

Research Article

Educational Science

Uncovering the Relationship between English Learning Burnout and Academic Achievement in a Chinese EFL Context

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This study examines English learning burnout as an affective risk factor in Chinese EFL education. Framed by Control-Value Theory (CVT), it focuses on whether burnout is visible in the sample, how it relates to English achievement, and whether it is better understood as a multidimensional construct. Data were collected from 640 students recruited from one regular public senior high school in eastern China, and achievement was measured with formal school-based English examination scores reported on a 150-point scale. Burnout was generally low to moderate, but demotivation was somewhat more pronounced than exhaustion. Correlation analyses showed that English achievement was negatively related to exhaustion, demotivation, and global burnout, with the strongest association emerging for the overall burnout index. Confirmatory factor analysis supported a two-factor model consisting of exhaustion and demotivation, and model-based composite reliability values indicated satisfactory internal consistency for the two subscales and the global burnout score. More broadly, the findings suggest that even relatively moderate burnout symptoms can carry academic significance in examination-oriented EFL settings, where students may continue to meet classroom requirements while gradually losing emotional energy and motivational commitment. The study therefore highlights the need to identify burnout early and to distinguish between fatigue-related strain and value-related disengagement when interpreting students' English learning experience.

Keywords: Burnout, Academic achievement, Exhaustion, Demotivation, EFL, Control-Value Theory**Introduction**

Research in second language acquisition no longer treats language learning as a purely cognitive enterprise. Learners' progress is now more often understood through the interplay of aptitude, strategy use, classroom participation, and emotion. The rise of positive psychology accelerated this shift by encouraging scholars to examine how enjoyment, hope, pride, and related emotions shape persistence and performance (Dewaele et al., 2019). At the same time, the field has become increasingly aware that a focus on positive states alone gives an incomplete picture.

Achievement emotions are closely tied to learners' appraisals of control and value, so negative emotions remain indispensable for explaining why effort weakens, participation narrows, or progress stalls (Pekrun, 2024).

Within educational research, burnout has become one of the clearest signs that prolonged academic demand can carry emotional costs. First discussed in occupational psychology, burnout typically refers to a syndrome marked by exhaustion, cynicism or detachment, and reduced efficacy under chronic stress (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Later scholarship showed that

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students can display comparable patterns when heavy demands, repeated frustration, and limited support gradually wear down their energy and commitment (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Salmela-Aro et al., 2009). In school settings, burnout has been associated with poorer well-being, weaker engagement, elevated dropout risk, and lower academic performance (Madigan & Curran, 2021; Bakker & Mostert, 2024).

Foreign language education provides particularly fertile ground for burnout. English learning unfolds over years, requires repeated practice across multiple skills, and exposes learners to continual correction and comparison. In examination-oriented contexts such as China, these demands are intensified by high-stakes testing and by strong expectations from schools and families. Recent work on English demotivation among Chinese secondary students shows that learners may begin to detach from English long before they visibly withdraw from classroom routines (Gao & Liu, 2022; Gao et al., 2022). In that sense, burnout in EFL settings is not only a matter of pressure; it is also a matter of how long students can continue to see effort as worthwhile.

Against this background, recent scholarship has argued that English learning burnout should be examined as a domain-specific form of academic burnout rather than as a generic stress response (Liu & Zhong, 2022). This position fits Control-Value Theory (CVT), which holds that achievement emotions vary across subject domains because they are grounded in domain-specific appraisals of control and value (Pekrun, 2024). A key development in Chinese EFL research is the proposal that English learning burnout is best understood through the dimensions of exhaustion and demotivation. Liu and Zhong (2022) found that burnout among Chinese senior high school learners did not map neatly onto the conventional three-component model often borrowed from occupational research. Instead, the construct was more adequately represented by two salient dimensions. Exhaustion refers to fatigue, burden, and emotional depletion generated by English study, whereas demotivation reflects declining interest, weakened commitment, and loss of value in English learning. This reconceptualization is important because it fits the realities of exam-driven EFL classrooms and resonates with adjacent work showing that classroom resources such as teacher support are implicated in how learners experience English study over time (Liu & Li, 2023).

Even so, several issues remain open. First, much recent work has concentrated on antecedents and accompanying states rather than on achievement itself: burnout has been linked to school climate, teacher support, emotional intelligence, growth mindset, resilience, and buoyancy, but the direct relation with English performance is often not the central focus (Liu, 2023; Li et al., 2025; Li & Zhang, 2024; Liu et al., 2023; Liu & Cai, 2025). Second, when achievement is included, the pathway is frequently indirect, running through variables such as resilience or engagement, which leaves the direct pattern between burnout dimensions and English scores comparatively underdescribed (Liu et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2025). Third, because burnout is sensitive to context, its dimensional structure should be demonstrated empirically rather than assumed, especially in exam-oriented Chinese EFL settings (Liu & Zhong, 2022).

The present study addresses these issues by clarifying the conceptual basis of English learning burnout, describing its profile in the available dataset, testing its association with English achievement, and examining the factorial validity of the measure. In doing so, it offers a more fine-grained account of how

burnout may function as an affective risk factor in Chinese EFL learning.

Literature Review

Studies on burnout

Burnout was first introduced in occupational research to describe chronic strain arising when demands outstrip available coping resources (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Educational psychologists later adapted the concept to student life, where burnout came to refer to exhaustion from study demands, detached or cynical attitudes toward schoolwork, and weakened feelings of accomplishment (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Salmela-Aro et al., 2009). The adaptation is sensible because studying, much like working, involves sustained effort, deadlines, evaluation, and recurrent performance pressure.

Research syntheses have made clear that burnout in education is not a trivial matter of discomfort. In a meta-analysis covering more than 100,000 students, Madigan and Curran (2021) showed that overall burnout and its component symptoms were all negatively associated with academic achievement. More recent theoretical work has likewise argued that burnout emerges when academic demands outweigh available resources, and that this imbalance is closely tied to poorer learning outcomes (Bakker & Mostert, 2024).

In SLA, burnout entered the discussion later than constructs such as anxiety, motivation, or willingness to communicate. Yet the broader affective turn in language learning has made it increasingly difficult to ignore. If enjoyment, hope, and buoyancy can sustain engagement, then chronic fatigue, boredom, and demotivation can be expected to interfere with it as well (Dewaele et al., 2019; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). Recent Chinese EFL work has reinforced this point by showing that boredom, hope, and other classroom emotions are tied to learners' effort and engagement rather than sitting at the margins of learning experience (Wang & Liu, 2022; Jiang & Liu, 2024). Burnout has therefore become relevant not only as a negative feeling, but as part of the broader emotional architecture of language learning.

One influential shift in this line of inquiry is the treatment of English learning burnout as a domain-bound phenomenon. Liu and Zhong (2022) argued that burnout in English learning should not simply be transplanted from occupational or general academic models because foreign language learning has its own emotional, interactional, and contextual characteristics. In Chinese EFL classrooms, high-stakes testing, repetitive practice, heavy curricular demands, and pressure from schools and families may all shape how burnout develops and how it affects learners.

Their scale-validation work suggested that English learning burnout among Chinese senior high school students is best captured by two dimensions: exhaustion and demotivation (Liu & Zhong, 2022). Exhaustion indexes burden, fatigue, and emotional strain in English study, whereas demotivation reflects declining interest, weakened commitment, and reduced perceived value. The distinction matters because it frames burnout as more than simple tiredness; it also includes a motivational loss that is especially consequential in language learning, where sustained investment is essential.

Subsequent studies have made this picture more concrete. Wu et al. (2024) identified burnout-engagement profiles among Chinese senior high school EFL learners, while Zhang et al. (2024) reported that burnout was closely tied to lower enjoyment and weaker engagement among junior high learners. Other research has begun to map the classroom conditions under which

burnout grows or recedes. Liu (2023) associated burnout with school climate and growth mindset; Fu (2024) drew attention to classroom social support and buoyancy in higher education; Liu and Li (2023) showed that students' perceived EFL teacher support constitutes an important psychological resource; and Liu et al. (2023) further suggested that resilience and motivation help explain how burnout spills over into engagement. Seen together, these studies point to a consistent conclusion: English learning burnout is produced within an ecology of classroom relationships, motivational resources, and repeated achievement experiences rather than within the learner alone.

Studies on the control-value theory

CVT offers a useful framework for explaining why burnout may be related to academic achievement. According to the theory, achievement emotions stem largely from learners' perceptions of control over tasks and outcomes and the value they attribute to those tasks and outcomes (Pekrun, 2024). When learners feel unable to manage learning demands or fail to see value in what they are studying, negative emotions become more likely. In language learning, repeated difficulty, perceived incompetence, monotonous routines, or weak future value may gradually foster exhaustion, frustration, boredom, and eventually burnout.

CVT is especially informative for the present study for two reasons. First, it helps explain why burnout should be detrimental to achievement: emotions affect attention, strategy use, persistence, self-regulation, and other processes directly tied to performance (Pekrun, 2024). Second, the theory highlights domain specificity. Students' control and value appraisals vary across subjects, which means their emotional experiences can vary across subjects as well. A learner may feel competent and interested in one discipline but helpless or detached in English. This logic supports examining English learning burnout as a distinct construct rather than as a simple extension of general academic burnout.

Related work on language emotions points in the same direction. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) showed that enjoyment and anxiety could coexist in language classrooms rather than forming opposite ends of one continuum. More recent studies in Chinese EFL contexts have reached a similar conclusion with other emotions: boredom and buoyancy jointly shape engagement (Wang & Liu, 2022), hope relates positively to learning effort (Jiang & Liu, 2024), and enjoyment makes a measurable contribution to students' willingness to invest effort in English teaching (Liu et al., 2025). These findings help place burnout within a wider emotional system and reinforce the idea that English achievement cannot be understood by looking at any single emotion in isolation.

Studies on the relationship between burnout and academic achievement

Evidence linking burnout to academic achievement is now well established in the broader education literature. Madigan and Curran (2021) reported that burnout was negatively related to achievement overall and that this pattern held across the traditional burnout dimensions. Burnout, then, is not simply undesirable from a psychological standpoint; it is also consequential for academic performance.

Within EFL research, studies that focus squarely on burnout and English achievement remain fewer, but the pattern is becoming clearer. Liu et al. (2024) found that English learning burnout negatively predicted English achievement both directly and

indirectly through English learning resilience. More recently, Liu et al. (2025) reported that engagement mediates the link between burnout and English achievement among Chinese senior high school students, while Cai and Liu (2025) showed that burnout also operates alongside buoyancy and engagement in pathways leading to academic achievement. These studies collectively suggest that burnout is academically consequential not only in a general sense but also in the day-to-day psychological processes through which learners persist, recover, and perform.

At the same time, the internal structure of burnout deserves closer attention. In occupational and general academic research, exhaustion is often treated as the core symptom (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). In EFL settings, however, demotivation is equally important and may be more revealing pedagogically. Falout et al. (2009) linked demotivation to both affective states and learning outcomes, and later reviews and empirical studies in Chinese English learning contexts have shown that demotivation is multi-causal, persistent, and closely connected to classroom realities such as repetitive tasks, limited perceived value, and strained support systems (Gao & Liu, 2022; Gao et al., 2022). If students stop seeing English as meaningful, achievement may erode not only because they feel tired, but also because the basis for sustained investment has weakened.

For this reason, exhaustion and demotivation should be examined separately when considering English achievement. Exhaustion may be more immediately connected to depleted energy and short-term performance difficulties, whereas demotivation may exert a slower influence by reducing practice, persistence, and willingness to participate. Because language development depends on cumulative effort over time, both dimensions are likely to matter, though not necessarily in identical ways.

In summary, the present study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) What are the descriptive characteristics of English learning burnout and its two dimensions in the available dataset?
- (2) How are exhaustion, demotivation, and global burnout related to English academic achievement?
- (3) Does the English learning burnout scale show acceptable factorial validity and internal consistency in the present sample?

Methodology

Participants

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design to examine English learning burnout and its association with English academic achievement in a Chinese EFL context. The sample comprised 640 senior high school students from one regular public senior high school in eastern China, including 273 males and 367 females across Year 1 to Year 3. The participating schools followed the standard senior high school English curriculum and organized English instruction through regular grade-level classes. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling from intact English classes; therefore, the sample provides evidence within a shared regional and curricular context, but it should not be interpreted as nationally representative.

All participants were studying English in an examination-driven environment marked by frequent school-based tests, sustained instruction, and continuous performance evaluation. Only cases with completed questionnaires and matched official English achievement records were retained for analysis. Prior to data collection, students were informed that participation was voluntary, that their responses would remain confidential, and

that the data would be used exclusively for research purposes.

Instruments

The study used demographic items together with a domain-specific burnout scale. After questionnaire administration, students' English examination scores were collected from school records and merged with the survey responses. Cases with missing questionnaire data or unmatched achievement records were removed before analysis.

1. English learning burnout

English learning burnout was assessed with the 10-item instrument validated by Liu and Zhong (2022). Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Consistent with the validated model, the instrument conceptualizes burnout as a two-dimensional construct composed of Exhaustion (B001-B004) and Demotivation (B005-B010). Exhaustion captures fatigue, burden, and emotional drain during English study, whereas Demotivation reflects reduced interest, lowered value, and weakened commitment. Internal consistency was evaluated through model-based composite reliability calculated from standardized CFA loadings and error variances, a procedure commonly used for latent constructs in SEM (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The reliability coefficients and detailed model-fit indices are reported in the Results section.

2. English academic achievement

English academic achievement was treated as the outcome variable. Scores were taken from formal school-based English examinations administered by the participating schools as part of routine grade-level assessment. These examinations followed the schools' standard administration and marking procedures, were recorded in official school records before being matched with the survey data, and used a 150-point reporting scale commonly adopted in senior high school English assessment in this context. They were not designed by the researchers. Although item-level test data were not available for recalculating test reliability, the use of official school examination records strengthened the ecological validity of the achievement measure. Higher values indicated

better performance. In the current dataset, scores ranged from 0 to 150, with a mean of 92.71 and a standard deviation of 23.033, indicating substantial variation in achievement.

Data collection and analysis

Questionnaires were administered during regular school hours. After the survey, students' official English examination scores from the most recent formal school-based assessment were retrieved from school records and matched with their questionnaire responses. Only valid and complete cases were retained in the final dataset.

Data analysis proceeded in several steps. First, descriptive statistics, including the mean, standard deviation, minimum, maximum, skewness, and kurtosis, were calculated for English achievement and the burnout-related indicators. These statistics offered both an overall profile of the sample and an initial check on whether the variables were suitable for subsequent parametric analyses. Next, Pearson correlations were computed to examine the associations among academic achievement, Exhaustion, Demotivation, and Global Burnout. CFA was then conducted in Mplus 8.3 to test whether English learning burnout was more appropriately represented by a two-factor structure. Model fit was evaluated using CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR, with CFI/TLI values around or above .90 and RMSEA/SRMR values around or below .08 interpreted as indicating acceptable fit when considered together rather than mechanically (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016). Composite reliability was also calculated for Exhaustion, Demotivation, and Global Burnout. Together, these analyses made it possible to describe burnout levels, evaluate the burnout-achievement relationship, and assess the measurement quality of the burnout scale.

Results

Descriptive profile of English achievement and burnout

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics for English achievement and the ten-burnout items. The average English score was 92.71 ($SD = 23.033$) on the 150-point scale, which places the sample

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for burnout and academic achievement.

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Academic Achievement	0	150	92.71	23.033	-.175	.038
B001 Exhaustion	1	5	2.40	1.132	.628	-.374
B002 Exhaustion	1	5	2.18	.982	.872	.616
B003 Exhaustion	1	5	2.17	.982	.797	.316
B004 Exhaustion	1	5	2.17	1.033	.793	.082
B005 Demotivation	1	5	2.39	1.088	.483	-.566
B006 Demotivation	1	5	2.59	1.097	.404	-.708
B007 Demotivation	1	5	2.63	1.097	.334	-.720
B008 Demotivation	1	5	2.43	1.029	.691	-.028
B009 Demotivation	1	5	2.38	1.006	.702	.017
B010 Demotivation	1	5	2.58	1.060	.431	-.502
Global Burnout	1	4.90	2.39	.803	.373	-.238

in the midrange rather than at either extreme. More important than the mean it is the spread: the standard deviation and full score range indicate that learners differed substantially in performance, making the sample suitable for examining how emotional variables relate to achievement. Burnout item means fell between 2.17 and 2.63 on the five-point scale, and the mean for Global Burnout was 2.39 ($SD = .803$). Read cautiously, these values point to a low-to-moderate level of burnout rather than a highly distressed group. In practical terms, the sample seems to include many students who were functioning adequately in school while still showing nontrivial signs of fatigue or reduced motivation toward English.

The item pattern, however, is not flat. The four Exhaustion items had means of 2.40, 2.18, 2.17, and 2.17, whereas the six Demotivation items had means of 2.39, 2.59, 2.63, 2.43, 2.38, and 2.58. Using the item means as a rough descriptive guide, Exhaustion averaged about 2.23 and Demotivation about 2.50. This gap is not large enough to be treated as a tested difference, but it is clear enough to be substantively noteworthy. What stands out is that the higher scores cluster around items tapping declining interest and reduced willingness to invest effort rather than around items reflecting sheer depletion. In other words, the more visible issue in this sample seems to be a softening of motivational commitment before a more severe sense of emotional drain sets in. That pattern fits the educational context reasonably well: in exam-oriented classrooms, students can continue to comply with routines and complete required work even while their personal sense of value or enthusiasm is starting to thin out.

The distributional statistics also support the use of subsequent parametric analyses. English achievement showed a skewness of -0.175 and a kurtosis of 0.038, suggesting an approximately normal distribution. Across the burnout items, skewness ranged from 0.334 to 0.872 and kurtosis from -0.720 to 0.616. These values imply some concentration at the lower end of burnout, which is consistent with the relatively modest means, but they do not suggest severe non-normality. Put differently, the sample is not characterized only by a small cluster of extremely burned-out students; rather, burnout symptoms appear to be distributed

across the group at mostly low to moderate levels. This matters for interpretation because it suggests that the observed associations with achievement are not being driven only by a few extreme cases.

Correlations between burnout and achievement

Table 2 presents the Pearson correlations among academic achievement, Exhaustion, Demotivation, and Global Burnout. English achievement was negatively correlated with Exhaustion ($r = -.275, p < .01$), Demotivation ($r = -.252, p < .01$), and Global Burnout ($r = -.278, p < .01$). The direction of these coefficients is clear: students reporting stronger burnout symptoms tended to receive lower English scores. In magnitude, the correlations are modest rather than overwhelming. That is worth underlining. English achievement is shaped by many factors beyond emotion, including prior proficiency, instructional quality, test format, and opportunity to learn. Even so, the size of these coefficients is large enough to show that burnout is not a trivial background condition. It has a reliable and meaningful connection with performance.

The correlations among the burnout indicators are also informative. Exhaustion and Demotivation were strongly related ($r = .803, p < .01$), while Global Burnout correlated very highly with Exhaustion ($r = .930, p < .01$) and Demotivation ($r = .954, p < .01$). This pattern supports two complementary readings. On the one hand, the two dimensions clearly belong to the same broader construct; students who feel worn down by English study are often the same students whose interest and commitment are slipping. On the other hand, the relationship is not so perfect that the two dimensions collapse into each other conceptually. The distinction therefore remains useful. One can imagine learners who are still trying hard despite feeling depleted, as well as learners who are no longer especially invested even if they are not the most exhausted in emotional terms.

It is also noteworthy that Exhaustion showed a slightly stronger negative association with achievement than Demotivation. Because the difference is small, it should not be overinterpreted. Still, the pattern is plausible. Exhaustion may affect immediate performance more directly by undermining concentration, stamina, and task persistence during lessons or tests.

Table 2: Results of correlation analysis.

	Academic Achievement	Exhaustion	Demotivation	Global Burnout
Academic Achievement	-			
Exhaustion	-.275**	-		
Demotivation	-.252**	.803**	-	
Global Burnout	-.278**	.930**	.954**	-

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3: Composite reliability of the burnout measures.

Burnout measure	Items	Composite reliability (CR)
Exhaustion	B001-B004	.913
Demotivation	B005-B010	.876
Global Burnout	B001-B010	.936

Demotivation may operate in a slower way, gradually reducing practice, participation, and willingness to expend effort. The two coefficients therefore hint at different temporal horizons of academic risk: one more proximal and energy-related, the other cumulative and investment-related. That is precisely why examining the subdimensions separately is more informative than relying only on a single burnout score.

Factorial validity of the burnout measure

Before interpreting the factor structure, internal consistency was checked using model-based composite reliability. The reliability coefficients were satisfactory for Exhaustion (CR = .913), Demotivation (CR = .876), and Global Burnout (CR = .936), all above the commonly recommended .70 benchmark (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). These values indicate that the two subscales and the overall burnout index showed adequate internal consistency in the present sample (see Table 3).

The CFA results provide a further check on how English learning burnout is organized in this dataset (see Figure 1). A two-factor model composed of Demotivation and Exhaustion produced acceptable fit (CFI = 0.943, TLI = 0.922, RMSEA = 0.078, SRMR = 0.047). Following commonly used SEM guidelines, CFI and TLI values above .90 are usually interpreted as acceptable incremental fit, while RMSEA and SRMR values below .08 indicate acceptable approximation and residual fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016). Judged against these criteria, the CFI, TLI, and SRMR were clearly acceptable, and the RMSEA was within the commonly used reasonable-fit range. Thus, although the model should not be described as perfect, the indices collectively support the adequacy of the two-factor representation. Standardized factor loadings ranged from 0.536 to 0.929, meaning that every item contributed meaningfully to its intended latent factor.

The latent correlation between Demotivation and Exhaustion was strong ($r = .849$), again highlighting that the two factors travel together. At the same time, the correlation stops short of redundancy. In measurement terms, the model therefore supports a position between two extremes: burnout is neither a set of unrelated symptoms nor a fully undifferentiated single state. For the present study, this matters because it justifies interpreting the descriptive and correlational results at both levels, that is, in terms of overall burnout and in terms of its two constituent dimensions. It also responds to the need to demonstrate, rather than merely assume, the reliability and factorial validity of a domain-specific burnout measure in the target EFL context (Figure 1).

Discussion

Descriptive profile of English learning burnout

The descriptive profile deserves a careful reading. A low-to-moderate mean does not mean that burnout is negligible; it means that burnout is already woven into ordinary classroom experience for at least part of the sample. In high-pressure EFL settings, students often continue to attend, complete assignments, and sit for tests even when enthusiasm has begun to thin out. That is why the higher demotivation scores are important. They suggest that the first visible crack may not be dramatic emotional collapse but a quieter withdrawal of personal investment. This interpretation is consistent with Liu and Zhong's (2022) two-factor model and also resonates with Chinese research on English demotivation, which has shown that value loss, repetitive learning routines, and weakened agency often precede more overt disengagement (Gao & Liu, 2022; Gao et al., 2022). For teachers, that means early warning signs may look deceptively mild: less voluntary participation, more mechanical completion of tasks, and weaker initiative rather than outright refusal.

CVT helps explain why this pattern is plausible. When learners start doubting whether they can handle classroom demands, or when the personal value of English becomes harder to see, the emotional tone of learning shifts. In exam-driven settings, students may still keep pace externally because the system requires it. Yet compliance does not necessarily indicate genuine motivational investment. A student can remain busy while becoming psychologically distant from the subject. From that angle, demotivation can be read as an early expression of disturbed control-value appraisals: English is still compulsory, but it is no longer experienced as manageable, meaningful, or rewarding enough to sustain wholehearted effort. This reading also fits recent work linking burnout to support, resilience, and engagement in Chinese EFL contexts, all of which point to the importance of classroom resources in stabilizing learners' emotional trajectories (Liu et al., 2023; Liu & Cai, 2025).

Another point worth emphasizing is that moderate averages can still matter considerably in language learning. Progress in English depends on accumulation: vocabulary growth, skill integration, and test readiness all build through repeated practice over time. Small but persistent losses in effort or emotional energy can therefore have consequences that look disproportionate to their mean-level scores. A learner does not need to report severe burnout for burnout to start constraining participation,

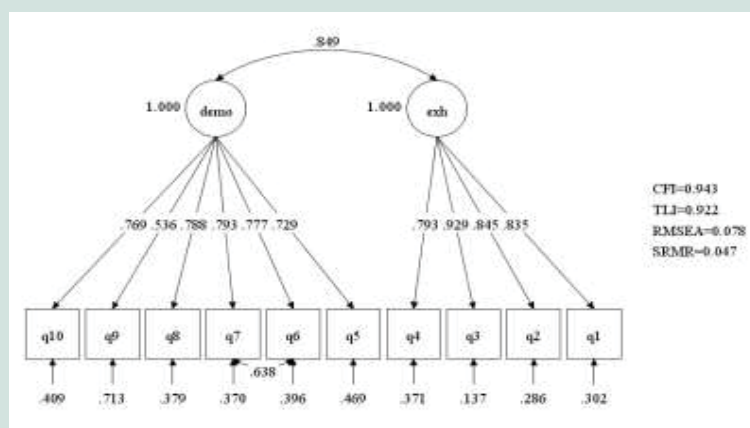


Figure 1: CFA results for English learning burnout.

narrowing strategy use, or eroding confidence. In that sense, the present results argue against waiting until burnout becomes dramatic enough to be unmistakable. By the time emotional strain becomes obvious, a more gradual motivational withdrawal may already have been affecting achievement for quite some time.

Burnout and English academic achievement

The negative correlations between burnout and English achievement align with a growing body of evidence, but the present study adds useful specificity because it focuses on English learning rather than on general school burnout. The message is not simply that students who feel worse do worse. Rather, the English classroom appears to be one site where emotional strain becomes academically consequential. This is consistent with Liu et al. (2024), who identified resilience as one pathway through which burnout affects achievement, and with Liu et al. (2025), who showed that engagement also helps explain the link. The current findings do not test those mediators directly, but they fit that broader picture well. Burnout likely matters because it enters the learning process through ordinary mechanisms: attending less closely, persisting less steadily, recovering less effectively from setbacks, and investing less voluntary effort in the subject.

The distinction between exhaustion and demotivation is especially useful here. Exhaustion likely works through immediate cognitive and behavioral costs. When students feel drained, it becomes harder to sustain concentration, manage frustration, or stay mentally present during difficult reading, listening, and grammar tasks. Demotivation, by contrast, may not always depress a single test score right away, but it can slowly reshape the amount and quality of effort students are willing to invest. This slower route is arguably crucial in EFL contexts, where achievement depends not only on formal instruction but also on the willingness to keep revisiting material, tolerating correction, and staying with tasks that often feel repetitive before they become rewarding.

The slightly stronger coefficient for global burnout also matters. It suggests that achievement is most vulnerable when fatigue and motivational withdrawal come together. A student who is tired but still invested may sometimes maintain performance through discipline or external pressure. A student who is less invested but not yet exhausted may still function reasonably well in the short run. The more serious academic risk seems to emerge when these conditions converge. That interpretation is compatible with person-centered work showing that burnout tends to cluster with other maladaptive states rather than occur in isolation (Liu et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2024). It also speaks to practice: addressing only workload or only motivation may help, but the strongest support is likely to address both the energy demands and the meaning structure of English learning.

The distinct roles of exhaustion and demotivation

The comparison between exhaustion and demotivation should nonetheless be read cautiously. The present study did not test whether the difference between the two correlations is statistically significant, and the coefficients are close. The real contribution of the comparison lies elsewhere. It shows that the dimensions are not interchangeable in interpretation even when they are closely related in measurement. Exhaustion directs attention to energy depletion and immediate strain; demotivation directs attention to value loss and weakening commitment. Those emphases lead researchers and teachers to somewhat different questions. Are students overwhelmed by the pace and density of work? Or are they no longer convinced that English study merits

sustained effort? In many classrooms both may be true, but the relative weight of each issue can shape what kind of intervention is most sensible.

Demotivation may be especially important in secondary EFL education because it is often quieter and easier to miss. Students may continue to do what is required, especially in tightly structured school environments, while emotionally shifting from committed learning to strategic compliance. That distinction matters. Strategic compliance can preserve appearances for a while, but it seldom supports deep or durable learning. Research on demotivation in Chinese English education has repeatedly shown that learners' goals, perceived relevance, and classroom atmosphere play a major role in whether investment is sustained (Gao & Liu, 2022; Gao et al., 2022). The present descriptive pattern, in which demotivation slightly exceeds exhaustion, fits that literature and suggests that the motivational texture of English classrooms deserves as much attention as the sheer amount of academic pressure students experience.

For that reason, the practical value of a multidimensional approach is considerable. Treating burnout as a single score can tell researchers whether distress is present, but it says less about what kind of distress is taking hold. Once exhaustion and demotivation are distinguished, the phenomenon becomes easier to interpret and, potentially, easier to address. A classroom in which learners are worn out may call for workload adjustment, pacing changes, clearer scaffolding, or recovery time. A classroom in which learners are mainly demotivated may call for more meaningful task framing, more choice, more visible progress, or stronger connections between English and students' lives beyond the examination room. The present data cannot adjudicate among such interventions, but they do make clear that a one-size-fits-all picture of burnout is inadequate.

Implications and Limitations

The pedagogical implications are fairly direct. Burnout should not be treated as an issue that belongs only to counseling services or only to the small number of visibly distressed students. In English classrooms, it appears closely enough tied to achievement that it deserves routine pedagogical attention.

One implication is that performance and well-being should not be set against each other. In exam-oriented systems, it is tempting to assume that more pressure necessarily yields more achievement. The present findings caution against that assumption. Pressure may produce short-term compliance, but when it feeds fatigue and motivational withdrawal, it can also weaken the very performance it is meant to improve. Teachers and schools are therefore better served by thinking in terms of sustainable achievement: standards remain high, but the path toward them includes psychological conditions that keep effort possible. A second implication follows from the relatively higher demotivation scores. Many interventions in secondary English classrooms focus on discipline, completion, and error correction. Those matter, but they do not by themselves rebuild value. Students are more likely to persist when they can see why English is worth learning, how classroom tasks connect to recognizable goals, and where their effort is leading. That does not mean every lesson must be entertaining. It means that the rationale for learning, the visibility of progress, and the sense of meaningful participation need to be kept alive. Task design, topic selection, and feedback practices all matter here.

The exhaustion finding points to a related but distinct issue: pacing. Heavy drilling, dense homework, and relentless test

rehearsal may be defensible in the name of examination preparation, yet they can also drain the attentional and emotional energy that successful language learning requires. Students need challenge, but they also need tasks that are scaffolded, expectations that are clear, and opportunities to experience competence rather than only deficiency. In practical terms, teachers may reduce exhaustion not simply by assigning less work, but by assigning work more deliberately. What's more, schools and curriculum designers may need to reconsider what counts as successful English instruction in the long term. A classroom that produces compliance but steadily depletes motivational resources may look efficient in the short run while undermining durable achievement. A more sustainable model would combine clear expectations with emotionally intelligent pacing, supportive feedback, and learning tasks that keep the value of English visible. The present study does not offer a single intervention formula, but it does make one point hard to ignore: sustaining achievement requires sustaining the learner as well.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although the sample included students from one regular public senior high school, it was obtained through convenience sampling within one regional context in eastern China. This limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other regions, school types, age groups, or educational levels. Broader and more diverse samples would help strengthen external validity in future work. Second, English achievement was measured with formal school-based examinations rather than a single externally standardized provincial or national examination. This choice improved ecological validity because the scores reflected students' real assessment context, but item-level reliability and full cross-school equivalence could not be independently verified. Future studies could use common standardized tests or report more detailed psychometric information about the achievement measure. Third, the study was correlational, so causal claims cannot be made. Although burnout was negatively associated with achievement, the direction of influence cannot be established from the present data alone. It is equally plausible that repeated low achievement contributes to later burnout, pointing to a potentially reciprocal relationship between emotional strain and academic performance. Finally, future work should move beyond cross-sectional snapshots by adopting longitudinal or person-centered designs. Recent research such as Ding and Wang (2024) suggests that burnout fluctuates over time and may be shaped by changing levels of boredom, hopelessness, and anxiety. Longitudinal evidence would be especially valuable for distinguishing the temporal roles of exhaustion and demotivation and for examining whether one dimension tends to precede the other.

Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between English learning burnout and English academic achievement in a Chinese EFL context and yielded a set of conclusions that are both empirically grounded and pedagogically relevant. At the most general level, the findings show that burnout should not be treated as an extreme or peripheral problem that matters only when learners become visibly distressed. In the present sample, burnout levels were generally low to moderate, yet the construct still showed a clear negative association with English performance. This means that even when students appear to be coping with routine school demands, the gradual accumulation of emotional strain and motivational weakening may already be

influencing achievement in meaningful ways.

More specifically, three main findings deserve emphasis. First, the descriptive results suggest that demotivation was somewhat more salient than exhaustion. This pattern indicates that in an examination-oriented EFL environment, students may begin to lose interest, value, or commitment before they show more obvious forms of emotional depletion. Second, English achievement was significantly and negatively related to exhaustion, demotivation, and global burnout, confirming that burnout is not merely a background emotional state but an academically relevant factor. Third, CFA and composite reliability results supported the two-factor structure of English learning burnout, reinforcing the view that burnout in this domain is best understood through the related yet distinguishable dimensions of exhaustion and demotivation rather than through an undifferentiated global construct alone.

Taken together, these findings deepen current understanding of how burnout operates in foreign language learning. They suggest that achievement may decline not only because students feel tired, overloaded, or emotionally drained, but also because they no longer see English learning as sufficiently meaningful to justify sustained investment. In this sense, the academic cost of burnout is both immediate and cumulative. Exhaustion may interfere more directly with concentration, persistence, and test performance, whereas demotivation may gradually reduce learners' willingness to participate, practice, and keep engaging with demanding tasks over time. This interpretation is also broadly consistent with related work showing that burnout is linked to achievement differences across learner profiles and is closely intertwined with disengagement as well as with other achievement-relevant emotions such as enjoyment, anxiety, and boredom (Asikainen et al., 2020; Li, 2022; Wang & Li, 2022).

From a practical perspective, the study points to the importance of sustainable achievement in EFL education. English teachers and schools should pay attention not only to visible academic outcomes but also to the emotional conditions that make those outcomes possible. When students continue to complete tasks but do so with declining interest, reduced initiative, or increasingly mechanical participation, these may be early indicators of burnout rather than minor motivational fluctuations. Classroom support should therefore address both sides of the construct: the reduction of excessive strain and the reconstruction of learning value. In pedagogical terms, this may involve clearer scaffolding, more manageable pacing, more supportive feedback, and more explicit efforts to show students why English learning matters beyond the immediate test situation. This implication also resonates with evidence that teacher support and buoyancy can help protect achievement-related processes in EFL settings (Li et al., 2023).

In conclusion, the present study makes a clear contribution: it shows that English learning burnout is measurable, multidimensional, internally reliable, and related to achievement. Supporting learners' long-term success in English therefore requires preserving the emotional energy and motivational commitment on which enduring language development depends.

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