

## Original Article

# The Impact of Burnout on the Psychological Well-being of ESL Students in Higher Education Environment

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## Abstract

This quantitative study delved into the intricate relationship between language learning and psychological well-being, emphasising its importance in holistic educational approaches, specifically for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners only. The demanding nature of SLA is emphasised as a significant consequence, guiding this exploration within the theoretical framework of Maslach's theory of burnout. The quantitative study involved 207 ESL students, obtained through convenience sampling, in Karachi Pakistan, utilising the Maslach Burnout Inventory-English Student Survey and the Psychological Well-Being Scale to measure burnout and psychological well-being (PWB). The gathered data was analysed using SPSS version 25. The results reveal a significant negative correlation between psychological well-being and burnout, with burnout emerging as a significant negative predictor of students' psychological states. These findings emphasise the need for proactive strategies to address burnout in ESL education, promoting mental health and fostering supportive learning environments. Ultimately, this research contributes a growing body of literature to the field, emphasising the paramount importance of nurturing the well-being of ESL students as they navigate the path to language proficiency in our interconnected global society.

**Keywords:** English as a Second Language (ESL), psychological well-being, burnout, ESL students, Maslach's theory of Burnout

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language, as a tool of expression, is a complex and ever-changing system of communication that creates a diverse world through its spoken and unspoken aspects while also determining our place in the world through the way we speak, hear, and read (Giri, 2023). While second language acquisition (SLA) as an intricate process encompasses linguistics along with social-psychological elements, the predominant focus has primarily revolved around linguistic aspects (Suzuki, 2023). The exploration of psychological factors in SLA, including feelings of anxiety, burnout, and involvement, is still in its early stages. Among these psychological factors, anxiety has been recognized as a significant individual factor capable of influencing SLA (Isakovna & Maftuna, 2023). To delve deeper into the psychological aspect of language acquisition, Li and Liu (2023) conducted a study that focused on Seligman's PERMA model.

This model encompasses five key dimensions: positive emotions, encompassing happiness and life satisfaction (P); engagement, also referred to as flow, representing deep involvement in an activity (E); positive relationships, which involve meaningful interactions with others (R); meaning, tied to an individual's passions and beliefs in life (M); and accomplishment, relating to personal success and achievement (A). The findings indicated that positive emotions, relationships, and engagement play a significant role in motivating language learners to develop their proficiency (Li & Liu, 2023). Similarly, in a study done by Gregersen (2019) that examined the integration of the PERMA model with language



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learning, it was highlighted that maintaining learners' motivations, fostering positive emotions, enhancing engagement, and achieving a sense of accomplishment all play a crucial role in the language learning process.

### **Language Learning and Psychological Well-Being**

Language learning and psychological well-being are intricately linked, with profound implications. Ryff (1989) adopted an integrated interactive strategy to define psychological well-being, formulating the concept as a fusion of six components: self-acceptance, sense of purpose in life, mastery of one's environment, positive interpersonal relationships, autonomy, and personal growth. While mastering a new language, an individual fosters confidence, social engagement, and cognitive agility (Abdullayev & Kholbekova, 2023). On the other hand, challenges presented in the learning process can also impact said individual's well-being (Mao et al., 2021). A study by Dewaele et al. (2019) explored the impact of language learning on well-being in a sample of adult learners. It was found that as individuals progressed in their language proficiency, there was a significant positive correlation with enhanced well-being, specifically regarding increased self-esteem and overall life fulfilment (Dewaele et al., 2019). Similarly, Dewaele and Li (2020) conducted a longitudinal study focusing on language learners over time.

They observed that those who persisted in their language learning endeavours experienced a reduction in stress and anxiety levels, indicating the potential stress-reducing benefits of language learning. Furthermore, the process of language learning engages an individual's cognitive functions, fostering mental agility and potentially mitigating the risk of cognitive decline. Nonetheless, the journey may present challenges that influence psychological well-being, including stress or anxiety (Choi et al., 2017). The intricate relationship between language learning and psychological well-being is crucial for developing holistic educational approaches that nurture linguistic skills and emotional resilience among ESL students (Abdullayev & Kholbekova, 2023). Recognizing the increasing need for sound English communication skills worldwide, it is crucial to understand how language significantly impacts the lives of ESL students, especially in the South Asian context (Hashemi, 2011). Research suggests that engaging with diverse resources and channels aids in improving English language skills while simultaneously reducing cultural stress, academic challenges, and negative emotions when interacting with peers from around the world (Meidasari, 2017). This dynamic process of language acquisition not only fosters effective communication but also diminishes feelings of isolation, enhancing social connections. Yet, it is pertinent to note that the acquisition of language skills can also evoke stress and apprehension, highlighting the delicate balance between linguistic competence and emotional well-being (Choi et al., 2017).

The pursuit of language proficiency often poses psychological strains on ESL students, with burnout being a significant consequence (Rehman et al., 2020). Burnout, characterised by enduring emotional and interpersonal stress, includes symptoms such as exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional effectiveness (Maslach et al., 1997). Xiyun et al. (2022) suggest that language proficiency not only enhances personal growth but also boosts self-confidence, thereby positively influencing emotional well-being. However, the demanding nature of second language learning can result in adverse emotional encounters like anxiety, burnout, and boredom (Fathi & Derakshan, 2019). Addressing the unique psychological prerequisites of language learners in the educational setting becomes paramount in promoting their academic engagement and overall well-being (Burić & Macuka, 2018). When these prerequisites are met, learners are more likely to thrive academically, contributing to their holistic development.

### **Burnout and Psychological Well-being among ESL Students**

Burnout is a persistent reaction to ongoing emotional and interpersonal stress. It is characterised by enduring emotions of exhaustion, detachment, and diminished personal accomplishment. Individuals experiencing burnout often feel emotionally drained, cynical, and less effective in their personal and professional lives (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). The correlation between burnout and well-being among ESL students is important because the combined pressures of language learning, cultural assimilation, and academic obligations can lead to burnout, resulting in emotional exhaustion and decreased overall well-being (Chen, 2023).

Factors including self-preservation (Jang et al., 2018), perceived social support (Fan & Lu, 2020), emotional intelligence (Villanueva et al., 2020), emotional exhaustion, and stress (Jeon et al., 2018), social anxiety (Zongbo et al., 2017), depression and academic resilience (Clough & Strycharczyk, 2012) influence the psychological well-being of learners as indicated in previous researches. Considering these variables when evaluating feelings of burnout would be a reasonable approach, given the shared nature of these emotions. In their study, De Coninck et al. (2019) discovered a significant connection between high school

learners' psychological well-being and their corresponding levels of psychological well-being during the initial phases of university. Nevertheless, their research revealed a gradual decline in psychological well-being over time. Similarly, the study conducted by Yu and Chae (2020) revealed a negative correlation between the psychological well-being of medical students and their academic burnout, while a positive correlation was found between their psychological well-being and resilience.

The study established that academic burnout and resilience significantly impact the psychological well-being of medical students. Furthermore, resilience emerged as a crucial variable for enhancing psychological well-being (Yu & Chae, 2020). Acknowledging this connection underscores the need for proactive strategies that promote well-being, such as stress reduction techniques, mental health support, and fostering a supportive learning environment. Addressing academic burnout not only enhances students' overall quality of life but also positively impacts their language learning outcomes, ensuring a more sustainable and fulfilling educational journey.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory of burnout, proposed by Maslach, states that burnout is a complex multidimensional syndrome characterised by three key dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (cynicism), and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1997). According to this theory, burnout is understood as a manifestation of individual stress that occurs within the intricate context of multifaceted social relationships, encompassing the individual's conception of self and others. This theory was first applied in workplaces but has since been studied in the field of education by various educational psychologists (Jacobs & Dodd, 2003; Noh et al., 2013; Schaufeli et al., 2002a). It has been established that schools place certain demands on students, such as the expectation to excel or be the best, which can create significant pressure (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009). Taking this into consideration, when students are unable to fulfil their own or external educational demands, a condition of stress emerges, characterised as school burnout (Barnett & Flores, 2016; Lewis & Frydenberg, 2004).

Interestingly, research findings indicate that the findings from studies on school burnout closely resemble those of employee burnout, including symptoms such as absenteeism, school dropout, and depression (Covington 2000; Frydenberg & Lewis 2004; Pines et al., 1981; Salmela-Aro et al., 2009; Yang 2004). Burnout in an educational setting can be associated with a lack of fulfilment of basic psychological needs (Al-Murtadha, 2019; Sasaki et al., 2020). This deficiency in fulfilling basic psychological needs can result in feelings of frustration and disengagement from academic pursuits, both of which are recognized symptoms of burnout (Al-Murtadha, 2019; Sasaki et al., 2020; Maslach et al., 1997). Furthermore, as suggested by Ryff et al. (2007), students' academic engagement can have a connection with their psychological well-being. Ryff (1989) defined this psychological well-being as the integration of six components: self-acceptance, purpose in life, environmental mastery, positive relationships, autonomy, and personal growth. Previous studies have found a link between academic burnout and psychological well-being in a variety of educational settings (De Coninck et al., 2019; Yu & Chae, 2020). However, limited studies have investigated this theory among ESL learners and how burnout may impact their psychological well-being. This underscores the importance of examining burnout in the educational context of ESL learners.

Similarly, a multitude of studies have explored the significance of psychological well-being within educational contexts, but the exploration of its specific role within ESL instructional settings remains in its developing stages. Moreover, extensive research has illuminated strategies for enhancing the well-being of EFL instructors, contributing to heightened job satisfaction (Huang et al., 2019). However, specifically in the context of Pakistan, there is a prominent gap in the literature with reference to the analysis of psychological well-being among ESL learners. As a result, this study plays a crucial role in addressing this gap by thoroughly examining the complex relationship between psychological well-being and burnout among ESL learners in Pakistan. This research aims to not only uncover the dynamics of this relationship but also to offer valuable insights into the implications of burnout on psychological well-being within this specific educational landscape.

### Research Questions

- What is the relationship between burnout and psychological well-being among ESL students?
- How does burnout impact the psychological well-being of ESL students?



### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### Design and Sampling

The current study utilised a quantitative research design. The sample size was determined by the convenience sampling method and comprised 207 undergraduate students aged between 18 and 36 years, recruited from various universities in Karachi, Pakistan. Among the participants, 149 (72%) were female and 58 (28%) were male, and 202 (97.6%) were within the age range of 18-25 years old, while 5 (2.4%) were within the age range of 26-35 years old.

#### Instruments

The following instruments were used to assess the study variables.

##### *Demographic Datasheet*

The provided items were designed to gather information from participants regarding their gender and age range.

##### *Maslach Burnout Inventory-English Student Survey*

To address the suggested research issues, the researchers used the Maslach Burnout Inventory-English Student Survey. The 15-item Maslach Burnout Inventory-Student Survey (Schaufeli et al., 2002b) was used as the basis for the tool's validation and conceptualization, with modifications made to better fit the scale with the context of English language acquisition. Exhaustion (4 things), Cynicism (3 items), and Reduced Efficacy (3 items) are the three aspects that make up the updated scale, which has 10 items in total. All items were assessed by respondents on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 5 representing "strongly agree." Higher ratings on the measure indicated that the participants had more burnout. Li et al., 2021 reported a high reliability of the scale ( $\alpha = .886$ ) and its sub-dimensions: Exhaustion ( $\alpha = .880$ ), Cynicism ( $\alpha = .835$ ), and Reduced Efficacy ( $\alpha = .811$ ). The reported correlation coefficient ( $r = .40$ ) between each item and the global scale indicated moderate validity.

##### *Psychological Well-Being Scale*

The 18-item Psychological Well-Being Scale, designed by Ryff & Keyes in 1995, was used in this research. The six domains of environmental mastery, positive relationships with others, autonomy, self-acceptance, personal progress, and purpose in life were used to depict the subscales of psychological well-being. The scale assesses physical signs of fatigue and psychosomatic tension and overall exhaustion. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 representing the strongest level of argument and 7 representing the lowest level of agreement. Lower scores on the scale denoted a low level of well-being. A sample item is 'I like most parts of my personality'. The internal consistency coefficient was reported as .73 (Murguia, 2001), while Gloria et al. (2009) reported an alpha of .84.

#### Procedure

Ethical considerations were conscientiously addressed throughout the research process, particularly in securing informed consent from participants. Participants were informed about their voluntary involvement, and the usage of data will be for research purposes only with a guarantee of confidentiality. The sample consisted of 207 responses collected via Google Forms from individuals who were readily accessible and willing to participate. The acquired data was initially scored following the guidelines in the scales' manuals and subsequently organised using Microsoft Excel. Following this, statistical analyses were performed utilising SPSS version 25 in order to investigate the research questions. The first question was addressed through Pearson correlation, while the second research question required a regression analysis in which burnout was considered the predictor variable and psychological well-being the dependent variable.

### 4. RESULTS & FINDINGS

A descriptive analysis was employed to determine the distribution of participants' ages and genders. The results are displayed in Table 1.

**Table 1**

Frequency of Participants' Age and Gender (N = 207)

Variable	F	%
Age		
18-25	202	97.6
26-35	5	2.4
Gender		
Male	58	28
Female	149	72

The analysis showed that 72% of participants were female, with males making up only 28%. Additionally, most participants fell within the age range of 18-25 years old, with only a small percentage falling within the age range of 26-35 years old.

**Table 2**

Descriptives and Pearson's Correlation Between the Burnout, Psychological Well-Being, and its subscales (N = 207)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Burnout	2.69	1.03	-							
2. Autonomy	4.26	1.46	-.48**	-						
3. Environmental Mastery	4.04	1.46	-.45**	.59**	-					
4. Personal Growth	4.58	1.51	-.61**	.55**	.59**	-				
5. Positive Relations with Others	4.15	1.51	-.41**	.43**	.65**	.64**	-			
6. Purpose in Life	4.30	1.01	-.21**	.14*	.08	.28**	.16*	-		
7. Self-Acceptance	4.45	1.56	-.53**	.58**	.70**	.72**	.70**	.22**	-	
8. Overall Psychological Well-Being	4.30	1.09	-.60**	.74**	.82**	.85**	.81**	.36**	.88**	-

\*\* $p < 0.01$ . \* $p < 0.05$ .

The analysis reported a significant and moderately strong inverse correlation ( $r = -.60$ ,  $p < .01$ ) between burnout and psychological well-being. Additionally, the various subscales of the psychological well-being scale displayed significant negative associations with burnout. Autonomy exhibited a weak negative correlation ( $r = -.48$ ,  $p < .01$ ), environmental mastery displayed a weak negative correlation ( $r = -.45$ ,  $p < .01$ ), personal growth demonstrated a moderate negative correlation ( $r = -.61$ ,  $p < .01$ ), positive relations with others had a weak negative correlation ( $r = -.41$ ,  $p < .01$ ), purpose in life exhibited a weak negative correlation ( $r = -.21$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and self-acceptance showed a significant moderate correlation with burnout ( $r = -.60$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). These findings emphasise the interconnected relationship between burnout and psychological well-being's various dimensions in ESL students. Table 2 illustrates the results.

**Table 3**

Regression Coefficients of Burnout and Psychological Well-Being (N = 207)

Variable	B	SE	t	P	95% CI	
					LL	UL
Constant	6.02	.16	35.68	.000	5.69	6.35
Burnout	-.63	.05	-10.93	.000	-.75	-.52

Note. CI = Confidence Interval, LL = Lower Limit, UL = Upper Limit.

The regression analysis revealed significant values. With an  $R^2$  value of .368, it is evident that burnout contributed to 36.8% of the variability in psychological well-being among ESL students ( $F = 119.51$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Furthermore, burnout emerged as a significant negative predictor of psychological well-being ( $\beta = -.60$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The results are displayed in Table 3.

## Discussion

Numerous studies have explored the importance of Maslach's theory of burnout and psychological well-being (PWB) in the realm of education. However, the examination of their precise function in ESL instructional settings in Pakistan is still in its earlier stages. Therefore, the aim of this study was to

explore the relationship between burnout and psychological well-being among ESL (English as a Second Language) students in Karachi, Pakistan. The study intended to examine two central research questions: First, to investigate the correlation of burnout and psychological well-being among ESL learners. Second, to see how burnout impacts the psychological well-being of ESL learners. The postulated research direct the investigation of the study, suggesting a significant adverse correlation between burnout and psychological well-being in this cohort. Furthermore, it is suggested that burnout is a significant negative predictor, potentially exerting adverse effects on the psychological well-being of ESL students. The analysis conducted in this study holds an important role in untangling the complex network of connections between burnout and psychological well-being among ESL learners.

The analysis of the first research question revealed a significant negative correlation between burnout and the PWB of ESL students (Aperocho & Payot, 2022). The experiences of ESL learners are supporting the observed negative relationship of burnout and the psychological well-being among ESL students (Aperocho & Payot, 2022). This negative correlation suggests that as burnout levels increase among ESL students, their psychological well-being declines, aligning with prior research demonstrating burnout's adverse effects on psychological well-being (Chen, 2023). Moreover, Yu and Chae (2020) also discovered a negative correlation between academic burnout and psychological well being of the students.

To understand this relationship efficiently, the individual subscales of the psychological well-being scale were examined. Autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance were all found to be significantly negatively correlated with burnout. This suggests that burnout adversely impacts students' psychological well-being, such as reducing their sense of autonomy and control over their academic journey (Loi & Pryce, 2022). They may also find it challenging to establish positive relations with peers and experience personal growth due to the emotional exhaustion associated with burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

Linear regression analysis was employed to investigate if there is an impact of burnout on psychological well-being of undergraduate ESL students. The analysis yielded significant results, indicating that burnout contributed to 36.8% of the variability in psychological well-being among ESL students. Additionally, burnout was found to be a significant predictor of reduced psychological well-being, confirming that elevated burnout levels are linked to decreased psychological well-being among ESL students. These results are consistent with the findings of a study conducted by Rehman et al. (2020), which included a sample of 486 students and demonstrated a substantial influence of burnout on students' psychological well-being.

## Implications

The findings of this study carry various implications for the field of ESL education, language teachers, and the well-being of students engaged in language learning. Recognizing the adverse correlation between burnout and psychological well-being highlights the importance of implementing interventions and support mechanisms to address burnout among ESL students. Teachers should not only focus on language proficiency but also be attentive to students' emotional well-being and educational institutions should consider incorporating stress reduction techniques, mental health support, and other strategies to encourage a supportive learning environment. Additionally, it is crucial to emphasise that students should not be subjected to excessive pressure while learning a second language to prevent burnout and protect their psychological well-being. Furthermore, to ensure a positive and productive learning environment, educators and course facilitators should consider designing syllabi and coursework that not only facilitate language learning but also prioritise motivation of the students and their engagement in the second language learning process.

## Limitations and Suggestions

It's imperative to recognize and mitigate the constraints of this study. One such limitation is the use of a convenience sampling method, which may introduce selection bias, potentially limiting the findings' generalizability to a larger ESL population. Furthermore, relying on self-report measures opens the door to social desirability and response bias. To offer a detailed and comprehensive understanding of ESL students' experiences, future research could benefit from incorporating objective measures or qualitative approaches. A point to take into consideration is that as the study was conducted to fit in the specific cultural context of Pakistan, the results may have been influenced by unique cultural factors in this region.

Finally, the study does not investigate the specific factors that contribute to burnout among ESL students, leaving the underlying causes of burnout to be investigated further. Future research in this area could concentrate on identifying and examining the specific academic and non-academic stressors

that contribute to burnout in ESL students. Researchers can also investigate the role of various coping mechanisms and intervention strategies in reducing burnout and improving well-being. To facilitate an improved understanding of the relationship between burnout and psychological well-being, future research can examine deeper into the stressors discussed in this study.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study is meant to highlight the multifactorial interplay between language learning and psychological well-being, emphasising the importance of a comprehensive approach to ESL education. Among ESL students, the correlation between psychological well-being was revealed to be significantly negative. The results affirmed a significant negative correlation between burnout and psychological well-being among ESL students. The effects of burnout were so adverse on students' emotional and cognitive states for their psychological well-being that it emerged as a significant negative predictor. These findings emphasised the need to address burnout and enhance students' overall well-being in ESL education. While acknowledging study limitations, such as the use of convenience sampling and the influence of cultural factors, future research should focus on identifying the stressors that contribute to burnout among ESL students and exploring effective coping mechanisms and interventions. It is crucial to prioritise the psychological well-being of ESL learners to enhance their language learning experience, academic engagement, and success in our globalised world.

### Competing Interests

The authors did not declare any competing interest.

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