



## The burnout levels of EFL teachers at primary schools, and their coping strategies

Gülşen Erdağ<sup>a\*</sup>, Zekiye Müge Tavil<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Gazi University, Gazi Faculty of Education, Teknikokullar, Ankara, 06500 Turkey

<sup>b</sup> Gazi University, Gazi Faculty of Education, Teknikokullar, Ankara, 06500 Turkey

### Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the burnout levels of teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) at primary schools in Turkey, and how they cope with burnout. It was also aimed to examine if there was a relationship between the teachers' burnout levels and their adopted coping strategies. The participants of the study comprised 108 EFL teachers working in primary schools in Tekirdağ province during 2018-2019 school year. They were selected using convenience sampling method and on voluntary basis. The data were collected via "The Teacher Burnout Scale" (Richmond et al., 2001) and a coping strategies multiple response questionnaire adapted by the researchers (Kyriacou, 2001; Küçüköğlü, 2013). For the piloting purpose, the questionnaire was administered to 29 EFL teachers. After the piloting, it was found that Cronbach's alpha of the questionnaire was .789. Then, the main study period was conducted with the participant teachers. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that the burnout levels of the participant EFL teachers was quite low. Furthermore, the results indicated that the teachers with severe burnout levels benefited less from both palliative/emotion-focused strategies and direct action/problem-focused coping strategies than the teachers with substantial, some and low burnout levels, respectively.

**Keywords:** Teacher burnout, English language teaching, coping, primary schools

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### 1. Introduction

Today, English is a global language, and not only serves as the lingua franca for industry, political and technological environments, but also for education. Consequently, several European countries such as Finland, Norway, Italy, and many Asian countries such as Turkey, China, India, etc. have modified their policies of education to involve English as a compulsory subject in primary schools (Gursoy, Korkmaz, & Damar, 2017). Along with the rapid transition of the world into a bi/multilingual culture, early language

learning helps children to develop holistically and to develop a positive attitude in their formative years towards foreign languages. For that reason, EFL teachers are particularly important. When the students begin to learn English, their first impressions of English will be shaped by their experience with their teachers. Therefore, it is essential that teachers not only have a strong academic history but also have a high degree of motivation and be in a good position mentally.

Nevertheless, according to many studies, it is apparent that teachers, together with other service workers such as police officers, nurses, and doctors are among those experiencing the most burnout (Schwab, Jackson, & Schuler, 1986), which is a psychological syndrome emerging as a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Burnout can be seen as a three-dimensional concept, including feelings of exhaustion, depersonalization, and unaccomplishment. Exhaustion emerges as the most noticeable response to the stress of the demands of the job and the feelings of unaccomplishment. Since people feel cynical, they take an unfriendly, detached, depersonalized position towards their work and towards the people with whom they interact through their work. They are likely to decrease their participation at work, and furthermore, they abandon their goals. They feel both inefficient and unsuccessful and these emotions often result in feeling inadequate. The universe is viewed as working against their efforts to succeed (Friedman, 2000).

Teachers use some coping strategies in order to deal with the emotions linked to burnout. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described coping as “those changing cognitive and behavioural efforts developed for managing the specific external and/or internal demands judged as exceeding or surpassing the individual’s own resources” (p. 141). According to Roesch and Weiner (2001), these coping strategies are an attempt to recognize, comprehend and express feelings. In the literature, different strategies have been suggested. Active-passive coping, problem-focused and emotion focused-coping, as well as palliative coping and direct action are the most cited ones which are mentioned in the current study.

Folkman and Lazarus (1980) developed problem-focused and emotion focused coping. Problem-focused coping works by taking actions in relation to oneself or the environment in order to change the relationship between the person experiencing stress and the environment. Making use of problem-focused coping corresponds with doing anything to solve a problem that is the source of anxiety, developing potential solutions and following an action-plan. On the other hand, emotion-focused coping has the purpose of decreasing stressful emotional responses. A spectrum of emotions, types of understanding and phrases are used in emotion-focused coping. According to many researchers, people benefit from problem-focused coping when they have low levels of burnout. Likewise, emotion-focused coping is associated with a high level of burnout. That means people with high degrees of burnout mostly use emotion-focused coping strategies. Nevertheless, some emotion-focused

strategies are also effective for decreasing burnout such as seeking social support, positive reassessment, acceptance, etc... (Shin, Park, Kim, Noh, & Lee, 2014).

On the other hand, Kyriacou (2001) categorises coping strategies into two, which are direct action and palliative techniques. While direct action is associated with the strategies teachers can use to get rid of the causes of burnout, palliative techniques do not deal with the reasons of stress itself but concentrate on diminishing the feelings of stress resulting from those sources. Some strategies, such as relaxation training to diminish the feelings of tension and anxiety may be physical in nature. Others may be cognitive and require the teacher to reframe the stressful conditions.

Regarding the consequences of burnout and being aware of the fact that teachers are the building blocks of the education system, it is vital that EFL teachers working in primary schools with young learners have a good psychology, are well motivated to teach, and do not suffer from burnout because the feelings of young learners toward EFL begin to develop at an early age. For that reason, the focal point of interest of this study is to discover if the EFL teachers working in primary schools suffer from burnout or not. If they do, finding out the burnout levels of EFL teachers working in primary schools is the aim of this study. It is also aimed to investigate how these teachers cope with burnout. It is also the purpose of the current study to discover if there is a link between these teachers' burnout levels and their coping strategies. Moreover, it is intended to show what kind of a relation there is between burnout levels of EFL teachers working in primary schools and their ways of coping with burnout if there is such a relation.

The study aimed to increase awareness of teachers, organisations and also communities in general about the nature of teacher burnout providing information about how to prevent and cope with teacher burnout.

## 2. Research Questions

The study focused on the burnout levels of English teachers working in primary schools in Tekirdağ province of Turkey, and to find out how they cope with burnout. The research questions of the study were formulated as in the following:

1. What is the burnout level of EFL teachers at primary schools in Tekirdağ?
2. How do these EFL teachers deal with teacher burnout?
3. Is there a relationship between burnout levels and the burnout coping strategies of these EFL teachers?

### 3. Method

Information about the context and participants, the data collection instruments, the data collection procedures and the data analysis are presented below.

#### 3.1. Context and Participants

The study was conducted in Tekirdağ province of in Turkey in 2018-2019 school year. In that city 138 EFL teachers were affiliated to public primary schools. Out of these 138 teachers, 108 teachers were selected via convenience sampling method, on voluntary basis. In the convenience sampling method, the participants of the research are chosen according to the ease of access (Kothari, 2004).

#### 3.2. Instruments

The data collection instruments of the study were “The Teacher Burnout Scale” (Richmond, Gorham, and Wrench, 2001) and a multiple response questionnaire according to the burnout coping strategies recommended by Kyriacou (2001) and Küçükoğlu (2013).

##### 3.2.1. Teacher Burnout Scale

In this study, “The Teacher Burnout Scale” developed by Richmond et al. (2001) was used because the participants were categorized into four different burnout levels based on the scores of the scale. These levels were as follows: “0-36 indicates few burnout feelings; 36-55 indicates some strong feelings of burnout; but probably not a serious problem; 56-70 indicates substantial burnout feelings, enough to recommend some help; and 71-80 indicates the individual is experiencing severe burnout”.

##### 3.2.2. Burnout Coping Strategies Multiple Response Questionnaire

With the aim of discovering how teachers cope with burnout, a multiple response questionnaire was adapted and used according to the burnout coping strategies suggested by Kyriacou (2001) and Küçükoğlu (2013). With the help of this questionnaire it was possible to categorise the burnout coping strategies that the participants benefited from into two, which were direct action/problem-oriented strategies and palliative/emotion-oriented strategies. The adapted version of the questionnaire was administered to 29 EFL teachers. After the piloting of this questionnaire, it was found that Cronbach’s alpha of this questionnaire was .789.

#### 1.1. Data Collection Procedure

When the required permission for the research was obtained from Tekirdağ province authorities of the Ministry of Education, a pilot study was conducted with 29 EFL teachers.

According to the results of the piloting process, the instrument was found to be reliable (Cronbach's alpha= .789). Then the main study period started, in which the data collection process lasted two months, from December 31, 2018 until February 28, 2019. The scale and the questionnaire were administered both in person and via Google Survey Forms.

### 1.2. Data Analysis

The following procedure was followed with the aim of answering the research questions of the study:

1. In order to discover the burnout levels of the participant EFL teachers, descriptive statistics were used.
2. A multiple response analysis was administered with the purpose of finding out if there was a particular way of dealing with burnout among the participants, and how they coped with burnout.
3. A multiple response analysis was also administered in order to discover if there was a link between these teachers' burnout levels and their burnout coping strategies.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The results of the study are tabulated and presented based on each research question as follows:

Results based on the research question: "1. What is the burnout level of EFL teachers at primary schools in Tekirdağ?"

it was discovered that the mean score of the Teacher Burnout Scale is  $\bar{X} = 37.79$  and the standard deviation is 13.80.

Table 1. The Descriptive Statistics of the Burnout Levels of EFL Primary School Teachers in Tekirdağ

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Burnout Level	108	59.00	20.00	79.00	37.79	13.80

According to Richmond et al. (2001) "36-55 indicates some strong feelings of burnout; but probably not a serious problem". Therefore, it can be understood that burnout levels of these participants were relatively low. This showed the fact that most of these teachers did not suffer from burnout in high levels. The results are also presented in Table 1 above. In addition, Table 2 and Figure 1 display more elaborate information about the burnout levels of the teachers.

Table 2. The Descriptive Analysis of the Categorisation of the Burnout Scores of EFL Teachers

Burnout Level	N	%	Cumulative Percent
Low	51	47.2	47.2
Some	45	41.7	88.9
Substantial	9	8.3	97.2
Severe	3	2.8	100.0
Total	108	100.0	

For the purpose of gaining more insight, the participants were divided into four main groups. As Table 2 also shows, 51 participants had low levels of burnout, 45 had some feelings of burnout, while 9 had substantial and 3 had severe burnout. Figure 1 shows the related the findings.

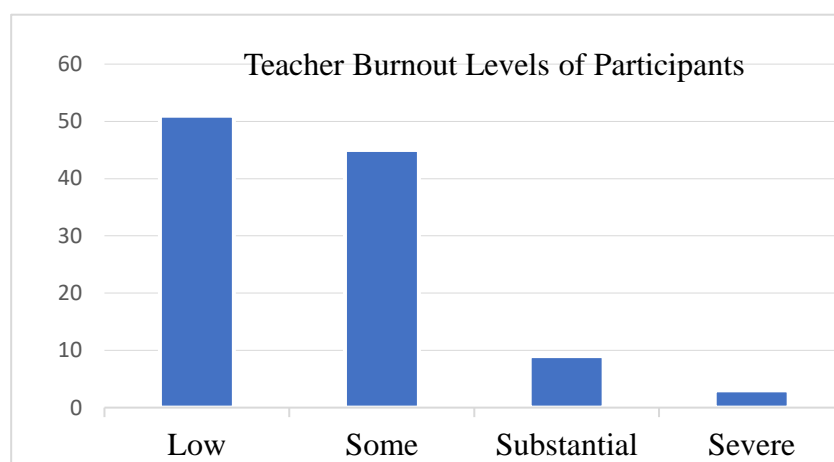


Figure 1: The burnout levels of EFL primary school teachers in Tekirdağ

Next, the data were analysed in order to answer the research question “How do these EFL teachers deal with teacher burnout?”. Table 3 illustrates these findings.

Table 3. The Descriptive Statistics of the Frequencies for the Coping Strategies Used by the Participants

How do you cope with burnout?	N	%
I try to keep problems in perspective	32	29.6
I avoid confrontations.	22	20.4
I try to relax after work.	84	77.8
I take action to deal with problems.	56	51.9
I keep my feelings under control.	72	66.7
I devote more time to particular tasks.	26	24.1
I discuss problems and express feelings to others.	55	50.9
I have a healthy home life.	55	50.9
I plan ahead and prioritize.	42	38.9
I recognise my own limitations.	51	42.7
I try to find opportunities to go abroad for educational and social purposes.	25	23.1
I identify the problems I face both personally and academically.	52	48.1
I spend at least one hour a week doing something for myself.	67	62.0
I try to find strategies to solve the problems I have identified.	68	63.0
I make sure that I have a clear job description.	25	23.1
I get the necessary administrative support.	13	12.0
I have my financial problems solved.	16	14.8
I have sufficient in-service training.	19	17.6

According to the findings, these teachers benefited more from palliative/ emotion-focused strategies than direct action/problem-focused coping strategies. On the one hand, trying to relax after work, keeping their feelings under control, spending at least one hour a week doing something for themselves, and having a healthy home life can be categorized as palliative/ emotion-focused strategies. On the other hand, trying to find strategies to solve the problems they have identified, taking action to deal with problems, discussing problems and expressing feelings to others can be categorised as direct action/ problem-focused coping strategies.

Finally, the data related to the last research question; “Is there a relationship between the burnout levels of and the burnout coping strategies of these EFL teachers?” were analysed. Table 4 in the following page displays these findings.

Table 4. The Participants' Usage of Coping Strategies According to Their Burnout Levels

How do you cope with burnout?	Burnout Level			
	0-36 Low	36-55 some	56-70 substantial	71-80 severe
I try to keep problems in perspective	15	15	2	0
I avoid confrontations.	9	9	2	2
I try to relax after work.	40	36	6	2
I take action to deal with problems.	33	19	3	1
I keep my feelings under control.	33	30	8	1
I devote more time to particular tasks.	15	8	2	1
I discuss problems and express feelings to others.	30	21	4	0
I have a healthy home life.	31	18	6	0
I plan ahead and prioritize.	28	12	2	0
I recognise my own limitations.	27	18	4	2
I try to find opportunities to go abroad for educational/social purposes.	13	10	2	0
I identify the problems I face both personally and academically.	24	22	6	0
I spend at least one hour a week doing something for myself.	33	27	6	1
I try to find strategies to solve the problems I have identified.	31	28	7	2
I make sure that I have a clear job description.	19	6	0	0
I get the necessary administrative support.	10	3	0	0
I have my financial problems solved.	8	7	1	0
I have sufficient in-service training.	13	5	1	0
Total	51	45	9	3

The results of the analysis showed the fact that the participants who had different burnout levels also made use of different coping strategies in order to cope with burnout. To begin with, the results indicated that teachers with a severe burnout level mostly applied the coping strategies of avoiding confrontations (66.7%) and trying to relax after work (66.7%), recognizing their own limitations (66.7%), trying to find strategies to solve the problems they have identified (66.7%).

On the other hand, teachers with a substantial burnout level mostly made use of the coping strategies of keeping their feelings under control (88.9%), trying to relax after work (66.7%), having a healthy home life (66.7%), identifying the problems they face both personally and academically (66.7%), spending at least one hour a week doing something for themselves (66.7%) and trying to find strategies to solve the problems they have identified (77.8%).

However, teachers with some feelings of burnout mostly benefited from trying to relax after work (80%), keeping their feelings under control (66.7%), spending at least one hour a week doing something for themselves (60%) and trying to find strategies to solve the problems they have identified (62.2%).

Lastly, the participants with low burnout levels mostly used trying to relax after work (78.4%), keeping their feelings under control (64.7%), taking action to deal with problems (64.7%), spending at least one hour a week doing something for themselves (64.7%), discussing problems and expressing feelings to others (58.8%), planning ahead and



prioritising (54.9%), recognizing their own limitations (52.9%), trying to find strategies to solve the problems they have identified (60.8%) and having a healthy home life (60.85%).

The findings also showed that trying to relax after work and trying to find strategies to solve the problems they have identified were the most used strategies among teachers with all burnout levels.

In short, the participants with various burnout levels coped with burnout by making use of different coping strategies. The participants with low and some burnout levels used more coping strategies than the others while the participants with substantial and severe burnout levels benefited from fewer coping strategies. With the severity of burnout, the number of used coping strategies also declined. For that reason, it can be concluded that this study concurred with Seidmann and Zager (1991). According to Seidmann and Zager (1991) using only one coping strategy is usually not adequate. In addition to this, some studies found that being consistent and pragmatic when using coping strategies can be more beneficial than using only one (Fortes-Ferreira, Gonzales, Gonzales-Morales, & Martin, 2006).

Moreover, all the participants with various burnout levels benefited from both palliative/emotion-focused and direct action/problem-focused coping strategies. Despite the fact that the participants with low and some burnout levels made use of more direct action/problem-focused coping strategies than teachers with substantial and severe burnout levels, respectively, the participants having substantial and severe burnout levels still used direct action/problem-focused coping strategies. This finding supported the findings of Jenaro, Flores & Arias (2007).

With regard to some researches, only emotion-focused/palliative coping strategies are used by the people with higher levels of burnout and these people do not benefit from direct action/problem-focused coping strategies. This study does not support these studies (Chwalisz, Altmaier, & Russell, 1992; Shin, et al., 2014). On the other hand, it supports Leiter (1991) in that making use of more direct-action coping strategies or control strategies is a sign of low burnout.

## 5. Conclusions and Suggestions

In the study, the burnout levels of the EFL teachers working in primary schools in Tekirdağ were found to be higher than lower. Furthermore, the findings also showed that teachers with low burnout levels made use of more coping strategies than the other teachers with some, substantial and severe levels, respectively. Despite the fact that teachers with all burnout levels benefited from both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies, it was discovered that teachers with low burnout levels used more problem-focused coping strategies.

With the help of the findings of this study, it was intended to provide practical

suggestions for educational administrators, policy makers, teachers, researchers and the readers of this study in order to prevent teacher burnout and to gain more insight about the subject.

First of all, it can be helpful to inform teachers about the useful coping strategies. This can be provided either before the beginning of their teaching career or with the assistance of in-service training. Instead of maladaptive coping strategies, teachers may profit from training to use more adaptive coping strategies. Regarding the fact that maladaptive coping strategies such as drinking alcohol, smoking, sleep deprivation are bad for one's health, these coping strategies can even negatively impact their feelings and their quality of life. Therefore, they can suffer from burnout. Instead of using maladaptive coping strategies, benefiting from adaptive coping strategies such as physical exercise and hobbies can be much more useful in order to prevent or reduce burnout.

Instead of making use of only one coping strategy, it could be more effective to use various strategies (Fortes-Ferreira et al., 2006). It may be more helpful to benefit from some specific coping strategies in some situations than others. For that reason, teachers should be trained about various coping strategies with the aim of preventing burnout or coping with it.

In order to alleviate the stressful feelings of teachers, it may be a good idea to organise social events such as trips, theatres, social meetings. Through these activities, teachers can discard their negative feelings, and this can enhance the positive relationship between colleagues. As a result, they can have a positive atmosphere in their working environment, and this can be helpful in avoiding stressful feelings and teacher burnout.

The causes of burnout can be individual or organizational or a combination of both. Since organizational factors have a major role in causing burnout, burnout can be avoided by eliminating these organizational factors such as role conflict, role ambiguity, low decision-making power, little support from peers and superiors, poor classroom climate, reward and punishment procedures, work overload, low salary, and excessive paper work.

Institutions should consult with teachers about the issues that influence their classroom teaching such as curriculum development and lesson planning (Kyriacou, 2001). By contributing to decisions regarding themselves, teachers can feel more accountable for the decisions and they can have more power over their working environment. Consequently, teachers can be active in the decision making process that plays a role in the quality of their work life. This can raise teacher morale, enthusiasm, self-esteem, motivation and job satisfaction. This can also diminish or hinder work-related stress and teacher burnout.

Last but not least, it might be beneficial to provide a free telephone counselling services for teachers just like the ones called "teacherline" or the internet website "www.teacherline.org.uk" provided for teachers in the UK (Kyriacou, 2001). This can be effective for teachers to ask for advice and suggestions, not only to prevent stressful emotions and burnout, but also to cope with these emotions.

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