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Iranian EFL Teachers' Level of Burnout and Coping Strategies in Post-Pandemic Era

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Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate and compare the prevalence and level of burnout among Iranian male and female EFL teachers. Furthermore, it intended to explore the selected EFL teachers' perceptions of the strategies which can be adopted to cope with the burnout in the post-pandemic era. To do so, a mixed method research design was adopted in which 50 EFL teachers were selected based on convenience sampling from a public school and private language institute in Yassoj. To collect the quantitative and qualitative data Shirom-Melamed Burnout Measure (SMBM) and an structured interview were utilized. The obtained data was analyzed using descriptive statics, chi-square test, and thematic analysis. The findings suggested that 28% of Iranian teachers perceive high levels of burnout in the post-pandemic era. Among the subscales of burnout, physical fatigue was found to have higher score. Significant associations were found between the EFL teachers' gender and *physical fatigue*, *cognitive weariness, emotional exhaustion, as well as* the overall score of burnout, being that men perceive higher levels of burnout than women. With respect to the qualitative results, it was indicated that the respondents considered such strategies as engaging in a permanent learning, establishment of positive student-teacher relationship, increasing patience and tolerance, enhancing interest in teaching, sharing the problems with colleagues, and respect to the moral consideration to cope with burnout after the pandemic.

Keywords: burnout, EFL teachers, coping strategies, post-pandemic, gender

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1. Introduction

Language teachers, who embrace a central role in developing the ability of pupils and accomplishments in second- and foreign-language teaching contexts, have not received adequate attention, despite teacher quality most recently turning into the focus of concern in many education-related discussions and some walks being taken toward enhancing education quality (Atmaca et al., 2020). As a result, it is vital to consider numerous aspects that may have an impact on teacher quality in an L2 situation.

This incompatibility might increase stress levels and cause certain psychological issues like inefficiency, weariness, anxiety, and despair. Because of this, burnout may have an impact on L2 teaching. Burnout is a psychiatric condition marked by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished feeling of personal achievement that can impact people who interact with others in some way (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). According to Li et al. (2021) teacher burnout is characterized as a symptom of physical, emotional, and attitudinal fatigue toward issues associated to education and the workplace.

Due to the abrupt onset and spread of the Covid-19 pandemic over the globe, governments are forced to take a variety of actions to handle the issue, including social isolation and the closure of educational institutions,. Since the teaching and learning processes are carried out virtually and using digital tools, this strategy creates large and sudden changes in educational practices and highlights the special role of virtual instruction (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). since of this, the unexpected change has made EFL teachers and students more anxious since they were worried about technology, internet access, and the right tools. In fact, EFL teachers and students who were exposed to the new teaching and learning environment experienced a range of demotivating factors that significantly outweighed the efficiency of the language learning process (Fuentes Hernández et al., 2020). Additionally, burnout can cause teachers to lose their motivation, dedication, and passion for their profession, which can be detrimental to their students' L2 learning. The coping mechanisms have therefore been one of the most promising topics in burnout studies. People who utilize a control-oriented coping technique can reduce their burnout (Cranwell-Ward & Abbey, 2005). Control-oriented coping techniques include both cognitive ones, like setting clear goals and time management, as well as behavioral ones, such actively addressing issues with managers and coworkers. Stress and burnout appear to be exacerbated by passive, regressive behaviors (flight, negation, belittling, resignation, etc.) (p. 42). Burnout is a multifaceted entity and its causes can vary based on a person's attributes and the circumstances in which they occur. Due to the interaction of several aspects in these occupational settings (i.e., social, political, and economic), burnout has been identified as a psychosocial condition mostly encountered in human service jobs (e.g., physicians, teachers, and educators) (Madigan & Kim, 2021).

Because the findings from earlier studies are sometimes contradictory, it is still unclear how sociodemographic traits relate to teachers' exhaustion (Purvanova & Muros, 2010). The same holds true for research projects involving Iranian educators. For instance, Alavinia and Ahmadzadeh (2012) discovered that women, younger, and less experienced instructors feel higher degrees of burnout in a research involving high school teachers. In contrast, findings from a study conducted by Nazari and colleagues (2020) revealed that there were no appreciable variations between burnout symptoms and sex, age, or years of experience. Mehari and Radi (2015) discovered variations between burnout levels and education level, years of experience, and degree of teaching, however they did not discover differences between burnout levels and age or married status.

Burnout, which may seriously affect a teacher's work and have a number of negative side consequences, including poor health, depression, absenteeism, etc., is widely acknowledged as one of the possible risks to teachers. However, it has been shown that educators who use positive coping strategies to deal with stress at work may be able to prevent burnout (Küçükoğlu, 2014). In spite of all the mentioned studies in the literature, it seems that there is an apparent lack of research studies concerning the burnout level of EFL teachers, as well as the study of coping strategies in this respect. Therefore, the present study was conducted to fill the existing gap in the literature by addressing the following research questions:

1. What is the Iranian male and female EFL teachers' burnout level after the COVID-19 pandemic?

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2. What are the strategies which EFL teachers adopt to cope with burnout in post-pandemic era?

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Teacher Burnout

Due to the fact that stress in the classroom is a common cause of burnout among teachers, Lavy (2022) explains that it manifests as physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion. Burnout is when stress builds up repeatedly even though stress is an unaltered component of life that can have both beneficial and harmful effects (Hanson, 2021). The majority of teachers indicate little discontent with their jobs, despite the teaching profession traditionally being one of the vocations with the greatest stress levels (Brasfield et al., 2019).

The difficulties that teachers had during the Covid-19 pandemic were the subject of recent research by Pressley (2021) on the causes of teacher burnout during the Covid-19 era. The purpose of the study which comprised four Covid-19 anxiety measures, was to get insight into the impact of Covid-19 on Teacher burnout which was used by 359 teachers across the United States. The findings indicated that instructors had significant levels of stress during the Covid-19 outbreak as a result of the increased educational standards, worries about the quality of education today, and additional expectations (Pressley, 2021).

Burnout often has two effects on an employee in the education sector: 1) reduced work quality performance and 2) a propensity or desire to quit. Lower work performance is not surprising for burnt-out teachers (Perrone et al., 2019). According to Yung et al. (2017), teacher burnout is a response to the type of work pressure that individuals like and has a substantial detrimental impact on each person's wellbeing, health, and devotion to their jobs. The characteristics of job burnout, sad mood, job satisfaction, and the inclination to leave the teaching profession were examined in a longitudinal research by Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2020). Teacher category, class size, the number of students who require help, attitudes toward inclusive education, and the accessibility of support are only a few of the instructors, students, and organization-level factors that Saloviita and Pakarinen (2021) examined in their study of teacher burnout and its three sub-domains.

2.2 Related Studies

Mota and Alaghband Rad (2023), who conducted a more recent study, examined teacher burnout at one of the most crucial periods of the COVID-19 epidemic in Iran. According to the findings, there is a significant amount of burnout among Iranian teachers during the pandemic, with 24% of respondents reporting significant levels of overall burnout. A significant proportion of Iranian teachers are already having trouble managing the stressors associated with their jobs, as evidenced by the fact that 32% of the sample reported experiencing high levels of physical exhaustion, 24.8% reported high levels of cognitive weariness, and 17.6% reported experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion.

Similar research was conducted by Momenzadeh et al. (2023), who investigated potential connections between burnout and active/passive motivation, sense of efficacy, and burnout among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors. To do this, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), Teacher's Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES), and Active/Passive Motivation Scale (APMS) were administered to 245 Iranian EFL instructors. The results showed that active/passive motivation and all TSES subscales, active motivation and all burnout subscales, and passive motivation and two burnout subscales, namely emotional weariness and personal accomplishment, all showed significant associations.

Asadi and Bozorgian (2022), in a similar vein, looked at the connection between burnout and foreign language teachers' dedication to their positions as instructors in Iran Language Institutes. In this study, we examined the variation in teacher burnout and its connection to teachers' commitment using observation, semi-structured interviews, the Maslach burnout questionnaire (MBI), and the organizational and work commitment questionnaire (OOC). The province of Mazandaran English language instructors were asked to take part in this study. Data research revealed a conflict between teachers' dedication to teaching English and their level of burnout. Male instructors have greater burnout than female teachers, according to descriptive statistics.

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In a similar vein, Kornoghabi and Asoudeh (2021) investigated the effects of wisdom-therapy on occupational burnout in teachers. Teachers in the experimental group had training over the course of 10 sessions using a wisdom-therapy approach. An ANCOVA study revealed that wisdom-therapy significantly reduced the degrees of professional burnout, depersonalization, and emotional exhaustion in Iranian EFL instructors.

Critical thinking proficiency was examined by Alinejad et al. (2021) in connection to burnout among 303 Iranian EFL instructors from various universities. The findings showed that Iranian EFL instructors frequently exhibit intellectual integration. Additionally, while gender had little bearing on their tendencies, instructional experiences were crucial in developing critical thinking. The findings of the regression analysis also revealed that the tendency to battle with negative attitudes had the biggest influence on teachers' burnout, and that the capacity to think critically may generally predict instructors' burnout.

Iranian EFL instructors were the subjects of a study by Baleghizadeh and Shayesteh (2020) that looked at the connections between burnout, personality characteristics, and psychological discomfort. Additionally, it was an effort to determine how well five personality traits predicted burnout in EFL teachers. The study's findings showed that psychological discomfort and personality factors were both connected with components of teacher burnout. The findings also revealed a strong inverse relationship between the burnout symptoms of depersonalization and emotional weariness.

A similar study by Nayernia and Babayan (2019) looked at the connection between English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors' self-perceived language competency and burnout experiences. The results of the correlational analysis showed a substantial inverse relationship between linguistic aptitude and the burnout elements of personal achievement as well as a significant inverse relationship between linguistic aptitude and the burnout features of emotional weariness and depersonalization. The results of the regression analysis showed that the other competence subskills, with the exception of reading, were the most accurate predictors of the other burnout components.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

For the purpose of the current study, a mixed-method design was utilized. In fact, the quantitative phase of the research was followed by an interview as the qualitative part of the study. In the quantitative phase, Shirom-Melamed Burnout Measure (SMBM) was given to the group of EFL teachers to complete. Further, in the subsequent qualitative phase, an interview was conducted with a volunteer group of EFL teacher to delve into their views on the burnout coping strategies.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The participants of the present study were 50 EFL instructors (25 males and 25 females) who work in both public and private language schools. 30 teachers from public high schools and 20 teachers from private language institutes were chosen. The EFL teachers had a variety of teaching backgrounds, from five to eighteen years. All of the chosen EFL instructors have a post-graduate degree (MA) in TEFL. The participants ranged in age from 26 to 38 (M = 34, SD = 0.786). In order to collect the required for qualitative phase of the study, 15 participants were selected among the sample and underwent semi-structured interview.

3.3 Instruments and Materials

3.3.1 Shirom-Melamed Burnout Measure (SMBM)

To determine the level of burnout, the Shirom-Melamed Burnout Measure (SMBM) (Mota & Rad, 2020) was applied. This 14-item survey assesses three aspects of burnout using three subscales: physical fatigue (6 items), cognitive weariness (5 items), and emotional exhaustion (3 items). Physical fatigue assesses feelings of physical exhaustion and perceived low energy. Cognitive weariness assesses perceived concentration issues and emotional exhaustion. The Cronbach alpha for internal consistency of the items were calculated and found out .82 which indicated a satisfactory level.

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3.3.2 Structured Interview with Open-ended Questions

In order to gather information for this qualitative study, a structured interview was conducted. Structured interviewing improves diversity and inclusion, boosts your likelihood of making the best recruits, and aids in compliance. These interviews speed up the interviewing process and make it simple to compare applicants. It was designed by the researcher in the form of the with 4 open-ended questions. The items were given to a TEFL professor who was requested to determine if the chosen open-ended questions were suitable based on the goal of the study in order to ensure the authenticity of this interview. Two subject-matter experts were invited to code and categorize the interviewees' replies to test the validity of the qualitative data. Following the completion of a pilot study, the consistency of the evaluators' assessments was examined for inter-coder reliability. An acceptable level of consistency between the two evaluations was demonstrated by the correlation of 0.89.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

In the sampling phase of this study, a public school and a private language institutes were selected from a previously organized list of the language institutes. Then, the researcher contacted the officials and manager of the selected language institutes and received the required permissions and the contact information (email address) of the number of EFL learners and teachers who studied and taught English in these institutes. After confirming that the intended number of EFL instructors had participated, the researcher emailed the intended questionnaire and open-ended interview questions and asked them to complete the questionnaire and respond the written interview based on their unique perspectives and ideas. The rationale behind using written interview was practicality and convenience of the data collection procedure. Finally, the relevant statistical techniques were used to examine the data that was received from the open-ended questions.

3.5 Data Analysis

In order to answer the first research questions descriptive statistics and Bivariate correlations (Chi-Square) were utilized. To investigate the second research questions, thematic analysis (TA) developed by Braun and Clarke (2013) was employed. Using a "selective reading method" (van Manen 1997, p. 93), the researcher examined the transcripts and underlined the lines that looked to contain the information he was looking for. The codes that shared unifying characteristics were then collected to create themes. After comparing the tentative themes developed in the earlier stage with the coded data and the entire dataset, the subthemes within each theme were then determined. The frequency and percentages for each topic and its subthemes were determined once all the themes had been gathered.

4. Results

4.1 The First Research Question

Descriptive data were performed to look into the average levels of burnout among Iranian instructors. Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, and total burnout scores for the three burnout elements for both men and women. Overall, the data suggest minimal burnout levels. In every area, males perform better than women in terms of burnout.

Table 1. Burnout Scores According to Gender (N = 50)

		Male	Female
Burnout	Mean (SD)	Mean	Mean
Physical fatigue	2.35 (.932)	2.91 (1.11)	
Cognitive weariness	2.49 (1.02)	1.83 (1.03)	2.04 (1.26)
Emotional exhaustion	2.22 (1.52)	2.29 (.961)	2.01 (1.19)
Overall burnout score	2.41 (1.83)	2.64 (.834)	2.11 (1.08)

Iranian men and women teachers were compared for high levels of burnout using bivariate correlations (Chi-Square). Scores on the SMBM equal to or greater than 5 are considered to indicate significant levels of burnout

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symptoms, according to Gomes (2012) and Mota and Rad (2020). The incidence of burnout (SMBM scores = or > 5) among Iranian male and female teachers is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Prevalence of burnout according to gender (SMBM scores = or > 5)

	Total	Male	Female	P-value
Burnout	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	
Physical fatigue	17 (34%)	12 (24%)	5 (10%)	.002
Cognitive weariness	12 (24%)	7 (14%)	5 (10%)	.004
Emotional exhaustion	7 (14%)	5 (10%)	2 (4%)	.001
Overall burnout score	14 (28%)	10 (20%)	4 (8%)	.012

According to the findings, 28% of Iranian instructors had significant levels of burnout during the COVID-19 epidemic, with teachers scoring higher on the physical exhaustion burnout component. Men feel higher degrees of burnout than women do, and there were significant correlations between the gender of the EFL teachers and physical tiredness, cognitive exhaustion, emotional exhaustion, as well as the overall burnout score.

4.2 The Second Research Questions

In order to answer this research question, the qualitative analysis of the participants' responses to the related open-ended questions of the interview was conducted using them-based analysis. According to the responses the following themes were extracted.

Table 3. The extracted theme from the interview about coping strategies

No.	**Theme**	**F**
1	Permanent learning	10
2	Positive student-teacher relationship	8
3	Patience and tolerance	8
4	Interest in teaching	9
5	Sharing the problems with colleagues	7
6	Moral Considerations	11
7	Classroom management	9

One of the recurrent topics in interviews was the participants' objectives and interests in expanding one's linguistic and pedagogical skills, as shown by the themes and the acquired frequencies in Table 3. They claimed that they made an effort to draw lessons from their experiences and that they paid attention to what happened in class. According to a teacher (teacher 2), "I try to study and find the answers or solutions to the problems I had during the school year and I could not find an answer to them at that time" during the summer break. Another teacher (teacher 3) said, "I attend a weekly meeting with certain friends to keep my knowledge current and to keep myself motivated."

Another recurring element in the teachers' comments was the need of building strong relationships with the kids. Many of the instructors who were interviewed emphasized the value of building strong relationships with students and discussed their efforts to do so at the start of the school year.

Tolerance of the issues or ignoring them, or an escape-oriented coping method, was another prominent theme among the non-burned-out instructors. If you consider difficulties, you won't be able to execute your work, as one of my

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teachers once remarked. “There are many occasions when I feel I have not been treated fairly,” a different instructor added. However, I try to just forget. Another instructor (teacher number three) remarked, “You have to have patience if you want to be a good teacher.”

The initial interest each teacher shown in teaching was a recurring topic in all of the interviews with instructors. For instance, instructor 6 stated, “I was interested in teaching from a young age.” I was a strong math student in high school, claimed a different instructor (teacher 11). But because I was interested in English and had a great English instructor, I made the decision to become an English teacher. Another instructor (teacher 7) remarked, “The only thing that makes all problems bearable is my interest in my work.” The adaptive, control-oriented method of discussing issues with administrators and peers was a key element in the teachers’ coping mechanisms.

Another notable topic in instructors’ thoughts was moral obligation. These educators claimed that they believed they had a moral obligation to their students and that they frequently reflected on this obligation to maintain their motivation high. You belong to all pupils, a teacher (teacher 8) once declared to herself. You should do well even if the class only has a few good pupils. A another instructor (teacher 15) stated, “I constantly consider morality and do not let the issues influence me.” I want to be a professional teacher, a different instructor (teacher 5) declared. Morality is one quality of a professional. I should recognize that there are issues if I've agreed to become a teacher.

Many of the educators surveyed also admitted to talking to others about their issues. Speaking with the sole aim of bare-soul disclosure or seeking counsel. For instance, a teacher (teacher 1) stated, "I discuss the issues with my wife at home. This helps me to relax. I chat to my colleagues, another teacher (teacher 3) stated. They occasionally offer helpful counsel for handling the issue, which helps me feel more at ease. I chat to my spouse, who is a math teacher, remarked another teacher (teacher 6).

5. Discussion

The present study was an attempt to investigate and compare the level and prevalence of burnout in Iranian male and female EFL teachers and explore their perceptions of the strategies which can be adopted to cope with the problems of burnout in the post-pandemic era. The obtained results suggest that 28% of the selected EFL teachers perceive high levels of burnout after the pandemic. Furthermore, 17% of the sample reported experiencing high levels of physical exhaustion, 12% reported experiencing high levels of cognitive weariness, and 7% reported experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion, indicating that a sizable portion of Iranian teachers are already struggling to cope with the pressures of their jobs. Previous studies conducted in Iran (e.g. Koohani & Dayeri, 2019; Mehrabi & Radi, 2015) showed lower rates, with teachers usually reporting low levels of burnout. These results suggest that the COVID-19 outbreak does increase Iranian teachers’ burnout experiences. We are unable to decisively compare our results to those acquired prior to the COVID-19 era, however, since the sample participants varied and because earlier studies had used other criteria to assess teacher burnout.

It might be claimed that Iran's political-economic scenario has had substantial effects on living standards and unemployment rates even though we did not assess cultural aspects in our study. Being employed in a profession that requires skill, like in teaching, is regarded as a privilege. In this regard, we contend that Iranians who are fortunate enough to have jobs tend to respect their employment and minimize the pressures they face on a daily basis. The findings of our study indicate that sociodemographic factors, with the exception of sex, did not significantly differ from reported burnout levels among Iranian teachers, indicating that sociodemographic factors had little bearing on the burnout experiences of Iranian teachers.

Continuing education, building rapport with students, being patient and ignoring issues, enthusiasm for teaching, talking about issues with principals and colleagues, adherence to moral principles, class management, and using traditional teaching methods were a few of the crucial strategies teachers used to avoid or deal with burnout. These coping mechanisms have already been noted in some of the literature. For instance, talking about issues with teachers and coworkers and conversing with people to unwind are what Berry (1998) refers to as social interaction, which is receiving assistance and emotional support from others. Laugaa et al. (2008) explore seeking out social supports in a manner similar to this. According to Leiter and Maslach (1998), collegiality means having good working relationships with both superiors and coworkers. In reality, this social assistance provides people with thorough information and guidance for coping with or averting difficult circumstances. The literature has also observed that one strategy to

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attempt and establish a relationship with the students is to provide them constructive criticism (Laugaa et al., 2008). Actually, this was classified as a specific form of problem-focused coping. Patience and ignoring problems are examples of emotion-focused strategies, according to Millward (2005), which are "used when we believe there is nothing we can do to manage or to change the situation" (p. 399).

Class management is comparable to coping that is problem-centered, as described by Laugaa et al. (2008). According to them, this tactic entails making an effort to conduct an unbiased analysis of the circumstance, managing one's emotions, considering the benefits of teaching, taking stock of the issue, and making an effort to reason it. They are also referred to as issue-focused strategies by Millward (2005), which refers to efforts to face and address the demands of the situation itself employing mastery' tactics like methodical problem identification and solution formulation. According to them, there are several approaches to finding solutions, including altering objectives and ambitions, better time management, facing the issue head-on, and/or rearranging the circumstances. Laugaa et al. (2008) also mention using a conventional teaching approach as a coping mechanism. They contend that this coping mechanism entails actions like demanding that the students be silent, acting in an authoritative manner, temporarily separating or isolating some pupils from the rest, keeping the students occupied, and forming routines in your teaching style. However, the literature analyzed for the present study makes no mention of adherence to moral or religious ideals. The characteristics of an Iranian environment focused on values and religion appear to be the reason. These two coping mechanisms are likewise both centered on emotions or on escaping. The fact that the study's instructors did not show signs of burnout and performed badly on the MBI implies that these coping methods, while being used seldom compared to the number of participating teachers, are effective at preventing burnout. However, educators will be better able to manage challenging demands at work if they have access to alternative coping techniques.

6. Conclusion

Although the unique COVID-19 pandemic is a recent global health emergency, multiple recent research are starting to confirm its effects on mental health. Therefore, it is crucial that the various educational agents (such as administrators, school and educational psychologists, and municipalities) start developing programs to help teachers as soon as possible. Our study's findings point to the significance of creating preventative intervention programs with instructors who show low levels of burnout, with an emphasis on sociocultural and environmental factors. It may be crucial to take into account individual variations in remedial intervention programs for instructors who already feel very high levels of burnout in order to provide a more effective support. Therefore, intervention programs should be responsive to the unique requirements of teachers and take into account the features of the local schools. The increased impact of the pandemic on teachers' ongoing work-related pressures should be taken into account when providing psychosocial assistance. The qualitative research reveals relatively few coping mechanisms. Given that the bulk of the tactics discovered are solely emotion-focused ones, it follows that instructors need to get training in effective coping techniques. Therefore, this might be one of the course objectives for pre-service teacher education programs as well as programs for on-the-job preparation.

By implication, EFL decision-makers should meet the desire for autonomy among EFL teachers by paying attention to their worries and giving them the freedom to choose their own courses of study. Indeed, given the constraints of the cross-sectional design of the investigation and the use of a small sample size, the findings of the present study should be interpreted with some care. Therefore, it's possible that not all Iranian EFL teachers experienced burnout in the same way as described in the participants' perspectives. Future studies are necessary to verify the study's findings and explore the potential impact of regulated motivation as a risk factor for burnout. To identify the causal relationship between teaching motivation and burnout in the context of L2 teaching, longitudinal research is advised. This will reveal which group of EFL teachers is more likely to lose interest and enthusiasm in their work. Other psychological variables, such as teachers' personalities, can also be investigated with respect to motivation.

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