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## The Relationship between EFL Teachers' Burnout and their Students' Foreign Language Anxiety

Sara Rezvani<sup>1</sup>  
Mahsa Rezvani<sup>2</sup>

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### Abstract

Effective teaching requires high level of emotional and labor investment compared to other professions, however, teacher burnout and ineffective classroom management and behavior in dealing with students' misbehavior may have devastating effects on students' affective status and learning. As a result, the present study was set out to explore the relationship between the level of EFL teachers' burnout and their students' foreign language anxiety. The participants were 97 English language learners and 15 EFL teachers recruited from three language institutes in Mashhad, Iran. All EFL teachers completed Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) while their students responded to the foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCAS) inventory. The results revealed that teachers' burnout had a positive relationship with students' foreign language anxiety in general, and communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation in students had a significant positive relationship with EFL teachers' emotional exhaustion in particular. Moreover, the results of this study have a number of implications for EFL teachers, educational authorities, and the researchers.

**Keywords:** Burnout, foreign language anxiety, EFL teachers, EFL learners.

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<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Accounting and Management, Islamic Azad University of Mashhad.

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Education, Eastern Mediterranean University of Cyprus

## INTRODUCTION

Burnout as a consequence of long-term occupational stress (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010) has been recognized as a significant factor influencing teachers' practices. Burnout is defined as "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do 'people-work' of some kind" (Maslach & Jackson, 1981, p. 99). Burnout and its depressive symptoms have been reported to be experienced by many teachers across the world (Jennett, Harris & Mesibov, 2003) including in Iran (Hosseini, Fatemi & Raufi, 2014). For example, Khezerlou (2012) reported that approximately 60 percent of Iranian EFL teachers experience burnout in secondary schools.

As a consequence of burnout, the quality of teaching and teacher-student relationship may damage, resulting in mental and emotional detachment of students from school. Indeed, EFL teachers' burnout and their ineffective performances in the classrooms may have devastating effects on students' affective status and learning. More importantly, it may result in the students' foreign language classroom anxiety (Boonrat, Wisessuwan & Tubsree, 2014). Anxious students may avoid participating in the classroom activities and speaking in the classroom. Foreign language anxiety is described as 'a distinct complex construct of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors which are related to classroom language learning (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986). Thus, it is essential to study the extent to which teachers experience burnout, and how it can affect feeling and performance of the students in the classroom.

In order to better understand the consequences of EFL teachers' burnout in the classrooms, this study aimed to investigate the relationship between EFL teachers' burnout and their students' negative feeling, specially anxiety. To this end, the following research question is posed:

Is there any relationship between the levels of EFL teachers' burnout and their students' foreign language anxiety?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Teaching is one of the most stressful occupations, and this stress can effect both teachers and students (Heidari & Gorjian, 2017). More specifically, it may lead to burnout in the teachers or anxiety in the students.

### *EFL Teachers' Burnout*

The concept of burnout for the first time was studied by Freudenberger (1974) and he defined it as a person's lack of enough resources to cope with work demands. Following that, Maslach and Jackson (1981) put forward three dimensions for burnout: (1) *Emotional exhaustion* which refers to the feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by work, (2) *Depersonalization* which refers to the unfeeling and impersonal response towards recipients of care or service, and (3) *Personal accomplishment* which refers to the feelings of competence and successful achievement in one's work with people. To date, numerous studies have indicated that burnout has a significant relationship with work performance (Ashtari, Farhady & Khodae, 2009; Parker & Kulik, 1995). In a study on teachers' burnout and their work engagement, Weinreich (2014) concluded that the teachers who experienced higher levels of burnout were less satisfied with their jobs and had poorer performances in their classrooms.

teachers' burnout may also lead to development of teachers' negative feelings towards their students, and lower tolerance and sympathy with them (Abdolzadeh, 2014; Bryne, 1994). Consequently, it can affect teaching quality and impede establishment of a positive teacher-student relationship and negatively affects students' achievement and their feeling towards the school and classroom (Fivesa, Hammana & Olivarez, 2007; Hosseini Fatemi & Raufi, 2014; Heidari & Gorjian, 2017; Khezerlou, 2017; Williams & Burden, 2007). In this line, the study of Sabanci (2009) showed that Turkish primary school teachers experienced high levels of depersonalization. On the other hand, the findings of some studies such as Kırılmaz, Çelen and

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Sarp (2003), Sadeghi and Khezrlou (2014), and Balay and Engin's (2007) study revealed that teachers suffer from the low levels of depersonalization and they experience the average to high levels of emotional exhaustion

### *Students' Foreign Language Anxiety*

Anxiety is one of the most prominent emotions which has a negative effect on students' output quality and learning process (Boonrat, et al., 2014). Many students feel more anxious and nervous in the foreign language classes compared to other subject areas (Arnaiz & Guillén, 2012). Foreign language anxiety (FLA) is defined as a complex psychological observable fact peculiar to language learning (Young, 1991).

According to Idri (2012), the majority of language students experience some levels of anxiety and most of them suffer from harmful anxiety. Foreign language learners may feel stressed while communicating in L2 language (Brown, 2008; Khawaja, Chan & Stein, 2017). They may experience language anxiety due to different reasons including not being able to express themselves in the target language, feeling the loss of L1 identities in a target language context, and using only English language in the class (Huang, 2014). Moreover, learners' beliefs such as the belief in giftedness for second language learning, less estimation of the competence and the belief that others can learn language better may also provoke anxiety (Cheng, 2001; MacIntyre, Noels & Clément, 1997).

Tran, Moni and Baldauf (2013) distinguished four sources of Foreign language anxiety including the complexity of the foreign language itself, learner-related factors (i.e., EFL learning ability, attitudes to EFL learning, prior negative EFL learning experiences, and other psychological factors), external factors (i.e., family factors, school factors, and contextual factors), and teacher-related factors (i.e., behaviors, and professional skills). Some scholars also pointed to the teacher-related factors as one of the important sources of language learners' anxiety. For instance, Young (1991) highlighted the role of teacher beliefs about language learning and teacher-learner interactions in foreign language anxiety. Also, Boonrat et al. (2014) stated that the teacher's behavior in the classroom influences students' foreign language anxiety.

Students' anxiety may have negative effect on language learning including language proficiency, students' motivation, the quality of communication in the classroom and students' self-esteem (Serraj & Noordin, 2013). Therefore, it is of utmost significance to study the factors contributing to foreign language anxiety of students such as teacher-related factors such as stress, depression and burnout. Due to the scarcity of research on the EFL teachers' burnout and its negative effect in their classrooms in Iran, this study aimed to explore the relationship between the levels of EFL teachers' burnout and their students' foreign language anxiety.

## **METHOD**

### *Participants*

The participants of this study were both teachers and learners recruited from three foreign language institutes in Mashhad, Iran. The teacher participants of this study were 15 EFL teachers (9 females, 6 males), aged from 26-41 years old with at least five-year experience of teaching English. The student participants of this study were 97 English language learners taught by 15 EFL teachers mentioned above. The learners were 51 females and 46 males with the age ranging from 15 to 27 years old. Furthermore, their proficiency level ranged from intermediate to advanced levels.

### *Instruments*

To measure the levels of burnout in the teachers, Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) developed by Maslach and Jackson (1986) was used, while to assess the levels of foreign language anxiety in the students Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCAS) developed by Horwitz et al. (1986) was employed.

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*Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)*: Maslach Burnout Inventory is consisted of 22 items with three sub-dimensions. Nine items deal with emotional exhaustion, 5 items measure desensitization, and 8 items measure personal accomplishment. The items ranged from never to every day on a seven-point frequency rating scale. The scores ranged from 0 point to 132 points, and a score above 40 demonstrates the burnout. The Cronbach Alpha value of emotional exhaustion was .90 and the Cronbach Alpha values of depersonalization and personal accomplishment were .79 and .71 respectively (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) (Appendix A).

*Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCAS)*: This questionnaire is consisted of 33 items on a five-point frequency rating scale. FLCAS has three sub-dimensions, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and communication apprehension. The scores ranged from 33 points (low anxiety) to 165 points (high anxiety). This questionnaire also has a high level of internal reliability and test-retest reliability (Horwitz et al., 1986) (Appendix B).

### *Procedure*

The data was collected over a 2-week period of the spring semester in 2017. The learners and teachers' questionnaires were administered and distributed in the classes by the researcher. The time needed to complete the questionnaires for both the teachers and students was approximately 15 minutes. Then, the obtained results from questionnaires were tabulated and analyzed using SPSS software. Both descriptive (Frequency, Mean, SD) and inferential statistics (Pearson Correlation) were used to analyze the data.

## **RESULTS**

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between ELT teachers' burnout and their students' foreign language anxiety, all the teachers participated in the study completed Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) while their students responded to the foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCAS) inventory. Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of teachers' answers to MBI considering three sub-scales of the inventory.

**Table 1. Teachers' Burnout**

	N	Mean	SD
<b>Emotional exhaustion</b>	15	38.06	2.78
<b>Personal achievement</b>	15	31.33	2.52
<b>Depersonalization</b>	15	15.93	1.90
<b>Total</b>		85.33	7.22

According to Table 1, the mean of teachers' scores in MBI is 85.33 and the standard deviation of teachers' scores is 7.22. Generally speaking, the total scores above 40 in MBI are indicator of burnout (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). More specifically, the mean score of the teachers' burnout in emotional exhaustion sub-scale (38.06) shows the moderate levels of burnout in them, while the mean of 31.33 in depersonalization sub-scale is associated with severe burnout, and the mean of 15.93 represents low level of burnout in personal achievement of the teachers.

According to the results, teacher participants tended to answer with higher frequency to the items dealing with the emotional exhaustion and teachers' depersonalization. For instance:

*Item 6*: I feel frustrated by my work.

*Item 5*: I feel burnout from my work.

*Item 20*: I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally.

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation of students' answers to three sub-scales of FLCA.

**Table 2. Student' Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety**

	N	Mean	SD
<b>Communication Apprehension</b>	97	47.23	2.63
<b>Test Anxiety</b>	97	44.58	3.29
<b>Negative Evaluation</b>	97	44.71	2.73
<b>Total</b>	97	136.53	6.55

In general, the scores of FLCA ranged from 33 points to 165 points and higher scores represent higher levels of anxiety in the students. According to the table above, the mean of the students' foreign language classroom anxiety is 136.53 and the distribution of mean is 6.55. This score shows that the average of the students suffers from approximately high level of foreign language anxiety, especially in communication apprehension sub-scale (47.23). Accordingly, the students agreed more with the items dealing with communication apprehension. For instance:

*Item 9:* I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class.

*Item 27:* I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class.

*Item 32:* I would probably feel comfortable around native speakers of the foreign language.

Table 3 shows the correlations between MBI sub-scales (emotional exhaustion, reduced personal achievement and depersonalization) and FLCA sub-scales (communication apprehension, test anxiety and negative evaluation).

**Table 3. correlation between dimensions of MBI and FLCA**

		<b>Emotional Exhaustion</b>	<b>Reduced Achievement</b>	<b>Personal Depersonalization</b>
<b>Communication Apprehension</b>	Pearson Correlation	.34**	.22	-.25
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.00	.42	.36
<b>Test Anxiety</b>	Pearson Correlation	.03	.16	.16
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.91	.56	.56
<b>Negative Evaluation</b>	Pearson Correlation	.48**	.08	.27
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.00	.77	.33

**\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).**

It can be seen in table above that there are positive significant correlations between the variable of communication apprehension in the students and the variable of emotional exhaustion in their teachers ( $r = .34$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and between the variable of negative evaluation in the students and the variable of emotional exhaustion in their teachers ( $r = .48$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between teachers' burnout and their students' foreign language classroom anxiety. To this end, two instruments (MBI & FLCA) were employed. The obtained results are discussed as what follows.

The results of this study revealed that the average of teacher participants experience high levels of depersonalization. The study of Kirilmaz et al. (2003), Balay and Engin (2007) and Sabanci (2009), in the line with the current study, revealed that turkish teachers experience the low levels of reduced personal accomplishment. On the other hand, the results of Sadeghi and Khezrlou's (2014) study showed that English teachers suffer from high levels of reduced personal accomplishment in Iran.

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Furthermore, the teachers of this study experience the moderate levels of emotional exhaustion. The studies of Kirilmaz et al. (2003), Sadeghi and Khezrlou's study (2014), Balay and Engin (2007) also indicated that teachers experience the average to high levels of emotional exhaustion.

This study also revealed that the teachers participated in this study experience the high levels of depersonalization which is in line with the study of Sabanci (2009), while this result goes against the results of Kirilmaz et al. (2003) and Balay and Engin (2007) who reported that the teachers suffer from the low levels of depersonalization.

Moreover, the results of this study also revealed that the average of the students suffered from approximately high levels of foreign language anxiety, especially in communication apprehension dimension. Furthermore, the Students tended to answer those items of FLCA which associated with fear of speaking and communicating in their English classrooms for example "I start to panic when I have to speak without preparation in language class." And "I get nervous and confused when I am speaking in my language class." This result is consistent with the studies of Brown (2008) and Khawaja et al. (2017) which revealed that students feel stress the most with speaking and communicating in L2 language.

To further investigation of the relationship between the level of EFL teachers' burnout and students' foreign language anxiety, Pearson correlation was used and showed that students' fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension had a positive significant correlation with EFL teachers' emotional exhaustion.

In fact, when a teacher experiences the emotional exhaustion, his productivity may reduce, and it can lead to ineffective teacher-student relationship and students' negative feeling towards language learning (Fivesa et al., 2007; Williams & Burden, 2007; Hosseini, et al., 2014; Heidari & Gorjian, 2017; Khezerlou, 2017). Teachers' negative feeling also effect the students' feeling to the classroom (Hosseini, et al., 2014; Heidari & Gorjian, 2017; Khezerlou, 2017). In such situation, teachers may have a lower tolerance and sympathy with their students and may develop negative feeling towards them (Abdolzadeh, 2014; Bryne, 1994). Thus, it can result in students' anxiety about communication in the classroom, and perception of their language mistakes as a threat.

Furthermore, according to Abdolzadeh (2014), burnout can affect teachers' productivity and engagement in the classroom and it can increase the students' anxiety in the classroom. As Boonrat et al. (2014) explained, the teachers' performances and behaviors influence the students' foreign language classroom anxiety.

### **CONCLUSION**

The results of the study generally indicated that EFL teachers' burnout had a positive relationship with students' foreign language classroom anxiety. More specifically, the students' fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension were associated with EFL teachers' emotional exhaustion. these findings shed lights on the significance of the EFL teachers' burnout and how it can be related to students' feeling toward foreign language classrooms. These findings have a number of implications for EFL teachers, educational authorities, and the researchers. Firstly, the results can increase the awareness of educational administrators about the consequences of their burnout, and the importance of finding effective solution to overcome it. Secondly, the findings of this study can help EFL teachers to diagnose teacher-related factors which effect the language anxiety of students. Thirdly, the findings point to the importance of identifying and applying coping strategies to prevent teachers' burnout so they can serve foreign language learners better.

Furthermore, since the participants of this study were selected from three language institutes in Mashhad, the findings have limited generalizability and should be treated with caution. Moreover, this study utilized only quantitative data collection instruments. It is highly



recommended that future studies focus on larger population and combine both quantitative and qualitative research methods to address the relationship between teachers' burnout and students' foreign language anxiety in more depth.

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