

ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IRANIAN EFL TEACHERS' BURNOUT LEVEL AND THEIR EPISTEMOLOGICAL BELIEFS

Pouria Aghaei (PhD candidate, corresponding author)

Department of Foreign Languages, Shiraz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran
Email Address: pouria_ghaei@yahoo.com

Firooz Sadighi (Professor)

Department of Foreign Languages, Shiraz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran

Khalegh Setoodeh (PhD candidate)

Department of Foreign Languages, Shiraz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran

Naghmeh Esmaili (PhD candidate)

Department of Foreign Languages, Shiraz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz, Iran

ABSTRACT

This quantitative research study aimed at investigating the relationship between Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' epistemological beliefs and their burnout level. To this end, two scales, Epistemological Beliefs Questionnaire developed by Chan and Elliott (2004) and Maslach Burnout Inventory for teachers developed by Schaufeli and Van Horn (1995), were administered to 80 Iranian EFL teachers to examine their epistemological beliefs as well as their burnout rate. The findings of the study revealed that Iranian EFL teachers tended to endorse, from among the four categories of epistemological beliefs, the innate/fixed ability and certainty knowledge. The findings demonstrated positive relationship between high burnout level and 'Innate/Fixed ability' epistemic beliefs of EFL teachers. The results also showed a negative relationship between high rate of burnout and 'Learning/Effort process' type of epistemological beliefs of EFL teachers. The study can shed light on the concept of epistemological beliefs of in-service teachers and help them to foster their pedagogical beliefs regarding choosing the method of teaching in a way that diminish their burnout and facilitate their enthusiasm to teaching.

KEYWORDS: epistemological beliefs, burnout, EFL teachers

INTRODUCTION

Due the importance of education in every society, great efforts are always made to ensure that every stakeholder in educational system, specifically teachers and learners, go through the education cycle successfully and reach to the highest point of accountability and efficiency.

Teaching is a demanding career and a lot of social, cultural and affective factors may influence the profession and consequently the performance of teachers. The concept of burnout was first established by Freudenbeger in 1974 as wearing down or depleting energy (Freudenburger & North, 1985). Maslach, one of the pioneering figures studying burnout defines it as a syndrome of physical and emotional exhaustion including the development of negative job attitudes, poor professional self concept and low empathetic concern for clients (Maslach & Pines, 1984). Accordingly, she presents the three dimensions of burnout as Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Reduced Personal Accomplishment. Emotional Exhaustion refers to the feelings of over extension and exhaustion resulting from daily conflict in work. Emotional exhaustion can be seen as the overuse or overwhelming of one's emotions through extensive demands from others, leading to a feeling of barrenness in which the individual can no longer continue meeting the demands (Hamann & Gordon, 2000). Depersonalization indicates the development of negative attitudes and impersonal behaviors to people in relation to the profession such as students and teachers. Depersonalization is also the emotionally dry and detached manner of relating to others. Depersonalization can cause individuals to feel little or no self-worth, leading to feelings of reduced personal accomplishments, with no desire to accomplish job-related tasks and assignments (Hamann & Gordon, 2000). Depersonalization in teachers is critical to student achievement. If teachers are lacking the desire to professionally accomplish their jobs, students will fail and student achievement will be inadequate (Dworkin, 2001). Personal accomplishment is the sense of personal fulfillment coming with self-esteem that is negatively related to burnout; the more people suffer from burnt out, the worse they feel about their personal accomplishment. Lack of feeling of success and accomplishment among teachers is defined as reduced professional efficacy, which is the negative belief of self capability in classroom. Since burned out teachers negatively affect themselves, their students, and the educational system, it is necessary to scrutinize the issue in pedagogical system and try to diminish it. Dworkin (2001) suggested defining teacher burnout is a pivotal primary step to establishing effective research on teacher burnout. Teacher burnout is the culmination of the same three components, but specifically found in teachers. Yong and Yue (2007) suggested identifying key elements that cause (or lead) to teacher burnout is critical to any research on the topic. Fisher (2011) stated preventing teacher burnout and supporting teachers suffering from burnout is important to student success.

Epistemology refers to a branch of philosophy focused on the nature, methods, limitations, and validity of knowledge (Moser, 1995). Over the centuries, philosophers have engaged in deliberations over the specific nature of knowledge and how it relates to similar notions such as truth, belief, and justification.

Teacher's beliefs have been viewed as a central part in every pedagogical context and needed to be addressed in the area of most educational reforms (woolfolk-Hoy, Davis & Pape, 2006). Some of these beliefs are about the nature of the knowledge and the process of knowing, which are, as Mori (1999) states, essential in EFL classroom settings. Hofer and Pintrich (1997) also noted that beliefs about the nature of the knowledge and the process of knowing should be considered the core of an individual's theory, while the other beliefs about learning, teaching and intelligence may be relevant to the core dimensions but are peripheral to an individual's theory.

RELATED LITERATURE

Olafson and Schraw (2006) determined the epistemological beliefs of elementary teachers and then attempted to look for a correlation between their epistemological beliefs and their actual teaching practices. The results of this study indicated that epistemological beliefs and worldviews are correlated. The contextualized and relativist worldviews were correlated with more sophisticated epistemological beliefs.

Chai and Khine (2008) have reported similar pattern of epistemic beliefs held by Singaporean pre-service teachers. Several variables were found to be correlated with these teachers' epistemic beliefs such as their ethnicity, gender, major subjects, and teaching experiences. Also Chai, Deng, Qian and Wong (2010) examined the epistemic beliefs held by 445 teacher education students from the South China context and have reported the same results with the pre-service teachers from Hong Kong and Singapore.

Mohammadi, Naderi, Shariyatmadari and Seif Naraghi (2013) investigated the relationship between teachers' epistemological beliefs and the inclination toward teaching approaches. The findings of this study showed that there is a significant relationship between type of teachers' epistemological beliefs and their teaching approaches, and that dimensions of epistemological beliefs can predict teaching approaches.

In a study, Landeche (2009) reported no significant correlations between emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and creativity index among teachers in public schools. However, she found a fairly strong relationship between creativity and reduced personal accomplishment.

The study of Mukundan and Khanderoo (2009) among 120 English language teachers in Malaysia revealed that emotional exhaustion of female teachers and depersonalization of male teachers were significantly high, while both had significantly a high level of reduced personal accomplishment.

Hosseini Fatemi and Raoufi (2014) examined a relationship between Iranian English language educators' burnout and teaching style in public schools and private institutions. The findings suggested a significant difference between burnout level and adoption of teaching styles by school and institute teachers.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Iranian EFL in-service teachers work in a challenging environment where the target language is practiced only within the walls of classrooms and does not have a practical usage beyond the academic and institutional setting. The present study will draw attention to what recognition of epistemological beliefs may achieve for foreign language teaching. The main purpose of the current study is therefore to investigate whether there is any relationship between teachers' epistemic beliefs and their burnout level. The types of Iranian EFL teachers' epistemological were also inspected in this study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the objectives of the study, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. Is there a relationship between Iranian EFL in-service teachers' epistemological beliefs and their burnout level?
2. What epistemological beliefs Iranian EFL in-service teachers hold?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

80 male and female Iranian EFL teachers who were native speakers of Persian were purposively selected from various universities such as Islamic Azad University and some language institutions in Shiraz, Iran (48 males and 42 females). Their teaching experience ranged between 5 to 15 years and their age range was between 25 to 40 years old. The detailed information of the participants is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of Participants

sex	Age groups		Degree	Informal Teaching Experiences		
Male 48	<25	14	English Teaching	53	<5	14
	26-35	26	English Translation	31	6-15	26
Female 42	36-45	29	English Literature	16	16-25	29
	>46	11			>26	11
N=80						

Instrumentation

Two instruments were used in this research project: The first one is Maslach Burnout Inventory for teachers (MBI_NL_Ed; Schaufeli & Van Horn, 1995), which is used to assess teachers' burnout level. The second one is Epistemological Beliefs Scale (Chan & Elliott, 2004) which is used to elicit the teachers' epistemic beliefs. The reliability and validity of both instruments were confirmed.

Maslach Burnout Inventory for Teachers (MBI)

Maslach Burnout Inventory for teachers (MBI_NL_Ed; Schaufeli & Van Horn, 1995) was used to gauge burnout level of the teachers. The instrument consists of 20 items, and is divided into three sub-scales: (1) emotional exhaustion (eight items, maximum score is 48); (2) depersonalization (five items, maximum score is 30) and (3) personal accomplishment (seven items, maximum score is 42). The reliability coefficients for subscales were as follows .81 for emotional exhaustion; .66 for depersonalization; .77 for personal accomplishment. These result indicated that all MBI subscales have high internal consistency.

Epistemological Beliefs Questionnaire (EBQ)

The second instrument utilized in this study was the Epistemological Beliefs Scale (Chan & Elliott, 2004). The scale encompasses thirty items that are rated on a five-point likert scale, ranging from 'Strongly Disagree' (1) to 'Strongly Agree' (5). It was developed and validated by Chan and Elliott (2004) and was reported to have satisfactory psychometric properties. For

estimating the reliability of this questionnaire the researcher again used Cronbach's alpha. The internal consistency of the scale was equal to 0.89 in Chan and Elliot's study, however, in this study, Cronbach alpha showed a reliability of 0.83 for this scale which suggests high internal consistency.

Data Collection Procedure

All the data required for the study were gathered by the researcher himself by attending the language universities and institutes where the data were to be collected. The data was collected in two parts. In the first part, the teachers were provided with the objectives of the study and also with the instructions. The teachers were informed that their participation would be entirely voluntary and were assured that the information they provide will be confidential and will be used for research purposes only. The teachers were given as much time as they needed to complete the questionnaires. The instruments were administered to English teachers in one way and that is face-to-face administration (print form).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To determine the relationship between EFL teacher epistemological beliefs with four different subcategories and their burnout level consisting of three different subcategories, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used. The results in table 2 show that there is positive correlation between teacher burnout level and participants Innate/Fixed ability beliefs.

Table 2: Correlation between Teacher burnout and Epistemological beliefs

		Emotional exhaustion	depersonalization	Low level of personal acc.
Innate/Fixed Ability	Pearson Correlation	.716	.697	.671
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000
	N	80	80	80
Certainty Knowledge	Pearson Correlation	.171	.113	.091
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000
	N	80	80	80
Learning Effort/Process	Pearson Correlation	-.614	-.771	-.650
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000
	N	80	80	80
Authority/Expert Knowledge	Pearson Correlation	-.028	-.022	-.014
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000
	N	80	80	80

With regard to the second research question, the findings of the descriptive statistics showed that Iranian EFL teachers in Iran tended to endorse, from among the four categories of epistemological beliefs, the innate/fixed ability and certainty knowledge. As it can be seen in

Table 3, Innate/Fixed ability and authority/expert knowledge received the highest and the lowest means respectively (4.37 and 2.51).

Table 3: The means of factors obtained from descriptive statistics

	N	M	SD	Alpha
Innate/Fixed Ability	80	4.37	0.74	.794
Certainty Knowledge	80	3.49	0.69	.619
Learning Effort/Process	80	3.11	0.87	.739
Authority/Expert Knowledge	80	2.51	0.63	.662
Valid N (listwise)	80			

Discussion

The findings clearly remind us of the fact that teachers who believe that constructing knowledge is innately fixed in our mind and teachers or learners do not have any freedom to gain the knowledge or change the situation of learning, had a higher burnout level in contrast to those who believe that knowledge is ever changing and every single learner should have the autonomy and can change his or her learning process by much more effort.

The findings of the study are consistent with the work of Kumaravadivelu (2006) and concept of “post-method” era. Language teachers in this era should open the door for creating concepts such as autonomy, awareness, creativity, reflectivity, critical thinking and so on in educational settings. The previous research found that the more the teachers have these concepts and believe in them, the less they would be affected by the burnout syndrome. The missing link in this story would be Epistemological Beliefs. When teachers believe that they do not have any ability to create something new and to change their teaching process, they do not actually believe in creativity and reflectivity and so they will face the burnout syndrome much more easily and sooner. The second research question investigates the type of epistemological beliefs that EFL teachers hold. The findings of the descriptive statistics showed that these teachers tended to hold beliefs about the innate and fixed nature of knowledge. Put another way, teachers believed that knowledge and knowing are innate and that learners cannot produce knowledge of English rather than just receiving it. This may remind us of the modern era of English language teaching (ELT) where, considering the centralized educational system in Iran, language teachers do not have enough autonomy to make decisions or carry out any kind of classroom action research or reflective teaching. As a matter of fact, for the most part, these teachers do not know the fundamental principles of reflective teaching which came into being since the inception of postmodernism. Sadly, there is still ‘a mad scramble’ (Brown, 2002, p. 171) in their search for the best method in Iranian schools and English language institutes.

Consequently, Iranian English teachers are preoccupied with preparing learners for the final exam which is held in a multiple-choice format whose focus is primarily on structures, vocabulary and reading comprehension, ignoring other important skills such as speaking, listening, and writing. The course book used for all students is prescribed by the language

center at the universities and language institutions, leaving language teachers no right to select the materials which they think are best suited to the needs of their learners. Therefore, taken together, it may be argued that the participants felt that, for example, the major role of an English teacher is to “transmit language knowledge to learners through continual practicing”. They embraced the traditional concepts of ‘rote learning’ and ‘memorization’ because they thought that learning occurs when teachers transmit the pre-established knowledge to their learners.

These findings support the previous findings of the study conducted by Ketabi, Zabihi and Ghadiri (2013) that have investigated the types of epistemological beliefs of Iranian EFL teachers and accentuate the point that unfortunately our EFL teachers, even experienced one do live in “traditionalism” era and do not believe in post-method concepts such as autonomy, awareness and critical thinking. The results are in a sharp contrast with the findings of Chan and Elliott (2002). In that specific study the participants who were 385 Hong Kong pre-service teachers believed that knowledge is ever changing. They also believed that knowledge is created through learning processes rather than handed down by authorities. The results of the study clearly showed that EFL teachers in Iran believe that students do not have the freedom to take part in their learning process and must accept everything from their superiors in the educational setting.

CONCLUSION

In light of research findings, it could be concluded that The results of Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient proved that those teachers with ‘innate/fixed ability’ beliefs had a higher rate of burnout and those with ‘learning/effort’ beliefs had a lower level of the burnout syndrome. The results also indicated that there is not any relationship with ‘certainty knowledge’ and ‘authority/experts’ categories and burnout level. Furthermore, the findings of the descriptive statistics proved that majority of teacher who took part in this research project believe that knowledge is an innate/fixed ability with Mean of 4.37. After that the participants believe in certainty knowledge with Mean of 3.49, knowledge as learning/effort process and the least of them believe in knowledge as transmitted by authority and experts. The results of the study can help EFL teachers, curriculum designers and all the stakeholders in the field to diminish the effect of burnout as a psychological disease and enhance the efficiency of EFL teachers.

Limitation of the Study

The sample size would limit the generalizability of the research study. Also the distribution of participants in different age and teaching experiences were not equal and this also may affect the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, this study only made use of self-report scales to elicit pre-service teachers’ beliefs and their burnout level and not other ways such as interviews or observations. The participants’ responses to these measures may have been confounded by social desirability or perceptual distortions.

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