# Burnout Coping Strategies among Iranian EFL Teachers

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**Abstract:** Burnout is one of the potential threats to teachers which can negatively influence their performance and bring about many side effects such as poor health conditions, depression, absenteeism, etc. It has, however, been found teachers who use effective coping strategies to deal with stressful job conditions can resist burnout. This qualitative design study aimed to investigate the coping strategies of 15 Iranian high school EFL teachers who did not show burnout on Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). The participants were interviewed and observed in classrooms and they were asked to keep journals for 8 sessions. The data were content analyzed and results show that establishment of rapport with students, discussing problems with principals and colleagues, class management, reflection, ongoing learning, adherence to moral principles and adopting a traditional teaching style are among the coping strategies these teachers used. The low frequency of these strategies, however, implies that EFL teachers, even those who resist burnout, need to be trained on different burnout coping strategies.

**Keywords**: Burnout, Coping Strategies, Qualitative Design, Iranian EFL Teachers.

## Introduction

One of the potential threats to those whose jobs entail dealing extensively with others, including teachers, is 'burnout'. The term burnout was coined by Freudenberger (1974) and was defined as "to fail, to wear out, or become exhausted by making excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources" (p. 159). In 1981 Maslach and Jackson proposed an empirically based multidimensional view to burnout which consisted of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion

is "the feeling of being emotionally overextended and depleted of one's emotional resources" and depersonalization is defined as "a negative, callous, or excessively detached response to other people" and reduced personal accomplishment is "a decline in feelings of competence and … achievement in ones' work" (Leiter & Maslach, 1998, p. 348).

Lens and de Jesus (1999) reviewing several studies conclude "burnout is a more important problem in the teaching profession than in many other professions with similar academic and personal requirements" (p. 194). Coombe (2008 as cited in Küçükoğlu, 2014) also believes teaching is among the top 5 most stressful careers in the world. Burnout has detrimental effects on teachers and can lead to job dissatisfaction, feeling uncommitted to one's work, absenteeism, turnover, poor performance, work alienation, physical and emotional ill-health (Chan, 2003; Jaffe & Scott, 1988). Blase (1984 as cited in Seidman & Zager, 1991) found that teachers who failed to cope with job-related stress reported more frequent headaches, sleepnessness, depression, and burnout than were school teachers who were better at coping. Seidman and Zager (1991) reviewing research on coping with job stress maintain that inadequate coping with job-related stress "not only results in increased absenteeism and job turnover, and poorer worker morale and performance, but also impedes student achievement" (p. 206). Therefore, one of the most promising areas in burnout studies has also been the coping styles. As Cranwell-Ward and Abbey (2005) maintain, people who use a control-oriented coping strategy experience less burnout. Control-oriented coping includes cognitive strategies, such as clarifying goals and managing time, as well as actions such as discussing problems directly with supervisors and coworkers. Rudow (1999), reporting the results of his study, also maintains that "active and palliative coping strategies in stressful situations help to lessen stress and burnout. Inactive, regressive styles (escape, negation, belittling, resignation, etc) seem to bring on stress and burnout" (p. 42).

Along these lines, and noticing that, to the authors' best knowledge, no study in Iranian EFL context has dealt with burnout coping strategies, this study aimed to study the coping strategies used by Iranian EFL teachers. The findings can help EFL teachers who work in stressful situations to deal more effectively with their jobs and to prevent their burnout.

## Review of Literature

Coping styles and strategies are among the factors which can influence the experience of burnout. In other words, adopting appropriate coping strategies can reduce the negative consequences of burnout and the burnout itself. Despite this significance, as Laugaa, Rascle

and Bruchon-Schweitzer (2008) maintain, only a dozen research studies have been devoted to coping strategies that teachers develop to confront professional problems.

Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, and Gruen (1986) in an attempt to study the coping strategies adopted by people confronting stressful situation developed a 66-item scale called The Ways of Coping Scale. This scale includes eight underlying constructs or factors which are actually the major coping strategies identified. These are confrontive coping, distancing, self-controlling, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance, planful problem-solving and positive reappraisal.

Seidman and Zager (1991) recognize two types of coping strategies i.e., adaptive and maladptive. Adaptive coping strategies include activities such as hobbies, physical exercise, and talking to colleagues, and maladaptive coping strategies include alcohol consumption, smoking, excessive eating, etc. The research Seidman and Zager review suggest that support from co-workers and supervisors is an effective coping strategy rather than from one's family members, who do not share the same stressful context and are less likely to be empathic.

To Berry (1998) individual strategies for coping include cognitive and behavior modification to help a person learn new ways of understanding existing conditions. People who are effective in coping with stress often say they do this by trying to get a new perspective on the situation. The coping strategies Berry refers to include activities designed to control physiological and emotional reactions, of which relaxation, meditation, biofeedback and physical exercise are examples. Another coping strategy involves social interaction i.e., getting help and emotional support from others. Social support provides people with specific information and guidance for dealing with a stressful situation or for preventing stress.

Millward (2005) recognizes two other sets of coping strategies i.e., problem-focused versus emotion-focused strategies. Problem focused strategies describe attempts to confront and deal directly with the demands of the situation itself using 'mastery' strategies such as systematic problem diagnosis and solution generation. Solutions may involve changing goals and aspirations, more effective time-management, confronting the problem directly, and/or changing the situation. Emotion focused strategies, on the other hand, describe strategies "used when we believe there is nothing we can do to manage or to change the situation, aimed at managing the physiological component of the response" (p. 399). Such strategies include venting anger, drinking, seeking emotional support and reappraising the situation in a way that minimizes its anxiety-inducing impact. In the reappraisal of the situation, we are often prone to distort the reality of the situation as a way of dealing with anxiety.

Boyd, Lewin and Sager (2009) found that emotion-focused coping influenced the psychological outcomes of emotional exhaustion and job-induced anxiety, which in turn influenced job satisfaction and intention to withdraw. While problem-focused coping had no effect on job-induced anxiety, it did affect emotional exhaustion, which in turn influenced job satisfaction and intention to withdraw.

Laugaa et al. (2008), analyzing the results of a study on the coping strategies of French teachers, identified four coping strategies including the need to communicate, coping centered on the problem, avoidance coping and adopting a traditional style of teaching.

The need to communicate or the search for social supports includes items such as letting others know exactly what your position is, assuring yourself your coworkers experience things the same way that you do, thinking about a problem with your coworker, giving your opinion about how things are done in the school and how they are developing, discussing problems with the principal and assuring yourself that others realize that you are doing your best.

Coping centered on the problem covers items such as attempting to objectively analyze the situation and controlling one's emotion, thinking about the positive aspect of teaching, taking stock of the situation and attempting to rationalize it, giving the students positive encouragement, and attempting to always remain coherent and honest in one's relation with the students.

Avoidance coping includes items such as not bringing work home, completely forgetting work when day is over, neither working too hard nor too long, getting more involved in extra professional activities, simply attempting to ignore the problems, avoiding the other members of teaching staff, and telling yourself it is just job and continuing to do it. In the face of professional stressors, avoidance coping consists of fleeing from all that concerns professional problems and devoting oneself to something else.

As for adopting a traditional style of teaching, this coping strategy includes items such as insisting that the students remain quiet, behaving in an authoritarian manner, separating or isolating certain students from others for a while, keeping the students busy and developing habits in your way of teaching.

## Method

To find out the burnout coping strategies among Iranian EFL teachers, a qualitative design was used in which data were collected through interview, observation and teacher's keeping journals.

## Participants

The participants in the study were 15 teachers who taught at public high schools. These participants scored low on the Persian version of Maslach Burnout Inventory or MBI (Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996), which was administered to a population of 209 Iranian EFL teachers in Mashhad and Ghouchan, north east of Iran. The reliability coefficients of the instrument in the present study were .79, .60 and .80, respectively for emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment. Participants were informed of the aim and importance of the study and written informed consents were obtained from them. They were ensured they could leave the study at any stage they wanted. They were further ensured that their identities will be kept confidential. Therefore, due to ethical issues, the identity of all teachers will be anonymous and each teacher is identified with a number. Table 1 displays the demographic features of the participants.

**Table 1.** Demographic features of participating teachers

| Teacher number | Gender | Experience | Degree | Type of employment |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Male | 22 | BA | Permanent |
| 2 | Male | 17 | BA | Permanent |
| 3 | Male | 15 | BA | Permanent |
| 4 | Male | 11 | BA | Permanent |
| 5 | Male | 16 | MA | Permanent |
| 6 | Female | 18 | BA | Permanent |
| 7 | Female | 14 | BA | Permanent |
| 8 | Female | 23 | BA | Permanent |
| 9 | Female | 16 | BA | Permanent |
| 10 | Female | 18 | BA | Permanent |
| 11 | Female | 12 | BA | Permanent |
| 12 | Female | 24 | BA | Permanent |
| 13 | Female | 25 | BA | Permanent |
| 14 | Female | 19 | BA | Permanent |
| 15 | Female | 10 | BA | Permanent |

## Procedure

A series of semi-structured interviews were scheduled at convenient times for the participants. The interviews were probed so that the participants will talk about how they dealt with tensions and stressful conditions of their job. In order to let the interviewees express themselves more

freely and to avoid their having problems communicating in English, the interviews were carried out in Persian. The Participants' consents were also obtained to audio-record their voices.

To analyze the interview data, following Seidman's (2006) guidelines, first all the interviews were conducted. Later, the interviews were transcribed and based on Berg, Lune and Lune's (2004) guidelines, they were deeply content analyzed to find the coping strategies of the participating teachers.

To validate the findings of the interview phase, next, the teachers were provided with a sample teacher journal and were instructed in keeping journals on what occurred in their classes and their reactions with an emphasis on how they tackled with the stressful events in their teaching. They kept journal for eight weeks. The journals were also kept in Persian. Then, their journals were content analyzed for the coping strategies they had used.

Finally, one of the researchers observed each teacher's class for two sessions. A noteworthy point regarding classroom observation is that some teachers were too concerned about this did not agree to be observed and those who agreed to be observed (11 teachers) were too concerned about videotaping the sessions. Therefore, they agreed only to the researcher's observing their classes and taking notes. One of the researchers observed these classes twice, once at the fourth week of the term and once near the end of the term.

## Results and Findings

## Interview Findings

The thematic analysis of the interviews with teachers generated the themes (coping strategies) displayed in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Coping strategies of Iranian EFL teachers revealed in interview data

| No. | Theme | Frequency |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Ongoing learning | 18 |
| 2 | Establishment of good rapport with students | 18 |
| 3 | Patience and ignoring problems | 15 |
| 4 | Interest in teaching | 15 |
| 5 | Discussing problems with principals and colleagues | 12 |
| 6 | Adherence to moral principles | 11 |
| 7 | Adherence to religious principles | 6 |
| 8 | Talking to others to relax | 6 |
| 9 | Reflection | 5 |
| 10 | Class management | 4 |

As Table 2 indicates, one of the common themes in interviews was their intention and interest in developing one's linguistic and pedagogical knowledge. As it is reflected in their statements, through reading EFL journals and books or watching educational films, these teachers tried to improve and refresh their knowledge and keep it up-to-date. Moreover, they said they tried to learn from their experiences and did not ignore the events which occurred in the class. As a teacher (teacher 9) said, "I take the opportunity of summer holidays and 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". Another teacher (teacher 1) also said, "To refresh my knowledge and to keep myself motivated, I participate in a weekly meeting with some friends. There, we try to speak English and discuss our problems in English".

Establishment of a good rapport with students was another common theme in remarks of the teachers. Many of the interviewed teachers underscored the importance of good rapport with learners and talked about their effort to establish such a rapport at the beginning of the school year. For example, a teacher (teacher 12) said, "In the first month of the year, my main purpose is to know the students and to change their negative attitudes. I try to establish good relations with them". Another teacher (teacher 13) said, "I usually talk to students individually or in groups and try to earn their trust". The teachers believed the establishment of good rapport could pave the way for gaining students' trust, and this trust could help teachers to have more influence on students. As a teacher (teacher 4) said, "I make friends with students first. Then, I give them some piece of advice not as a teacher but as a friend".

Another very common theme in the non-burned-out teachers was tolerating the problems or ignoring them i.e., an escape-oriented coping style. As a teacher (teacher 3) said, "If you think of problems, you will not be able to do your job". Another teacher (teacher 14) said, "There are many times that I feel I have not been treated fairly. But I try just to forget". Another one (teacher 1) added, "If you want to be a good teacher, you have to be patient".

A theme noticeable in all teachers' interviews was the outset interest they showed to teaching. For example, a teacher (teacher 2) said, "I was interested in teaching from childhood". Another teacher (teacher 5) said, "I was a good math student in high school. But I was interested in English and my good English teacher influenced me a lot so that I decided to be an English teacher". Another teacher (teacher 7) said, "It is only my interest in my job that makes all problems tolerable".

Another major theme in the coping strategies of teachers was the adaptive control-oriented strategy of talking about the problems with principals and colleagues. As a teacher

(teacher 13) said, "I talk to the principal and I inform him that if the current situation continues, his expectations will not be fulfilled". Another teacher (teacher 6) said, "I talk to counselor of the school. I urge him to pay special attention to some students". Another teacher (teacher 5) said, "I directly talk to the principal. In this way, she feels more responsibility for solving the problems".

Moral duty was another noticeable subject in teachers' ideas. These teachers said they felt they had a moral duty as a teacher, and they kept thinking of this moral duty to keep their engines running. As a teacher (teacher 8) said, "I say to myself: you belong to all students. Even if there are few good students in the class, you should do your job well". Another teacher (teacher 15) said, "I think of morality all the time and do not let the problems influence me". Another teacher (teacher 5) said, "I want to be a professional teacher. One characteristics of a professional is morality. If I have accepted to be a teacher, I should accept that there are some problems too".

Religious factors were also among the important themes in teachers' interviews. These teachers believed sticking to religious principles would help them to deal with problems more easily. As a teacher (teacher 13) said, "I work for God. It is not important how students, parents or authorities react". Another teacher (teacher 15) said "I tolerate all problems because teaching is prophets' job". Another teacher (teacher 6) also said, "I work well so that my salary becomes halal".

Many of the interviewed teachers also said that they talked to others about their problems. The purpose of this talking could be just baring one's soul or asking for advice. For example, a teacher (teacher 1) said, "I talk with my wife at home about the problems. This calms me down". Another teacher (teacher 3) said, "I talk to my colleagues. This makes me relaxed and sometimes they give good advice for tackling the situation". Another teacher (teacher 6) said, "I talk to my husband who is a math teacher. Students do not like math either. So, he gives me advice and guidelines on how to deal with this".

Reflection on class behaviors and problems and analyzing the situation was another theme common in these teachers' ideas. As a teacher (teacher 5) said, "Whenever a student shows a problem, I first think what I should do to prevent him from doing such a thing in next sessions". Another teacher (teacher 14) also said, "I think about students' feedback and think of ways and strategies to make them feel more positive about the class".

Class management skills were also another common theme. For example, a teacher (teacher 2) said, "You should only know how to manage the class". Another teacher (teacher

10) said, "I try different techniques to control students. I involve weak students in taking notes, for example". Another teacher (teacher 5) said, "I know students and I can predict their behavior. So I think of appropriate solutions". Another teacher (teacher 13) said, "When I feel students are tired or uninterested, I do not go on teaching. I talk about educational issues and let them talk about their problems".

## Journal keeping Findings

Thematic analysis of the journals kept by the 15 teachers who had not shown signs of burnout, led to the identification of the following categories of coping strategies displayed in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Coping strategies of Iranian EFL teachers revealed in journal keeping data

| No. | Theme | Frequency |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | Establishment of rapport with students | 13 |
| 2 | Discussing problems with principals and colleagues | 9 |
| 3 | Class management | 8 |
| 4 | Reflection | 8 |
| 5 | Ongoing Learning | 5 |
| 6 | Adherence to moral principles | 4 |

In the content analysis of the journals, trying to establish good rapport with students was also a very significant theme. For example, as a teacher (teacher 8) writing about a clash with a student stated:

After the class I tried to have a chat with him and said 'I do not expect good students even the simplest mistakes. And I hope to see you more active next session'. He smiled and said he had not known that I was going to ask questions. I was happy that he was not upset. Another teacher (teacher 3) wrote, "I talked to students. I tried to give them positive energy. I said if they tried and studied harder and compensated for their low scores, we would go camping".

Talking to the principal and colleagues was another identifiable coping strategy in the journals. For example, a teacher (teacher 4) wrote, "I decided to talk to the principal and seek advice". Another teacher (teacher 12) also wrote, "After the class, I talked to the counselor and asked her to inform the families and ask for their cooperation".

Class management was another identifiable strategy in the journals which teachers used to tackle stressful situations. For example, a teacher (teacher 13) wrote, "I noticed some students were noisy and did not cooperate. I decided to assign them as the heads of the groups. In this way, they had to lead the groups and therefore, they had to cooperate and make less noise". Another teacher (teacher 5) wrote, "A student made a funny wisecrack. I asked him to come to the board and answer the questions. Others kept silence".

Reflection on the class events and trying to analyze the problems and find solutions was another strategy that teachers used. For example, a teacher (teacher 5) wrote, "At home, I was thinking about the problem. I said to myself 'I should behave in a way that students study because they respect me not because they fear me'". Another teacher (teacher 10) wrote "I am very annoyed with myself. I shouldn't have said such a thing to my student. But I don't know why I do not predict the possible problems and I do not think of a suitable reaction in advance".

Ongoing learning either from one's experience or from books or others was another common theme in the journals. For example, a teacher (teacher 2) wrote, "I decided to take lesson from my experience and do not repeat the same mistake in other classes". Another teacher (teacher 15) wrote, "I decided to think of more effective techniques. Maybe, I need to read more on this topic". Another teacher (teacher 1) also wrote, "I bought a new multimedia CD. I wanted to know how that teacher taught".

Morality was another identifiable theme in teachers' journal. For example a teacher (teacher 2) wrote, "I was tempted not to go to school that day and to make an excuse. But I said, 'A man should have work conscience". Another teacher (teacher 5) wrote, "This method made me very tired but at least I had no troubled conscience".

## Observation Findings

Eleven of the teachers who had participated in interview and journal keeping stages were also observed in real classrooms. The purpose was to validate the findings of the interview and journal keeping, and to detect any other coping strategies which might have been ignored inn other phases. Due to the nature of the observation data, however, it was not possible to identify many coping strategies in the observation data. Table 4 displays the two coping strategies identifiable in the observation data.

**Table 4.** Coping strategies of Iranian EFL teachers revealed in observation data

| No. | Theme | Frequency |
|-----|-------|-----------|
| 1 | Adopting a traditional teaching style | 14 |
| 2 | Establishment of rapport with students | 7 |

A new coping strategy of adopting a traditional style of teaching was identified in the observation data. Although, the focus of the Ministry of Education in recent years has been on encouraging cooperative teaching methods and team work teaching, some teachers taught traditionally in schools where majority of the students were weak. That is, they read the vocabulary list and translated it for the learners and only sometimes asked students to translate very simple sentences. After the class, in discussing the class procedures with the researcher, many of these teachers said that they did not use the recommended methods of teaching such as the cooperative and team work teaching techniques in schools where students were mainly weak. As they said, in these schools, students were not ready for these methods. This clearly shows that by adopting traditional styles of teaching, these teachers in fact avoided many of the stressful factors such as students' inability to perform a task in a group or their low proficiency to answer questions. Moreover, using the traditional teacher fronted style of teaching, the teacher has more control over the class and there are fewer chances for student misbehavior.

One strategy identified in the observation data was the good rapport teachers tried to establish with students. In these classes, teachers talked respectfully to students. They addressed students as sir or lady and used polite form of verbs with them. These teachers usually admired correct answers by students. In a class, even when students read and translated most parts of a sentence wrongly, the teacher (teacher 4) thanked them and said it was good but they needed more practice. In these classes, the teacher also talked to students about how to read and learn. These teachers usually gave advice to learners on how to study. For example, a teacher (teacher 15) talked to students about vocabulary learning strategies and mnemonic devices.

**Discussion**

As already stated, ongoing learning, establishing good rapport with students, patience and ignoring problems, interest in teaching, discussing problems with principals and colleagues, adherence to moral and religious principles, talking to others to relax, reflection, class

management, and adopting traditional teaching styles were among the important strategies teachers used to prevent burnout or to cope with it.

Some of these coping strategies have already been noticed in the literature. For example, discussing problems with principals and colleagues and talking to others to relax are in fact what Berry (1998) calls social interaction i.e., getting help and emotional support from others, or what Laugaa et al. (2008) call the search for social supports, or what Leiter and Maslach (1998) call collegiality which is supportive relationships with supervisor as well as coworkers. This social support in fact provides people with specific information and guidance for dealing with a stressful situation or for preventing stress.

Trying to establish rapport with students has also been mentioned in the literature with the name of giving the students positive encouragement (Laugaa et al., 2008). They actually classified this as a subtype of coping centered on the problem.

Patience and ignoring problems is also what Millward (2005) call emotion-focused strategies, which as he maintains are "used when we believe there is nothing we can do to manage or to change the situation" (p.399). Laugaa et al. (2008) call this coping strategy avoidance coping.

Reflection and class management are also similar to what Laugaa et al. (2008) call coping centered on the problem. To them, this strategy includes attempting to objectively analyze the situation and controlling one's emotion, thinking about the positive aspect of teaching, taking stock of the situation and attempting to rationalize it. Millward (2005) also calls them problem focused strategies which describe attempts to confront and deal directly with the demands of the situation itself using 'mastery' strategies such as systematic problem diagnosis and solution generation. Solutions, as they maintain may involve changing goals and aspirations, more effective time-management, confronting the problem directly, and/or changing the situation.

Laugaa et al. (2008) also refer to adopting a traditional style of teaching as a coping strategy. As they maintain, this coping strategy includes items such as insisting that the students remain quiet, behaving in an authoritarian manner, separating or isolating certain students from others for a while, keeping the students busy  and developing habits in your way of teaching.

Adherence to moral and religious principles, however have not been mentioned in the literature reviewed for the present study. The reason seems to lie in the peculiarities of an

Iranian context which is a religious and morality-based one. Moreover, these two coping strategies are in fact emotion-focused or escape-oriented strategies.

Although the frequency of the strategies used is low compared to the number of the participating teachers, the fact that the teachers under study did not show symptoms of burnout and they scored low on MBI indicates the effectiveness of these coping activities in preventing burnout. However, if teachers have more coping strategies at their disposal, they will have more resources to deal with stressful tensions in their jobs.

## Conclusion

The findings show rather few coping strategies (compared to the number of participating teachers, and the journals they kept and sessions they were observed). This implies that teachers need to be trained on effective coping strategies, as majority of the identified strategies are only emotion-focused ones. Therefore, this can be among the course objectives for on-the-job preparing programs and even pre-service teacher education programs.

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