

15. Language Learning Burnout in University English Preparatory Schools: The Impact of Initial Proficiency and Current Proficiency on Burnout Experience and Intensity¹

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APA: Zabitgil Gülseren, Ö. & Yılmaz, E. H. (2025). Language Learning Burnout in University English Preparatory Schools: The Impact of Initial Proficiency and Current Proficiency on Burnout Experience and Intensity. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, (48), 265-281. **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17452780>

Abstract

This study investigates the prevalence of burnout among students in a university English Preparatory School (EPS) and examines whether initial English background influences burnout intensity. All students completed the same year-long curriculum and academic requirements, but they entered the program with different starting levels of English. One group began with little or no prior knowledge—A1 to B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; beginner to upper-intermediate)—while the other entered with some background—A2/B1 to C1/C1 Plus (elementary/intermediate to advanced/advanced-plus). Burnout was analyzed through the three dimensions of exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficacy. A convergent mixed-methods design was used. Quantitative data came from the Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey (MBI-SS), and qualitative data from semi-structured focus group interviews. Participants were 202 Turkish EFL students completing the final stage of the EPS program. Results showed moderate exhaustion, moderate-to-high cynicism, and relatively high academic efficacy, confirming the presence of burnout across the sample. Statistical analysis revealed no significant differences in burnout levels between students with limited/no prior English knowledge and those with some background, indicating that intensive preparatory programs can produce similar burnout regardless of entry proficiency. These findings highlight the need for proactive measures to reduce emotional strain and support student well-being in EPS contexts.

Keywords: Burnout, Exhaustion; Cynicism; Professional Efficacy; Proficiency Levels; English Preparatory Schools (EPS); English as a Foreign Language EFL; Maslach Burnout Inventory-Student

¹ **Statement (Thesis / Paper):** It is declared that scientific and ethical principles were followed during the preparation process of this study and all the studies utilised are indicated in the bibliography.

Conflict of Interest: No conflict of interest is declared.

Funding: No external funding was used to support this research.

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Source: It is declared that scientific and ethical principles were followed during the preparation of this study and all the studies used are stated in the bibliography

Similarity Report: Received – Turnitin / Rate: %8

Ethics Complaint: editor@rumelide.com

Article Type: Research article, **Article Registration Date:** 15.09.2025-**Acceptance Date:** 27.10.2025-**Publication Date:** 28.10.2025; **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17452780>

Peer Review: Two External Referees / Double Blind

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Survey (MBI-SS)

Üniversite İngilizce Hazırlık Okullarında Dil Öğreniminde Tükenmişlik: Başlangıç Dil Yeterliliği ve Mevcut Dil Yeterliliğinin Tükenmişlik Deneyimi ve Yoğunluğu Üzerindeki Etkisi⁴

Öz

Bu çalışma, bir üniversite İngilizce Hazırlık Okulu'ndaki (İHO) öğrenciler arasında tükenmişliğin yaygınlığını araştırmakta ve başlangıçtaki İngilizce altyapısının tükenmişlik yoğunluğunu etkileyip etkilemediğini incelemektedir. Farklı başlangıç seviyeleriyle hazırlık okuluna gelen tüm öğrenciler bir yıl süreyle tamamen aynı müfredat ve akademik çalışmaları tamamlamaktadırlar. Bir grup çok az ya da hiç ön bilgiye sahip olmadan eğitime başlamış (Diller için Avrupa Ortak Başvuru Çerçevesi [CEFR] A1–B2; başlangıçtan orta-üst seviyeye), diğer grup ise belirli bir geçmiş bilgiyle (A2/B1–C1/C1 Plus; temel/orta seviyeden ileri/ileri-üst seviyeye) hazırlık okuluna dahil olmuştur. Tükenmişlik, **yorgunluk**, **sinizm(cynicism)** ve **mesleki yeterlik** boyutları üzerinden analiz edilmiştir. Çalışmada yakınsayan karma yöntem deseni kullanılmıştır. Nicel veriler **Maslach Tükenmişlik Envanteri–Öğrenci Anketi (MBI-SS)** aracılığıyla, nitel veriler ise yarı yapılandırılmış odak grup görüşmeleriyle toplanmıştır. Katılımcılar, İHO programının son aşamasını tamamlayan **İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen (EFL)** 202 Türk öğrenciden oluşmaktadır. Bulgular, orta düzeyde yorgunluk, orta-üst düzeyde sinizm ve göreceli yüksek akademik yeterlik göstermiş; bu da örneklem genelinde tükenmişliğin varlığını doğrulamıştır. İstatistiksel analiz, sınırlı ya da hiç önceden İngilizce bilgisi olmayan öğrenciler ile belirli bir geçmiş bilgiye sahip olan öğrenciler arasında tükenmişlik seviyeleri açısından anlamlı bir fark olmadığını ortaya koymuştur. Bu da yoğun hazırlık programlarının, giriş yeterlilik düzeyinden bağımsız olarak **öğrencilerde** benzer tükenmişlik düzeyleri üretebileceğini göstermektedir. Bulgular, İHO bağlamlarında öğrencilerin duygusal yükünü azaltmaya ve iyi oluşlarını desteklemeye yönelik proaktif önlemlerin gerekliliğini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Tükenmişlik; Yorgunluk; Alaycılık; Mesleki Yeterlik; Yeterlilik Düzeyleri; İngilizce Hazırlık Okulları (İHO); Yabancı Dil Olarak İngilizce (EFL); Maslach Tükenmişlik Envanteri–Öğrenci Anketi (MBI-SS)

⁴ **Beyan (Tez/ Bildiri):** Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.

Finansman: Bu araştırmayı desteklemek için dış fon kullanılmamıştır.

Telif Hakkı & Lisans: Yazarlar dergide yayınlanan çalışmalarının telif hakkına sahiptirler ve çalışmalarını CC BY-NC 4.0 lisansı altında yayımlanmaktadır.

Kaynak: Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.

Benzerlik Raporu: Alındı – Turnitin / Oran: %8

Etik Şikayeti: editor@rumelide.com

Makale Türü: Araştırma makalesi, **Makale Kayıt Tarihi:** 15.09.2025-**Kabul Tarihi:** 27.10.2025-**Yayın Tarihi:** 28.10.2025; **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17452780>

Hakem Değerlendirmesi: İki Dış Hakem / Çift Taraflı Körleme

1. Introduction

Learning English within a single academic year is demanding for students in university English Preparatory Schools. They must reach the required proficiency level, pass multiple exams, and only then begin their chosen degree programs. The study aims to explore what percentage of EFL learners experience burnout while learning English and whether burnout intensity differs according to their language proficiencies. A clearer understanding of this phenomenon will help educators respond more effectively to students' needs.

The workload of preparatory programs - exams, quizzes, projects, assignments, and mandatory attendance - often produces stress, physical fatigue, and psychological exhaustion. Although students typically start motivated, knowing that completion grants entry to their bachelor's programs, the intensive schedule can erode motivation and lead to late submissions, incomplete assignments, reduced attention, and absenteeism. Different research endeavors to date have examined the burnout phenomenon and explored strategies to address it (Erakman & Mede, 2018), defining the condition as a recurring state of negative feelings, attitudes, and expectations that causes distress and dysfunction. This internal state manifests in varying degrees of distress, discomfort, or dysfunction (Maslach et al., 2008). The degree of mental exhaustion shapes the coping strategies students can or cannot use to sustain their language-learning journey. Early burnout research focused primarily on professionals, but its relevance later extended to students and language learners (Pottage & Huxley, 1996). Psychologically, academic tasks such as attending classes, completing assignments, and preparing for exams can be regarded as forms of "work" (Schaufeli & Taris, 2005).

As research on burnout has evolved, conceptualizations of burnout have shifted from a single internal state to a multidimensional construct with three core components. The first component, exhaustion, refers to physical, psychological, or emotional depletion, often considered the central feature of burnout. The second dimension, depersonalization, reflects a negative or detached response toward others, such as irritability, loss of idealism, and disengagement. The third, reduced personal accomplishment, refers to low self-esteem, diminished productivity, and negative self-perception. Together these dimensions form a comprehensive framework for understanding burnout.

Language learners, particularly those studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL), are especially vulnerable. Frequent assessments, constant exposure to unfamiliar structures, and persistent pressure to achieve proficiency heighten anxiety and apprehension (Jahedizadeh et al., 2015, 2016; Wang et al., 2018, as cited in Karimi & Fallah, 2019). Such conditions can damage both academic performance and overall well-being. Therefore, a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of burnout is essential, as well as the implementation of precautionary measures that support learners in reaching their full potential and reduce the risk of dropout.

The present article focuses on a specific aspect of this challenge: the role of students' prior English knowledge. In the preparatory program examined here, all students complete the same year-long curriculum and face identical academic demands, but they enter with different starting levels. One group begins with little or no English background (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [CEFR] level A1, "beginner") and progresses to B2 ("upper-intermediate"), while another starts with some prior knowledge—A2 ("elementary") or B1 ("intermediate")—and advances to C1 or higher ("advanced/advanced-plus"). Comparing burnout levels between these two groups allows investigation of whether initial English background influences the development of burnout under the same

instructional conditions.

2. Literature review

The origins of burnout research

The concept of burnout, first used as a metaphor for mental exhaustion, emerged in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s to describe professionals in fields such as law, social work, psychology, education, probation, and hospice care (Schaufeli, 2003). Since it was first coined, burnout has been described in various ways. Early definitions emphasized its physical characteristics, but attention gradually shifted to its mental aspects. Herbert Freudenberger (1974), a pioneer in burnout research, highlighted the physical manifestations, describing burnout as a state of exhaustion caused by excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources. Christina Maslach (1982) later expanded the concept to stress its psychological dimensions. Today, burnout is widely understood as a multidimensional syndrome encompassing exhaustion, cynicism (or depersonalization), and reduced professional efficacy. Schaufeli (2003) further characterizes it as a gradual depletion of energy and loss of enthusiasm, reflecting both physical and psychological symptoms.

Herbert Freudenberger and Christina Maslach offered differing perspectives on burnout. This study adopts a multidimensional view that incorporates elements of both physical and psychological spheres. Freudenberger (1974) emphasized a clinical approach, describing burnout as a psychological disorder rooted in personality traits and maladaptive coping patterns (Schaufeli, 2003). Maslach, by contrast, highlighted interpersonal, social, and organizational factors as the main causes. The clinical view dominated early literature and inspired workshops and interventions, but empirical research remained limited until the 1980s, when self-report measures such as the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) advanced the field (Schaufeli, 2003).

Burnout is now widely defined as a psychological condition affecting professionals in fields such as teaching, medicine, and social work. Maslach (1973) described it as emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy, while Freudenberger (1974) called it “the failure, wearing out, or fatigue caused by excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources.” Perlman and Hartman (1982) identified 48 definitions across professions including doctors, daycare providers, and nurses, showing its pervasiveness from young adults to the elderly.

In addition, Gold and Roth (1993) suggested that burnout arises when professional needs and expectations are unmet, causing dissatisfaction and low self-esteem. Most definitions converge on burnout as exhaustion accompanied by despair and hopelessness (Çam, 1992). To understand the concept fully, it is essential to examine the expanded models and theories emerging over the course of time. Thus, theories of burnout unfolded in the course of time to encompass larger tableau.

Theories and models of burnout

Burnout has been examined from multiple theoretical perspectives. Scott Meier (1983) criticized the lack of grounding in early research and proposed a cognitive-behavioral model with three types of steps as: *reinforcement*, *outcomes*, and *self-efficacy* on the personal level. He argued that unmet expectations lead to *negative emotions*, *reduced persistence*, and *ineffective behavior*. Unlike Maslach, Meier treated *emotional exhaustion* as a product of both environmental and personal factors. His 23-item Burnout Assessment (MBA) showed acceptable reliability but relied on overall burnout scores rather than

specific subscales. From a different perspective, Cherniss (1991), interpreted burnout as a *defense mechanism* against chronic occupational stress, marked by psychological disengagement. He emphasized that not all individuals under stress experience burnout since effective stress-management strategies can serve as protective factors. Relaxation techniques may help reduce stress but do not fully address burnout caused by persistent exposure (Leiter, 1991).

Another novel perspective came from Edelwich and Brodsky (1980) who proposed a developmental model with four stages—*enthusiasm, stagnation, frustration, and apathy*—showing how initial high expectations can erode through heavy workloads, limited resources, and inadequate recognition. Perlman and Hartman (1982) likewise described burnout as a *chronic stress response* involving emotional and physical exhaustion, declining performance, and behavioral withdrawal, underscoring the interaction of internal and external factors.

Maslach (1982) defined burnout as a state in which highly motivated individuals become overwhelmed by stress, diminishing their ability to contribute meaningfully. This perspective is notable because both strong and weak motivations are prone to influence as circumstances change. Later, Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001) refined this perspective, leading to the development of the *Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)*. The MBI remains the most widely used tool for measuring burnout, distinguishing it from related constructs such as stress, dissatisfaction, and depression (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Stress may be temporary, which is a common occurrence, but prolonged stress can lead to burnout (Gold & Roth, 1993). Through extensive research, Maslach and colleagues extended the concept beyond human service workers to employees in many sectors (Maslach et al., 2001) and identified three interrelated components:

Exhaustion: mental and physical fatigue caused by sustained stress.

Cynicism: psychological detachment or withdrawal as a coping response to exhaustion.

Reduced professional efficacy: decreased confidence in one's own abilities, often resulting from exhaustion and cynicism.

These components form the burnout dimensions measured by the MBI, described in the next section. Burnout is typically indicated by high exhaustion and cynicism scores combined with low professional efficacy (Schaufeli, Martínez et al., 2002). The MBI has since been adapted for diverse settings, resulting in four versions: Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS), Educators Survey (MBI-ES), General Survey (MBI-GS), and Student Survey (MBI-SS).

Dimensions of burnout

Despite varied definitions, Maslach et al., 2008 identify three core dimensions central to burnout research:

1. *Exhaustion:* a sense of being worn out, depleted, or emotionally drained. Emotional exhaustion is often regarded as the *core feature* of burnout, undermining both cognitive and physical functioning (Yilmaz, 2013; Güven, 2013).
2. *Depersonalization (Cynicism):* A negative shift in attitudes toward others, characterized by irritability, disengagement, and emotional detachment. Dinç (2008) described depersonalization as a coping mechanism in which individuals distance themselves from those they serve. Initially protective, it can over time deepen into coldness, indifference, and

isolation.

3. *Reduced Personal Accomplishment /Reduced Professional Efficacy*: negative self-appraisals, feelings of failure, and low self-esteem that may lead to guilt, diminished morale, or in severe cases, even depression (Yılmaz, 2013).

These three dimensions are closely intertwined, forming a knot that is difficult to untangle. Exhaustion reflects physical and emotional depletion, showing the association between mental and physical well-being. Cynicism brings a detached or negative attitude toward tasks, responsibilities, and peers, and fosters isolation and gradual eradication of competence and productivity. As a result, reduced professional efficacy follows, marked by negative evaluations of one's abilities. Together these dimensions provide a comprehensive model for assessing burnout (Maslach et al., 2008), illustrating a downward spiral that weakens physical, mental, and social capacities. Educators must therefore recognize signs of burnout and take precautionary measures to help learners regain their former strength.

Burnout in EFL

Research shows that burnout significantly affects language learners. Wang et al. (2018) found that language learner burnout undermines motivation, persistence, and overall achievement. Likewise, Jahedizadeh et al. (2015) reported that EFL students often experience high levels of exhaustion and cynicism, limiting their engagement in learning activities. Together, these findings indicate that burnout is a critical factor altering both academic success and the emotional well-being of language learners.

Although initially examined in professional settings, burnout is also relevant to academic environments (Schaufeli & Taris, 2005), particularly intensive language programs. Students in such contexts face structured, mandatory tasks—lectures, assignments, and frequent examinations—and prolonged exposure to these demands can lead to academic burnout, characterized by exhaustion, cynicism toward schoolwork, and a sense of inefficacy (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Contributing factors include overcrowded classrooms, excessive workloads, limited support, and uncertainty about post-graduation prospects (Neumann et al., 1990). These conditions closely mirror those of university English Preparatory Schools (EPS), where constant deadlines for tests, submissions, and presentations challenge even highly motivated students and can erode their readiness during the course of one-year long intensive language learning.

Common symptoms of burnout include chronic fatigue, disengagement, increased absenteeism, and diminished motivation (Zhang, Gan, & Cham, 2007). Academic burnout can also lead to serious psychological and physical health problems (McCarthy et al., 1990), underscoring the need for continued research of burnout experience. EFL learners/language learners are particularly vulnerable due to the unique challenges of foreign language learning. Constant testing, linguistic insecurity, and pressure to achieve language proficiency can lead to anxiety and negative emotional states (Fallah, 2017; Khodadady & Khajavy, 2013, as cited in Karimi & Fallah, 2019). These factors raise affective filters, hinder performance, and threaten overall well-being (Horwitz et al., 2010). Addressing burnout among language learners, especially in preparatory schools, is therefore essential.

Foreign language learning places additional demands on students, particularly in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). Students must master new linguistic structures, vocabulary, and cultural elements while meeting academic expectations, a combination that heightens stress and burnout (Jahedizadeh et al., 2016). According to Karimi and Fallah (2019), EFL students are

especially at risk due to repeated evaluations, language anxiety, and fear of failure. Although burnout in educational and EFL contexts has been widely studied (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Seibt et al., 2021), few studies have examined how it varies across proficiency levels. Evidence is mixed: higher-proficiency students may experience less anxiety and greater confidence, buffering against burnout (Khajavy et al., 2018; Dewaele & Macntyre, 2014), while advanced learners may face increased pressure and expectations that heighten risk (Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2014).

Time spent is yet another variable on the program may also influence burnout. Students at the beginning of their language-learning journey are less prone to burnout than those who have spent a full year in the system, whether they have met their language goals or not (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Yang, 2021). Yet, the findings about the impact of proficiency on burnout experience remain inconclusive. Some studies indicate that proficiency has little to no impact on burnout, highlighting the need for further research in this area (Horwitz, 2017; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004).

This study aims to address the knowledge gap on burnout in English preparatory schools. Educators should examine contextual factors such as different language proficiency levels, the number of success or failure experiences by learners, amount of workload, or other personal obligations surrounding learners in English preparatory schools (Seibt et al., 2021; Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2014).

3. Methodology

Research design

This study employed a convergent design, collecting quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the topic. The two data sets were analyzed independently with equal weight and then merged for interpretation. In the first phase, the Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey (MBI-SS) provided quantitative data; in the second, semi-structured focus group interviews supplied qualitative insights.

Participants

The sample consisted of 202 Turkish EFL students in the final stage of the English Preparatory School (EPS) at a foundation university in İstanbul. Although participants were grouped by exit proficiency, these groupings also reflected their amount of prior English knowledge at entry.

Limited/No Background Group: 110 students who began the program at CEFR A1 (beginner) and progressed to B2 (upper-intermediate) within eight months.

Some Background Group: 92 students who entered with prior English knowledge—45 at A2 (elementary) and 52 at B1 (intermediate)—and advanced to C1 or higher (advanced/advanced-plus) in the same period.

Despite different starting points, all students followed the same year-long curriculum, assessments, and attendance requirements. Participants were 18–22 years old.

Data collection

For the quantitative phase, The Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey (MBI–SS) is used. It is a well-established and dependable instrument used to assess burnout among students. Its construct-related validity and reliability have been verified in various research contexts worldwide (Maroco & Bonini Campos, 2012; Schaufeli et al., 2002). The Turkish version of the MBI–SS, adapted and validated by Çapri et al. (2011) with a sample of 782 university students, preserves the original three-factor structure of Exhaustion, Cynicism, and Academic Efficacy. In this version, exhaustion is measured by five items, cynicism by four items, and academic efficacy by four items. Following Ergin’s (1992) adaptation for Turkish use, the original 7-point response format was replaced with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Never (1) to Always (5). Consequently, the present study employed this 5-point frequency-based format. Higher scores on the exhaustion and cynicism subscales and lower scores on academic efficacy indicate greater levels of burnout (Schaufeli, Martínez et al., 2002). The survey consisted of two main parts: the first section included brief demographic questions (e.g., gender, residence, and years of English learning), while the second part comprised the 13 items of the Turkish MBI–SS. Although demographic information was collected, it was used solely to describe the sample and not included in the statistical analyses. The three-factor structure of the Turkish version of the MBI–SS (Exhaustion, Cynicism, and Academic Efficacy) has been previously confirmed through confirmatory factor analysis (Çapri et al., 2011), and the same structure was retained in this study.

For the qualitative phase, Focus Group Interviews are used. Three focus groups were conducted with volunteers from the B2, C1, and C1 Plus levels. Each group included six to seven students, aligning with recommended sizes for effective discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Before the interviews, participants completed a brief open-ended questionnaire based on the MBI–SS to encourage reflection on burnout and to prepare them for discussion. This step also enabled the researcher to confirm and elaborate on themes that emerged during the interviews.

Data analysis

Quantitative data from the Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey (MBI–SS) were analyzed in SPSS version 25. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies) summarized burnout scores for the three subscales—exhaustion, cynicism, and academic efficacy.

Reliability analysis. Internal consistency in the present sample was satisfactory for all MBI–SS subscales. Cronbach’s α and McDonald’s ω coefficients were calculated for each dimension: **Exhaustion** ($\alpha = .82$, $\omega = .88$, $k = 4$), **Cynicism** ($\alpha = .84$, $\omega = .89$, $k = 5$), and **Academic Efficacy** ($\alpha = .69$, $\omega = .81$, $k = 4$). These values indicate good reliability for exhaustion and cynicism and acceptable reliability for academic efficacy.

To test for differences, an independent-samples *t*-test compared students who entered the program with limited or no prior English knowledge ($A_1 \rightarrow B_2$) and those with some prior knowledge ($A_2/B_1 \rightarrow C_1/C_1$ Plus). Normality and homogeneity of variance assumptions were checked and met before analysis, and statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. Normality was evaluated using Shapiro–Wilk tests ($p > .05$ for all subscales) and visual inspection of Q–Q plots, which showed approximately linear distributions. Levene’s tests also confirmed homogeneity of variances across groups ($p > .05$). These results indicated that the assumptions for *t*-tests were met.

Qualitative data from semi-structured focus group interviews were examined thematically following Miles and Huberman's (1994) three-stage model of data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing to enrich interpretation of the quantitative results.

In this mixed-methods study, the quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during the interpretation stage to provide a deeper understanding of burnout. Focus group questions were designed around the three burnout dimensions of the MBI-SS and aimed to clarify the quantitative trends. A hybrid coding approach was used: main themes were derived deductively from the MBI-SS subscales, while new subthemes were identified inductively from participants' statements. To ensure reliability, two researchers coded a sample of the data independently and reached 88% agreement, after which the full dataset was coded using the finalized codebook.

4. Results

Quantitative findings

Descriptive statistics showed similar burnout levels across groups. Independent-samples t-tests compared students with limited/no prior English knowledge (A1→B2) and those with some prior knowledge (A2/B1→C1/C1 Plus) on the three subscales of the MBI-SS. No significant group differences emerged for exhaustion, cynicism, or academic efficacy ($p > .05$ for all comparisons), indicating that starting English background did not affect burnout levels after the yearlong program.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for burnout scores on the three Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey (MBI-SS) subscales—exhaustion, cynicism, and academic efficacy—for the two comparison groups.

The limited/no prior English knowledge group (students who began at CEFR A1 and completed the program at B2) and some prior knowledge group (students who began at A2 or B1 and completed at C1/C1 Plus) followed the same year-long curriculum and assessment requirements. Descriptive statistics showed that mean scores for both groups were closely aligned across all three dimensions of burnout. Overall, students in both groups reported moderate exhaustion, moderate-to-high cynicism, and relatively high academic efficacy, indicating that feelings of fatigue and detachment were present but that students generally maintained confidence in their academic abilities.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for burnout subscales by students' English background (limited/no background vs. some background)

Subscale	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE Mean
Exhaustion	B2	110	2.91	0.86	0.09
	C1/C1+	92	2.88	0.84	0.09
Cynicism	B2	110	2.47	0.81	0.08
	C1/C1+	92	2.42	0.79	0.08
Professional Efficacy	B2	110	3.12	0.65	0.07
	C1/C1+	92	3.26	0.61	0.06

Note. Values represent mean burnout scores for each subscale of the MBI–SS. Higher scores on Exhaustion and Cynicism and lower scores on Professional Efficacy indicate greater burnout.

The comparison of students with limited or no prior English knowledge (B2 group) and those with some prior knowledge (combined C1/C1 Plus group) showed very similar burnout profiles across all three dimensions of the Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey. Descriptive statistics revealed nearly identical mean scores for exhaustion (B2 $M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.95$; C1/C1 Plus $M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.90$) and cynicism (B2 $M = 2.67$, $SD = 0.89$; C1/C1 Plus $M = 2.57$, $SD = 0.91$). Professional efficacy was slightly higher in the C1/C1 Plus group ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.50$) than in the B2 group ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.53$), but this difference was not statistically significant. Independent-samples t -tests confirmed no significant differences between the two groups in any dimension ($p > .05$). These findings indicate that, despite entering the program with different levels of English background, students in both groups experienced comparable levels of exhaustion, cynicism, and academic efficacy by the end of the year-long preparatory school.

Inferential analysis

To test for group differences, independent-samples t -tests compared the two groups on each subscale. Assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were checked and met. As shown in Table 2, no significant differences emerged between groups on exhaustion, cynicism, or academic efficacy ($p > .05$ for all comparisons).

Table 2. Independent-samples t -test results comparing burnout subscales by students' English background (limited/no background vs. some background)

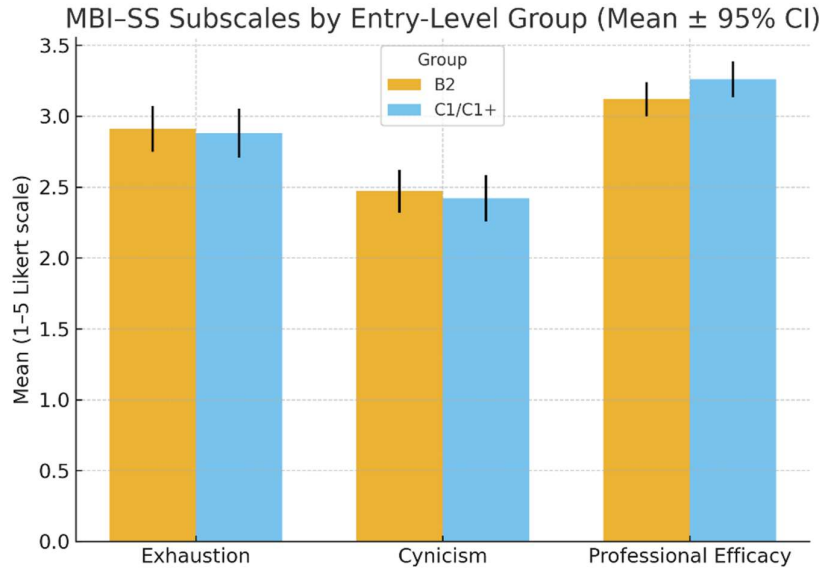
Subscale	t (200)	p	Levene's p	Cohen's d	95% CI for d	Interpretation
Exhaustion	0.09	.933	.363	0.01	[-0.27, 0.29]	Negligible
Cynicism	0.80	.425	.740	0.11	[-0.17, 0.39]	Negligible
Professional Efficacy	-1.77	.079	.365	-0.25	[-0.53, 0.03]	Small (C1/C1+ higher)

Note. Positive d values indicate higher scores for the B2 group; negative values indicate higher scores for the C1/C1+ group. Effect sizes were interpreted following Cohen's (1988) conventions ($d = 0.2$ small, 0.5 medium, 0.8 large).

The independent-samples t -tests showed no statistically significant differences between the two groups on **Exhaustion** ($t(200) = 0.09$, $p = .933$) and **Cynicism** ($t(200) = 0.80$, $p = .425$). For **Professional Efficacy**, the difference approached significance ($t(200) = -1.77$, $p = .079$), indicating a small effect in favor of the C1/C1+ group ($d = -.25$, 95% CI [-0.53, .03]). Overall, the effect sizes were small ($|d| \leq .25$), suggesting negligible practical differences between the groups.

As shown in Figure 1, mean differences between the two groups were minimal across all three subscales.

Figure 1. Mean scores and 95% confidence intervals for the MBI–SS subscales across groups (B2 and C1/C1+).



Qualitative findings

B2 students

Focus-group interviews with the B2 group (students who began the program with little or no prior English) revealed themes that reinforced the survey data. Across all three burnout dimensions, students described persistent fatigue and mental strain, citing the long hours, heavy homework load, and difficulty managing time. Many said the year-long program “consumes so much of our time” and leaves them “exhausted and very tired” by day’s end. Motivation to attend classes often depended on external factors—family encouragement, social life, and especially teacher influence—while early skepticism about the program frequently gave way to recognition of its benefits.

In terms of cynicism, students voiced mixed feelings. Some worried about the program’s relentless focus on English and the monotony of coursework (“I feel like I’m turning into a robot”), yet others appreciated the discipline and saw clear gains in fluency and writing. These views point to a moderate level of detachment, consistent with the quantitative cynicism scores.

Perceptions of academic efficacy were also varied. Several participants expressed confidence in their problem-solving skills and active class participation, while others questioned whether high grades truly reflected their ability or felt unsure about readiness for departmental studies. A few admitted concerns that their English might still be inadequate, but many highlighted the “solid foundation” the program provided and felt optimistic about succeeding in their future coursework.

Overall, the qualitative data portrays B2 students as physically and mentally taxed yet generally confident in their academic growth, with moments of doubt and monotony balanced by recognition of

real language gains—closely mirroring the moderate exhaustion, moderate cynicism, and relatively high academic-efficacy levels found in the survey.

C1/C1 Plus students

Across both C1 and C1 Plus groups, students described high levels of physical and mental fatigue, even though survey data suggested only moderate exhaustion. Many spoke of the intensity and pace of the year-long language program (EPS), saying that the heavy workload and long days left them “tired,” “sleepy,” or eager for the day to end. Yet, several students balanced this with a sense of growth and accomplishment, noting that the demanding schedule ultimately improved their skills and confidence. Motivation to keep attending classes stemmed from personal responsibility, future goals, and social support from classmates and teachers, which helped them overcome morning fatigue.

Feelings about the value of the English Preparatory School (EPS) were mixed. Some students reported an initial enthusiasm followed by a gradual decline, citing monotony, the repetitive nature of assignments, or the relentless English-only focus as demotivating. Others experienced the opposite trajectory, saying their interest and engagement increased as their proficiency grew and as they developed stronger writing and speaking skills. Many highlighted the practical usefulness of English—for university studies, technology, and daily life—as a reason their overall cynicism remained low to moderate despite moments of boredom.

Both groups expressed generally high confidence in their academic abilities by the end of the program. Students spoke of significant progress in presentations, writing, and independent study skills, often crediting teacher support and the program’s rigorous projects. They felt the preparatory year of EPS provided a solid English foundation and transferable academic skills, leaving them well prepared for department level English. While a few described themselves as “average students,” most voiced strong self-belief and readiness to handle the challenges of their upcoming majors.

Summary of findings

Descriptively, students who began with limited/no prior English (B2; A1→B2) and those with some prior knowledge (combined C1/C1 Plus; A2/B1→C1/C1 Plus) reported similar burnout profiles: moderate exhaustion, moderate-to-high cynicism, and relatively high academic efficacy. Inferential tests (independent-samples t-tests) showed no significant group differences on exhaustion, cynicism, or academic efficacy ($p > .05$ for all), indicating that initial English background did not influence burnout levels by the end of the year-long English curriculum at EPS. Qualitative findings from both groups converged with the survey results: students described sustained fatigue due to the EPS’ intensity, mixed but generally low-to-moderate cynicism tempered by recognition of practical gains, and strong academic efficacy, citing improved writing, speaking, and study skills and the supportive role of instructors and peers. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative strands suggest that program demands, rather than entry proficiency, shaped students’ burnout experiences, while teacher support and perceived utility of English functioned as protective factors.

5. Discussion

Interpretation of findings

This study set out to determine whether students’ initial English background affected the intensity of

burnout after completing a one-year university English Preparatory School (EPS) program. Using a convergent mixed-methods design, we compared students who began the program with little or no prior English (A1→B2) to those who entered with some background (A2/B1→C1/C1 Plus). Across the three dimensions of burnout—exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficacy, our findings showed no statistically significant differences between the two groups. Qualitative data reinforced these results, revealing similar patterns of fatigue, mixed attitudes toward coursework, and generally strong academic efficacy in both groups.

The lack of significant differences between the B2 and C1/C1+ groups may be explained by several contextual factors. Both groups completed the same intensive English program, sharing identical schedules, instructors, and assessment procedures. This program homogeneity likely minimized differences that might have otherwise emerged between students with different starting proficiency levels. The timing of data collection may also have influenced the results, as the study was conducted at the end of a long and demanding academic year when most students were physically and mentally tired. Finally, a possible ceiling effect may have limited observable differences between groups, since both reported relatively high academic efficacy and moderate levels of burnout. In other words, because many students scored toward the upper end of the scale on efficacy, there was little remaining variation to produce statistically significant group differences.

Relationship to previous research

The lack of significant differences aligns with earlier studies suggesting that language proficiency alone does not reliably predict burnout (Horwitz, 2017; Matsuda & Gobel, 2004). Both groups in this study endured the same intensive schedule of lectures, assignments, and assessments, which appears to have outweighed any protective effect of entering with stronger English skills. This supports Schaufeli and Taris's (2005) argument that the academic environment—its workload, pace, and performance pressures—functions much like a workplace in generating burnout. While some research has found that higher proficiency can buffer anxiety (Khajavy et al., 2018), our results indicate that the uniform program demands and year-long exposure to stressors were more decisive than entry-level proficiency.

Insights from the qualitative data

Focus-group interviews provided nuance to these quantitative findings. Students in both groups described sustained physical and mental fatigue, reflecting the “exhaustion” core of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). Yet, many simultaneously reported growth and a sense of accomplishment, highlighting the dual nature of intensive language study. Cynicism was present but generally moderate: some students complained of monotony and the relentless English-only environment, while others became more engaged as their skills improved. Importantly, nearly all participants emphasized the practical value of English and credited supportive instructors and peers, which appeared to buffer against deeper detachment and inefficacy.

Implications for English preparatory programs

The results suggest that program design and learning environment, rather than students' starting proficiency, are critical in shaping burnout. Administrators should therefore focus on structural support that benefits all learners. The findings point to several strategies that English Preparatory Programs can adopt to help reduce student burnout and sustain motivation:

- **Balance academic workload:** spread exams, writing assignments, and projects more evenly across the semester to prevent excessive pressure at the end of the term. Teachers can also coordinate deadlines across courses to avoid overlapping major tasks.
- **Diversify learning tasks:** include more variety such as speaking projects, short debates, reflective journals, and technology-based activities to break routine and increase engagement. Alternating individual and group tasks may also help students feel more involved.
- **Support teacher professional development:** organize regular PD workshops on recognizing early signs of student stress, giving motivational feedback, and using classroom communication that fosters emotional safety. Teachers who are aware of burnout symptoms can respond more sensitively to students' needs.

These small but systematic adjustments in course design and teacher training could help students maintain focus, motivation, and emotional balance throughout intensive preparatory programs.

Limitations and future research

This study was conducted in a single foundation university in Turkey, which may limit generalizability to other institutional contexts. Burnout was measured only at the end of the program; longitudinal data could clarify how symptoms develop over time. Additionally, while focus groups enriched interpretation, individual interviews or diary studies might reveal more private experiences of stress and coping. Future research could control for potential confounding variables such as gender, socioeconomic status, absenteeism, and working hours through multivariate regression or ANCOVA models. Including these predictors would help determine whether the observed burnout patterns are independent of demographic or behavioral differences. For example, controlling for gender or part-time work experience could reveal whether these factors moderate the relationship between language proficiency and burnout intensity.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to determine whether the starting level of English proficiency shapes burnout among students completing a one-year university English Preparatory School (EPS) program. Despite entering with markedly different backgrounds—some beginning with little or no English (A1→B2) and others with prior knowledge (A2/B1→C1/C1 Plus)—students finished the program with strikingly similar burnout profiles. Both groups reported moderate exhaustion, moderate-to-high cynicism, and relatively high academic efficacy, and independent-samples t-tests confirmed that none of these differences were statistically significant. The message is clear; it is the intensity of the program, not the starting point of the learner in terms of language proficiency, that drives burnout. A heavy workload, relentless pace, and continual assessments exert the same emotional and physical toll on all students, regardless of how much English they knew at the outset. At the same time, consistently high scores for academic efficacy and strong qualitative evidence of teacher support highlight powerful protective factors that help students maintain confidence and perseverance. Language educators and learning contexts should build supportive learning environments and create a community of learners to lift each other in need. Apart from the language educators, these findings are a call to action for administrators and policy makers. Efforts to safeguard student well-being should focus less on sorting out learners by proficiency levels and more on system-wide renovations: balanced scheduling, manageable homework loads, built-in

stress-management support, and professional development that equips teachers to sustain motivation throughout the year. Hence, future research should extend these insights by tracking burnout longitudinally and testing targeted interventions that reduce fatigue while preserving academic rigor. Addressing burnout proactively is not simply a matter of student comfort; it is essential to protecting learning outcomes and ensuring that intensive English programs such as EPS remain both effective and humane.

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