

Exploring the Relationship between Creativity and Burnout among Iranian EFL Teachers

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Abstract

Teachers' level of burnout and creativity are considered as variables which affect the quality of both teaching and learning in almost any educational context. The present study aimed at investigating the relationship between creativity and burnout among Iranian EFL teachers with respect to gender differences. In so doing, an exploratory/descriptive study was applied with a sample size of 100 male and female classroom teachers. A survey was given to English language teachers in 12 English language institutes from all over the city of Mashhad. Weak correlations were found between creativity and the two dimensions of burnout, i.e., emotional exhaustion, depersonalization. However, a fairly significant correlation was observed between creativity and reduced personal accomplishment. Further, by running two way ANOVA it was revealed that gender did not influence the relationship between reduced personal accomplishment and the creativity index.

Keywords: Burnout, Creativity

1. Introduction

Today a fairly large number of English language teachers appear to be suffering from burnout which is widely believed to be a by-product of working too hard and intensively. To this day, psychologists have come up with a myriad of reasons and explanations for this phenomenon; yet it keeps hampering dozens of English teachers, many of whom very experienced and skillful, from pursuing their professional career. For example, Bryne (1998) stated that 50% of beginning teachers leave the teaching profession within their first 4 years. Many studies have been conducted to shed light on the murky points of this phenomenon. However, quite a few factors were found to play a significant role in generating burnout amongst English teachers. Campbell (1983) asserted that our society cannot afford the large number of teachers who are leaving the teaching profession each year because of symptoms of burnout. In this respect, Townley, Thornburg & Crompton (1991) mentioned that identification of workplace and personal variables significantly related to burnout and/or competence can be useful to employers as they hire new teaching staff.

As Iwanicki (1983) rightly put, burnout is a complex phenomenon requiring the close attention of all educators. Likewise, other professionals of the field agree that burnout is a multi-faceted, multi dimensional phenomenon, demanding a complex perspective to investigate its varied components and constituents.

Here, a psychological construct that may serve to block or delay burnout is creativity; a part of each person's mentality whose impact on teachers' burnout has not been investigated thoroughly to the present day. Carter (2004) believed that research into the phenomenon of creativity is by no means extensive and has only been actively pursued during the past fifty years or so. He goes further to say that this subject has been seen mainly as the domain of various sub-disciplines, a process which to some degree has led to fragmentation and marginalization of creativity as a topic for study.

Unfortunately, research on tracing a possible interaction between these two variables i.e. burnout and creativity in EFL context has remained intact and mediocre. Few studies have made an attempt to enlighten the complexity of the interaction between these two mental constructs.

1.1 Burnout

It is now well accepted that the burnout phenomenon is a chronic state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion that arises in personnel from the cumulative demands of their work (Goddard, O'Brien & Goddard, 2006). The current definitions and elaborations of burnout is by far diverse and varied. However, among all, probably the most widely accepted definition of burnout has been proposed by Maslach (1982) describing burnout as a multi-faceted phenomenon: "a three dimensional syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that occurs among individuals who work with people in some helping capacity". (p. 3)

According to Maslach, burnout has three symptoms. These three signs of burnout are: emotional exhaustion (feeling of being emotionally overextended and exhausted with one's

work), depersonalization (the development of negative and indifferent attitudes toward others) and reduced personal accomplishment (the loss of feelings of self competence and not being satisfied with one's achievements) (Maslach & Jackson, 1984; Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter 2001)

Christina Maslach is one of the pioneering researchers on burnout. She developed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), which is still considered the most reliable and valid instrument on measuring burnout

1.2 Creativity

Dornyei (2005) sees creativity as an under-researched area of psychology and takes the view that so far the attempts to define this mental construct has centered around the terms 'creative person', 'creative thinking' or the 'creative process/ behavior/production/ performance' rather than the actual concept of creativity. Most probably one main reason to explain this deficiency in the literature of creativity is its *fuzzy* nature and the fact that it is deemed as *soft psychology* (Plucker, Beghetto & Dow, 2004). "Soft constructs" are difficult to explicate due to their unobservable qualities and specifics and that at times they are impossible to be measured, verified or studied objectively. In this respect, Amabile (1983), describe creativity as a confluence of intrinsic motivation, knowledge of a field and particular cognitive skills.

In a similar same vein, Carter (2004) having done extensive research into this field, is convinced that the dominant paradigm of research into creativity is based on the discipline of psychology, and that creativity is commonly viewed as a mentalistic phenomenon. He contends that this phenomenon cannot be decontextualized or studied in a disciplinary vacuum or seen as an exclusively mental process and that creativity is a social, cultural and environmental phenomenon as well as a psychological process.

A key figure who contributed a lot to our understanding of creativity is Guilford who provided a list of cognitive processes involved in creativity. Guilford (1950) found that sensitivity to problems, creative fluency of production, ability to come up with novel ideas, flexibility of mind, synthesizing ability, analyzing ability, reorganization and redefinition of organized wholes, a high degree of complexity of the conceptual structure, and evaluation. Later in 1959 in his studies Guilford brought up the idea of 'divergent thinking' that is the ability to produce many different ideas in response to a problem, as the prime cognitive component of creativity. Baer (1993) counts four relatively distinct aspects of divergent thinking: creative fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration. The first one is the ability to produce a large number of ideas; while the second concerns the ability to produce a wide variety of ideas. Further, originality deals with the potential to produce unusual ideas and elaboration centers around developing and embellishing ideas and producing many details. By many, these four components are considered to be the main processes of creativity itself.

Torrance (1966), another prominent expert in this field and one who developed the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (TTCT), believes that creativity is 'a process of becoming sensitive to problems, deficiencies, gaps in knowledge, missing elements, disharmonies, and so on. What's more, creativity is identifying the difficulty; and eventually searching for solutions,

making guesses, or formulating hypotheses about the deficiencies: testing and retesting these hypotheses and possibly modifying and retesting them; and finally communicating the results

Moreover Albert and Kormos (2004) direct our attention toward the empirical evidence indicating that factors of creativity-related intellectual abilities tend to rest on one common higher order factor called 'idea production'. Carroll (1993) presents nine basic factors to be involved in idea production: ideational fluency, naming facility, associational fluency, expressional fluency, word fluency, sensitivity to problems, originality/creativity, figural fluency and figural flexibility. Out of the nine factors eight are primarily concerned with the speed of idea production whereas originality/creativity seems to determine the quality or level of idea production (Albert & Kormos, 2004).

1.3 Research on Burnout and Creativity

Factors influencing burnout and creativity are very many. However, the interaction between these two is yet an under-researched area and one that has not much literature. Farber (2000) stated that around one third of teachers were strongly discontent with their occupations, and that a considerable proportion of these teachers, that is 5 to 20 percent, are suffering from burnout. Some of the underlying reasons for their frustration and dissatisfaction originated from being loaded up with increasing paperwork, large classes, undisciplined and unmotivated students, lack of support, increasing workload, and feelings of being undervalued (Kokkinos, 2007). In the same vein, "U.S. Schools," (cited in Landeche, 2009) asserted that rules, regulations, and the structures that teachers are required to teach from, suppress and discourage teachers and bring about some 50% of teaching leaving their career after the first year. Apparently this stifling restricts the creativity of these teachers (Landeche P., 2009). For example, Stager (2003) stated that the standardization in curriculum and syllabus design as well as in teaching techniques and strategies hold back creativity in the classroom. In another study, Parsley (2004) confirmed that teachers were retiring early and experiencing burnout owing to the expectations that No Child Left Behind generates. No Child Left Behind is a law which was set for the Elementary and Secondary schools in 1965 in the US, which holds that states using federal funds are accountable for their student academic achievement. In this act states are required to develop a set of high-quality, yearly student academic progress reports that include assessments in reading/language arts, mathematics, and science. Each year they must report students' progress in terms of percentage of students scoring at the "proficient" level or higher.

Further in this regard, in a personal interview (cited in Landeche, 2009) Dicharry, a teacher, said that one of the frustrations that many teachers express is that there is little room for them to be creative and they are normally limited in this matter. Many factors work against them. Rules and regulations, disruptive students, a critical public, uncooperative parents, and non-supportive administration are a few. Teachers feel compelled to "teach the test," she maintained, which leaves little room for creativity. She also stated that the teachers believed that the lack of creative skills was one of the causes that led them to experience burnout more severely, and that excluding creativity from a creative profession might render it much harder for teachers to stay both physically and emotionally healthy.

According to the related literature in this area, creativity exerts a positive influence on particular individuals under specific conditions. For instance, Ornstein (2006) stated how creativity came to help the survivors of the Holocaust during captivity and how they adjusted themselves to society once they were released by managing to endure the stress of their imprisonment period. Similarly, Schmidt (2006) discovered that creative skills decreased the pain and reversed damage to the brain. Moreover, Farber (2000) in his review of literature concerning the interventions for stress-related symptoms of burnout arrived at the conclusion that since there are so many variables affecting burnout and that since teachers demonstrate such a variety of symptoms, each person had to be examined individually, including applying creativity by resorting to art or music therapy. In my study through the related literature almost no research was found to support the theory that creativity and burnout can influence one another either on a large or small scale.

Empirical studies in connection with creativity and burnout were either very rare or mediocre. In one study, Schaufeli, Maslach & Marek (1996) tried to explore the connection between burnout, innovation and creativity. This study revealed empirical evidence of a connection between burnout and creativity. Moreover, they found that people who are experiencing burnout are seen as less creative people. However, in a different 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.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

This research was conducted so as to study a sample population of 100 English language teachers, including 50 males and 50 females. The participants came from 11 different language schools from varied parts of the city of Mashhad, making the sample broadly representative of all EFL teachers in the city.

The average age of the sample group was around 31, ranging from 22 to 37, which is rather young. Furthermore, they all had at least 4-5 years of experience in teaching English as a foreign language. Here, the “convenience or opportunity” sampling technique (Dornyei, 2007) was used which is a widely accepted research method in social sciences.

2.2 Instruments

In the present study the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (TTCT) (Torrance, 1998) was employed to measure the participants' creativity on 4 different areas of fluency, originality, elaboration, and flexibility. The test included 60 questions and the scores for each question were added up and a score out of 120 was obtained which represented the overall score for creativity. Moreover, the Maslach's Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson 1986) was used to verify degrees of burnout components; this test requires participants to answer 22 questions that measure the 'frequency' and 'intensity' of burnout; 9 items to measure 'emotional exhaustion', 8 items for 'reduced personal accomplishment' and 5 to assess 'depersonalization'. For the purpose of this study, the Persian translations of both TTCT and

MBI were used in order to minimize degrees of incomprehensibility resulting from the different English proficiency levels of the sample group.

2.3 Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

Maslach and Jackson (1981) examined the reliability of MBI with the use of alpha and the following results were gained: emotional exhaustion ($\alpha=0.90$), depersonalization ($\alpha=0.79$) and reduced personal accomplishment ($\alpha=0.71$) (cited in Ghobari, Nabavi & Shirkoul, 2005). In Iran the reliability of this inventory was also studied by Badri Gargari (1995) who arrived at the following results: emotional exhaustion ($\alpha=0.84$), depersonalization ($\alpha=0.75$) and reduced personal accomplishment ($\alpha=0.74$) (cited in Ghobari, Nabavi & Shirkoul, 2005; Farahmand, 2007). Furthermore, the validation of this inventory was done by Filiyan (1992) in Iran. In this study, once the original inventory was translated into Persian, it was given to some experts in Tarbiyat Modares University, Psychiatry Institute, Psychology Department of Allameh Tabatabayi University and some other experts in the field of psychology.

The Persian version of TTCT used by the researcher in this study has been translated and modified by Abedi (1993). Using the test-retest method, he gave the test to the students of secondary schools in Tehran and gained the following reliability scores: fluency: $r=0.85$, flexibility: $r=0.85$ originality: $r=0.82$, and elaboration: $r=0.80$. Further, the total reliability of the test was reported to be between 0.80 to 0.90. Moreover, Abedi (1993) calculated the validity of the test through concurrent validity method. He administered both the Persian and the original Torrance Test of Creative Thinking simultaneously and achieved meaningful and significant reliability correlations of the four subscales between the two versions of creativity test; for example, $r=0.497$ for originality subscale and $r=0.468$ for fluency.

2.4 Procedure

The participants i.e. the English teachers were given both creativity and burnout questionnaires and were asked to fill them out and bring them back within two days. The MBI takes 10-15 minutes to complete whereas the TTCT might take 15-20 minutes. Once the questionnaires were collected the researcher checked if they were properly and completely filled out.

Regarding data analysis, all the raw scores (one score for creativity and 3 scores for burnout) were collected from the 100 participants' questionnaires and were then entered to a standard statistical program, in this case SPSS software, so as to calculate the Pearson correlation coefficient between the two variables, and further a two-way ANOVA was used to explore the effect of the third variable, that is gender, on possible the interaction between creativity and burnout.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

Preliminary results from the TTCT suggest that the mean score for the creativity index is around 80 (out of 120); meaning that the whole sample population possessed an average level

of creativity that is between 75-85 as defined earlier. However, there exists a negligible difference in male and female levels of creativity as the male index is 81.12 whereas the female index is 78.04. Still both genders fall into the average creativity category.

With regard to burnout, it can easily be seen that the levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization for the whole population is very low; 13.84 and 3.99 respectively. Therefore, a 'low' frequency of burnout can be associated with them. Further, the mean score for personal accomplishment (36.57) indicates the average frequency of burnout in the sample population. Interestingly enough, the mean scores for the male and female populations do not vary significantly as compared to the whole population mean scores and thereby suggesting 'low' frequency in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization together with average frequency for personal achievement. Table 1 provides the mean scores for creativity and burnout components in the whole sample.

Table 1. Mean scores for creativity and burnout components in the whole sample

		Creativity	Emotional exhaustion	Personal accomplishment	Depersonalization
N	Valid	100	100	100	100
	Missing	0	0	0	0
Mean		79.58	13.84	36.57	3.99
Minimum		43	3	8	0
Maximum		109	40	48	26

As with the percentages, it is evident that a large proportion, i.e., 37%, of the population, are ranked as 'high' (85-100) and 'very high' (100-120) creativity. On the other hand, the same percentage goes to the 'low' (50-70) and 'very low' (less than 50) creativity groups. As for males, 46% ranked as 'high' and 'very high' creativity while only 32% were in the 'very low' creativity categories. By contrast, in females a smaller proportion, 28%, fell into the 'high' and 'very high' creativity group while a bigger percentage, 42%, goes for 'low' and 'very low' creativity groups. Moreover, only 26% of all the participants possessed an average level of creativity (75-85). Figure 1 further illustrates these proportions more vividly.

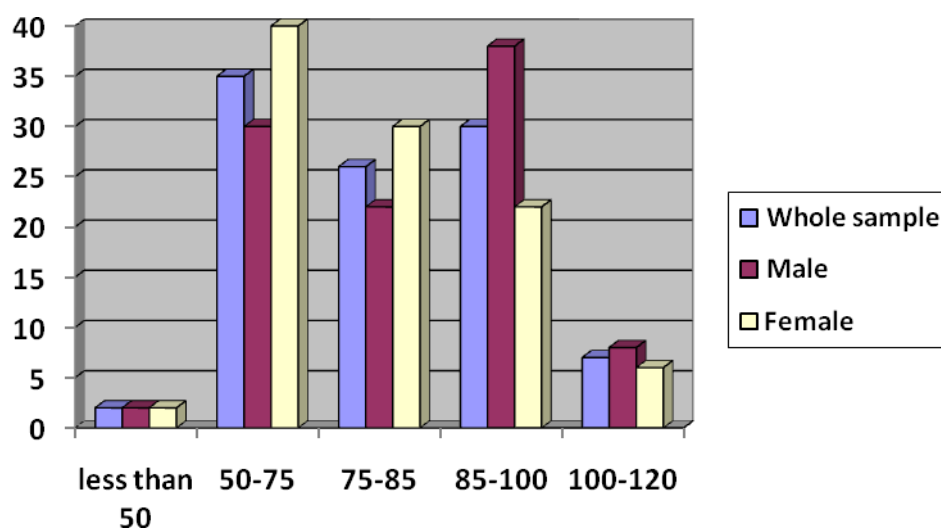


Figure 1. Percentages of participants with different creativity scores

Concerning burnout indexes, the biggest proportion, 73%, is experiencing ‘low’ emotional exhaustion. Moreover, the largest group which is 52% of all the participants has ‘high’ personal accomplishment. As for depersonalization, some 79% have ranked as ‘low’ frequency group. These percentages clearly imply the fact that the majority of the sample population undergoes ‘very low’ frequency of burnout. Gender does not create any significant change in the frequency of burnout experienced by both male and female participants as they all ranked ‘low’ or ‘very low’ in the frequency of burnout.

3.2 Interpretive Statistics

Furthermore, the results from the Pearson correlation formula for creativity and burnout scores revealed very little interaction between the elements of burnout and creativity index. It can be clearly seen in Table 2 that the correlations between creativity scores and emotional exhaustion and depersonalization scores are very weak (-0.090 and -.055 respectively), indicating no relationship and connection between them. In contrast, creativity appears to have a fairly meaningful relationship with personal accomplishment, as the correlation value is around 0.4, ($P < 0.01$) in this case. In other words, the more creative the teachers were, the higher frequency of personal accomplishment they experienced and vice versa. Overall, based on the given correlations, it is abundantly obvious that creativity and burnout exert quite little influence on each another. However, it is to be highlighted here that charts 2, 3 and 4 very vividly point at the fact that the majority of the participants in this study experienced burnout very low levels of frequency, in all its 3 components. This in turn, may suggest that creativity might correlate more significantly when burnout is observed at higher frequency and with more intensity.

Table 2. Correlation coefficients between the variables including both genders

Variables		Creativity	Emo.Ex	Re.Pe.Ac.	Depers.
Creativity score	Pearson Correlation	1	-.090	.371(**)	-.055
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.371	.000	.586
	N	100	100	100	100
Em.Ex	Pearson Correlation	-.090	1	-.162	.485(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.371	.	.107	.000
	N	100	100	100	100
Re.Pe.Ac	Pearson Correlation	.371(**)	-.162	1	-.377(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.107	.	.000
	N	100	100	100	100
Depers	Pearson Correlation	-.055	.485(**)	-.377(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.586	.000	.000	.
	N	100	100	100	100

These results were very much analogous to the findings of Landeche (2009) who, through the same correlational study discovered no significant correlations between creativity and 2 dimensions of burnout, that is emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and a meaningful relationship with reduced personal accomplishment. In her study, the correlation between creativity and personal accomplishment had the highest rate, that of 0.432, with a correlation between creativity and emotional exhaustion at 0.073, and between creativity and depersonalization at 0.072. However, she found strong correlations between years of experience and age ($r=0.87$) and years of experience and depersonalization ($r = -0.49$). It

should be noted, however, that in that study the participants were native teachers from public schools and not EFL teachers.

Further separate correlations for male and females participants confirmed the same results as in the whole sample population. Two moderate positive correlations, that of 0.450 for males and 0.306 for females are indicative of moderately significant and direct relationship between the level of creativity and the frequency with which personal accomplishment is experienced by both male and female English teachers. Tables 5 and 6 provide separate correlations between the creativity index and the 3 dimensions of burnout for the two genders.

Moreover, to see whether or not the variable of gender exerts any influence on the relationship or the correlation between creativity and burnout the two-way ANOVA was used to examine the interaction between the 3 variables of personal accomplishment, creativity and the fixed factor group that is gender. Table 3 sums up the results produced by SPSS software regarding the relationship between the 3 variables.

Table 3. SPSS output reporting the effects of the variables on one another. (two-way ANOVA statistics results)

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: Reduced personal accomplishment

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	1267.257(a)	3	422.419	5.357	.002
Intercept	543.841	1	543.841	6.897	.010
SEX * CREATIVITY	26.467	1	26.467	.336	.564
SEX	33.995	1	33.995	.431	.513
Creativity	1238.534	1	1238.534	15.708	.000
Error	7569.253	96	78.846		
Total	142573.000	100			
Corrected Total	8836.510	99			

R Squared = .143 (Adjusted R Squared = .117)

The findings showed no significant impact exerted by gender on the relationship between creativity and burnout in EFL teachers. As can be seen the p-value is very high and much bigger than 0.05 ($P > 0.05$), indicating that gender plays no role in the interaction between reduced personal accomplishment and creativity. Therefore, it is confirmed that the relationship which was already found between creativity and reduced personal accomplishment is not mediated by gender, that is the interaction between these two variables, remains steady when studied separately under groups of males and females.

4. Conclusions

This research primarily aimed at investigating the relationship between creativity and burnout in Iranian EFL teachers. The findings, however, revealed no significant relationship between the two variables of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, (in burnout) and the creativity index. Emotional exhaustion had a very low correlation of $-.090$ with the creativity index. Likewise, depersonalization and creativity index showed a weak correlation of $.055$, while a higher correlation was observed between creativity and personal accomplishment at 0.371 , ($P < 0.01$); suggesting a fairly meaningful interaction between the two variables. On the whole it can be concluded that the relationship between burnout and creativity is fairly weak. In other words, burnout and creativity do not influence each other as much as to state firmly that either of them has any buffering effect on the other. One possible explanation for the lack of such relationship between these two variables in this study can be attributed to some specific characteristics of the sample population. It turned out that the current active teaching staff in private language schools in the city of Mashhad were within a very young age range, that of 22 to 35, and experienced very low degrees of burnout. Further the average years of their experience in TEFL was something around 4-5. Probably the results could speak to a greater and stronger relationship between burnout and creativity provided that the sample was mainly comprised of a more aged group of EFL teachers who possess at least 10 years of experience and has undergone a higher level of burnout.

The second question in the present study looked for the possible influence of gender on the relationship between burnout and creativity. By comparing the correlations between 'personal accomplishment' (which was the only component of burnout that correlated with creativity) and creativity in male and female participants it can be firmly stated that gender did not play any role in the existing interaction between the two variables. In this case, male correlations was $.450$ as compared to that of $.306$ in females, suggesting an analogous interaction between the variables in both genders. Since the other two sub-constructs of burnout indicated no relationship with creativity, drawing a comparison between them will prove useless. Also, the same results were reached through the use of two way ANOVA, so as to measure the role of gender in the connection between creativity and 'personal achievement'. The significance was $.010$ which proved that sex does not affect the relationship between creativity index and personal achievement. Based on the researcher's investigations, there is no literature that speaks to a connection between burnout and creativity, considering the effect that the variable of gender might produce. Therefore, as it can be seen, the interaction between burnout components and creativity index remains steady across genders. However, other factors such as age, race and years of experience (which were not the focus of this study) could possibly play a leading role in this respect. For example, Landeche (2009) found a reverse relationship between years of experience and depersonalization.

Other studies in connection with creativity and burnout, though very few, produced more or less the same results. For instance, a study by Schaufeli et al. (1996) looked at the connection between burnout, innovation and creativity. This study found empirical evidence of a connection between burnout and creativity. In fact, they found that people who are experiencing burnout are associated by less creativity. For one thing, their study had an

additional variable of ‘innovation’ which was not included in this research. For another, their sample size (N=80) was smaller than the population in the present study (N=100), making the findings more comprehensive and reliable. Similarly, Landeche (2009) found connections between creativity and personal achievement with a correlation of .432, and no relationship with the other two dimensions of burnout. Further in her study, she discovered other significant correlations between age and years of experience and between years of experience and depersonalization. The variables of age and years of experience were not considered in the present study. A deficiency in Landeche’s work could be that the sample size in her study (N=19), was too small to stand up to academic standards and yield reliable results.

Overall, it can be concluded that only a connection exists between creativity and one construct of burnout, that is reduced personal accomplishment, and that gender exerts no influence on the relationship between these two variables. However, it should be noted that the participants in this study were all young teachers with very low levels of burnout. Probably an interaction between creativity and burnout can be better detected in samples with high degrees of burnout as well as older age.

4.1 Pedagogical Implications

The findings of the present study can be particularly applied by educational supervisors in language schools, textbook and syllabus designers as well as English teachers. Firstly, supervisors can organize workshops in which teachers are trained to teach creatively and flexibly; for example by demanding teachers to perform the same task in a given textbook in different ways for students with different English proficiency levels. Drawing on the results of this study, they can find ways to raise the level of personal accomplishment, and thereby enhancing the level of creativity in their teaching staff. Moreover, as the results show, younger teachers are less likely to be suffering from burnout noticeably and this may imply the fact that employing younger teachers with an average years of experience might be the right decision where older and more experienced teachers are also an alternative.

4.2 Avenues for Further Research

It appears that more research could be conducted to examine the relationship between burnout and creativity in larger sample populations and with regard to other variables such as years of experience and age. Other creativity tests could also be used to assess this construct more precisely. Furthermore, a longitudinal approach to studying creativity and burnout may prove more beneficial.

In the present study it turned out that the sample group suffered from a minimum degree of burnout probably due to their youthfulness and fewer years of experience; other studies are suggested to cover teachers with higher average age and with more years of experience so that the effects of burnout can be better detected in relation to creativity or other constructs.

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