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WHAT DO IN-SERVICE LANGUAGE TEACHERS' PROMOTION DISCOURSES REVEAL? LOOKING AT AFFORDANCES AND CONSTRAINTS¹

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Abstract

This article focuses on Polish in-service language teachers' (n=48) perception of affordances and constraints communicated during a professional promotion examination for teachers. The study identified nineteen affordances and twenty constraints which were related to language (n=6), the learner (n=10), the teacher (n=6), parents (n=8) and the language teacher profession (n=9). In the light of these five concepts considered here, the most significant findings are the existence of discrepancy between the English taught at school and the English heard outside the classroom as well as the contextual factors which largely affect language teachers' job (dis)satisfaction. Several ways, such as promoting teacher wellbeing and teacher agency, in which these could be addressed to better conform to the current concerns are presented.

Key words: in-service language teachers, promotion examination, teacher discourses, affordances and constraints

Introduction

In recent years, a considerable amount of research has focused on language teacher psychology, ranging from both negative states of teacher profession, such as stress levels, teacher burnout, emotion labour, to exploring positive effects under the term of teacher wellbeing. Acknowledging both tensions and bright sides in language teacher profession undoubtedly contributes to uncovering the issues language teachers and language teacher educators want to know more about. However illuminating and informative, most of these studies [e.g. Acheson, Nelson 2020; Morris, King 2020] usually rely on teacher questionnaires and surveys as well as teacher interviews,

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including focused interviews. Despite the insights such instruments provide, this line of inquiry may always be shaded by teachers' prompt and at times ill-considered responses (questionnaires and surveys), by voicing their harms or offering answers that please interviewers (interviews), or by being suggested what others say (focus interviews). That is, in all of these studies teachers respond to the researchers' questions, so their answers are guided and, therefore, less 'authentic'. By contrast, what the present study offers are the insights into in-service language teachers in Poland which are produced spontaneously, as part of their narratives on other topics in a promotion examination context, and, in this sense, worth considering. Drawing on an ecological approach, this study shows how the ecology – that is affordances and constraints – in which Polish language teachers are embedded affect their everyday work.

Theoretical framework

Ecological perspectives are “concerned with situated cognition and agency” [van Lier 2011: 383]. They are usually presented as related to three layers of participation: the micro, meso, and macro-levels. The microsystem concerns teachers' practices that contribute to their lives on an individual level and may vastly differ from teacher to teacher. The mesosystem is focused on the organizational and institutional support (or its lack) on teachers' functioning in his or her workplace. The macrosystem is looking at the language teacher profession from the lens of social practices and ideologies, such as education policies. Similar to this model of ecological perspectives are Zembylas's [2002] and Barkhuizen's [2016] frameworks, which can also be successfully implemented in investigating language teacher psychology. Considering teacher emotions, Zembylas [2002], likewise, acknowledged the three levels from the perspectives of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup dimensions, whereas Barkhuizen [2016] offered a model for exploring teacher narratives comprising story (personal world), Story (institutional world), and STORY (sociopolitical world).

Two concepts that are crucial in the ecological approach are affordances and constraints. Affordances are inherent in any context, and they can be defined as environmental opportunities which trigger certain actions. The concept of affordances was suggested by Gibson [1979] but it has gained attention in the education field. The main assumption is that an individual should be considered within the contexts of the systems in which they act, and different parts of the micro, -meso, and -macro systems offer different opportunities, which contribute to the individual's perception of them. Although affordances are part of any given context, it is through each teacher's interaction with its resources that a purpose is established [van Lier 2004].

Constraints are the opposite of affordances in the ecological approach. They appear when the available resources are not used appropriately. Constraints 'constrain' teachers' predetermined interaction with the environment and make their goals more difficult to achieve. One example of this could be when teachers do not experience competence or may not be considered competent by others. Then, they may encounter challenges in the job which, in turn, prevents them from successful engagement in their community of practice.

Studies on teachers' affordances and/or constraints were conducted by Lave and Wenger [1991] in relation to community learning, and in language teacher education field with reference to teacher identity [Deters 2011], motivation [MacIntyre, Serroul 2015], ELT classrooms [Kostoulas, Stelma 2016], to name but a few.

Purpose of the study

An overall interpretation of the literature on language teachers shows that in-service language teachers constitute a specific group of professionals that may be affected by different affordances and constraints from other groups of teachers' affordances and constraints, and that Polish language teachers' affordances and constraints have not been addressed sufficiently. Hence, it is important to identify what these affordances and constraints are and how they are perceived and spontaneously negotiated by teachers in their workplace situations, for example during a professional promotion examination which teachers take in order to upgrade their professional status. To this end, the present study, which is a part of a wider project [Werbińska 2022], aimed to explore the following two questions:

1. What do the language teachers' exam narratives reveal about the teachers' individual relationship with their educational environment in terms of affordances?
2. What do the language teachers' exam narratives reveal about the teachers' individual relationship with their educational environment in terms of constraints?

Method

Context and participants

Since the present study aimed to explore the context of Polish language teachers as seen through what they narrated in their promotion interviews, a brief description of the ecology of teachers' promotion examinations follows.

The possibility of being promoted is an important element for teachers. The promotion interview, irrespective of the teacher's professional status, provides more job stability, and besides, it has three additional advantages for the teacher: economic, as it brings the teacher a higher income, psychological, as it generates more job satisfaction, and sociological, as it provides the teacher with an opportunity to play a new professional role [Szumiec 2017]. Although it changes with respect to regulations, Polish teachers may apply for professional promotion to become an 'appointed' teacher, and then, after additional several years, they can apply again for the status of a 'chartered' teacher. A standard promotion interview lasts around one hour. The venues vary but, depending on location (a city, a town, or a village), it is usually a conference room, an office, or even a classroom. The usual set of examiners are: a representative of the local education authority, the school principal, two or three subject experts and, at the teacher's request, a representative of a teacher's union. During the interview the teachers present their professional achievements based on the criteria specified in the legal regulations, which is followed by the commission's questions (in the case of applying for the status of an appointed teacher) or talk to the commission on their

professional output described beforehand in their documentation (in the case of applying for the status of a chartered teacher).

In the present study, there were 22 language teachers who applied to become appointed teachers and 26 language teachers who applied to become chartered teachers. For the sake of simplicity, the discourses of both groups of teachers are considered here together, as the affordances and constraints of both groups tend to overlap.

Data collection

The data sources (teacher narratives) were detailed extracts from the notes of interactions that took place during the author's (as one of the experts) participation in different promotion interview commissions. The field notes were as meticulous as it was possible under the circumstances. Yet, the author always did her best to put down all conversation threads or characteristic expressions that were used. In order to limit the memory loss, the notes were completed straight after the event so as to reconstruct the meanings of the utterances and obtain thick descriptions [Geertz 1973]. In total, forty-eight extracts, or transcribed interactions, of the teachers' accounts² were obtained.

Data analysis

The findings are derived from a thematic analysis of the data set, which comprised teachers in the process of their interviews for professional promotion. All the interviews were segmented into meaning units, open coded and then classified into themes. The themes were related to five concepts that had been chosen beforehand, as those which feature strongly in any language teacher's understanding of language teaching: language, the learner, the teacher, parents, and the teaching profession. These five concepts had been expected to be used by the participants when they presented their 'professionalism' in the promotion interviews. The constant comparison technique was used to make sure that the data were accommodated in the formulation of the findings. To make the study valid, one critical friend was also requested – another language teacher promotion expert – to provide feedback and to learn if the findings were corroborated by her teacher promotion experiences.

Below, the findings related to the participants' affordances are discussed before proceeding to considering what the teachers' constraints are.

Findings

Affordances

Table 1 (see Appendix) shows the main themes (final column) related to the affordances that emerged from the teachers' discourses. The specific topics related to these themes are listed in the penultimate column (*Topics*) along with the total number of meaning units related to affordances that were cited in the data (*Total no. of meaning units*) and the number of teachers (*Participants*) who spoke about this topic. It

² The whole procedure of collecting data is described in Werbińska [2022].

should be noted that the number of participants does not equal the number of meaning units, as some teachers gave more than one unit of meaning. The themes were finally assigned to the five previously selected concepts: language, the learner, the teacher, parents, and the teaching profession (the first column).

As can be seen, seven corresponding themes emerged: *more contact with language* and *being an examiner* (language), the treatment of learner as an individual (the learner), *professional teacher development* and *desirable classroom behaviours* displayed by teachers (the teacher), *taking care of relations with parents* (parents), and *professional wellbeing* (the profession) (Table 1).

Extra contact with language was frequently mentioned by the participants in connection with the concept of language. Seventeen teachers in total discussed their understanding of active engagement ways with language. These embraced increased contact with language through extra school hours of English, participating in school trips abroad, conducting school exchanges and international projects, but also encouraging students to take part in language competitions and using communicative methodology in the classroom (e.g. various interaction patterns, innovative speaking techniques, including students' interests in lesson preparation, making use of other languages that students may know) to make the classroom communication as reminiscent of the real-world situation as possible.

In the theme related to the concept of language, teachers' possession of school-leaving examination credentials as a form of language support was included. All the teachers who were external examiners believed that their training and work in checking formal examination papers gave them an advantage over those language teachers in their school who were not external examiners. The participants maintained that thanks to having an examiner's certificate they were better able to prepare their students for external tests, and therefore, had a better knowledge of what and how to teach the language.

A major affordance related to the concept of the learner was the treatment of the learner as an individual. The teachers spoke about their learners as individual human beings who should be provided with support from the teacher. They frequently emphasized students' strong points, included students' interests in lesson preparation, used formative assessment, prepared engaging and motivating lessons and were generally eager to take on extra work that was conducive to students' success. From what emerged in this point, it could be concluded that without focusing on students as learners with individual needs, teachers would be unable to establish good rapport with the students and this would have a detrimental effect on their language success.

The affordances related to the concept of the teacher were the teachers' participation in professional development activities, such as workshops for teachers, teacher training courses and webinars. The teachers pointed out the importance of continuous learning, which helped them reflect upon and improve their teaching practice.

In addition, several participants discussed the importance of improving their practice by regularly observing their students with the aim of solving students' individual problems. Another important feature was the employment of desirable

teacher behaviours, such as praising students, drawing on the materials prepared or suggested by students, or using short intensive revisions to help students learn. In relation to this theme, teachers also resorted to sharing their own passions with students, thereby displaying their teacher transportable identities [Zimmerman 1998; Richards 2006].

As far as the concept of parents was concerned, what helped teachers to perform their job smoothly was taking care of relations with parents. The participants spoke about the support they receive from parents that could only be gained if the contact with parents was actively encouraged by the teachers. This could be done by inviting parents to the teachers' display lessons, conducting parents' meetings in a pleasant atmosphere, close listening to what parents have to communicate, or drawing attention to students' strengths. As a result of such behaviours, parents are more supportive of the teachers and eager to take an active part in school projects by offering help or even reinforcing the benefits of teacher-initiated projects in the family, as the example of one teacher's words illustrates:

Parents surprised me because, to put it colloquially, they took to the project no less than the kids. [The project was about healthy eating]. Mothers would come to me and say, 'Oh, my God, because of the project they don't want to eat this or that'. But it wasn't said in a bad way. It was funny or 'Mum, we can't possibly eat it'.

The concept of the profession elicited from the teachers the theme that has been labelled 'professional wellbeing'. Teacher wellbeing included several indicators that usually pertain to the issue of wellbeing, such as a comfortable workplace (e. g. teaching small classes, enjoying a pleasant atmosphere at school) or good interpersonal relations with others (students, their parents, colleagues, and school superiors). What was additionally contributed by the study participants was the wellbeing of an individual teacher that could be achieved by, for example, being an external examiner or even following the prescribed accountability criteria which, in some teachers' opinions, help to develop their creativity. This also means that there is not one universal idea of teacher wellbeing, or when its typical components are met, individual differences in teachers' wellbeing may appear.

Constraints

As in the section regarding affordances, the issues related to constraints are grouped for the participating teachers around the same main concepts: language, the learner, the teacher, parents, and the teaching profession. Table 2 (see Appendix) shows the main topics which the language teachers found to be counterproductive to flourishing in the performance of their job. Seven resulting themes included *the discrepancy between the language heard at school and out of school* (language), a learner's *individual background* and *monitoring student language knowledge* (the learner), *teacher competence* and the issue of *teacher learning* (the teacher), *lack of parental understanding* (parents) and, like in the section on affordances, *professional wellbeing* (the profession). As in the case of affordances, the number of participants does not

equal the number of meaning units because some teachers suggested more than one unit of meaning.

A major theme regarding constraints to the teachers' performance of their job concerned the discrepancy between the way language (especially English) is presented in the language classroom and how it is perceived (pronounced, written, communicated) in real life. By the same token, the teachers found it challenging to acknowledge the double existence of one kind of language that is practised for school and assessed during examinations on the one hand, and another kind of English that is used in natural communication in both spoken and written modes, on the other. This issue gave rise to student anxieties over the lack of consistency and negative attitudes, and was partly responsible for students' perception of school English teaching as out of touch with reality. This theme seems to pose an important question about whether and to what extent students' engagement with language beyond school (through pop culture, Internet contacts, etc.) should be acknowledged in the school context.

Another diversity issue relating to the contrast between what is taught and what is experienced included the decreasing practice of using other languages in real life contexts. Two teachers of German complained that during international school exchanges in Germany, Polish students of German preferred to communicate in broken English instead of using German with their German native speaking counterparts. Although it could be explained by the students' willingness to resort to one common foreign language for both groups, which English provided, thus putting them more on a par, or Polish students' better command of English than that of German, the use of English in Germany by Polish students who are learning German deprives them of opportunities to practise German in a natural surrounding.

Two of the constraints that teachers experienced in relation to the students were the issue of the learner's individuality and the theme of monitoring student language knowledge. Interestingly, as we saw above, focus on learner individuality was perceived by teachers as an affordance, but it may also be a source of constraint. This constraint was discussed by the teachers in both groups and included differences in students' socio-economic backgrounds, the difficulty of accommodating students with special needs as well as dealing with individual differences in students' abilities. For some teachers, the attention expected to be placed on lower-achiever students at the expense of gifted students was also an issue, as presented in the words below:

I get the impression that we're losing gifted learners by levelling out the chances for weaker students. The gifted students always get lost by working only to the basic requirements of the course book. That's why we're all trying to differentiate work. But I also think that students themselves have such an attitude that the exam doesn't give them anything. I can give an example from the writing part of the exam. They seem to think that if they don't write a letter, nothing will change. But they'll lose ten points in the exam. And it's not because they can't write. The students usually think 'Either I'll write it well or I won't write it at all.

Also related to the learner concept is the problem of monitoring students' linguistic knowledge. Some teachers are displeased with having to adopt a strong examination

focus in their teaching but also with having to organize too many language-related competitions in which students are not willing to participate. The teachers say that such forms of checking language knowledge, whether during external examinations or in the form of teacher-made or inter-school language contests, are time-consuming and constrain their teaching creativity.

The constraint themes that were revealed in relation to the concept of the teacher concerned the teacher's perceived lack of competence and the constant need for learning. The comments which were made about the first issue were related to those aspects of the job that the speakers encountered for the first time. They mostly included special needs students and how to deal with them, but one teacher also noted her obligation to mentor pre-service teachers, at a time when she herself was not yet even an appointed teacher, as presented below:

As a mentor of a pre-service teacher on school placement I thought – me, so young and inexperienced and I am expected to teach someone?

The necessity of updating professional knowledge and taking part in professional development sessions, perceived as an affordance for some participants, turned out a problem for others. One teacher discussed constant learning in relation to constraints to the job (“Applying for a job of a Polish teacher I had to become an English teacher. I’m really learning English all the time”). Drawing on what the participants revealed about their understanding of who a language teacher is, it is clear that beliefs about the successful performance of the teacher's role significantly differ.

The theme of lack of understanding between teachers and parents was discussed as a constraint by only three teachers. One of the topics was the excessive and unhealthy aspirations held by some of the parents towards their children. Parents' preoccupation with students' grades and their indifference to their children's participation in school performances, which were discussed above, could also be treated as constraining factors in the teachers' perception of their job.

As to the themes related to the constraints to a positive perception of the language teaching profession, teacher wellbeing, or rather what affects it negatively, emerges again. Apart from financial complaints and difficulties in teaching a foreign language in the present time, some participants lamented their lack of being appreciated by students or, in younger classes, students' parents. Others complained about a lack of opportunities to attend free professional development courses in English-speaking countries, or routine in doing their job, or the discomfort that results from having to teach students who are their colleagues' children.

Discussion and conclusions

The study reported here aimed to advance the understanding of the language teachers' affordances and constraints that emerged in their discourses during their teacher promotion interviews. As the goal of the teachers was to withstand the commission's scrutiny and gain acceptance in their professional promotions, this study somewhat shows what 48 in-service language teachers say and how they say it to demonstrate

their professional relationships with their educational environments in terms of affordances and constraints.

The purpose of the first research question was to identify job affordances, whereas the purpose of the second research question was to diagnose job constraints to the teachers' successful relationship with the educational environment in which they function. These unfolded from the interview discourses that concerned the five constructs: language, the learner, the teacher, parents, and the profession. Altogether, 19 examples of affordances were pinpointed, with 3 relating to language, 4 to the learner, 3 to the teacher, 5 to parents, and 4 to the profession. As to the constraints, 20 examples of constraints were identified with 4 related to language, 4 related to the learner, 3 to the teacher, 3 to parents and 6 to the language teacher profession. The affordances generated seven major themes: extra contact with language and external examiner's certificate (language), learner as an individual (the learner), professional development and teacher classroom behaviours (the teacher), relations with students' parents (parents) and professional wellbeing (the profession). Analogously, the emergent constraints also gave rise to seven themes: discrepancy between language at school and in real life (language), learner as an individual and monitoring language knowledge (the learner), lack of competence and the necessity of constant learning (the teacher), lack of understanding (parents) and, again, professional wellbeing (the profession) as was illustrated in Tables 1 and 2.

In the light of the five basic concepts investigated here, the most significant findings in terms of affordances and constraints considered together which address the current issues are two: 1) There is a discrepancy between the English taught at school (that is, used for examination passing) and the English heard outside the classroom, 2) Contextual factors largely affect teachers' job (dis)satisfaction.

As to the first issue, the findings suggest that in times of globalization the role of English, which is a global language, may be different. Rather than focusing on traditional exam-based understanding of language as a set of systems and skills, the language could be viewed in more pragmatic terms as preparation for life and international contacts. Unfortunately, many teachers in the study still think about language teaching as the product. What is more, teachers still take pride in their being external examiners, consider examination credentials as an affordance and teach grammar and vocabulary 'to the test', as one participant in the study said: "I know exactly what is expected from the examiner [...] Where to put the reference and what to do so as not to omit anything to the highest possible score. Precision of this kind, what exactly is expected of learners, was really very useful". Perhaps teaching a foreign language to the test could be superseded by teaching a language for sustainable living where non-formal language education could be recognized, more appreciated and better reflected in ways of assessing students. Hence, reorientation of the system of language teaching so as to make it address the current world concerns, including the change of testing it, may be worth considering.

As to the second finding, the study shows that teacher wellbeing is an important issue, which can be corroborated by the recent studies [Pentón Herrera, Martínez-Alba,

Trinh 2023]. In terms of affordances, language teachers stress the positive emotions in their work, such as happiness, joy, pride, satisfaction that could be achieved by expanding those teacher wellbeing areas that surfaced in the study as affordances to the job (e.g. comfortable workplace, good interpersonal relations). It could become a systemic task to cater for positive workplace cultures which focus on individual and collective strengths and foster positivity in educational institutions. Such positive actions could embrace positive relationships, effective leadership, positive organizational practices or good human resources practices. A key word here, however, would be the operative term “suitable” [cf. Mercer, Gregersen 2020: 17], as contexts vary and what is relevant, beneficial, and therefore suitable in a given setting, may also vary and escape straightforward definitions. An illustrative example from the study are the teachers who claimed that finishing a course to become a certified high-stakes examiner would contribute to their feeling better in a particular school.

Another strategy which is also crucial for teachers’ professional wellbeing is the promotion of language teacher autonomy. When teachers have more independence in their work-related decisions and practices, they identify themselves more with the profession, invest more in their professional development, or more eagerly engage in innovations. Despite obvious contextual constraints, such as national curricula, school regulations, administrative decisions, etc., teachers could be encouraged to exercise more autonomy through curricular decisions, the organization of administrative tasks, choices with regard to their professional development, involvement in whether and how to do project work, etc. [c.f. Mercer, Gregersen 2020: 29]. It should be common knowledge that teacher autonomy is important for teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction, and that it positively impacts learner autonomy [Little 1995].

It can be concluded that major affordances and constraints in the study were related to a number of issues, such as language differences, interactions with students and parents, teacher beliefs, etc., yet all turning around the five basic constructs pre-selected here. Several identical themes emerged in both affordances and constraints groups, which clearly means that the same factor can be understood as beneficial and facilitative or counter-productive and futile to different teachers’ successful performances of their job. Further studies are needed to better understand language teachers’ affordances and constraints as they are perceived by them in different socio-political contexts in teacher education.

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Appendix

Table 1. Teachers' perception of affordances

| Investigated concepts | Participants | Total no. of meaning units | Topics | Themes |
|-----------------------|--------------|----------------------------|---|--|
| Language | 17 | 26 | <p>a) Contact with language through extra school hours, preparation for language contests, projects, trips, foreign guests.</p> <p>b) Classroom practices focused on active methods, various interaction patterns referring to different languages, accommodating students' interests, innovations, developing speaking skills.</p> <p>c) Teachers who are examiners.</p> | <p>Extra contact with language</p> <p>Examiner's certificate</p> |
| The learner | 21 | 34 | <p>a) Noticing students' individuality through focusing on their strengths, stimulating their self-development and reflection, accommodating students' interests providing them with meaningful activities, coaching.</p> <p>b) Dividing into language level groups, including extra interest language classes or remedial groups.</p> <p>c) Classroom practices focused on formative assessment, active methods, language contests for all students, group performances for other students, school outings.</p> <p>d) Reflection on students concerning their motivations, various aspects of their lives.</p> | Learner as an individual |
| The teacher | 15 | 21 | <p>a) Taking part in teacher training courses and workshops.</p> <p>b) Observing students and helping with solving their problems.</p> <p>c) Teachers' classroom management: planning, using students-made supplementary materials, praising, using short intensive revisions, sharing teachers' passions with students, being engaged, learning from students.</p> | <p>Professional development</p> <p>Teacher behaviours</p> |
| Parents | 13 | 19 | <p>a) Careful listening to parents and accommodating their knowledge about children.</p> <p>b) Taking care of parents' comfort through minimising distance, meetings over coffee, offering help.</p> <p>c) Encouraging parents to communicate with teachers through inviting them to English lessons, student performances, the platform for contacts with parents.</p> <p>d) Drawing attention to children's strengths.</p> <p>e) Conducting projects with positive impact on the whole family.</p> | Taking care of relations with parents |

| | | | | |
|----------------|---|----|---|------------------------|
| The profession | 6 | 12 | a) Comfortable workplace (e.g. small classes, a nice atmosphere). b) Teacher cooperation with colleagues, parents, students. c) Being an examiner. d) Accountability criteria that make teachers creative. | Professional wellbeing |
|----------------|---|----|---|------------------------|

Table 2. Teachers' perception of constraints

| Investigated concepts | Participants | Total no. of meaning units | Topics | Themes |
|-----------------------|--------------|----------------------------|---|--|
| Language | 7 | 9 | a) Anxiety about speaking and writing. b) Fixed core curriculum requirements. c) English as a lingua franca reduces the use of other languages. d) Examination results. | Discrepancy between language at school and in real life. |
| The learner | 9 | 12 | a) Different socio-economic backgrounds. b) Learners' individual features: anxiety about being laughed at, shyness, deficits. c) Too much focus on students' recruitment for language competitions. d) Strong examination focus. | Individual learner Monitoring language knowledge |
| The teacher | 5 | 6 | a) The teacher's incompetence when dealing with students' deficits or mentoring pre-service teachers. b) Superiors' unwillingness to excuse teachers' absence due to professional development. c) Constant learning. | Lack of (perceived) competence Learning |
| Parents | 3 | 3 | a) Parents' excessive ambitions. b) Parents' preoccupation with grades. c) Lack of parents' interest in children's school performances. | Lack of understanding |
| The profession | 7 | 9 | a) Financial constraints. b) Lack of appreciation. c) Lack of opportunities to attend courses abroad. d) Parents who are colleagues. e) Difficulty involved in teaching a foreign language. f) Routine. | Professional wellbeing |