The Causes of Burnout among Iranian EFL Academics: A Case Study

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A B S T R A C T

Workplace stress among employees has been known to impede work efficacy, a phenomenon usually referred to as burnout. Recently, there has been a growing research on this issue in educational contexts, particularly at pre-tertiary levels, giving rise to a need to do this kind of investigation at higher education level as well. As a response to this need, the present paper is a report of a case study aimed at examining the causes of burnout experienced by two Iranian EFL academics. The results of the thematic analysis of the interviews with the participants indicated five main conceptual categories associated with the subjects' burnout experiences: Institutional demands, interpersonal problems, discordant outlooks, lack of student motivation, and lack of institutional supports. The discussion on each of these categories shed light on how these categories may contribute, in varying degrees of course, to the burnout among academics.

Keywords: burnout; academics; Iranian EFL context; thematic analysis

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Introduction

For a long time, many societies have considered teaching, particularly at higher education, to be a low-stress profession (Fisher, 1994; Willie & Stecklein, 1982). This might have been true in the past due to seemingly light workload of the academics compared to other professions (Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua, & Stough, 2001), but no longer tenable in the 21st century whereby academic work has experienced a radical transformation from a pure educational task into a highly competitive market-dominated product-oriented research. Being unprepared for this unexpected socio-economic pressure from the volatile market economy onto a fairly secluded world of educating and research has turned universities into anxiety-driven environments (Shin & Jung, 2014). The world of academia now faces the challenge of adjusting itself into the expectations of an extensively demanding environment and increasingly finds its career stressful and precarious (Gillespie et al, 2001; Kinman, 2001; Kinman & Jones, 2008). This stress level, according to Winefield (2000), is more than that of many other occupations such as engineering, transportation, business and banking. To name a few contributing factors to this high stress level one may point at factors such as high expectations for published research, more effective teaching, tougher standards for promotions, heavy non-academic workload, shortage of time and resources, competition for funds and other resources, and above all frequent change of policies by higher ranking authorities (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Kinman, 2001; Kinman & Jones, 2008; Tytherleigh, Webb, Cooper, & Ricketts, 2005). To make it even worse, most of previous privileges of academic profession such as professional autonomy, social respect, job security, collegial support, academic freedom, and high payment have been eroding rapidly in recent years (Fredman & Doughney, 2012). In fact, due to many socio-economic transformations occurring at higher levels of social life, universities, particularly ones in developing countries, are under all sorts of pressure which has affected the academic life of these countries.

Obviously, coping with these unprecedented complex situations can be a big hurdle for the academic world. Research shows that as a result of these challenges, universities face the overwhelming problem of burnout among their faculty members (Shin & Jung, 2014; Watts & Robertson, 2011; Zábrodská, et al, 2017). This is more likely to be the case with less powerful fields of study such as humanities, and education which usually come at the bottom of the list of priorities of governments who favor more fields such as engineering, medical sciences and basic sciences for both ideological and practical reasons.

To shed more light on the realities of such neglected fields, in particular English language teaching, it is necessary to focus, as a case study, on the causes of burnout among academic staff at one of the departments offering various English language and literature courses in the context of Iran since different contextual factors are associated with the frustration of academic staff. As a first step, however, it is essential to delve into some literature to see how the concept of burnout has been defined in the context of education.

Literature Review

Burnout

Maslach and Jackson (1986) define burnout as "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do 'people work' of some kind" (p.1). Elsewhere, Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001), see burnout as a "prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job" (p. 397). Considering the above definitions, Burnout can be seen to stem from three factors, namely, emotional exhaustion (depletion of energy), a feeling of depersonalization (detachment

from work and colleagues at work), and reduced personal accomplishment, (feeling of inadequacy and inefficacy) (Maslach et al., 2001). Although exhaustion and depersonalization seem to be interrelated, feeling inadequacy is assumed to be either the consequence of the two or thought of as an independent development (Maslach, 2003; Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Research supported the multidimensional nature of burnout and indicated that the three dimensions cannot be combined to form a single measure (Langballe, 2006). In his model of burnout, Golembiewski (1989) suggests that feeling of inadequacy is the consequence of earlier burnout cynicism, which then turns itself into emotional exhaustion. However, Leiter (1989) argues that the emotional exhaustion is the initial dimension of burnout which leads to the development of cynicism as an ineffective coping strategy, which in turn results in feeling of inadequacy.

According to Chang (2009), individual, organizational, and transactional factors are three main sources of burnout. Individual factors involve demographical data such as age, gender, and teaching experience. Organizational factors are related to characteristics of the job and workplace such as low salary, class size, facilities, and socioeconomic status of the institution. Finally, transactional factors refer to interaction of individual and organizational factors such as teacher's judgment of student misbehavior and norms of student-teacher interaction. Research has indicated that individual factors do not have a significant explanatory power in burnout level (Maslachetal, Schaufeli., & Leiter, 2001) and there has been a shift from examining merely individual and organizational factors to transactional factors (Chang, 2013). According to Ashkanasy, Zerbe, and Hartel (2002), one important cause of burnout is emotional labor, which is thought to be in close relationship between emotional exhaustion and job dissatisfaction (Grandey, 2003), both of which in turn can result in burnout.

A recent inspection into literature bears witness to the rise of interest in burnout syndrome among university staff. For instance, research by Lackritz (2004) showed that 20% of university academics in the US experienced high level of burnout. It also reports of a correlation between the level of burnout with class size, devoted time for teaching tasks, and numerical student evaluations. Work by Otero-López and his colleagues (2008) indicated existence of a correlation between lack of social support and optimism, excessive working hours, daily hassles and difficulties with burnout among academics. In another study Zábrodská and his colleagues (2018) studied the contribution of psychosocial work environments to burnout among university teachers. Results showed that work-family conflict was a stronger predictor of burnout among the faculty members.

Despite growing literature in this area of research, most studies have so far taken place in anglosaxon contexts (Shin & Jung, 2014); and given the role of contextual factors in the burnout level, it seems necessary to study the issue outside anglosaxon contexts, particularly in developing countries. In addition, most of the studies have adopted a quantitative approach in their study of burnout. So, applying a qualitative approach, the current work aims to cover these gaps in literature by studying the causes of burnout among faculty members in the context of an Iranian university.

Method

The current study was based on a qualitative case research design. As an in-depth study of a particular situation, case studies have been widely used in social studies and the interest is even growing in light of innovative approaches to research such as grounded theory. It was based on collecting information via interviewing two insider participants from the context under the study,

describing the collected information and adding depth to the description by providing relevant explanation.

Participants

Two English academics from an Iranian state university participated in the study. One of them was a full time Associate professor and the other was an adjunct lecturer. Participant A was a 54-year-old professor who had completed his Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics. Participant B was a 34 year-old Ph.D. candidate in English Language Teaching at an Iranian state university. She had a solid experience in teaching English at both private and state universities.

Data Collection

To gather data for the current study, we conducted three interviews with the participants. Each interview lasted 60 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researchers. We followed a semi-structured interview starting with the same protocol of open-ended questions which aimed to elicit narratives and rich descriptions of teachers' perceptions of their emotions at university. The participants were asked questions about their experience at the classroom setting, their interaction with students, and their relationship with their colleagues and other university staff, what kind of problems they faced, whether this impacted their job satisfaction and led to their frustration and attrition in their job. After transcribing the recorded interviews, the data were coded manually as opposed to computer analysis; as Basit (2003) argued, computer coding systems are effective when the ultimate objective is quantifying the data and might not be appropriate for qualitative studies. This kind of analysis allows considering different contextual factors in academics' ideas and traces hidden meanings in their insights about their emotional experiences.

To code the data, open coding strategy which is an emergent coding technique drawn from grounded theory methodology was used (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First the data was searched for participants' experience of emotional demands and problems in their job; specific attention was paid to instances of frustrating experiences. After finding the instances of frustrating experiences, an attempt was made to find the causes of these experiences and how they contributed to burnout.

In the final stage, an attempt was made to find the overall themes about academics' frustrating experiences, the causes, coping strategies and the consequences of these experiences in teachers' job. By going back and forth through the data, the factors which were relevant to academics' interaction with others and their understanding of themselves and frustrating issues about their job were identified.

In order to confirm the validity of these themes, one more interview was conducted with the participants and they were involved in member checking process. The participants were asked to judge the validity of the themes and offer more insights on them. The findings of the final interview which were recorded through notes taken by one of the researchers were applied to the results to confirm the appropriateness of the findings. And to ensure reliability of the coding, the data were coded by another independent coder, and Cohen's Kappa coefficient was applied which produced inter coder reliability of .91.

Results

The results of the interviews with the participants indicated that they perceived their workplace as being stressful and anxiety provoking. It exerted great pressure and stress on them. The thematic analysis of data produced five main themes about causes of burnout: Institutional demands, interpersonal problems, discordant outlooks, lack of student motivation, and lack of institutional supports.

Institutional Demands

The first and main cause of pressure and stress for participant A came from decision makers at university and higher levels, i.e. Ministry of Science, Research and Technology. Participant A believed that many of the organizational rules and institutional policies were not in harmony with the spirit of academic environment. The purposes these rules and regulations pursue are not in accordance with the needs and the purposes of a healthy academic context, which is essential for a steady academic work. Some of these regulations are even obstacles in the way of professors' academic objectives. Participant A believed that this situation is the result of seeing universities by higher level political authorities as a platform for political confrontation, the result being intimidation, frustration, and alienation. For examples, most university high rank administrative positions go to those coming from basic sciences or engineering department/s, and staff from humanities rarely get higher academic executive positions, which is, more than anything, a reflection of two opposing (positive vs. negative) outlooks to these two disciplines by politically powerful policy makers of the country. As a result, those departments specializing in human sciences find themselves in a disadvantageous position as regards issues like applying for academic privileges such as promotions, sabbatical leaves, foreign conferences, etc. Awareness of these unfair and discriminatory stances has obviously a very negative effect on the attitude of the academic staff working within humanities. This is particularly true in case of English Departments. English has the status of foreign language in Iran and as such is usually regarded as secondary to Persian as the official language of the country and recently even to Arabic as the language of religion. This discriminatory situation varies, of course, from more established big universities to young small universities whereby many of the administrative and academic staff have little international experience. Also, there is usually a latent negative attitude towards professors of this field, particularly towards those who have experience of studying abroad on the ground that these professors have been influenced by foreign cultures. Given this attitude, the teaching staff members at English departments are usually marginalized as much as possible in decision making processes. As a consequence, they usually lag behind the normal promotions due to the distance they are kept from the center. Participant A, confirmed that this was the case in his place of work. He added that among the three language and literature departments, namely Farsi, Arabic, and English, the privileges such as promotions, equipment, administrative positions, larger and better furnished staff rooms go usually to some departments other than English Language and Literature Department, reflecting an ideologically oriented negative attitude towards foreign language departments in general and English in particular. He believed that this kind of discrimination on the basis of field of study has been taken by many as a norm, perhaps assuming that this is a policy implicitly encouraged and supported officially.

On the whole, he said that the academic staff such as himself were dissatisfied with having very little role, in making educational or research policies no matter how minor and trivial they are. Two examples from his experience can bear witness to what he said:

Experience one:

Once I agreed with my students to have extra classes for one of the courses at MA level, as we were interested in covering more deeply some topics compatible with the course objectives. But, after the first extra class, I was questioned about the need for such class meetings and I was pressed to stop it, which I did and I felt terrible about it.

Experience two:

I had an MA class which had been scheduled for two o' clock in the afternoon despite my disapproval of this time for any class particularly MA classes. I thought since students came back after lunch they would not be focused enough for class activities. So, I decided to change the time from afternoon to morning sessions. I even held one class in the morning which was satisfactory for both the students and me, but I was reprimanded later by head of the department, so I had to give up.

This lack of ownership of policies, procedures, and regulations, he was convinced, can create many barriers against the academic improvement and progress of all teaching staff in general, and those working at English Language and Literature Department in particular, a situation that may consequently lead to a huge source of frustration for the staff.

The frustration level maybe greater in those staff who come with a solid educational background, a strong binding to academic ethics, and more experience in teaching and research, and with more academic contact with international communities. On the other hand, it may also be even more excruciating for young academics as they are normally more ambitious, idealistic and impatient than their more experienced colleagues. In A's words:

When you are young and ambitious accepting what you experience here is very difficult, you question the existing policies of the university and this severely affects you.

Interpersonal Relationships

Another important cause of stress and burnout among academic staff is related to lack of psychological harmony among themselves, a factor that may contribute to another problem, namely lack of cooperation. The participants in the current study believed that lack of coherency and harmony among the staff may create a very heavy and intolerable working atmosphere in which no one can concentrate on their teaching and research tasks. This situation was best described by A:

…… this hypocrisy has had a very severe negative impact on me as I realized how difficult it is to work with people with whom I have little psychosocial harmony. The effect was so serious I wished I was able to retire, and had the laws allowed, I would definitely have done so.

He believed that it is very important that department staff should work together and try for the objectives and improvement of the department. However, he said that some people in his department did not show any interest for being united and working cooperatively. He stated that lack of collegial support and harmony among university staff is to some extent related to external factors such as unnecessary competition among colleagues created by ill-thought of policies of the university. As a result, many staff attempt for their personal interests and rarely consider the priorities of the purpose for which they work at a university. This competition for inadequate individual benefits has given rise to an atmosphere of distrust, secrecy and cynicism at the expense of optimism, transparency, and understanding. In fact, there is no sense of mutual trust, kindness and healthy interaction among academic staff.

Another reason for lack of understanding and cooperation among colleagues is the problem of job security among some colleagues. They are worried about their position because of less security in their employment so instead of focusing on their teaching objectives and attempting for benefits of the department, they try for their own survival at university and follow shortcuts by attaching themselves to some political positions, so in order to protect their status and job, sometimes, they sacrifice and harm the department and other members of it. This unpleasant atmosphere has been reflected in A's remarks during his interview:

> *Most of the time, I feel frustrated wasting my time and energy on unnecessary conflicts created by work politics. I suffer from psychological strains caused by illogical and even illegal acts of some who by perusing personal benefits neglect the present and future needs of our students.*

This lack of positive rapport among staff members was a big challenge for A as he struggled with his work environment to cope with the negative emotions built up by lack of empathy among his colleagues. Despite his effort to feel emotionally good, he could not avoid sense of emotional exhaustion and burnout n his context of work.

This situation was a lot more stressful for adjunct participant B, who felt unsecure during her work at the department. She had to keep her ideas for herself and be cautious in her relationship with her colleagues. She believed that most of her colleagues did not care about her rights as a part-time employee and just thought of gaining more for themselves. She found it very painful not to be able to show her dissatisfaction of the situation.

In fact, all the time she had to hide her true feelings about events. She had to tolerate many things including what others decided for her without asking her opinion as she did not have any rights in the department. This directly affected her personal integrity and professional identity. The kind of self-image that she has developed in years of learning and teaching at the department has weakened her relationship with colleagues. In her words:

> *When I came to this university to do my MA, I was quite a happy girl. Gradually, I was subdued to become a very reserved, stressed out, and inattentive first as a student and later, when I came back to teach as a teacher. These days although I enjoy my classes, out of class atmosphere is unbearable. I do not receive the respect I expected to receive as an invited part-time young teacher. I have to be very tactful in my relationship with my colleagues particularly when it comes to express my opinion about departmental matters. I have to be very cautious due to my part-time status, which causes a great deal of anxiety and insecurity.*

What seems to be an issue here is the fact that a member suffers from a situation known as 'between the rock and hard place'. That is, she has either to be silent and submissive in regards to the issues of teaching her courses and working relationship with her colleagues, or probably lose her job because of not being silent and submissive, a situation which has built in her a great deal of anxiety and emotional exhaustion leading to burnout.

Discordant Outlooks

Generally speaking, many English teachers welcome the innovations in all aspects of their academic activities such as teaching, learning, assessment, role relationship, administration, and providing choices and options for students. However, the participants in the interview complained about the discrepancies between the outlooks of teaching staff at English Department and the decision makers in the faculty of Humanities. This can be explained in terms of lack of congruence between educational values and methods of English Department, which can be traced back to foreign language culture in which these teachers were educated and the dominant

decision-making departments which are resistant against any innovation of curricula, methods of practice, and teacher-student interactional modes in classes.

This erosive contrast has adds to the state of anguish, according to participant A:

> *I usually feel lonely in my work culture because of the discrepancy between the two conflicting cultures of education and epistemology. An added pressure is felt as the decision-making processes are at the hands of disciplines which are more in attuned with the official policies. As a result, my teaching as well my colleagues' teaching is affected by assumptions and principles other than what we have learned as years of socializing and practicing within our own discipline, a conflict which adds to the emotions of an applied linguist and EFL teacher in and out of his classrooms.*

The participants believed that association with Western culture in general and its academic norms and values in particular has provided them with a critical window that opens to the reality and pitfalls of the current system and learning culture. And this is where the root of the problem lies. Critical stances upon which such comparisons are made are not usually welcome by dominant readings. So, a tension exists between two ways of thinking as regards both macro educational policies and micro level practices. This is a kind of tension mentioned by Widdowson, when he distinguished between retrospective and prospective pedagogical purposes, and also between teacher-oriented versus learner-oriented process of teaching and learning (Widdowson, 2003).

The participants felt that the culture and educational system here makes them apply principals and methods which are at odds with what they have learnt. In fact, their assumptions of teaching and university setting are different from what they experience in their workplace.

> *I do not understand the logic behind the rules and principals we are following on daily basis? What is the underlying purpose of education at our universities? How are we going to put into use our knowledge into practice in our classes and for what kind of society we are educating our students? I really do not understand the value of the current approaches and procedures in our universities? (Participant B).*

The conflict between teachers' ideal teaching context and the assumptions and beliefs they are exposed to in reality adds to their frustration. The resulting frustration followed by feelings of loneliness, waste of talents and experience, and loss of motivation all contribute to blockage of innovation and creativeness and criticality both in the teaching and the research activities they are involved in. Another consequence of this tension between the ideal and actual is the forced conclusion that some teachers may feel as to give up their standards and adjust themselves to the realities imposed by the situation.

Lack of Student Motivation

Another important theme derived from interview data is students' lack of motivation to learn. There is now a general belief among political authorities, educational administration, teachers, parents, and even students themselves that the motivation level among both pre-university and university students has dropped considerably. The issue can be looked from different perspectives and each such perspective can shed some light on the underlying reasons for this problem. One source of the problem that everybody agrees on is the socio-economic situation, particularly the problem of unemployment among university graduates, the rate of which according to one recent governmental report is 50% as reported by Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare. However, given the scope of our study, we shall focus only on some of more specific factors pertaining to the area of our investigation, i.e. students learning English. Here we are dealing with two types of learners: Those who study English Language and Literature as their major course, and those who have to sit in one general English and one English for Specific Purposes (ESP) during their BA/BSc. degree courses in various academic disciplines.

Lack of motivation is mostly the problem of students who sit in general English and ESP classes. Overall, these students fall into three categories: few with exceptionally high, some with acceptable, and a majority with lower levels of English proficiency. Regardless of their levels of proficiency these courses are compulsory. Lack of motivation is higher among the first (high level) and third (low level) students. The first group complains they learn little from the courses as the teachers try to take into account the needs of the whole class. The third group complains for a quite different reason. Most of them simply do not like learning English since they either had a lot of experience in English as a foreign language at secondary education or they do not see English as a significant adjunct course.

To find out how this issue was dealt with from teachers' point of view, our interview with the participants addressed the issue. Each of the two participants perceived students' lack of motivation differently and experienced different feelings. Participant A tried to sympathize with his students and help them regain their motivation but at the same time he talked about the challenges of teaching at university and experienced a kind of emotional consonance and comfort in his interaction with students. His sympathy with students and considering the realities of society and university helped him construe this as a tolerable matter.

> *I notice elements of frustration and demotivation among my students, particularly among undergraduate students. Although this has an impeding effect on my mind, I try to help, if not all but some of my students regain or build up their motivation. I understand them and never criticize them for being demotivated and say we are in the same situation. Instead of blaming students for their lack of motivation, I try to analyze the socio-psychological pressures that contribute to the decline of motivation in learning.*

For participant B, who also as a teacher sympathizes with her students, lack of student motivation often puts her under great pressure and anxiety. In her words:

> *I understand how much they like me and want to be present in my class, however when it comes to learning and doing exercises they are ambivalent and try to pass. I understand their lack of motivation, and try to make them interested in English. But sometimes I think my energy and time is wasted in this way* (Participant B).

Despite these grim feelings, she also said she usually did not express her true feelings nor did she talk about the level of anxiety imposed on her by the students' lack of motivation. She believed that she had to show up very energetic and optimistic in her classes because being fresh and active could help her students in learning. In her view, in order to help students to become interested in learning, teachers need to be a perfect actor in the classroom playing different roles and pretending emotions that they might have never experienced in reality. She had to pretend to be very eager and happy; although this was not her true feeling in other settings.

> *I understand their lack of motivation, and try to make them interested in English. But sometimes I think my energy and time is wasted in this way. Sometimes I really get tired at the end of the day.* (Participant B).

Knowing this, participant B devoted her time to her students and tried to make close relationship with them. However, sometimes she did not want to listen to her students but the responsibility she felt forced her to invest time and energy for them. The teacher reported of her physical fatigue and mental frustration in her attempt to motivate the students.

Lack of Institutional Support

Institutional support is understood to a have a key role in the efficacy of the tasks carried out for the objectives of a given institute, be that be a university, a company, or a factory. In the context of the current research, both participants believed that there was not adequate support for

teaching English. They also believed that this lack of support is rampant at other universities throughout the country although the degree of this indifference may vary from one university to another.

In spite of the recognition of importance of English at higher academic levels in Iran, in practice there is no reform movement for teaching English. There is little will, if any, by policy makers, for reforming the present situation of teaching English for Specific Purposes. Reform is needed not only in redefining the objectives, and methodologies, but also in training teachers, increasing course hours, and employing standardized assessment methods. This criticism was evident in the participants' interviews, too. According to participant B:

> *My general and ESP courses are usually overcrowded, sometimes more than 50 students in the classroom. On top of that, these students usually display an array of proficiency levels, from beginners to advanced ones. Teaching in these classes is usually very daunting and challenging. There is no room for applying the appropriate instructional approaches and strategies and I really cannot achieve the course objectives. Most of the class time is devoted to management issues and I cannot meet the needs of all the students and provide an interesting and helpful class for all proficiency levels.*

The teacher understands that such courses are useless with no clearly defined objective either for the teacher or the students. She also perceives that this helpless situation gives rise to further demotivation of the students. Being aware of this dire situation, participant B experiences a high degree of burden and labor to teach, to cope with class situations that are totally at odds with the view of English classes in the 21st century. Also knowing the fact that this has been going on for many years without any improvement is a salt to injury and leads to additional emotional exhaustion and burnout for her and all other teachers in the same situation.

Discussion

The current study investigated the causes of burnout in two academics in an Iranian state university. The findings demonstrated that institutional demands at the university constituted one major cause of burnout in academics. A teaching context characterized by extra demands, pressures, discrimination, and academics' not being involved in decision making process creates many tensions for them and distracts them from their primary objectives in their job. The results are partially in line with the findings of Kinman (2001) who reported that academics' lack of involvement in decision makings process at UK universities was construed as a stress factor by them and contributed to their health matters. Brew, Boud, Lucas and Crawford (2018) also observed that authorities establish policies with the aim of making changes and improving the quality of education at universities; however, some of these policies may turn out to have opposite effects and not lead to desired outcomes. Similarly, Khezerlou (2017) emphasized importance of flexible and fair regulations by the authorities. The results highlighted the importance of safe and relaxing environment in academics' psychological well-being. It is important that policy makers try to free university from political issues and return it to its main objectives, i.e. promotion of science and knowledge via education and research. They should avoid any kind of discrimination and prejudice among members.

The study also indicated that problems rooted in interpersonal relationships were another cause of frustration among academics. The results accentuated the importance of psychological harmony, understanding, and trust among academic staff at university because lack of understanding created many challenges for academics. The findings are in line with the results of Simmons and her colleagues (2009) which emphasized the importance of trust among colleagues at work, and argued that trust allows for more open discussion of challenges and the acceptance of advice. The authors also suggested that discussing professional conflicts with colleagues

reduces the risk of burnout. Similarly, Johnson, Worthington, Gredecki, and Wilks-Riley (2016) suggested that professionals who tend to trust colleagues may be more positive in their interactions with clients. Van Emmerik (2002) also proposed that a supportive departmental climate and assistance from colleagues in the department reduced emotional exhaustion. It is important that academics try to create a relaxing atmosphere for each other by understanding and respecting others' values and rights. The university should be considered as a setting for cooperative work in which the academics help others in achieving their objectives rather than creating challenges and problems for each other. It is also necessary that in recruiting new members, in addition to candidates' competence and professional achievements, their personality factors and whether they are going to adjust themselves to situation and can work with others be examined.

The results also indicated that discordant outlooks at the university constituted another major cause of burnout among participants by creating negative emotions and challenges for them. The participants were teaching in a context which encouraged beliefs and values which were at odds with their epistemological beliefs and established values. Similarly, Roohani and Dayeri (2019) suggested that the mismatch between the teachers' expectation and job demands was one source of emotional exhaustions among them. It is an axiom that teachers' epistemological beliefs determine and shape their teaching practice. They plan and organize their classes based on what they deem appropriate for their classroom and objectives. However, in this context the participants could not act according to their own values as the dominant ideologies at the university and faculty and their realization in the overall policy making and teaching practice contrasted with their values and created extra demands for them.

Another finding of the study was the contribution of institutional support to academics' frustration in their job. The academics expected the authorities' support in order to improve the quality of English language teaching at the university level; however, they were left alone with various unsolved problems which added to stress and emotional exhaustion among them and reduced their energy and motivation. The results are partially in line with findings of Kinman, Wray, and Strange (2011) which indicated that teachers who received workplace support experienced less emotional exhaustion and more job satisfaction. Similarly, the results of Swanson and Huff's (2010) study on FL teacher attrition in Georgia indicated the critical role of institutional support in teachers' decision to remain in their job. In order to help academics to achieve their objectives in teaching and research as well as to avoid frustration among them, authorities should provide any kind of support and advantages.

Another finding of the study was related to the role of student motivation in academics' burnout. Students' lack of interest in English language teaching especially in ESP and general English classes affected participant B in a negative way. In fact, the time and energy she invested to motivate students was not productive; students did not want to invest in learning English because English was considered only as a course to pass and did not play any important role in their studies. This has roots in macro policies of education which do not value English language in the educational system of the country. The existing situation was perceived very unfavorable and stress-provoking for her as students' lack of interest demotivated her a lot. Past literature has investigated the significance of student factors including the number and type of students i.e., postgraduate or undergraduate students on academics' burnout (Byrne, 1991; Lackritz, 2004; Pretorius, 1994), and the current study demonstrated the effect of student motivation in academics' burnout. This issue requires further investigation in order to clarify the role of student motivation in different aspects of academics' work and their burnout experiences.

Conclusion

Although the results of current study cannot be generalized, it provided rich insights about the causes of burnout in one of the state universities in Iran. In fact, it has provided new directions in the study of burnout among the academics. In contrast to studies mentioned in literature review which focused on work demands and classroom factors as fundamental causes of burnout, the current qualitative study demonstrated the significance of macro level policies and outside class factors in academics' burnout. Future research can provide complementary results by following this line of research and focusing on contextual factors of other universities in Iran and worldwide. Studying the causes of burnout among academics in different universities all over the world can help in offering a theoretical framework about academic' experiences and coping strategies in relation to burnout in university settings.

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Appendix

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (Grand Tour and Possible Follow-up Questions)

1. Tell me how you feel about the work that you do.

    a. How satisfying would you say that your job is?

    b. What are the most discouraging things about teaching?

    c. Has how you feel about teaching changed over time at all? If so, how?

2. Tell me a story of a time when you felt like you were going through extreme pressure and stress at university.

    a. How did you feel before, during, and after that incident?

    b. How did it affected you and your job satisfaction?

    c. Is this kind of performance a common occurrence? How often do you do things like this?

3. What are particular causes of frustration and stress at your university?

4. How do you react to the frustrating events in your job?

5. How do you see teaching FL as different from teaching other subjects? How are your experiences as a FL teacher similar to or different from the stories that teachers in other departments tell you?

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