

Investigating the interplay between English language teachers' autonomy, well-being and efficacy

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This study investigates the interplay between the concepts of teachers' autonomy, well-being and teacher efficacy by drawing on the perceptions of primary, secondary and high school English teachers working in private and state schools in Turkey. The overarching aim of this study is to investigate these three factors, as perceived by English teachers across school levels and types and thus to identify common experiences among them. The study employed a mixed-methods approach. Using open-ended questions and the scales of teachers' autonomy, well-being and teacher efficacy, the data were collected from 293 English teachers. This study found that autonomy is strongly correlated with teacher efficacy. The findings also show that the teachers' levels of autonomy in state schools were higher. Similarly, findings also indicate that the autonomy secondary school teachers experienced was higher than that of teachers working in primary schools. The study makes a contribution to the field by drawing conclusions about the interplay of these three factors.

Introduction

Autonomy, once associated largely with self-access learning centres, has been receiving a great deal of attention in highly diverse social and cultural contexts all over the world. As the impact of independent, out-of-class activities on student learning is studied more closely, educational practitioners and researchers have come to a growing realisation of the key role of learner autonomy (Ozer & Yukselir, 2021; Smith et al., 2018).

Accumulated findings have demonstrated that enhancing teacher autonomy directly impacts the development of learner autonomy in foreign language learning (Cirocki & Anam, 2021; Kong, 2022; Manzano Vázquez, 2018; Okay & Balçıkanlı, 2021; Yukselir & Ozer, 2022). Besides the traditional role of introducing English, language teachers today are expected to assume numerous roles such as designer of learning, counsellor and facilitator of learning (Gao, 2018). Without autonomy of some kind, language teachers are less likely to execute these roles and teachers failing to assume these roles are less likely to nurture autonomous language learning amongst students. A lack of teacher autonomy, however, is only one factor that may result in multiple stressors and for a teacher to promote better language learning, a dynamic interplay of teacher qualities and a variety of socio-contextual factors matter (Benson, 2010; Mercer, 2021; Thompson & Woodman, 2019). Teacher autonomy is also considered integral to teachers' strategies for a higher sense of efficacy (Choi & Mao, 2021). In light of recent findings in language teaching, it is clear that teacher well-being (MacIntyre et al., 2019; Mairitsch et al., 2021; Mercer, 2021) and teachers' sense of efficacy (Haworth et al., 2015; Mahalingappa et al., 2018;

Thompson & Woodman, 2019; Yough, 2019; Zee & Koomen, 2016) are two other factors that are at the core of student learning.

Defining teacher autonomy, well-being and efficacy

In the literature, teacher autonomy as a complex phenomenon involving psychological and sociological aspects (Erss et al., 2016) has been broadly discussed to such an extent that previous studies have indicated a positive relationship with the development of learner autonomy (Feryok, 2013; Raya et al., 2007; Tschirhart & Rigler, 2009). Encompassing various interpretations in the literature, teacher autonomy has been connected with professional freedom that allows teachers to control their professional activities (Choi & Mao, 2021; Tran & Moskovsky, 2022), so it was realised that there is a close connection between teachers' capacity and controlling their professional development (Lennert da Silva & Mølsted, 2020; Smith & Erdoğan, 2008). Particularly from 2005 onwards, there have been more studies that place emphasis on the strong connection between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy based on the premise that language education practitioners, just like learners, should exercise some degree of autonomy to teach effectively (Benson, 2010; Cirocki & Anam, 2021; Feryok, 2013; Kong, 2022; Tschirhart & Rigler, 2009). In order to foster learner autonomy, it is necessary for teachers to have their own autonomy first, by having a strong sense of individual responsibility for the teaching process, such as selecting instructional materials, designing curriculums, and managing classes by themselves (Kong, 2022).

Given its complex nature, defining teacher well-being is often quite challenging (La Placa et al., 2013; Mairitsch et al., 2021). From a psychological aspect, especially in language learning, the general aim is to empower learners' well-being and facilitate their learning process; hence, there has been very little focus on teachers' individual and vocational well-being (Castle & Buckler, 2009). In contrast to this minimal focus, teacher well-being plays a crucial role for language teachers to develop positive relationships with learners, to have a formative influence on learners, to find creative ways to teach the target language, to enhance learner achievement, and to exhibit effective classroom management (Bajorek et al., 2014; Gregersen et al., 2020; MacIntyre et al., 2019; Mercer, 2021; Mercer et al., 2016). The higher the teacher well-being that exists, the better the practice becomes (Gregersen et al., 2020). Therefore, language teachers should be careful about potential stressors: toxic workplace cultures, not getting along with colleagues, discipline problems (Bajorek et al., 2021; Mairitsch et al., 2021), excessive workloads, time-consuming administrative tasks, dealing with autocratic leadership, lack of resources (Borg, 2006; Gkonou & Miller, 2017; Gregersen et al., 2020; Mercer & Gregersen, 2020; Mercer et al., 2016; Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016), and evaluation anxiety (Horwitz, 1996). Moreover, stressors such as language anxiety, intercultural encounters, and high-energy methodologies can be added to the list (Borg, 2006; Gkonou & Miller, 2017; Horwitz, 1996; King & Ng, 2018).

Grounded in social cognitive theory (Baleghizadeh & Shakouri, 2017), teacher efficacy is a key factor in teacher effectiveness (Thompson & Woodman, 2019). Interrelated with well-being, it is a moderator of the relationship between vocational well-being and stressors

that it also has influence over, such as job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Law & Guo, 2015; Matteucci et al., 2017). Regarding the fact that teacher efficacy has an impact on both teachers' and learners' high-quality performances (Baleghizadeh & Shakouri, 2017; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998), one should know that it is in close connection with teachers' enthusiasm, persistence, and effort (Haworth et al., 2015; Mercer et al., 2016; Thompson & Woodman, 2019; Yough, 2019).

Theoretical background

Despite the multitude of factors that impact teacher performance, in this study we focus our attention on the interplay of language teachers' autonomy, well-being and efficacy. The theoretical framework for the present study draws on Benson's (2010) argument that teacher autonomy is 'facilitated or constrained by structural factors within the schools and education systems, but it also depends upon the interests and internal capacities of individual teachers' (p. 273). The theoretical underpinning for this study also rests on Zee and Koomen's (2016) evidence based on a critical review of 40 years of research indicating that teacher efficacy is relevant for their well-being. Along with the importance of autonomy of language educators to teach creatively (Benson, 2010) and a dynamic interplay of teacher qualities, efficacy, and a variety of socio-contextual factors matter for promoting better language learning (Mercer, 2021; Thompson & Woodman, 2019).

This work rests on the premise that teacher efficacy is one of the essential determinants for teacher well-being (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Zee & Koomen, 2016) and is associated with job satisfaction (Matteucci et al., 2017) and learner achievement (Baleghizadeh & Shakouri, 2017; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Zee & Koomen, 2016). Moreover, this study considers teacher efficacy as an independent predictor of job satisfaction by drawing on the study of Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2014). Therefore, the conceptual framework of this study hypothesises that there exists a strong connection between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy, based on the premise that teachers should exercise some degree of autonomy to teach effectively (Benson, 2010; Cirocki & Anam, 2021; Feryok, 2013; Kong, 2022; Tschirhart & Rigler, 2009), and also attempts to illuminate the interrelated effect of teacher autonomy and teacher efficacy in order for language education practitioners to experience a positive state of well-being.

Aim and research questions

Even though teacher autonomy in connection with teacher efficacy (Choi & Mao, 2021; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014) and in relation to well-being (Law & Guo, 2015) or teacher efficacy in relation to well-being (Zee & Koomen, 2016), have been studied in previous research, little is still known about the interplay of language teachers' autonomy, well-being and teacher efficacy and how the relationship between the three variables differs with school type and level. The previous literature reports that school type (Oberfield, 2016; Xia et al., 2021) and school level may be an important influence on teacher autonomy. For example, Xia et al. (2021) found that autonomy was perceived to be greater amongst teachers working in public schools than in private schools. Therefore, we

hypothesise that not only teacher autonomy but also well-being and teacher efficacy might be impacted by school type and level. For instance, in the Turkish private school system, how teachers teach might be determined by what they are mandated to do by the school administration and indirectly by students' guardians.

This mixed-methods study relies on data from teachers in primary, secondary and high schools and is one of the first attempts to gain insight into the dynamic relationships between the three concepts for English language teachers working in state and private schools at three educational levels. Therefore, the overarching aim of the present study is to investigate the teacher autonomy, well-being and teacher efficacy levels among Turkish EFL teachers working in primary and secondary education and to draw conclusions about the interplay of these three factors. The following research questions were addressed:

RQ1: What is the relationship between teacher autonomy, well-being and efficacy?

RQ2: What is the level of teacher autonomy, well-being, and efficacy and how do they differ with school type and school level?

RQ3: What are the English language teachers' understanding of their own autonomy, well-being and efficacy?

Method

For a more complete understanding of the results obtained from collecting both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously, an embedded mixed-method design was used (Creswell, 2012). The rationale for using this design relates to the fact that it requires the research team to collect one form of data together with another form of data which helps to support the primary form of data, quantitative in this case. The primary objective of this study was to examine the three factors as perceived by English teachers across school levels and types and thus to describe the commonality of perception.

Participants and procedure

In order to select as large a sample as possible, a combination of convenience and snowball sampling techniques was used (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The research team asked some of the survey respondents to circulate the survey to their colleagues in the same school and hence the snowball got bigger. The sample comprised 293 English teachers (93 males and 200 females) from all of the seven geographical regions of Turkey. The participants ranged in age from 23 to 65 ($M = 36.24$; $SD = 7.36$) and their teaching experience ranged from 1 to 46 years ($M = 12.85$; $SD = 7.87$).

Before data were collected, ethical approval and appropriate permissions were sought and obtained from the ethical review board of a state university in the southeast of Turkey. Subsequent to the development of the first version of the questionnaire, researchers purposively selected four English teachers, each working at primary, secondary or high school, for a focus group interview to collect their shared understanding of the three concepts under investigation. Preliminary results from this interview enabled researchers

to optimise their open-ended questions, but most importantly it was this interview that led the researchers to investigate the school levels and school type as demographic variables. After the development of the survey, participants were asked to fill out an online questionnaire about their autonomy, well-being and efficacy. The time frame for data collection was four months from June to September 2021. The questionnaire took teachers approximately 25 minutes to complete.

Table 1: Descriptive characteristics of the participants

Variable	Descriptor	<i>n</i>	%
Geographical region	Aegean	41	14.0
	Black Sea	17	5.8
	Central Anatolia	46	15.7
	Eastern Anatolia	18	6.1
	Marmara	29	9.9
	Mediterranean	111	37.9
	South-eastern Anatolia	31	10.6
School level	Primary	87	29.7
	Secondary	96	32.8
	High	110	37.5
Type of school	Private	73	24.9
	State	220	75.1

Instruments

The final version of the survey consisted of four parts: teacher autonomy, well-being, teacher efficacy and open-ended comments. To this end, three scales were administered in English without any changes made by the researchers. But the open ended questions in line with the scope of the study were developed by the researchers themselves.

Teacher autonomy scale

The teacher autonomous behaviour scale developed by Evers et al. (2017) to measure teacher autonomy is a multidimensional instrument that is applicable in both primary and secondary educational contexts. The scale is a twenty-item measure with responses on a scale from (1) 'almost never' to (7) 'almost always'. It is composed of four dimensions and has negatively-phrased items. In the present study, the scale was found to have a high reliability with a countrywide teacher sample ($\alpha = .94$).

Teacher well-being scale

The teacher subjective well-being scale is a brief self-report measure for assessing teachers' positive psychological functioning at work. It captures teachers' wellness across eight items that focus on school connectedness and teaching efficacy on a scale from (1) 'Almost never' to (4) 'Almost always'. In the current study, the internal reliability for the entire scale was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = .86$).

Teacher efficacy scale

The teachers' sense of efficacy scale is a twelve-item short form questionnaire developed by Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001) to assess a wide range of capabilities that teachers regard as key to effective teaching. It has a unified and stable factor structure with an alpha coefficient of .90 and due to its non-specificity, it lends itself to comparisons of teachers across contexts, subjects and school levels. Internal reliability for the current research was computed by coefficient alpha ($\alpha = .96$). Respondents were asked to specify their beliefs about accomplishing each task on a nine-point Likert scale: from (1) 'nothing' to (9) 'a great deal'.

Open-ended questions

The online survey also included four optional questions to which respondents were able to provide open comments in regard to their views of teacher autonomy, well-being and teacher efficacy. To help the research team optimise the open-ended questions and to enhance the credibility of them, four teachers from primary, secondary and high school were interviewed on *Zoom* to comment on the clarity of the questions. Thus, the following questions were revised and included in the study after the *Zoom* interview, which was carried out in Turkish so that the teachers could express themselves more comfortably while being recorded. The revised questions were:

- (1) Do you feel that you have discretionary freedom in the syllabus and in the materials, method and techniques you use while teaching? Please explain.
- (2) Please indicate to what extent you think you have a good level of well-being at work.
- (3) Please indicate to what extent you believe in your capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student learning.
- (4) Do you think that teacher autonomy, teacher well-being and teacher efficacy mutually affect each other? Please elaborate.

Data analysis

The quantitative data gathered from teachers were analysed using IBM *SPSS Statistics version 22*. Prior to the data analysis, the data were first screened for assumption testing, including normality checks. Descriptive statistics were used to present information on participant characteristics. Independent sample t-test and one-way analysis of variance were performed to determine whether the means are significantly different. The Pearson product-moment correlation was used to determine the strength and direction of the associations between the variables. In addition, Levene's test was used to check whether the samples have equal variances. Analyses also involved Cronbach's alpha to measure the reliability of each scale and the Tukey post hoc test to assess the significance of difference between possible pairs of means. The effect size was measured using Cohen's *d* and *eta squared* (η^2).

The qualitative data were analysed using content analysis; the purpose being to draw inferences from open comments to contextualise and interpret the phenomenon for sense-making (Krippendorff, 2018). Specifically, teachers' written responses to open-

ended questions were analysed to identify the areas of similarity and conflict in their views. With this aim, content analysis, systematic coding and the categorising approach (Krippendorff, 2018) were used to make inferences. For this analysis, the research team first read and coded the data individually to have an idea about the content, and then came together three times to compare and contrast emerging codes and major themes. This allowed interconnectedness of the excerpts (Saldana, 2014). Direct quotes and sentence fragments were given to support themes. After that, the intercoder reliability was computed using Cohen's *kappa* and it demonstrated a substantial agreement ($\kappa = 0.77$) (McHugh, 2012).

Results

In order to investigate the associations in relation to the first research question asking whether there is any statistically significant relationship between autonomy, well-being and teacher efficacy, a Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient was calculated.

Table 2: Correlations between teacher autonomy, well-being and teacher efficacy ($N=293$)

		Teacher autonomy	Well- being	Teacher efficacy
Teacher autonomy	Pearson correlation Sig. (2 tailed)	1	.309 .000	.537 .000
Well-being	Pearson correlation Sig. (2 tailed)		1	.359 .000
Teacher efficacy	Pearson correlation Sig. (2 tailed)			1

The highest correlative association that emerged from the measurements of the three continuous variables were between autonomy and teacher efficacy ($r = .537, p < .001$), indicating a strong correlation. There was also significant evidence of a relationship between well-being and teacher efficacy ($r = .359, p < .001$) and autonomy and well-being ($r = 0.309, p < 0.001$).

A one-way ANOVA was carried out to compare participant responses to dependent variable measures of teacher autonomy, well-being and teacher efficacy according to school level and type.

The participants were also asked four open-ended questions so that the researchers could gain a deeper insight into language teacher autonomy, well-being and teacher efficacy, the main focuses of this current study. As a result of the analysis of the qualitative data, three major themes emerged: (1) the lack of teacher autonomy; (2) prerequisites for well-being; and (3) the connection between teacher autonomy and teacher efficacy. Regarding the first theme, some participants complained about the lack of teacher autonomy and provided reasons for it. For example, Participant 17 said *'I do not have any right to say anything about the curriculum, the managers send [decide on] the required materials and curriculum, and we apply them'*. Participant 215 wrote that *'I can use whatever material I want, but there is no way to change the*

curriculum'. In a similar vein, Participant 56 said, '*Absolutely no. The Ministry of National Education decides and then sends the materials, and we apply them. That's it*'.

Another major theme related to the prerequisites for well-being. Findings from the participants' remarks show that well-being stems from personal motivation ($n = 81$), feeling respected at work ($n = 52$) and the institution's attitudes ($n = 50$). Participant 79, for example, wrote that '*The respect which I feel from our managers makes me more motivated and I work more willingly*'. This motivation is also related to teaching staff ($n = 40$) in the schools. The following excerpt illustrates another respondent's (Participant 85) view that well-being helps boost his/her confidence as a teacher, '*I work with a qualified academic staff and professionalism is always everywhere, which makes me feel confident*'. However, the rest ($n = 70$) stated that they could not achieve well-being due to some difficulties such as micromanagement, a high number of teaching hours and financial situations, especially in private schools. In fact, micromanagement, which means the school administration's control of every detail (White, 2010), and financial issues were mostly valid for the teachers working in private schools ($n = 102$). For example, participant 134 said, '*I have not been working in a school where our managers respect us, and they are only monitoring and warning us*'.

The last major theme that emerged from the data was the connection between teacher autonomy and teacher efficacy. Although the data revealed that participants had divergent ideas as to how each concept related to another, most of them ($n = 102$) stated that teacher autonomy and teacher efficacy particularly complemented each other. 120 participants mentioned that teachers having a higher sense of efficacy levels can gain teacher autonomy compared to those who do not. Also, participant 77 made the following remark to indicate a causal link between autonomy and teacher efficacy:

A teacher with self-efficacy can find the right way without depending on any other person or program. In my opinion, this leads to autonomy.

Another respondent (Participant 122) furthered this view:

Teacher self-efficacy gives me the opportunity to teach well, and Teacher autonomy makes me comfortable and happier while teaching the class. If the authority [the school management] had wanted me to teach in line with their teaching methods and approaches, I would not have been able to manage the class and would have been affected negatively. Furthermore, teacher self-efficacy is very important for me and being accepted by the other academic staff makes me happy. The fact that teachers with self-efficacy and TA have positive impacts on teacher education enables teachers to gain teacher well-being directly.

When tested for TA by school level, there was a significant difference in mean scores [$F_{(2,290)} = 3.798$, $p = .024$, $\eta^2 = .026$] between the school levels. Eta-squared was .026 indicating a small effect size (Kirk, 1996). Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey test showed a significant difference between primary and secondary schools ($p = .020$). When the mean score for well-being was examined in relation to school level, a one-way analysis of variance test showed that teachers' means did not vary significantly according to school level [$F_{(2,290)} = 1.926$, $p = .148$, $\eta^2 = .013$]. Again, a one-way ANOVA was carried out to

evaluate the relationship between teacher efficacy and school level and the analysis failed to yield a statistically significant finding [$F_{(2,290)} = 2.463, p = .087, \eta^2 = .017$]. Independent-samples t tests were conducted to compare TA, well-being and teacher efficacy mean scores for teachers in state and private schools. Of the three dependent variables tested, a significant difference was found only in scores of TA for private ($M = 4.17, SD = 1.00$) and state ($M = 4.96, SD = 1.13$) school teachers [$t(291) = -5.28, p < .001, d = .73$]. Cohen's d was calculated as 0.734, indicating a medium effect size (Kirk, 1996).

Table 3: One-way ANOVA and t-test results for the school level and type of school on teacher autonomy, well-being and teacher efficacy

Variable		<i>n</i>	Teacher autonomy		Well-being		Teacher efficacy	
			Mean (<i>SD</i>)	<i>p</i>	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	<i>p</i>	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	<i>p</i>
School level	Primary	87	4.50 (.19)	.024	3.18 (.59)	.148	6.66 (1.28)	.087
	Secondary	96	4.95 (1.73)		3.32 (.51)		7.08 (1.36)	
	High school	110	4.81 (1.07)		3.20 (.53)		6.85 (1.22)	
School type	Private	73	4.17 (1.00)	.015	3.26 (.56)	.605	6.86 (1.28)	.914
	State	220	4.96 (1.13)		3.22 (.54)		6.88 (1.30)	

Discussion

The data emerging from this country-wide, mixed-methods study suggest that even though teacher autonomy is correlated with teachers' well-being and teacher efficacy, the association between autonomy and teachers' sense of efficacy, in particular, is a strong one. The literature reviewed in the section above supports this relationship (Choi & Mao, 2021) on the grounds that autonomy strengthens teacher efficacy. The data also revealed the effect of school type and level to autonomy in a language-teaching context. In other words, the levels of autonomy exhibited by teachers in state schools were higher than those of their colleagues working in private schools. Similarly, Xia et al. (2021) found that teachers working in public schools reported greater autonomy in comparison to their counterparts in the private sector. Moreover, the autonomy experienced by secondary school teachers was higher than that of teachers working at primary schools. As there is a notable body of work indicating that autonomy plays a critical positive role when it comes to teachers' continuing professional development (Choi & Mao, 2021; Lennert da Silva & Mølsted, 2020) and when it comes to the development of autonomy among learners (Gao, 2018; Kong, 2022; Tschirhart & Rigler, 2009), so it seems necessary to delve into the reasons for relatively lower autonomy perceived by teachers in primary schools and in the private sector. Yet, to the best of authors' knowledge, this country-wide study is a unique effort to investigate the intercorrelations between autonomy, well-being and teacher efficacy together and it shows that teachers who exhibit higher levels of autonomy are also possibly those who have greater well-being and teacher efficacy. Moreover, based on the multi-levelled school evidence, teachers working in private schools reportedly have less autonomy possibly due to higher expectations of the administration and stricter monitoring mechanisms.

As exemplified in the results, the qualitative findings are also consistent with the quantitative ones, which puts emphasis on the high level of associations between teacher autonomy and teacher efficacy. That is to say, teachers who are self-efficacious are also those who are more likely to achieve greater autonomy in their teaching. In parallel, it can also be said that teachers could teach more effectively when they possess a high-degree of well-being (Caprara et al., 2006). In a similar vein, high qualities in terms of responsibilities, suitable levels of autonomy and connectedness to school environments can be signs of positive well-being, specifically in the private sector (Brady & Wilson, 2021). Promoting well-being is also related to teacher-student interaction, since it provides relatedness (Split et al., 2011), and pre-service teacher well-being is based on the interactions of teachers in different contexts, not only in educational settings (Mansfield & Batman, 2019). Well-being may emerge from the dynamic interplay between sociocontextual factors and personal characteristics, so language teaching practitioners should seek ways to integrate not only linguistic but also non-linguistic goals for learners (Mercer, 2021). The teachers' open comments also implied that self-efficacious teachers were likely to gain greater autonomy. Furthermore, although expressed by only some participants working in private primary schools, teachers who have a high degree of well-being could have the chance to gain the other variables and contribute to their teaching styles. Again, this also shows that these domains (well-being to teacher efficacy, teacher autonomy to well-being, teacher autonomy to teacher efficacy) in teacher education are closely related and complement each other (Law & Guo, 2016; Zee & Koomen, 2016).

Conclusion

In acknowledgement of the growing recognition that teacher autonomy is central to student engagement and learning, the present study contributes to the theoretical understanding of teacher autonomy by examining its associations with well-being and teacher efficacy. Moreover, this is one of the first studies to investigate teacher autonomy across school levels and types in the EFL context in Turkey. This study has shown three novel findings: (1) autonomy, well-being and teacher efficacy are intercorrelated, with a strong correlation between autonomy and teachers' sense of efficacy; (2) of the three variables, there was a statistically significant difference only between primary and secondary school teachers' autonomy; and (3) only autonomy was significantly higher in the group of teachers working in state schools.

It is worth noting a major implication with future research directions. Even though this study has highlighted significant relationships between teachers' autonomy by school level and type, further research is clearly necessary to understand the reasons for these differences. Further cross-cultural studies are also encouraged to add to the literature on the dynamic relationship between teacher autonomy, well-being and teacher efficacy among educational practitioners at private and state schools as well as among pre-service teachers. The statistical difference and varying opinions of teachers at private and state schools in exercising teacher autonomy is another gap in English language teaching research.

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