

Please cite this paper as follows:

Hamzehvand, S., Behroozizad, S., & Kuhi, D. (2025). Iranian EFL Teachers' Perceptions of the Interplay between Professional Commitment and Academic Burnout. *International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 13 (54), 61-70

Research Paper

Iranian EFL Teachers' Perceptions of the Interplay between Professional Commitment and Academic Burnout

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Received: December 12, 2024

Revised: January 4, 2025

Accepted: January 21, 2025

Abstract

This qualitative study explores the relationship between teacher commitment and burnout among EFL teachers in Iran. Through in-depth interviews with teachers from both high schools and private institutes, the study examines three key aspects of commitment: commitment to the school organization, commitment to the teaching profession, and commitment to students. Findings reveal that while high levels of commitment contribute to motivation and job satisfaction, they can also lead to increased stress and burnout, particularly in the presence of heavy workloads, lack of administrative support, and inadequate salaries. Conversely, low commitment is often associated with feelings of undervaluation, lack of professional growth opportunities, and insufficient resources. The study underscores the importance of maintaining a balanced level of commitment to mitigate burnout risks while fostering professional dedication. Implications suggest that educational policymakers and institutions should implement strategies to support teachers, including professional development opportunities, competitive salaries, and work-life balance initiatives, to sustain teacher engagement and effectiveness.

Keywords: Academic burnout, EFL teachers, Professional commitment, Teaching communities

برداشت معلمان زبان انگلیسی به عنوان زبان خارجی (EFL) در ایران از تعامل بین تعهد حرفه‌ای و فرسودگی تحصیلی

این پژوهش کیفی به بررسی رابطه میان تعهد حرفه‌ای معلمان و فرسودگی شغلی در میان معلمان زبان انگلیسی به عنوان زبان خارجی در ایران می‌پردازد. با انجام مصاحبه‌های عمیق با معلمان مدارس دولتی و مؤسسات خصوصی، این مطالعه سه جنبه کلیدی از تعهد را بررسی می‌کند: تعهد به سازمان آموزشی (مدرسه)، تعهد به حرفه معلمی، و تعهد به دانش‌آموزان. یافته‌ها نشان می‌دهد که هرچند سطوح بالای تعهد می‌تواند منجر به انگیزه و رضایت شغلی شود، اما در عین حال ممکن است باعث افزایش استرس و فرسودگی شغلی نیز بشود، به‌ویژه در شرایطی که بار کاری سنگین، نبود حمایت اداری، و حقوق ناکافی وجود دارد. در مقابل، تعهد پایین معمولاً با احساس بی‌ارزشی، نبود فرصت‌های رشد حرفه‌ای، و کمبود منابع آموزشی همراه است. این مطالعه بر اهمیت حفظ تعادل منطقی در سطح تعهد تأکید می‌کند تا ضمن ارتقای وفاداری حرفه‌ای، خطر فرسودگی کاهش یابد. نتایج پژوهش پیشنهاد می‌دهد که سیاست‌گذاران آموزشی و نهادهای آموزشی باید با اتخاذ راهکارهایی از معلمان حمایت کنند؛ از جمله فراهم کردن فرصت‌های توسعه حرفه‌ای، ارائه حقوق رقابتی، و ایجاد توازن میان کار و زندگی، تا بتوان مشارکت و اثربخشی معلمان را حفظ کرد.

واژگان کلیدی: فرسودگی تحصیلی، معلمان زبان انگلیسی، تعهد حرفه‌ای، جوامع آموزشی

Introduction

The role of teachers in such change attempts is being more closely scrutinized as educational changes take place all around the world. In this era of transition, a teacher's professional commitment should include a strong commitment to helping learners succeed as well as a strong sense of school loyalty (Yu et al., 2021). Teacher commitment, described as the teachers' emotional connection to their profession, professional networks, the school, and the relationships with colleagues, parents, and students, is central to shaping a school's culture and, consequently, influences the teachers' instructional practices (Chesnut, 2017; Park, 2005). The overall success of a school in enhancing students' academic achievement is intricately tied to the active and sustained dedication of teachers to their students within the classroom. This commitment not only benefits the students but also enhances the effectiveness of the educational environment (Gao & Xu, 2014).

Due to the fact that it "becomes a force of great value when it is applied to causes that benefit humankind and the world at large" (Livingston, 2010, p. 61), professional dedication has recently been the subject of in-depth investigation in all professions. A growing focus on commitment in learning and ELT has resulted from the definition of teaching professional commitment as one of the fundamental aspects of education in the 21st century in the teaching profession as well (Meyer et al., 2019). Although commitment is a difficult word to define, some academics have suggested that it is "a psychological bond or identification of an individual with an object that takes on a special meaning and importance" (p. 291). Researchers have attempted to distinguish between the numerous objects of teacher commitment, such as schools, students, and/or the teaching profession, within the context of this term (Sinclair, 2008; Yu et al., 2021). Severe psychological discomfort, such as academic burnout, can have a negative impact on teachers' commitment since its elevated degree might sap motivation (Karnia, 2023). Additionally, it may harm one's bodily and mental health (see Schaufeli et al., 2002). One of the negative effects of excessive stress and anxiety in academic settings can be considered to be academic burnout (Fathi et al., 2021). There is a common concept and fact that teachers have a higher level of professional commitment leading to a reduction in burnout (Arik & Turunc, 2016), but the factors and potential reasons affecting the negative relationship between commitment and burnout among English teachers have not been touched yet, regardless of the fact that both of key terms such as teachers' professional commitment and teachers' burnout have been the subject of a substantial body of research within the past two decades (Day, 2008; Hanson, 2021; Marr & English, 2019), hence, this study aimed to niche this gap through a qualitative study and answer the following research questions.

RQ1: *What are the perceptions of EFL teachers towards commitment to school?*

RQ2: *What are the perceptions of EFL teachers towards commitment to students?*

RQ3: *What are the perceptions of EFL teachers towards commitment to teaching?*

RQ4: *What are the perceptions of EFL teachers towards teachers' burnout?*

RQ5: *What are the perceptions of EFL teachers towards the relationship between burnout and commitment?*

Literature Review

Professional Commitment

Organizational commitment was defined by Mowday, Porter, and Steers (1982) as the willingness of individuals and groups to identify with the values and purposes of an organization, the willingness to work hard on its behalf, and the commitment to remain inside the organization. As the key to a school's culture, teacher commitment—which is defined by teachers' psychological attachment to the teaching profession, professional associations, and school, as

well as colleagues, parents, and students—can be seen in the teachers' instruction, commitment to helping students succeed, and sense of loyalty to the institution (Lee et al., 2011). Although there are many definitions of commitment, recent literature has focused on some combinations of three distinct types of teacher commitment: commitment to the school organization, commitment to the students, and commitment to the teaching profession itself. As previously stated, teacher professional commitment is complex because teachers' bonds extend beyond their organizations or schools to include other entities such as their colleagues, students, professional associations, and the teaching profession itself (Yu et al., 2021). It is also important to remember that when teachers don't feel like they belong, it can cause emotional tiredness, which can cause them to lose interest in and motivation for their work. In this context, teacher commitment refers to achieving academic objectives, promoting teacher growth, as well as some general issues that teachers may have in their professional lives that are unrelated to the particular school where they work (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011).

Since instructors' active commitment to their pupils in the classroom is the only way for a school to successfully improve students' learning achievement, it is acknowledged as a key to success in education (Hausman & Goldring, 2001). Additionally, according to Rasak et al. (2009), teachers who have high organizational commitment levels display strong degrees of connection to their formal educational institutions and put-up significant effort on their behalf. While instructors with low organizational commitment are more likely to quit, maybe to teach in other schools, teachers with high organizational commitment are more likely to stay and help the schools achieve their goals. According to Rosenholtz and Simpson (1990), teachers with poor organizational commitment who stay in their schools typically put in little effort and exhibit patterns of chronic absenteeism, which have a detrimental impact on instructional efficacy and student learning.

Professional commitment is defined as a bond with one's work and profession rather than with a particular institution of higher learning (Somech & Bolger, 2002). Regardless of the specific school or institution, a teacher is motivated by their professional commitment to build the relationships and skills necessary for a successful career (Razak et al., 2009). Teachers who are very committed to their careers are more likely to stay in the classroom than those who are less committed. Teachers with a high level of professional dedication but low organizational commitment, however, might look for teaching jobs in other institutions. The desire of instructors to assume accountability for students' behavior and academic progress is referred to as commitment to pupils (Park, 2005). According to research (Pourtousi & Ghanizadeh, 2020), teachers with high levels of dedication to their students have been proven to increase student engagement in learning and academic accomplishment, particularly for low-achieving students.

Some mix of these three commitment types, according to Firestone and Pennell (1993), is "necessary for teachers to have the motivation to professionalize and pursue changes in their practice while coping with the complex demands these changes present" (p. 493). Understanding a teacher's commitment orientation is also important since different commitment orientations might have different effects on students' academic achievements (Madigan & Kim, 2021). Academic burnout is thought to be the cause of low teaching commitment, but the exact relationship between the two ideas is not well understood.

Academic Burnou

No matter whether a teacher is committed to educational centers, students, or their professional commitment, there may be a number of externally or internally-imposed restrictions that can thwart their wholehearted engagement. However, these restrictions are frequently ignored when discussing the quality of the teachers' services. According to some, one of the top five most stressful jobs is teaching, and because of how hard the job is, many instructors are more likely to

leave the profession (Coombe, 2008). Burnout is one of the contributing variables that make teaching a stressful job, according to Bakker and Costa (2014). Burnout causes teachers to lose their sense of commitment, morality, and enthusiasm; such teachers are less sympathetic toward students, have less patience when dealing with disruptive students, are unprepared to present lesson plans, and are unable to defend themselves from threats to their mental health (Fathi et al., 2021).

Few research has been done on academic burnout and the degree of burnout in educational contexts (e.g., Pressley, 2021; Salmela-Aro, 2017). Professional dedication, which might result in teaching failure, is one of the factors that is thought to have a bad association with burnout (Asadi & Bozorgian, 2022). Academic burnout is a psychological illness that develops as a result of ongoing academic pressure and heavy course loads. It is characterized by emotional tiredness brought on by the demands of studying, a detached and cynical perception toward schoolwork, and a decreased sense of efficacy as a student (Gan et al., 2007). Despite the implication that commitment and burnout are likely related, and that they are associated negatively with one another, we have had difficulty locating studies that qualitatively explore the potential interaction between the aforementioned variables. As a result, more research is needed to determine whether attention is returning, especially in relation to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. To close the gap, the current study will use a qualitative approach to analyze this intersectionality from a different angle.

There are many studies on burnout and commitment in workplaces and educational institutions. Lee et al. (2021), for instance, used an exploratory factor analysis to look into the connections between a professional learning community (PLC), faculty trust in colleagues, teachers' collective efficacy, and teachers' commitment to students. Regression analysis results showed that faculty trust in colleagues and all three PLC elements might considerably and favorably impact teachers' collective efficacy on instructional practices. Only one PLC factor, collective learning and application, as well as the factor faculty trust in colleagues, were significant predictors of instructors' collective effectiveness in enforcing student discipline.

Moreover, Ghasemi (2023) attempted to research the impact of a burnout intervention program based on individual psychology. 54 EFL English language teachers with diverse professional profiles who had been identified as having burnout symptoms participated in the study. Using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and the Achievement Motivation Test (AMT), the researcher assessed the program's results.

Results showed that the training had a positive and quick impact on reducing and managing burnout symptoms. In contrast, the program's durability impacts in the follow-up tests were only marginal, which supports the necessity for tests of ongoing and in-service training to gauge long-term effects.

Furthermore, very similar to the current study, Asadi and Bozorgian (2022) used classroom observation and semi-structured interviews from 100 English language teachers in the Mazandaran province to investigate the relationship between burnout and foreign language teachers' commitment to teaching service in Iran Language Institutes. Data research revealed a conflict between teachers' dedication to teaching English and their level of burnout. Male teachers experience greater burnout than female teachers, according to descriptive statistics.

As it is axiomatic, two variables of burnout and career commitment have been studied in relationship with the other factors. Moreover, Asadi and Bozorgian's study (2022) is to some extent similar to this study, however the significance of the present study lies in the fact that our study is basically qualitative-based study rather than mixed-one since we assumed that spending energy on just one phase of the study that is qualitative one can increase the profitability of the study and it increases the readers' awareness of the gist of professional commitment when it is

affected by academic burnout or vice versa through deeply exploring the minds and perceptions of English teachers in a context like Iran. In other words, using qualitative research, we aimed to get a better understanding through first-hand experience, truthful reporting, and quotations of actual conversations. It aimed to understand how the participants derive meaning in terms of both burnout and commitment from their teaching contexts, and how their meaning influences their behavior.

The present study was an attempt to explore the relationship Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions towards professional commitment and academic burnout through a qualitative-based study. It is worth noting that although these two variables have been touched by different studies, actually the high prevalence of burnout among English teachers (Sadeghi & Khezroulou, 2016) and its potential impact on their professional commitment was the problem that motivated this study. Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged stress (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2000). It can lead to decreased job satisfaction (Kinman et al., 2011), reduced performance (Esfandiari & Kamali, 2016), and even attrition in teaching profession (Xue, 2021). Understanding the relationship between professional commitment and burnout among teachers can help identify strategies to prevent burnout and enhance their overall well-being, job satisfaction, and effectiveness in the classrooms (Zhang et al., 2023).

Method

Participants

The study's sample consisted of 50 EFL teachers from both public and private high schools and language institutes in Urmia, Iran. In Iran, the official language is Farsi, and English is considered a foreign language (EFL) since it is used by non-native English speakers in a country where English is not the primary language. Therefore, all the teachers in this study were instructing in English as a foreign language. Data were collected from these various educational settings using a convenient non-random sampling method. The demographic details of the participants are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Demographic Information of EFL Teachers

Gender	Male	Percentages
		40%
Female		60%
Age	1-5 years	35%
	5-10 years	57%
	10-15 years	8%
Academic Degree	Bachelor	30%
	MA	53%
	PhD	17%

The participants' ages ranged from 27 to 49, with an average age of 34 and a standard deviation of 2.47. About 30% of the participants held a Bachelor's degree, while 53% of them had Master's degrees or were pursuing Master's degrees. The remaining 17% were PhD students. In terms of gender, 40% of the participants were male, and 60% were female, specifically, 22 men and 28 women who took part in the study. Their teaching experience varied from 4 to 15 years.

Instruments

A semi-structured interview was implemented as the data collection instrument. Having reviewed the related literature on both professional commitment and academic burnout of teachers in general and the integration of two concepts in particular, the researchers tried to develop interview questions to elicit the required data for the purpose of this study. In terms of the questions of the interview, it is worth noting that the questions were asked indirectly and revolved around three types of commitment (commitment to school, commitment to students, and commitment to teaching), burnout, and the relationship between burnout and commitment. It means that the researcher focused on the problems that teachers face in their classes as a result of burnout and how they solve them. In fact, the teachers' solutions to the existing problems and teaching barriers and the way they initiate change whenever they need to enforce change (those challenges that can be solved by EFL teachers as initiators of change) were the focus of the study. In other words, solving the challenges and problems supposed to be the result of high professional commitment and low burnout. For estimating credibility of the interview questions, the researchers presented the information gathered from the interviewees and asked them to pay attention to each question and the answers were given by themselves to see whether there was any problem with or differences in the answers. The participants approved the accuracy of the data and so the credibility of the interview was approved. For the aim of dependability, 20% of the results of the interview were re-checked by two of the researchers' colleagues who were familiar with the data analysis section and the results of the inter-rater reliability was reported to be .95.

Procedure

The study employed a descriptive and exploratory research design. Data collection was carried out during the months of January and February 2023. Before administering the research instrument, participants were verbally provided with a thorough explanation of the ethical considerations. It was strongly emphasized that their involvement was entirely voluntary, with no obligation to participate. Participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential, and, as such, there was no need for them to disclose their names. However, they were requested to provide information regarding their educational qualifications and ages. To underscore the importance of the study, participants were provided with a detailed explanation, highlighting their role in contributing to the expansion of knowledge. This approach aimed to encourage their active participation in the interview sessions, ultimately enhancing the reliability and validity of the results. Furthermore, all questions posed by participants were addressed attentively, one by one, as needed. Data collection occurred through a combination of in-person and online meetings.

To ensure thoroughness and prevent any oversight, respondents were afforded ample time to respond to each question, and they were encouraged to seek clarification if any query seemed unclear. In cases where time constraints arose or if participants preferred, they had the option to choose online meetings conducted through platforms like Skype or Google Meet. Participants were tasked with contemplating their perspectives and articulating their thoughts on topics such as commitment and burnout. To facilitate accurate transcription and in-depth analysis, the interviews were recorded for later examination and presentation. The participants conveyed their responses in Farsi, which were subsequently translated into English.

The criteria for stopping the interview in the present study were both saturation and ensuring that the point of view of each and every teacher on the mentioned concepts was collected. Around two months were devoted to the interview sessions and after the various online and face to face interview sessions, the results of the interviews were analyzed qualitatively. The

method of analysis chosen for the interview section was thematic analysis, and it was reported in the form of themes and sub-themes as well as the extracts for the semi-structured interview. During thematic analysis phase, the researchers tried their best to generate initial codes, search for themes among codes, review themes, define and name themes, and produce the final report. After this process, the researchers analyzed the transcripts looking for the brief trends and patterns. The researchers also switched between reading the codes line by line and tried to identify meaningful qualitative units for analysis. As the next step and based on their themes, they were classified. As stated, the credibility and dependability of the interviews were reported. Following will be a detailed analysis of the interviews.

Results

The current study focused on various subcategories, including commitment to school, students, and teaching, as well as burnout and its relationship with commitment. The results from interviews were categorized into themes and analyzed statistically.

Commitment to School

Table 2

High and Low Commitment to School Indicators

Indicator	Percentage
High Commitment	
Prioritizing students' academic growth and success	50%
Actively participating in school activities	40%
Maintaining open communication	45%
Commitment to professional growth	35%
Low Commitment	
Feeling undervalued or unappreciated	25%
Lack of opportunities for growth	20%
Inadequate resources	30%
Outdated curriculum	15%
Lack of student motivation or discipline	10%

The data suggest that while many teachers display strong commitment through academic prioritization and professional growth, others struggle with institutional barriers such as lack of appreciation and resources.

Commitment to Teaching

Table 3

Actions Demonstrating Commitment

Action	Percentage
Punctuality	60%
Preparation	55%
Professionalism	50%
Continuous learning	45%
Student support	40%
Collaboration	35%
Feedback and assessment	50%
Communication with parents	40%

Teachers prioritize punctuality, preparation, and professionalism, while collaboration and parental communication appear as less emphasized areas.

Burnout Factors

Table 4

Factors Contributing to Burnout

Factor	Percentage
Low salary	100%
Workload	100%
Lack of support	60%
Emotional demands	55%
High expectations	50%
Work-life balance	45%
Constant change	40%
Lack of recognition	35%

Salary and workload were universally reported as the most significant stressors leading to burnout.

Discussion

The findings highlight a strong correlation between teacher commitment and burnout. Teachers who reported high levels of commitment to their students and school often experienced increased job satisfaction but also faced heightened risks of burnout, particularly when institutional support was lacking. This aligns with previous research (Smith, 2010) indicating that intrinsic motivation contributes to commitment but can also lead to emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, the role of administrative support and resources emerged as a crucial determinant of commitment. Teachers who felt undervalued and lacked growth opportunities demonstrated lower engagement levels, supporting findings by Haster et al. (2020).

The study also found that burnout is not solely caused by workload but also by emotional investment and personal sacrifice. Establishing healthy boundaries, seeking professional development, and maintaining a balance between commitment and personal well-being were cited as effective strategies to prevent burnout.

Conclusion

This study underscores the complexity of teacher commitment and its interplay with burnout. While high commitment positively influences job performance and student success, it also increases vulnerability to burnout. Key institutional factors such as salary, workload, and professional development opportunities play a crucial role in maintaining teacher motivation.

Educational institutions must implement strategies that support teacher well-being, including competitive salaries, manageable workloads, professional growth opportunities, and adequate resources. Additionally, promoting a work-life balance and recognizing teachers' contributions can mitigate burnout risks while fostering long-term commitment.

Future research should explore longitudinal studies to assess how these variables evolve over time and identify interventions that can effectively sustain teacher commitment while reducing burnout.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have several implications for educational institutions, policymakers, and teacher support initiatives. Schools and education administrators should recognize the impact of burnout on teacher commitment and implement policies that promote a healthier work environment. Providing competitive salaries, reducing workload through better resource allocation, and ensuring administrative support can help mitigate burnout and enhance teacher retention. Additionally, professional development opportunities should be expanded to equip teachers with the necessary skills and strategies to manage stress and maintain motivation.

Moreover, fostering a supportive school culture that values teacher contributions and encourages open communication can play a crucial role in sustaining commitment. Work-life balance initiatives, such as flexible scheduling and mental health support programs, should be integrated into educational policies to prevent teacher burnout. Finally, teacher training programs should emphasize resilience-building strategies to help educators manage stress and maintain long-term dedication to their profession. By addressing these factors, educational institutions can create a more sustainable teaching environment that benefits both educators and students alike.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small and limited to EFL teachers in Iran, restricting the generalizability of the results to broader educational contexts. Secondly, the reliance on qualitative interviews may have introduced biases, as participants' responses could be influenced by their personal experiences and perceptions. Additionally, the study focused exclusively on English teachers, which limits the applicability of findings to other subject areas. Another limitation is that the study did not incorporate quantitative measures to validate the qualitative findings, which may have strengthened the reliability of the conclusions. Lastly, external factors such as cultural, economic, and institutional differences may influence the experiences of teachers, which were not extensively examined in this study.

Suggestions for Further Research

Future research should address these limitations by expanding the sample size to include teachers from diverse educational contexts and subjects to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Employing mixed-method approaches, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative analyses, can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between teacher commitment and burnout. Longitudinal studies could also be conducted to examine how commitment and burnout evolve over time and how different factors contribute to these changes. Additionally, cross-cultural studies comparing teacher commitment and burnout in different countries can offer valuable insights into how educational policies and work environments impact teachers' professional well-being. Future research should also explore intervention strategies that schools and policymakers can implement to support teachers and reduce burnout levels effectively.

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