Addressing the Shortage of ESL/EFL Teachers Amid the Pandemic: An Investigation Into Teacher Burnout in a Profit-Driven Context

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Abstract

The conundrum of ESL/EFL shortage has been exacerbated due to the Covid-19 outbreak as many Vietnamese public schools have undergone an alarming spike in teacher turnover rates. One of the influencing factors of teachers' decision to leave their profession has been reported to be being drained from work. Very little, however, is known about the teachers in the private sector, which is profit-driven. The study addresses this gap in teaching practices in Vietnam, exploring teacher burnout in several language institutes in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. A mixed-method approach adopted from Seidman's Teacher Burnout Scale was employed to measure the burnout score. To gain a more insightful understanding of the determinants, participants, including teachers and academic leaders, were invited to reflect on their experience regarding their school leadership and how it has affected their career paths. The findings reveal that the teachers' age and years in service are not correlated to their burnout scores. Although the mean score is slightly low compared to the total score (M = 53.35/126), mixed results are reflected in the qualitative data from open-ended questions in the survey. During semi-structured interviews, more emerging factors which contribute to teachers' well-being were also discussed. Finally, this study proposes some solutions for profit-driven school leaders to ensure sustainable growth.

Keywords: Teacher Shortage, Teacher Burnout, Profit-Driven Sector



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Introduction

For the past two years, the pandemic has exacerbated the perennial issues in education, particularly the teacher shortage. According to the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training's report to the National Assembly in 2022, 16,265 teachers resigned and switched to other jobs (10,407 public school teachers and 5,858 private school teachers), disrupting the provision of high-quality education to all students (Thu Hang, 2022). The main reasons for this alarmingly high turnover rate of teachers are reported to be longstanding negative stressors (Vinh Ha, 2022), including 1) low wages, as the average monthly income of a teacher from public schools is around VND 6 million (approximately equivalent to \$250); 2) poor school management; 3) unreasonable assignment of tasks; 4) the lack of democracy affecting the teachers' working spirit and creativity; 5) and poor facilities (Thu Hang, 2022).

While much attention has been drawn to public schools, not many studies investigate the private sector. This is such a gap in the research, as the number of resigned teachers in private schools is significantly lower than that of public ones. Hence, conducting research in profit-driven educational sectors can provide beneficial insights to tackle the chronic teacher shortage.

This study aims to address the issue by examining teacher burnout in the private sector, specifically language centres, in the Vietnamese context and identifying the factors that affect the teachers' decision to leave their job. The research questions are as follows:

- How burned out are teachers working for profit-driven schools amid the pandemic?
- What are other factors affecting the teacher turnover rate in those schools?

Literature review

1. Teacher shortage

1.1 Consequences

The problem of teacher shortage is not novel, with many reports on the possible shortage of primary and secondary teachers being published in the early 1980s, (see Darling-Hammond, 1984; Haggstrom, Darling-Hammond, & Grissmer, 1988; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Over the past few decades, a series of studies (see Grissmer & Kirby, 1987; Grissmer & Kirby, 1992; Grissmer & Kirby, 1997; Mumane et al., 1988) have been done in an attempt to address the concern over teacher shortages in many countries (Santiago, 2002). This raises the question of why teacher shortages are the main source of concern for many people, both in the academic field and among policymakers.

To explain this, the consequences of this major issue should be focused. As raised by Reilly (2022), students are the ones who suffer the utmost consequences of this shortage, as they may experience classes with a rotation of substitute teachers, resulting in no graded work or supervision. This is further supported by McKenna (2018), who states that the high turnover rate of teachers affects the students' performance by hindering the stability of the school, through which the cooperation between colleagues and the development of institutional knowledge are damaged.

Besides students, a shortage of teachers can cause harm to the teachers themselves as well as the general education system (García & Weiss, 2019), resulting in a reduction of the teachers' effectiveness and a high consumption of public economic resources. Consequently, it is more challenging for teachers and the schools to develop a professional reputation, which in turn worsens the problem. In a report published recently, Schmitt and deCourcy (2022) claim that the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the long-established problem of teacher shortage, which perplexes people as to how this shortage is caused.

1.2 Causes

Along with mentioning the issue of teacher shortage, Schmitt and DeCourcy (2022) also delineate two prominent causes leading to this phenomenon, namely, the low pay in relation to the teachers' profession as compared to those at the same qualification level, and the progressively stressful working conditions. Regarding the former, many studies have highlighted salary as a significant factor in determining whether or not teachers will leave their jobs (Goodlad, 1984; Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll, 2003). In empirical research conducted in Nigeria by Subair & Talabi (2015), 217/275 teachers (78.9%) stated that salary dissatisfaction was the main reason for the teacher shortage. For the latter factor, Schmitt and DeCourcy (2022) maintain that stress is a common factor in the teaching job due to many factors, including the long working hours, large class sizes, and evaluation processes. To add further details, Ingersoll (2001) emphasises that poor working conditions can damage the reputation of the schools as well as the teachers, making recruitment a more challenging task. Together with the outbreak of the pandemic, teachers confront many other stressors relating to health risks, new methods of teaching, and the rapid changes demanded by the job (Schmitt & DeCourcy, 2022). As a result, the combination of both new and old types of stressors has driven the teachers to potentially burnout and quit their jobs, leading to the shortage problem.

To summarize, teacher shortages are a persistent problem that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Among its main causes, low pay and stress have been acknowledged as the factors having the most significant impacts. Nevertheless, it is also worth mentioning that such results are derived from research and reports of teachers from the public schools, leaving a gap to be bridged for those teaching in the private sector.

2. Teacher burnout

2.1 Definition

Being identified as one of the main causes leading to teacher shortages, it is therefore vital to understand the definition of burnout. The explication of burnout has intrigued academia since the 1970s, with a few articles by Freudenberger (1975) and Maslach (1976) being the first ones to label the phenomenon its initial term (Maslach et al., 2001). Burnout is defined as "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do 'people-work' of some kind" (Maslach & Jackson, 1981, p. 99). It is also clarified as "the end result of prolonged stress experienced on a daily basis" (McCormack & Cotter, 2013, p. 16). As articulated by Brown and Roloff (2011), this emotional exhaustion can adversely affect the teachers' welfare and their commitment to the job. Maslach and Jackson (1981) further emphasise the impacts of burnout on a person's well-being, stating that it is one of the dominant factors causing people to experience low self-esteem, leading to different

types of distress, insomnia, drug and alcohol abuse, as well as problems maintaining relationships with their family and acquaintances.

In identifying the sources of teacher stress, Turk, et al. (1982) point out the seven areas that appear with a consistent pattern through different research, which are: the school environment, student misbehaviours, poor working conditions, personal concerns of the teacher, relationships with parents, time pressures, and inadequacy of training. Furthermore, the role of management, or principals to be specific, is also highlighted by Dworkin et al. (2003) as it can have an influential effect in reducing the burnout feeling among teachers. This is practised through the much-needed recognition from the managers to the ones in task.

2.2 Burnout indicators

Given such aforementioned alarming impacts, educational institutions must find ways to mitigate the problem. This can be done through the assessment of the burnout syndromes, as well as the factors leading to such emotions (Schwab, 1983). As suggested by Maslach, burnout can be assessed in its three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Koeske & Koeske, 1989).

According to Maslach et al. (1997), the first aspect occurs when "emotional resources are depleted, workers feel they are no longer able to give of themselves at a psychological level", which is characterised by the feelings of frustration, anger, depression, and dissatisfaction, causing teachers to be less resilient towards their emotions (Larrivee, 2012). In terms of depersonalisation, negative and cynical attitudes towards other people are developed, making teachers become more critical and have the tendency to blame those who work with them. For the final factor, it is illustrated through one's self adverse evaluation, or a loss of self-efficacy, resulting in disillusionment and a feeling of dissatisfaction for what they have achieved (Maslach et al., 1997).

As for the stages leading to burnout, Figure 1 below shows its three stages—stress arousal, energy conservation, and exhaustion—together with the symptoms associated with each stage.

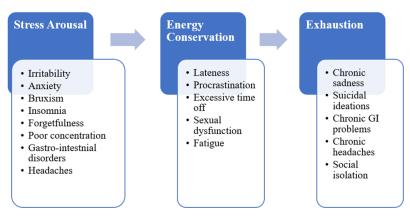


Figure 1: Three Stages of Burnout (Adopted from Texas Medical Association, 2010)

As can be seen, there are various symptoms at different stages, ranging from weak to more serious indicators. As a result, if a high burnout score is achieved among teachers, an assessment of the participants' health condition is needed to examine their appropriate level of burnout, through which suitable measures can be suggested.

Research design

This study employs a mixed-method approach that combines qualitative and quantitative data to increase the validity of the findings (Creswell, 1999; Creswell & Creswell, 2018, Schifferdecker and Reed, 2009). Three typical language centres in Ho Chi Minh City were selected to be the subjects of this research to gain an insightful understanding of teachers' vicarious experiences with teaching and their contexts (profit-driven schools) and compare the biographies of the subjects to provide the dynamics affecting the teachers' burnout and their retention (Thomas, 2017).

1. Instruments

1.1 Teacher Burnout Scale

This research adopts the Teacher Burnout Scale devised by Seidman & Zager (1986). The questionnaire (see Appendix a) comprises 21 questions divided into four subcategories:

- Career satisfaction (5 items: 1, 5, 10, 12, 19)
- Perceived administrative support (6 items: 3, 8, 11, 15, 18, 20)
- Coping with job-related stress (6 items: 2, 4, 7, 9, 13, 14)
- Attitudes towards students (4 items: 6, 16, 17, 21)

The scale consists of a six-point Likert's response: 1: strongly disagree; 2: moderately disagree; 3: slightly disagree; 4: slightly agree; 5: moderately agree; and 6: strongly agree.

1.2 Open-ended question

Since the researchers aim to collect a significant number of teachers' free thoughts and feelings, an open-ended question is time-saving and ideal for all participants to freely express their opinions rather than imposing them to select from a predetermined list of answers (Geer, 1988). Specifically, the participants were asked to describe their experience with teaching and working with the centres which could be answered in words or full sentences. There was no word limit for the responses.

1.3 Interviews

Google Meet was used to conduct online interviews, allowing participants to freely express their opinions and feelings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants got the consent form prior to the meeting. They were all aware of the purpose of the research and that the conversations were recorded. The semi-structured questions are constructed based on the following themes:

- Their experience with the centre operation and support; and how they affect teacher well-being and work commitment
- Their perspectives on the factors that influence teacher turnover rates

For ethical reasons, the participants' names were kept anonymous.

2. Participants

ESL/EFL teachers from three language centres in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam were the subjects of this research. All centres are profit-driven and customer-oriented, as the main revenues come from student enrollment, and the quality of the centres is determined by customer satisfaction and the students' improvements in their English proficiency. The names of the three centres are confidential, but their information regarding their number of teachers, teacher turnover rate, and teachers' reasons for resigning is approved to be used in this study. Details are as follows:

- Language Center A has 15 teachers (seven expats and eight Vietnamese).
- Language Center B has 12 teachers (three expats and nine Vietnamese).
- Language centre C has 16 teachers (four expats & twelve Vietnamese).

From January to September, 22 out of 65 full-time teachers resigned from 3 centres, including 18 expat teachers (81.82%) and 4 Vietnamese teachers (18.18%). According to the data from the human resources department, a majority of teachers left due to their relocation and dissatisfaction with the salary. Many teachers were dismissed for misconduct (absence, tardiness, and defamation of the organisation). Others submitted their resignation letters due to personal reasons. Consequently, the three centres had confronted hindrances from their teacher shortage, entailing heavy burdens regarding cost and time on the onboarding phase; and degradation of reputation due to teachers' absenteeism, leading to a great loss of student enrollment and the organisation's revenues.

Initially, invitations were sent out to all 43 teachers who are working for the aforementioned language centres. However, only 31 ESL/EFL teachers, including 5 expats and 26 Vietnamese, agreed to participate in the study (See Figure 2 for their demographics).

		Teachers'	demographics	3	
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	31	21.00	35.00	28.1935	3.30070
Years of experience	31	2.00	12.00	5.3548	2.69009
Valid N (listwise)	31				

Figure 2: Teachers' Demographics

Ethical consideration

The research proposal was sent via email and accepted by the academic managers, head teachers, and schedulers. Consent forms were sent to all participants (teachers), and they had to grant permission to collect their data before completing the questionnaire. Finally, all information of the participants is confidential.

Data collection

From August 12–September 12, 2022, online surveys and consent forms were distributed to all teachers from the three centres. From September 5 - September 19, 2022, the researchers conducted 30-minute interviews via Google Meet with participants who accepted the invitation to join the meeting in the initial online survey.

Data analysis

For quantitative data retrieved from the teacher burnout scale, a statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) was used to proceed and analyse the scores. A reliability test (Cronbach's Alpha) was also employed to ensure the data's consistency. The obtained result for the scale is reliable ($\alpha = 0.86$). Before adding all scores of responses and comparing them with the mean score, reverse coding was applied for positive worded items (items: 1, 3, 5, 8, 10, 16, 17, and 19). The high sum score is equivalent to a high burnout state.

For qualitative data from the open-ended question and interviews, the coding method was adopted to examine the teachers' responses.

Findings

1. Teacher burnout score

The mean score for Teacher Burnout was relatively low (M = 53.35/126) compared to the scale's average score (See Figure 3).

	Te	acher Burn	out		
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Total Teacher Burnout Score	31	24.00	82.00	53.3548	14.20692
Valid N (listwise)	31				

Figure 3: Teacher Burnout Score

This indicates that the participants did not endure burnout with teaching or at their workplace. However, the qualitative data show that they did experience several negative workplace stresses, which contributed to their decision to leave the organization.

2. Qualitative data

2.1 Open-ended question

Initially, the participants were asked to freely describe their feelings about teaching at their current centres, resulting in mixed responses with a total of 103 words (See Figure 4).

·	Teac	hers' Repsonses	
Categories	Number of answers	Sub-categories	Total Count
		work related (relationship)	3
		feeling (well-being)	25
Positive	62	work related (workload)	8
		career choice	24
		others	2
		work related (relationship)	6
		feeling (well-being)	11
Negative	31	work related (workload)	10
		career choice	3
		others	1
		work related (relationship)	0
		feeling (well-being)	1
Neutral	3	work related (workload)	0
		career choice	1
		others	1
		work related (relationship)	0
	fied 7	feeling (well-being)	0
Unidentified		work related (workload)	0
		career choice	2
		others	5
Total	103		

Figure 4: Teachers' responses to open-ended question

Having been coded, the descriptive words were put into five sub-categories, namely work-related (relationship), feeling (well-being), work-related (workload), career choice, and others. Teachers are noticeably happy with their career choice; therefore, the profession itself is barely a stressor for the participants. Among the categories, feeling (well-being) receives distinctively mixed feedback but the majority of them is positive. In contrast, many negative words are used primarily to describe job-related issues (workload) (See Figure 5).



Figure 5: Teachers' negative description of their experience at work

To gain a more in-depth understanding of the negative experience and how it relates to the decision to resign, five participants (one foreign and four Vietnamese teachers) who revealed their intention to leave the organization in the coming months were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. They are the ideal candidates as they no longer endure the pressure of the organisation's employees, so their answers are reliable and authentic.

2.2 Job-related problems

Workload

The number of administrative tasks for the teachers before and amid the pandemic was fairly similar, including calling the parents and writing daily reports. Although they understood the reasons for completing such tasks, as they are beneficial for the student's progress and serve as an add-on service from a profit-driven language school, some of them expressed their reluctance to complete such tasks as there was a manifest lack of an elaborate procedure for dealing with unexpected issues and conflicts.

Calling the parents is **annoying** for me, especially when they (the parents) did not pick up the phone, but I have to keep calling them.

In this case, the teacher failed to reach the parents according to the arranged schedule. She had to make another call during her duty hours which encumbers the accomplishment of other priorities such as planning the lessons or grading the student's work. This might lead to the accumulation of incomplete and overdue tasks, gradually becoming a burden for the teachers. Another stressor comes from the academic staff whose responsibility is taking care of the clients (students and parents), and supervising the parent conference.

I said my schedule was very tight but the staff said: "oh, this (calling the parents) is very easy, why are you making a fuss".

From the teacher's sharing, the internal communication regarding teachers' responsibilities was visibly weak due to the absence of empathy and mutual understanding regarding how administrative tasks should be executed. Therefore, many of them used negative words ("exhausted", "tired", "overwhelming", "lack of energy", "lots of work", and "lack of support") to describe their workload in the open-ended question.

Conflicts

Conflicts are, indeed, inevitable in any workplace, and specifically, in profit-driven schools, they involve the discrepancy between teacher beliefs and the school's business model.

(the centre) They want students to play a lot of games... I feel like if I were to do that, I would be cheating the students out of their money. I feel a combination of games and lectures would be better, but some teachers here they just gamify way too much from the beginning of the class to the end.

Another prominent issue lies in the lack of transparency, which threatens the teachers' security and belief in the organisation where they are working for.

I'm very frustrated about cutting my annual leave and holiday leave without any official email.

The Pandemic has encumbered economic growth, and profit-driven organisations have endured the detrimental effect. One of the consequences is squeezing the benefits, which was not transparently and officially explained by emails, leading to the teacher's hostility. Moreover, this also displays the frustration of the organisation when dealing with its crisis.

I had to submit the IELTS certificate to teach the test-prep program, but other teachers didn't have to.

In this case, the teacher disagreed with the bias existing in the organisation as the requirement was inconsistent and unfair to all teachers, leading to negative attitudes. Once the teachers no longer feel safe and trust their superiors, resigning their job is only a matter of time. This explains why some teachers put "mundane", "maltreated", and "chaotic" in the description box of their experience with teaching at their current workplace.

Teachers' weak commitment to the career

The requirement for recruiting EFL/ESL teachers working for private language centres in the Vietnamese context is less stringent. While it is mandatory for teachers from public schools to submit a bachelor's degree in teaching, candidates with an accredited teaching certification such as TESOL could be qualified to teach at any language centre. Although this might be an optimal solution to reactively ameliorate the issue of teacher shortages, it cannot ensure retaining the number of teachers. During the interview, a teacher with no teaching experience expressed doubts about pursuing a career in education.

I started the career with a banking degree, so in this major, **I've always felt like I** don't belong, or I'm falling behind. So that's why I'm not gonna continue teaching in the future

In the future, if I had the choice, I'd rather explore something else that I really love. Teaching is fun, and the time goes fast now compared to the past, but I still can't picture myself as a teacher in the future. I don't think going to work is like doing what I love if I teach.

The teacher still hesitated to commit to working for the school in the future, despite the joy and motivation brought by teaching and the workplace. Her commitment to her career and workplace has been weakened as a result of the shaky teaching foundation. Her explanation might clarify the negative descriptions of work (such as "bored", "impatient", and "uninspired"). Looking from a more general perspective, some teachers enter the educational sector while exploring their professional passions or pursuing other goals. If the teachers have other priorities or fail to make sense of why they are doing what they are doing, they might be prone to giving up teaching. This is more prevalent for expat teachers, as some of them are mobile and willing to relocate after a short period of time, probably for six months or a year. Hence, settling to teach might be insignificant to their career path. Therefore, profit-driven organisations, especially academic managers, should acknowledge this issue and devise plans to cultivate their teachers' passion and commitment to the profession if they wish to retain their teachers.

Teachers' weak commitment to the profit-driven context

On the opposite end of the spectrum from teachers whose jobs were uncertain was a group of teachers who were committed to teaching and their professional development.

I have a very solid plan about what I want to be in the future. I want to develop academically, that means I want to study higher, and then I want to try to find opportunities to teach in other countries so that I can experience different environments, learn about teaching methods from different places....So that's where I'm heading, develop academically, teach in universities, or academic establishments or institutions.

According to the teacher in the interview, working for the language centre was just a stepping stone for her to gain experience and generate additional income. Thus, without any strategies to construct and consolidate employee commitment in profit-driven schools, their teachers might be prone to resign from their job.

Discussion

The social-economic burden of the pandemic is alarming, leading to an enormous wave of teacher resignations from both the public and private educational sectors. Among the reasons, salary dissatisfaction is reported to be the main reason for teacher shortages, which has been addressed as a conundrum in the literature (see Goodlad, 1984; Ingersoll, 2001; Schmitt & DeCourcy, 2022). In a report from the Vietnamese national press, teachers' salaries in private schools are approximately twice as much as those in public schools (Tue Hai, 2010). This explains why teachers from public schools chose to leave or pursue their careers in the private sector.

The three centres in this study confronted a high teacher migration rather than attrition, despite their welcoming recruitment policy, which is lowering the standard to fill vacant teaching positions. This solution, in fact, has been critiqued as being impractical to ameliorate the teacher shortage as it is teacher retention that the schools should maintain (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Similar to what has been discussed in the literature review and recent national reports, the financial matter is the notable cause of the high teacher turnover rate. This is, nevertheless, due to the competitive salaries and benefits among different centres in the region, not because of poor payment. Although raising the salary is the manifest solution, it is considered extravagant (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003) and has been encumbered by the pandemic as a severe recession is forecasted to take place soon due to trading disruption over the last two years (see Echarte Fernández et al., 2022; Hunt et al., 2022; Jomo & Chowdhury, 2020). Having said that, salary is still the cornerstone for attracting high-quality teaching staff. It also serves as a strategy to promote the teachers' commitment to the organisation, helping to maintain the current employees. Once the teachers are liberated from their financial burden, they can devote themselves to developing their professional competence, promoting the organisation's reputation for teaching quality. As a result, student enrollment can also increase, meaning greater revenues.

Moreover, teachers' well-being and experience are also determining factors. From the quantitative data measuring teacher burnout scores, teachers from those centres did not endure burnout, as the mean scores are significantly lower than the average score from the original scale. Yet the open-ended question and interviews disclose a further in-depth

understanding of teacher resignation if their concerns are not financially related. Specifically, they have expressed enduring several negative stressors related to working conditions and commitments, undermining their well-being, passion, and motivation for teaching. To alleviate the teachers' stress or burnout, an in-depth understanding of the social environment is crucial (Maslach and Leiter, 2016) to accommodate a positive school climate referred to as "the quality and character of school life" (National School Climate Centre, 2022), encompassing "norms, values, interpersonal relationships, and structures of school that affect people's sense of social, emotional, and physical safety" (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 182). Focusing on cultivating the internal environment, indeed, can be a sustainable solution for tackling the teacher shortage, if raising teachers' salaries entails financial burdens on educational sectors, especially for public schools. Not only can a secure, democratic, and healthy workplace promote strong commitment, but the school's values and reputation can also be enhanced, attracting more student enrollment as a result. From this study, transparency in communication and academic support are the utmost concerns, which should be the starting point for policymakers and school leaders to embark on their reformation plans and procedures to construct a better school climate.

Limitations and further directions

This study only investigated three language centres while the contexts for other private sectors such as international schools can also yield a more holistic perspective regarding the teacher shortage from profit-driven educational organisations. Comparative studies across different schools, business models, and teaching platforms, therefore, might be further directions for future studies. Moreover, due to the restricted network of the researchers, the participants in this research are limited. Hence, participants' demographics for later investigation can be more diverse, such as STEM teachers or English for Specific Purposes teachers. Finally, since teacher migration is the major issue in the three centres, more experimental studies in various contexts are needed to focus on school policies and organisational management to enhance school climate and work commitment.

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