BURNOUT LEVELS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS

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Abstract. Teachers are among the working populations who are at high risk of being affected by burnout syndrome, an emotional stress condition manifested in emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, 1976). The goal of this quantitative cross-sectional study is to examine English language teachers' burnout levels and how the three core components of burnout are related to several teacher background variables such as gender, age, and teaching experience. Data were collected through a demographic form and Maslach Burnout Inventory. The results show that the rate of burnout in EFL teachers is at a medium level in emotional exhaustion and personal achievement dimensions, and low in depersonalization. Our findings also confirmed that gender, age and teaching experience affect EFL teacher burnout.

Keywords: burnout; depersonalization; EFL teachers; emotional exhaustion; reduced personal accomplishment

1. Introduction

Individuals need to work in order to satisfy their basic needs and for this, they spend a significant portion of their lives working. The time they stay at work, regardless of its nature, might negatively affect both their physical and mental health. Consequently, the problems they face can lead to burnout. Teaching is one of the most demanding professions that pose a high probability of burnout occurrence. When compared with other professions, teachers are claimed to experience burnout syndrome frequently (Seferoğlu, Yıldız, & Yücel, 2014). The accumulation of stress typically results from school type, physical insufficiencies and shortages, lack of resources, clashes with administration, institutional features, and demographic factors such as age, gender, or educational status (Durak & Seferoğlu, 2017). Teachers' occupational burnout levels affect their life satisfaction as well as job performance that in turn affects the quality of education they provide (Swider & Zimmerman, 2010).

The origin of the concept of burnout belongs to Freudenberger who defined it as "to fail, wear out, or become exhausted by making excessive demands on

energy, strength, or resources." (Freudenberg, 1974: 159). Maslach and her colleagues (1996) later conceptualized burnout as an intense situation that results from individuals' interactions with people at work and/or the work itself. Burnout is supposed to be manifested in numerous symptomatic ways. The physical health symptoms constitute a feeling of exhaustion most of the time, frequent headaches, change in sleep habits and lack of energy, while behavioral signs include one's agility to anger, sudden irritation, exasperation, difficulty in managing feelings, and being excessively rigid, stubborn, and inflexible (Freudenberg, 1974).

Work-related burnout comprises three dimensions. Emotional exhaustion is related to emotional and physical fatigue, stress, and inability to have a complete recovery. This dimension is said to form the initial stage of burnout and reflects the internal dimension of burnout (Arı & Bal, 2008). Depersonalization means adopting cold, distant, critical and cynical attitudes toward work and people at work (Leiter & Maslach, 1988). The third component, reduced personal accomplishment, involves feelings of insufficiency and results in proneness to devalue what is actually being achieved (Maslach et al., 1996).

According to the burnout model, when individuals are unable to respond to the psychological demands of the occupation and their energy resources no more help them to overcome the pressures of the profession, they first experience emotional exhaustion (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Employees who cannot cope with excessive demands in the work environment become insensitive to the people they serve, which results in depersonalization. When these workers feel that there is a discrepancy between their contribution to the society and the organization and their behavior, they think they have insufficient personal achievements (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). The outburst of teacher burnout appears in the form of unwillingness to teach, create a nice atmosphere, as well as loss of energy and lack of interest in performing the profession (Faraci, 2018).

Teachers who suffer from excessive burnout have more tendency to be irritated, anxious, depressed, contemptuous, and emotionally and physically exhausted. Although the presence of teacher burnout in different contexts is well documented in previous literature (Kokkinos, 2007; Kyriacou, 1987; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010), there is little research on burnout among English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in the Turkish context. Therefore, this quantitative study aimed at investigating EFL teachers' burnout levels and how the three core components of work burnout are related to gender, age, and teaching experience.

A review of the related literature indicates the impact of several demographic characteristics on burnout levels of teachers in a variety of contexts. Some of the factors that cause burnout are listed as age, gender, marital status, number of children, personal expectations and desires, personality traits and performance (Avşaroğlu, Deniz, & Kahraman, 2005). It is suggested that women and men who work in the same profession experience different dimensions of burnout at

different levels. There is a general assumption that burnout occurs more frequently among women as women are believed to be more vulnerable than men in terms of coping with stress (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Previous research also offers support for the tendency of women to suffer more from emotional exhaustion compared to men (Lau, Yuen, & Chan, 2005). Men, on the other hand, are reported to have higher levels of persistent or recurrent feelings of depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment compared to women (Maslach et al., 2001). Teacher age has been shown to correlate consistently with burnout. Earlier studies have indicated that young teachers experience higher levels of emotional exhaustion compared to older teachers because of their high expectations at the initial stages of their job (Antoniou, Polychroni, & Vlachakis, 2006). As for teacher experience, previous research provides inconsistent findings with regard to the effect of teachers' teaching experience on their burnout levels. While one line of research suggests that teachers with less experience generally suffer from higher levels of burnout (Zabel & Zabel, 2001); the other line of research mentions the significance of experience on teacher burnout. It is noted that experience serves as a significant predictor of emotional exhaustion that constitutes the core dimension of burnout (Özdemir & Demir, 2017) in a way that teachers with more experience tend to be more exhausted emotionally. Finally, some studies report that teachers with very little and quite extensive experience are less likely to experience burnout (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 2001). Since burnout is a frequently observed phenomenon, the results of this study may be valuable to all the stakeholders involved in the educational process. For the purpose of this study the following research questions were formed.

1. What are the burnout levels of English language teachers?

2. What are the burnout levels of teachers according to their demographic characteristics?

3. Do burnout levels of English language teachers show a meaningful difference according to gender, age, and teaching experience?

4. To what extent are the sub-dimensions of burnout correlated?

2. Method

The study was based on   a descriptive correlational design in which a self-reported survey was used. Data were collected from in-service EFL teachers with varying experiences from different age groups. Snowball sampling technique was used to reach participants. The data collection instrument was administered to the participants both face-to-face and online. To be eligible, the participants had to be graduates of ELT program.

2.1. Data Collection Instruments

We used a two-part self-report questionnaire that included the following components for the collection of data:

Demographic Background Form: Participants were asked to fill in a demographic form that included demographic characteristics such as gender, age, and total years of teaching experience.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) — Educators Survey (Maslach et al., 1996). Through this 22-item self-report measure, teachers' burnout levels were assessed on a 7-point Likert scale including three different dimensions - Emotional Exhaustion (9 items), Depersonalization (5 items), Personal Achievement (8 items). Emotional exhaustion (EE) measures feelings of being emotionally stressed by the work one performs. Depersonalization (DP) assesses impaired and contorted perception of one's service or instruction. Personal Achievement (PA) measures feelings of competence and successful achievement in one's work. The validity of the questionnaire was ensured by confirmatory factor analysis (Beckstead, 2002). For reliability, the Cronbach's alpha values were found as 0.92, 0.84, and 0.86, respectively (Maslach et al. 1996).

Participants were asked to indicate their preferences on a scale ranging from 0 to 6 as follows: Every day (6)- A few times a week (5)- Once a week (4)-A few times a month (3)- Once a month or less (2)- A few times a year (1)- Never (0). All subscale scores were computed individually by adding the scores of statements for three constructs. Values range from 0 to 54 for EE, 0 to 30 for DP, and 0 to 48 for PA. Higher scores in EE and DP point to more severe levels of burnout whereas high scores indicate greater PA and hence low levels of burnout. The three MBI dimensions were treated separately rather than combining them to have an aggregate score (Maslach, Leiter, & Schaufeli, 2009).

2.2. Data Analysis

Before proceeding to perform parametric analysis, skewness and kurtosis coefficients were used for testing the normality of the scores (Büyüköztürk, 2009). Descriptive statistics indicated normal distribution in EE (.277 and -.749) and PA (-.380 and -.445) constructs. However, DP items have skewed distributions due to univariate outliers. After eliminating nine outliers, normal distribution was achieved for DP (.978 and .142). In the end, skewness and kurtosis values showed normal distribution in all the variables in the MBI.

Descriptive statistics were used to describe EFL teachers' characteristics. Additionally, inferential statistics were performed on the data to test the differences in participants' burnout subscales based on the categorical variables. Lastly, value of the Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to measure the strength of the correlation among participants' reported burnout subscales. SPSS 21.0 program was used in the analysis. Significance level for inferential statistics was defined as $\alpha = 0.05$ (2-tailed). Cronbach's alphas for emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment were found as .88, .76, and .77, respectively, indicating a satisfactory degree of internal validity.

2.3. Participants

Data were collected from 434 EFL teachers working in elementary, middle and high schools in Istanbul, Turkey. The sample consisted of 85% female teachers (N=369) and 15% male teachers (N=65). The age of the teachers varied from 20 to 40. We had to eliminate the teachers in the age-range 41-45 and 46-50 due to limited number of respondents, as inclusion of their data would decrease the power of the analysis. Similarly, the teaching experiences of teachers were grouped into four. Similarly, we had to eliminate the teachers with more than 20 years of experience due to the limited number of respondents in these groups. Detailed demographic characteristics are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic features of participants

Features	Categories	N	%
Gender	F	369	85
	M	65	15
Age	20-25	101	23.3
	26-30	128	29.5
	31-35	146	33.6
	36-40	59	13.6
Teaching Experience	0-5	163	37.6
	6-10	141	32.5
	11-15	94	21.7
	16-20	36	8.3
	Total	434	100

Majority of the participating teachers are in the age range of $31 - 35$ making up 33.6% of the sample. They are followed by teachers in the age groups $26 - 30$ (29.5%) and $20 - 25$ (23.3%) and the age range $36 - 40$ constitutes the least represented group with 13.6%. Teaching experiences also show variation. There is a decline from the least experienced teachers to the most in terms of frequency. Teachers with $0 - 5$ years of experience form the greatest part of the sample (37.6%). Teachers with 6-10 years of experience follow this group constituting 32.5%.

3. Findings

The first research question aimed at understanding the levels of burnout components of EFL teachers. For the interpretation of the data, the scoring criteria suggested by Maslach et al. (1996) was used (see Table 2).

Table 2. Scoring Criteria for Burnout Levels

Burnout Dimensions	Low level	Medium Level	High Level
EE	0 – 16	17 – 26	27 and above
DP	0 – 8	9 – 13	14 and above
PA	37 and above	31 – 36	0 – 30

Minimum, maximum, arithmetic mean, and standard deviation values were calculated for three dimensions of burnout (Table 3). The results showed a moderate level of EE (M=26.32). Low levels of burnout were observed in DP (M=6.49) and PA (M=34.48) dimensions.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for dimensions of burnout

Burnout Dimensions	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.
EE	434	.00	54.00	26.32	11.54
DP	434	.00	23.00	6.49	5.65
PA	434	15.00	48.00	34.48	7.31

However, it is important to note that the mean score of EE (M=26.32) is very close to the score indicating high level (27 and above). In addition, the rather high value of standard deviation implies the variance in teachers' feeling of EE. We can infer that there might be teachers in our data set who are suffering from higher levels of EE.

The second research questions concerned the relationship of gender, age, and teaching experience with the burnout dimensions. To understand the effect of gender on EFL teacher burnout, independent samples t-test was conducted on the data. In Table 4, the results of an independent t-test are given to show the comparisons of the main variables among female and male EFL teachers.

Table 4. Comparison of burnout dimensions in female and male participants

Burnout Dimensions	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	p- value
EE	F	369	26.84	11.64	.026
	M	65	23.38	10.53	
DP	F	369	6.38	5.61	.738
	M	65	7.07	5.88	
PA	F	369	34.43	7.24	.366
	M	65	34.76	7.73	

*$p < .05$

According to the results, female EFL teachers' emotional exhaustion level is higher than male participants, whereas DP level of male teachers is higher than that of female teachers. Regarding PA dimension, both female and male teachers reported similar levels. Independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference between female (M=26.84, SD=11.64) and male (M=23.38, SD=10.53) EFL teachers only in the scores for EE construct; t(432)=2.240, p = .026.

The second variable tested in the study was age. Means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum scores for each component of burnout construct is given in Table 5.

Table 5. Means and Standard Deviations on the MBI

Burnout Dimensions	Age Groups	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
EE	20 – 25	101	27.18	10.52	9.00	51.00
	26 – 30	128	24.40	11.34	2.00	54.00
	31 – 35	146	26.57	12.27	.00	53.00
	36 – 40	59	28.40	11.44	10.00	48.00
	Total	434	26.32	11.54	.00	54.00
DP	20 – 25	101	7.78	6.00	.00	23.00
	26 – 30	128	6.39	5.47	.00	23.00
	31 – 35	146	5.94	5.61	.00	23.00
	36 – 40	59	5.83	5.29	.00	20.00
	Total	434	6.49	5.65	.00	23.00
PA	20 – 25	101	34.47	7.05	16.00	47.00
	26 – 30	128	33.85	7.68	15.00	48.00
	31 – 35	146	34.60	7.49	16.00	48.00
	36 – 40	59	35.61	6.43	19.00	47.00
	Total	434	34.48	7.31	15.00	48.00

It was seen that the age group 36 – 40 scored the highest (M=28.40, SD=11.44) on EE, whereas the teachers in the age group 26 – 30 scored the least (M=24.40, SD=11.34). However, there was no statistical difference among different age groups with reference to EE.

There was a statistically significant difference between groups in DP construct as determined by one-way ANOVA (F (3,430) = 2.51, p = .032). A Tukey post hoc test revealed that DP level of teachers in the age group 20 – 25 (M=7.78, SD=6) was statistically significantly higher compared to the EFL teachers between the ages of 31 and 35 (M=5.94, SD=5.61).

In PA dimension, lower scores indicate a higher level of burnout. In our group of EFL teachers, the teachers in the age group 26 – 30 had the highest level (M=33.85, SD=7.68) of burnout. This group was followed with teachers whose ages range between 20 and 25 (M=34.47, SD=7.05), and with the age group 31 – 35 (M=34.60, SD=7.49) and 36-40 (M=35.61, SD=6.43), respectively. The following chart displays the levels of each burnout dimension on different age groups.
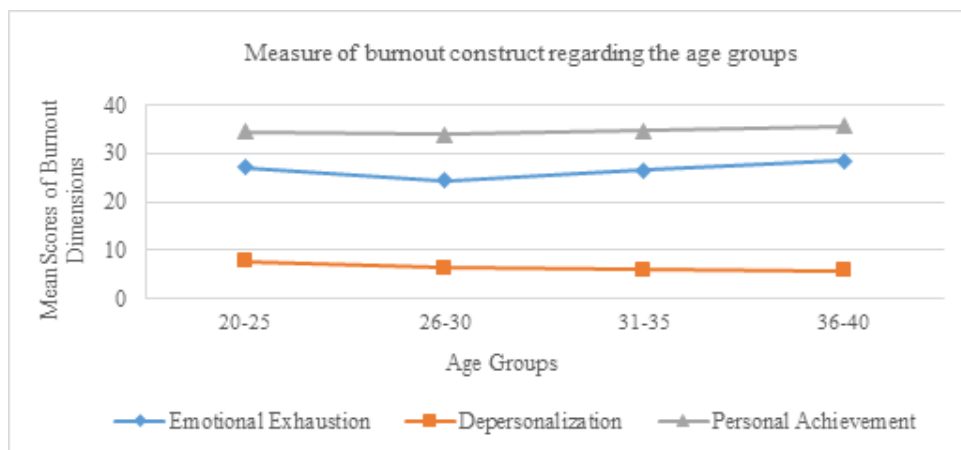
Figure 1. Measure of burnout constructs regarding the age groups

As for the effect of teacher experience on burnout levels of EFL teachers, ANOVA test revealed a significant difference among different experience groups ($F(3,430) = 3.06$, $p = .028$).

Table 7. Descriptive statistics for teaching experience variable

Burnout Dimensions	Experience	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
EE	0 – 5	163	25.82	11.01	2.00	51.00
	6 – 10	141	25.05	11.59	.00	54.00
	11 – 15	94	29.02	12.12	9.00	53.00
	16 – 20	36	26.55	11.40	10.00	48.00
	Total	434	26.32	11.54	.00	54.00
DP	0 – 5	163	7.13	5.81	.00	23.00
	6 – 10	141	5.81	5.29	.00	23.00
	11 – 15	94	7.09	6.23	.00	23.00
	16 – 20	36	4.63	3.98	.00	17.00
	Total	434	6.49	5.65	.00	23.00

	0 – 5	163	34.47	7.17	16.00	48.00
	6 – 10	141	34.41	8.10	15.00	48.00
PA	11 – 15	94	33.61	6.96	16.00	48.00
	16 – 20	36	37.13	4.69	27.00	44.00
	Total	434	34.48	7.31	15.00	48.00

A Tukey post hoc test revealed that EE level of teachers with teaching experience of 11 – 15 years (M=29.02, SD=12.12) was statistically significantly higher compared to the EFL teachers with teaching experience of 6 – 10 years (M=25.05, SD=11.59). Teachers with 11 – 15 years of experience also scored the highest in DP (M=7.09, SD=6.23). The same group of teachers showed similar results in PA, they had the highest score in PA (M=33.61, SD=6.96). Considering that low score in PA indicates high burnout levels, we can say that, teachers with 11 – 15 years of experience suffer the most in all three dimensions of burnout.
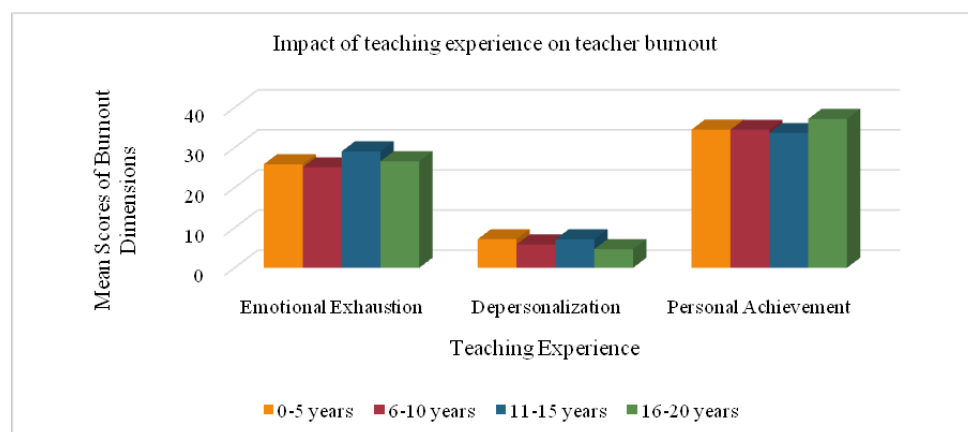
Figure 2. Impact of teaching experience on teacher burnout

Finally, we checked correlations among three constituents of burnout. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was run to measure the relationship among the constructs. Table 8 shows the results of correlation analysis among three dimensions of burnout.

Table 8. Correlations among three constructs

	EE	DP	PA
EE Pearson Correlation	1	.606**	-.365**

DP Pearson Correlation	.606**	1	-.327**
PA Pearson Correlation	-.365**	-.327**	1

** . All correlations were statistically significant at p < 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The matrix of correlations between MBI exhibits a significant rather strong positive correlation between EE and DP (r = .606, p = < .001, n = 434 whereas EE is inversely correlated with PA (r=-.365, p = < .001, n = 434). Similarly, PA has significant negative correlation with DP (r=-.327, p = < .001, n = 434). Yet, the correlation between PA and EE, and PA and DP is not very strong.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Work-related stress is an important phenomenon and there are specific working populations, like teachers who are more likely to be affected by occupational stress and the consequences of it. Changes in teachers' roles and responsibilities and people's expectations from teachers have an impact on how they carry out their roles and fulfill their responsibilities (Seferoğlu et al., 2014). Having to perform well in a multitude of roles puts pressure on the teachers, which in turn can trigger burnout.

Generally speaking, participants of this study reported lower levels of burnout than what was presented in past studies (Hakanen, Bakker & Schaufeli, 2006). EE was the highest dimension contributing to burnout in our sample. In line with Brouwers and Tomic (2000) and Maslach et al. (1996), EE can be viewed as a core component and first indication of burnout. Individuals who experience EE at work are more likely to experience burnout and ultimately they are more likely to leave the profession (Maslach et al., 1996). Therefore, effective intervention strategies should be identified and implemented at this stage to increase both the efficiency and well-being of in-service language teachers.

Regarding gender variable, female language teachers exhibited significantly higher symptoms of burnout than male teachers on the EE subscale, corroborating past findings (Comerchero, 2008; Lau et al., 2005). Yet, we obtained results contrary to studies that report higher levels of burnout experienced by male teachers especially in Turkish context (Durak & Seferoğlu, 2017; Seferoğlu et al., 2014). Lack of consistency in the results obtained regarding gender differences suggests that, each gender may experience burnout at different levels depending on the context.

In terms of age, the age group 36 – 40 scored the highest on EE, whereas the teachers in the age group 26 – 30 scored the least. However, there was no statistical difference among different age groups in reference to EE. There was

a statistically significant difference between groups in DP construct. Teachers in the age group 20 – 25 suffered statistically significantly more from burnout than the EFL teachers between the ages of 31 and 35 do. A similar finding was reported by Seferoğlu et al. (2014) who found that the participating teachers aged 20 – 30 received higher scores than the other age groups in DP. In PA dimension, the teachers in the age group 26 – 30 indicated the highest level of burnout among the sample with reference to PA. This finding was different from the findings reported by Seferoğlu et al. (2014) in whose study older teachers experienced higher levels of burnout than the other age groups.

Finally, teaching experience was also found to affect participating teachers' burnout levels. A significant difference was observed among groups. Our results provide strong evidence that teachers with less teaching experience suffer more from burnout compared to teachers with more experience. This finding is in line with previous studies, which concluded that teachers with less experience are more susceptible to higher levels of burnout (Durak & Seferoğlu, 2017). This finding requires policy makers to provide opportunities for professional development of teachers to enable them to develop effective stress management strategies at the initial stages of the profession.

The correlations among the sub-dimensions of burnout scale signaled a significant positive correlation between EE and DP, and negative correlations between EE and PA as well as PA and DP. Our findings corroborate the findings of Steinhardt et al. (2011) who also found correlations among the burnout subscales, particularly a large correlation between EE and DP in their descriptive study on the effects of burnout on chronic work stress and depressive symptoms.

Limitations and further suggestions. This study has some limitations. There is a possibility that participants may not have answered with full honesty due to social desirability bias (Albert & Tullis, 2013). In our data set, the number of respondents over the age 40 was limited. Teachers with high levels of burnout may have refrained from participating due to already feeling the stress of burnout. Therefore, the results may be different with larger samples that include teachers who are more experienced. This study was limited to understanding the impact of demographic variables on teacher burnout. It is advisable to extend this study to include the relative impact of school context variables such as increased workload, students' misbehaviors, and conflicts with colleagues, and lack of administrative support which will allow the possibility to run regression analysis and establish predictive models.

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