

Indonesian Mid-Career EFL Teachers’ Depersonalization and its Impact on Their Well- Being: A Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

Well-being is an important aspect for EFL teachers that indicate their psychological and physical wellness state both in their professional and personal life. However, depersonalization that contextually happened in the workplace can negatively affect how they teach and work in the school, causing the feeling of indifference and threatening their well-being in return. On the other hand, depersonalization has been reported to be a contagion to other people, further exposing other colleagues to experiencing and feeling burned out. Questions emerged from this phenomenon, that is, how Indonesian mid-career EFL teachers’ depersonalization affects their motivation and how they employ the coping strategy to sustain motivational well-being. Using a narrative inquiry methodological approach, this study explores this phenomenon through a narrative frame with three Indonesian mid-career EFL teachers. Extensive thematic analysis showcased that Indonesian mid-career EFL teachers experienced depersonalization originating from poor colleague work ethics and inadequate leadership, causing their motivation well-being to plummet. However, the depersonalization was overshadowed by their respective sources of motivation to work as an EFL teacher. Strategies to mitigate such depersonalization were reported to be: (1) involving oneself in continuing professional development, (2) spiritual reflection, and (3) recreational rest. The study implies an indication that contextual factors such as organizational scholarship and interpersonal-collegial relationships are playing a critical role in shaping EFL teachers’ overall well-being.

Keywords: *depersonalization, EFL teachers, motivation, well-being*

INTRODUCTION

“Mother, I’d like to take English language education as my college major”

“How about try finding other major than that?”

“Why so?”

“It’s for the variation within this family”

(Personal communication, 2021)

In the second quarter of 2021, a son expressed his intention to enroll an English language education major. His mother, however, disapproved his dream of becoming an English teacher. Contextually, his mother has an ongoing experience of becoming an English teacher for almost 20 years. Moreover, his father and his sibling were also graduated from an English language education major. On additional note, his father was also disproving his son’s proposal to enroll in the said major, despite having more than 40 years of teaching English in various educational levels (now retired). This shows how high the status of English in the family. However, the discouragement to enroll in the same major coming from the parents have led the son to discontinue his dream of becoming an English teacher.

Teaching profession is a demanding job that involves the implementation of interdisciplinary field. A burgeoning study that reflects such situation is that of MacIntyre et al.’s (2019) study, who reported that the stress originated from teaching profession can impact the well-being of teachers. Stressors in the teaching sectors may involve subjective aspects such as emotion and motivation (Kurniawati et al., 2022; Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). Other studies have also added to the literature that contextual factors such as institution, education regulation, collegial relationship, teacher-student rapport, and workload to be influential to the teacher’s well-being (Cherkowski, 2018; Ebadijalal & Moradkhani, 2022). However, while many studies focused on the teacher well-being on general scope, Mercer and Gregersen (2020) pointed out that language teachers, in this case EFL teachers, are encountering unique challenges when it comes to teaching. Due to the dynamic and rapidly everchanging culture and communication strategies in the world, EFL teachers are expected to culturally, but also universally, relevant with the time. This has caused a tremendous stress for English teachers especially situated in the expanding circle countries where English is viewed as a foreign language, which in turn lowers the exposure to the said language (Kachru, 1985).

Stress comes with myriad forms and various intensity levels. While daily hassles or low-level stress may be beneficial for the professional development of teachers (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020); medium or higher, or even unique challenges, level of stress could lead to

an extensive stress and then lead teachers to burnout (Maslach, 1998; Maslach et al., 2001). There have been many reports on teacher stress which then the teacher developed a sense of burnout (see Ratanasiripong et al., 2022, for example). Akbari and Roudi (2020) unearthed cases of burnout among Iranian English teachers with several factors including students' low proficiency levels, students' disruptive behavior, students' learning motivation, low collegial support, time limitation stress, and class oversize to be the cause for burnout to emerge. A recent study also revealed the harmful effect a burnout can be, that is, burnout is contagious (Meredith et al., 2020). This means that EFL teachers exposed to other teachers who are emitting burnout can be affected or even developed a sense of burnout within themselves as well. According to a recent study, prolonged burnout may erode EFL teachers' motivation to teach and then lead to attrition, a practice where EFL teachers are intentionally quitting their profession (Sulis et al., 2022).

Despite many studies have mapped the effects and causes of burnout as well as its impact on EFL teachers' well-being, empirical evidence from various countries is still limited. Given the alarming urgency of absenteeism as a result of extensive stress based on previous studies, studies into how EFL teachers' depersonalization affects their motivation to work as well as their coping strategies is also a path less traveled. Therefore, the current study aimed to enrich the existing literature on EFL teacher burnout and well-being through the lens of narrative inquiry and novel context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

EFL Teacher Well-Being

The concept of language teacher well-being was developed by Mercer and Gregersen (2020) by contextualizing Seligman's (2011) positive psychology theory entitled "well-being". In this concept, Mercer and Gregersen (2020) classified the notion of language teachers' well-being into two categories: personal and contextual factors. The former deals with internal emotions, mind, motivation, and physical well-being while the latter considers environment and relationship as the building blocks to well-being.

One of the building blocks of EFL teachers' well-being is motivation. This dimension can be defined as the meaning and purpose in one's teaching. It also comprised of five underlying components: (1) teacher-student motivation connection, (2) the role of time and goals, (3) intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to work in the teaching profession, (4) motivation maintenance, and (5) fuel source of motivation—all of which have its own indicators (see Mercer & Gregersen, 2020). In essence, this dimension, while falls under the personal factors

category, has an interconnection with other dimensions both from the same category or different category. For instance, teacher-student motivation connection involves interaction and relationship among teacher and their students which also falls under the category of contextual factors. With that in mind, therefore, rather than seeing each of the categories along with its underlying dimensions and components as an independent value, we regard them as an intertwined, dependent construct.

EFL Teachers' Depersonalization

The concept of depersonalization is one of the job burnout dimensions coined by Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001). It is the feeling of detachment and cynicism towards colleagues. In the context of EFL teaching, this may involve a feeling of seeing students or colleagues as impersonal object, meaning that they only consider them as an inanimate thing rather than a unique individual, living person (Maslach, 1998). This psychological condition has been well documented in the literature to be more relevant among people who work in the social and medical sectors (see Maslach et al., 2001; Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

Studies regarding depersonalization in the context of teaching has gained a momentum in recent years, revealing the cause as to why depersonalization occurs among teachers as well as its impact on them. For example, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2017) reported that environmental factors such as students, teachers, school authorities, and beyond the context of school influence how teachers develop burnout. In addition, a more recent study by MacIntyre et al. (2019) uncovered many sources of teacher burnout, one of which conflict at work becomes the main cause for depersonalization and job burnout. Ratanasiripong et al. (2021) also added to the existing literature body of teacher burnout by discovering that low resiliency and self esteem predicted anxiety and stress among teachers. In the next year, Ratanasiripong et al. (2022) further revealed about teacher burnout from a more contextual perspective, that is, socio-economic status and relationship quality are among the two that contributes to depersonalization and burnout. This implies that while personal factors play an important role in maintaining teachers' burnout level and well-being, socio-contextual factors are of paramount aspect that affects burnout and well-being.

Previous Studies

A decade ago, research trend had shifted from focusing on negative traits of teachers (e.g., emotional exhaustion) into a more positive outlook (e.g., well-being). This direction was

orchestrated by the development of positive psychology by Seligman's (2011) seminal work. In recent years, however, the research trend has also shifted from focusing on individual dynamics into a more contextual issues (see Mercer, 2021). Many research after Mercer's (2021) directional paper has led many research to integrate ecological perspective into the study of well-being.

A series of studies on well-being have been carried out by many researchers recently, incorporating ecological perspective into the study. Mairitsch et al.(2021) and Sulis et al., (2021) reported that both individual (e.g., motivation, workload) and contextual (e.g., relationship, ELT teacher status) dynamics are important aspects that contribute to the well-being of pre-service EFL teachers. On the note of early-career EFL teachers, Sulis et al. (Sulis et al., 2022) revealed that social relationship in the school will influence whether pre-service EFL teacher to stay in the profession. Zooming on the mid-career teachers, Shin et al. (2023) found that mid-career EFL teachers tend to find well-being when they have more access to continuing professional development (CPD). Finally, according to Babic et al. (2022) late-career teachers tend to find and develop a sense of well-being in the form of motivation to teaching profession and positive work relationship, which in turn develop retention. Noting on the novelty of the current research, the current study attempted to investigate (1) indication of depersonalization (a negative traits potentially lead to burnout and attrition) among mid-career EFL teachers in Indonesia and its impact on well-being, as well as (2) the coping strategies to tackle depersonalization and maintain motivation to work as EFL teachers—which to the best of the authors' knowledge has not been recorded in the literature yet.

METHOD

Research Design

Grounded upon qualitative methodological approach, this study utilized a narrative inquiry research design as coined by Barkhuizen et al. (2014). Incorporating narrative inquiry, while not novel for this research topic (see Sulis et al., 2021), presents a beneficial qualitative data that entails participants lived experience through narratives. As a means for data collection, narrative frames as previously has been proven to provide rich qualitative data were used in this study (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008). However, the current study adapted the narrative frames as in Barkhuizen and Wette's (2008) digitally, resolving the issue of space limitation for participants with high willingness to narrate their experiences (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). Prior to distributing the narrative frames, consent forms and demographic survey was

administered to each participant for further analysis. Once the data have been fetched, thematic analysis procedure specialized for narrative inquiry in the context of ELT were conducted. This thematic analysis comprised of three main phases: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) coding the narrative, and (3) categorizing the codes. All of which the data analysis procedure was done in a cyclical manner to ensure trustworthiness and rigor of the data.

Setting and participants

The current study was conducted at one of the public junior high schools located in Kuningan, West Java. For years, this school has been accepting students from low-to-medium socio-economic and various cultural background. To be specific, although the majority of students accepted have a homogenous ethnicity, that is, Sundanese, many of them yields minor different which often cause confusion among teacher-student communication. This cultural barrier, as one of the participants confessed in a preliminary interview, has caused some problems among teachers. In this study, three participants were involved. They are EFL teachers with varying teaching experiences and gender.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The current study attempted to uncover the research question proposed in the previous section, namely, how are the depersonalization of Indonesian mid-career EFL teachers and its impact on their well-being; and how Indonesian mid-career EFL teachers utilize coping strategies to overcome the depersonalization and maintain their motivation level. Analysis result yielded two emergent themes congruent with the research questions, that is, (1) depersonalization indication of Indonesian mid-career EFL teachers, and (2) Work motivation maintenance.

Depersonalization Indication of Indonesian Mid-Career EFL Teachers

In this study, P1 expressed that her motivation to teach is originated from her previous educational background. Although so, her initial dream occupation was to become a police officer. Despite such, her intrinsic motivation indicates a strong will to delve deeper into the education world. P2 has the same incongruent initial dream and current occupation. Initially, P2 had a dream of becoming an engineer. However, due to his parent's choice he was discouraged to achieve his dream job and entered the teaching world. P3, on the other hand,

has an incongruence in terms of initial dream and current occupation as well. Despite that, she mentioned that teaching was her passion and that she sees this job positively.

“I became an English teacher because this is my passion and I love to share what I know and knowledge. For me, this profession is a pleasant and noble job. At first, my dream job was to become a fashion designer and now I’m working as an English teacher.”

NF3.IN1.Para1, 10.23

In terms of interaction and relationship, P1, P2, and P3 have their own unique experience. Starting from P1, she mentioned that she tried to make friends with everyone in the office. However, she also shows an attitude of exclusion despite saying to make friends with everyone. She mentioned that she avoids making deep contact with teachers who are lazy all the time and conservative about positive change in education. Although having such exclusion criteria, her relationship with her students is in a positive term. She further stated that she always entered the classroom, taught students using personalized approach, and concluded her class schedule with vibrant positive emotions. This allowed her to produce positivity both for herself and her students. P2, on the other hand, while not giving any comments on negative relationship with any of his colleagues, he mentioned that he befriended with everyone in the office equally. Moreover, his interaction and relationship with students is in a very positive way. It even become his main source of motivation to teach every day. Moving to P3, she sees interaction and relationship with students as a part of the teaching job, meaning that she has a different view on teacher-student relationship unlike P2. Collegial relationship in the view point of P3, however, is a necessary means for stress-relieving endeavor. She also mentioned that collegial interaction allows her to also share experiences in teaching.

“... Having a close relationship with teacher whose dedication is high and completes their job makes me to be more motivated in doing my job as a teacher, so spending time with them is a time well spent. On the other side, I’m not close with those who have a lack of motivation to work and doesn’t embrace new innovation in education because I think their mindset is like a conservative people.”

NF1.IN4.Para2, 10.23

Zooming on another indicator, namely time perception and goals, P1 has a tendency to see her life investing for the future times. She believes that by doing the best at the present time will result in a better future. P2 has a similar view as P1, that he lives for the future times. He realized this belief by doing actions in the present time. He argued that “... *the future is the fruit that we planted in the current time*” (*NF2.IN3.Para1, 10.23*). P3, while possessing the same perspective of time as P1 and P2, that is future oriented, has a different goal compared to the other participants. She believed that by doing all the best she could in the present time is for her investment to improve her well-being in the future.

In terms of motivation, P1 and P3 shows a strong intrinsic motivation. This quality of motivation allows them to thrive in the profession. A study by Fernet et al. (2017) explained this phenomenon that teachers with high motivation level tend to have less depersonalization level, which in turn can be translated into lower burnout level. The high motivation level may also be coming from the nature of their teaching experience, which falls under the category of mid-career EFL teachers. Study by Hellebaut et al. (2023) accentuated that mid-career teachers have a more controlled motivation. This, then, lead to lower burnout level in return. P2, on the other hand, finds a more extrinsic motivation to fuel his teaching motivation. This finding is quite contrasting with that of Fernet et al.'s (2017) study, in which extrinsic motivation tends to last shorter compared to its intrinsic counterpart. Another worth noting aspect is his parent's disapproval towards P2's dream job, which may potentially cause a sense of burnout in an earlier time.

While P2 does not exhibit intrinsic motivation throughout his teaching career, he found interaction and relationship with his students to be his main source to stay in the profession and continue to thrive. P1 and P3 also shows a positive relationship with their students, allowing for a lively atmosphere to be present in the teaching and learning situation. This quality of reciprocal social interaction has been documented well, and that this finding resonates with that of Virtanen et al. (2019) who found that positive teacher-learner rapport can lead to improved teacher well-being. Another studies (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020; Ratanasiripong et al., 2022) are also pointing at the same conclusion when it comes to positive teacher-student rapport and teacher well-being. However, collegial level relationship experienced by P1 has indicated that other teachers who shows negative traits in the workplace could lower other teacher's motivation to work and then develop depersonalization. This finding is complemented by that of Meredith et al. (2020) and Mercer and Gregersen (2020) who agreed that emotions and burnout are contagious among those who are exposed.

In terms of time perspective, all of the participants show identical orientation and goal, that is, future times, although one of them indicates a different goal. As argued by Mercer and Gregersen (2020), future oriented EFL teachers may give their best to do action in the present. However, they are also vulnerable to over time work. This negative side effect is bound to people with future orientation regardless of their goal. Studies have also shown the negative effects of high workload which can lead to job burnout and even attrition (Jerrim & Sims, 2021; MacIntyre et al., 2019; Mairitsch et al., 2021). Therefore, while all of the three participants

shows enthusiasm towards preparing for their future, there is a possibility of them developing a sense of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, two of which indicators of burnout.

Work Motivation Maintenance

The maintenance of motivation to work consists of three pillars: job crafting, working with strength, and appreciation. Firstly, job crafting involves tinkering and adjusting one's work so that they can make their work best suited or tailored for themselves. Secondly, working with strength involves acknowledging one's (dis)advantages and utilizing it for job crafting. Lastly, appreciation, as the name suggests, is a reward given to EFL teachers as a means for expressing gratitude, usually coming from higher ups.

In terms of job crafting, P1 initially shows a negative perspective towards EFL teaching profession. She stressed on how teaching students as a stressful, exhausting job. In addition, she also has a negative attitude when it comes to collegial relationship and managerial issues with the former school principal. Despite such, she shows a high adjustment in her work as a teacher. This includes developing a sense of determination to work as an EFL teacher, always refreshing her pedagogic knowledge up to date, and attending to continuing professional development. Different with P1, P2 comes from a teacher family, meaning that he already exposed to teaching even in his very inner circle relationship. Thus, although P2 highlighted that becoming a teacher is not his dream, he sees teaching profession as a positive profession due to the nature of his teacher family. Therefore, this diminishes the potential of depersonalization caused from his parent's decision to disapprove him going to engineering major. Additionally, to maintain this motivation, P2 underlined on the importance of social relationship among teachers. On the other hand, P3 has a positive outlook when it comes to crafting her job. In essence, she shares similarities with P2 that building positive social rapport allows her to improve her work as a teacher.

“In the beginning, I see this occupation as a not really good job because teaching student is very demanding and exhausting ... But I overcome it by doing my job, updating my knowledge about teaching, and participating in a teacher training program. As for collegial relationship, I don't see it in a good term in the first place. This is because of my former school principal's bad management. And then because of that also, the work ethic of teachers is very bad.”

NF1.IN4.Para3, 10.23

On the note of impactful challenges, each of the participants deployed a unique approach. P1, when encountering big challenges, used her advantageous traits to innovate as well as patience to resolve the problem. And in terms of exhaustion or demotivation, P1 took

several activities that can restore her motivation level, this includes doing hobbies, writing a diary in English, and going to recreational places. However, P2 employs a rather distinctive approach when he is challenged by demotivation, that is, doing spiritual reflection. He mentioned that strengthening his bond with his family as one of the endeavors, beside spiritual reflection, to replenish his motivation fuel. P3, on the other side, used a more individual approach to maintain her motivation level in times of demotivation. She expressed that good foods and drinks, controlling her breath, and reminding of the struggles to get to the current point as among her attempts to maintain motivation. In other words, she employs mindfulness strategies (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020).

“Throughout this teaching career, there is some ups and downs ... But whenever I feel less motivated, I always took a spiritual reflection towards God Almighty and my family.”

NF2.IN4.Para1, 10.23

As an additional attempt to maintain motivation level, each participants acknowledged their strength and weaknesses. This has led them to self-discovery in terms of working as teacher and crafting their job. Starting with P1, she used her strengths including (1) determination to improve competence, (2) innovative creation, and (3) patience. While so, she also acknowledged her weaknesses including boredom and laziness. On the other hand, P2 used a more social approach, that is, responsibility, communication, and respect towards others. On his disadvantages, he mentioned that he is lacking of decision-making, people pleasure, and less assertive. P3, however, acknowledged that she has the quality of: cheerful, sociable, and fun. On the other side, she also reflected upon her disadvantages, that is, hasty, impatient, and too trusting.

Zooming on appreciation, P1 received a sense of appreciation from her students, colleagues, and school principal. This allows her to sustain her motivation level. In addition, through her view, appreciation has a pivotal role in maintaining both motivation and performance of EFL teachers. On the other hand, P3 received appreciation from her students, rather than, as generally practiced, her colleagues or higher ups. Despite confessing that receiving no appreciation from anyone would not affect her, she, in contrast, stated that appreciation is of paramount importance to be provided. Intriguingly, P2 viewed salary and social support as an appreciation from the government and his surroundings respectively. Despite so, he mentioned that the practice of providing appreciation, for him, may be important or not. This neutral view on appreciation allowed him to keep doing his job as an EFL teacher.

While the practice of mentorship (as utilized by P1) and mindfulness (as employed by P3) has been documented in Mercer and Gregersen's (2020) study, P2 showed a rather unique approach that, to the best of the authors' knowledge, has not been recorded yet in the literature. The reason for this might be coming from the cultural and religion context in which this study is conducted. Indonesia is one of the largest Islamic populations in the world, thus making most of its population to be religious in a way. Noting on P3's approach, she combined the idea of mindfulness, physical well-being, as well as social and emotional support by sharing her stress with other colleagues. However, this strategy of P3 while can become a solution in one hand, it presents a potential harmful effect on those who are involved on the other hand. This phenomenon is often called burnout contagion (Meredith et al., 2020) or social contagion (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020), and it, in the long run, can lead to a shared burnout among colleagues.

All of the three participants employed their strengths and acknowledging their weaknesses in terms of working as an EFL teachers. The quality in which they employed, while different to each other, allows them to develop a sense of teaching efficacy (Bandura, 1977). This is also complemented by the study of Mercer and Gregersen (2020) where an EFL teacher who utilized their values in action (VIA) characteristics can improve their teaching performance, maintaining motivation, job crafting, and self-regulation.

Zooming particularly on P2's view of appreciation, MacIntyre et al.'s (2019) study have reported that salary is one of the main causes for stress among teachers. This controversial view of P2 may present other issues that may lead to depersonalization and burnout in general. In extreme cases, however, this can also lead to attrition or quitting the teaching profession (see McInerney et al., 2018, for example). Thus, EFL teachers with similar view to this finding is vulnerable to burnout.

CONCLUSION

The current study attempted to investigate the depersonalization level of Indonesian mid-career EFL teachers and how it can impact their motivation well-being, as well as the coping strategies to mitigate such depersonalization and maintain motivation to continue working as an EFL teacher. This study unearthed insights that Indonesian mid-career EFL teachers are experiencing a certain degree of depersonalization, and that there are some potentials to the depersonalization worsen over time. The source for such depersonalization was reported to be originating from contextual aspects including collegial interaction and

school leadership characteristics. Strategies to mitigate such negative attitude were (1) providing mid-career EFL teachers with access to continuing professional development, (2) spiritual reflection, and (3) recreational rest—with religious approach being a noteworthy, novel finding. As a result of this, one may imply that systemic level support to provide mid-career EFL teachers an access to CP, and create channels of safe and sound communication means are beneficial to promote mid-career EFL teachers' well-being.

The current study relies upon narrative inquiry research method to understand the experiences of Indonesian mid-career EFL teachers' depersonalization level and their well-being, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings. However, similar cases found across the same contextual properties may find the current findings applicable and take the recommended action. Moreover, due to the nature of the current study, the variability of participants demography also narrows the applicability to other contexts. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to involve a larger and more heterogenous participants in terms of demography. In addition, future studies may also benefit the incorporation of organizational scholarship as one of its research variables (see Mercer & Gregersen, 2020).

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