

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 What Is Language Teacher Psychology?

Language teacher psychology can be defined as “[w]hat they [language teachers] do, think, feel and believe” (Mercer, 2018, p. 504). It encompasses a diverse range of mental constructs and processes, such as motivation, engagement, self and identity, personality, agency and autonomy, emotions, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, goals, and well-being, among others. One way of thinking about language teachers’ psychology, as proposed by Dörnyei (2009), is to consider three interconnected domains, referred to as a *trilogy of mind perspective*: cognition, affect, and motivation. The domain of *motivation* is associated with wanting and desire; *affect* involves experiences, positive or negative; while *cognition* refers to experiences associated with thinking and reasoning (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Although there are many aspects we could focus on, we have chosen these three core domains of psychology, the trilogy of mind, as our organizing principle for this Element. While we realize this cannot accommodate all areas of psychology, we think that for the scope of this publication, it offers a comprehensible but thorough overview of some of the key areas of language teacher psychology, mindful of the overlap in the domains.

Although psychological constructs and processes have been explored extensively in respect to language learners, the landscape of language teacher psychology remains comparatively under-examined (Dörnyei, 2018; Mercer, 2018). Yet, it is apparent that the psychology of teachers plays a central role in effective language education. First, psychological constructs and processes, such as beliefs, emotions, and motivation, have been shown to impact teachers’ behaviors and teaching practices (Azari Noughabi, Ghonsooly, & Jahedizadeh, 2024; Azari Noughabi, Yang, et al., 2024; Borg, 2003; Elahi Shirvan et al., 2025; Gao & Cui, 2024), which, in turn, have an influence on students’ learning outcomes (Panayiotou et al., 2014). Second, a focus on language teachers’ mental processes can help identify factors that contribute to stress, burnout, and job satisfaction (Acheson et al., 2016; Gregersen et al., 2021), thereby enabling institutions to provide better professional support and enhance teacher well-being and retention. Third, through processes of contagion, it is possible to appreciate how language teacher and learner psychologies are interconnected with emotions and engagement spreading from one to the other (see, e.g., Solhi et al., 2024; Sulis & Mercer, 2025). Fourth, language teachers’ awareness of their own psychology and knowledge about psychology in general can help them understand their strengths and weaknesses, encouraging reflective

practices and potentially leading to effective and focused continued professional development (see Smid et al., in press). As such, researching language teacher psychology can benefit not only the teachers themselves, but it can also help us better understand how they approach their teaching, as well as the possible psychological impact they may have on their learners.

In this Element, we employ a deliberately broad and diverse typology of language teachers. We seek to reflect on those working at different stages of their career trajectories (i.e., preservice, early career, mid career, and late career), those teaching various languages (English as well as languages other than English [i.e., LOTE]), those from diverse backgrounds (linguistically, culturally, and socially), those working in both formal and informal contexts, and those in educational settings ranging through elementary, secondary, tertiary, and adult education. As a preliminary caveat, it is important to acknowledge that the field as a whole tends to exhibit a bias toward certain populations of language teachers, such as teachers of English as an additional language (Lx), preservice teachers, and those working in tertiary contexts. This inevitably leads to the overrepresentation of some groups in our review of the literature and prompts us to call for further research into other populations. While language teacher educators can also be considered as part of the broader population of language teachers (Smid & Mercer, 2025a), we have chosen to exclude them from the forthcoming discussion due to space limitations, the need for a specific focused discussion on their psychologies, and the more limited existent scholarship on their psychologies – although this has seen notable expansion recently (see, e.g., Barkhuizen, 2021; De Costa & Nazari, 2026; Mercer et al., 2025; Rakicioğlu-Söylemez, 2024; Yuan, 2019). As even this brief overview of some of the types of language teachers immediately makes apparent, there is vast diversity among the global language teaching community, and thus, there is much work needed to understand all of their unique profiles and experiences. Our intention is for this Element to serve as a call to action for more research to build on the existing body of knowledge, in order to make language teacher psychology a rich, diverse, and broadly inclusive field of scholarship. We are also mindful of the limits of what we can achieve in this publication but hope it provides a rich enough basis to inspire other lines of research.

## 1.2 The Aims of This Element

Generally, teachers and their psychologies have been neglected within language education, with them typically being viewed at best as a tool or medium for instruction as opposed to valuable stakeholders in their own

right (Dörnyei, 2018). Compared to the expansive body of work exploring language learner psychology (see, e.g., Csizér & Magid, 2014; Dörnyei, 2005, 2009; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Hiver, Al-Hoorie, & Mercer, 2021; Lamb et al., 2019; MacIntyre et al., 2016; Mercer & Williams, 2014), language teachers are notably under-researched and under-theorized. To date, there has been significant work looking at their cognition (see, e.g., Borg, 2003, 2006a; Freeman, 2002, 2020; Kubanyiova, 2012; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015b) and identities (see, e.g., Barkhuizen, 2017; De Costa & Norton, 2017; Menard-Warwick, 2013; Varghese et al., 2016), but other areas of their psychologies, even the most common ones, such as motivation and emotions, remain relatively unexplored. Mercer and Kostoulas's (2018) edited volume on this topic laid down the foundations for the initial scope of work and consideration of diverse teaching populations that could be examined. Thankfully, since then, there has been a notable surge of research in the area including various monographs (e.g., Smid, 2022; A. S. Thompson, 2021; G. Thompson, 2020) and edited collections (e.g., Gkonou et al., 2020; Martínez Agudo, 2018; Smid & Mercer, 2025b) along with an ever-increasing number of journal articles looking at aspects of language teacher psychology beyond cognition and identity. Consequently, we felt it was time to take stock of these developments, connect existent works, identify lacunae, and outline an agenda for further work in the field.

This Element has three main aims. First, we wish to synthesize research on language teacher psychology to provide state-of-the-art insights into the topic. We do so by adopting a trilogy of mind perspective (Dörnyei, 2009), which helps organize aspects of teacher psychology into three domains: cognition, affect, and motivation. Second, the overview of the literature outlines key issues, identifies gaps in current understandings and scholarship, and it also introduces less common constructs, such as flow, collective efficacy beliefs, and attributions, among others. Third, we intend to reflect on practical implications for practitioners, language teacher educators, preservice teachers, and policymakers of the research to date. Each following section includes questions for reflection as well as concrete ideas for future empirical research. As such, the monograph is intended to be of interest for academics, postgraduates, and teacher educators in applied linguistics. Rather than aiming to be a conclusive statement of all work in this area, we hope to open the dialogue and inspire further scholarship and practical interventions in the field to ensure language teachers working in all types of contexts receive the attention and thus support they deserve.

We recognize that our individual backgrounds and psychologies are integral to the development of this Element, which is why we consider it necessary to introduce ourselves. Dávid, a native of Hungary, has a PhD degree in language pedagogy and has a decade of experience working in academia since obtaining his Master's degree in English applied linguistics in 2015. He has research experience both at the pre- and postdoctoral levels in Hungary and Austria, specializing in language learner and teacher psychologies, which is complemented by his practitioner experiences teaching preservice language teachers in Hungary, Japan, and Austria. His immersion in diverse classroom contexts and professional environments and focus on preservice English language teachers' psychology from a trilogy of mind perspective as part of his doctoral dissertation have been particularly defining for his understanding of the topic of this Element. Sarah was born and raised in the United Kingdom (UK) but has lived in Austria for over twenty-five years. She studied French and German originally but then for her Master's switched to training as an English as an Lx teacher. She has worked as both an English as an Lx teacher and teacher educator at the University of Graz in Austria for nearly twenty-five years. Her research has always explored diverse aspects of language learner and teacher psychologies with a focus on their emotional experiences. Her commitment to language education as well as her respect for and appreciation of the lives and experiences of language teachers has been a key drive behind her work on this Element with her explicit hope to create increased awareness of the value of understanding and supporting language teachers in their psychologies.

### 1.3 The Organization of This Element

This Element is divided into five sections. Following this introductory section, each of the main sections is dedicated to one of the three main domains of language teachers' psychology: cognition, affect, and motivation. Although, for compensability and ease of organization, we have separated them out into individual sections, in reality, the topics are intricately interconnected. Throughout the Element, we strive to draw explicit attention to any notable connections between the concepts as appropriate. In Section 2, we examine research on constructs related to language teachers' cognition and metacognition. This includes professional knowledge, beliefs about language learning and teaching, self- and collective efficacy beliefs, attitudes, and metacognition. In Section 3, we critically review research on language teachers' affect and emotions, exploring the diverse possible functions of negative and positive emotions as well as important

related constructs, such as emotional intelligence, emotional labor, and emotional contagion. In Section 4, we look at three types of research on language teacher motivation: choice motivation (i.e., motivation behind entering the profession), engagement in the classroom, and motivation for ongoing professional development through the career span. The closing section is devoted to a discussion on language teacher psychology from a holistic perspective, and we offer a number of concluding thoughts, hoping they might stimulate additional research efforts into this vitally important topic in language pedagogy.

## 2 Cognition and Metacognition

Language teacher cognition refers to “what teachers know, believe, and think” (Borg, 2003, p. 81) about any aspects of their work, including themselves, the teaching and learning process, teachers and students, and the subject matter. This cognitive dimension has been the most prominent focus of existing scholarship on language teacher psychology. Even around twenty years ago, Borg (2003) noted how vibrant this domain was, reviewing more than sixty papers and identifying more than a dozen – often overlapping – concepts relating to language teacher cognition. Since then, the scholarship on language teacher cognition has continued to grow with numerous monographs and edited collections (see, e.g., Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015b; Li, 2020; G. Thompson, 2020).

In this section, we refer to *cognition* as a general umbrella term meaning the cognitive mental domain of language teachers as a whole or also when referring to a specific mental process, such as perception, memory, knowledge, and reasoning (Woolfolk, 2016). The term *metacognition* refers to more complex, higher-order cognitive processes concerned with a conscious awareness of one’s own lower-level cognitive processes as well as their regulation (Haukås, 2018; Hiver, Whiteside, et al., 2021). Examples of metacognitive processes include self-awareness and management of strategies related to teaching (e.g., self-reflection) (Haukås, 2018; Hiver, Whiteside, et al., 2021).

Two more terms that require unpacking are knowledge and beliefs. *Knowledge* refers to an understanding of something assumed to be fact, whereas *beliefs* refer to the assumption that something is true even without evidence, and there may be others who believe differently (Boldrin & Mason, 2009; Skott, 2015). Thus, knowledge is more universal, while beliefs are more personal. As beliefs tend to be linked to personal values, they are also known to be more tightly linked to affect, including

emotions (Barcelos & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2018), and beliefs can vary in the degree of certainty with which they are held (Skott, 2015). A related but distinct construct is *attitude*. Bizer et al. (2006, p. 1) define it as “the mental representation[s] of what we like and dislike in our world” and so it is “a global and relatively enduring evaluation of a person, object, or issue.” Attitudes are much broader in scope than cognitive beliefs and encompass cognitive and affective bases (Ajzen, 2001). As such, attitudes serve as an important link between the current section and the next one on affect and emotions, and, although not purely cognitive in character, we include a short section on them to bridge to the next section.

In this section, we will focus on five key areas of inquiry on language teacher cognition, acknowledging throughout that this reflects a subjective selection from a broader base of literature but aims to provide a solid introductory base. These include language teachers’ (1) professional knowledge; (2) beliefs about language learning and teaching; (3) efficacy beliefs, including self-efficacy and collective efficacy beliefs; (4) attitudes; and (5) metacognition.

## 2.1 Language Teacher Knowledge

Language teachers’ professional knowledge is central to their decision-making processes in practice. What kinds of knowledge this encompasses is constantly changing as a result of technological advancements, new pedagogical and didactic insights, and changing language learning communities, which are becoming increasingly diversified linguistically and culturally. Additionally, what constitutes teaching varies across time and contexts as a result of differing sociocultural norms, expectations, and policies (see Johnson & Golombek, 2020; Larsen-Freeman, 2000). All of these changes offer “new challenges, questions, and resources with regard to the roles, tasks, and contributions of language teachers” (Kubanyiova & Crookes, 2016, p. 117).

Frameworks to evaluate language teacher knowledge exist for in-service and preservice teachers (e.g., König et al., 2016; Newby et al., 2007). For example, Newby et al.’s (2007) work specifies the following categories that necessitate language teachers’ understanding and expertise: knowledge about (1) context, (2) methodology, (3) resources, (4) lesson planning, (5) conducting a lesson, (6) independent learning, and (7) assessment of learning. However, despite the usefulness of such frameworks for prompting reflection and facilitating curriculum design for teacher education

programs, they inevitably often cannot keep pace of changes in the content of language teacher knowledge, and they cannot typically capture specific, localized knowledge. Given the vast scope of what could be included in language teacher knowledge, frameworks may, by necessity, have to be partial in scope and comprehensiveness. As such, some studies have focused exclusively on specific areas of knowledge, for example, content and language integrated learning (CLIL) knowledge (Morton, 2018), technological pedagogical and content knowledge (Cheng, 2017), and teachers' psychological knowledge about self and learners (Smid et al., in press) in order to narrow the scope but offer more depth to a particular domain.

One interesting line of research has investigated how differences in language teachers' knowledge can impact their classroom practices. For example, Richards et al.'s (2013) qualitative case study used interviews and classroom observations with LOTE teachers with varying levels of language proficiency (i.e., linguistic knowledge) in New Zealand. It found that out of the seven measured indicators of effective language teaching, four were enacted by all the teachers regardless of their proficiency and all seven by those with an advanced language proficiency level only. Specifically, teachers with low proficiency failed to provide sufficiently rich language input or improvise when asked about the target language or culture. These findings highlight the importance of cultivating language teachers' proficiency levels to facilitate effective pedagogical practices.

Another line of research has looked into how factors can mediate the relationship between language teachers' professional knowledge and their practices. In respect to preservice teachers, a core impact on their knowledge stems from the numerous hours unconsciously observing teachers in practice, also called *apprenticeship of observation* (Lortie, 1975). Watzke's (2007) longitudinal qualitative study with beginning high school LOTE teachers utilized classroom observations, focus group interviews, and reflective journals and revealed that the participants' practices were more likely to be associated with their prior experiences accrued as a learner of the target language than their knowledge gained through teacher education. This was evident also through their adoption of noncontemporary, outdated teaching techniques, which reflected experiences in their own schooling as opposed to what they had learned during their studies – a finding replicated in other contexts also (see, e.g., Ruohotie-Lyhty & Kaikkonen, 2009). Watzke argues that, to combat this, it is important to facilitate the development of novice language teachers' pedagogical knowledge through effective, positive mentor–mentee relationships.



The relationship between language teachers' knowledge and their teaching practices can also be mediated by features of the socio-contextual setting. One interesting example of this is the role of power relations in the workplace. Xu and Liu's (2009) qualitative case study of a tertiary-level English as an Lx teacher in China demonstrated that the participant's assessment practices could not always be predicted based on their reported knowledge about assessment, as they perceived a pressure to conform to their superior's expectations about grading. The specific cultural context of the study is known to value hierarchical order, which is one possible reason for the unpredictable nature of knowledge in the participating teacher's practices (Xu & Liu, 2009). The work thus also illustrates how socio-contextual factors can impact the ways in which teachers enact their professional knowledge.

In sum, language teachers' professional knowledge is multifaceted, including aspects such as knowledge of language, classroom management, and assessment, among others. It plays a key role in determining the enactment of teaching practices and their effectiveness. However, this link between knowledge and practice is not straightforward, as it is mediated by both personal and socio-contextual factors, which means research and practice need to be conscious that what a person knows may not be acted upon as expected. Despite a solid existent base of research on this relationship on which to build, there remain many other possible avenues for further research. Firstly, there is a need for a better understanding of how language teacher knowledge develops across the career span, how conscious learning interplays with experiential learning while working in the profession, and when, how, and why (or why not) knowledge is enacted in teaching practices. This would help clarify how knowledge is formed, how different types of knowledge are enacted at different stages of a teacher's career, and what specific mediating factors exist between knowledge and practices. Second, in line with the shifting conceptualizations of language teacher cognition (Burns et al., 2015), more studies that adopt sociocultural, sociohistorical, and complexity perspectives would generate more comprehensive, holistic, context- and time-sensitive models of language teacher knowledge (Canh, 2020; Freeman, 2020; Freeman & Johnson, 1998). Finally, as teachers are having to continuously adapt to rapid technological changes, such as the rapid growth and use of digital technologies, including generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools (Moorhouse & Wong, 2025), it would be important to understand how language teachers develop their knowledge about these areas (see, e.g., Redecker, 2017) and how that affects their practices.