

An Empirical Study on English Learning Burnout among Chinese English Majors—Taking English Major Undergraduates at X University as an Example

Li Yafeng and Liu Fei*

School of Foreign Studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University, China
Email: yafengli@mail.nwpu.edu.cn (L.Y.); sophiayucheng@mail.nwpu.edu.cn (L.F.)

*Corresponding author

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Abstract—Burnout has a great impact on students' learning achievement and motivation. This paper investigates the English Learning Burnout (ELB) of 122 English Major undergraduates from one first-rate university in Xi'an by questionnaire. After the quantitative analysis, it finds that participants show a high level of burnout from English learning ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.96$). Among three dimensions of English learning burnout, cynicism occupies the first ($Mean = 3.31$, $SD = 0.94$) and emotional exhaustion ranks the second ($Mean = 3.28$, $SD = 0.97$), followed by reduced personal accomplishment ($Mean = 3.27$, $SD = 0.88$). To deeply explore the factors influencing the ELB, linear regression analysis is conducted. Results of linear regression analysis show that four kinds of factors influencing learning burnout proposed in previous studies including school factor, disciplinary factor, personal factor and social factor contribute to the ELB. Based on the research finding, it proposes suggestions for teachers to pay more attention to students' psychology for learning. Meanwhile, it is also suggested that the curriculum be optimized to meet the need of the talent market and students' prospects.

Keywords—English learning burnout, Chinese English majors, teaching suggestion

I. INTRODUCTION

In Second Language Acquisition (SLA), negative affective factors like language anxiety have received great attention [1, 2]. Burnout, a kind of negative concept in psychology, attracted scholars in the 1970s like American psychoanalyst Freudenberger who formally proposed this concept for the first time when he studied occupational stress [3] and Maslach who made further research on job burnout. Language learning burnout as one of critical negative emotion factors has aroused Second Language Acquisition (SLA) scholars in recent years. Erakman and Mede [4] pointed out that English Learning Burnout (ELB) has been under explored in the field of language education.

In China, English learners have to accomplish lots of rigid learning tasks and various learning requirements regarding listening, speaking, reading, writing and interpreting for the purpose of getting high scores in English examinations when they are primary and high school students. And in college, it is still examination-oriented English content. Therefore, ELB seems a common negative emotional factor among Chinese English learners. Various factors like lack of interest in learning and boredom with learning may lead to the phenomenon of learning burnout in college students to different degrees. Meanwhile, in recent years, the employment competition has become more and more severe due to COVID-19. And the lack of supervision for online

study may decrease their learning achievement resulting into burnout. Burnout seriously restricts the improvement of the quality of talent cultivation in universities [5].

This paper focuses on the phenomenon of ELB and investigates Chinese English majors to explore the current situation of ELB among them and the influencing factors of ELB, which may contribute to researches on the negative affective factors of language learning and provide evidence related to suggestions on improving English learning results.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Learning Burnout

The early concept of “burnout” has no clear definition, which is mainly about the summary and enumeration of symptoms related to burnout syndrome. According to the most consensual of diversified definitions, Maslach *et al.* [6] defined the burnout that it is a multi-dimensional syndrome comprising three symptom clusters including emotional exhaustion (feelings of stress and chronic fatigue), cynicism (also known as depersonalization; a detached attitude toward work and work-related people), and reduced personal accomplishment (reduced feelings of efficiency and success). Whilst emotional exhaustion was deemed as an emotional component, cynicism and lack of personal efficacy were regarded as cognitive ones.

Learning/academic burnout is a negative psychology status that students lack confidence to deal with learning difficulties and show towards school, study and curriculum in the process of learning. Academic burnout is a concerning issue worldwide that is particularly predicted by academic motivation [7]. Over the past two decades, academic burnout of foreign language learning has attracted extensive attention of Chinese scholars [8]. Studies on learning burnout in China have been increasing, but English learning burnout attracts less attention.

B. English Learning Burnout

Academic burnout of EFL is put forward by introducing the concept of burnout into the field of foreign language learning. English learning burnout refers to negative feelings, such as exhaustion and indifference to the English language learning, and reduced self-efficacy caused by the gap between learners' expectations of the content, process and results of English learning activities and the actual results [9].

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), study on learners' academic burnout is largely under explored. In China, the contribution to academic burnout

research mainly lies in the field of foreign language learning. The research group is relatively wide, including primary school students, junior high school students, senior high school students, vocational students and even undergraduate and graduate students. The research on English learning burnout is of great significance for improving English teaching. According to the literature collection and collation, there are few studies on the current situation of English learning burnout in China, and most of the existing studies are related to college students' autonomous learning ability. For instance, Tao [10] found that students' foreign language learning burnout is common, but their indifference to foreign language learning is high; Mindfulness, foreign language learning burnout and English autonomous learning behavior are significantly correlated, and the correlation coefficient between burnout and autonomous learning behavior is high. Foreign language learning burnout has a partial mediating effect between mindfulness and English autonomous learning behavior. Bai [11] found that teaching factor, school environment, peer factor, social factor, and personal factor have a significant impact on college non-English major students' English learning burnout.

As He and Hu [12] found, from 2001 to 2022, research regarding English learning burnout mainly focuses on status of ELB, influencing factors and approaches to overcome ELB via empirical study like investigation. And correlation analysis is usually adopted especially in exploring influencing factors of ELB. College students (non-English major), high school students and vocational school students are the common research objects in previous studies. At present, there are few studies concentrating on English majors' learning burnout. There are a large number of English learners in China, and most colleges and universities have English majors. Due to differences in regions, environments, educational backgrounds, etc., the profile of English learning burnout among English majors may be different.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Research Questions

The purposes of this research are to explore the learning burnout of English major students in their EFL.

RQ1: What is general situation of English major students' intensity of foreign language learning motivation?

RQ2: How do social factor, disciplinary factor, personal factor and social factor contribute to English majors' ELB?

B. Measures

Questionnaire was used in data collection, which includes four parts. Part A is about the background information of the subjects, including four topics: 1) gender, 2) age, 3) native place (urban or rural areas) and 4) one-child or not. Next is concerning the survey of English learning burnout. The corresponding dimension of Q5–7 is emotional exhaustion; Q8–10 correspond to cynicism; Q11–13 correspond to reduced personal achievement. Q5–13 are scored with 5-point Likert scale, and the numbers 1 to 5 respectively indicate from 1 (not at all true for me) to 5 (definitely true for me). Part C is the survey of the influential factors of English learning burnout, including 12 questions, which is also rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true of me)

to 5 (very true of me). Q14–16 correspond to social factors, Q17–19 to disciplinary factors, Q20–22 to personal factors, and Q23–25 to school factors. Before the formal issuance of the questionnaire, 35 students from a certain university participated in the questionnaire test and were interviewed. According to the test results, the author made some modifications to the questionnaire.

The research utilized statistical analysis and SPSS 26.0 to obtain the results to research questions. The data analysis included: (1) Descriptive statistics, (2) Pearson Correlation and (3) Regression analysis. In order to clarify the relative contribution of these variables, a multiple regression analysis is used. Linear regression is an important concept of social science research. Correlation analysis is used to describe the intensity of linear relationship between two consecutive variables. Linear regression analysis based on the relationship is forward to interpret or forecast the phenomenon between the variables statistical methods. The purpose of this study wants to interpret the cause of learning burnout by linear regression analysis from several aspects including society, curriculum setting, school and individual.

C. Sample

By random sampling, 130 students from X university were investigated, shown as Table 1. Before the survey, they had been informed of the purpose of this study and the precautions for completing the questionnaire. 130 questionnaires were recovered, and 122 valid questionnaires were left after excluding the questionnaires that were filled in regularly and missing more than 10% of the information.

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of samples

Item	Number	Percentage	
Gender	Male	18	14.75%
	Female	104	85.25%
Average Age	20.25		
Native place	Urban	84	68.85%
	Rural	38	34.15%
One-child or not	Yes	68	55.74%
	No	54	44.26%

The population for this study is all Chinese undergraduates who major in English learning; a total number of 122 students contained 18 male and 104 female objects with average age of 20.25. 68.85% of the sample group is from urban areas. And almost half of them are from one-child family.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Reliability and Validity

For data reliability and content validity, relevant analysis was carried out. Cronbach a coefficient was utilized to measure the reliability of questionnaires.

Table 2. Reliability of the questionnaire

Questionnaire	N of Items	Cronbach Alpha
English learning burnout	25	0.932

It can be seen from the Table 2 that the reliability coefficient of learning motivation is 0.932>0.9. Therefore, the data of the two questionnaires are of highly qualified, authentic and reliable, and can be employed for further

analysis.

Validity is used to measure whether the item design is reasonable and to verify the relationship between expected variables and items. Through Bartlett's test, it can be seen from Table 3 that the KMO value is $0.828 > 0.8$ ($Sig < 0.001$), which demonstrates that the research data has a good level of validity for information extraction.

Table 3. KMO and Bartlett's test of English learning burnout scale

Items	Value	
Measure of Sampling Adequacy	0.828	
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Chi-Square	2765.090
	df	630
	Sig.	0.00

B. Foreign Language Learning Burnout

1) General situation of English major students' English learning burnout

According to Table 4, result shows that the mean values of

ELB and its three clusters are above 2.5 (full score is 5), implying that the participants generally have a relative severe burnout in their present English study. The mean values of three sub-variables of ELB are almost equal to 3.30, indicating that most of the participants are experiencing emotional exhaustion, cynicism and reduced accomplishment at the same time. The average value of cynicism (mean = 3.31) is the highest among all dimensions, which indicates to some extent that college students majoring in English have a detached attitude toward English learning. Although the average value of emotional exhaustion is relatively low, the standard deviation of negative emotional response is the highest ($SD = 1.03$). It can be explained that some learners' symptoms of negative emotional response are severe in the process of English learning. Furthermore, compared to the other two dimensions, the average score of the reduced personal accomplishment is the lowest (mean = 3.26), representing the majority of participants have a sense of accomplishment in learning English.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of English learning burnout

Items	EL Burnout	ELB-Emotional exhaustion	ELB-Cynicism	ELB-Reduced personal accomplishment	Valid N (listwise)
N	122				122
Mean	3.2846	3.2760	3.3115	3.2678	
Std. Deviation	0.95615	0.93652	0.94644	0.87998	

Table 5. Pearson correlation between English learning burnout and influencing factor

Items	Social factor	Disciplinary factor	Personal factor	School factor
English learning burnout	0.747**	0.853**	0.787**	0.754**
Sig.	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

Note: **means $p < 0.01$

Table 6. Linear Regression result of learning burnout and its influencing factors

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	VIF
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
(Constant)	0.574	0.136		4.235	0.000	
Social factor	0.087	0.059	0.108	1.463	0.146	3.005
Disciplinary factor	0.427	0.069	0.479	6.156	0.000	3.344
Personal factor	0.182	0.061	0.222	2.994	0.003	3.052
School factor	0.140	0.060	0.164	2.320	0.022	2.771
		R ²			0.788	
		F			108.922	
		P			<0.001	

Dependent variables: English learning burnout

Table 5 shows that English learning burnout is significantly positively correlated with four factors found in previous studies ($p < 0.01$). Among categories of influencing factors, disciplinary factor ranked first, followed by personal factor, school factor and social factor.

2) Regression analysis of English learning burnout and its influencing factors

Multiple regression analysis is conducted to further investigate the deeper relationship between English learning burnout and its influencing factors. English learning burnout is regarded as the dependent variable, and different categories of influencing factors are taken as the independent variables.

As can be seen from the results in Table 6, the coefficient of determination between English learning burnout and its

influencing factor, namely, R square is 0.788, indicating that the independent variable can explain 42.3% of English learning burnout. Besides, F value of the model in this regression is equal to 108.922, indicating that the overall regression model is effective. From the perspective of standardized regression coefficient, the standardized coefficient values of social factor, disciplinary factor, personal factor and school factor are 0.108, 0.479, 0.222, 0.164 respectively, and the corresponding p values are all less than 0.05. It can be concluded that social factor, disciplinary factor, personal factor and school factor have a positive predictive effect on English learning burnout, and the regression equation of the model is:

English learning burnout = 0.574 + 0.087*social factor + 0.427*disciplinary factor + 0.182*personal factor + 0.140*school factor.

According to descriptive statistic of English learning burnout, to some extent, college students majoring in English have a negative attitude toward English learning while the majority of participants have a sense of accomplishment in learning English. The result is similar to the finding of Yu *et al.* [7] that EFL undergraduates of two universities in China reported high levels of language learning burnout. These findings indicate that English learners in China might have been bored with English learning. Taking the results in Tables 5 and 6 into consideration, social factor, disciplinary factor, personal factor and school factor contribute to English learning burnout. In China, students started to learn English at 6–7 years old, and they have experienced almost 11–12 years of English learning until university. And during their English learning, the main goal is to obtain a high score in English exams, which needs their accomplishment of lots of rigid tasks like dictation, grammar exercise and reading comprehension. The long period of English learning with effort on rigid tasks may cause students' chronic fatigue. Further, few courses are set based on students' interest. If students are interested in their major courses, they will actively study them; if they are not interested in their major courses, they will find them boring and tedious, or they will not feel the value of the courses for the cultivation of professional ability, they will definitely become bored.

Taking the results into consideration, we suggest that foreign languages teachers should care about students' psychological status especially negative emotional factors like burnout, which can be intervened from several factors like social factor, disciplinary factor, personal factor and school factor, taking measures such as optimizing the professional curriculum in accordance with the development of basic education and the needs of students. In this regard, professional curriculum should be optimized in accordance with the development of basic education and the needs of students. It is critical to provide students with a more reasonable and valuable curriculum. For example, in addition to the traditional English pedagogy and related skills practice courses, some English teaching courses can be added, which not only meets the requirements of the professional training objectives, but also satisfies the needs of students. Of course, in addition to optimizing the professional curriculum, it is also proposed to reform the teaching methods. Teachers should adopt flexible teaching methods to attract students to class activities, encourage students to actively participate in the curriculum, stimulate students' interest in learning, and eliminate their burnout. Enhancement of career guidance and improvement of students' professional commitment is also necessary.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper focuses on the phenomenon of burnout of English majors who have been influenced by COVID-19 to explore their current situation of English learning burnout by investigating 130 English major students. Here are main findings.

According to descriptive statistic of English learning

burnout, to some extent, college students majoring in English have a negative attitude toward English learning. Social factor, disciplinary factor, personal factor and school factor together have a positive predictive effect on English learning burnout. Among categories of influencing factors, disciplinary factor ranked first, followed by personal factors, school factors and social factors, which indicates that the curriculum is required to be optimized to cater with the need of talent market and students' prospect. Facing the impact of COVID-19 decreasing the employment opportunity, English major students still know the importance of EFL and have strong learning needs and their intensity for EFL is relatively strong. By this study, the research results could provide the way to ameliorate the study of EFL. It is the important work of foreign language education to alert educators to students' burnout in order to make their learning better.

There are also limitations like monotonic instrument to collect data and homogeneity of participants. For further study, the relationship between English learning burnout and other affective factors like enjoyment and anxiety should draw attention.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Li Yafeng conducted the research and wrote this paper with supervision of Liu Fei. Both authors approved the final version.

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