



## Iranian EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Burnout Sources: A Qualitative Study

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### Abstract

This qualitative study aims to investigate the sources of burnout from Iranian EFL teachers' perspectives. To this end, thirty-four Iranian male and female EFL teachers participated in the semi-structured interview to comment on the burnout sources and then rank them in terms of priority. Also, one hundred teachers responded to an online open-ended questionnaire. The coding scheme revealed two external and internal nodes, five themes, and fifteen subthemes. Under the external node lay financial, organizational, and teacher training problems. The internal node involved teachers' psycho-affective traits and personal life affairs. The results showed that external sources outweighed the internal ones. Among the external sources, teachers' low pay, the supervisor's maltreatment, and workload, and among the internal ones, teachers' low problem-solving abilities, low motivation and self-efficacy held high ranks. No one attributed burnout to teachers' gender and age, and almost all participants unanimously criticized the educational administration system of Iran for not providing teachers with the necessary means of burnout recognition and prevention. The study has implications for educational policymakers and practitioners.

**Keywords:** burnout, external sources, internal sources, Iranian EFL teachers, qualitative design

### **Introduction**

Burnout is an important threat to those dealing extensively with people. Freudenberger (1974) coined the term, defining it as “to fail, to wear out, or become exhausted by making excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources” (p. 159). Burnout is a psychological condition that results from an ill-match between the individual and a demanding work environment. Desrumaux et al. (2015) point that a person’s work climate plays a “critical role in matters of occupational health” (p.186), while Freudenberger (1974), who first introduced the concept of burnout, recognized the importance of personality characteristics.

Lens and de Jesus (1999) emphasize that “burnout is a more important problem in the teaching profession than in many other professions with similar academic and personal requirements” (p. 194). Borg (2006) points to the special characteristics of language teachers, and Hammadou and Bernhardt (1987) propose that “being a foreign language teacher is in many ways unique within the profession of teaching because in foreign language teaching the medium is the message” (p.302). In addition, the EFL context provides English language teachers with a difficult and challenging situation, which can affect the quality of their teaching and put them at high risk of mental and emotional exhaustion (Byram, 2013). Madigan and Kim (2021) assert that burnout could be a highly important agent making teachers’ think of quitting their careers.

Maslach and Leiter’s (1999) model of burnout explains precursors and consequences of teacher burnout and includes characteristics of the task, teacher, and context. Jackson and Schuler (1983) divide the main teacher burnout factors into organizational (those relating to the administration of the educational setting) and personal (i.e., individual traits) components. Likewise, Schwab, Jackson, and Schuler (1986) identify background, personal, and organizational aspects as the three general sources of teacher burnout. Durr, Chang, and Carson (2014) categorize the sources of burnout into three organizational, individual, and transactional levels. Transactional factors consist of interactions between individual factors and organizational and/or social factors that might be realized by such teacher traits as self-efficacy, attitude, and beliefs. Mahmoody- Shahreabaky (2019) claims that the transactional level has gathered momentum in education by offering

much fodder for research on burnout with a focus on interactional or contextual variables in educational settings. According to Maslach and Leiter (2005, as cited in McCormack et al., 2018), the sources of burnout include one or more of the factors of workload (too much work, insufficient resources), control (micromanagement, lack of influence, accountability without power), reward (insufficient pay, acknowledgment, or satisfaction), community (isolation, conflict, disrespect), fairness (discrimination, favoritism), and values (ethical conflicts, meaningless tasks).

The issue of teacher burnout has been addressed by researchers at macro and micro levels (Sabokruh, Razmjoo, and Dehghan, 2019). At the macro level, for example, Fiorilli, Albanese, Gabola, and Pepe (2017) studied governmental regulations, the financial state of the profession, and the societal value given to the job. At the micro level, factors like institutional applications, the influence of work hours, or student pressure have been investigated (e.g., Kazerouni & Sadighi, 2014; Soodmand Afshar & Doosti, 2015, cited in Sabokruh, Razmjoo, & Dehghan, 2019). Many studies have attempted to detect the sources of burnout within the teaching profession, some focusing on personal factors (Gold & Roth, 2013) and others on environmental factors (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Considering the personal contributors to burnout, some studies have addressed the relationship between burnout and demographic variables like age, gender, years of experience, and level of education (Mukundan & Ahour, 2011); others have focused on such teacher characteristics as teachers' attitudes towards perceived stressors (e.g., Bermejo et al., 2016) or personality traits (e.g., Schaufeli, 2003). Rashtchi and Mashhoor (2019) indicated that extroverted EFL teachers were less prone to burnout. Atmaca (2017) found that self-efficacy had an important role in EFL teachers' burnout. Motallebzadeh, Ashraf, and Yazdi (2014) showed a reverse relationship between EFL teachers' self-efficacy and burnout. Zhu et al. (2018) found that teacher self-concept via teacher self-efficacy influenced burnout. Seifalian and Derakhshan (2018) showed a significant correlation between the self-efficacy of teachers majoring in EFL and burnout but no correlation for those whose major was not EFL. Some studies have indicated a negative relationship between teachers' burnout and their self-efficacy, self-

confidence, motivation, self-esteem, productivity, professional engagement, and job satisfaction (Larrivee, 2012; Gold & Roth, 2013; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014; Marek et al., 2017; Herman, Hickmon-Rosa, & Reinke, 2018, as cited in Mahmmody, 2019). Nayernia and Babayan (2019) argued that EFL teachers' language proficiency could reduce burnout. Addressing the problem-solving abilities, Marony (2005) concluded that those individuals who do not perceive themselves as effective problem-solvers may be more vulnerable to affective disturbances, especially the burnout syndrome. A substantial number of studies point to cognitive impairment as a cause of burnout (Savic, 2015).

Environmental factors have been shown to play a greater role in teacher burnout, prompting some researchers to investigate the organizational and administrative areas. Vandenberghe and Huberman (1999) noted that the role of teaching could be attached theoretically to the workplace ecology. Capone, Joshanloo, and Park (2019) found that collective efficacy, school climate, and organizational justice were significantly associated with burnout. The pedagogical stressors of working with lots of students at the same time (Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings, 2012), interpersonal conflict with students, parents, or colleagues (Unterbrink et al. 2012), discipline problems and disruptive student behavior, time pressure, work overload, lack of student motivation or attention, and value dissonance (how much teachers and students share the same values or norms) (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017) put teachers under great pressure. Van Droogenbroeck, Spruyt, and Vanroelen (2014) investigated the role of workload and interpersonal relationships at work in predicting teacher burnout. As Maslach and Leiter (2016) maintained, burnout is the result of prolonged interpersonal stressors at work.

Although teacher burnout has been widely researched for around 50 years, it is an extensively dynamic concept, and its investigation entails culture-specific research at a given period of time. As Kovacs (2010) puts it, the reasons for teacher burnout seem to differ from one culture or educational system to another culture or educational system.

This study attempts to investigate the sources of EFL teachers' burnout from Iranian teachers' perspectives. Burnout research has frequently relied on quantitative procedures and measures, including highly structured rating

scales with fixed response options (Ghasemi & Hashemi, 2011). A shortcoming of quantitative studies, according to Dornyei (2007), is that their exploratory capacity is limited; that is, they average out the data; thus, failing to do justice to a diversity of participants' subjectivity. Qualitative research, on the other hand, is "an effective way of exploring new, uncharted areas" (Dornyei, 2007, p. 39). Hence, the need for qualitative studies through interviews in which teachers can open up and freely and naturally verbalize their feelings about problems leading to job resentment is much felt. This study is an attempt to bridge this gap by addressing Iranian EFL teachers' views on the sources contributing to their burnout.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The data were collected from two sources: a face-to-face semi-structured interview and an on-line open-ended questionnaire containing one single question. The participants of the interview were thirty-four Iranian EFL teachers (18 female and 16 male teachers) within an age range of 20-40, who were living in Mashhad, Iran, and teaching English at schools, universities, or institutes. They had BA, MA, and Ph.D. degrees with 1 to 21 years of experience as permanent or hourly-paid teachers. Due to ethical considerations, the participants were identified by pseudonyms. Appendix 1 displays the participants' information in detail. As for the online questionnaire, one hundred EFL teachers (46 males and 54 females) expressed their ideas as openly as possible to teacher burnout causes in response to an open-ended question.

### **Instrumentation**

Two instruments were used in this study: one questionnaire and one interview. The researcher interviewed the participants to elicit their ideas on the sources of EFL teachers' burnout. The questions developed for the face-to-face interview were broad enough to allow the interviewees to elaborate on the topic and pave the way for any new emergent questions (Appendix 2). For validity purposes, four assistant professors helped the researcher by reviewing the questions and making any modifications. In addition to the interview, 100 EFL teachers responded to a single, general, and open-ended

online question that addressed the sources of Iranian EFL learners' burnout and job resentment. The question was: *In your opinion, what are the contributors to Iranian EFL teachers' burnout?*

### **Procedure**

The researcher made contact with English teachers in Mashhad by joining English teachers' groups in Telegram and WhatsApp social networks and inviting them to participate in the research. She managed to interview 34 EFL teachers, but not wanting to miss the variety of teachers' opinions, she asked those who were not willing to take part in the interview to respond to a general and open-ended online questionnaire containing one single question on the sources of Iranian teachers' burnout in as much detail as possible. Getting access to a fairly large number of teachers via the internet made the researcher avail herself of this opportunity. To this online question in the questionnaire, 100 teachers volunteered to respond.

The face-to-face interviews were conducted where the participants felt comfortable, e.g., their classrooms, their homes, the university libraries, or public meeting places such as a café or park. The duration of the interview sessions ranged from half an hour to one hour and a half in Persian. The participants' consent was also obtained for the audio-recording of their voices. The researcher started with friendly conversation to push the participants through the interview questions in a stepwise fashion. Having collected the demographic information of the participants, she started with some introductory questions to encourage and motivate them (e.g., questions like whether they have ever mentally or psychologically felt disturbed or exhausted due to the teaching career, or whether they have observed this condition in their colleagues). The main questions involved six content questions focusing the participants' attention on identifying the causes of Iranian EFL teachers' burnout, followed by a seventh challenging question, requiring them to rank these causes in order of priority (This seventh question is referred to as 'Ranking Question' in this study and serve as an independent source of data reflecting the relative importance of burnout contributors). To reduce the participants' uncertainty and confusion and help them think more systematically, the researcher divided the burnout sources into internal (biological, psychological, and cognitive) and external (organizational, cultural, and environmental) factors. Drawing upon findings

presented in the literature, she posed her questions in such a way as to elicit the participants' opinions about different variables. After interviewing 34 teachers, the researcher realized that the data collection process had reached some saturation (i.e., the views had become more or less similar), so she did not find it necessary to use additional teachers. The process of collecting data lasted over seven months, after which the transcribed data were translated into English and categorized into themes and sub-themes. To establish the reliability, the second researcher of the study also coded the interview transcripts, using the first researcher's coding template, and then checked the amount of similarity and difference between the two coding schemes (Dörnyei 2007). A large proportion of agreement was found between the schemes.

The same procedure was also applied to the online study. One hundred teachers' written responses were collected, around 50% of which were in Persian. These responses were translated into English. The participants pointed to 242 causes of burnout, which were classified into 45 topics; then, all the responses were coded, categorized, summarized, and expressed in percentage.

## **Results**

As noted earlier, the study made use of an interview and an online investigation. The participants' views were coded and categorized into themes and sub-themes. The results are presented separately.

### **The Interview**

Seven content questions were used in the interview. In order to reduce the participants' confusion of the topic; the researcher cued them to think of the teacher burnout in terms of internal factors (e.g., teachers' psycho-affective status) and external factors (organizational and administrative). Thus, the ideas were arranged in the form of a hierarchy, at the top of which there were two external and internal nodes covering five main themes and fifteen sub-themes as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
Content analysis of semi-structured Interview by classifying into nodes, themes, subthemes

1. External sources			2. Internal sources			
1. Financial	2. Organizational	3. Teacher Training	1. Personal Status	2. (Cognitive- socio-affective) traits		
Low payment	<b>1. Supervisor</b> Supervisor's misbehavior Supervisor's interference in teachers' teaching Dictatorial atmosphere Interference in teachers' scoring Not caring about teachers' timesheet Intolerant of criticism	<b>1. Academic training</b> Lack of or insufficient needs analysis of teachers to identify problems and find solutions Lack of or insufficient teacher training programs like seminars and conferences Inefficient teacher evaluation No cultural requirements to hire and train up-to-date teachers	<b>1. Personal-family challenges</b> Poor relationship among family members Dysfunctional family <b>2. Demographic problems</b> Age and its effect on person's decisions Teachers' experience (i.e., teachers with longer experience are more tolerant of adverse conditions.	<b>Cognitive</b> Insufficient or ineffective problem solving ability due to rate of intelligence and mental processing ability No creativity	<b>Social</b> Teachers' ineffective management ability/skill Low sociability Teachers' personality (being too extroverted or introverted) Closed-mindedness No or low risk-taking capacity to deal with occupational problems Shyness	<b>Affective</b> Low self-efficacy No or low motivation No or low self-regulation skills Negative attitude toward working conditions Little interest in teaching Little professional aspiration Low job satisfaction Lack of self-awareness
Economic problems due to sanctions	<b>2. Students' Parents</b> Parents' lack of proper respect for teachers Parents' distrust of teachers' efficiency Parents' insufficient knowledge about objectives of teaching English	<b>2. Non-academic training</b> No scheduled friendly meetings for teachers No discussion meetings with experienced teachers	<b>3. Health problems</b> Physical problems Psychological problems Paucity of recreational and refreshing activities Insufficient sleep Insufficient exercise Insufficient leisure time			
No financial stability/security in Iran	<b>3. Workload</b> Crowded classes Excessive paperwork Students' different proficiency levels insufficient time to cover lessons Teaching /non-teaching related-workload Teachers' two or multiple jobs		<b>4. Personal knowledge</b> Teachers' inadequate English proficiency and inadequate knowledge of foreign language pedagogy			
Problems due to bankruptcy of monetary institutes	<b>4. Educational facilities</b> Classroom /office environment Light/Curtain /whiteboard/					



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Marker  
Home to  
work  
distance

**5. Colleagues**

No or few  
peer  
reflective  
dialogues

No or little  
cooperation  
or  
coordination

Jealousy  
among  
colleagues

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Psycho-affective traits and personal status (such as the unique characteristics of an individual in the organization like biological characteristics, domestic life and family relations, health, and knowledge level) were the two main themes underlying the internal node. Financial problems (any monetary problems like low payment, economic problems due to sanctions imposed on Iran, lack of financial stability/security, and financial abuse of teachers due to bankruptcy of institutes), organizational sources (those factors that are unique to the educational system in which they work as educational facilities, workload, and relationship with colleagues, students and their parents) and teacher training problems were three main themes subsumed under the external node. The external node accounted for % 63 of the burnout causes, while % 37 was related to the internal node. Low teacher payment, as the most important financial problem, organizational problems, and teacher training problems comprised %14.11, % 44.7, and %3.5 of the external node, respectively. Under the internal node, the cognitive-social-affective problems and personal status constituted %25.8 and %11.7 of the teacher burnout contributors, respectively. Table 2 demonstrates the percentages of the contributors identified by the participant teachers.

**Table 2***Analysis of semi-structured interview of burnout sources by percentage*

#170 topics for causes												
<b>External sources</b>			<b>Internal sources</b>									
<b>#106</b>			<b>#64</b>			<b>%</b>						
<b>%62.35</b>			<b>37.64</b>									
<b>Financial</b>			<b>Personal status</b>									
# 24			# 20									
% 14.11			% 11.76									
<b>Organizational</b>			<b>Cognitive-socio-affective traits</b>									
#76			# 44									
% 44.7			%25.88									
			<b>Cognitive</b>			<b>Social</b>		<b>Affective</b>				
reward	Security	Workload	parents	material	colleagues	intelligence	Problem-solving	ability	self-esteem	interest	Self-efficacy	motivation
#3	#3	#4	#4	#5	#5	#9	#10	#25				
%3.9	%3.9	%5.2	%5.2	%6.25	%6.25	%20.4	%19.7	%56.8				
						#2	#2	#3	#4	#4	#4	#5
						%1.17	%1.17	%1.76	%2.3	%2.3	%2.3	%2.95
<b>Teacher training</b>												
# 6												
%3.529												

The first content question of the interview addressed the teachers' definition of teacher burnout. To define the concept, the teachers used such ideas as a decline in the work quality, tiredness, low motivation, unwillingness to work, disability to work, internal fatigue, no job satisfaction, poor aspiration, and low state of the profession, which showed some familiarity with the concept.

To the second question (*Have you ever felt like you are beginning to develop burnout?*), 24 teachers (70%) responded they had somewhat experienced it, while 9 teachers' (26%) reply was negative. 31 teachers (97%) said that they had met teachers complaining of burnout, and in response to the emergent question of what factors had led to their feeling of burnout, most of them (40%) replied that internal and external factors were equally important; 28% attached more importance to external factors, while 19% considered internal factors more important. 7% of the participants pointed to either internal or external conditions as the only cause of burnout. One participant (Farid) said that it is not right to separate internal and external factors as they are interrelated.

In response to the third question (*What external or environmental factors, in your view, are effective in the development of the teacher burnout?*), most of the teacher participants replied that their low pay was the greatest

potential contributor to burnout. A participant (Raha) said, “we are overworked and underpaid. Many teachers are not officially employed and are paid on an hourly basis, and this hourly payment is really meager”. 20.5% of the participants related burnout with educational facilities (e.g., poor lighting, lack of equipment or defective equipment, lack of refreshments), and 17.5% regarded administrative deficiency and supervisor mistreatment (e.g., authoritarian management and inattention to teachers’ views, plans, and criticisms) as the primary potential for burnout. They believed that such management had caused them to lose their autonomy; thus, negatively affecting their self-concept. A teacher (Nooshin) commented, “the manager’s dictatorial attitude and maltreatment and his ignoring teacher autonomy has really brought me to the verge of job resentment”. 62 % of the teachers attributed burnout to such organizational factors as workload (e.g., excessive paperwork, crowded classrooms with different proficiency levels), student misbehavior, lack of job security and promotion, lack of teacher training programs, and deficient parent-school relationship (e.g., parents’ undue interference in some educational affairs)

Regarding the fourth question (*What internal factors (cognitive, socio-affective traits) do you think can contribute to the teacher burnout?*), 88.9% of the participants believed in the strong relationship between the teacher self-efficacy and burnout, and 56% assigned central importance to the teachers’ intelligence and problem-solving abilities, motivation, and sociability (19%). Other factors mentioned by the participants included interest in teaching (3%) and such personality traits as teachers’ personality, adaptability, optimism, hope, patience, easygoingness, and purposefulness, each accounting for 3%. Mahtab said, “intelligent people are good at doing everything; they do not get confused and react sensibly in adverse situations”. Ali commented, “human functioning is closely dependent on their mental processing”. 5.6% of the participants, however, did not believe in problem-solving ability as the major factor, holding that most educational problems could not be controlled by individuals and were more associated with organizational and administrative incompetence. Some participants pointed to teachers’ personal problems (domestic life, physical and mental health, family relationships) as highly effective internal factors. Faramarz

got as far as saying that, “even a teacher’s failure to take regular baths could lower his/her morale, inadvertently affecting their behavior at work”. Shahrouz said, “not having enough time to spend with family or friends or having difficult and dysfunctional family relations is likely to make a teacher prone to burnout”.

As for the fifth question (*Do you think that biological factors of sex and age can contribute to teacher burnout?*), 50% of participants believed that gender was not an important factor in causing burnout; 30% of participants asserted that female teachers were more affected by burnout because they were more vulnerable to adverse conditions. A participant (Salman) said that women, children, and old people were typically more prone to any offensive or aggressive behavior in society or family. Kati noted that burnout was more common in female teachers, as their payment was lower than men, and they almost always had to teach at low-grade levels, which are more demanding. 19% thought that burnout was more likely to occur in men than women because, as Mehrdad noted, men were typical breadwinners in Iran, and the low payment of male teachers, being grossly disproportionate to high inflation, had put them under too much strain. Concerning the age variable, 63% of the teachers believed that age had hardly any effect on burnout. Soroush said, “As a supervisor, I observe some young teachers who are drastically depressed while there are old and middle-aged teachers who are energetic and are constantly thinking of improving their styles and methods”. 37 % believed that old teachers were more likely to experience burnout due to long-lasting work, while 13% believed that young teachers were more sensitive to educational problems. Interestingly, all female teachers thought that they had experienced some degree of burnout, while very few male teachers pointed to such experience. Both male and female teachers believed that gender and burnout were hardly related.

To the sixth question (*Do you think that the language teaching profession in Iran has the potential to play a role in the development of burnout?*), 40 % of the participants responded that teaching English in Iran was problematic, particularly due to flawed governmental policies. Fataneh said that most teachers had to teach in crowded classes with low payment and no insurance. Homa believed that the educational system in Iran did not follow

proper standards in teaching English. Horam regarded that Iran was a foreign language learning context where learners had hardly access to natural input outside the class. 15% of participants believed that there was no difference between teaching English and other subjects in developing burnout. 19% of teachers believed that English teaching was wonderful and interesting not only for students but also for the teachers themselves, making them more tolerant of educational or societal deficiencies.

Concerning the last question (*How do you rank the sources of burnout in terms of their importance?*), 56.25% believed that external sources were more important than internal ones, and 43.75% thought the other way round. Within the external sources, low teacher payment (37.47%), organizational problems (a total of 21.8%) of supervisors' misbehavior (9.3%), work facilities (6.25%), workload (3.1%), and reward or promotion (3.1%), respectively, were salient, while troubled relationships among colleagues and the bad conduct of students accounted for an insignificant percentage. Many teachers complained about authoritarian management as a major daunting and demoralizing factor. Within the internal node, cognitive-social-affective traits (34.37%) and personal status (9.3%) stood out. Of the cognitive and socio-affective factors, teachers' low self-efficacy (15.5%), low motivation (12.4%), and low sociability (3.1%) were the leading contributors. Among the sources related to personal status, dysfunctional family relations, along with having additional jobs (to make both ends meet) and health care problems, outweighed other sources. Totally, 81% of the teachers (26 out of 34 teachers) somehow considered low teacher payment a cause of job resentment, and 37.47% considered it the primary cause, while low self-efficacy, low motivation, and supervisor misconduct held the next ranks. As Rojin noted, "As soon as you utter the word 'payment' to a group of teachers, you will be flooded by a myriad of comments in complaints of teachers' livelihood". In fact, the participants' response to this last question serves as a summary of burnout sources and their relative importance from Iranian EFL teachers' perspectives (Table3).

**Table 3***The Analysis of the Ranking Question in the semi-structured interview*

External sources				Internal sources		
56.25%				43.75%		
<b>Financial</b>				<b>Cognitive-socio-affective traits</b>		
Low payment				34.37%		
				<b>affective</b>		<b>social</b>
				motivation	Self-efficacy	sociability
				12.4%	15.5 %	3.1%
<b>Organizational</b>				<b>personal status</b>		<b>9.3%</b>
21.8%				Family problem		Personal health
reward	workload	facilities	supervisor	3.1%		3.1%
3.1%	3.1%	6.25%	9.3%			
<b>Teacher training</b>				<b>%0</b>		

### The Online Question

The written online responses of 100 EFL teachers to the general open-ended question (*What do you think are the possible contributors to Iranian EFL teachers' burnout?*) were also arranged and coded in a hierarchy. Accordingly, external and internal nodes were at the top, with the former, including financial, organizational, and teacher training problems, and the latter, including cognitive- social-affective problems and personal-life problems. The results are summarized in Table 4.

**Table 4***The analysis of the responses to the on-line open-ended question by percentage*

External sources (#26/45)		Internal sources (#17/45)		Others(#2/45)
57.7%		37.7 %		4.4%
# 242 items		# 118 items		# 2 items
<b>Financial</b>		<b>Cognitive-socio-affective traits</b>		<b>Others</b>
# 47 ( %19.4)		#47(%19)		#3(%1.23)
		affective		
		Teacher's negative attitude	Lack of motivation	
		% 2.06	% 4.9	
<b>Organizational</b>		<b>Personal status</b>		
#118(%48.76)		#14(%5.78)		
No insurance	workload	Teacher's low knowledge		
% 4.54	% 5.7	% 1.65		
<b>Teacher training</b>				
#9(%3.71)				

The external node, according to the respondents, constitutes 57.7% of the problems contributing to teacher burnout, while the internal node accounts for 37.7% of the problems. In total, 242 problems, organized into 45 categories, were cited by the participants as the possible causes of teacher burnout. Organizational sources (%48.76), financial problems with a focus on low salary (19.4%), and teacher training problems (%3.7) comprise the external factors. At a glance, under the organizational node, workload (% 5.7), lack of insurance (% 4.54), dissatisfaction with textbooks (% 3.71), monotonous work (% 3.3), lack of administrator support (% 3.3), shortage of educational facilities (% 3.3), and bad supervisor behavior (% 2.89) were the first six important items, respectively. Problems related to rewards and insufficient teaching skills accounted for 1% of the respondents' ideas on the causes of teacher burnout. These findings are, to some extent, aligned with those of the interview in the priorities given by the participants to the burnout sources. Under the Internal factors, teachers' cognitive-social-affective traits comprised %19 with motivation as the primary source (% 4.9), and teacher attitude accounted for % 2.06. The personal status, the other theme under the internal node, amounted to %5.78, with the teachers' limited English proficiency as the major factor (% 1.65).

The results of the two data collection procedures (the interview and online questionnaire) were also compared for the purpose of discovering their degree of correspondence and enhancing the study transferability (Table5).

**Table 5**

*Comparing the findings from the semi-structured interview and online question*

Instrument	Node	Theme Percentage	The most frequent subtheme
Ranking question	External %56.2	Financial %37.47	payment
		Organizational %21	supervisor
		Teacher training %0	-
	Internal % 43.75	Cognitive-socio-affective traits %34.37	affective (self-efficacy/motivation) social(sociability)
		Personal status %9.3	Personal -family problem
Semi-structured	External	Financial	payment

interview	%63	%14.11	Organizational	supervisor
			%44.7	Teacher training
Online open-ended question	Internal %37	%25.8	Cognitive-socio-affective traits	affective(motivation/ self-efficacy) cognitive(problem-solving) social(sociability)
			Personal status	teacher knowledge level
	External %57.7	%11.76	Financial	payment
			%19.4	Organizational
Internal %37.7	%3.71	Teacher training	CPD/ to be up to date/TTC	
		%19	Cognitive-socio-affective traits	affective (motivation)
		%5.78	Personal status	teacher knowledge level

According to Table 5, external problems outweigh the internal ones, and among these external problems, low payment, supervisor, and workload were salient. Teacher training problems (i.e., lack of sufficient programs for enhancing teachers' knowledge and skills) made an insignificant contribution. Within the internal domain, teachers' self-efficacy, motivation, and sociability were of more significance.

### Discussion

Since burnout, as noted by Kovacs (2010), is, to a large extent, culturally determined, this study set out to investigate the sources of Iranian EFL teachers' burnout by interviewing a sample of such teachers and gathering one hundred Iranian teachers' online responses to a general open-ended question. The results of both data collection methods were organized into the hierarchical structure with an external node, encompassing financial, organizational, and teacher training problems, and an internal node, involving cognitive-social-affective traits and personal status problems. The external node with a low payment, supervisor, and workload and the internal node with teacher's self-efficacy, motivation, problem-solving, and sociability were prominent.



The results indicated that the external problems (administrative and organizational) outweighed the internal sources (teachers' psycho-affective problems) (Table 6).

**Table 6**

*An overall view of the relative importance of external and internal sources of burnout*

Ranking question (Q#7)	External sources %56.2	Internal sources % 43.75
Semi-structured interview	External sources %63	Internal sources %37
On-line Open-ended question	External sources %57.7	Internal sources %37.7

This finding is in line with Talmor, Reiter, and Feigin (2005), who defined teacher burnout as a devastating organizational syndrome. It is also in agreement with Atmaca (2017) and Cephe (2010) in Turkey, and Pyhältö, Pietarinen, and Salmela-Aro (2011) in Finland, who found the working environment and organizational problems as the major sources of teachers' dissatisfaction. In the Iranian context, Roohani and Dayeri (2019) pointed to some external sources as major contributors to Iranian EFL teachers' burnout. The present study also indicated that among the external sources, Iranian teachers' low salary was prominent, corresponding with the finding reported by Jackson and Schuler (1983) and Schwab and Iwanicki (1983) in the United States, Gu and Chen (2010) in Taiwan, and Nadeem et al. (2011), Ghenghesh (2013), Kazerouni and Sadighi (2014), and Salehi, Taghavi, and Yunus (2015) in Iran, all pointing to teachers' low salary as an important determining factor leading to job resentment. Moghaddas and Zakeri (2012), as well as Sabokruh, Razmjoo, and Dehghan (2019), insisted on the need for giving more attention to Iranian EFL teachers and solving their financial problems as a protection against burnout.

The results indicated that the organizational or administrative deficiencies of the superintendent mistreatment (i.e., the superintendents' lack of flexibility in management and their adherence to stringent rules and

reluctance to take the teaching staff's ideas or plans into account) and poor working conditions (e.g., heavy workload, insufficient or flawed language teaching equipment, low level of job security and lack of insurance, insufficient reward and promotion, inadequate curriculum and planning for teaching, and lack of peers reflective dialogue) stood in high ranks. Training problems (academic, non-academic) were assigned a small percentage of contribution to the teacher burnout by the participants involved in the study. Among the administrative sources, supervisor and workload were more salient. In this regard, Dorman (2003) in Queensland, Domenerh and Gomez (2010) and Manssero et al. (2006) in Spain, Hakanen, Bakker, and Schaufeli in Finland (2006), Mukundan and Khandehroo (2010) in Malaysia, Droogenbroeck, Spruyt, and Vanroelen (2014) in Belgium, El Helou, Nabhani, and Bahous (2016) in Lebanon, and Roohani and Dayeri (2019) in Iran showed workload as an important cause of teacher burnout. Sabokruh, Razmjoo, and Dehghan (2019) argued for a balance between work and life to save time for attending to personal affairs as a protection against Iranian EFL teachers' burnout.

One factor found in the present study to be of a prominent role in promoting teacher burnout was the relationship between the superintendent and teaching staff (i.e., lack of friendly rapport between them, superintendent's authoritarian behavior, and lack of shared decision scheme). Roohani and Dayeri (2019) pointed to EFL teachers' lack of autonomy in making decisions about pedagogical affairs as crucial to their job satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Loughran and Kelchtermans (2006) maintain that teachers who are given a high degree of autonomy in running their classrooms can readily and creatively cope with adverse conditions in the workplace. Jackson (1983) suggests that having the right to contribute to the decision-making process minimizes job-related stress. Likewise, Maslach (1978) reports data indicating that burnout rates are lower where the supervisor or management could build up a good rapport with the staff. Some other research studies stressing the prominent role of supervisory support and establishing a positive social environment in educational institutions are Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011), Hakanen, Bakker, and Schaufeli (2006), Roohani and Dayeri (2019), Lopez et al. (2008), and Schwab, Jackson and Schuler (1986).

Teachers' workplace, as another organizational factor, was also found to be important in promoting their sociability. Ahn's (2016) interesting finding in a Japanese context showed that teachers' rooms (shokuin shitsu) provided a zone for the development and maintenance of collegial relationships and exchange of information among teachers, having some bearing on teachers' disposition and morale. The quality of working relationships among colleagues was also identified by Byrne (1999) as a fundamental predictor of burnout. Similarly, some other studies found interpersonal relationships among supervisors, teaching staff, colleagues, students, and parents to be related to teachers' emotional exhaustion (e.g., Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999; Marzano & Heflebower, 2012; Mendler, 2014; Van Droogenbroeck, Spruyt, & Vanroelen, 2014). Ratcliff et al. (2010) found that the teacher-student relationship and student misbehavior were a teacher obsession, serving as a great job stressor. Moiiinvaziri and Razmjoo (2015) pointed out that this unfriendly relationship caused depression in students, too. Simões and Calheiros (2019) showed that teachers' self-efficacy and teacher-student closeness mediated burnout in Portuguese teachers. Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2011) reported that teachers' relationships with their colleagues and students' parents were significant predictors of burnout. Akkerman and Meijer (2011) indicated that teachers' poor relationships with their colleagues could be extremely depressing. Avanzi, Schuh, Fraccaroli, and Dick's (2015) study in an Italian context reported the mediating influence of social support and collective efficacy on teacher burnout.

Within the organizational framework, teacher training had some, though not significant, effects. Some research has demonstrated that most EFL teachers do not receive proper preparation for their future occupation (Kashef, 1999; Nunan, 2003; Peacock, 2009; Pham, 2001, as cited in Moiiinvaziri & Razmjoo, 2015). Sanford (2017) in California indicated that hiring more paraprofessionals and providing material resources and increased opportunities for mentorship and professional development are important factors contributing to job satisfaction, especially for novice teachers. This finding is aligned with that of the present study in teachers' emphasis on the provision of academic teacher training programs (e.g., teachers' needs analysis, seminars, TTCs, conferences) and non-academic

teacher training programs like scheduled friendly meetings among teachers or between new and experienced teachers. Moivaziri and Razmjoo (2015) emphasize the importance of teacher training by claiming that the teacher's insufficient knowledge or proficiency can also lead to student burnout, and, as Lewis and Riley (2009) put it, "a faulty education harms student physically, psychologically or educationally" (p. 418). Nezakat-alhossaini and Ketabi (2012) and Moghaddas and Zakeri (2012) asserted a need for changes in different aspects of a teacher training program in Iran due to its low quality and practicality.

With regard to the internal sources, which were divided into the teachers' cognitive-affective traits and their domestic life affairs, the former stood out. This is in line with the finding by Pishghadam and Sahebjam (2012) in Iran, Unaldi, Bardakci, Dolas, and Arpaci (2013) in Turkey, and Garcia, Munoz, and Ortiz (2005) in Spain, who reported a relationship between personality types and burnout. Among the affective-cognitive factors, teachers' self-efficacy, motivation, problem-solving ability, sociability, self-esteem, and creativity were, according to the participants, the most influential. However, teachers' low self-efficacy and motivation (within the affective domain), as well as low the problem-solving ability (within the cognitive domain) and sociability were of more significance.

The salience of self-efficacy and motivation, as found by this study, is in agreement with a number of studies. Ghasemzadeh, Nemati, and Fathi (2019) found EFL teachers' self-efficacy as a strong predictor of burnout. Seifalian and Derakhshan (2018), Skalvik and Skalvik (2010), and Evers, Brouwers, and Tomic (2002) showed that there was a significant correlation between the self-efficacy and burnout of teachers whose majors were EFL. Some studies indicate that teachers with a higher sense of efficacy show more resilience to the hardships of the teaching profession (e.g., Wheatley, 2005; Wang, Hall, and Rahimi, 2015). Azeem (2010) pointed out that low self-efficacy made teachers come up with deficient plans and show inappropriate behavior. Zee and Koeman (2016) maintained that connections between the teacher self-efficacy and burnout dimensions were independent of the influence of teachers' career stage, grade level, or country. As for motivation, Fernet, Guay, Senécal, and Austin (2012) in Canada, and Berghe et al. (2014) in Belgium showed a negative relationship

between motivation and burnout. Rouhani and Dayeri (2019), in Iran, found a negative relationship between the autonomous forms of motivation and burnout among EFL teachers. Concerning the teachers' cognitive states, the current study demonstrated that their problem-solving ability and sociability played an important role in coping with adverse conditions. The results corresponded with the findings of the studies by Khezerlou (2013), who found that problem-solving was the dominant dimension in predicting DP and reduced PA parts of burnout in Iranian English teachers. The present study found only a small percentage of importance for the teacher's personal and domestic life as a contributor to burnout.

Regarding the effect of gender as a biological factor, all participants believed that there was no relationship between gender and burnout. The participants' beliefs in the lack of a relationship between gender and burnout are in line with the findings of the study by Kabunga (2020), who showed a prevalence of burnout among university academic staff in Uganda, while it was not gender-related. This result is further supported by Beer and Beer (1992) and Çoğaltay, Anar, and Karadağ (2017), showing no evidence of gender differences in burnout levels among teachers. In contrast, Decker and Borgen (1993) found that females were more likely to suffer from burnout than males, and Teles et al. (2020) showed that Portuguese female teachers at higher education institutions exhibited higher levels of emotional exhaustion. It seems that to come up with hard and solid evidence on the relationship between gender and burnout, the research domain needs more replication studies.

By and large, according to the findings of the study, external factors outweighed internal factors. Although the external and internal sources affecting teacher burnout are interrelated, they were mostly the external sources that shaped the participant teachers' attitudes and feelings in educational settings in Iran, making them resistant or vulnerable to burnout. This could be partly because in Iran, and perhaps many Middle East countries, teachers often tend to locate problems and solutions outside, and of course, no teacher training programs are set up to make teachers recognize and improve their inner state. Among the external sources, teachers' low payment, superintendents' lack of or insufficient concern for

incorporating teachers' ideas and plans into the curriculum, and workload stood out, and regarding the internal factors, the psycho-affective traits of self-efficacy, motivation, sociability, and problem-solving ability were the most important contributors to burnout, respectively. EFL teachers' level of proficiency or knowledge of the subject was the next determining factor. Teachers' problems with domestic life and difficult family relationships were variables within the personal status theme that accounted for some amount of, though a low percentage, teacher burnout.

The message or pedagogical implication that comes through is loud and clear. It is time for the educational system of Iran to wake up to the issue of teacher burnout. Most Iranian teachers, including English teachers, work long hours for very low pay. This is especially true for many teachers teaching English at schools, language institutes, and some universities. Being overworked and underpaid, Iranian teachers often turn into clock watchers and tend to work perfunctorily without interest, which, in turn, negatively affects their teaching quality. This holds especially true for language teaching, which requires great passion and enthusiasm. The educational system of Iran desperately needs competent and professional managers who can build a friendly rapport with teachers and between teachers. As for the working conditions and environment, most Iranian English teachers complain about the shortage of facilities (language teaching equipment and labs) and disproportion between the number of students and educational space, especially at schools and high schools. Since many schools refuse to employ additional staff, English teachers often have to grapple with overcrowded classes. In such classes, they often fail to apply the desirable communicative methodology and have to simply focus on grammar and accuracy for examination purposes, as language education in Iran is mostly examination-oriented. Such a monotonous and imposed way of teaching is often a source of demotivation for the English teacher, and potentially, a source of burnout. The educational administration of Iran was criticized by the participants involved in the study for not providing them with necessary information about stress management. Gold (1985) argues that raising teachers' awareness of stress and providing them with a series of programs for effective coping mechanisms could help them better resist stressful situations. Policymakers should understand the process and

procedures for developing an environment that limits burnout levels and the ways to cope with it. Although some inherent cognitive and affective features like the teacher's problem-solving ability and self-efficacy can help them cope with burnout, many teachers, according to the participants of the present study, are deeply influenced by external administrative factors, which if properly attended to by educational authorities, the problem of burnout and job resentment may be, to a large extent, alleviated.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1

Teachers' information participating in the semi-structured interview

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Experience	Degree	Type of employment	Age	Burnout		
						EE	DP	RPA
1.Farahnaz	Female	1 years	MA	Hourly-paid	26	High	Aver	Aver
2.Zari	Female	5	BA	Hourly-paid	22	Aver	High	Aver
3.Allale	Female	7	Ph.D. student	Hourly-paid	34	High	Aver	Low
4.Susan	Female	10	Ph.D. student	Hourly-paid	33	High	Aver	Aver
5.Fariba	Female	1	BA	Hourly-paid	22	High	Low	Low
6.Faride	Female	2	BA	Hourly-paid	22	High	Aver	Aver
7.Armita	Female	15	BA	Hourly-paid	33	High	High	Low
8.Zeinab	Female	4	BA	Hourly-paid	20	High	High	Aver
9.Natash	Female	12	Ph.D. student	Hourly-paid	26	Low	Low	Low
10.Mahtab	Female	3	BA	Hourly-paid	20	Aver	Aver	High
11.Fataneh	Female	21	BA	Hourly-paid	40	Aver	Aver	Low
12.Mahsa	Female	10	MA	Hourly-paid	36	Low	Aver	Low
13.kati	Female	4	BA	Hourly-paid	23	High	High	Low
14.Forogh	Female	15	Ph.D.	Hourly-paid	40	High	Low	Low
15.Nooshin	Female	4.5	BA	Hourly-paid	25	Aver	Aver	Low
16.Farahnaz	Female	3	BA	Hourly-paid	33	Aver	Aver	Aver
17.Homa	Female	12	BA	Hourly-paid	31	Aver	Low	Low
18.Rojin	Female	10	MA	Hourly-paid	28	Low	Aver	Low
19.Behzad	Male	5	MA student	Hourly-paid	23	High	Low	Aver
20.Parviz	Male	6	MA student	Hourly-paid	26	Low	Aver	Low
21.Salman	Male	1	BA	Hourly-paid	20	Aver	Aver	Low
22.Soroush	Male	3	BA	Hourly-paid	24	Aver	Aver	Low
23.Horam	Male	10	BA	Hourly-paid	32	Aver	Low	Low
24.Raha	Male	3	BA	Hourly-paid	33	Aver	Aver	Aver
25.Ali	Male	3	BA	Hourly-paid	24	Low	Low	Low
26.Bahman	Male	10	MA	Hourly-paid	30	Aver	Aver	Low
27.Hojat	Male	13	BA	Hourly-paid	33	Low	Low	Low
28.Arshia	Male	3	BA	Hourly-paid	22	Aver	Low	Low
29.Akbar	Male	18	BA	permanent	37	Aver	Low	Aver
30.Mehrdad	Male	1.5	BA	Hourly-paid	23	Low	Aver	Low
31.Shahrouz	Male	6	MA	Hourly-paid	25	Aver	Aver	Low
32.Faramarz	Male	10	MA	Hourly-paid	27	High	Aver	Low
33.Mohhammad	Failed	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

34.Fahime	Failed	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
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## Appendix 2

### The interview questions

Greeting	Name	Gender	Experience	Degree	Age
1. How do you define teacher burnout? 2. Have you ever felt like you are beginning to develop burnout or Have you ever met teachers complaining of burnout? (If yes, describe their feelings and behavior. 3. What environmental (external) factors, in your view, are effective in the development of the teacher burnout? 4. What internal factors (cognitive, affective and communicative or social ) do you think can contribute to the teacher burnout? 5. Do you think the biological factors of sex and age can be contributing factors in the teacher burnout? 6. Do you think that language teaching profession in Iran has the potential to play a role in the development of burnout? 7. Would you rank the sources of teacher burnout in order of importance? Are there any other things you want to say about the teacher burnout?....					
Probe	Questions You frequently refer to the word..... what do you mean by this? Why it is so important? Could you clarify it more?				

### Biodata

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