

# The Role of Conscientiousness in Managing Instructional Load and Preventing Burnout in Online ELT Contexts

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## Abstract

Online English Language Teaching (ELT) places substantial cognitive, emotional, and technological challenges on teachers, intensifying their probability of burnout. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, this study explored whether conscientiousness accounts for teachers' potential to cope with perceived instructional load and prevent burnout in online English as a Foreign Language settings. Ninety-two full-time online EFL instructors completed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), the Big Five Inventory (BFI), and an adapted Workload Perception Scale (WPS). Hierarchical regression indicated that perceived instructional load was linked to burnout (combination of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization;  $R^2 = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and that conscientiousness autonomously enhanced prediction ( $\beta = -.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\Delta R^2 = .12$ ), showing lower burnout among more conscientious teachers. Correlational analyses supported negative correlations between conscientiousness, perceived workload, and burnout symptoms. Follow-up semi-structured interviews with 15 teachers selected purposively found three resilience practices which were typical of highly-conscientious instructors—structured planning, clear work-life boundaries, and digital organization strategies—that proved to influence workload evaluation. The integrated quantitative and qualitative findings suggest conscientiousness serves both as a predictive quality and a behavioral capacity for maintaining teacher well-being in highly demanding digital settings. Implications for teacher training consist of incorporating personality-sensitive training in managing time, digital self-regulation, and boundary context.

**Keywords:** Conscientiousness, Instructional load, Burnout, Online teaching, EFL teachers, Mixed-methods

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## Introduction

The global expansion of online English Language Teaching (ELT) has revolutionized instructional delivery, including both new possibilities for and considerable demands on educators. As digital platforms grow in importance to teaching practice, the learning environment requires educators to manage the demands of complex technological environments, balance asynchronous communication, and maintain learners' motivation and engagement in online learning environments. The increasing cognitive, emotional, and administrative burdens contribute to an increased risk of stress and burnout. The move towards online instruction specifically has increased workload demands, requiring more teachers to plan and develop online courses, to assess digitally, and to be constantly 'on-call' (Hodges et al., 2020; Maslach & Leiter, 2008; König & Frey, 2022). Given that the situation requires teachers to manage pressures and tasks on a personal level, it has become essential for research into teacher education and professional development to investigate the personal and contextual factors that help teachers sustain performance and their well-being in online spaces (Kizil et al., 2025).

Within these high-demand online settings, the concept of instructional load has attracted a lot of attention as a critical factor of teacher well-being. While often equated with workload or cognitive load, instructional load more accurately refers to the integration of instructional, technological, and administrative requirements that teachers must handle when designing and teaching online. However, cognitive load signifies the mental effort needed to interpret and arrange data (Sweller, 2011), while workload usually depicts teachers' subjective beliefs and views of effort and time pressure. In online ELT, instructional load comprises lesson planning, content curation, technology incorporation, and learner support, all of which cause possible stress when incongruent with teachers' personal resources (Houichi, A., & Sarnou, 2020).

Burnout, described by Maslach & Leiter (2008) as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and decreased personal achievement, commonly results from a continual mismatch between educational demands and coping resources. Scholars in educational psychology and applied linguistics have identified increasing concerns about burnout among language teachers in online and hybrid contexts (Toloczko, 2024). The transfer to online educational situations increases time pressure and reduces traditional boundaries between personal and professional life, leading to fatigue and reduced motivation. As such, it is important to determine what may be protective against the consequences of educational load so that teachers can protect their effectiveness and mental health.

One guaranteed way for understanding individual differences in vulnerability to burnout lies in personality psychology, specifically the Big Five model (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Out of these five traits, conscientiousness, which is defined as organization, self-discipline, goal orientation, and reliability, has reliably been correlated with efficient management of stress and adaptive self-regulation (Boyd et al., 2010; John & Srivastava, 1999). In educational settings, conscientious teachers have more potential to plan lessons strategically, set realistic goals, and stick to organized routines, which may alleviate the experienced burden of educational load. Research studies in general education state that conscientiousness negatively anticipates burnout and has a positive correlation with job satisfaction and resilience (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Zawadzka et al., 2023); however, its particular function within online ELT contexts needs more exploration.

While there has been considerable inquiry into teachers' burnout, there has been little empirical research on the interaction between individual personality traits and instructional load to affect well-being in online EFL contexts. Previous research studies have mainly highlighted institutional factors (e.g., class size, technological infrastructure) or instructional factors (e.g., instructional design, digital knowledge), ignoring the role of personality-based traits that may form coping mechanisms. Additionally, few research studies have incorporated quantitative and qualitative approaches to reflect both statistical relationships and lived experiences. This gap highlights the need for more investigation that both assesses predictive associations and examines behavioral mechanisms that are fundamental to efficient workload management.

To bridge this gap, this research study intends to focus on the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), which proposes that personal resources, like conscientiousness, can mitigate the negative impacts of job demands—here perceived as instructional load—on burnout results. As a result, this research explores the impact of

conscientiousness on teachers' perceptions of instructional load and their vulnerability to burnout in online ELT contexts. Using a mixed-methods design, the study integrates hierarchical regression analyses with qualitative interviews to present a complete account of both predictive and process-oriented aspects. By illuminating the protective role of conscientiousness, the results intend to contribute to teacher training programs, highlighting personality-sensitive interventions that promote self-regulation, time management, and long-term well-being in digital teaching contexts.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The rapid transition to online English Language Teaching (ELT) has notably changed pedagogical practices, intensifying the cognitive, emotional, and administrative demands imposed on teachers. While digital learning contexts have broadened access and availability, they have also escalated the sophistication of educators' professional roles, often contributing to increased levels of experienced instructional load and burnout (Houichi, A., & Sarnou, 2020). Research studies repeatedly show that online teachers experience prolonged screen exposure, longer preparation time, and unclear work–life boundaries, all of which lead to emotional fatigue and professional detachment (König & Frey, 2022). These pressures are particularly notable in ELT, where instructors must deal with linguistic, educational, and technological aspects of teaching all at the same time (Kizil et al., 2025).

In spite of these difficulties, not all instructors cope with high instructional load in the same way. Recent findings state that individual personality features affect the way educators assume and deal with their workload. Among the Big Five dimensions, conscientiousness, which is defined as self-discipline, organization, and goal-directed behavior, has been linked to adaptive coping, efficient time management, and resilience against job stress (Boyd et al., 2010; Zawadzka et al., 2023). Yet, while the predictive power of conscientiousness has been examined in general education, restricted empirical research has explored its particular role in online ELT settings, where the interrelationship between educational demands and technological complexity presents unique stressors.

In the meantime, prior research studies on teacher burnout have mainly concentrated on external variables like institutional support, class size, and technological infrastructure (Kim & Asbury, 2020), often neglecting intrapersonal elements that may affect the interplay between instructional load and burnout. Few research studies have combined quantitative and qualitative approaches to represent both the statistical associations and the underlying behavioral strategies through which conscientiousness may reduce stress. In consequence, the literature does not have a comprehensive understanding of the way conscientiousness functions as a personal resource in reducing the negative impacts of instructional load in digital ELT contexts.

Rooted in the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), this research tries to bridge this gap by exploring whether or not conscientiousness anticipates lower levels of burnout via more efficient instructional load management among online EFL instructors. The problem, thus, is in the inadequate recognition of personality-driven coping mechanisms in designing teacher training and professional growth programs. Without such understanding, institutions may continue to apply generalized workload interventions that

overlook the individual differences forming educators' potential to keep their well-being in highly demanding digital contexts.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research study is important for several reasons, such as theoretical, pedagogical, and institutional, in expanding theoretical insights about teacher well-being, managing workload, and professional growth in digital learning contexts.

From a theoretical standpoint, the research builds upon the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) by integrating conscientiousness as a crucial personal resource that explains the interplay between instructional load and burnout. Whereas previous research studies have mostly focused on external or environmental factors (Kim & Asbury, 2020), this study underscores intrapersonal features as equally necessary constituents of resilience. By placing conscientiousness within the JD-R framework, this study helps the reader to have a more comprehensive understanding of how individual characteristics engage with professional obligations in online ELT. Meanwhile, the incorporation of the Big Five model (Costa & McCrae, 1992) reinforces the relevance of personality theory to language teaching environments, addressing recent calls for multidimensional approaches to teacher psychology (Mercer & Kostoulas, 2020; Zawadzka et al., 2023).

From a pedagogical and professional viewpoint, the findings of the present research provide practical implications for teacher training and teacher education. Realizing the way conscientiousness promotes adaptive coping and workload regulation can clarify the design of personality-sensitive programs for professional growth (Kizil et al., 2025). Such programs may integrate modules on managing time, digital organization, and reflective self-regulation, contributing to educators developing behaviors that are in line with conscientiousness, ignoring their underlying individual differences. Additionally, by pinpointing specific behavioral strategies employed by highly conscientious instructors, like structured planning, prioritization, and boundary-setting, this research offers a practical framework for fostering teacher well-being in online classes (Boyd et al., 2010).

From an institutional and policy point of view, this research highlights the significance of incorporating personality assessment and support mechanisms into teacher recruitment, mentoring, and evaluation systems. Institutions can apply these viewpoints to design context-responsive workload policies that identify individual differences in coping potential and self-management. Moreover, the mixed-methods approach employed in this study can be used as a methodological model for future ELT research, showing how quantitative results can be supported by qualitative data to produce more nuanced interpretations of teacher experience (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Finally, the study pushes the field of online ELT teacher training forward by connecting psychology, pedagogy, and policy. Its scholarly offerings both enrich theoretical understanding of the conscientiousness–burnout link and suggest evidence-based strategies for promoting teacher resilience, sustaining educational quality, and advancing well-being in increasingly digitalized learning settings.

## Purpose of the Study

This study intends to explore the role that the personality trait, conscientiousness, plays in moderating perceived instructional load and preventing burnout among online EFL teachers. The main purpose of the study is to determine whether high levels of conscientiousness are interrelated with lower emotional fatigue and depersonalization, and better management of workload.

## Research Questions and Null Hypotheses

Guided by the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) and the Big Five personality framework (Costa & McCrae, 1992), this research explores the way *conscientiousness*, as a personal resource, affects the relationship between *perceived instructional load* and *burnout* among online EFL teachers. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was used, which started with quantitative analyses to assess predictive relationships and then came qualitative exploration to heighten understanding of coping strategies.

### Quantitative Research Questions

**RQ1.** *Is there a significant relationship between perceived instructional load and burnout among online EFL instructors?*

**RQ2.** *Does conscientiousness significantly predict burnout among online EFL instructors after controlling for perceived instructional load?*

**RQ3.** *Does conscientiousness moderate the relationship between perceived instructional load and burnout?*

### Qualitative Research Question

**RQ4.** *How do high-conscientiousness online EFL instructors describe the strategies and behaviors they use to manage instructional load and prevent burnout?*

The qualitative phase aims to identify behavioral mechanisms—such as structured planning, digital organization, and boundary-setting—that illustrate how conscientiousness operates as a protective resource within the JD-R framework.

### Research Null Hypotheses

**H<sub>01</sub>.** There is no significant relationship between perceived instructional load and burnout among online EFL instructors.

**H<sub>02</sub>.** Conscientiousness does not significantly predict burnout after controlling for perceived instructional load.

**H<sub>03</sub>.** Conscientiousness does not significantly moderate the relationship between perceived instructional load and burnout.

## **Literature Review**

### **Burnout in Online English Language Teaching (ELT)**

Teacher burnout—framed by Maslach and Leiter (2008) as consisting of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment—has long been identified as a pervasive work-related challenge in teaching. Recently, the rapid transition toward online teaching has exacerbated these difficulties. Online English Language Teaching (ELT), especially, asks for ongoing digital presence, responsiveness to learners in various time zones, and adjustment to new technologies (König & Frey, 2022). Studies carried out during and after the pandemic have reported increased stress levels among language teachers, mainly because of more lesson preparation time, technical troubleshooting, and a sense of social isolation in online classrooms (Kizil et al., 2025). These findings are in line with Hodges et al. (2020), who stated that distant teaching needs both knowledge technology and increased emotional and cognitive investment.

In the meantime, burnout in online ELT often goes beyond workload volume to include technostress—the stress and burden resulting from continuous digital connection, platform change, and technological breakdowns (Dong et al., 2025). Research by Toloczko (2024) on Iranian EFL teachers highlights the way unclear boundaries between personal and professional spheres escalate exhaustion and decrease motivation. On the whole, these research studies show that the online educational environment introduces new and multifaceted stressors that warrant renewed exploration of burnout's predictors and mediators.

Critical synthesis: Although prior research has successfully reported increasing burnout levels among online language instructors, a large number of research studies underscore contextual and institutional elements (e.g., workload intensity, insufficient support, class size) rather than individual difference variables that could explain diversity in teachers' resilience. In consequence, the literature demands a deeper investigation of personal traits, such as personality traits, that might alleviate the negative effects of online teaching requirements.

### **Instructional Load and Teacher Well-Being in Digital Contexts**

The concept of instructional load refers to the Educational, technological, and administrative requirements teachers face when planning and teaching (Houichi, A., & Sarnou, 2020). It is different from cognitive load (Sweller, 2011), which pertains to EFL students' mental effort, and from workload, which generally mirrors subjective appraisals of job requirements. In online ELT, instructional load is reflected in activities such as digital material design, asynchronous learner feedback, evaluation via learning management systems (LMS), and incorporation of multimedia resources (Kizil et al., 2025). Such tasks can increase both quantitative load (time spent) and qualitative load (mental sophistication), causing possible overload if educators have inadequate coping mechanisms (Zawadzka et al., 2023).

Recently, research studies have also pinpointed technological load—the extra burden of keeping up proficiency level with evolving platforms—as a distinctive aspect of instructional load (Alharbi, 2025). If these requirements are not alleviated, they can increase the amount of stress, diminish teaching satisfaction, and result in burnout (König & Frey, 2022). On the contrary, teachers with successful organizational strategies and self-regulatory skills might be able to cope with instructional load more effectively, reducing stress and keeping motivation (Houichi, A., & Sarnou, 2020; Zawadzka et al., 2023).

**Critical synthesis:** In spite of the fact that there has been an increasing attention to teacher workload in online teaching, little research has conceptualized instructional load as a multi-component construct incorporating educational, administrative, and technological requirements. In the meantime, empirical research rarely explores the way teachers' personal traits—such as conscientiousness—account for or regulate the relationship between instructional load and burnout. This conceptual gap restricts the growth of individualized workload management interventions.

### **Conscientiousness as a Protective Trait in Teacher Psychology**

The Big Five personality model (Costa & McCrae, 1992; John & Srivastava, 1999) considers conscientiousness as an inherent trait characterized by organization, persistence, accountability, and self-discipline. Within occupational psychology, conscientiousness has been reliably related to job performance, goal achievement, and stress resistance (Boyd et al., 2010). In teaching, Kim & Asbury (2020) and Zawadzka et al. (2023) have stated that conscientious instructors demonstrate more self-efficacy, improved management of time, and less vulnerability to burnout. Too, Hussain (2024) has declared that conscientiousness bears a negative correlation with emotional tiredness among secondary school instructors.

In the context of English Language Teaching, conscientiousness may have a specific value because of the high amount of autonomy and multitasking needed in online teaching settings. Instructors who bear a high conscientiousness are more willing to plan lessons in advance, create clear routines, and have systematic monitoring of the learners' progress (Boyd et al., 2010), behaviors that are closely in line with adaptive workload regulation. Nevertheless, as Kizil et al. (2025) state, personality-oriented approaches have been underexplored in research areas related to teacher education, where interventions often emphasize institutional resources over individual characteristics.

**Critical synthesis:** The previous research studies strongly support conscientiousness as a personal resource linked with resilience and professional efficiency. However, very little research has explored the way conscientiousness functions in online ELT, where pedagogical needs are not only technologically heightened but also cognitively intensified. Understanding this relationship could generate critical implications for trait-based coping strategies that promote teacher well-being.

## **The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model as an Integrative Framework**

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) offers a comprehensive theoretical foundation for analyzing the interrelationship between job requirements, personal resources, and professional outcomes. Based on the JD-R theory, job requirements (e.g., instructional load) account for burnout, whereas occupational and personal resources (e.g., conscientiousness) limit and reduce these impacts and promote engagement. Applications of the JD-R model in pedagogical settings have recently exhibited that personal resources, such as emotional intelligence and self-efficacy, considerably buffer the negative effect of high demands (Castro Silva et al., 2023; Scholze & Hecker, 2024). Nevertheless, the incorporation of consistent personality features, including conscientiousness, into JD-R formulations is still relatively rare.

Previous research carried out by Zawadzka et al. (2023) and Kim & Asbury (2020) declares that conscientiousness may function as a limiting resource, moderating the relationship between workload and burnout. This viewpoint is in line with Boyd et al. (2010), who support the idea of expanding the JD-R model to encompass dispositional traits of self-regulation. In online ELT, where instructional load is heightened, modeling conscientiousness as a JD-R resource can provide a much better understanding of why some educators succeed under pressure, whereas others face exhaustion.

Critical synthesis: Though JD-R research has increased rapidly across sectors, online language education needs further exploration. Little research has simultaneously measured instructional load (as demand), conscientiousness (as resource), and burnout (as result), leaving a conceptual and empirical gap in understanding the way these constructs interact within online teaching environments.

### **Synthesis and Research Gap**

Across the reviewed literature, three key themes emerge. The first one is "Burnout," which remains a critical issue in online ELT, intensified by technological and pedagogical demands. Next is "Instructional Load," which encompasses pedagogical, administrative, and technological dimensions, and is a salient predictor of teacher strain. Last but not least comes "Conscientiousness," which has the potential, as a personal resource, to mitigate these adverse effects through enhanced self-regulation and workload management.

However, the interrelation between these themes remains underexplored. Existing studies often address either environmental demands or personality traits in isolation, lacking integrative models that explain how conscientiousness shapes teachers' perceptions and management of instructional load. Additionally, mixed-methods approaches that integrate quantitative testing of predictive interplays with qualitative viewpoints into behavioral mechanisms are rare in ELT research.

To bridge this gap, this study employs the JD-R framework to explore the predictive and mediating roles of conscientiousness in the relationship between conceived instructional load and burnout among online EFL teachers of English as a Foreign Language. By triangulating

statistical evidence with qualitative narratives, this research adds to not only theoretical enhancement but also practical guidance for designing personality-sensitive professional growth programs in online ELT settings.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), integrating quantitative and qualitative data to examine how conscientiousness functions as a personal resource in managing perceived instructional load and preventing burnout among online EFL instructors. The quantitative phase utilized a predictive correlational design to test three null hypotheses derived from the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Following this phase, a qualitative phase was conducted to explore, in depth, the strategies and behaviors that high-conscientiousness instructors employ to regulate workload and maintain well-being. The sequential integration allowed quantitative findings to guide qualitative sampling and question design, facilitating a more nuanced understanding of the behavioral mechanisms underlying statistical relationships.

### **Participants**

#### **Quantitative Phase**

In the quantitative phase, the sample consisted of 92 Iranian EFL instructors (63 females, 29 males) teaching in online English language programs at different branches of Safir Language Academy in Tehran and 2 more neighboring cities. Participants were selected via purposive sampling and inclusion criteria, which were A) holding at least a BA in English, TEFL, or Applied Linguistics; B) a minimum of one year of online teaching experience, and C) currently teaching intermediate or advanced EFL learners through synchronous or blended online platforms (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet, or LMS portals such as Moodle). The participants had an average age range of 34.7 years ( $SD = 6.2$ ), and their average online teaching experience was 3.8 years ( $SD = 1.9$ ). Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was obtained electronically.

#### **Qualitative Phase**

Based on quantitative results, 15 instructors representing the upper quartile of conscientiousness scores were purposefully selected for follow-up interviews. This criterion-based selection allowed examination of real-world coping behaviors among instructors most aligned with the study's focal trait. Demographically, the qualitative subsample mirrored the larger group in gender and teaching experience, ensuring representativeness.

### **Instruments**

In the quantitative phase, three validated instruments were employed together with a semi-structured interview guide, which was developed for the qualitative phase.

## 1. Big Five Inventory

The Conscientiousness subscale (9 items) of the 44-item BFI (John & Srivastava, 1999) was used to measure participants' trait conscientiousness. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Sample items include "I see myself as someone who does a thorough job." Cronbach's alpha for the subscale in this study was .84, indicating good internal consistency.

## 2. Perceived Instructional Load Scale

To assess perceived instructional load, an 8-item scale was adapted from Houichi & Sarnou's (2020) online teaching cognitive load inventory, contextualized for instructors. It measured perceptions of pedagogical, technological, and administrative demands (e.g., Preparing online lessons requires significantly more time and effort than in-person teaching). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Internal consistency was  $\alpha = .86$ .

## 3. Maslach Burnout Inventory – Educators' Survey

The MBI-ES (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) (22 items) measured teacher burnout across three dimensions: Emotional Exhaustion (EE), Depersonalization (DP), and Personal Accomplishment (PA). Following standard practice, a composite burnout score was calculated by combining EE and DP (reverse-coded PA). Responses were given on a 7-point frequency scale (0 = never, 6 = every day). Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were .90 (EE), .78 (DP), and .81 (PA), indicating strong reliability.

## 4. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore the behavioral mechanisms underlying conscientiousness-related coping. Sample prompts included:

- "Can you describe your typical approach to planning and organizing online lessons?"
- "How do you set boundaries between work and personal life during online semesters?"
- "What digital strategies help you manage instructional demands efficiently?"

Each interview lasted 30–40 minutes, was conducted via Zoom, and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim with participants' consent.

## Procedure

### Quantitative Phase

As for recruitment and consent, oral invitations together with a written study description and consent form were presented to the participating teachers in person. Regarding online survey administration, the participants completed the instruments in a single online session via Google Forms, which took them approximately 20 minutes. Concerning data screening, responses were

checked for completeness, and assumptions of normality, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity were tested before analysis. And for confidentiality purposes, all responses were anonymous, and no identifying information was collected.

### **Qualitative Phase**

In this phase, and based on quantitative results, 15 participants scoring in the upper quartile of conscientiousness were selected for sampling purposes. Regarding interview scheduling, sessions were arranged at the participants' convenience and conducted in English. Finally, and for the purpose of recording and transcription, each interview was recorded, transcribed, and member-checked for accuracy.

The integration point occurred during interpretation, where qualitative findings were used to explain and contextualize statistical patterns (e.g., how conscientiousness manifests behaviorally to reduce burnout).

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Quantitative Analysis**

Data were analyzed using SPSS 27 and PROCESS Macro v4.2 (Hayes, 2013). To this end, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis) and reliability indices (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) were computed. Pearson correlations examined bivariate relationships among variables. Hierarchical multiple regression tested  $H_{01}$  and  $H_{02}$ , with Step 1 including perceived instructional load as a predictor of burnout and Step 2 adding conscientiousness to assess incremental variance ( $\Delta R^2$ ). Moderation analysis (PROCESS Model 1) tested  $H_{03}$ , examining whether conscientiousness moderated the instructional load–burnout link. Assumptions of normality, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity were verified. The significance level was set at  $\alpha = .05$ , and effect sizes ( $\beta$ ,  $\Delta R^2$ , and 95% CI) were reported for interpretive clarity.

#### **Qualitative Analysis**

Interview transcripts were coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) in NVivo 14. The analysis followed a six-phase approach involving familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report production.

An inductive approach ensured that themes emerged from participants' narratives while being interpreted through the lens of JD-R theory. Peer debriefing and member checking enhanced trustworthiness, and triangulation across data sources (survey + interviews) improved validity.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Participants provided informed consent, were assured of confidentiality, and retained the right to withdraw at any point. All data were securely stored and reported anonymously.

## Results

### Quantitative Results

#### Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, and Pearson Correlation Coefficients among the three main variables: Perceived Instructional Load (PIL), Conscientiousness (CON), and Burnout (BO).

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Study Variables (N = 92)*

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Perceived Instructional Load	3.68	0.72	—		
2. Conscientiousness	4.02	0.54	-.31**	—	
3. Burnout	3.12	0.81	.48**	-.45**	—

**Note.**  $p < .05$ ;  $p < .01$  (two-tailed)

As shown in Table 1 above, perceived instructional load correlated positively with burnout ( $r = .48$ ,  $p < .01$ ), whereas conscientiousness correlated negatively with both perceived instructional load ( $r = -.31$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and burnout ( $r = -.45$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These results indicate that teachers perceiving higher instructional demands tend to experience greater burnout, while those with higher conscientiousness tend to perceive lower load and report less burnout.

#### Hierarchical Regression Analysis

To test  $H_{01}$  and  $H_{02}$ , a hierarchical multiple regression was conducted with Burnout as the dependent variable. Perceived Instructional Load was entered at Step 1, and Conscientiousness was added at Step 2 to assess incremental variance.

**Table 2**

*Hierarchical Regression Predicting Burnout (N = 92)*

Predictor	$\beta$	t	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	F (df)
Step 1			.23	—	26.78 (1, 90)**
Perceived Instructional Load	.48**	5.17			
Step 2			.37	.14**	25.79 (2, 89)**
Perceived Instructional Load	.36**	4.20			
Conscientiousness	-.39**	-4.54			

**Note.**  $p < .05$ ;  $p < .01$ .

### Interpretation:

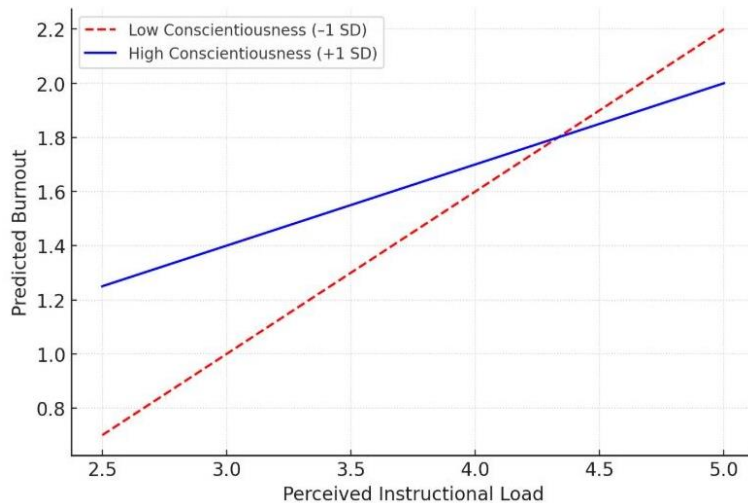
- Step 1 confirmed that perceived instructional load significantly predicted burnout ( $\beta = .48, p < .001$ ), and so, there is a positive relationship between the two variables, explaining 23% of the variance. Put in other words,  $H_{01}$ , which states that ‘there is no significant relationship between perceived instructional load and burnout among online EFL instructors’, is rejected.
- Step 2 showed that adding conscientiousness increased the explained variance by 14% ( $\Delta R^2 = .14, p < .001$ ).
- In the final model, conscientiousness remained a significant negative predictor ( $\beta = -.39, p < .001$ ), supporting  $H_{02}$  rejection, which stated that ‘conscientiousness does not significantly predict burnout after controlling for perceived instructional load’. This indicates that conscientiousness predicts lower burnout even after accounting for instructional load.

### Moderation Analysis

To test  $H_{03}$ , a moderation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Macro Model 1 (Hayes, 2013), with Conscientiousness as the moderator between Perceived Instructional Load and Burnout.

Results indicated a significant interaction effect ( $\beta = -.22, SE = .09, t = -2.44, p = .017, 95\% CI [-.40, -.04]$ ) showing that conscientiousness reliably moderated the relationship between instructional load and burnout and so  $H_{03}$  which stated that ‘conscientiousness does not significantly moderate the relationship between perceived instructional load and burnout.’ was rejected. The negative direction of both the coefficient and the confidence interval suggests that higher levels of conscientiousness weaken the positive association between instructional load and burnout. In other words, as teachers’ conscientiousness increases, the extent to which instructional load contributes to burnout decreases. The confidence interval further shows that the true moderating effect is likely to fall between  $-.40$  and  $-.04$ , reinforcing that this buffering influence is statistically significant and not due to random variation.

Figure 1 below also visually illustrates the moderating role of conscientiousness. As shown, burnout levels increase with higher instructional load, but the slope is flatter for high-conscientiousness teachers, confirming that conscientiousness buffers the effect of perceived instructional load on burnout. Put in other words, the slope representing the high-conscientiousness group (+1 SD) is noticeably flatter, indicating that teachers high in conscientiousness experienced less increase in burnout as instructional load rose, compared to low-conscientiousness teachers (-1 SD). Thus,  $H_{03}$  was rejected, confirming that conscientiousness buffers the effect of instructional load on burnout.



**Figure 1.** Moderation of the relationship between perceived instructional load and burnout by conscientiousness

## Qualitative Results

### Overview

To complement the quantitative findings, qualitative interviews with 15 high-conscientiousness instructors explored the behavioral strategies used to manage instructional load and prevent burnout. Thematic analysis yielded three overarching themes and nine subthemes, summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Themes and Subthemes Emerging from Qualitative Interviews*

Theme	Subthemes	Description
1. Structured Pedagogical Planning	(a) Weekly scheduling, (b) Task batching, (c) Prioritization	Teachers created weekly timetables, batched repetitive tasks (e.g., feedback), and prioritized essential content to reduce overload.
2. Digital Organization and Efficiency	(a) LMS automation, (b) Template use, (c) Resource repositories	Participants employed tools (Moodle auto-grading, lesson templates) to streamline preparation and grading.
3. Boundary-Setting and Self-Regulation	(a) Work-life separation, (b) Self-care routines, (c) Cognitive reframing	Instructors maintained fixed working hours, engaged in brief restorative breaks, and reframed heavy workloads as professional growth opportunities.

As can be seen in Table 3 above, thematic analysis of interview data yielded three overarching themes—Structured Pedagogical Planning, Digital Organization and Efficiency, and

Boundary-Setting and Self-Regulation—which illustrate how conscientiousness supports effective workload management.

Under Structured Pedagogical Planning, instructors described proactive strategies such as weekly scheduling, task batching, and prioritization. By organizing their lessons, grading, and meetings in advance, they reduced uncertainty and last-minute pressure. One participant noted, “I map out every week in detail—lessons, grading, meetings—so I’m never reacting last minute.”

The second theme, Digital Organization and Efficiency, reflected strategic use of technology. Teachers reported employing automation tools in LMS platforms, reusing slide and feedback templates, and maintaining organized resource repositories to streamline repetitive tasks. As one instructor commented, “I use Moodle quizzes for self-marking and keep reusable slide templates—it saves hours.”

The final theme, Boundary-Setting and Self-Regulation, described teachers’ efforts to maintain psychological balance through clear work–life separation, self-care routines, and cognitive reframing of workload stress. For instance, one teacher shared, “After 8 p.m., I switch off notifications—that’s my family time.”

Together, these themes show that conscientious teachers manage instructional load by organizing their tasks systematically, optimizing digital resources, and regulating their energy, thereby mitigating burnout risk.

### **Integration with Quantitative Findings**

Qualitative findings elucidated the *mechanisms* through which conscientiousness functions as a protective resource in the JD-R framework. High-conscientiousness teachers reduced job demands via planning and automation, enhanced personal resources through self-regulation, and sustained engagement by reframing stressors positively. These behaviors collectively weakened the load–burnout link, supporting quantitative moderation results. To summarize qualitative results and answer RQ4, one can say that qualitative data revealed coping strategies (planning, digital organization, boundary-setting) underpinning conscientiousness’ buffering role.

The convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrates that conscientiousness not only predicts lower burnout but also shapes behavioral patterns that help teachers actively manage instructional load in online ELT contexts — fully consistent with the JD-R model’s resource-buffering proposition.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study is to explore the significant role that conscientiousness plays in managing perceived instructional load and preventing burnout among online English as a Foreign Language teachers, grounded in the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) and the Big Five personality framework (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the study integrated hierarchical regression,

moderation analysis, and qualitative interviews to propose a thorough understanding of how a main personality trait interplays with job demands in online English Language Teaching settings. The following discussion incorporates these findings from theoretical, empirical, and pedagogical viewpoints.

## **Interpretation of Findings**

### **Instructional Load and Burnout**

Consistent with  $H_{01}$  rejection, perceived instructional load was an important positive predictor of burnout, explaining 23% of the variance. This reinforces previous research showing that increased job requirement directly leads to emotional fatigue and depersonalization in education (Maslach & Leiter, 2008; König & Frey, 2022). The findings are in line with the JD-R model's core principle that excessive demands without adequate resources heighten the risk of stress. Within online ELT, instructional load includes both lesson planning and technological incorporation and management of digital communication, which jointly increase teachers' cognitive and emotional demands (Houichi, A., & Sarnou, 2020; Kizil et al., 2025).

### **Conscientiousness as a Predictor of Burnout**

Supporting  $H_{02}$  rejection, conscientiousness appeared as a strong negative predictor of burnout, explaining an extra 14% of variance apart from instructional load. These findings pinpoint conscientiousness as a protective personal resource, aligned with results from teacher psychology (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Zawadzka et al., 2023). Conscientious people, who are characterized by diligence, organization, and self-discipline, are better able to plan workloads, stick to plans, and keep their professional efficacy even under high educational requirements. From the JD-R viewpoint, conscientiousness functions as a resource reservoir, enabling proactive coping and adaptive self-regulation that buffers the harmful effects of job requirements.

### **Moderating Effect of Conscientiousness**

The noteworthy interplay effect witnessed in  $H_{03}$  further confirms the mitigating hypothesis of the JD-R model: conscientiousness impairs the positive relationship between instructional load and burnout. As it has been shown in Figure 1, high-conscientiousness teachers showed a flatter slope, demonstrating less increase in burnout as demands heightened. This moderating trend reflects findings from wider occupational research, which recognize conscientiousness as a resilience element that improves planning, persistence, and effort regulation (Boyd et al., 2010). Therefore, the results provide new evidence that personality-based resources can alleviate the stress-strain pathway within online ELT, an environment characterized by persistent digital and emotional load.

## Qualitative Corroboration

The qualitative results broadened this interpretation by highlighting behavioral mechanisms aligned with high conscientiousness, like 'Structured pedagogical planning', 'Digital organization and efficiency', and 'Boundary-setting and self-regulation'.

These strategies practically instantiate conscientiousness, mirroring agentic management of resources instead of passive trait influence. Teachers described advanced planning, automation via LMS tools, and purposeful boundary-setting — all behaviors that are in line with self-regulatory and resource-conservation theories (Hobfoll, 2011). Collectively, these patterns crystallize the way conscientiousness enacts its mitigating role — by promoting systematic routines and cognitive perspectives that change job requirements into manageable demands.

## Integration with Theory and Literature

The present results together expand the JD-R model by empirically indicating that consistent personality features, like conscientiousness, can function as enduring personal resources in teaching environments. While previous JD-R applications emphasized situational supports (for instance, autonomy, peer collaboration), this study highlights the trait-resource pathway, indicating that stable traits help adaptive coping potential. Additionally, the incorporation of Big Five personality theory into the JD-R framework deepens explanatory scope, conceptualizing conscientiousness not only as a predictor but also as a moderator of stress.

Based on empirical data, the study supports prior research connecting workload and burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2008; König & Frey, 2022) and provides new evidence particular to online ELT, an environment where instructional load is intensified by digital complexity (Houichi, A., & Sarnou, 2020). By exhibiting a statistically and practically significant moderating role, it also responds to recent calls (Scholze & Hecker, 2024) for refined models incorporating individual differences within job-requirement structures.

## Pedagogical and Professional Implications

The results of the present study bear several implications for teacher education, professional growth, and organizational policy:

1. **Personality-Sensitive Professional Growth:**
2. Training modules can integrate self-awareness activities and goal-setting workshops to help educators control conscientiousness-linked behaviors (e.g., planning, prioritization, boundary management).
3. **Digital Time-Management Training:**
4. Workshops underscoring workflow automation, template design, and task batching can model strategies recognized among teachers with high conscientiousness.
5. **Workload Policy Reforms:**
6. Institutions should design context-responsive workload models, identifying diversity in individual coping capacities and fostering fair distribution of online educational tasks.

7. **Teacher Well-being Initiatives:**
8. Embedding reflective practices, stress-management techniques, and support communities may reinforce accessibility of resources, particularly for instructors who have lower conscientiousness.
9. **AI-Assisted Load Management:**
10. Future professional development may integrate AI-based planning tools that scaffold organization, mirroring behaviors of highly conscientious instructors — thereby democratizing access to adaptive strategies.

## Limitations

This study bears some limitations in spite of its contributions:

1. **Sample Representativeness:**
2. The population under study consisted merely of Iranian online EFL instructors, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other cultural and institutional settings.
3. **Self-Report Bias:**
4. The use of self-report measures on all variables provides an opportunity for common method variance; however, follow-up studies might obtain peer ratings of the participants or objective measures of workload.
5. **Cross-Sectional Design:**
6. Because of the design used, causality cannot be inferred. Longitudinal studies might provide some insight into the directionality of conscientiousness, workload, and burnout over time.
7. **Single Trait Focus:**
8. Although the study was mostly concerned with conscientiousness, it may be that other traits, such as emotional stability and openness, might have a different interaction with instructional load, which would merit investigation.
9. **Contextual Variables:**
10. Leadership style and autonomy in the institutions of which the sample was constituted were not factored; however, the introduction of those job resources would add considerably to the ecological validity of the JD-R model.

## Suggestions for Future Research

1. **Longitudinal and Cross-Cultural Studies:**
2. Teachers should be studied over certain terms and different nations, so that the dynamics of time and culture in the burnout and load processes can be identified.
3. **Experimental and Intervention Designs:**
4. It would be valuable to carry out experimental designs, such as training courses, i.e., time management and planning courses, to find out whether increasing conscientiousness and related behaviors can lead to a decrease in burnout.
5. **Multivariate Modeling:**
6. Another area that should be investigated is multivariate experimental design by using structural equation modeling (SEM), which would identify the direct, mediated, and moderated pathways in the JD-R models.

**7. Comparative Personality Analysis:**

8. The area of personality and comparison of traits in relation to others of the Big Five, i.e., neuroticism, extraversion, etc., in terms of job demands and prediction of burnout, could be a valuable area of research with regard to trait-resource theory.

**9. Integration of Technological Supports:**

10. The practical aspects of using technological help and support, such as computer literacy and workload implications from artificial intelligence (AI) programs, could be investigated with the aim of decreasing the workload of teachers of various personality groupings.

## **Conclusion**

This study set out to investigate the role of conscientiousness in managing instructional load and preventing burnout among online EFL instructors, using the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model and the Big Five personality framework as guiding perspectives. In an era of increasing digital complexity and instructional demands, understanding how personal resources shape teachers’ capacity for resilience is both theoretically significant and practically urgent.

Findings from the quantitative phase revealed three key patterns:

1. Perceived instructional load had a positive and significant impact on burnout, confirming it as a significant job demand in online ELT.
2. Conscientiousness appeared to be a negative predictor of burnout levels, showing that instructors with high conscientiousness have less emotional fatigue and depersonalization.
3. Conscientiousness was further shown to moderate the perceived load-burnout relationship, providing a buffer against high experience of overload.

Supporting qualitative data showed how conscientious teachers deal with these demands: through planning, efficient use of technology, and value-setting. These are ways in which teachers can express behavior showing their conscientiousness, which help conserve psychological resources and preserve well-being.

These results extend the JD-R model theoretically by viewing conscientiousness as a personal resource contributing direct effects and buffering properties of job suffering. Practically, these results suggest that teacher training programs should encourage the knowledge and skills necessary for the attainment of conscientiousness-related competencies – proactive organization, workload organization, and digital self-management, all of which contribute to the enhancement of resilience in an online teaching environment. Institutional leadership would be wise to advocate workload technologies that allow better bracketing of job demands with available resources, particularly in recognizing personality types and their potential in coping with workload.

Finally, this study shows that preventing burnout in online ELT is not simply a linear process in which job demands are diminished, but rather that internal resources must be developed, which will energize teachers and allow them to cope more effectively with these demands.

Therefore, the implementation of trait-informed professional development initiatives and positively biased, resource-type institutional support will contribute to educational systems, enhancing a viable, adaptive, and worthwhile online teaching career.

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