

Focusing on Teacher Wellbeing, Positive Psychology, and Peace

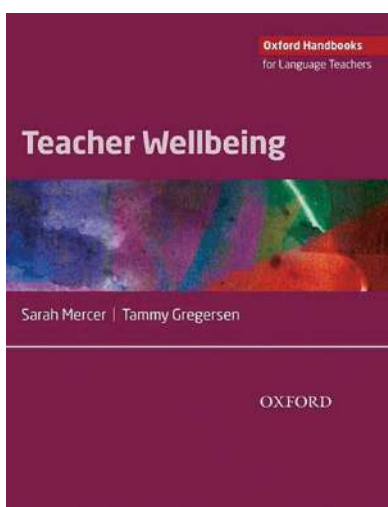
Tammy Gregersen, University of Sharjah

Tammy Gregersen is a professor of TESOL at the American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates and is a featured speaker at this spring's international conference. Dr. Gregersen is "committed to teachers and learners finding what makes life most worth living." With this in mind, her recent research and writings have dealt with positive psychology, teacher wellbeing, and peacebuilding. Accordingly, her talk for our conference is "A Research-Based, Practical Exploration of Language Teacher Wellbeing." Dr. Gregersen recently gave this interview for The English Connection. — Ed.

KOTESOL: To begin with, Dr. Gregersen, would you let our readers know some background information about yourself?

Dr. Gregersen:

Hmmm, where to begin... How about I start with those things for which I feel the most passion? I love experiencing other cultures. I feel energized by being confronted with new and exciting phenomena that I haven't interacted with before. Rather than saying "I'm from the U.S." or "I lived in Chile for 17 years" or "I'm currently teaching in the U.A.E," I'd prefer to say that I am proud to be a global citizen – a person who sees the world through an international, universal lens. This means that whenever I meet someone new – no matter what part of the world they are from – we are kindreds. We are united by shared humanity.



▲ **Teacher Wellbeing (Oxford University Press, 2020) – eight chapters, each dedicated to a specific dimension of teachers' lives.**

KOTESOL: You have recently co-authored the book *Teacher Wellbeing*. Would you tell us about this collaboration with your co-author, Sarah Mercer – how materials for the book were collected, and how the book is organized?

Dr. Gregersen: "SarBear" (my personal moniker for Sarah) and I go back several years to the first International Conference on the Psychology of Language Learning and Teaching that she hosted in Graz, Austria. Because of our shared professional interests and the fact that we personally "clicked" immediately, we became close friends and collaborators. Working with Sarah never feels like drudgery or effortful! In fact, most of the time when we meet for collaborative purposes, whether online or in

person, we finally get around to talking "shop" only after we've caught each other up on private life events.

As for our *Wellbeing* book, it is organized into eight chapters, each of which is dedicated to language teachers' motivations, minds, emotions, relationships, work places, physical bodies, or futures. For us, delegating the workload was easy and natural as Sarah's forte is in making complex ideas salient and my skill set is particularly effective for making practical pedagogical applications from theory. That said, the chapters would go back and forth between us until we both felt satisfied that we did the best job we could for our readers and teacher colleagues.

KOTESOL: Also recently published is a book on peacebuilding (*Peacebuilding in Language Education: Innovations in Theory and Practice*).

One of your co-contributors and co-editors on that project is Rebecca Oxford, who, by the way, is also an invited speaker at this year's international conference. Please tell us about your work on this book as well as your various collaborations with Dr. Oxford.



Dr. Gregersen: Rebecca and I go back even further than my friendship with Sarah! I

actually met Rebecca through Elaine Horwitz, an eminence with whom many of your readers will be familiar because of her incredible work on foreign language anxiety. I was in Texas at TexTESOL when Elaine introduced Rebecca and me. Besides her seminal work in coalescing peace and linguistics, Rebecca is also known for her work in language learning strategies, and it was on that topic that we first shared ideas and began a lifelong collaboration. From strategies, we together jumped feet-first into positive psychology in language learning and teaching. Rebecca was one of our star contributors with her piece on "EMPATHICS" (an acronym that she developed to discuss wellbeing) to a Multilingual Matters anthology, *Positive*



▲ Tammy Gregersen (left), with *Teacher Wellbeing* co-author Sarah Mercer.

Psychology in SLA, which I co-edited along with Peter MacIntyre and Sarah. The “peace” collection was initiated by Rebecca, and I was honored to be part of her team. Peter and I wrote two manuscripts for it: one on peace and positive psychology and the other on the ways in which nonverbal behavior impacts how we communicate peace. Rebecca and I are now working on another book together, (along with another colleague, Yecid Ortega), for Cambridge University Press about which I am super excited. It examines the intersections of positive psychology, peace, and intercultural communication and provides scenarios and activities for language classrooms.

“Beckers” (as I call her) and I have vacationed together with our husbands and dogs on various occasions. We often share a hotel room at conferences, too. I think we both have stories to tell, but I had better leave it at that in case she is writing for this edition of *The English Connection*, too!

KOTESOL: You have also done work on “dealing with emotions of teaching abroad.” Many of our readers are teaching abroad. Could you give any tips on dealing and what “silver linings” we might find?

Dr. Gregersen: That paper was soooooo much fun! I had a personal stake in it because I am a huuuuge user of sublimation as an emotional strategy. Together with Peter MacIntyre, we designed a case study that focused on an international, in-service teacher who volunteered for a week-long intervention study. Our purpose was to discover whether the positive psychology cognitive reappraisal strategy of finding a “silver lining” (seeing something positive) in adverse events that occurred in one’s daily life was an effective strategy for augmenting teacher wellbeing. To gather structured background information, our teacher-participant completed measures of dispositional optimism, perceived stress, job satisfaction, and emotional experience. Although her answers on the pre-tests suggested that she was generally optimistic, they also revealed high stress and a tendency toward experiencing more negative than positive emotions, and only moderate job satisfaction at best. For the study, she

documented her stressors and the ways in which she was able to find silver linings in them for one week. Qualitative data from her journals, open-ended interview questions, and follow-up interviews provided information on ten specific occasions of teacher stress. For all stressors, our teacher was able to reframe the stressors and find silver linings, but the effects were short-lived. In the end, we discovered that our teacher naturally used another strategy, defensive pessimism (preparing for the worst case), when facing uncontrollable events and that this was her usual “go to” response. So although finding silver linings might work for some teachers to develop dispositional optimism and teacher resiliency, it will not always be the most effective strategy for all people – a conclusion that aligns well with what we know about

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strategy use: that the best strategies are personally effective and highly idiosyncratic.

KOTESOL: What are you planning for your KOTESOL conference presentation to be about, and how will it relate to our conference theme “More Than Words: Teaching for a Better World”?

Dr. Gregersen: I mentioned in an earlier question that the *Teacher Wellbeing* book was comprised of eight chapters – each dedicated to a specific dimension of teachers’ lives. My plan for the conference is to choose my favorite activity from each dimension, provide a bit of

background information on the “whys” of each, and then talk about the “hows.” That is to say, I’d like to transform my presentation into a “wellbeing workshop” and walk participants through a variety of exercises in pursuit of self-care.

In terms of “Teaching for a Better World,” we know that the teaching profession is one that naturally attracts people who want to serve others, and in doing so, teachers often sacrifice a lot of themselves and become swept away by emotional labor. We spend so much time putting our learners at the center of our daily pursuits that we often fail to make our own personal worlds a better place. I am hoping that my presentation will help my language teacher colleagues discover an effective work-life balance so that our inner worlds are enhanced. In my presentation, “world” refers to teachers’ personal domains.

KOTESOL: What would you like for the audience’s take-aways to be from your conference session?

Dr. Gregersen: The most important take-away for language teachers from my session is that they not only deserve to consider themselves as worthy of self-care but that it is also good for their learners. “Self-care” is not synonymous with “selfish,” but rather it is integral to our being able to give our best to our learners. We know through research that teachers who are in a good emotional and psychological “head space” also have learners who thrive. Emotions are contagious – from teachers to learners and vice versa – so when we go into our language classrooms feeling that we are thriving and flourishing, we transmit this to our learners as well, and the contentment cycle continues. *How* we can do this will be the centerpiece of my talk.

KOTESOL: You have done a lot of work on teacher wellbeing and peacebuilding education recently. Where do you see yourself working as the future unfolds – in these same areas and/or moving into new and different areas?

Dr. Gregersen: Teacher wellbeing and peacebuilding have really resonated with me on a personal level. I’m a true believer! We’ve spent time and energy over the past few years looking at emotional and psychological components and because I am committed to teachers and learners finding what makes life most worth living, I’d like to continue down this same path. However, what we don’t know a lot about are the linguistic outcomes that may or may not arise from greater self-satisfaction. Even though emotional and psychological contentment are in and of themselves worthy of study, wouldn’t it be interesting to find out the implications of wellbeing on a person’s ability to acquire or learn another language? So maybe in the next few years I’ll don my “applied linguist” hat (while not removing my teacher hat!!!) to investigate further benefits.

KOTESOL: What other areas are you interested in – professionally or personally?

Dr. Gregersen: My first professional love has always been teacher education. I’ve been incredibly lucky in my journey in that I’ve been able to wed my passion for equipping prospective educators with the content, attitudes, behaviors, and skills they need to be accomplished

teachers with my curiosity about language as a means of communication among diverse others. That said, I’m interested in discovering ways to make our classroom teaching more effective. At the moment, I’ve been working with Sarah Mercer on a type of teacher feedback called “appreciate inquiry,” which takes a strengths-based approach that empowers learners by focusing on what they do right – rather than a traditional deficit approach that sees the elements that need correction. I’d like to continue down the path of researching how precepts of positive psychology – like signature strengths – can be implemented through intervention studies in teacher education and language classrooms to enhance teachers’ and learners’ development.

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KOTESOL: With the “jump into the deep end” in the use of technology for remote emergency teaching due to the onslaught of Covid, what changes do you foresee in education delivery, or in policies and practices related to teacher and student wellbeing?

Dr. Gregersen: One of the new developments we’ve been working on in terms of methodological research design is complex dynamic systems – looking at any given phenomenon as a system of constantly fluctuating, interacting variables that change over time. We decided to look at teacher wellbeing over time during the Covid pandemic and measured it at the beginning of the surge, a year later, and now we are just reviewing our third wave of data. We investigated ideas like coping, hope, growth, stressors, uplifts, etc. It’s been a fascinating project! Readers can find our results in the journal *System*. An important takeaway, however, is that we need to be attentive to teacher wellbeing with or without a pandemic raging. Of course, life has gotten even more dicey with the rise of Covid, but teacher burnout was an issue even before this current global crisis.

Our foray into “the deep end,” I think, has made teachers incredibly resilient. Our research has shown that some teachers have taken great pride in the fact that they were able to survive the transition into online learning, and they feel that what they’ve picked up technologically will be a great help to their future language instruction. Of course, the stressors are part of the equation, but one thing we discovered is the hardiness that characterizes teachers! I’ve never been prouder to call myself a language teacher!!

KOTESOL: And KOTESOL is proud to have you as a featured speaker at our conference! We look forward to your presentation there, and thank you for the preview of your session that you have provided in this interview.