




## EFL Teachers' Burnout during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Can Teaching Context Make a Difference?

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### ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the differences between Iranian EFL teachers' burnout in online classes during the Covid-19 pandemic in public schools (PSs) and private language institutes (PLIs). It also investigated the causes of teacher burnout in the two contexts. The participants included 268 Iranian EFL teachers (108 teaching at PSs and 160 teaching at PLIs). The study employed a mixed-method design. In the quantitative phase, 268 EFL teachers were asked to answer Maslach et al.'s (1996) Burnout Inventory and in the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 EFL teachers (10 from PSs and 10 from PLIs). The results of the first phase of the study indicated a significant difference between the two groups in the two dimensions of burnout including "Emotional Exhaustion", and "Personal Accomplishment". However, the difference between the "Depersonalization" aspect of burnout was not significant. The results of the second phase of the study indicated that factors such as challenges of online teaching, concerns about teaching effectiveness, lack of collegiality and principal/manager support, financial concerns and low wages, lack of job security, students' misbehavior and lack of motivation, lack of teacher autonomy, heavy workload, as well as school/institute policies were conducive to teacher burnout.

**KEYWORDS:** Covid-19 pandemic; EFL teachers; Online teaching; Teacher burnout

## 1. Introduction

The outbreak of the Covid-19 has created educational systems across the world unprecedented problems. As a result of the pandemic and the concomitant quarantine, many educational institutes were obliged to transition to online delivery mode of education to ensure public health. Despite its advantages, this abrupt shift in education has been accompanied by particular hassles, one of the most significant of which is ensuring the quality of instruction in online classes. As research has frequently demonstrated, the quality of instruction is among the most crucial factors affecting student achievement (Clotfelter et al., 2007; Haycock, 1998; Nye et al., 2004). Accordingly, teachers have critical roles to play both in virtual courses and in in-person courses and influence the success or failure of educational systems.

Teachers experience a plethora of stressors in online teaching including increased workload, use of new technologies, conflict, and role ambiguity, to name a few (Kaya, 2022; Pressley, 2021; Vargas Rubilar & Oros, 2021). In the absence of

efficient coping strategies, these stressors can result in teacher burnout which is referred to as “the state of physical and emotional depletion resulting from conditions of work” (Freudenberger, 1974, p. 160). Prior research has indicated that burnout can adversely influence the quality of instruction and can result in job dissatisfaction which can culminate in teachers’ decision to leave the profession (Huberman & Vandenberghe, 1999). Furthermore, the literature has documented a multitude of factors which can give rise to teacher burnout (Navidinia & Heiran, 2017). These factors can be broadly classified into contextual and personal ones. Contextual factors, among others, may include the type of institution, its curriculum, its guidelines, and instruction modality (Bartosiewicz et al., 2022; Khezerlou, 2017; Kimsesiz, 2019; Panisoara et al., 2020). Personal determinants which are both affected by and affect the contextual variables are emotional intelligence, resilience, self-esteem, and self-efficacy to name a few (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

Taking into account that online teaching particularly under the conditions of the pandemic is a new phenomenon and that teachers experience a host of stressors which might be different from those specific to face-to-face, it is imperative to examine the causes of teacher burnout in this milieu. Furthermore, in the view of the crucial role of the contextual factors in teachers’ experience of burnout (Kokkinos 2007) and the contextual variations that exist between public schools (PSs) and private language institutes (PLIs) in Iran (e.g. differential levels of institutional demand, teachers’ view toward teaching, access to resources, and the amount of collegial support available (Moradkhani & Shirazizadeh, 2017), this study aims to look into how EFL teachers’ experience of burnout is different with regard to the peculiarity of the two contexts.

As a consequence, this study aims to first, compare the level of Iranian EFL teachers’ burnout during the Covid-19 pandemic in PSs and PLIs and second, to investigate the factors causing teacher burnout in two contexts. An investigation of this kind can harness the stakeholders’ awareness including teacher educators’ and the administrators’ of the factors causing burnout in web-based teaching before any reactive measures can be taken to prevent and remedy such burnout. In particular, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Is there any significant difference between Iranian EFL teachers' level of burnout in PSs and PLIs?
2. What factors can cause Iranian EFL teachers’ burnout in online education during the Covid-19 pandemic in PSs and PLIs?

## 2. Review of literature

### 2.1. Teacher burnout: definitions and contributing factors

Over the years, various definitions have been proposed for the term “burnout”. Maslach, as one of the most prominent figures in the literature on burnout, alongside Jackson, defined burnout as “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do people-work of some kind” (Maslach & Jackson, 1981, p. 99). On the basis of this definition, they divided the concept into three key aspects of emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and personal accomplishment (PA) (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

Emotional exhaustion which arises as a result of experiencing high levels of stress and the demands of the job, describes a person’s emotional resources being depleted forcing them to withdraw psychologically from their jobs (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Depersonalization which is also related to emotional exhaustion, is manifested through negative attitudes toward the clients (Maslach & Jackson, 1981), which in the case of the teaching profession includes the students. Of course, such negative views are not limited to others considering that individuals suffering from burnout tend to evaluate themselves and their professional achievements negatively as well, thereby feeling dissatisfied with themselves, their clients, and their jobs (Edú-Valsania et al., 2022). As the third aspect of burnout, Personal Accomplishment (PA) refers to the tendency to view one’s work and professional achievements negatively (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). In the case of teachers, diminished levels of PA are displayed through feelings of the lack of contribution to students’ development, while developing a feeling of fatigue and tiredness and staying physically and emotionally distant are manifestations of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, respectively (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Maslach et al., 1996).

In addition to Maslach and Jackson’s (1981) classification of burnout, which is the most inclusive and widely-accepted one, other definitions discuss the various dimensions of the concept. One such definition is provided by Pines and Aronson (1988) which focuses on long-term exposure to the emotional demands of the job and defines burnout as the subjective experience of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion due to demands of the profession. In general, the physical and affective exhaustion as well as the environmental variables seem to play a role in the majority of the definitions of burnout. Furthermore, teachers constitute a popular subject pool for the studies of burnout considering the emotional demands of their profession (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998) and a bulk of research has endeavored to document the effect of different factors on teacher burnout.

With regard to the role of demographic variables in teacher burnout, there exists a host of conflicting results. On either side of the spectrum, studies show positive or negative correlations, making it difficult to draw any firm conclusions on the links between such variables and burnout levels (Bayani et al., 2013; Farshi & Omranzadeh, 2014; González-Morales et al., 2010; Green et al., 2014; Mousavy & Nimehchisalem, 2014; Purvanova & Muros, 2010). Gender is a significant indicator in different dimensions of burnout where women have been found to be more inclined toward emotional exhaustion and men toward depersonalization (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; González-Morales et al., 2010; Purvanova & Muros, 2010).

The role of marital status in the experience of burnout is up for debate considering the conclusions from Mousavy and Nimehchisalem (2014), who identified significantly higher levels of burnout in married teachers as opposed to the findings of Jackson et al. (1986) in this regard. From among the other demographic variables included in the literature, teaching experience seems to account for burnout to some extent, specifically for burnout intensity and emotional exhaustion (Brewer & Shapard, 2004; Capel, 1987). Still, there are studies which fail to link burnout to any of the demographic variables including years of experience (Farshi & Omranzadeh, 2014; Hock, 1988; Yastibas, 2021).

Another category of variables in relation to burnout includes individual factors such as resilience, self-regulation, self-efficacy, and adaptability. It is not surprising that the literature supports a negative association between emotional intelligence, stress, and burnout levels which can be due to more efficient emotional regulation and a stronger sense of self (Gohm et al., 2005; Mayer et al., 2000; Mérida-López & Extremera, 2017; Pishghadam & Sahebjam, 2012; Vaezi & Fallah, 2011). Emotional intelligence helps emotional regulation and building tolerance, thus allowing for more efficient ways to cope with the stress and challenges of the job (Kariou et al., 2021; Mérida-López & Extremera, 2017; Pishghadam & Sahebjam, 2012; Vaezi & Fallah, 2011). As Pishghadam and Sahebjam (2012) reported emotional quotient (EQ) is associated with lower scores in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and higher scores in personal accomplishment.

Self-efficacy is also related to emotional intelligence since it is a strong positive predictor of personal accomplishment and is linked to lower levels of burnout (Bartosiewicz et al., 2022; Foley & Murphy, 2015; and Motallebzadeh et al., 2014). Other personality traits including, adaptability, ambiguity tolerance, and neuroticism have been also indicated to affect burnout. While ambiguity tolerance and adaptability are both negative predictors of burnout (Azadianbojnordi et al., 2021; Zhaleh et al., 2018), higher scores in emotional exhaustion are best predicted by high scores in neuroticism and low scores in extroversion (Pishghadam & Sahebjam, 2012).

Another line of research is concerned with the relation between teacher burnout and the contextual factors, including type of institution, class size, administrative policies, and the demands of the job. The literature confirms the role of the socioeconomic status of the institute, excessive workload, low financial rewards, inadequate resources and training, as well as poor work conditions in manipulating burnout levels among teachers (Barutçu & Serinkan, 2013; Brissie et al., 1988; Carson III, 2006; Roohani & Dayeri, 2019). In this regard, Grayson and Alvarez (2008) studied the effects of school climate on the core three dimensions of burnout, revealing that teachers' experience of burnout was greatly affected by the presence of strong community and administrative support as well as proper instructional management. Yet in another study, Roohani and Dayeri (2019) contented that Iranian EFL teachers had lower levels of burnout since they were intrinsically motivated in their profession, verifying the role of motivation and self-regulation as predictors of burnout.

The teachers' choice of teaching style can also have a preventive role in burnout experience as demonstrated by Ghanizadeh and Jahedizadeh (2016). This seems to be affected by the type of institution the teacher works in, as the instructional policies and demands may vary in different contexts. Interestingly, in two separate studies aiming to identify context-laden factors affecting burnout by comparing Iranian high schools and language institutes, Rostami et al. (2015) and Heiran and Navidinia (2015) found that teachers in the public sector demonstrate significantly higher levels of burnout compared to their private section counterparts. These results are in sharp contrast with the findings of Soleimani and Bolourchi (2021) and Bahrami and Moradkhani (2019). The choice of teaching approach and the existence of such a choice for the teacher can have a role in their burnout experience. For example, in private language institutes teachers have the freedom to choose a more modern approach and thus can work together with their learners providing a chance to build rapport and flexibility in the class compared to the traditional approaches which are often used at schools (Rostami et al., 2015).

Studies also demonstrate that when the instructional rules and policies are perceived as limiting or incongruent with teachers' beliefs and outlooks, they can lead to a higher risk of burnout (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Salahshour & Esmaili, 2021). These policies may exclude teachers from decision-making at school, and limit school resources and teachers' salaries, thus contributing to the experience of burnout (Betoret, 2009; Foley & Murphy, 2015).

## 2.2. Teacher burnout in online classes

Online education has gained more momentum since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and some researchers have sought to investigate teacher burnout during this trying time (Bartosiewicz et al., 2022; Bravo et al., 2021; Ferdous & Shifat, 2020; Panisoara et al., 2020). During the first wave of the national lockdowns, most educational institutes opted for fully online classes which proved to be demanding especially for teachers. Even as the teachers returned to school after a period of online classes, they were faced with dramatically different instructional routines and approaches (Pressley, 2021). More teachers are reported to have experienced burnout during the pandemic and the levels of burnout have also been shown to increase significantly (Pressley, 2021; Vargas Rubilar & Oros, 2021).

Studies also searched for the reasons behind such a trend and provided justifications and counteractions for the matter. For example, Izquierdo et al. (2021) investigated the relationship between language instructors' unpreparedness and their burnout level during the pandemic. Their findings point to an increase in work hours and workload as the main culprits in teacher burnout during the pandemic (Izquierdo et al., 2021). Similarly, Pressley (2021) and Kaya (2022) believe that increased job demands such as the need for more detailed lesson plans alongside the lack of efficient support particularly on technology-related skills, emotional as well as instructional support have substantially contributed to the increase in burnout levels. Being forced to acquire technology-related skills and pursue training with regards to technology-assisted language learning independently, despite having access to the internet, was among the factors that increased their workload (Izquierdo et al., 2021).

Ghanbari and Nowroozi (2022) provided a more inclusive categorization of the sources of stress and burnout during the pandemic in the form of the four categories of technological, pedagogical, affective, and administrative challenges. Poor digital literacy, online assessment concerns, and technological availability belong to the first category, while the pedagogical demands of online education including the change in roles and teaching approach belong to the second (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022). Azadianbojnordi et al. (2021) exhibited that an overall positive attitude towards change, in general, can indirectly predict burnout levels during the pandemic, since it affects their acceptance of e-learning and virtual education. Overall, the transition to online education which took place over the past years had negative psychological consequences, especially among language teachers (Escudero-Nahón, 2021).

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Design of the study

To delve into the differences in burnout levels of Iranian EFL teachers in PSs and PLIs during the pandemic and to examine the factors contributing to burnout, this study adopted a mixed-method design. In the quantitative phase of the study, Maslach et al.'s (1996) Burnout Inventory was distributed among EFL teachers using Google Docs. In the qualitative phase of the study, 20 EFL teachers, 10 from PSs and 10 from PLIs were interviewed.

#### 3.2. Participants

In the quantitative part of the study, 268 EFL teachers completed the survey. The participants were 108 (40.3%) teachers teaching at public schools and 160 (59.7%) teachers teaching in private language institutes. Of 268 participants, 152 (56.7%) were female and 116 (43.3%) were male with the age range of 20 to 61 and a mean of 30.95. Regarding their academic degrees, 139 (51.9%) teachers had Bachelor's degrees, 117 (43.7%) had Master's degrees, and 12 (4.5%) were Ph.D. holders and students. Although 292 teachers participated in this study, the participants with missing values were excluded, thereby, leaving us with 268 participants.

From among the participants, 20 teachers (10 from PSs and 10 from PLIs) were selected for the qualitative part of the study to be interviewed using purposeful sampling and employing homogeneous and intensity strategies on the account of the richness of the information they provided (Creswell, 2012). Attempt was made to choose teachers of the same demographic information in pairs from PSs and PLIs to minimize the differential effects of demographic attributes on teachers' experience of burnout. In so doing, a pair of teachers (one from a PS and one from a PLI) was chosen with the same teaching experience, gender, academic degrees, and the age levels they taught. Moreover, care was taken to select pairs with different demographic information to ensure a diversity of factors which may affect teacher burnout. From the participants selected for the interview, 3 had experience teaching both in PSs and PLIs which helped take a comparative look at the issue in both contexts.

#### 3.3. Instruments

##### 3.3.1. Maslach et al.'s (1996) burnout inventory

Maslach et al.'s (1996) Burnout Inventory is the most widely-used scale for measuring teachers' level of Burnout. It includes 22 statements, and participants are asked to rate each item on a seven-point Likert scale from Never (0) to Everyday (6). This

scale includes three sub-scales of "emotional exhaustion", "depersonalization", and "personal accomplishment". High scores on the first two components and low scores on the last one are considered as indications of burnout. In this study, the reliability coefficient of the inventory using Cronbach's alpha was 0.76. Moreover, previous factor analytic studies (e.g. Schaufeli & Van Dierendonck, 1993) have confirmed the three dimensions of burnout as represented in the scale.

### 3.3.2. Semi-structured interviews

In order to obtain a deeper understanding of the reasons that can cause teacher burnout in virtual teaching, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 EFL teachers, 10 from PSs and 10 from PLIs. The interviews were semi-structured allowing the researchers to raise further questions to clarify and probe the issue in case the respondents' answers were not adequate. Following the methodological procedures in other studies on teacher burnout (e.g. El Helou, Nabhani & Bahous, 2016), the participant teachers were asked to describe their different activities inside and outside the online classes and what they did to cope. In addition, they were encouraged to share their feelings, perceptions, and thoughts regarding online education and the stressors they experienced in their teaching context which provided an understanding of the causes and origins of burnout in the contexts of the online teaching. The interviews were mainly conducted through social media due to the lockdown and in participants' mother tongue (Farsi). The interview data were then transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis approach.

### 3.4. Procedure and data analysis

The quantitative data of this study were collected using Google Docs. Having obtained the EFL teachers' consent, the link to the questionnaire was sent to them. The qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews using social media platforms considering the spread of the Covid-19 and the lack of in-person access to the participants. The quantitative data of the study were analyzed using SPSS. Both descriptive and inferential statistics (including Independent Sample T-tests) were used to answer the first research question. Regarding the qualitative data, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis was used to analyze the interviews. The recorded voices sent via social media platforms were first transcribed verbatim and then the comments were read by the researchers to familiarize ourselves with the data. Simultaneously, notes of summaries were taken with the aim of obtaining the initial ideas for analysis and coding. Next, the initial codes were reviewed, merged and reduced to get the recurrent main themes and taxonomies. Having finalized the major themes, we did several re-readings to ensure that no pieces of information are left. Further, segments of verbatim were chosen to illustrate the themes emerged from the data. To ensure the trustworthiness of analysis, 30% of the data were analyzed by the second and the third researchers and the disagreements were resolved through discussion and negotiation.

## 4. Result

### 4.1. Result of the quantitative phase

In this phase of the study, Maslach et al.'s (1996) Burnout Inventory was distributed among 268 EFL teachers (108 teaching at public schools and 160 teaching at private language institutes). Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the two groups. To examine if the level of difference between the two groups was significant, an Independent Sample T-test was administered. As indicated in Table 2, there is a significant difference between the level of burnout that EFL teachers in PSs and PLIs experience in virtual education ( $P < .05$ ).

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of EFL Teachers' Burnout in PSs and PLIs.**

	Context	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Teacher	Public Schools	108	53.7685	15.40033	1.48190
Burnout	Private Institutes	160	63.9250	20.43291	1.61536

**Table 2. The Results of Independent Sample T-test of the Differences between Teachers' Burnout in PSs and PLIs.**



		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Burnout	Equal variances assumed	-4.391	266	.000	-10.15648	2.31303

In order to examine the differences between the two groups in the three components of burnout including "emotional exhaustion", "depersonalization", and "personal accomplishment", three more Independent Sample T-tests were administered. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for the three components of burnout for both groups. As indicated in the table, the mean difference between the two groups is higher for the two components of "Emotional Exhaustion" and "Personal Accomplishment", and in both of them, the private language institute teachers have a higher mean.

**Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of the Three Components of Burnout for EFL Teachers in PSs and PLIs.**

	Context	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Emotional Exhaustion	Public Schools	108	17.6111	11.34409	1.09159
	Private Institutes	160	23.9813	14.28967	1.12970
Depersonalization	Public Schools	108	11.1481	6.16565	.59329
	Private Institutes	160	10.1688	5.40931	.42764
Personal Accomplishment	Public Schools	108	25.0093	9.27915	.89289
	Private Institutes	160	29.8750	8.83158	.69820

In order to examine if the mean differences between the two groups are significant, three Independent Sample T-tests were administered. As Table 4 portrays, there is a significant difference between the two groups in the two components of "Emotional Exhaustion", and "Personal Accomplishment" ( $P < .05$ ). However, the mean difference between the two groups in "Depersonalization" is not significant ( $P > .05$ ). It means that the private institute teachers have a significantly higher level of "Emotional Exhaustion", and "Personal Accomplishment" compared to the public school teachers.

**Table 4. The Results of Independent Sample T-test of the Differences between PS and PLI Teachers in the Three Components of Burnout**

		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Emotional Exhaustion	Equal variances assumed	-3.880	266	.000	-6.37014	1.64190
Depersonalization	Equal variances assumed	1.374	266	.171	.97940	.71304
Personal Accomplishment	Equal variances assumed	-4.334	266	.000	-4.86574	1.12261

## 4.2. Result of the qualitative phase

The analysis of the qualitative data pointed to some reasons for teacher burnout in online teaching contexts including the hassles with online teaching, lack of teaching effectiveness, lack of collegiality and support, financial issues and low wages, lack of job security, student misbehavior and lack of motivation, lack of teacher autonomy, heavy workload, and workplace context which will be discussed below.

### 4.2.1. Online teaching challenges and obstacles

Part of the reasons for teacher burnout in both PSs and PLIs concerned the issues related to the online teaching. Many factors such as teachers' lack of familiarity with online teaching platforms especially at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, poor internet connection and internet coverage, the loss of teacher-student interaction, lack of students' engagement, student evaluation, and health issues because of working with digital tools for long hours created occupational burnout for EFL teachers in both contexts. Even some teachers, especially the older ones, preferred to quit the profession temporarily until in-person classes are resumed. Here are some excerpts of the participants' ideas.

#### Excerpt 1

"After so many years of teaching in-person classes, it has been very disparate for me to shift to online teaching especially at the beginning of the pandemic. I simply couldn't get used to it.... The reasons are mainly my lack of familiarity with online teaching and the poor internet connection". (*Interviewee 9, PS*)

#### Excerpt 2

"Although I am familiar with teaching online, unfortunately, many students either do not have access to the internet or are not willing to participate in classroom activities. Even for those attending the class, I am not sure if all of them are really following the class". (*Interviewee 3, Ps and PLI*)

#### Excerpt 3

"There is not much interaction between the students and the teacher. Many of the students are reluctant to turn on their webcams or mics and be involved in classroom activities. So, I should talk more in the class which is against the norms of a language class". (*Interviewee 6, PLI*)

#### Excerpt 4

"The main issue with my online classes is evaluating students. Because of its limitations, I think online testing is not very reliable. Sometimes you see that the answer to the same question is written by many students using the same wording showing that they may be sharing the answers in online platforms". (*Interviewee 1, PLI*)

#### Excerpt 5

"Because of teaching online classes for a long time, unfortunately, I have a very bad neck pain. So, I have canceled all of my online classes". (*Interviewee 4, PLI*)

### 4.2.2. Concerns about teaching effectiveness

Another factor causing teacher burnout was the feeling that their teaching was ineffective. This was more evident among public school teachers who believed that due to reasons such as heterogeneous and crowded classes, time limitations, lack of technological facilities, lack of teaching materials, and students' absenteeism from the online classes as a result of the lack of access to the internet or digital devices, their teaching was not very effective. This is in line with the results of the quantitative phase of the study showing that public school teachers had a significantly lower level of "personal accomplishment". Here are some excerpts to illustrate the point:

#### Excerpt 6

“The main reason causing burnout for me is the feeling that my teaching is not effective. I consider myself a competent person who can make positive changes in society. But, because of the limitations of online classes, I think my teaching is almost a waste of time”. (*Interviewee 2, PS*)

#### Excerpt 7

“Because of the class size, heterogeneous students, lack of possibility to involve all the students in productive tasks, and the problems with online teaching platform, my teaching is not as effective as it should be”. (*Interviewee 7, PS*)

#### Excerpt 8

“Compared with my experience of teaching in private language institutes, the language proficiency level of my students in public schools do not improve due to time limitations and many other factors”. (*Interviewee 6, PS and PLI*)

### 4.2.3.Lack of collegiality and principal/manager support

One of the factors causing stress for EFL teachers in both contexts was the lack of a good relationship among colleagues and principal/manager support. This was specially the case in online classes where teachers were left on their own to find solutions to their problems through trial and error and the opportunities for professional development and growth were few and far between considering the teachers fell physically apart and felt professionally isolated. This point is indicated in the following excerpts:

#### Excerpt 9

“The working condition in my institute is very problematic. There is a fierce negative competition among teachers. We don’t often share the issues which arise in our profession with each other. If I can find another institute, I’d prefer to leave here”. (*Interviewee 6, PS and PLI*)

#### Excerpt 10

“The institute manager expects too much from the teachers. He expects us to be available online to answer students’ questions all the time and give them feedback which is beyond what I can do. Unfortunately, he prefers punishing teachers to encouraging them”. (*Interviewee 10, PLI*)

#### Excerpt 11

“The problems that I have with my colleagues started from a classroom observation which is a very routine practice in my institute. Unfortunately, one of them tried to highlight the weaknesses of my practice and ignore my strengths. Since that time, I do not have a good attitude toward classroom observation”. (*Interviewee 1, PLI*)

#### Excerpt 12

“In online courses, especially the beginning days, we were left on our own to run the classes. As teachers, we were not connected since asking for help meant raising questions on our own competencies. In the cases where teachers were comfortable asking each other their questions, little help received as we were all perplexed with this new online teaching.” (*Interviewee 3, PS and PLI*)

### 4.2.4.Financial concerns and low wages

One of the main problems causing teacher burnout in both contexts was the financial problems and low wages. In fact, for the majority of teachers, this was the main reason leading them to leave the profession, in case they could find another job. Considering the high inflation rate in the country, many teachers believed that they could not afford to pay for their expenses without working extra hours and having another part-time job. The excerpts show this point:

#### Excerpt 13



"The wages are very low in the language institute that I am teaching. I am still single and live with my parents. I am sure I wouldn't be able to afford family expenses with this salary".(Interviewee 6, PLI)

#### Excerpt 14

"Considering the high inflation and low salary of the teaching profession, if I can find another job with a better salary, for sure I'll prefer to leave the teaching profession, despite my love for it". (Interviewee 4, PLI)

#### Excerpt 15

"In order to afford my expenses, I need to work from the morning till evening. I know that it can harm my health and family relationships, but I have to do that. I know it might cause burnout after a while". (Interviewee 3, PS and PLI)

### 4.2.5.Lack of job security

The issue of job security was a concern for teachers working in PLIs or those working in PSs based on an annual contract. The fact that they may lose their job due to various reasons caused them extra stress as indicated in the following excerpts:

#### Excerpt 16

"I work in a language institute and I receive a monthly salary, but I know that at any time I may lose my job if they can find another teacher with fewer expectations". (Interviewee 6, PLI)

#### Excerpt 17

"One of the main problems of working in private language institutes is that you usually do not have a fixed salary, insurance, retirement pension, etc. So, if teachers have the chance to find another job, they usually leave the teaching profession". (Interviewee 5, PLI)

#### Excerpt 18

"In public schools, we have a monthly salary and we have job security which is good, though the salary is not enough. But in our school, there are teachers teaching based on an annual contract; I know that their stress and dissatisfaction with the teaching profession is much more than that of us". (Interviewee 3, PS and PLI)

### 4.2.6.Students' misbehavior and lack of motivation

Although, this category is not specific to online classes, teachers complained about how student misbehavior and lack of motivation caused them discomfort in both contexts. Some teachers believed that despite high expectations from parents, many students are not motivated enough to study and learn. In online classes, the problem of students' demotivation was deteriorated since they lost their social networks and were isolated. Moreover, they could make excuses with regard to the internet and their technical failures and evade their duties and coursework more easily. Here are some excerpts of teachers' comments:

#### Excerpt 19

"My students, who are teenagers, do not have enough motivation to learn. Their parents force them to participate in the classes. Also, some of them are very noisy. So, a significant portion of the class time should be spent on classroom management which is very stressful for me". (Interviewee 5, PLI)

#### Excerpt 20

In online classes, students frequently make excuses. When I ask them to turn on their mics or webcams and share their ideas or responses, they pretend that their mics and cameras don't work. Or, when they are not following the class and I call them out, they use pretexts like, I lost my connection or my device had got frozen I couldn't answer." (Interviewee 9, PS).

#### Excerpt 21

“Generally speaking, my students are not motivated enough to study. This can adversely influence my teaching effectiveness”. (*Interviewee 9, PS*)

#### 4.2.7.Lack of teacher autonomy

The lack of teacher autonomy was another factor leading to teacher burnout. Some teachers believed that they needed to follow exactly what the institute and school dictated to them and there was no scope for maneuvering or applying their creativity in teaching pedagogy as indicated in the following excerpts:

##### Excerpt 22

“In our language institute, you have to follow a fixed schedule given to you at the beginning of the semester. So, the theoretical issues we studied about creativity in teaching and making decisions based on the contextual variables and individual characteristics cannot come in handy”. (*Interviewee 1, PLI*)

##### Excerpt 23

“During the online classes, it has happened to us a couple of times that the platform specified for teaching failed. However, since the class archives were checked, we were not allowed to use an alternative platform.” (*Interviewee 7, PS*)

#### 4.2.8.Heavy workload and obligations

Some teachers especially those teaching in private language institutes believed that heavy workload caused many problems for them. The burden was reported to be added in the online courses with many teachers having children at home whose academic responsibilities were assigned to their parents. In addition, being obliged to share the devices with their children to get connected to their classes which were often at the same of their parents’ classes created further hassles.

##### Excerpt 24

“I teach for long hours each day. I have to teach both my students and my kids at home. We often share the same cellphone for online classes and this has created me some problems as my kids classes and mine are often at the same time.”. (*Interviewee 7, PS*)

##### Excerpt 25

“With the online classes that I have, I need to teach long hours and after the class, I should mark my students' homework on WhatsApp or other platforms. In addition, my students ask questions at any time they want and I am supposed to answer them, so I do not have any time to rest” (*Interviewee 4, PLI*)

#### 4.2.9.School/institute policies

The different policies adopted by PSs and PLIs were often a source of fatigue and boredom for teachers driving them to experience extra burden and stress. One such policy was put forward for PSs in rural areas during the pandemic where students did not have access to the internet and technical devices necessary for online classes. In such areas, the teachers were obliged to commute to the areas to attend the in-person classes despite the outbreak and the associated health risk (*interviewee 2, PS*). Another such policy taken by language institutes was running hybrid classes to ensure maximum enrollment in classes. That is, the class was run both face-to-face for those attending the class in-person and virtually for those students who were online. Managing two groups of students at the same time was also believed to be tiresome and demanding and required the teachers to exert themselves even more (*interviewee 5, PLI*).

## 5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to compare Iranian EFL teachers’ level of burnout during the Covid-19 pandemic in PSs and PLIs and to investigate the factors causing teacher burnout in both contexts. To this aim, quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed using Maslach et al.’s (1996) Burnout Inventory and semi-structured interviews respectively.

With regard to the first research question, the findings in the quantitative phase of the study exhibited a significantly higher level of Emotional Exhaustion and Personal Accomplishment among PLI teachers compared to their PS counterparts. Evers et al. (2004) suggested considering Emotional Exhaustion as the first evidence of experienced burnout. The difference between the experienced burnout in the three dimensions can be justified considering the findings of the qualitative phase. Higher levels of certain aspects of burnout among PLI teachers are partially in line with the findings of Soleimani and Bolourchi (2021) and Hosseini Fatemi and Raoufi (2014) who observed a higher overall burnout experience among private language institute teachers. The findings are, however, in contrast to those of Heriran and Navidinia's (2015) and Ferreira and Martinez's (2012) which indicated a higher burnout level among public school teachers in studies conducted prior to the pandemic.

One significant contribution of our study was revealing the intricate differences in the experience of burnout between public school and private language institute teachers. While previous studies report an overall difference between the levels of burnout among PS and PLI teachers, our findings demonstrated a more complex picture of their burnout experience. Accordingly, PS teachers reported higher levels of Depersonalization whereas PLI teachers stated higher levels of Emotional Exhaustion and Personal Achievement. Previously, Ferreira and Martinez (2012) revealed that PS teachers reveal higher levels of both emotional exhaustion and Depersonalization, while there was no significant difference with regard to personal accomplishment. Although it is partially in line with the findings of this study with regard to the level of depersonalization, it contradicts our findings in the other two subscales of burnout. Furthermore, echoing our findings, Nikolaos et al. (2006) reported higher levels of Emotional Exhaustion among private sector early educators compared to public school teachers.

Prior research (e.g. Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2022; Hassani, 2021; Malekolkalami, 2020; Shobeiry, 2022; Soleimani & Bolourchi, 2021) has highlighted some challenges facing teachers in remote education including promoting student engagement, lack of suitable material and proper online assessment methods, digital literacy and access, as well as disruptive student behavior. These challenges could result in decreased levels of teaching effectiveness among EFL teachers. For instance, in the context of public schools, running large and heterogeneous classes can cause teachers classroom management challenges which directly affect the quality of teaching, thereby prompting lower personal achievement scores.

Additionally, being positioned in a rigid environment that restricts teachers' autonomy and dictates certain behavior and schedules can foster the development of teacher burnout as it fosters the perceptions of unmet goals and a lack of professional development (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). Teachers' professional beliefs shape their teaching practice and help them organize their teaching according to what they believe to be appropriate (Salahshour & Esmaeili, 2021). Limiting their creativity and scope of maneuvering through strict and rigid policies and regulations can lead the way to burnout according to a number of studies (Khezerlou, 2017; Salahshour & Esmaeili, 2021; Soleimani & Bolourchi, 2021; Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2021).

On the other hand, exhausted from online classes, the teacher is surrounded by demotivated, burnt-out, and often competitive peers who fail to provide the much-needed emotional and professional support. This lack of support network coupled with demanding and criticizing parents and authorities exacerbates the feeling of low personal achievement and ineffectiveness which might already be present due to the novelty of online teaching experience and lack of familiarity with the new environment and the required skills.

An amicable work climate can help teachers not only to maintain a realistic view of their teaching circumstances but also aid them to manage the stress and challenges of online education. Bahrami and Moradkhani (2019) support this, confirming the significance of support from peers and principals. By the same token, van Emmerik (2002) supports the role of departmental support and peer assistance in reducing emotional exhaustion. It is also in accordance with the findings of Moradkhani and Shirazizadeh (2017) who emphasized the crucial role of collegial support, stating lack of appropriate rapport can be demotivating to teachers. The presence of such collegiality and collaboration not only fosters but also entails the existence of an atmosphere of professionalism, the value of which cannot be undermined in the prevention of burnout. As Seyedjalali et al. (2021) stress professional behavior in administrators necessitates creating an open and accepting environment for instructors (Seyedjalali et al., 2021).

The issue of demotivation is another culprit in both contexts. For example, in PLIs, on the one hand, teachers are demotivated due to the lack of job security and an imbalance between the demands of the job and the payment (Pishghadam & Sahebjam, 2012). In PSs, on the other hand, teachers often enjoy a secure job and payment which can compensate for the negative factors present in this context at least to some extent, though students may lack the necessary intrinsic motivation. In any circumstances, however, having a secure job can be a driver in the prevention of burnout (Bahrami and Moradkhani, 2019).

Understandably, demotivated students can create a host of problems in the class, complicating class management for the teacher. Furthermore, a combination of the aforementioned factors has devastatingly increased teachers' workload leading to higher burnout levels, especially emotional exhaustion. In a similar vein, an increase in workload drives teachers to experience increased mental stress and frustration (Ferdous & Shifat, 2020; Shobeiry, 2022) and deprives them of the time to be spent with the family and the support that can be provided by them. Studies show that those who benefit from family and friends' support also benefit from better mental and emotional health which can prevent burnout (Bahrami & Moradkhani, 2019). Ferdous and Shifat (2020) along with Honar zad (2022), and Van Droogenbroeck et al. (2021) corroborate the effect of

increased workload and time pressure in the development of burnout. Although increased workload cannot independently aggravate burnout, concerns about the fit between working hours and personal affairs may have a stronger effect (Barnett et al., 1999).

## 6. Conclusion

Considering the importance of teachers in the success or failure of educational systems, it is incumbent upon policymakers to pay more attention to the stressors causing teacher burnout. Increasing the technological literacy of teachers, creating a more teacher-friendly environment, decreasing teachers' workload, and increasing their payment can be considered as some ways that can alleviate the problems and prevent burnout. In addition, considering the lack of effectiveness of current teacher professional development programs in the Iranian context (Navidinia, 2021), more need-responsive teacher professional development programs are required to prepare teachers and arm them with the necessary coping strategies to prevent burnout.

This study has some limitations. Apart from the relatively small sample size particularly, in the interview section, the data collected by administering Maslach et al.'s (1996) Burnout Inventory were based on teachers' self-explanatory perceptions which might affect the generalizability of the findings. Despite its limitations, the study has gone some way in improving our knowledge of the status and causes of burnout among Iranian EFL teachers in the milieu of online education which is one of the first studies of this kind.

Given the importance of teacher burnout, it is hoped that future lines of research delve more deeply into causes and origins of burnout in other contexts. The interplay of contextual and personal factors causing burnout, for instance, is one of the related areas that future researchers can address. Furthermore, identifying some effective and context-sensitive strategies that can help teachers cope with job stressors is another area for further research.

## 7. Disclosure statement

The authors have no conflicts of interests to declare.

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