



Personal factors and teacher stress: implications for EFL lecturers in higher education

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Abstract

While much of the existing literature on teacher stress has traditionally focused on institutional pressures such as workload, student performance, and administrative demands, there is a growing recognition that personal circumstances significantly influence how stress is experienced and managed by university lecturers. This review synthesizes key findings from international studies to examine how marital status, caregiving responsibilities, personality traits, and gendered cultural expectations, acting as both significant sources of strain and potential buffers, impact EFL teacher stress levels. In addition, it was found that the sustained stress resulted in severe consequences, including increased burnout, declining job satisfaction, negative impacts on students' learning outcomes, and alarmingly high turnover rates. Based on the findings, some strategies to enhance EFL teacher well-being in higher education will be provided for the reference of instructors and institutions.

Keywords: *EFL teacher stress, EFL teacher well-being, job satisfaction, personal factors/circumstances, students' learning outcomes*

I. INTRODUCTION

Stress is a significant aspect of the modern lifestyle, and in many nations today, workers often find their jobs to be more stressful than they were in the past. According to Selye [1], a completely stress-free life is neither possible nor desirable, and a healthy dose of tension and stress can serve as a motivator and improve productivity at work. Stress may inspire us when it remains within healthy bounds. It pushes us to prepare, to focus, to improve. Yet extreme stress seems to cause bodily discomfort and misery [2]. It also turns destructive, leading to exhaustion, disengagement, and burnout [3].

Teachers in the teaching profession, particularly those who teach English as a foreign language (EFL), frequently endure significant levels of stress. Colleges, students, and society are putting more pressure and expectations on instructors. As stated by Kyriacou [4], teaching is just as stressful as being a police officer, a jail guard, an air traffic controller, a doctor, or a nurse. EFL

<https://doi.org/10.65153/g6xvr503>

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teachers' work-related stress can be a significant contributor to various health issues, which can then have a negative impact on students and society. Consequently, identifying the causes of work-related stress and addressing the problem will help accelerate the learning process and support the teaching community in maintaining their well-being.

Stress among university instructors can be significantly influenced by various factors. Although institutional pressures, such as workload, student performance, and administrative demands, have been the subject of significant international research recently, there is growing recognition that personal circumstances also have a substantial impact on how university lecturers experience and manage stress. Family responsibilities, caregiving duties, personality traits, coping mechanisms, and gendered cultural norms are a few examples of these individual-level impacts. Nevertheless, there remains a dearth of research that methodically summarizes these individual stressors among EFL instructors in higher education.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a narrative literature review approach to examine existing research on personal factors contributing to stress among EFL lecturers and explores their mechanisms of influence. Since stress and professional performance are closely intertwined [5], some methods to improve the well-being of EFL teachers in higher education will be offered for instructors' and institutions' reference, based on the findings.

The reviewed literature was drawn from established academic sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and selected review studies indexed in databases such as Google Scholar. The selection primarily focused on studies published from the early 2000s to 2025 that examined stress, coping, and related personal characteristics among teachers, lecturers, or closely related educational professionals. While research specifically targeting EFL lecturers was prioritized, studies on teachers were also included where theoretical frameworks or empirical findings were relevant and transferable to the EFL higher education context.

In this review, the term “EFL lecturer(s)” refers to instructor(s) who teach EFL in higher education settings, where English is not the primary language. Although the review prioritizes studies conducted with university-level EFL lecturers, relevant research involving school-level educators is also referenced where appropriate. Rather than suggesting direct equivalence across educational levels or instructional environments, these studies are used to shed light on broadly

<https://doi.org/10.65153/g6xvr503>

Journal of Science and Technology of East Asia University of Technology



equivalent emotional and psychological processes, such as stress evaluation, emotional regulation, and coping styles.

II. PERSONAL STRESSORS

2.1 Marital status

The relationship between marital status and teacher stress is complex. Some studies, including those by [6], suggest that marital status may not have a statistically significant effect. However, other research indicates that being married can increase perceived stress, especially when teachers struggle to balance work and family demands [7;8]. Many married EFL instructors bear this invisible emotional burden, particularly those with dependent children. They often juggle multiple roles, including caregiver, researcher, spouse, teacher, and parent.

From a mechanistic perspective, marital status influences stress primarily through role strain and role overload. The simultaneous demands of work and family increase cognitive and emotional load, limit opportunities for psychological detachment from work-related stressors, and reduce time available for recovery. Over time, sustained role multiplicity may lead to chronic emotional tension and heightened vulnerability to stress and emotional exhaustion.

As Poloski and Bogdanic [7] note, marital status is not merely a demographic factor. It is an emotional context that shapes how stress is experienced. Taken together, existing evidence suggests that marital status may be an important personal factor associated with workplace stress among EFL lecturers, particularly in contexts characterized by strong work-family role demands.

I.2 Caregiving responsibilities - Genders - Cultural expectations

Caregiving responsibilities are a significant source of stress for EFL lecturers, particularly in sociocultural contexts where caregiving roles are strongly gendered. In many Asian societies, including Vietnam, it is still widely believed that women should be the primary caregivers. Xian qi liang mu, meaning "a virtuous wife and caring mother," is a cherished yet heavy ideal in Chinese culture. Similar ideas are also subtly reinforced by societal norms in Vietnam. As a result, female lecturers often bear a larger share of household and childcare responsibilities in addition to their academic work [9; 10; 11]. For example, research during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that female faculty members with young children reported much higher stress. At one U.S. university,

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60% of women, compared to 49% of men, said their stress increased significantly due to caregiving and work demands [12]. As Moen and Roehling [13] explain, women in their 30s often face rising professional expectations while family responsibilities peak. When eldercare duties, such as supporting aging parents, are added, the pressure can become overwhelming [14].

Researchers note that caregiving responsibilities influence stress through the Family-to-Work spillover process, in which family obligations intersect with career responsibilities. This spillover constrains lecturers' ability to psychologically disengage from stressors, shortens recovery time, and undermines emotional regulation. Long-term exposure to this stress may lead to emotional exhaustion, declines in overall well-being, and increased susceptibility to burnout. Studies have shown that female academics with heavy caregiving responsibilities often report reduced research time, lower productivity, and increased emotional fatigue [15; 16].

But to be clear, this is not just a woman's issue. Some studies, such as Sun and Dapat [17], have found that in certain contexts, male EFL professors report higher overall job stress than their female colleagues. A study in Nigeria reported that male lecturers perceived stress differently from female lecturers, indicating a gender difference in stress perception [18]. However, empirical evidence specifically addressing family-related stressors among male lecturers remains limited [18], underscoring the need for further research.

It is clear that gendered and cultural expectations strongly shape how teachers experience and cope with stress. Female lecturers, especially mothers, often face what is known as a "double shift": professional work during the day and domestic work at night, which, over time, can increase the risk of emotional exhaustion.

I.3 Personality traits and Coping mechanisms

Not every stressor originates in the external world. Some stem from teachers' personalities, thought processes, and coping mechanisms.

Perfectionism, often regarded as a virtue in academia, is one such personality-related factor. However, perfectionism has two distinct facets. Self-critical perfectionism, characterized by a persistent fear of failure or self-doubt, has been associated with higher stress levels and emotional exhaustion [19]. Conversely, perfectionistic aspirations combined with high self-efficacy and



perceived control may contribute to greater resilience and lower stress [20]. At the individual level, maladaptive perfectionism may intensify stress by amplifying self-evaluative pressure and emotional reactivity, whereas more adaptive forms of perfectionism tend to support a sense of competence and emotional regulation. Accordingly, the influence of perfectionism on stress depends not only on high standards but also on how these standards are cognitively and emotionally managed.

Coping mechanisms further shape lecturers' experiences of stress by determining how stressors are addressed or avoided. Prior research distinguishes between active (problem-focused) and passive (avoidant) coping [21]. Active coping involves planning, problem-solving, and reframing challenges in a positive, constructive manner. Lecturers who adopt an active coping style tend to show higher engagement and emotional resilience. Passive coping strategies, such as avoidance or withdrawal, delay stress resolution and prolong emotional arousal, thereby increasing vulnerability to anxiety, disengagement, and emotional exhaustion. Coping styles influence whether situational stressors are effectively managed or gradually develop into chronic stress.

These findings suggest that personality traits and coping mechanisms mediate the relationship between stressors and stress-related outcomes among EFL lecturers. Individual differences in perfectionism and coping styles shape stress appraisal and emotional regulation processes, thereby influencing lecturers' susceptibility to sustained stress.

II. CONSEQUENCES OF TEACHER STRESS

Teacher stress does not exist in isolation. It affects how educators instruct, how learners acquire knowledge, and how organizations operate. To put it another way, stress has the power to subtly influence every aspect of education, from the classroom to the university system. In this review, the consequences are considered at two levels: their effect on teaching and learning, and their longer-term implications for burnout and institutional functioning.

3.1 Effects on teaching and learning

Research indicates that elevated stress among lecturers may undermine effective teaching by intensifying negative emotional states, such as frustration, anxiety, and emotional fatigue, as reported by Collie et al. [22] and Khan et al. [23]. When EFL lecturers experience sustained



emotional exhaustion, they may struggle to maintain patience, creativity, and responsiveness in classroom interactions. Teaching may consequently become less engaging, emotionally detached, and more mechanical.

Empirical studies suggest that prolonged stress may lead to more negative work-related attitudes. For example, Mariani et al. [24] found that instructors who experience ongoing stress tend to adopt a more pessimistic attitude toward their work. As stress accumulates, teaching practices may become increasingly routine and emotionally detached, diminishing lecturers' sense of fulfillment and potentially affecting students' classroom experiences. Overall, existing research suggests that stress among EFL lecturers can indirectly influence teaching quality and learning processes through emotional regulation, motivation, and instructional engagement.

II.2 Burnout and its consequences

Burnout is a more severe and cumulative consequence of prolonged occupational stress. According to Cunningham [25], burnout is characterized by physical, emotional, and mental fatigue and is triggered by prolonged exposure to work-related stress. Johnson et al.'s additional study [26] supports the idea that long-term stress eventually leads to emotional exhaustion and disengagement. In higher education, teaching is often identified as a profession with heightened vulnerability to burnout due to its emotional, cognitive, and relational demands [27].

As burnout develops, lecturers' connection to work, and often their sense of purpose, begins to weaken. Burnout can lead people to emotionally and cognitively distance themselves from their work, as Maslach and Leiter [28] explain, resulting in a loss of motivation and energy. For EFL lecturers, such disengagement can affect not only their teaching performance but also their long-term commitment to the profession, thereby increasing the likelihood of job attrition.

At a broader level, burnout among lecturers carries institutional consequences. Weng and Xi [29] demonstrate that high turnover not only lowers staff morale but also increases recruitment and training costs. The departure of experienced lecturers may disrupt mentoring relationships, weaken instructional continuity, and undermine institutional stability. Similarly, Redding and Henry [30] found that losing a teacher midyear can significantly disrupt learning consistency and educational quality, particularly in skill-based courses such as language teaching. Beyond these practical costs,



there is also an invisible toll, a decline in the emotional climate of the institution. When colleagues are constantly leaving or disengaged, team spirit and collaboration weaken. For this reason, teacher well-being should be regarded as an organizational priority, not merely a personal matter. If lecturers are emotionally healthy, the institution thrives; if they are not, the entire system suffers. Thus, teacher well-being is not only a matter of individual survival but also a form of institutional sustainability.

To enhance the systematicity and clarity of the literature review, Table 1 provides a concise summary of the key studies examined in this review.

Table 1. Summary of Key Studies on Personal Stressors and Consequences among EFL Lecturers

No.	Author(s)	Year	Context	Focus	Key Findings
1.	Selye	1976	Stress theory	Nature of stress	Moderate stress can be motivating; prolonged stress becomes harmful.
2.	Kyriacou	2010	Teachers	Teacher stress	Teaching is among the most stressful professions.
3.	Erden et al.	2023	Teachers (meta-analysis)	Marital status and stress	Effects of marital status on stress are context-dependent.
4.	Thébaud et al.	2024	University faculty	Caregiving and stress	Female faculty reported higher caregiving-related stress.
5.	Sun & Daphat	2024	Chinese EFL lecturers	Job stress	Male EFL lecturers reported high stress in some contexts.
6.	Stoeber & Rennert	2008	Teachers	Perfectionism	Self-critical perfectionism is associated with increased stress and burnout.
7.	Nazari et al.	2023	EFL teachers	Coping strategies	Active coping reduces stress; avoidance increases exhaustion.
8.	Collie et al.	2012	Teachers	Teaching outcomes	Stress undermines teaching efficacy and engagement.



9.	Cunningham	1983	Teachers	Burnout	Burnout results from prolonged occupational stress.
10.	Maslach & Leiter	2016	Education & Care professions	Burnout	Burnout leads to disengagement and loss of meaning.
11.	Redding & Henry	2018	Teachers	Turnover	Stress-related attrition disrupts teaching continuity.

III. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Stress will always be a part of life and teaching, but how individuals and institutions handle it will determine whether it becomes a transformative or destructive force.

4.1 Individual strategies

University EFL instructors may benefit from proactively developing coping mechanisms and self-care strategies to manage personal stress more effectively. Previous studies have shown that mindfulness-based interventions, such as yoga, deep breathing, and meditation, significantly reduce instructors' stress and emotional fatigue [31]. Additionally, planning, problem-solving, and seeking social support from colleagues, friends, and family appear to be more adaptive than avoidance-based or passive coping techniques. Research indicates that coping skills are not fixed traits but can be developed through practice, and that targeted interventions may enhance teachers' resilience and psychological well-being [32].

Establishing clear boundaries between work and personal life also plays an important role in stress regulation. For example, avoiding checking work emails outside official hours or dedicating time solely to rest and personal activities may help lecturers psychologically detach from work. Moreover, a healthy lifestyle that includes regular exercise, enough sleep, a balanced diet, and scheduled breaks enhances overall well-being and improves stress management.

While high standards are common in academic settings, excessive self-critical perfectionism has been linked to heightened stress and emotional exhaustion. Thus, it is essential to acknowledge and address perfectionistic tendencies by setting realistic goals and cultivating self-compassion, rather than engaging in harsh self-criticism, which can help individuals remain motivated and

<https://doi.org/10.65153/g6xvr503>



prevent burnout [33;34]. Additionally, to share experiences and ease psychological burdens, lecturers are encouraged to participate in peer support groups or seek professional counseling if stress becomes overwhelming. Through these strategies, educators can better manage personal stressors and sustain high levels of instructional effectiveness.

III.2 Institutional strategies

Individual stress management efforts do not occur in isolation but are influenced by the institutional environments in which lecturers carry out their professional roles.

To support the mental health of EFL instructors, universities may consider implementing comprehensive policies and initiatives that promote mental well-being. First, these may include regular opportunities for professional development and stress-management training, such as stress-resilience workshops, cognitive-behavioral techniques, and mindfulness-based seminars. Comprehensive evaluations show that mindfulness therapies can significantly reduce teacher stress in various international settings [31]. Additionally, family-friendly practices such as flexible teaching schedules, caregiving leave, and access to childcare support can help lecturers better manage work-family demands. Research indicates that organizations that promote work-family balance see improvements in faculty burnout and well-being [35]. Workload management is also an important institutional consideration. Regular reviews of teaching and administrative responsibilities, clearer role definitions, and more balanced task distribution may reduce role overload and role ambiguity, which are known contributors to occupational stress.

IV. CONCLUSION

This narrative literature review has examined stress among EFL lecturers in higher education, with a specific focus on personal-level determinants. The review highlights how marital status, caregiving responsibilities, personality traits, coping mechanisms, and gendered cultural expectations shape lecturers' experiences of stress in academic contexts. The evidence indicates that personal stressors operate through identifiable mechanisms, including role strain, Family-to-Work spillover, maladaptive emotion regulation, and ineffective coping styles. Married lecturers and those with caregiving responsibilities, particularly women in sociocultural contexts where caregiving is strongly gendered, often experience heightened stress due to competing professional



and family demands. Additionally, individual differences in perfectionism and coping strategies influence stress appraisal and emotional regulation, which can lead to either emotional exhaustion or psychological resilience.

Sustained stress may have consequences that extend beyond individual well-being. As discussed, prolonged stress can undermine instructional engagement, reduce emotional availability in the classroom, and increase vulnerability to burnout among EFL lecturers. Over time, burnout may weaken professional commitment and contribute to lecturer attrition, with potential implications for instructional continuity and institutional stability.

Based on these findings, this review emphasizes pedagogical implications at both individual and institutional levels. Developing adaptive coping strategies, setting boundaries between work and personal life, and addressing self-critical perfectionism can help lecturers manage personal stress more effectively. A supportive institutional environment can further enhance the effectiveness of these individual efforts.

This review also suggests that lecturer stress may be better understood when personal life circumstances, psychological resources, and professional demands are considered together rather than in isolation. To further develop this line of inquiry, further studies could consider longitudinal approaches and pay more attention to groups that have received less research attention, such as male lecturers' family-related stress, in order to gain a clearer picture of how personal stress may change over time.

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<https://doi.org/10.65153/g6xvr503>

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