

Considering the relationship between self-assessed language proficiency and Teacher burnout

Farnaz Sahebkhair (Ph.D.)

Assistant Professor of TEFL, Department of English
 Language Teaching, Tabriz Branch, Islamic Azad
 University, Tabriz, Iran
 fsahebkhair@iaut.ac.ir

Abstract

Teachers feeling about their language proficiency have great effect on students. If teachers do not feel confidence in their language proficiency, this can cause burnout and weakness in teaching. However teacher burnout has gotten the attention of many researchers, there is little empirical evidence for the contribution of English language teachers' language proficiency level to their experience of burnout in the Iranian context. Therefore, the present study examined the relationship between English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' self-assessed language proficiency and their experience of burnout. This research indicated that EFL teachers' level of burnout could be reduced through language proficiency. Data were collected from 50 Iranian EFL teachers who were teaching in Kish English Institute in Tabriz, Iran. The Maslach Burnout Inventory - Educator Survey and Iranian EFL Teacher Self-Reported Language Proficiency Scale were used. The correlational analysis revealed that language proficiency had a significant negative relationship with the results of burnout.

Keywords: burnout, burnout questionnaire, EFL, self-assessed language proficiency

1.Introduction

Most of us get stressed at work at some point. Burnout occurs as a result of sustained stress that never subsides. This is due to prolonged periods of intensity and excessive demands on energy, strength and resources. Freudenberg (1970) recognized that professions which involve a strong sense of morality or purpose, and commitment from workers, who sacrifice themselves for the good of others, were most at risk. It's no wonder that teachers and everyone working in education profession are at risk of burnout. Accountability pressures, workload and hours can increase stress and pay remains low in comparison to other graduate roles.

Teachers' well-being and influence has a significant role in students' learning and education. According to Maslach and Leiter (1999), teachers' "well-being and their contribution to student education should be a primary objective of educational leaders" (p. 303). However, less attention has been directed to teachers than learners in English Language Teaching (ELT) studies (Akbari 2008).

Burnout is regarded as a symptom of lack of professional well-being (e.g., Klusmann et al. 2008). Nevertheless, it is revealed that among the professions who provide human and social services, teachers experience the highest levels of burnout (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Furthermore, teacher burnout as an experience of depletion of emotional resources, depersonalization of students, and lack of personal accomplishment has substantial impacts on teachers' effective professional functioning (e.g., Klusmann et al., 2008). Maslach (2003) stated that burnout emerges because of misfit between job demands and individual resources to cope with those demands. Correspondingly, different scholars have studied not only situational factors, such as misbehavior of students and supervisory support, but also teachers' individual factors, such as their sense of self-efficacy and professional knowledge, which can expose them to or buffer them from psychological pressure, stress, and burnout (Dicke et al., 2015; Lauerma & König, 2016). In other words, the more individual resources and competence (e.g., professional knowledge), the better teachers would overcome the difficulties of teaching profession and thus less probable to experience the psychological strain of burnout (e.g., Durr et al. 2014; Lauerma & König, 2016).

In English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) literature, target language proficiency plays a crucial role in teachers' competency and learners' learning. English language proficiency as an aspect of EFL teachers' competency and subject knowledge has generally been identified as one of the most fundamental characteristics of a good English teacher in ESL/EFL education (Braine, 2010). Furthermore, due to the fast spread of English language around the world, non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) have increased vastly in number (Eslami & Fatahi, 2008). On the other hand, several researchers have stressed the importance of high English language proficiency for teachers (e.g., Elder & Kim, 2014) because different aspects of teachers' teaching (e.g., confidence) and learners' learning (e.g., motivation) are influenced by teachers' language proficiency either positively or negatively. Additionally, research has indicated that target language proficiency of EFL teachers can influence their teaching efficacy (Choi & Lee, 2016).

Teachers' target language proficiency has been considered as a significant part of language teacher competence and as an influential factor in student learning (e.g., Andrews, 2007; Richards, 2015). Richards (2015) claims that language proficiency significantly affects how well a teacher can teach a second language. Furthermore, EFL

teachers should possess an advanced level of target language proficiency because they are considered as the main source of input which is an essential

principle for effective instructed language learning (Canh & Renandya, 2017). On the other hand, teachers who are less proficient could encounter difficulties in correcting the errors of language learners (Farrell & Richards, 2007). In a qualitative study in Vietnam, Canh and Renandya (2017) examined the extent to which EFL teachers' target language proficiency and their competence to use it can create learning opportunities for the learners. Accordingly, they concluded that English language teachers should possess not only advanced level of general English language proficiency but also classroom English language proficiency for effective learning and teaching.

Reves and Medgyes (1994) studied 216 native and non-native EFL teachers in different countries. Accordingly, they found out that 84% of the non-native teachers feel incompetent with regard to speaking, listening, writing, pronunciation, and vocabulary. In an investigation in EFL context of Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, Butler (2004) studied elementary teachers' self-perceived level of target language proficiency and the minimum level of proficiency that they felt was necessary to teach English at the elementary school level. Accordingly, the researcher revealed that teachers assessed their proficiency in speaking and writing at lower levels than in reading and listening. More specifically, teachers felt significance gaps between their perceived language proficiency and the necessary level for teaching.

2.Methodology

2.1. Participant

Participants of this study were 50 Iranian EFL teachers in Kish English institutes in Tabriz, Iran. All teachers were native speakers of Azerbaijani Turkish. Persian was their second language and English was their foreign language. 29 were female and 21 were male teachers. Their age ranged between 24 to 55 years old. All teachers had 5 to 10 years of experience in teaching English. 19 teachers had B.A degree in TESOL, 28 had M.A. degree in TESOL and 3 had PH.D in TESOL. All teachers taught headway books at Intermediate and advanced levels.

2.2.Instruments

Research has indicated that insufficient target language proficiency of non-native EFL teachers can contribute to the emergence of various disorders among them (e.g., Swider & Zimmerman, 2010).

Akbari and Eghtesadi (2017) have addressed the role of non-native EFL teachers' target language proficiency in their experience of stress and ultimately burnout. Furthermore, Khani and Mirzaee (2014) argue that subject knowledge and language proficiency can make teachers more stressful to the negative effects of contextual factors which can ultimately expose them to psychological strain of burnout. Accordingly, the current study tries to explore the relationship between EFL teachers' language proficiency and the burnout.

While several attempts have been made to investigate the contribution of EFL teachers' individual characteristics to their burnout experience, few if any studies have stressed and discussed the role of developed or inadequate language proficiency of Iranian EFL teachers as protector against or contributor to stress and ultimately burnout respectively (Akbari & Eghtesadi, 2017; Khani & Mirzaee, 2014). Therefore, this study attempts to address this gap in the EFL context by investigating the relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' language proficiency and their experience of burnout. Hence, the present study aims to find answers to the following research questions:

1.Is there any relationship between EFL teachers' self-assessed language proficiency and their experience of burnout in the Iranian context?

Two instruments were used in this qualitative study. Iranian EFL Teacher Self-report of Language Proficiency was used from (Eslami & Fatahi, 2008) and Maslach Burnout Inventory - Educator Survey (MBI-ES) was used from (Maslach et al. 1996 cited by Eslami & Fatahi, 2008). The Scale for language proficiency had consisted of 12 items. The MBI-ES consists of 22 items which assess the three burnout dimensions of emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and personal accomplishment (PA). The items in both scales were on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (5).

Table 1. *Iranian EFL Teachers' Self-Reported English Proficiency*

Items of English proficiency subscales	Strongly disagree(1)	Disagree(2)	So so(3)	Agree(4)	Strongly Agree(5)	
1. In face-to-face interaction with an English speaker, I can participate in a conversation at a normal speed.						
2.I know the necessary strategies to help maintain a conversation with an English speaker.						
3. I feel comfortable using English as the language of instruction in my English class.						
4. I can watch English news (for example, CNN) and/or English films without subtitles.						
5.I understand the meaning of common idiomatic expressions used by English speakers.						
6. I can understand when two native English speakers talk at a normal speed.						
7. I can understand English magazines, newspapers, and popular novels.						
8. I can draw inferences/conclusions from what I read in English.						
9. I can figure out the meaning of unknown words in English from context						
10. I can easily write business and personal letters in English and can always find the right words to convey what I want to say						
11. I can fill in different kinds of application forms in English such as a bank account application						
12. I can write a short essay in English on a topic of my knowledge						

Table2. *Maslach Burnout Inventory - Educator Survey*

Emotional exhaustion (EE)	Strongly disagree(1)	Disagree(2)	So so(3)	Agree(4)	Strongly agree(5)
1) Feel emotionally drained from work					
2) Feel used up at the end of the workday					
3) Feel fatigued when getting up in the morning					
4) Feel like at the end of the rope					
5) Feel burned out from work					
6)Feel frustrated by job					
7) Feel working too hard on the job					
8) Working with people puts too much stress					
9) Working with students is a strain					
Personal accomplishment (PA)					
10) Can easily understand students' feelings					
11) Deal effectively with the students' problems					
12) Feel positively influencing people's lives					
13) Feel very energetic					
14) Can easily create a relaxed atmosphere					
15) Feel exhilarated after working with patients					
16) Have accomplished worthwhile things in job					

17) Deal with emotional problems calmly					
Depersonalization (DP)					
18) Treat students as impersonal "objects"					
19) Become more callous toward people					
20) Worry that job is hardening emotionally					
21) Don't really care what happens to students					
22) Feel students blame me for their problems					

2.3. Procedure

This study was a qualitative study. There were two questionnaires for assessing EFL teachers' self-assessed language proficiency and their burnout. All the procedure in this study was modified from (Eslami & Fatahi, 2008 ; Nayernia & Babayan, 2019). All teachers were chosen from Kish English Institute in Tabriz, Iran.

2.4. Design

Due to the proposed research question, this study required a correlational method of research. Self-

assessed language proficiency and burnout were two variables that their correlations were calculated.

2.5. Data design

Correlation between the results of two questionnaires was assessed by SPSS version 21.

3.Results

Descriptive indices are provided for the studied variables in Table 1. Of the total studied sample, 38% had a bachelor's degree, 56% had a master's degree, and 6% had a doctorate.

Table 1. Descriptive studies of samples

Education				
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid B.A	19	38.0	38.0	38.0
M.A	28	56.0	56.0	94.0
PhD	3	6.0	6.0	100.0
Total	50	100.0	100.0	

Table 2. Descriptive indices for the studied variables.

Statistics										
	N		Std. Error		Std. Error		Kurtosis		Minimum	
	Valid	Missing	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	of Skewness	of Kurtosis	of Kurtosis	um	um
Proficiency	50	0	41.82	9.075	-.147	.337	-.903	.662	27	62
Burnout	50	0	60.96	9.528	.141	.337	-1.216	.662	43	77

Table3. Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for normalness of data

One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test								
Normal Parameters ^{a,b}			Most Extreme Differences				Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Absolute	Positive	Negative			
Proficiency	50	41.82	9.075	.157	.103	-.157	1.113	.167
Burnout	50	60.96	9.528	.141	.141	-.109	.998	.272

a. Test distribution is Normal.

b. Calculated from data.

Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to check the normality of the distribution of variables. According to the significant levels obtained, it is concluded that the Proficiency and Burnout variables have a normal distribution ($p>0.05$).

Table4 . *Pearson correlation test for showing the correlation between proficiency and Burnout*

Correlations			
		Proficiency	Burnout
Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	1	-.815**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	50	50
Burnout	Pearson Correlation	-.815**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	50	50

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

Pearson correlation test was used to check the relationship between Proficiency and Burnout. The results of the Pearson correlation test showed that there is a significant inverse relationship between Proficiency and Burnout ($r=-0.82$, $p=0.001$).

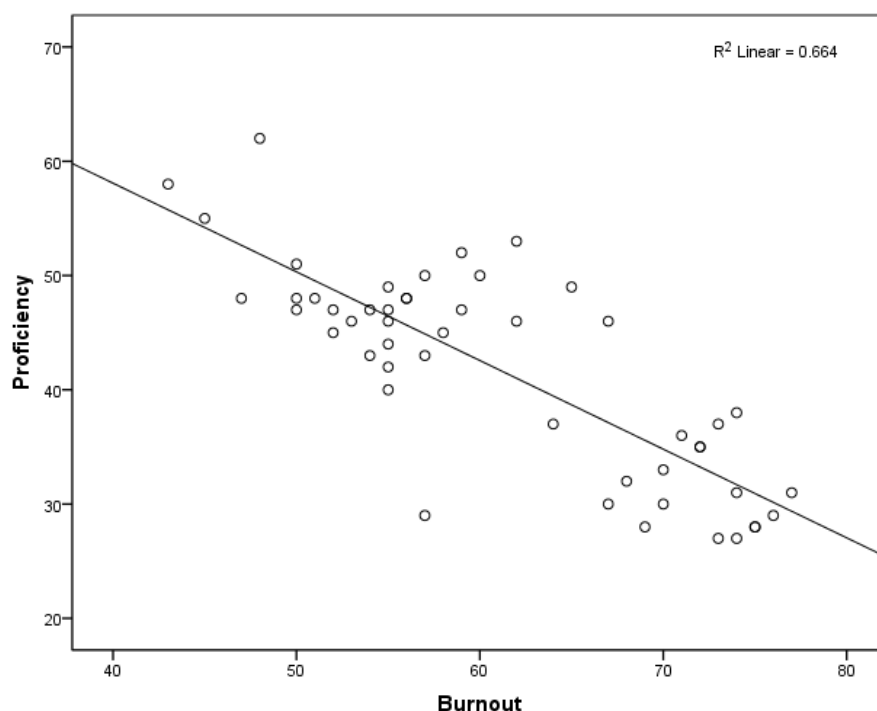


Figure 1. *Pearson correlation test for showing the relationship between proficiency and burnout*

4. Discussion and Conclusion

As individuals, our stress tolerances vary. What we do need is an understanding of the signs of burnout and the proactive measures that can be put in place to avoid it. We need to look after ourselves and those we work with, if we are to keep great teachers teaching. Burnout is considered to have a wide range

of symptoms however, three main signs of the condition are:

Exhaustion-For teachers this may include both emotional and physical exhaustion. Evidence of this may be frustration and irritability, mood swings, impaired concentration, chronic fatigue and insomnia as well as physical symptoms such as increased

illness, palpitations, gastrointestinal pain, headaches and dizziness. Detachment from the job-For teachers this may develop through cynicism and pessimism towards teaching, students, colleagues or the school itself. The person with burnout may prefer to avoid contact and involvement with others, and experience a loss of enjoyment from the things that once brought pleasure. Reduced performance-For teachers this may develop through negative feelings, lack of productivity and poor performance. Evidence of this may be feelings of hopelessness and apathy, low self-confidence, increased irritability with one's self and others, increased time spent completing tasks and apathy to want to do so. Teachers may follow these rules to reduce the signs of burnout: to be aware of their emotions, stress levels and health; Take charge of their wellbeing; Question the impact before taking

on new work; Accept that sometimes they just have to say no; Take mental health days. The results of this study showed that there is a negative relationship between proficiency and burnout. It means those teachers who have higher language proficiency has lower burnout and vice versa. The findings of the current study is based on the data collected in Iranian context as an EFL context and the participants of the current study are limited to those EFL teachers who teach in private language institutes in Iran which are different from high schools and universities with regard to educational objectives and atmosphere. So, further studies should be done in different atmospheres like schools and universities. Furthermore, future studies should use different assessment tools for assessing language proficiency and burnout between teachers.

References

- Akbari, R. (2008). Post-method discourse and practice. *TESOL Quarterly*, 42(4), 641–652.
- Akbari, R., & Eghtesadi, A. R. (2017). Burnout coping strategies among Iranian EFL teachers. *Applied Research on English Language*, 6, 179–192.
- Andrews, S. (2007). *Teacher language awareness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Braine, G. (2010). *Nonnative speaker English teachers: research, pedagogy, and professional growth*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Butler, Y. G. (2004). What level of English proficiency do elementary school teachers need to attain to teach EFL? Case studies from Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(2), 245–278.
- Canh, L., & Renandya, W. A. (2017). Teachers' English proficiency and classroom language use: a conversation analysis study. *RELC Journal*, 48(1), 67–81.
- Choi, E., & Lee, J. (2016). Investigating the relationship of target language proficiency and self-efficacy among nonnative EFL teachers. *System*, 58, 49–63.
- Dicke, T., Parker, P. D., Holzberger, D., Kunina-Habenicht, O., Kunter, M., & Leutner, D. (2015). Beginning teachers' efficacy and emotional exhaustion: latent changes, reciprocity, and the influence of professional knowledge. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 41(1), 62–72.
- Durr, T., Chang, M. L., & Carson, R. L. (2014). Curbing teacher burnout. In P. W. Richardson, Karabenick, S. A., & H. M. G. Watt (Eds.), *Teacher motivation: implications for theory and practice* (pp. 198–213). U.S.: Routledge/Taylor & Francis.
- Elder, C., & Kim, S. (2014). Assessing teachers' language proficiency. In A. J. Kunnan (Ed.), *The companion to language assessment*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, Inc..
- Eslami, Z., & Fatahi, A. (2008). Teachers' sense of self-efficacy, English proficiency, and instructional strategies: a study of nonnative EFL teachers in Iran. *TESL-J*, 11(4), n4.
- Farrell, T. S., & Richards, J. C. (2007). Teachers' language proficiency. In T. S. Farrell (Ed.), *Reflective language teaching: from research to practice* (pp. 55–66). London: Continuum.
- Freudenberger, H. J. (1974). Staff burnout. *Journal of Social Issues*, 30(1), 159–166.
- Khani, R., & Mirzaee, A. (2014). How do self-efficacy, contextual variables and stressors affect teacher burnout in an EFL context? *Educational Psychology: An International Journal of Experimental Educational Psychology*, 35, 93–109.
- Kinman, G., Wray, S., & Strange, C. (2011). Emotional labour, burnout and job satisfaction in UK teachers: the role of workplace social support. *Educational*, 14, 45–56.
- Lauerman, F., & König, J. (2016). Teachers' professional competence and well-being: understanding the links between general pedagogical knowledge, self-efficacy and burnout. *Learning and Instruction*, 45, 9–19.
- Maslach, C. (2003). Job burnout: new directions in research and intervention. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 12, 189–192.
- Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (1999). Teacher burnout: a research agenda. In R. Vandenberghe & A. M. Huberman (Eds.), *Understanding and preventing teacher burnout: a sourcebook of international research and practice* (pp. 295–303). Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Nayernia, A., & Babayan, Z. (2019). EFL teacher burnout and self-assessed language proficiency: exploring possible relationships. *Language Testing in Asia*, 9(3), 4–11.
- Reves, T., & Medgyes, P. (1994). The non-native English speaking EFL/ESL teacher's self-image: an international survey. *System*, 22(3), 353–367.

Richards, J. C. (2015). *Key issues in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S. (2007). Dimensions of teacher self-efficacy and relations with strain factors, perceived collective teacher efficacy, and teacher burnout. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 99, 611–625.

Savignon, S. J. (Ed.). (2002). *Interpreting communicative language teaching: contexts and*

concerns in teacher education. New Haven: Yale University Press

Swider, B. W., & Zimmerman, R. D. (2010). Born to burnout: a meta-analytic path model of personality, job burnout, and work outcomes. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 76, 487–506.