



## Teacher Burnout: Reviewing Empowerment, Immunity, and Autonomy as Healing Pills

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### ABSTRACT

*Burnout is often characterized by feelings resulting from interpersonal interactions which seem to trigger the presence of chronic stress. The teaching occupation is considered one of the most stressful occupations because it requires teachers to deal with challenging students and parents and to manage heavy workloads in their workplace. Therefore, there is a greater risk of burnout among teachers as compared to many other occupations. A substantial percentage of English language teachers today seem to be experiencing burnout, a condition often associated with both excessive stress and intensive workloads. To date, psychologists have proposed a variety of explanations and reasons regarding this phenomenon, but there have been few studies offering remedies for teacher burnout in the literature. This review study attempts to offer some important remedies for teacher burnout and demonstrate the role of teacher immunity, teacher autonomy, and teacher empowerment as remedial constructs for ameliorating teacher burnout to fill the existing research gap. Generally, this study suggests that empowerment, immunity, and autonomy play a crucial role in ameliorating teachers' burnout. Moreover, juxtaposing these factors may significantly alleviate teacher burnout. The findings of this study can aid teachers in alleviating their burnout by highlighting their autonomy, immunity, and empowerment abilities.*

**KEYWORDS:** Teacher autonomy; Teacher burnout; Teacher empowerment; and Teacher immunity

### INTRODUCTION

In any educational system, teachers are crucial stakeholders, possessing the ability to influence both student success and the overall effectiveness of the system (Darling-Hammond, 2020). Teaching plays a pivotal role for language learners because it can pave the way for achieving their educational and professional goals (Esfandiari & Kamali, 2016). According to Saloviita and Pakarinen (2021), teaching has been considered one of the most stressful jobs in various educational and cultural contexts. In the process of teaching, there are several sources of stress, including



inadequate consideration for the teaching profession, conditions of work that are unfavorable, insufficient salary of the responsibilities involved, overload of work, and difficulties making progress with academically struggling students.

Akbari and Eghtesadi Roudi (2019) stated that burnout can result from chronic exposure to this type of stress, which is a reaction based on emotions in which there is a loss of positive feelings and enthusiasm on the part of the teacher, in he/she loss his/her sympathetic and respectful attitude toward the learners and confidence in one's capabilities as an effective teacher. Besides, burnout is considered to be a psychosocial syndrome that develops from chronic work-related stress (Maslach et al., 2001, as cited in Madigan et al., 2023). Moreover, burnout is widely considered a professional disease, known as the greatest occupational hazard of the twenty-first century which poses a global threat (Aloe et al., 2014; Leiter & Maslach, 2005). Correspondingly, Madigan and Kim (2021) believed that teacher burnout is linked with lower academic achievement and less student courage quality.

Saloviita and Pakarinen (2021) argued that burnout progresses gradually when work becomes unfulfilling, unpleasant, and unrewarding. They also posited that understanding the factors of teacher burnout aids in constructing schools that enhance instructors' job satisfaction and the possibility of high-quality education. In this case, it should be noted that the issues listed before can be resolved in some ways. Namely, empowerment theory by enhancing individuals' psychological and/or structural power, enables them to take control of their work and make decisions aimed at improving their lives (Sadan, 1997). Based on empowerment theory, it is vital for alleviating teacher burnout to have a school structure that allows for structural empowerment. In addition, the concept of immunity for language teachers is characterized by Hiver and Dörnyei (2017) as a great system that acts as a reaction to intense hazards and permits educators to preserve instructional effectiveness and professional stability. They maintained that educator immunity mediates particular issues with more context-related discussions, and this idea was a core issue to many of the major issues facing language teachers. Furthermore, the term teacher autonomy describes teachers' control over their curriculum, assessments, classroom organization, and environment (Lacaba et al., 2020). Based on Daniilidou and Platsidou (2018), the concept of instructor autonomy pertains to the ability and responsibility of the educator to formulate their method of instruction.

All in all, to the best of our knowledge, no previous studies have captured teacher burnout, teacher immunity, teacher autonomy, and teacher empowerment about each other. To fill this void, this review study aims at exploring some existing studies regarding teacher empowerment, teacher immunity, and teacher autonomy, as healing pills and remedies, for reducing burnout from teachers, educational settings, or other relevant individuals and components.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **TEACHER BURNOUT: A COMMONLY REPORTED ISSUE AMONG TEACHERS**

Bryne (1998) claimed that during the first four years of their career, half of new instructors quit teaching. As postulated by Ghonsooly and Raeesi (2012), burnout is believed to be a complex, multifaceted issue with numerous dimensions that require an advanced viewpoint to examine its diverse elements and components.



In its original definition, burnout refers to the frustration or fatigue brought on by placing extreme requirements on individuals' strength, assets, or energy (Freudenberger, 1974, as cited in Dursun, 2021). Similarly, Maslach (1986, as cited in Madigan & Kim, 2021) presented the greatest commonly accepted definition of burnout, characterizing it as a phenomenon with multiple facets: a three-dimensional syndrome of emotional exhaustion (feeling of being emotionally worn out and drained at a person's work), depersonalization (an unfeeling and unbiased reply toward recipients of one's care, service, instruction, or treatment), and reduced personal accomplishment (feeling of decreased achievement and competence in one's work with others) that occurs among individuals who work with people in some helping capacity. Among these three dimensions, emotional exhaustion is known as a central feature of the whole phenomenon (Maslach & Leiter, 2016, as cited in Saloviita & Pakarinen, 2021).

Burnout causes a person to become less committed, have absences from work, decreased production, and low spirit (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). According to Pines and Aronson (1988; as cited in Yeboah et al., 2022), burnout is a condition of mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion that people exhibit after being in emotionally challenging situations for an extended period. Based on their definition, physical exhaustion involves a lack of energy, persistent tiredness, weakness, and a range of somatic and bodily problems. Besides, the sensation of powerlessness, confinement, and hopelessness is emotional exhaustion. Accordingly, mental exhaustion indicates a pessimistic view of oneself, one's job, and one's life (Moghadam et al., 2020).

Meyer (1982) believed that burnout is divided into two categories: active burnout, which is connected to external factors, and passive burnout, which is associated with internal factors. Accordingly, an external locus of control, such as members of the family, and environmental circumstances have been linked to the development of active burnout. On the other hand, passive burnout can arise from internal conflicts, which are frequently caused by unsolved personal and/or professional issues.

Numerous studies have suggested that burnout may have detrimental effects on both teachers and students (e.g., Kitaoka-Higashiguchi et al., 2009; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). Meanwhile, teaching EFL requires teachers to maintain productive and favorable beliefs about themselves, their students, and the environment and procedures of education, because EFL teachers' views greatly impact how well they do their jobs (Fathi et al., 2021; Soodmand Afshar & Ghasemi, 2017). Fathi et al. (2021) expounded that L2 instructors may be less effective and engaged in their work when they have negative ideas about themselves or their profession, such as feeling that they are burned out.

Mahmoodi and Shahrehabaki (2019) proposed that providing instructors with the necessary tools in teacher training programs and making organizational-level contextual adjustments could be the most efficient strategy to avoid burnout in educators. Even though organizational interventions and modifications to the teaching and learning environment seem like the best solutions, these factors are challenging to modify (Ghasemi, 2021). Therefore, as a key intervention at the individual level, remedies should emphasize psychological and personal aspects. In this study, three important remedies are presented as healing pills for alleviating teacher burnout.



## **EMPOWERMENT**

Empowerment pertains to psychological empowerment, which is characterized as the mental attitude regarding one's potential to impact one's occupation and social context (Tsang et al., 2022). Empowerment can take place on several stages, and scholars have devised diverse methodologies, such as organizational and motivational techniques, to examine and advance the procedure of empowerment (Joseph, 2020). Empowerment, as seen from an organizational standpoint, is a process guided by organizational structure that gives individuals access to opportunities, knowledge, resources, and assistance to help them achieve their employment goals (Kanter, 1993). Thus, this viewpoint emphasizes the structural dimension of empowerment and works to advance organizational structure to attain structural empowerment (Mills & Ungson, 2003).

Based on a motivational viewpoint, empowerment is a reflection of intrinsic motives or desire for self-efficacy or independence (Conger & Kanungo, 1988, as cited in Abun, 2021). This viewpoint has been researched as a way to help individuals feel more psychologically powerful by improving their four core cognitions: influence, competence, meaning, and self-determination (Spreitzer, 1995, as cited in Oliveira et al., 2023). In addition, both psychological and structural empowerment can improve people's well-being and productivity at work by giving them the ability to take charge of their work and see the deep relationships that exist between their occupation and themselves (Zhang et al., 2018).

Correspondingly, developed by Alfred Adler, the theory of human manner known as Individual Psychology serves as a therapy technique that enhances individuals' ability to both contribute positively to society and find personal fulfillment. However, a useful strategy for empowering and inspiring teachers suffering from burnout syndrome on an individual basis is individual psychology. According to Bakker and Costa (2014), burnout can result from not meeting one's basic psychological requirements, therefore empowering instructors through a well-thought-out program might be a beneficial personalized remedy.

Furthermore, as an empirical investigation, Mohd Yusoff and Tengku-Arifin (2020) designed a study to investigate the relationship between teacher empowerment (TE) and teacher wellbeing (TWB) in the workplaces. Through a cross-sectional survey design, this quantitative research used 371 secondary school teachers as its participants. The findings of this study indicated that teacher empowerment and teachers' wellbeing in their workplace have a direct relationship. In other words, the greater the level of teacher empowerment, the greater the level of teacher wellbeing could be. So, it is crucial to highlight the teacher empowerment in schools to ascertain their positive wellbeing.

## **IMMUNITY**

According to Haseli et al. (2018), the immunity of Language instructors is an important variable that greatly influences their behavior, professional identity, and perspective on the occupation. Hiver and Dörnyei (2017) believed that the notion of language teacher immunity explains how language teachers' defense mechanism prevents them from being adversely affected by turbulence in their professional identity. Therefore, instructor immunity arises to equip educators with the necessary skills to confront stress under complicated circumstances for effective teaching.



Moreover, Hiver and Dörnyei (2017) stated that immunity for language instructors might have two different effects. While fruitful teacher immunity could encourage instructors to embrace new chances for alteration, maladaptive immunity prevents teachers from implementing new methods of instruction and class management, potentially leading to attrition and burnout (Hiver & Dörnyei, 2017; Rahimpour et al., 2020). Accordingly, attrition indicates a circumstance in which the system of immunity pervades language educators with motivation, resilience, and enthusiasm whilst defending them from stressful situations. On the other hand, burnout results in emotion-related fatigue, callousness, and cynicism in instructors (Hiver & Dörnyei, 2017).

Using a mixed methods design, Haseli Songhori et al. (2018) investigated the primary immunity type of Iranian ELT teachers. The participants of the study were 230 EFL teachers who first received a questionnaire, and later were interviewed by 13 experienced teachers. The study found that Iranian EFL teachers have a predominant type of maladaptive immunity. In addition, their study found four levels (i.e. triggering, coupling, realignment, and stabilization) for the immunity of teachers, similar to Hiver (2016). Likewise, Maghsoudi (2021) employed a study to examine the prominent type of teacher immunity in Arak, Iran. In order to gather the required information, the researcher used a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. Ultimately, the findings of ANOVA, and t-test showed that productive (i.e., positive) immunity was the main type of immunity among the new EFL instructors.

On the other hand, Rahmati et al. (2019) probed the immunity enhancement of Iranian EFL teachers in a qualitative study. Their studies found that the students' low motivation, instructors' insufficient income and self-confidence, lack of time, and parents' excessive expectations were the main disruptions that generated their immunity. To deal with the above disturbing issues, the teachers used particular plans such as arranging lesson plans, fostering a beneficial environment in the classroom, and discussing aspirations with parents.

As reported by Hiver and Dörnyei (2017), the immunity of language teachers is conceived to protect language teachers against the many limitations associated with the field of language teaching. Moreover, the immunity provided to language instructors may act as a shield to protect them from the challenges and complexities present in different educational settings (Namaziandost & Heydarnejad, 2023). Because language instructor immunity influences practically every action that instructors perform in their occupations, examining language teacher immunity may provide more understanding of instructors' identities, cognitions, and proficiency (Hiver & Dörnyei, 2017).

## **AUTONOMY**

The notion of autonomy is complex, challenging, and differing in nature. The reason for this is that autonomy could indicate various things to different individuals (Pitt, 2010). Piaget defined autonomy as a psychological quality that does not include arbitrary external expectations and extreme internal tensions (Manzano Vazquez, 2018). The concept of teacher autonomy, on the other hand, is a means to allow teachers to set up their teaching conditions freely with no limitations (Javadi, 2014). The first definition of teacher autonomy was provided by Little (1995) as "teachers' capacity to undertake self-directed teaching" (p. 176). In a later note, Smith (2003) defined teacher autonomy as being able to develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for success as a teacher. A similar definition of autonomy in



teaching is the freedom given to teachers to decide and select their teaching methods, design their tasks, and evaluate their performance. Furthermore, it is widely admitted that this notion does not naturally exist in individuals; instead, it can be taught and it relies heavily on their instinctual capabilities (Bradshaw et al., 1996, as cited in Namaziandost & Heydarnejad, 2023).

The majority of research on language teaching classifies the autonomy of teachers as an aspect of a person's capability to control his or her development in professionalism (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014). Language teachers' autonomy is demonstrated by their ability to cope with internal and external limitations to enhance language learning (Han, 2021).

According to Kumaravadivelu (2001), teacher autonomy involves the teacher's ability to develop and apply a theory unique to his or her educational setting. It has been acknowledged that stress, as a concept related to teachers' emotions, is a widespread problem in various educational settings, and excessive stress can result in burnout (Chan, 2004). As stated by Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2009), stress can also be caused by several factors, including conflicts with colleagues, lack of support from the school leadership, increased workload, behavioral problems among students, problems with the parent-teacher relationship, as well as a lack of autonomy.

In an experimental study, Alrabai (2021) aimed to investigate the impact of instructor autonomy-guiding teaching on EFL student autonomy through placing an experimental intervention in EFL classrooms for 12 weeks, utilizing autonomy-promotion strategies. Participants of this study were 86 EFL teachers. In this study, the researcher used an online teacher self-report instrument to identify the most useful autonomy-enhancement strategies. The findings of this study highlighted the critical role teachers acting as a facilitator in enhancing important features of EFL student autonomy according to experiment-based data.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Nowadays burnout is commonly recognized as a chronic state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion resulting from the cumulative demands of the workplace, which entails an enduring state of psychological and emotional disorders (Goddard et al., 2006). Additionally, burnout is generally characterized by indifference regarding one's job, failure to cope with occupational-related stress, and interpersonal division between colleagues and students, which may result in professional detachment by abandoning teaching altogether (Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2014).

As a common phenomenon among teachers, burnout is a research-worthy topic as burnt-out teachers feel uninvolved, uncommitted, and unsatisfied. Therefore, identifying factors leading to teacher burnout can have significant implications for the development, motivation, and job satisfaction of teachers, as well as for the development and success of students (Ju et al., 2015; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016). Educational researchers began to become increasingly interested in burnout, and several studies indicated that burnout is a common problem among teachers and other human services workers, with teachers being particularly susceptible to burnout (Johnson et al., 2012; Lauermann & Konig, 2016).



This study sought to introduce remedial sources and constructs for EFL teachers' burnout with the use of empowerment, immunity, and autonomy. Given the importance of language teachers' burnout, this investigation aimed to probe the contributions of empowerment, immunity, and autonomy in educational settings. Generally, this study suggests that empowerment, immunity, and autonomy play a crucial role in ameliorating teachers' burnout. Moreover, juxtaposing empowerment, immunity, and autonomy may significantly alleviate teacher burnout. Therefore, it is demanding that teachers, educators, and policymakers become aware of the interplay between these constructs. These insights can aid enhance the educators' and researchers' understanding of the role of empowerment, immunity, and autonomy in evaporating teachers' burnout and producing positive results.

Empowerment, immunity, and autonomy can have significant implications for reducing teacher burnout. By providing teachers with the authority, resources, and independence to make decisions, administrators can reduce teacher burnout, improve their job satisfaction, and increase their retention. Stakeholders could improve teacher empowerment and autonomy by giving them the freedom to design their lesson plans, make decisions about classroom management, and take ownership of their professional development, to enhance student outcomes and academic achievement. Moreover, they can increase teacher immunity by providing teachers with the skills and resources they need to cope with the emotional and psychological demands of their profession to reduce their stress and anxiety and improve their well-being.

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