

## Exploring the Relationship between Burnout and Critical Thinking Skills among Iranian University Professors Teaching TEFL

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### ABSTRACT

The profession as a teacher involves experiencing a number of challenges which naturally lead to emotional tiredness and lack of reward, technically known as burnout (Colomeischi, 2015). The goal of the present study was to investigate the relationship between burnout and critical thinking ability. To this end, a sample of 40 professors of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) filed at a number of universities in Iran was chosen. Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was employed to assess the participants' burnout level, which is specifically evaluated by measuring three subscales of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal achievement. In addition, the measures of the participants' critical thinking skills were obtained via Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal (WGCTA). The Pearson correlation coefficient analysis indicated that emotional exhaustion and depersonalization strongly and negatively correlated with critical thinking ability. However, a strong and positive relationship was found between personal achievement and critical thinking skills.

**Key words:** Burnout, Critical Thinking Skills, Depersonalization, Emotional Exhaustion, Personal Achievement

### INTRODUCTION

In any job, the people who are involved may experience plenty of distress. The term emotional burnout is mostly used to describe the emotional condition of the people providing professional assistance for their customers in an emotionally rich atmosphere (Madaliyeva, Mynbayeva, Sadvakassova, & Zholdassova, 2015). This alarmingly growing problem occurs when the people can not defeat the pressure of such vocations (Kabadayi, 2015). In this regard, particular attention must be paid to the professional activity of teachers as their occupation requires special emotional tension, high mental workload, intensive concentration, and constant contact with students and colleagues all of which lead to anxiety and mental stress (Satyaldina, 2015).

On long term, the anxiety that teachers experience can affect teaching quality, so they are in an urgent need of immediate attention (Chan, 2010; Colomeischi, 2015; Kovacs, 2010). Unless burnout is eradicated, the adverse outcomes such as loss of productivity, teachers' and students' demotivation, and lack of effective rapport between the teacher and learners are set to follow (Küçüköglü, 2014). Burnout may also damage the teacher's mental state. A teacher who suffers from the symptoms of emotional distress and exhaustion can not be fully eager or ready to enter the realm of education challenging and reforming long-established knowledge critically. Hence, burnout is likely to hamper the teacher's critical thinking skills (Entezari & Ghafournia, 2016).

### Burnout

Schwarzer and Hallum (2008, p.154) defined burnout as "a chronic state of exhaustion due to long-term interpersonal stress within human service profession". Maslach and Jackson (1984) stated that burnout is a construct consisting of three subscales of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, affecting individuals who work with people and are exposed to emotionally-charged social situations. First, a person experiences emotional exhaustion when s/he feels overextended in his/her job. Such an emotional over-drain subsequently leads to indifferent attitudes toward the workplace. In other words, the person shapes a kind of emotional and cognitive distance which turns him/her to an unengaging worker deliberately ignoring his/her commitment toward the other people. Finally, for a person feeling emotionally tired and alien with others, dissatisfaction with the job, loss of self-competence, and lack of accomplishment are set to follow.

In an educational setting, burnout appears when teachers feel emotionally cold, personally detached, and ignorant of students' individual features. Burnout can decrease education quality, raise mismatch among teaching workforce, and result in failure in the teaching profession (Madaliyeva et al., 2015).

Grabbing the attention of many scholars, the syndrome of burnout has been the focus of plenty of research so as to identify factors which trigger it. Madaliyeva et al. (2015) investi-

gated the ways through which burnout can be decreased via special training targeting the improvement of emotional competence. Dividing the participants into two groups, the researchers employed the corrective training program only in the experimental group. The result demonstrated that such training including mental self-regulation can be effective in reducing the negative outcomes of burnout. In a study done by Dogan, Lacin, and Tural (2015), social support and life satisfaction are confirmed to decrease the level of burnout which people experience.

In many studies, the association between burnout and individual characteristics has been explored. Entezari and Ghafournia (2016), for instance, explored teacher burnout in Iranian university professors teaching TEFL regarding the projection of critical agency. The professors were categorized into three groups regarding whether they project their originality in the class setting: the professors in the first group were mainly repeaters of the teaching materials; the second group included those who were dominantly concerned with paraphrasing and simplifying the concepts, and those in the third group projected their own identity via presenting their own original ideas. They came to this conclusion that burnout is lower in professors whose dominant teaching practice is critically judging the realm of knowledge, thoughtfully pondering over the current intellectual framework, and challenging the concepts. On the other hand, those who are just concerned with recapping or paraphrasing the concepts of the book experience higher burnout.

Colomeischi (2015) explored the association between burnout and emotional intelligence and personal traits. It was found that burnout negatively correlate with emotional intelligence, life satisfaction, and personal characteristics. Specifically, teachers who suffer from burnout are less extrovert, emotionally stable, and autonomous. Such a similar result is also gained by Pishghadam and Sahebjam (2012) who demonstrated a significant relationship between burnout subscales and personality traits and emotional intelligence.

Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) investigated the relationship between teacher self-efficacy, burnout subscales, and job satisfaction. The result indicates that low self-efficacy results in the feeling of burnout. A negative correlation is also found between job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, yet it positively correlated with self-efficacy. Achieving similar results, Brouwers and Tomic (2000) recommended self efficacy-directed intervention to treat teachers suffering from burnout. Schwarzer and Hallum (2008) went one step further to assert that age may mediate the relationship between self-efficacy and burnout. It means that such a relationship is more evident for the teachers who are not older than 40 years old.

Ghonsooli and Raesi (2012) confirmed that there exists a weak relationship between creativity and emotional exhaustion while creativity rather strongly correlates with reduced personal accomplishment. Overall, it is concluded that there exists a fairly weak relationship between burnout and creativity.

Hosseini and Raoufi (2014) differentiated between teachers who teach in public and private sectors in terms

of the level of burnout they may suffer from. It was found that two groups differed significantly considering their emotional exhaustion. Institute teachers demonstrated higher emotional exhaustion than public school teachers. Nonetheless, the teachers in the groups did not differ significantly regarding their emotional exhaustion and depersonalization.

Up to now, many studies, some of which were presented here, explored the association between the subscales of burnout and many personal traits and constructs. However, the possible interaction between burnout dimensions and critical thinking skills has not been comprehensively investigated.

### Critical Thinking Skills

In a world dominated by social, political, and ethical challenges, to approach the problems and issues rationally and scientifically and to minimize the mistakes are getting more and more complicated. Indeed, in the modernizing world, the ability to think critically is undeniably crucial. Taylor and Mackenney (2008) defined critical thinking ability as the synthesis of skills consciously applied by a thinker when s/he wants to analyze a body of data. These skills include evaluating assumptions, avoiding emotional reasoning, drawing inferences, and producing arguments (Fisher, 2001; Piaw, 2010). Sarigoz (2012) identified it as a reasoning-based thinking comprising the skills as reasoning, analyzing, problem solving, creative thinking, and accurate judgment.

Baysal, Arkan, and Yildirim, (2010) believe that any qualified teaching syllabus aims at promoting critical thinking ability. Shallow thinking does not suffice to train individuals who can envision the future in the rapidly changing world. Undoubtedly, it is the responsibility of educational systems to teach learners to develop such skills. However, unless there are some teachers who have already acquired the ability to think critically, expecting learners to fulfill such an aim is unfair. In this regard, the role of the teacher efficiently dealing with the demands of the information and technology era has also changed. (Birjandi & Bagherkazemi, 2010; Grosser & Lombard, 2008; Stapleton, 2011). Tuncer and Ozeren (2012) also asserted that we need teachers equipped with the ability to critically ponder over well-established knowledge. This skill can help them cope with the challenges in the teaching practice.

Many intellectuals believe that teacher education programs can develop critical thinking skills in prospective teachers who are to train critical thinkers in classrooms. To this end, teacher trainers are recommended to move away from the traditional methods of instruction which do not foster critical thinking skills toward an inquiry-based instruction. Such new methods of instruction can educate soon-to-be teachers to develop the skill to think critically (Qing, Jing, & Yan, 2010; Kitot, Ahmad, & Seman, 2010).

Gedik (2013) explored the effects of gender and grade level on critical thinking skills of 142 teacher candidates. He found that pre-service teachers have inadequate level of critical thinking skills. While gender variable do not significant-

ly affect critical thinking level, critical thinking ability of the second and third year students' differs significantly from that of the first year students favoring the first group. It is concluded that unless attempts are made to improve prospective teachers' critical thinking skills, they can not furnish their prospect learners with such skills. The same result is also obtained by Tuncer and Ozeren (2012).

It is one of the fundamental features of a teacher to think critically as critical thinking skills may determine success in the teaching profession. To prove such an interaction between critical thinking skills and professional success, Birjandi and Bagherkazemi (2010) asked 67 Iranian teachers to fill Watson-Glasser Critical Thinking Appraisal (WGCTA). Their students were also given the successful Iranian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher questionnaire. The result indicates that the more critically the teachers can think, the higher success they obtain in their teaching practice. This result has consistency with the findings obtained by Ghaemi and Taherian (2011). They also demonstrate positive and significant relationship between professional success in teaching and teachers' critical thinking ability.

However, Aliakbari and Sadeghdaghighi (2013) stated that there are some barriers to implement an educational system in which critical thinking is dominant. For instance, many teachers may not be fully knowledgeable about the construct; some others may resist employing the ability. Anyway, if it is required that the students be capable of critical thinking, they must be trained to develop this way of thinking by first and foremost teachers.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The job of a teacher involves dealing with human being, so, unsurprisingly, it can include moment-by-moment challenges which are, at social and professional levels, undeniable. Loss of energy and emotional distress which any teacher is at the risk of experiencing may hamper the quality of teaching (Colomeischi, 2015). Hence, any study which can deepen our familiarity with the concept of burnout is worthwhile. Many researchers made the attempt to find the relationship between burnout and other variables (e.g. Ghonsooli & Raeesi, 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Few studies (e.g. Entezari & Ghafournia, 2016), however, have shed light on the possible interaction between burnout syndrome and critical thinking skills. Therefore, on the account of rare studies in this filed, the present study aims at finding the relationship between each subscale of burnout and critical thinking ability.

The following research questions, addressed with null hypotheses, were specified regarding the purpose of the study.

- Q1: Is there any significant relationship between emotional exhaustion scores and critical thinking scores of the university professors teaching TEFL?
- Q2: Is there any significant relationship between depersonalization scores and critical thinking scores of the university professors teaching TEFL?
- Q3: Is there any significant relationship between personal achievement scores and critical thinking scores of the university professors teaching TEFL?

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

40 university professors (28 males, 12 females) teaching TEFL at the BA, MA, and PhD levels participated in the present study. Their aged ranged from 29 to 56. They held MA or PhD degrees and taught at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Hakim Sabzevari University, Azad University of Neishabour, Torbate Heidarie University, Zahedan University, Semnan Univerisity, and Tabaran University. The gender variable was not taken into account.

### Instrumentation

In order to address the research questions, the following instruments were used.

#### *Maslach burnout inventory (MBI)*

Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was used to measure the participants' level of burnout. This instrument consists of 22 items, including 9 items to measure emotional exhaustion, 5 items to assess depersonalization, and 8 items to test personal accomplishment. The scoring of the items is based on a 7-point likert scale which ranges from (0) "never" to (6) "everyday". In this study, the Persian translation of MBI was used. The reliability of the questionnaire was computed by Crobach alpha and was reported to be 0.84, which suggests its high consistency.

#### *The watson-glaser critical thinking appraisal (WGCTA)*

The professors' critical thinking abilities were assessed via Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal (WGCTA), which comprises 80 items. The test measures five subscales of inference, the recognition of assumptions, deduction, interpretation, and the evaluation of arguments. To put in specific words, 16 items are likert-scaled questions which test inference, the ability to differentiate the correctness or incorrectness of interpretations; 16 items are two-scaled items which measure the recognition of assumption, the skill to identify hidden assumptions made out of the statements; 16 items are two-scaled questions which assess deduction, the capability to deduce from premises reasonably; 16 items are two-scaled questions which evaluate interpretation, the ability to discriminate warranted and unwarranted generalizations made out of data; the last final 16 items measure evaluation of arguments, the skill to make distinction between the arguments which are related or unrelated to the statement. The reliability of the questionnaire, computed by Crobach alpha, was reported to be 0.76. This approves its reliability.

### Study Design

Since the aim of this study is finding the relationship between burnout and critical thinking, the design of the current study is ex post facto in which relationships between dependant and independent variables can be explored. In the current study, critical thinking is the attribute independent



**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of the subscales of burnout and critical thinking ability

	Emotional exhaustion	Depersonalization	Personal achievement	Critical thinking
Mean	27.45	16.20	22.95	46.92
Range	48	24	35	54
Standard deviation	13.7	7.84	12.53	13.56
Minimum	2	2	10	22
Maximum	50	26	45	76

variable which is the characteristics of the participants that had before study, and burnout is the dependant variable.

### Procedure

First of all, to obtain the professors' level of burnout, the professors were asked to take Maslach Burnout Inventory. For each participant, the scores for three subscales of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal achievement were calculated. In addition, the participants took Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal and their critical thinking scores were measured. The aim of the research and sufficient instruction to answer the test and the inventory were provided for the participants. They were made sure that the results would be confidential and anonymous. After the data were collected, they were statistically analyzed via Pearson correlation coefficient (SPSS, version, 16) to find the possible relationship between critical thinking scores and the scores of each subscale of burnout.

### RESULTS

In this section, the results of the descriptive analysis of the subscales of burnout and critical thinking are presented and discussed. Furthermore, the relationship between each subscale of burnout and critical thinking is inferentially analyzed.

#### Descriptive Statistics

First of all, the data regarding each subscale of burnout and critical thinking is described in terms of the measures of central tendency and variability.

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics of the subscales of burnout and critical thinking. Maslach and Jackson (1984) provided a scale for the identification of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal achievement measures as "low", "average", and "high". According to this scale, the level of emotional exhaustion for the whole population (mean=27.45) is average while depersonalization index, 16.20, is considered to be a high frequency. Furthermore, the mean score for personal achievement, 22.95, indicates a low frequency in the sample population. Overall, it appears that the participants suffer from a rather high level of burnout. Considering critical thinking, the preliminary results suggest that the mean score is about 46 (out of 80), indicating that, generally, the critical thinking ability of the participants is at the average level. Except the depersonalization variable (7.84), standard variation indexes for the other variables are

**Table 2.** The results of Pearson correlation coefficient between emotional exhaustion scores and critical thinking scores

	Emotional exhaustion	Critical thinking
Emotional exhaustion		
Pearson correlation	1	-0.80**
Sig (2-tailed)		0.00
N	40	40
Critical thinking		
Pearson correlation	-0.80**	1
Sig (2-tailed)	0.00	
N	40	40

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

approximately the same, suggesting the same amount of diversity in the variables of emotional exhaustion, personal achievement, and critical thinking (13.7, 12.53, and 13.56, respectively).

#### Inferential Statistics

The null hypotheses suggest that there are no significant correlations between each subscale of burnout and critical thinking scores. To test these hypotheses, Pearson correlation coefficient was conducted.

Table 2 presents the result of Pearson correlation run to identify whether there is a significant relationship between emotional exhaustion scores and critical thinking scores. Clearly, there is a statistically significant and fairly strong and negative relationship ( $P < 0.05$ ,  $r = -0.8$ ) between the variables. This indicates that the more the teachers suffer from emotional exhaustion, the less they enjoy critical thinking ability and vice versa. Hence, the hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between emotional exhaustion scores and critical thinking scores of the university professors teaching TEFL is disconfirmed.

Table 3 shows the coefficient of Pearson correlation between depersonalization scores and critical thinking scores. As it is evident in this table, the correlation coefficient is -0.79 which is significant at the level of 0.01. This suggests that the variables are significantly and negatively correlated with each other; thus, the second null hypothesis, there is no significant relationship between depersonalization scores and critical thinking scores of the university professors teaching TEFL, is also rejected. This means that the more the teachers suffer from depersonalization,

**Table 3.** The results of pearson correlation coefficient between depersonalization scores and critical thinking scores

	Depersonalization	Critical thinking
Depersonalization		
Pearson correlation	1	-0.79**
Sig (2-tailed)		0.00
N	40	40
Critical thinking		
Pearson correlation	-0.79**	1
Sig (2-tailed)	0.00	
N	40	40

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

**Table 4.** The results of pearson correlation coefficient between personal achievement scores and critical thinking scores

	Personal achievement	Critical thinking
Personal achievement		
Pearson correlation	1	0.71**
Sig (2-tailed)		0.00
N	40	40
Critical thinking		
Pearson correlation	0.71**	1
Sig (2-tailed)	0.00	
N	40	40

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

the less they benefit from critical thinking ability and vice versa.

Table 4 illustrates the result of Pearson correlation coefficient run to identify whether there is a significant relationship between personal achievement scores and critical thinking scores. According to the table, personal achievement has a fairly strong and positive relationship with critical thinking scores ( $r=0.71$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), indicating the rejection of the third hypothesis, there is no significant relationship between personal achievement scores and critical thinking scores of the university professors teaching TEFL. Hence, the more the teachers benefit from personal achievement, the more they enjoy critical thinking ability and vice versa.

## DISCUSSION

Working with a young generation motivated to indulge in learning can be indeed fulfilling for teachers. However, the inherent challenges involved in the teaching practice can make it dissatisfactory and stressful for them. (Clipa & Boghean, 2015). This stress which is technically identified as burnout can adversely affect educational goals. It can reduce productivity of teaching, effective rapport between the teacher and learners, and their motivation (Küçüköglü,

2014). Consequently, many studies (e.g. Dogan et al., 2015, Madaliyeva et al., 2015) were conducted to widen our views about burnout so that it can be prevented or eradicated.

The present study investigated the burnout construct in the teaching context. It explored three subscales of depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and personal achievement in university professors of TEFL. The association between each subscale of burnout and their critical thinking ability was also examined.

Initially, the descriptive data indicates that the participants suffer from a rather high level of burnout. This can be due to the circumstances under which they were working. Most of the professors (26 out of 40) were not permanently employed and did casual work. This suggests that they did not enjoy job security as they could be easily dismissed and replaced by the others. Unemployed teachers are also paid on an irregular basis, depending on the number of the credits they teach. Thus, financial stability is also another merit they lack. Even the pay they earn is given too late, maybe months after the completion of the term. Such factors may add to the challenging demands which are inherently involved in the teaching profession and may lead to the burnout syndrome.

In terms of the first hypothesis of this study, emotional exhaustion was found to have a rather strong and negative relationship with critical thinking skills. Emotionally exhausted teachers feel overextended and depleted in their job. The teachers can think of the teaching profession as a laborious task which consumes too much physical and mental energy. Undoubtedly, they feel too depleted to add color to their teaching practice through thinking critically which assumes a great deal of creativity, interpretation, and evaluation. The more they suffer from emotional exhaustion, the more they avoid from confounding their teaching task with challenging the concepts and reforming the current intellectual framework through critical and judgmental thinking and vice versa.

The same hold true for the second hypothesis of this study. A fairly strong and negative relationship between depersonalization and critical thinking skills was also identified. A teacher who suffers from depersonalization tries to create a kind of emotional and cognitive distance from his/her job. S/he also develops indifferent attitudes toward all the individuals involved in the teaching practice, from the learners to the authorities. Such an impersonal teacher ignores the qualities such as critical thinking skills that make him/her an active engaging agent. Critically pondering over the information presented by the others is, for sure, not favored by a teacher feeling alien.

However, it was found that there is a strong and positive relationship between personal achievement and critical thinking skills, suggesting that high level of personal achievement is related to high level of critical thinking ability. This is hardly surprising since a teacher who feels qualified and efficient in his/her job seeks to employ any technique to add to the productivity of his/her teaching practice. S/he tries to refrain from the repetition of knowledge and provides opportunities to critically challenge what is presented in the textbooks.

Overall, it can be concluded that burnout and critical thinking skills are negatively related to each other. What was obtained in this study has also achieved by other researchers. For example, Entezari and Ghafournia (2016) stated that the professors who critically analyze the trend of knowledge to challenge long-held ideas suffer from lower levels of burnout. The professors whose dominant teaching practice is to repeat or, at most, paraphrase textbook concepts, however, experience higher levels of burnout.

Furthermore, the results of study by Colomeischi (2015) nearly reflects the findings of this study. He explored the association between burnout and emotional intelligence and personal traits. It was found that burnout negatively correlate with emotional intelligence, life satisfaction, and personal characteristics. Specifically, teachers who suffer from burnout are less extrovert, emotionally stable, and autonomous. Such a similar result was also gained by Pishghadam and Sahebjam (2012) who demonstrated a significant relationship between burnout subscales and personality traits and emotional intelligence.

The results of the study is considerably advantageous for teachers. The fact that the more they suffer from burnout, the less they enjoy critical thinking ability is a caution for them. Teachers are recommended to reduce or eliminate what makes them feel stressful in the workplace and have more control over their job. In an ever-changing society, no more do educational systems need teachers who are just concerned with the replication of knowledge instead of critical pondering over it. In addition, the results are beneficial for administrative policy makers. They are required to support teachers in any possible way from teacher training workshops to supervisory sessions to improve teachers' emotional competence.

While the present study was extensive in the range of statistical and logical analysis undertaken, it is important to acknowledge the limitation regarding the sample of the participants. To put in more specific words, the selection and the number of the universities in general and the professors in particular were subject to permission and administrative selection. Generally, test and inventory replying is always dependent on the participants' availability and good will. In other words, the choice of the participants can be considered as a kind of purposive sampling rather than a random one. Indeed, to meet the ethical requirements, such an issue is inevitable.

However, the researchers suggest some hints to be taken into consideration for any future research. Other more universities and a larger sample can be investigated, helping a solid understanding of the phenomenon of burnout. In addition, longitudinal studies can fully deepen our understanding of more aspects of teacher burnout. Moreover, the studies in which the gender and the age of the teachers are taken into account can yield more generalizable results. Finally, similar studies can be carried out in different academic fields other than TEFL.

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