



Career plateauing and job burnout: The mediating role of career calling

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How to cite: Yao, M., & Zhao, H. (2024). Career plateauing and job burnout: The mediating role of career calling. *Social Behavior and Personality: An international journal*, 52(12), e13944

This study explored the association between career plateauing and job burnout, with a particular focus on career calling as a potential mediator. We distributed questionnaires to 305 English as a foreign language teachers in China and employed structural equation modeling to analyze and evaluate the proposed conceptual model. The findings revealed there was a negative relationship between career plateauing and career calling, and furthermore, the relationship between career plateauing and job burnout was mediated by career calling. This study provides a fresh theoretical perspective on how career plateauing relates to job burnout and offers practical implications for educational institutions to mitigate the adverse effects of career plateauing and foster sustainable well-being among English as a foreign language teachers.

Keywords

career plateauing, career calling, job burnout, English as a foreign language teachers

Article Highlights

- We developed a theoretical model to examine career plateauing, career calling, and job burnout among English as a foreign language teachers.
- Career plateauing was negatively correlated with career calling, which, in turn, was negatively correlated with job burnout.
- Career calling played a key mediating role between career plateauing and job burnout.

Job burnout, characterized by a range of physiological syndromes emerging in the workplace due to excessive work demands, has garnered attention from scholars and professionals (e.g., Lubbadeh, 2020). Teachers who suffer from burnout commonly exhibit diminished patience and empathy toward their students, decreased enthusiasm regarding teaching effectiveness, and a higher likelihood of leaving the teaching profession (Shen et al., 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020; Wong et al., 2017). Furthermore, research suggests that burnout can result in stress, anxiety, and depression, impacting the mental well-being of teachers (Agyapong et al., 2022). Thus, comprehending job burnout in teachers and implementing tailored interventions may help to mitigate and manage burnout symptoms, increase overall well-being, and enhance the stability of teaching teams (Beames et al., 2023; Samadi, 2020).

Teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) in China encounter notable physical and emotional strains, notably within the context of an examination-driven pedagogy (Fan et al., 2021). In such scenarios the propensity for job burnout among EFL teachers is notably elevated (Yu & Yu, 2023). Prior research has delved into various psychological and contextual variables influencing burnout among EFL teachers, including self-efficacy, resilience, emotional regulation, time constraints, and disciplinary issues (Khani & Mirzaee, 2015; Li, 2023). Nevertheless, limited research has explored the connection between career-related factors and burnout among EFL teachers.

In the realm of organizational psychology, career plateauing poses a significant challenge for employees, with nearly all staff members encountering this phenomenon at some point during their professional journeys (Abd-Elrhman et al., 2020). *Career plateauing* is defined as a sense of frustration that arises when avenues for career progression become limited within an organization (Milliman, 1992). Research has shown that career plateauing serves as a precursor to various adverse work-related outcomes, including diminished engagement, decreased organizational identification, and heightened turnover intentions (Wen & Liu, 2015; K. Yuan et al., 2022).

Kwon (2022) delved into the impact of career plateauing on job burnout amidst the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing a positive association between the two constructs. Their research identified that the remote nature of work necessitated by the pandemic may underlie the stark link between career plateauing and job burnout. As individuals grapple with the challenges of remote work, characterized by increased isolation and limited opportunities for self-enhancement, feelings of anxiety and helplessness may give rise to career plateauing and eventual burnout (Kwon, 2022). As society transitions back to traditional work settings postpandemic, it becomes imperative to delve deeper into the relationship between career plateauing and job burnout.

Moreover, *career calling* has emerged as a buffering factor against burnout (Zhao et al., 2022), encapsulating the intrinsic drive and enthusiasm individuals harbor toward their professional roles, often fostering a profound sense of purpose and contentment in their careers (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007). This concept underscores a strong devotion to a specific career domain, which is particularly pertinent in high-stress professions like teaching (Redín & Erro-Garcés, 2020). Within the context of EFL teaching in China, a field undergoing continuous transformations in response to societal shifts, there is mounting pressure on educators to meet evolving expectations (R. Yuan & Zhang, 2017). Against this backdrop, we probed the interplay of career plateauing, career calling, and job burnout among Chinese EFL teachers, with the aim of elucidating whether career calling acts as a mediator in the relationship between career plateauing and job burnout. The research model of this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

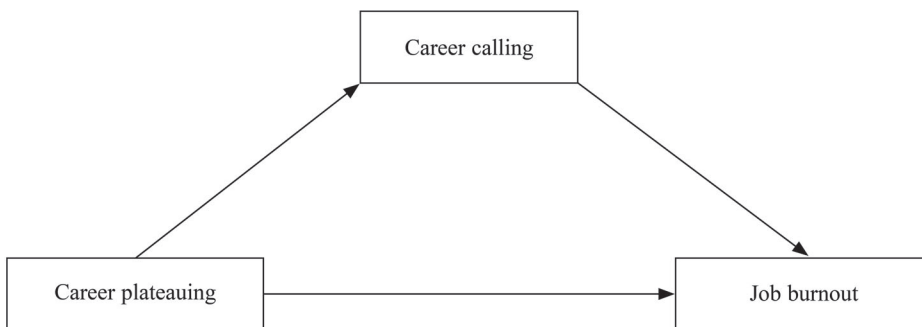


Figure 1. *Theoretical Model*

The Current Study

Career plateauing occurs when employees perceive a lack of opportunities for advancement, growth, or development in their current positions (Milliman, 1992). When teachers reach a career plateau, they may experience a decrease in motivation and engagement with their work (K. Yuan et al., 2022). Faskhodi and Siyyari (2018) found a significant negative correlation between work engagement and burnout among EFL teachers. Moreover, career plateauing can create feelings of job insecurity (Kurji et al., 2023), which can increase teachers' vulnerability to job burnout (Çetin & Çolak, 2020). Research has also suggested that employees experiencing a career plateau may engage in psychological

withdrawal behaviors such as reduced effort at work, absenteeism, or even contemplating leaving the organization (Shakiladevi & Basariya, 2018; Wen & Liu, 2015). These behaviors can contribute to job burnout, as the employee feels disconnected from their work and the organization (Petitta & Vecchione, 2011). Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Career plateauing will be positively related to job burnout.

Career calling is frequently linked to *intrinsic motivation*, defined as participation in activities for the inherent satisfaction and enjoyment they offer (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007; Rheinberg & Engeser, 2018). When individuals perceive their work as a calling, they are more inclined to experience a sense of purpose, fulfillment, and significance in their professional capacities. Thus, intrinsic motivation serves as a protective factor against job burnout (Zhao et al., 2022). Those who interpret their work as a calling often demonstrate greater levels of resilience and effective coping mechanisms in dealing with work-related challenges and stressors (Kemsley, 2018; Leshner, 2015). This capacity to adaptively manage job demands can assist in averting the escalation of burnout symptoms (Gong et al., 2021). Within the realm of education, educators who approach their profession with a career calling exhibit a profound sense of meaning and purpose, manifesting a higher willingness to dedicate considerable effort and engagement, hence experiencing diminished role stress and job burnout (Zhao et al., 2022).

Moreover, career plateauing is typified by restricted opportunities for progression or skill enhancement (Milliman, 1992). This dearth of advancement possibilities may impede an individual's pursuit of their career calling, as they might perceive limitations imposed by their current position, hindering meaningful pursuit of their passions or interests (Dik et al., 2019). Furthermore, career plateauing engenders heightened levels of stress and discontent with one's professional trajectory (Arora, 2014). These adverse psychological consequences can impede individuals' ability to engage with their career calling, leading to challenges in maintaining a sense of purpose and enthusiasm in their work (Chandio et al., 2013). Therefore, we anticipated that a misalignment between EFL teachers' career aspirations and the actuality of their professional growth opportunities due to career plateauing may heighten feelings of burnout in their teaching roles. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Career calling will mediate the positive relationship between career plateauing and job burnout.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We derived the data utilized in this study from a convenience sample consisting of EFL teachers who participated in a national conference on reforms in English teaching at colleges held in western China. The study received ethical approval from the ethics committee affiliated with Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. To ensure data validity, we instructed participants not to submit partially filled surveys. Of the surveys we received, 17 were removed due to being incomplete and 305 valid responses (94.72%) were included in the final analysis. The demographic characteristics of the sample population are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of Respondents

Demographics	<i>N</i>	%	<i>M (SD)</i>	Range
Gender				
Male	89	29.18		
Female	216	70.82		
Age			37.45 (9.65)	25–51
Teaching experience			8.92 (6.42)	4–22

Note. Age and teaching experience were measured in years.

Measures

Given that the study participants consisted of English teachers who possessed a high level of proficiency in the English language, translation of the items was unnecessary. Consequently, the original versions of the scales were employed in this research. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Career Plateauing

We measured career plateauing using Wang et al.'s (2014) six-item shortened version of the Career Plateauing Scale developed by Milliman (1992). A sample item is "I have reached a point in my career where I do not expect to move much higher."

Career Calling

We adopted Dik et al.'s (2012) two-item Brief Calling Scale to measure career calling. A sample item is "I have a good understanding of my calling as it applies to my career."

Job Burnout

We adopted Wu et al.'s (2019) eight-item scale to measure job burnout. A sample item is "I feel tired when I wake up and have to face the day's work."

Results

Correlation Analysis

Table 2 presents the correlations, means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alphas for the measures utilized in the study.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Cronbach's Alphas

Measurement variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	1	2	3
1. Career plateau	3.16	0.76	.83	.73		
2. Career calling	3.25	0.85	.81	-.44***	.73	
3. Job burnout	3.47	0.81	.85	.27***	-.53***	.73

Note. *N* = 305. Square roots of average variance extracted are shown on the diagonal.

** $p < .01$.

Reliability and Validity Assessment

We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to assess the reliability and validity of the model. As displayed in Table 3, the three-factor model exhibited a satisfactory fit to the data and outperformed the single-factor model. Additionally, composite reliability values exceeded .70 and average variance extracted (AVE) values surpassed .50. Furthermore, the square root of AVE for each construct exceeded the correlations between the given construct and those of other constructs. These results confirmed the adequacy of the measures' validity and reliability.

Table 3. Model Fit Indices

Model	χ^2	χ^2/df	RMSEA	NFI	RFI	TLI	CFI
A: Three-factor model ^a	125.60	1.24	.03	.94	.93	.99	.99
B: One-factor model ^b	877.08	8.43	.14	.60	.54	.57	.63

Note. RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; NFI = normed fit index; RFI = relative fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index; CFI = comparative fit index.

^a Career plateauing, Career calling, Job burnout; ^b Career plateauing + Career calling + Job burnout.

Structural Equation Modeling

Subsequently, we constructed a structural equation model to examine the direct and indirect effects of career plateauing and career calling on job burnout. We evaluated the mediating role of career calling using the bootstrapping method, with 5,000 iterations and 95% confidence intervals (CIs). The path coefficient from career plateauing to job burnout was nonsignificant, $\beta = .04$, $p = .53$, 95% CI [-0.10, 0.19]; thus, Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Negative relationships emerged between career plateauing and career calling, $\beta = -.44$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.56, -0.31], and between career calling and job burnout, $\beta = -.51$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.65, -0.36]. Of particular note, the findings revealed a significant indirect effect of career plateauing on job burnout as mediated by career calling, $\beta = .22$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.34], supporting Hypothesis 2.

Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the associations among career plateauing, career calling, and job burnout among Chinese EFL teachers. Analysis of the proposed model revealed significant results. First, although we found a positive correlation between career plateauing and job burnout, which is similar to the findings of Kwon (2022), structural equation modeling analysis did not support the positive link between the two variables. One possible rationale for this observation is the inclusion of career calling as a mediator in the present study. Moreover, Chinese authorities have recently implemented educational policies aiming at enhancing teachers' welfare, training, and overall job satisfaction (Gong, 2023). Consequently, EFL teachers may now operate within a supportive work environment characterized by appreciation and backing from colleagues and superiors, which could help alleviate the adverse effects of career plateauing on job burnout (Aronsson et al., 2017).

Additionally, we observed that career calling played a crucial role in elucidating the relationship between career plateauing and EFL teachers' job burnout. Specifically, EFL teachers experiencing career plateauing had low levels of career calling, leading to heightened job burnout. This finding aligns with those of Zhao et al. (2022), emphasizing the significance of career calling in mitigating teachers' job burnout. The identification of career calling as a mediator in the link between career plateauing and job burnout suggests that career plateauing itself does not directly cause job burnout; rather, teachers facing career plateauing are susceptible to job burnout due to their diminished sense of career calling. These results contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of career plateauing in the context of EFL teaching.

This study also has practical implications. First, educational institutions should facilitate opportunities for EFL teachers to enhance their skills and pursue career advancement to prevent career plateauing. Second, institutions should cultivate a work environment that emphasizes the meaningful aspects of teaching English as a foreign language. Furthermore, it is crucial for educators to have access to career counseling services that can assist them in exploring their passions and

interests within the realm of EFL teaching. By taking these practical implications into account, educational institutions can effectively support EFL teachers in sustaining a sense of career calling, overcoming career plateauing, and ultimately mitigating job burnout within their profession.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Our use of a cross-sectional investigation approach means we could not establish causality, highlighting the need for future longitudinal studies. The utilization of solely self-report measures in this research suggests the potential presence of bias in the results, underscoring the necessity for forthcoming studies to incorporate diverse data sources, such as interviews, peer evaluations, or student assessments. Furthermore, while this study focused exclusively on the mediating effect of career calling, it is imperative to acknowledge that additional contextual boundary factors, notably the work environment, also play a crucial role in influencing the relationship between career plateauing and job burnout. Future research endeavors could delve into the impact of other boundary factors on the mechanism linking career plateauing to job burnout, thereby enhancing comprehension of the phenomenon of career plateauing. Future research could also consider whether career calling functions as a moderator between career plateauing and job burnout.

Acknowledgments

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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