

The Motivational Aspects of Meaningful Work among Iranian EFL Faculty Members

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the motivational aspects of meaningful work among EFL faculty members utilizing grounded theory. To achieve the study's objectives, 19 faculty members with diverse ages, ranks, and tenures were selected as experts through purposive and theoretical sampling. Data analysis involved open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, complemented by constant comparison to derive insights. The findings revealed that the participant EFL faculty members were intrinsically motivated to engage in meaningful work and took proactive measures to do so. The coding process revealed four categories, including the need for (a) beneficence (serving others), (b) competence (becoming a better self), (c) relatedness (unity with others), and (d) autonomy (freedom). Additionally, the study identified various contextual factors, including individual characteristics (personality traits and autonomous motivation), organizational factors (organizational culture, job resources, and job demands), and student factors (engagement). These findings are consistent with the basic psychological needs outlined in self-determination theory, particularly the fulfillment of the needs for beneficence, autonomy, and relatedness. The findings also underscore the interconnectedness of these needs, with competency being satisfied through relatedness. The implications of this research are relevant to language educators and teacher training, emphasizing the importance of addressing these motivational factors to promote meaningful work in the university EFL context.

Keywords: EFL faculties; meaningful work, motivational factors, qualitative research

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Introduction

Human beings inherently seek meaning in their lives (Frankl, 1984) and yearn for meaning in their work (Cohen-Meitar et al., 2009) to feel that life is significant, important, worthwhile, or purposeful. Moreover, meaningful work is a source of satisfaction (Rosso et al., 2010), even more than spare time (Charles-Leija et al., 2023). Recent research has shown that employees prioritize the sense of meaningfulness in their work over other factors like compensation, opportunities for advancement, and the working environment (Hu & Hirsh, 2017). It is postulated that meaningful work is intensely personal and leads to positive attitudes (Bailey & Madden, 2016), reduced burnout (Malachi-Pines, 2002), improved performance, engagement, commitment, and less intention of quitting (Lysova et al., 2019).

Owing to the positive valence of meaningful work, it has become a topic of great interest among scholars of different fields such as psychology, management studies, sociology, and ethics in recent years (Chalofsky, 2010; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Lysova et al., 2019; Riivari et al., 2020; Stes & Petegem, 2014). However, meaningful work in EFL contexts is still understudied. What makes meaningful work special in the EFL context is its emphasis on cooperation, interaction, and shared learning, which are all basic elements of meaningful work (Beadle & Knight, 2012; Michaelson et al., 2014). Considering the key role of teachers as agents of change, researchers have shifted their attention toward the identification of factors affecting teachers in their meaningful work (Derakhshan, Greenier, & Fathi, 2023; Wang et al., 2021).

Self-determination theory (SDT) offers a valuable lens through which to examine the motivational aspects of meaningful working. By focusing on intrinsic motivation, basic psychological needs, and external factors, SDT provides a comprehensive framework for understanding why individuals are drawn to and find fulfillment in their work (Gagné & Deci, 2005). This theory aligns closely with the concept of meaningful work, which is characterized by a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In the current study, SDT serves as the theoretical foundation for analyzing the motivational dynamics within the context of meaningful work, guiding both the research methodology and the interpretation of findings (Deci et al., 1985). By employing SDT, the researcher aims to uncover the

underlying psychological mechanisms driving engagement and satisfaction in the workplace, ultimately contributing to our understanding of how individuals derive meaning from their professional experiences. In line with the research aim, the following research questions were posed.

1. What are the motivational sources of meaningful work among Iranian EFL faculty members?
2. What contextual factors influence the motivation of EFL faculty members to work meaningfully?

Review of Literature

Meaningful Work

Victor Frankl (1946) in his seminal work “Man’s Search for Meaning” emphasized the pivotal role of values in shaping a meaningful life. This notion highlights the intrinsic link between meaning in life and human well-being and flourishing, as corroborated by various scholars (Ryff & Singer, 1998; Seligman, 2011; Steger et al., 2008). The concept of a meaningful life, intertwined with meaningful work, aligns closely with the principles of positive psychology, offering individuals a sense of purpose, fulfillment, and satisfaction (Kendall, 2019). Meaningful work is commonly characterized as work imbued with personal significance, fostering individual growth, and contributing to the greater good (Allan et al., 2016; Steger et al., 2012). According to Martela & Pessi (2018), work achieves meaningfulness when it aligns with a broader purpose and facilitates self-realization. The definitions of work meaning and meaningfulness have presented a multifaceted perspective, often characterized by inconsistencies (Rosso et al., 2010).

In the context of this study, meaningful work is defined as an individual’s subjective perception when their work enables them to contribute to the greater good, fosters personal growth, and holds intrinsic significance (Steger et al., 2012). Previous scholars have delineated various sources and outcomes associated with meaningful work. Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) identified four primary sources, including personal development, unity with others, service to others, and self-expression. Individuals with meaningful work experience quicker recovery and higher energy levels, as well as increased motivation for their work (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). Additionally, meaningful work contributes to determining social

status and enhancing self-esteem for employees, leading to improved job performance (Kim & Beehr, 2018). Employees who perceive their work as meaningful demonstrate higher psychological well-being and job satisfaction compared to their counterparts (Allan et al., 2019; Esteves & Lopes, 2017; May et al., 2018).

Teacher Motivation and Meaningful Work

Teaching is a profession of profound significance, extending far beyond the simple dissemination of knowledge (Steger et al., 2012). Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) suggested that teachers' positive perception of their work attributes to the sense of contributing to societal betterment and finding personal fulfillment (Willemse & Deacon, 2015). It arises when an employee's personal beliefs, values, and actions match the specific demands of their job (Hackman & Oldham, 1980).

The correlation between meaningful work and teacher motivation is significant within the educational context. When teachers perceive their work as imbued with meaning, their motivation levels are often heightened. Meaningful work endows teachers with a profound sense of purpose and fulfillment, as they recognize the substantial impact of their contributions to the educational process and the holistic development of their students (Datnow & Park, 2018). This intrinsic motivation, stemming from the perceived significance of their work, serves as a driving force for teachers to surmount challenges, persevere in their endeavors, and aspire to excellence in their pedagogical practices.

In the university context, much like in other educational settings, teacher motivation holds a central role, given that teachers act as leaders within their classrooms and directly influence student motivation (Dörnyei, 2001; Montalvo et al., 2007). Consequently, enhancing teacher motivation not only benefits educators but also yields positive outcomes for students (Bishay, 1996). Despite facing increased workloads and expanded responsibilities such as teaching, research, and services, motivated faculty members actively seek support and opportunities for growth to infuse their work with meaning (Ng & Feldman, 2013). According to Hackman and Oldham (1976), attaining a sense of meaning in one's work often leads to proactive motivation (Wright & Cropanzano, 2000). Being proactive involves preventing problems, anticipating opportunities, and initiating efforts to

make changes in a work setting or pursue a different future.

Self-Determination Theory

One particular theoretical framework applicable to the motivational potential of teachers is the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It outlines five distinct types of motivation, ranging from autonomous to controlled, encompassing intrinsic motivation, integrated regulation, identified regulation, introjected regulation, and external regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The theory posits that the most self-determined forms of motivation emerge when three psychological needs are satisfied: the need for competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy involves self-regulating experiences, fostering feelings of volition and alignment with internalized values, while competence relates to a sense of mastery in various domains of life (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Relatedness pertains to feelings of belonging, care, and social connections (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Dik & Duffy, 2012). Fulfilling these needs is predictive of well-being both between and within individuals over time (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Methodology

The current research employs a qualitative approach, specifically grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which is chosen when there is limited evidence on a phenomenon. Grounded theory, rooted in symbolic interactionism, is an inductive method that focuses on human interaction and social processes (Munhall, 2007). Symbolic interactionism underscores the importance of process and context, making it suitable for addressing the study question. Grounded theory methodology is well-suited for exploring areas with limited knowledge, aiming to develop substantive theories grounded in data (Annells, 1997). Since meaningful working construct has not been extensively researched in Iran, employing grounded theory appears to be an effective method for gaining insight from the experience of faculty members in this field and understanding the motivational factors behind their experiences. A key feature of grounded theory is its flexibility in data collection, incorporating various sources such as observations, interviews, documents, and images to comprehend how research participants construct meanings and define realities in specific contexts (Charmaz, 2008). Charmaz (2008) emphasizes the importance of utilizing diverse data collection methods throughout the research

process to ensure the credibility of the resulting theory.

Participants

Participants were 19 faculty members selected as experts recruited from universities located in Ahvaz, Shiraz, Tehran, Azerbaijan, Sistan and Baluchestan, and Ilam. These participants specialized in TEFL and boasted a minimum of 5 years of teaching experience. The rationale behind selecting faculty members as research participants stemmed from the recognition of teaching as one of the most meaningful professions. Furthermore, teachers are acknowledged to wield a significant influence on the meaningfulness of their work (Stegger, 2012). Of the 19 participants, 7 (36.8%) were female, and 12 (63.2%) were male. In terms of educational qualifications, 3 (15.8%) held the rank of associate professor, 8 (42.1%) were assistant professors, 2 (10.5%) were full professors, and 6 (31.6%) were instructors. Tenure status was categorized into pre-tenured, tenured, and truck tenured levels, with 6 (31.6%) participants falling under the pre-tenured category, 8 (42.1%) under the truck tenured category, and 5 (26.3%) being tenured.

Instruments

The research data were collected through semi-structured interviews and class observation mapped on grounded theory guidelines (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The purpose of conducting interviews was to elicit data on EFL faculty members' perceptions of meaningful working to delve into the motivational sources of teaching meaningfully. Non-participant observation (observing participants without actively participating) was the second instrument used for gathering data on the actual strategies used by Iranian EFL faculty members in the classroom context. Five classroom observations were conducted using observation sheets to systematically assess three central areas of focus, including teacher-student interaction, teacher instruction, and student engagement in the learning process.

Data Collection

To facilitate the collection process and ensure precision in data analysis, two researchers simultaneously examined the data collection and analysis procedures. The research inquiries underwent examination with the input of seasoned professors possessing significant expertise in qualitative research. They oversaw the workflow and coding process, offering constructive feedback on coding

procedures until data saturation was achieved. The primary data collection method utilized in the research was semi-structured interviews, complemented by five classroom observation sessions to offer a more comprehensive insight into the research topic. Semi-structured interviews are widely favored in qualitative research for data-gathering purposes. Integrating observation alongside interviews allows researchers to delve deeper into participants' experiences, capturing nuances such as non-verbal cues and contextual insights that interviews alone might overlook (Green & Thorogood, 2014). Guiding interview questions were crafted with the assistance of two researchers, both associate professors in TEFL. The interviews, lasting between 40 to 50 minutes each, were conducted via both phone (12 interviews) and Skype (7 interviews employing eCamm Call Recorder with participants' consent) spanning from November 20, 2022, to June 11, 2023. Confidentiality of data was assured to all participants.

The interview commenced with an introduction and pleasantries, followed by seven questions aimed at investigating the motivational sources of meaningful work. They explored experiences of motivation and engagement in EFL teaching, definitions of meaningful work, the role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as well as strategies for fostering intrinsic motivation and creating a supportive teaching environment. The first author audio-recorded all interviews, transcribed them word for word, and analyzed them without interruption. Reflective notes were taken immediately after each interview by the second researcher. The data analysis began simultaneously with the commencement of the interview by the second researcher. Classroom observations were conducted based on a checklist developed from insights gained during interviews and to confirm the interview data. Five non-participant observation sessions took place at Shahid Chamran University, Ahvaz, focusing on teacher-student interaction, instructional methods, and student engagement during teaching sessions. Observation participants were assistant professors and instructors conducting classes at the undergraduate level within the field of English language teaching. Each observation session lasted between 1.5 to 2 hours. Detailed field notes were recorded on a laptop using an observation sheet to aid in data documentation.

Data Analysis

The data analysis comprised two stages: the first stage was an inductive

process employing grounded theory to identify motivational themes extracted from the interview data, and the deductive process applied the self-determination theory (SDT) to organize the categories and subcategories of the SDT basic psychological needs framework. The study utilized three coding methods: open, axial, and selective to analyze the research data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) based on grounded theory principles on the recorded data from the classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. After collecting the data, observation sheets, field notes, and reflective notes were organized in conjunction with the semi-structured interview data. Audio files were transcribed and analyzed by constant comparison, and interpretations were translated into codes, categories, and finally theorizing on the participants' experiences. Both the first and last two authors undertook independent reviews and coding of the successive interviews. Periodically, they convened with the second author to resolve any disparities and achieve consensus.

NVivo software was applied to facilitate the analytical procedures because of its vital coding function, enabling researchers to capture the information points involved in the material source (Su et al., 2022). In the first phase, all the instances quoted by participants were identified through open coding, for example, “making a difference in learners’ lives is everything for me”. During the open coding phase, when more data was gathered, it would either be placed under an open coding category or a new category until data saturation took place. Data saturation refers to the point where the information gained from data collection becomes repetitive or redundant (Bogdan & Biklan, 2007). In axial coding, the strategies were categorized by connecting the specific strategies. For example, EFL faculty’s ‘devotion’ interacts with common traits categorized into ‘personality traits’, and the process continues. Finally, in selective coding, all the categories were placed under one umbrella term, namely ‘individual characteristic’. A frequency count of the participants’ strategies for meaning-making was also performed on the data collected in the observation stage. For instance, the frequency counts of applying extra work activities or relational coding indicate the extent to which teachers are involved in meaningful work in the class contexts. To uphold data integrity and ensure the overall quality of the study, two colleagues consistently checked the coding process.

Trustworthiness of Research Results

To ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative research findings, four key aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability, are considered essential. To ensure data trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba's criteria were applied. The interviews and coding were scrutinized by two experienced researchers, both associate professors in TEFL with qualitative research expertise, to ensure conformity. Establishing the credibility of the findings involved employing data triangulation and peer review, which included using multiple sources of data (interviews and classroom observations) and incorporating the perspectives of two researchers to minimize bias. Additionally, researcher reflexivity was employed to mitigate any potential prejudice. An external audit by a colleague (assistant professor) was conducted to cross-check the data analysis processes, enhancing both dependability and conformability. Member checking was also utilized post-interviews, where participating teachers were asked to provide feedback on the extracted themes and categories, further strengthening the research's validity. Furthermore, the study's results and interpretations were reviewed by two researchers.

Results

The final analysis identified two main categories of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, from which five themes and 11 subcategories were identified. Intrinsic motivations were found to include various themes related to helping others, which were the most common theme identified under the category of 'beneficence'. Extrinsic motivations, on the other hand, included instrumental reasons for working, such as a desire for promotion and avoiding conflict with colleagues, with the lowest frequency as shown in Table 1.

Table 1*Frequency of Motivational Themes in the Workplace*

Category	Subcategory	Frequency
Internal motivation	Positive impact on the life of others,	11
	Fostering students' communicative competence,	
Beneficence	Enhancing collective self-efficacy,	11
	Preparing students for their future work,	
	Changing learners' negative mindsets,	
Autonomy	Curriculum customization,	9
	Self-selected language utilization,	
Relatedness	Autonomy support,	8
	Learning from colleague experiences,	
Competence	Possessing the necessary skills, knowledge, and abilities to effectively perform job duties,	5
Category		2
External motivation	To get a promotion	

First Research Question

Final analyses yielded 405 open codes, with two broad themes of external and internal motivations identified, encompassing five motivational categories and 11 subthemes (see Table 1). Internal motivations revealed specific themes related to participants' inner drive for beneficence, autonomy, relatedness, and competence, while external motivations included instrumental motivation such as the need for promotion.

Beneficence. To address the first research question and ascertain the sources of participants' motivation for meaningful work, they were asked to express their perception of meaningful work. Transcribed data indicated that the majority of respondents defined meaningful work as effectively teaching and improving the lives of learners, enhancing their academic, cognitive, and emotional well-being. Following the completion of the coding process and synthesizing all proposed definitions by EFL faculty members, "Positive impact on learners' lives" emerged as the most frequently mentioned definition, occurring 11 times, surpassing other definitions. Additionally, four subcategories were identified: "fostering students' communicative competence," "Enhancing collective self-efficacy," "Changing learners' negative mindset," and "Preparing students for future work." These

subcategories were grouped under the main category of "beneficence," denoting a prosocial act."

Positive Impacts on EFL Learners. A substantial number of participants enthusiastically discussed ways to significantly impact the academic lives of learners. Some expressed concerns beyond their personal needs, emphasizing their greatest aspiration to contribute to the upbringing of the younger generation for the enhancement of the nation's future and prosperity.

P11: (45 years old, tenured, associate professor)

Preparing them for a better life is enough for me to feel my work is meaningful.

Fostering Students' Communicative Competence. Fostering communicative competence emerged as a paramount concern for a considerable number of participants. They underscored the necessity for substantial reforms within the Iranian educational system, particularly emphasizing the need to revise instructional approaches and methods at the university level.

P02: (54 years old, associate professor, tenure-track)

For years, we have witnessed minimal changes in our educational system. We have repeatedly emphasized that the traditional educational system is no longer responsive to the needs of the new generation... It is imperative to pave the way for positive changes

Enhancing Collective Self-Efficacy. The concept of "collective self-efficacy" was indirectly stated, with participants referring to students' shared beliefs that they can work together to produce effects. Collective efficacy expands the construct of self-efficacy within the group. Participants stressed that teachers can provide feedback to learners to offset their negative attitudes toward academic tasks by supporting learners' self-efficacy and corroborating this attitude through collaboration, thereby improving collective efficacy.

P14: (46 years old, instructor, pre-tenure)

Every student should have confidence in their capability to work on tasks individually and to have a shared belief in the team's capacity to choose the optimal course of action.

Changing Learners' Negative Mindset. Some participants referred to the

negative mindset of students regarding EFL learning. Teachers felt responsible for making conscious efforts to bring effective, creative, and engaging class activities to motivate and involve the students. Participants also pointed out the dire need to raise awareness among EFL students about the role of the English language in their future success.

P08: (52 years old, associate professor, tenure-track)

Our students' negative emotions toward becoming English teachers are high because they are pessimistic about being hired by an educational organization and dissatisfied with part-time jobs at language institutes that offer very low salaries... We should change their mindset by enhancing the quality of teaching.

Need for Autonomy. Ten out of nineteen participants referred to recent experiences of autonomy satisfaction in their teaching context, resulting in 31 total coded instances. Through inductive analysis, two themes were identified: curriculum customization and self-selected language utilization.

Curriculum Customization. One objective in education should be to enhance student engagement in learning and cultivate intellectually curious learners. A strategy to realize this objective could involve removing bureaucratic structures and empowering classroom teachers. The theme of teacher authority within the classroom, combined with curriculum customization and self-selected language utilization, emerged from the research findings.

P15: (47 years old, associate professor, tenured)

I believe the curriculum is too broad to adequately cater to the students' requirements... In my opinion, the curriculum serves as a general framework outlining our objectives, but I frequently modify it to suit the specific needs of my students.

Self-Selected Language Utilization. Tenured participants (associate professors and full professors) interviewed for this theme highlighted their sense of personal control and independence in how they used the target language. They discussed actively negotiating, presenting, and interpreting meaning in the target language based on their own beliefs, values, and perspectives.

P15: (47 years old, associate professor, tenured)

I have no constraints in managing my classroom; I make decisions based on the needs of the learners. As an educator with direct interaction with the learners, I am better positioned than anyone else to understand their needs.

Need for Relatedness. Roughly two-thirds of the participants expressed an inclination towards peer collaboration and/or training primarily because of the opportunity it provided to interact with colleagues. This facilitated the establishment of unique, reciprocal relationships, thereby instilling a profound sense of belonging akin to an emotional home. Relatedness was more favored by pre-tenured and tenure-track participants as a means of autonomy support and learning from colleagues' experiences.

P09: (52 years old, tenure-track, assistant professor)

My colleagues and I consider the university our second home... By assisting each other, we can overcome shortcomings and remain hopeful for the future of the university.

Learning from Colleague Experiences. Fostering a culture of collaboration, open communication, and continuous learning within the university community can greatly enhance the exchange of knowledge and experiences among colleagues.

P05: (38 years old, instructor, pre-tenure)

I'm gaining valuable insights from their diverse perspectives. Just yesterday, I was amazed because something I had firmly believed for years was challenged when we discussed it as a group. I had to reconsider my stance and acknowledge that their viewpoints compelled me to reassess my own.

Need for Competence. Competence entails achieving mastery and effectiveness in one's endeavors. Analyzing the data indicates that ten participants mentioned that they felt competent in their profession, with satisfaction of the need for relatedness. Possessing the necessary skills, knowledge, and abilities to effectively perform job duties was repeatedly expressed by participants. In other terms, they contribute to the enhancement of their own competence by leveraging assistance from their colleagues. These experiences were consistently linked to feelings of self-confidence.

P08: (52 years old, associate professor, tenure-track)

I have gleaned a wealth of knowledge from esteemed professors and colleagues, consistently striving to absorb insights from them in both pedagogy and research domains

Second Research Question

In response to the second question, they were asked to elaborate on activities undertaken toward meaning-making language teaching. For a more in-depth analysis, SDT psychological needs were considered (competence, autonomy, relatedness, and beneficence). Some of them referred to different teaching methods and techniques for engagement in the classroom contexts. Several participants highlighted personal teaching attitudes and the organization’s lack of attention to addressing the educational conditions at universities. These cases were all documented and subsequently coded as contextual factors. Table 1 illustrates the open, axial, and selective coding.

Table 2
Open Codes, Axial Coding, and Selective Coding Concerning Contextual Factors

Open–Coding	Axial- Coding	Selective-Coding	Contextual Factors
Conscientiousness, devotion, proactivity, adaptability, rapport, self-regulation, self-transcendence-	Personality traits	Individual characteristics	
Personal initiated innovative behavior	autonomous motivation		
Trust, integrity, loyalty, adaptability	Organizational culture	Organizational factors	
Innovation of teaching method, innovation of course design, online innovative teaching			
self-efficacy, autonomy, competency, adaptability, resilience, and optimism	Job resource		
Physical issues, physiological issues, psychological issues, time issues concerning teaching, research-service	Job demands		
Feedback. cooperation, respect, behavior, Motivation, autonomy, appraisal support,	Engagement	Students' factors	

Contextual factors in grounded theory denote specific elements and

circumstances inherent to a given setting or environment that exert influence on the formulation or comprehension of a theoretical methodology. These factors assume a pivotal role in the identification and analysis of the context in which social phenomena occur. Understanding contextual factors helps researchers uncover patterns, relationships, and meanings that emerge from the data. The coding process concerning contextual factors revealed three main categories and six subcategories.

Individual Characteristics. The first category, a precondition context in motivating faculties to do meaningful work, is 'individual characteristics'. The 'individual characteristics' mentioned by the participants included “personality traits” and “autonomous motivation.”

Personality Traits. The personality traits mentioned by the participants included conscientiousness, devotion, proactivity, adaptability, rapport, self-regulation, and self-transcendence. These themes illustrated participants' views of internal facets that shaped their perceptions of meaningful work.

P05: (38 years old, instructor, pre-tenure)

Teaching in EFL classes requires devotion, effort, tolerance, and a passion for work and students. You need to exert empathy with students and help them, both in and outside of classroom hours.

Autonomous Motivation. Autonomous motivation is described as the degree to which people engage in an activity primarily because they find the activity interesting, enjoyable, and challenging (Amabile & Pillemer, 2012). Participants demonstrated their motivation by taking proactive steps in performing impactful activities.

P05: (38 years old, instructor, pre-tenure)

I try to adapt my teaching activities to my students' needs. For example, when I feel collocations are missing from the teaching material, I add collocations as an extra task to our daily work. Fortunately, students find it very helpful.

Organizational Factors. Participants discussed how the overarching cultures, policies, and regulations of higher organizations could affect their ability to provide care for their jobs or demotivate them from making their work meaningful. The most crucial contextual factor, in terms of the meaningfulness of work, was

organizational factors. The concept of organizational factors revealed three subcategories including "organizational culture", "job resources", and "job demands."

Organizational Culture. Participants implicitly defined organizational culture as the positive atmosphere the organizations create in which teachers collaborate to make decisions for their university and students' successes. Relational culture was the dominant organizational culture among Iranian EFL learners. This theme confirms the significance of satisfying the need for relatedness in a meaningful working environment.

P15: (47 years old, associate professor, tenured)

When I was hired as faculty at 30, I was young and inexperienced. I asked my colleagues to introduce the top professors in our field

Job Resources. Based on interview analysis and achieving codes, personal resources, including self-autonomy, competency, adaptability, resilience, and relatedness, have had the highest frequency codes concerning job resources.

P13: (40 years old, instructor, pre-tenure)

I can adapt myself to any situation...I think genuine passion for one's work diminishes the difficulty of the task

Job Demands. Job demand codes derived from participant interviews include physical issues, physiological issues, psychological issues, and time issues concerning teaching, research, and service.

P04: (43 years old, instructor, pre-tenure)

getting tenure is the most demanding part of our job. I have to keep my job so I have to pursue tenure. I have to work for hours, publish papers, and attend conferences. I have to spend time on it.

Students' Factors. Too much concern of faculties for students leads to the category of "Student Factors," which involves factors that contribute to motivating students and students' active engagement in class activities and willingness to cooperate with classmates.

P18: (48 years old, tenure-track, associate professor)

These days students are demotivated. They do not feel the need to learn foreign languages. Besides, they are depressed because of losing hope for

their future

Classroom Observation

Observations were conducted to triangulate the collected data from semi-structured interviews with participants' perceptions of their work. All classes enjoyed safe and non-threatening environments. Most observed teachers seemed to have established supportive and positive relationships with students. Students engaged in various pair or group work, and teachers in both settings demonstrated compassion and patience. Students interacted freely with their teachers. Teachers instructed their students clearly, helpfully, and patiently. Almost all teachers managed their class time effectively, and they demonstrated care for moral and ethical principles in classes. The majority of teachers attempted to motivate students to speak, encourage them to be active, provide feedback, explain, and support. Most of the time, when students needed help, teachers were ready to assist.

Observation 1 (P13): Oral Reproduction of Stories. The teacher encountered technical difficulties with playing MP3 files in the classroom, resorting to playing the audio on their cell phones. Despite this setback, the teacher engaged students by acting out parts of the story and involving them in retelling it. The teacher facilitated vocabulary and collocation learning by writing new words on the board and encouraging students to use them in sentences while summarizing the story. Then, the teacher asked students to share their audio files on WhatsApp. Students actively participated in analyzing the story's elements. Teachers and students demonstrated autonomy in their learning by selecting topics for discussion and choosing learning materials, with several students taking initiative in group activities.

Observation 2 (P05): Developing Reading Skills. Students followed the teacher into the classroom and took their seats. After greeting the students, the teacher distributed a handout and explained the concept of intensive reading, emphasizing its communicative purpose. Students were grouped into threes to predict the content of the text, fostering engagement and enjoyment in the reading class. The teacher provided explanations as needed and assisted students in using sentences correctly. Throughout the observation, students displayed a strong desire for competence and learning collocations, showing determination to overcome language barriers.

Observation 3 (P08): Easy Writing. During a writing session, a student expressed dislike for writing, prompting the teacher to emphasize its importance and reference religious texts to underscore the significance of writing skills. The teacher then assigned a writing topic and patiently checked each student's work, providing compliments on their progress. Peer interaction and collaboration were evident, with teachers and students supporting each other through feedback and encouragement, fostering a sense of relatedness within the classroom.

Discussion

This qualitative study sought to examine the motivational aspects of meaningful work among Iranian EFL university faculty members, delving into basic psychological needs and a mini-theory of SDT, including competence, relatedness, autonomy, and beneficence, as well as contextual factors affecting faculty members. First, diverse motivational themes were identified through interviews and classroom observations. Following this, the concepts outlined in self-determination theory were examined. The results support the SDT framework as a means to understand the motivational aspects of meaningful work (Deci et al., 1985). Additionally, internal motivations consistent with the basic needs outlined in SDT were identified, shedding light on the unique motivational drivers related to meaningful work. The coding process revealed four categories including (a) need for beneficence (serving others), (b) need for competence (becoming a better self), (c) need for relatedness (unity with others), and (d) need for autonomy (freedom). More specifically, this study demonstrated that satisfaction of autonomy, competence, relatedness, and beneficence all emerged as separate predictors of work meaningfulness, which is in line with Martela et al (2018). Findings highlighted 'beneficence' as the most salient and frequent characteristic across other basic psychological needs. These findings suggest that helping others and having altruistic intentions are among the primary goals of EFL faculty members, and their occupational significance is realized when an individual can fulfill these psychological needs. Satisfaction of beneficence was reported by eleven faculty members for a total of nineteen coded occurrences, with subcategories of "fostering of learners' communicative competence," "enhancing collective efficacy," "changing learners' negative mindsets," and "preparing students for their future work." These findings provide support for Allan et al.'s (2019)

research findings that people who perceive their work as helping others experience more intrinsic motivation and meaningfulness in their work. The need for autonomy was the second category highlighted, with subcategories of 'Curriculum customization' and 'self-selected language utilization,' signifying the sense of control to foster a deeper sense of ownership and investment in one's professional activities, leading to increased job satisfaction and motivation. In contrast to the existing literature on self-determination theory (SDT) in professional settings, which often downplays the significance of relatedness needs compared to autonomy and competence needs (Gagne et al., 2005), the findings of the present study highlight the importance of relatedness needs as significant motivational factors.

These findings align with Dik and Duffy's work (2012), emphasizing the importance of relatedness in navigating challenging work conditions and pursuing meaningful work. When faculty members feel connected to their colleagues and the broader educational community, they are more likely to be motivated to work in ways that positively impact others. This sense of relatedness can lead to greater investment in creating supportive and enriching learning experiences for students, as well as collaborating with peers to continuously improve teaching practices, seeking opportunities to mentor and support students, fulfilling their desire for meaningful connections, and contributing to the personal and academic growth of those they work with. Findings also revealed that novice faculty members benefited from autonomy support provided by experienced colleagues, aligning with the view that mentoring benefits mentors by helping them fulfill their own psychological needs.

The unexpected result was that Iranian faculty members, irrespective of their rank, tenure, and age, demonstrated autonomous motivation in engaging in meaningful work. In other words, regardless of their rank or age within the academic establishment, faculty members can be equally motivated to contribute to the well-being of others and find deep meaning in their work that is rooted in their personality traits, particularly the sense of devotion. While younger faculty members articulate their concerns regarding workloads and attainment of tenure, they persist in exhibiting motivation through their dedication to the well-being of their students. These findings confirm Bakker et al.'s (2005) assertion that under demanding work conditions, employees who hold high levels of resources dispose of more supplies and, thus, are more capable of dealing with demands; as a result, they experience

lower levels of exhaustion.

In finalizing the coding process of the contextual factors affecting faculty members' motivation in executing meaningful work, four categories emerged, including: (a) individualistic characteristics (autonomous motivation, personality traits), (b) organizational factors (organizational culture, job resources, job demands), and (c) student factors (engagement). These findings serve as confirmation of the importance of the workplace environment and the mitigation of obstacles, alongside the reduction of demands and augmentation of job resources. Unquestionably, the reduction of barriers correlates with heightened motivation and job meaningfulness.

Conclusion

This qualitative research aimed to explore the motivational sources of meaningful employment among Iranian EFL university faculty members, focusing on SDT basic psychological needs covering beneficence, competency, relatedness, and autonomy. Additionally, the study investigated contextual factors impacting faculty members' motivation to work meaningfully. Through semi-structured interviews and classroom observation sessions, diverse ages, ranks, and tenures of faculty members were represented. The findings revealed intrinsic motivation towards meaningful work among Iranian EFL faculty members irrespective of their age, rank, and tenure. The study also revealed the significance of beneficence as the most salient motivating factors and the need for autonomy was the second category leading to increased job satisfaction and motivation. Additionally, the study identifies various contextual factors influencing meaningful work, including individual characteristics (personality and autonomous motivation), organizational elements (organizational culture, job resources, and demands), workplace environment (autonomy support), and student engagement. These findings are consistent with the Self-Determination Theory, particularly emphasizing the fulfillment of basic psychological needs like beneficence, autonomy, and relatedness. Research findings highlight the interconnectedness of these needs, with competency being achieved through relatedness.

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