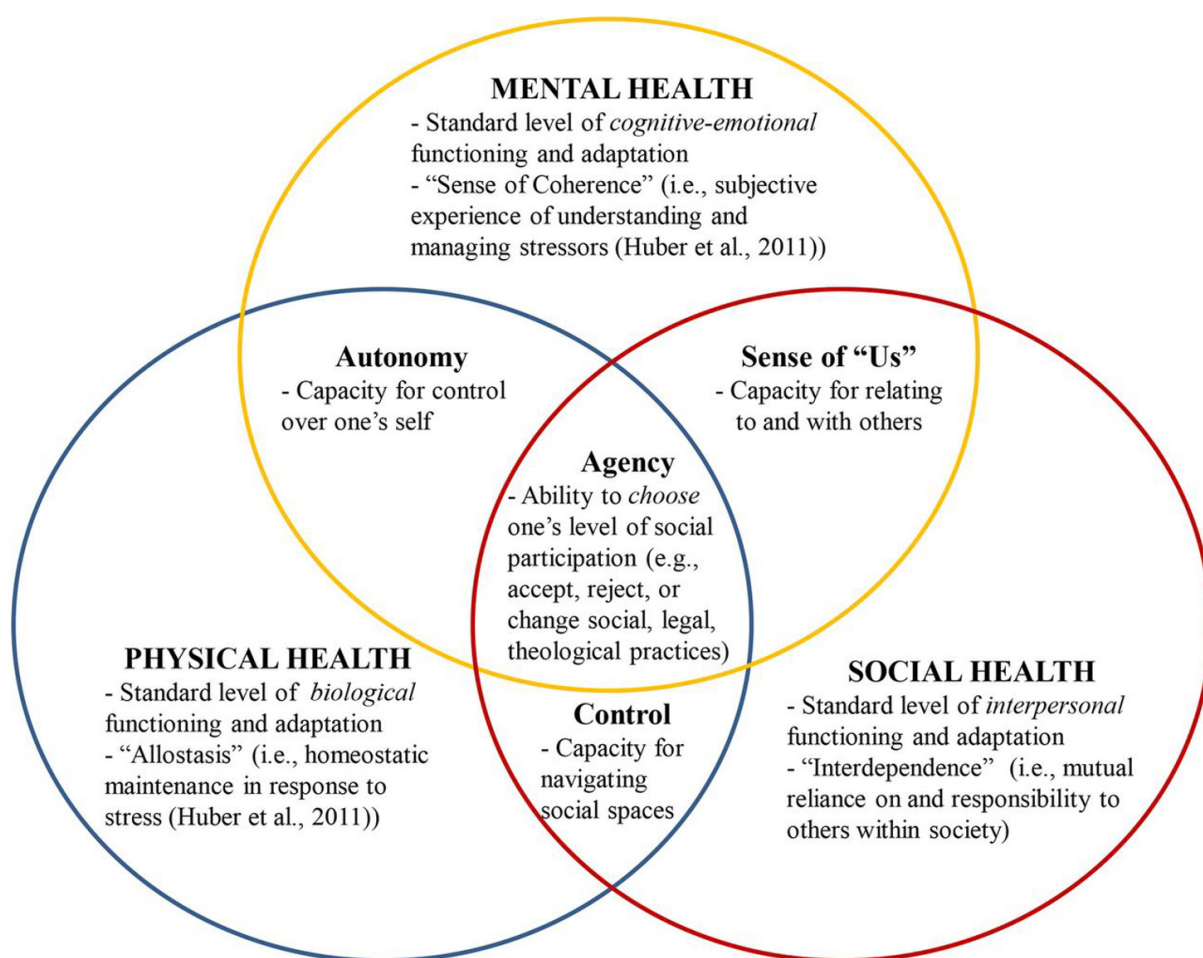


Figure 1. The transdomain model of health (Manwell et al., 2015, p. 9)

The terms mental health or mental hygiene (mentálhigiéné in Hungarian terminology) can be understood as referring to an interdisciplinary field of study (Buda, 2000) as well as a movement which is “primarily concerned with preventing psychosis and other mental illnesses as well as with protecting and promoting mental health” (Tomcsányi, 2000, p. 148). According to Tomcsányi, mental health

includes the physical and mental wellbeing of the whole person and his environment, that is, its aim is “the restitution of the humanistic, holistic view of man, its restoration in theory and practice, on a large scale, through the cooperation of all human disciplines (Tomcsányi, 1988, 1994, as cited in Tomcsányi, 2000, p. 148).

(...)

[M]ental health is not merely a state, but (rather) a process of striving and a behaviour (too) which ensures stability through a continual search for equilibrium, in the midst of continuous changes. This stability is not an imaginary ideal of complete well-being but an attitude which includes a lively sense of being healthy despite difficulties, disorders, pressures, and sometimes even illnesses, in which the feeling of being threatened does not exceed a certain limit, partly dependent on the individual’s level of tolerance. (Tomcsányi & Tóth, 1995, p. 32, as cited in Tomcsányi, 2000, p. 148).

This interpretation highlights the holistic nature of mental health as a field of study and presents mental health as a dynamic human trait: “a process of striving” “despite difficulties” (Tomcsányi & Tóth, 1995, p. 32, as cited in Tomcsányi, 2000, p. 148). This view seems to be very well applicable in the field of education.

Further terminological challenges arise in Hungarian, where the term *spiritual* is more commonly used than *mental* in the phrase *mental health*: *lelki egészség* = *spiritual health*. The term *lelki* (derived from *lélek*, meaning *spirit*, *soul*, or *psyche*) does not fully correspond to the English term *mental*. Moreover, the Hungarian version *mentális* is negatively loaded as it is more often used in a clinical context, in connection with disorder, illness and disease, for example as in *mentális zavar* (= *mental disorder*). Hungarian literature on mental health with preventive focus predominantly uses the term *lelki egészség* or *mentálhigiéné* (mental hygiene, as mentioned above). In addition, *mentálhigiéné* can both mean the field of study and the practice of the profession itself, meaning “the protection of spiritual health” (“*lelki egészségvédelem*”) (Grezsa, 1998, p. 9.) This distinction is important for the present study, as the participants are native speakers of Hungarian; therefore, the Hungarian term *lelki egészség* is used in communication with them during the interview study.

In the UK, Mental Health Promotion has been developed into a nationwide programme. According to a definition used by the HEA “mental health is the

emotional and spiritual resilience which allows us to enjoy life and to survive pain, disappointment and sadness. It is a positive sense of well-being and an underlying belief in our own, and others' dignity and worth" (Health Education Authority, 1997).

This study adopts the broadest possible definition of mental health to encompass various aspects relevant to education all of which (e.g. the core concepts in the Transdomain Model of Health) may be applicable to a school setting and foreign language learning and teaching. The emphasis placed on different aspects of mental health varies depending on the school ethos and individual teaching practices, which this study seeks to explore. Therefore, the term 'mental health' will be used in a wider sense than emotional well-being because it includes, for example, the social aspect (e.g. being able to connect with others) as well.

2.3. Positive Psychology

Positive psychology has increasingly influenced the field of foreign language teaching in the past 20 years (Dewaele et al., 2019 ; MacIntyre et al., 2019; Mercer & Macintyre, 2014; Mercer, 2017; Oxford, 2016;). It is also referred to as the psychology of happiness and well-being as it focuses on mental health rather than mental illness. Earlier theories of psychology mostly focused on the deviations from normality, and therefore, viewed mental health as the absence of mental illness. In contrast, positive psychology seeks to identify strategies for maintaining and enhancing mental health by cultivating certain psychological skills such as coping and empathy and other personal attributes like self-knowledge or self-awareness and self-confidence.

It is important to note that "positive psychology with its concentration on well-being, does not ignore human difficulties but it faces them from the point of view of human strength rather than weakness" (Oxford, 2016, p. 11). Positive psychology does not encourage individuals to feign happiness or disregard pain; rather, it provides strategies and resources to live a happy life. It is not some "magic potion" to be taken that makes all hardships disappear. In this context education and teachers can play a pivotal role by helping students discover and apply their inner resources.

Oxford (2016) proposes a framework, called the *EMPATHICS vision* to be applied in language learning and teaching which includes the basic dimensions, key terms of positive psychology:

E: emotions (the concepts of the emotional brain, positive and negative emotions, emotional intelligence) and **empathy**

M: meaning and motivation (the concepts of making meaning in one's life and self-actualization, theories of motivation)

P: perseverance (being able to make an achievement despite the difficulties, strongly related to confidence) including **resilience** (*psychological fitness*), **hope** (not wishful thinking but “desire accompanied by (reasonable) expectation” (Clarke, 2003 as cited in Oxford, 2016, p. 30) and **optimism** (the concept of coping strategies and optimism as an explanatory style)

A: agency (the concept of functional self-determination) and **autonomy** (self-regulation)

T: time (temporal appraisal theory, the meaning of time perspective)

H: hardiness (dealing with stress, commitment, control and challenge) and **habits of mind** (e.g. thinking flexibly, striving for accuracy and persisting)

I: intelligences (the theory of multiple intelligences and the triarchic theory of intelligence)

C: character strengths (the concept of universal or core virtues)

S: self-factors (self-efficacy, self-concept, self-esteem and self-verification)

(Oxford, 2016, p. 10.)

Oxford proposes several hypotheses based on these dimensions. According to these hypotheses, people (language learners in our case) with high well-being possess the qualities or abilities connected to the dimensions, for example, they can identify their emotions, and are capable of empathy. However, she warns that there is no causality between well-being and the qualities and abilities. By drawing on extensive previous empirical evidence and theories, she contends that all of these dimensions are relevant to second language acquisition and that some of them, for example, empathy and character strengths have not been thoroughly examined from this point of view.

It is crucial to emphasise that both mental health (as a field of study) and positive psychology are concerned with the prevention of mental illness and the enhancement of the well-being of healthy people. Teachers in general, whose work involves close personal contact with their students, and FL teachers in particular, can have a major role in this. FL teachers, indeed, are in a unique position even in Hungary’s quite controlled educational system because the subject matter they teach is language, the main means of communication itself. This means that they are probably the least constrained by curricula and other regulations, and they have more freedom in selecting the topics of their lessons as compared to teachers of other subjects. As interaction is both the goal and primary activity of language teaching and learning, language classrooms might provide a unique opportunity for fostering mental health development.

Furthermore, the experiences students encounter during their educational journey, including the influence of their teachers' actions, persist far beyond their years in school. There is research evidence pointing at a strong relationship between adolescent and adult mental health (e.g. Gerritsen et al., 2022; Kemp et al., 2024; Schlack et al., 2021). The preventive nature of mental health initiatives and positive psychology suggests that providing such care to teenagers in education is likely to have lasting effects on their well-being, extending well into adulthood.

2.4. Empirical Studies

In this section, some empirical studies that investigated teacher roles and the possible application of positive psychology in education are reviewed briefly.

2.4.1. Teacher Roles

In a study conducted partly with Hungarian participants, Borg investigated what distinctive characteristics foreign language teachers might have compared to teachers of other subjects (Borg, 2006.) He found that a close teacher-learner relationship was one of the most commonly mentioned themes. Language teachers and their students often develop a deeper understanding of one another, facilitated by the inherently personal nature of communication in language learning. Wan et al. (2011) conducted a study in which they asked English teachers and English major students to come up with metaphors for the *English teacher*. One of the main categories of metaphors was *Teacher as nurturer*, relating the teacher's role to that of the gardener or a parent "in all cases considering the teacher as a facilitator of personal growth and development" (Wan et al., 2011, p. 408). Both of these findings are relevant to the theme of teachers being facilitators of learners' mental health promotion.

Some studies (e.g., Ekornes et al., 2012; O'Reilly et al., 2018) from the European scene in the field of general education found that teachers are usually not familiar with the term *mental health*, therefore do not perceive promoting it their primary role and do not have the skills to do so. In addition, the term is often associated with difficulties and therefore has a negative connotation. This finding highlights the potential challenge of teachers' limited awareness or understanding of mental health-related concepts.

2.4.2. Positive Psychology in Education

In the past fifteen years, as a result of the flourishing of positive psychology in applied linguistics, a large number of empirical studies have been conducted investigating the emotional and affective factors of both students and teachers

(Dewaele et al., 2019.) Positive psychology in pedagogy has also inspired studies within the Hungarian educational context. Studies have been conducted, for instance, in the field of art education (Bredács, 2018; Bredács, & Takács, 2020.), physical education (Szabó & Borkovits, 2015.), general primary and secondary education (Dibuz-Pávics, 2019 ; Hamvai & Pikó, 2008; Jámbori et al., 2019), and in connection with teacher well-being (Holecz & Molnár, 2014.)

Fodor et al. (2018) give account of a project called *Positive psychology in the classroom* in the Hungarian context. Using Fredrickson's "Broaden and build" theory (Fredrickson, 2013), the project focused on a group of Hungarian students studying Italian and their teacher. They applied both the cognitive (identifying character strengths, communication, constructive criticism, giving positive feedback) and emotional (the ten representative positive emotions included in the theory: joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, love) aspects of positive psychology in a development program. The article describes, however not in much detail, how a group of 16 students prepared for the OKTV (Országos Középiskolai Tanulmányi Verseny, National Secondary School Academic Competition) in Italian as a foreign language, using the "broaden-and-build" theory. They found that as a result of the program, the students' achievement grew dramatically.

3 Research Gap

Although there is a consensus that pedagogy in general should aim at the whole person, the role of EFL teachers in maintaining and promoting the students' mental health has not been extensively examined in the Hungarian context.

Therefore, the following research questions (RQs) are addressed in this study:

1. What beliefs and views do Hungarian secondary school EFL teachers hold regarding their role?
2. How can mental health and well-being be promoted in the EFL classroom and what is the teacher's role in it?

Another purpose of the study is to validate the interview questions.

4 Research Design and Method

A qualitative research design was used for two reasons. First, the aim is to find out about teachers' personal proposition towards and beliefs about their role, whether they consider themselves promoters of mental health. Second, the actual wording of their ideas on the topic is highly relevant. Therefore, the study consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted in the participants' native Hungarian. All excerpts quoted are the writer's translation.

RQ 1 as well as the interview questions in sections II. and III. 1-7. in the interview guide (see Appendices) are quite broad and address teacher roles in general rather than the issue of mental health and mental health promotion directly. This is the result of a conscious decision based on previous findings (e.g. Ekornes et al., 2012; O'Reilly et al., 2018) suggesting that teachers very often do not explicitly assume a role in caring for students' mental health and the term *mental health* is often negatively loaded. In addition, it was thought that if teachers do not deliberately take on this role, they may also remain unaware of how their pedagogical approach and classroom practices impact their students' mental health. Therefore, the study partly focused on how participants view their role as a teacher in general with a special interest in what elements and features of the role can be related to the topic of mental health promotion.

4.1 Participants

The participants were three female secondary school English teachers, who only teach this subject, aged 42 (Klára), 44 (Anita) and 51 (Blanka) (pseudonyms are used) with teaching experience of 5 (Blanka), 12 (Klára) and 22 (Anita) years. Blanka and Klára have had different jobs too, and all of them have children so they have had career breaks. Anita and Blanka work in Budapest and Klára in a medium-sized town in the countryside. They all teach in state secondary schools, which means they hold an MA degree in English, and that their students' age ranges between 14 and 19 years old. Klára's school is also a vocational school, so some of her students are 20-21 years old. Anita and Blanka are taking part in the postgraduate programme of Mental Health Studies at Károli University Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Institute of Psychology.

4.2 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. They were informed about the purpose of the study, the assurance of anonymity, the confidential handling of the data and the voluntary nature of their participation, including their right to withdraw at any time. Accordingly, pseudonyms are used in this paper.

It must be borne in mind that all data gathered in this study was self-reported by the participants, and reflected their personal views and beliefs. Consequently, there is a possibility of self-report bias. To mitigate this, the interview questions were carefully formulated to avoid leading the participants, who were assured that there were no right and wrong answers, encouraging them to express their perspectives freely.

4.3 Instrument Development and Data Collection

Data was collected in spring 2020. The first version of the interview guide

was discussed with colleagues and after some modifications, two interviews (33 minutes and 49 minutes) were conducted and recorded via Skype on the same day. This was not ideal but partly due to lockdown constraints, arranging appointments was not easy. Between the two interviews, no changes were made in the interview guide, but an attempt was made to memorise the questions so that checking the question sheet all the time would not be necessary during the second interview. For the first interview, it was observed that the researcher (acting as the interviewer) tended to rephrase questions when the participant hesitated to respond. This behaviour may have stemmed from discomfort with silence and a desire to assist the participant. However, it is possible that the interviewee required additional time to process the question, and the rephrasing may have interrupted her thought process, potentially causing confusion.

By reordering some of the questions and incorporating an additional one (Question 8, see Appendix A), a new version of the interview guide was created. Addressing the topic of mental health directly (Question 8) was deemed necessary after the first two interviews as participants tended not to bring it up explicitly. It had been initially considered a leading question as it may exert social desirability pressure on participants to state their belief about the importance of mental health. This revised version of the interview guide was used in the third interview a few weeks later. This was also done online (49 minutes). The interviews were transcribed using a voice recognition software and manually.

5 Data Analysis and Results

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed, involving iterative reading of the transcripts, highlighting passages in the data that seemed relevant to the research questions. Then, initial codes were generated manually. These initial categories were subsequently grouped into more abstract themes and a thematic map was created.

Three dominant sub-categories emerged: democratic values; being supportive and empathetic; and having a personal relationship constitute a broader category: *humanism*, which appears as favourable in the account of the participants. These are opposed by the category *lack of humanism*, which was viewed as unfavourable by participants. There are two more separate categories which do not fit into either of the big ones but can be linked to them: *the teacher's character and personality*; and *positive effect of teacher's humanistic views: setting an example and developing character*. Three more categories also emerged: *English as a means for maintaining mental health*; *beliefs about English* and *challenges*. Figure 2 illustrates the emerging thematic categories and their interrelationships.

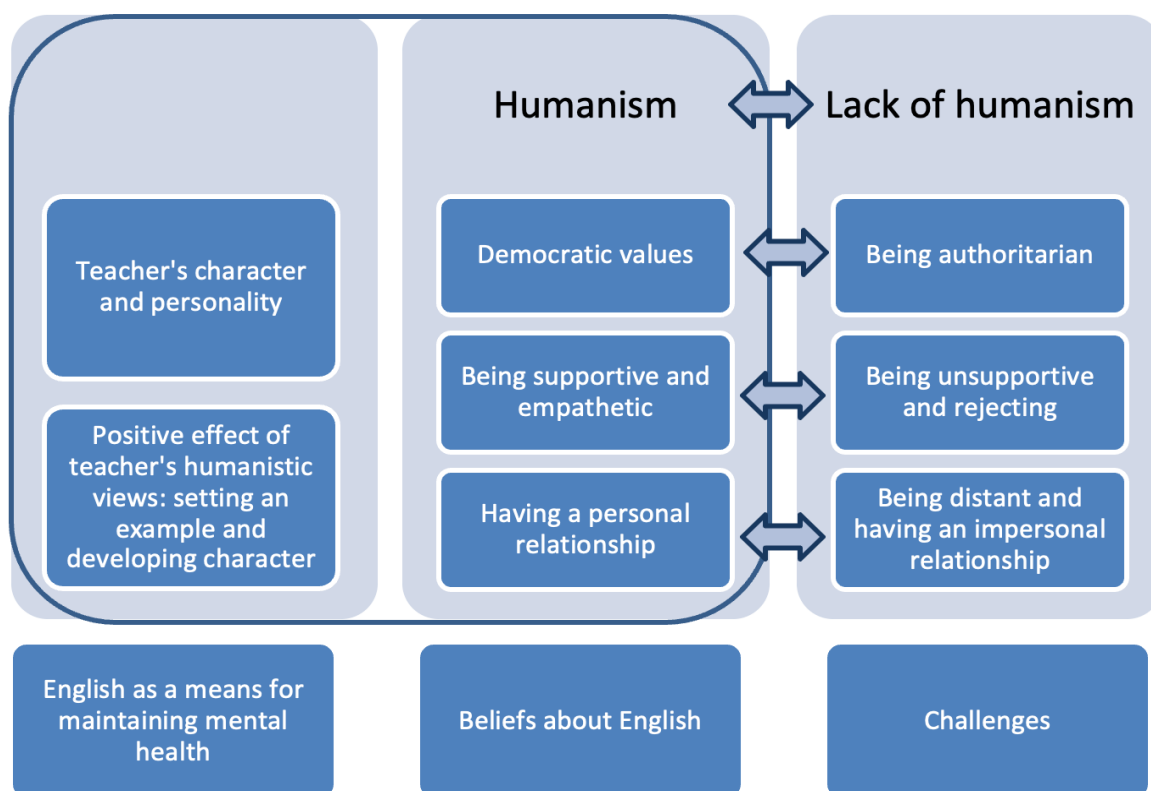


Figure 2. Emerging categories

5.1 Humanism

One of the most dominant themes that appeared in all three interviews were humanistic values. Interestingly, many very strong memories came up when the participants talked about their own teachers in the past. It looks like the values they currently appreciate and pursue were there in the practice of some of their teachers or were the opposite of some other teachers' (lack of humanism), which highlights the importance of apprenticeship of observation (Borg, 2004).

5.1.1 Democratic Values

Participants highlighted their appreciation for their teachers who demonstrated respect, considered students' decisions, intended to cooperate with students, treated students as equal and as partners or considered students' needs. As Anita said about one of her teachers:

I looked up to her as a role model. She always treated us as partners and never spoke down to us; instead, she talked to us as equals. You could actually discuss things with her — like being flexible with test dates, for instance. I really liked that she treated us as equals.

Klára also recalled her strong dislike for a teacher of hers who acted superior.

5.1.2 Being Supportive and Empathetic

This theme was prevalent all throughout the data: the participants related to their teachers' attitudes and their own practice. In their view, teachers should be patient, supportive, empathetic, understanding, inspiring and kind. Being easy-going and having a sense of humour also count as positive traits. Teachers should foster students' self-confidence and cultivate a trusting environment. Blanka views her role as that of a helper, a link between childhood and the adult world:

I often feel, when I talk with them, that I am a link between their growing-up, becoming-an-adult but still child-like [world] and the adult world. Being among them, in everyday interaction and experience, I can sense them, their problems, but at the same time I come from a different world, due to my age and experience which might throw new light on those things, so then we try to find a common ground there.

The positive personality traits and attitudes are opposed in the data by negative ones that the participants view as least favourable: when a teacher acts superior or exploits their hierarchical authority, when they use their authority and power to silence someone (a student) or deliberately hinder a student's progress. In addition, being condescending, impolite, rejecting, reserved, unsupportive, half-hearted, cold and distant appeared in the data as opposites of the positive personality traits mentioned above.

5.1.3 Having a Personal Relationship

All participants expressed a strong passion for teaching, their role as teachers and their students. They believe that having a close personal relationship with their students is one of the most important features of their job. Key themes include being present and fostering connection, having warmth in student-teacher relationships.

It is not necessarily the knowledge of the teacher about the subject or the methodology that makes their lessons good, not even their preparation, but their person(ality), the human being that they bring to the classroom. I mean if you can connect to them, to their personality, if students can address them, if they can tell them their problems, whatever really concerns them, not just have a textbook-like conversation. (Klára)

Participants highlighted that this connection is not only important from the students' point of view but for the teacher as well: "[It is important to] connect to the students, and that we can give each other something that lifts the other one up, because I feel that they give to me too, their attitude, their opinions, our talks..." (Blanka) . One teacher further emphasised this reciprocity talking about remote teaching she had to do in spring 2020 because of the pandemic

situation: “... it made me realise how much it means to me that I am there, we are present, me and the group, we are together and this is such added value, this personal presence...” (Anita, note how unstructured the sentence is, she was really emotional about it.) This theme ties closely to the personality traits of teachers. The negative ones mentioned in 5.1.2 all seem to be incompatible with the idea of building close personal relationships with students.

The participants believe that as foreign language teachers, they have more opportunities to develop close relationships with their students compared to teachers of other subjects.

There are a lot of opportunities to get to know each other through the writing assignments and speaking activities or presentations, so the relationship between teacher and student can be very different. (...) we talk in class, talk about their families, hobbies, so I might have a bigger chance to get to know them, how they live with their families, if they fight with their siblings or if they live in a single-parent family, and then how they share housework, than their – say – Math teacher who only might talk about these things with them in the break or the last lesson before Christmas, but otherwise it does not fit in their work. (Anita)

“[In a foreign language class] there is more interaction, there are more possibilities to communicate, and as a consequence, closer relationships may be formed.” (Blanka)

5.1.4 The Teacher’s Character and Personality

The character and personality traits of teachers seem to be a key factor. The participants’ view of the good teacher was similar in the sense that although the traits listed in 5.1.2 were highly important to all, they asserted that there are many kinds of good teachers who are good in their own way. The important thing is – as Anita said – consistency and integrity, demonstrated through alignment between beliefs and actions.

5.1.5 Positive Effect of Teacher’s Humanistic Views: Setting an Example and Developing Character

Another related notion was the teacher’s role in setting an example and serving as potential (role) models. This occurs through the personal relationship, where the teacher as a person with all their beliefs, thoughts, ways and manners (one participant even said “worldview”) meets the students as persons as well. Evidence suggests that a teacher’s humanistic approach, along with the techniques and activities they employ, significantly impacts students. The following example of a speaking activity frequently applied by one participant, illustrates this influence.

When one of them (a student) gives a presentation, (...) I've always thought it was important to tell them, *and now they say it too*, even in English, to open your *hearts* and ears, listen to him/her so as to *support and help* him/her. And it is very interesting that by now there is a *trustful environment*, (...) so when somebody talks [about a topic], (...) they ask him/her questions, so they *have to listen*. And I tell them that these questions – and I mean it – are not like we want to find out what he/she doesn't know, but *supportive* questions, so that in case he/she forgot to tell something, could add it to the presentation. (...) After that I ask them for their opinion. They can tell the presenter what they think, and the presenter can tell how he/she felt during the presentation, what he/she thinks about their performance. And it is interesting that now they *help* each other more and more often, and they say things like: you did very well but *be more confident* next time, speak up. Because we could barely hear you but *you said good things*, we just couldn't hear." (Blanka, emphasis from researcher)

5.2 English as a Means for Maintaining Mental Health

The possibility that English as a foreign language in the classroom can be a means for maintaining mental health appeared explicitly in Klára's account.

I say, and I've been saying that for some time now, not even in this school, that the language teacher is kind of a psychologist, too. When we talk in a different language, it is another personality (self), or I don't know. I don't know how to say it, it's a different kind of being, different things or themes come up, people usually open up. And yes, it can be a little bit like some therapy. Not so much in my groups, because there are only a few of them who are at that level so that we could have this kind of conversation, unfortunately, but it happens. So, with the ones where it works well, we can have a fluent conversation, this function works well, too.

While it is incorrect and inappropriate to view the language teacher as a therapist, the idea that the language learner's personal growth might be linked to their ability and willingness to communicate highly personal themes in a foreign language is worth considering. It should also be remembered that Klára, contrary to the other two participants, has not received training in Mental Health Studies, where students are strictly instructed not to regard themselves as therapists.

5.3 Beliefs about English

The data also revealed specific beliefs about the English language. The participants view the knowledge of English and the transfer of this knowledge as valuable. They view their role as the transmitter of this knowledge as critical to their students' future success. Klára, especially, expressed her feelings about

learning English. She remembered that learning English had not been enjoyable for her until she began learning with a particular teacher and then on her own to prepare for a language exam, when she realised some aspects of the language (logic, structure), which she refers to as “aha-experiences”.

5.4 Challenges

The data also highlighted some challenges frequently faced by teachers. These are relevant to teachers’ mental health as the skills for maintaining resilience, good self-knowledge and setting clear boundaries are crucial for doing the job. One participant (Blanka) mentioned the flaws of the state educational system that sometimes prevents her from doing her job the way she wishes to. Some of her ideas about teaching are not feasible because of the limitations and expectations she faces in the state system. She even says that she might leave the profession (in the state system) if her “soul can no longer cope with this manufacturing plant ... industry ...”.

6 Discussion

The data allows insight into what beliefs and views the participants hold regarding their teacher role (RQ1). They view themselves as *knowers* and *activity-organisers*, but being *learning-counsellors* (Tudor, 1993) is also a very strong feature of their role. Their beliefs of favourable and unfavourable teacher personality traits (section 5.1.2.) and their emphasis on close personal teacher-student relationships suggests that they consider their helper-supporter role integral to their teaching philosophy. This attitude is key regarding *how* they might foster their students’ mental health (RQ2). They believe that by modelling a supportive attitude they can foster their students’ personality development and soft skills, for instance empathy and the self-factors (e.g. self-esteem), which is a core concept of mental health in the Transdomain Model of Health (Manwell et al., 2015) and also a key term of positive psychology according to the *EMPATHICS vision* (Oxford, 2016). By advocating democratic values like respect, cooperation and partnership in their classrooms, they might also contribute to enhancing further aspects of their students’ mental health, as agency, autonomy and control are core concepts of mental health in the Transdomain Model (Manwell et al., 2015) as well.

It is important to acknowledge – as Oxford (2016) states – that there is no causality between well-being and the EMPATHICS themes. In this study, suggestions of cause-and-effect relationships reflect the participants’ beliefs as derived from the data. The EMPATHICS model refers to the language learner, it proposes hypotheses about the language learner with high well-being and offers implications to language teaching. In this study, these hypotheses and

implications are considered from the teachers' perspective. Although causality should be scientifically proven, the data tentatively suggests that certain teacher behaviours result in certain student behaviours (see section 5.1.5.). For example, the teacher's empathetic attitude might have an effect on students' becoming more empathetic with each other and more accepting towards themselves, thus resulting in higher self-confidence. Students might unconsciously copy their teacher's behaviour, not because they expect some reward or punishment but because it makes them feel good, as suggested in humanistic psychology (e.g., Rogers as cited in DeCarvalho, 1991). The teachers' empathetic, supportive attitude may also have a positive effect on students' motivation, perseverance and self-factors but, of course, this needs further investigation.

Character strengths being part of the EMPATHICS vision is a key term of positive psychology. Some character strengths that are listed on the VIA Institute inventory of universal virtues and character strengths (Oxford, 2016, 58-59.) appear in the data. The participants especially regard kindness, love, and social intelligence (which make up the virtue of *humanity*), fairness and teamwork (which belong to *justice*) and humour (which belongs to *transcendence*) as important in their teaching.

With regard to RQ2, the data does not provide a very thorough insight into what actual classroom activities the participants use (which may indicate a limitation of the instrument). However, they may contribute to the enhancement of their students' mental health and well-being by creating such an environment, based on their views and beliefs, that has the potential to achieve this – rather implicit – goal. As discussed in Sections 2.2 and 2.3, mental health / mental hygiene and positive psychology are concerned with the prevention of mental illness and the promotion of mental well-being of healthy people. This can be realised through the teacher's humanistic attitude, views and practices, which can result in their students becoming more resilient, empowered and better equipped with coping strategies. Nevertheless, one specific classroom activity is mentioned, a speaking activity (described in 5.1.5.), in which students reflect both on their own performances and those of their peers. This may enhance a number of relevant skills and personality features: autonomy, cooperation, self-reflection and self-confidence, and what Oxford (2016) refers to as *habits of mind*, namely: thinking flexibility and listening with understanding and empathy.

The biggest difference between the two interview guides that were used with the first two and the third interview was that in the latter one a question (Question 8) was included that directly asked how important it was to the interviewee to maintain or develop students' mental health. In her answer, Klára talked about how she mentors a student with ASD (autism spectrum disorder), which suggests that she considers mental health an issue for people with (mental) problems or difficulties. This observation appears to be consistent with findings from earlier studies (e.g., Ekornes et al., 2012; O'Reilly et al., 2018), which suggest that teachers often associate the concept of mental health with

instances of disorder or deviant behaviour. While this is far from sufficient data to draw conclusions, it raises a point worth further examination.

As for evaluating the instrument, it seems that the emergent themes are relevant to the research questions. However, further clarification of participants' responses would have been beneficial in some cases. Conducting semi-structured interviews requires flexibility and quick thinking to formulate effective follow-up questions. It is hoped that, with more experience, the researcher will develop stronger skills in handling such situations, leading to more insightful and detailed responses in future interviews. The interview questions in sections II. (about the participants' own teachers and past experiences) and III. 1-7. (about their practice as teachers) give insights into their attitude towards teaching and pedagogical approach. The answers to these provided much data about how they might foster student mental health in an implicit way in their classrooms. Nevertheless, adding question III/8. was necessary to elicit explicit reflections on the issue of mental health.

7 Conclusion

In this study, an attempt was made to gather some information about how three experienced English teachers see their role, whether they regard themselves and act as promoters of mental health in the classroom. We have seen that they appreciate and display some key characteristics that can be the basis for it. They also consider a personal relationship between the teacher and the students typical in foreign language teaching.

The experiences and influences encountered during the transformative years of adolescence leave a lasting impression on an individual's life. Although only little insight was gained into what particular classroom activities the teacher participants employ, based on the data provided, it can be inferred that their care and teaching approach have a positive impact on the mental health and well-being of their teenage students, with effects that are likely to endure beyond secondary school.

However, mental health or well-being was not directly mentioned, which can be a weakness of the first version of the instrument. Klára, who was the only one asked this question, associated *mental health* with mental difficulties, which might imply that even teachers who care about their healthy students at a personal level and even might use English for therapeutic purposes, do not realise that by doing so, they can contribute to the students' emotional and mental well-being.

Therefore, another implication can be valuable to teacher trainers and trainees in ELT. In teacher training programmes and during early-career mentoring, it is crucial that novice EFL teachers are made aware of this aspect of

the profession. Gaining knowledge about mental health promotion and engaging in its practical applications will equip new educators to navigate the challenges they face, as well as the multifaceted roles they are expected to assume. By fostering this understanding, teacher training can help young teachers build the resilience and skills necessary to thrive in a dynamic and demanding profession.

A further step to continue this study could be conducting more interviews with teachers using the final version of the interview guide. In addition, to get a larger scale and generalizable results, a questionnaire for teachers could be designed, with questions for beliefs and attitudes about mental health, and actual classroom activities that might be relevant. Finally, secondary school students could be involved to see how they perceive their teachers' beliefs, attitudes or behaviour in connection with some themes of positive psychology, in the form of a questionnaire study.

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