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Decision fatigue among EFL teachers: Sources, instructional consequences, and coping strategies

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ABSTRACT

EFL teachers make many instructional, administrative, and interpersonal decisions throughout the working day, yet decision fatigue in EFL teaching has received limited research attention. This study examined the level of decision fatigue among EFL teachers, its reported sources, its effects on teaching practices, and the strategies teachers used to manage it. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was used. Quantitative data were collected from 364 EFL teachers through the nine-item Decision Fatigue Scale and analyzed using descriptive statistics. Semi-structured interviews were subsequently conducted with six EFL teachers, and the interview data were analyzed thematically to explain the scale results. The scale results showed a high level of decision fatigue among the participants. The interviews linked decision fatigue to administrative workload and non-teaching tasks, parental pressure or negligence, students' lack of motivation, assessment responsibilities, material preparation, and toxic work environments. Participants reported loss of motivation, reduced instructional clarity, and avoidance as its effects on teaching. Collaboration, passive recovery, and self-regulation were identified as coping strategies. The results indicate that decision fatigue may affect teachers' classroom attention, instructional decisions, and responses to changing classroom needs. Reducing unnecessary non-teaching duties and giving teachers regular opportunities to share planning and classroom decisions with colleagues may help reduce decision fatigue and maintain instructional clarity in EFL classrooms.

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Introduction

A teacher is responsible for every activity and action in the classroom during instruction. Furthermore, they are expected to collaborate with colleagues and families. As in all fields of education, in the continuously changing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, teachers are expected to make countless decisions daily. They often require quick thinking and adaptability, from selecting appropriate teaching materials and adjusting lesson plans to assessing student performance and managing the classroom. Additionally, they do it in a foreign language (English in this context). Every decision made, regardless of its significance, consumes some of the brain's energy, ultimately depleting the personal capacity for decision-making (DM) (Dubash et al., 2020). Over time, this continuous consumption and depletion can

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impose a significant burden on EFL teachers. If they do not repeatedly recover, they may feel decision fatigue (DF). DM becomes tougher due to DF, leading the brain to seek beelines (Tierney, 2011); this can manifest as impulsive DM or a tendency to avoid DM. Although many studies investigated DF in profession-specific fields (Dong et al., 2024; Dubey, 2019; Fernández-Miranda et al., 2023; Kosarko, 2024; Sarıakçalı, 2025; Schweitzer et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2018), there is no department-specific research in education. DF has been widely studied in healthcare and business contexts. However, research on DF in EFL education remains limited, despite the constant and linguistically mediated nature of DM in this context. EFL teachers make educational decisions in another language, so acting consistently, logically, and pedagogically appropriately becomes difficult, and consequently, the quality of their decisions may decrease. This decrease in decision quality may negatively affect classroom management, student engagement, and teacher-student interaction, which are very important for learning EFL.

The current study provides insights into how DF manifests among EFL teachers who make intense decisions. By doing so, it contributes to a profound understanding of the DF that EFL teachers face by highlighting causes. The findings aim to inform the stakeholders and EFL teachers about the importance of teacher well-being by focusing on the effects of DF on EFL teaching. Furthermore, it helps promote teacher, student, and educational effectiveness by shedding light on the DF and overcoming strategies. Although DM and its related dimensions are prosaic in education, DF has not been given regard in EFL education. For this purpose, the research questions are:

1) What is the level of DF among EFL teachers?
2) What are the main sources of DF among EFL teachers?
3) What effects does DF have on EFL teachers' teaching practices?
4) What coping strategies do EFL teachers use to manage DF?

Literature Review

DM involves envisioning rival paths, assigning actions based on possible outcomes, and choosing the action with a stronger sequel than the threat (Shackle, 1986). To clarify, the cognitive process of selecting a plan of action from a range of options is known as DM (Agarwal et al., 2023). DM is a constant part of the teaching process, which places teachers in a central role (Eggleston, 2018). It is a course of information processing which helps teachers to understand a problem, relate evidence from the context, evaluate pros and cons, choose a criterion, and make a decision (Smith, 2017). Those decisions can vary from setting the objectives to be taught, materials to be used, activities to be executed, to evaluation (Subedi et al., 2023), and significantly affect student success/failure (Eggleston, 2018).

Freeman (1989) represents teaching language via a model that includes four static elements (knowledge, skills, attitude, and awareness), which lacks a "moving part" and clearly states that the dynamism is enabled with DM. An analogy can be drawn: DM works like the cylinder of a car that makes it go smoothly on the road. Shavelson and Stern (1981) present two assumptions on teaching as a cognitive process: the first asserts that teachers make decisions based on constructed models by themselves and behave reasonably regarding those

models, while the second relates thoughts and actions; teachers' behaviors are led by their judgments, thoughts, and decisions (Shavelson & Stern, 1981). In other words, teaching cognitions are transformed into teaching actions (Borko & Shavelson, 2013).

Smith (1996) proposes a framework for DM of EFL teachers. The framework illustrates how their decisions are shaped by both pre-active (teacher characteristics) and context (institution, setting, and students) factors, which are reflected in both planning and implementation decisions interdependently in Figure 1.

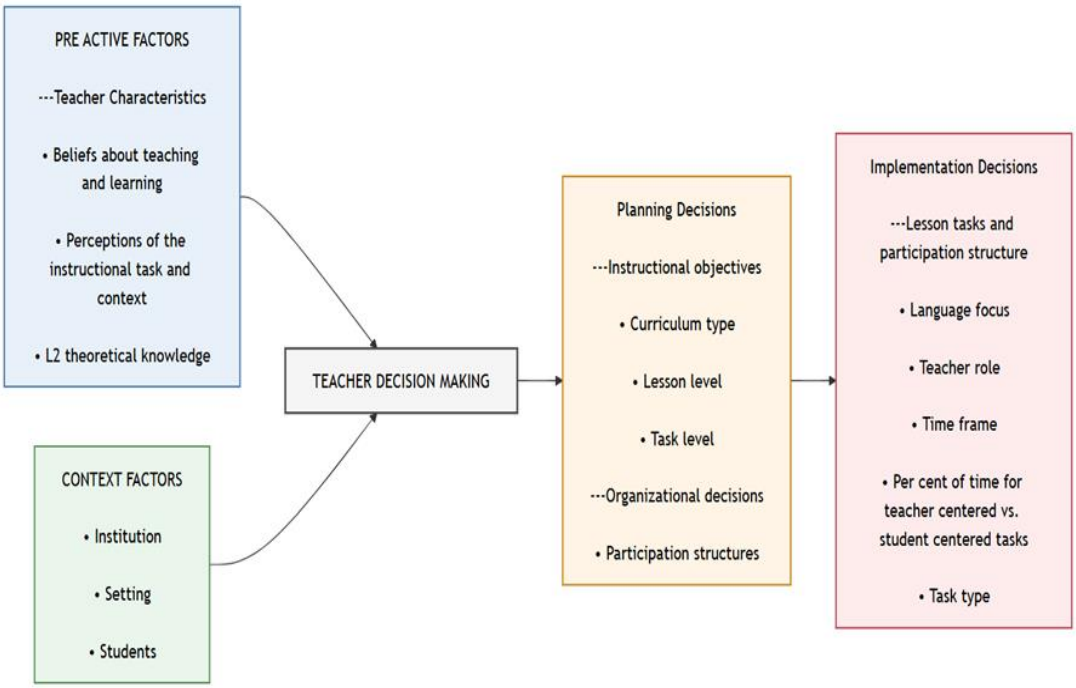

Figure 1. EFL teacher DM framework of relationships (Adapted from Smith, 1996)

Fatigue is felt when a task is performed until it feels like it requires more effort than it should (Macintosh & Rassier, 2002). A subjective condition of extreme, prolonged tiredness and diminished physical and mental energy that does not get better with rest is called fatigue (Cella et al., 1998). It is also expressed as the recognition of a lower capacity to engage in physical and/or mental activities as a result of an imbalance in the availability, use, and/or recovery of resources required for action (Aaronson et al., 1999). Baumeister et al. (2007) propose the Strength Model of Self-control, drawing an analogy between self-control and a muscle; as a muscle gets tired of physical efforts, the self-control may get tired of cognitive efforts. Meanwhile, every decision costs a biological worth (Tierney, 2011). DM can be perceived as something easy. Contrarily, it involves the analysis of different pathways to find the best solution to a problem; it is the combination of all elements in the process (Blackley et al., 2021). To illustrate, repeated DM can exhaust mental resources, leading to psychological challenges (i.e., anxiety, stress), practical challenges (i.e., uncertainty and risky behaviors), ethical concerns, and emotional distress (Grignoli et al., 2025). As one of the reasons for loss of control on decisions, DF is a psychological term described as "the impaired ability to make decisions and control behavior as a consequence of repeated acts of decision-making" (Pignatiello et al., 2020, p. 123).

A decision-maker should be sure where to pay attention under pressure, even if the attention is demanded for more than one situation (Stacey et al., 2024). EFL teachers are in a position of DM (Kardena, 2024), influencing all aspects of the instruction processes. When considering that a teacher can make between 21 and 30 decisions in half an hour on average (Stacey et al., 2024), DF can be an effective factor that deteriorates healthy DM among teachers, as the process of DM itself includes various factors and has many results. In a teaching hour, from error correction to appraisal, taking attendance accurately, to finishing the lesson and curriculum on time, teaching, and shaping the behaviors of the students are some of the tasks of an EFL teacher. Time is limited; although the teacher has to make countless decisions, being analytical and critical. On the other hand, being analytical and critical may become difficult because of DF (Dubey, 2019). Those skills are very important to teach English because an EFL teacher should be shrewd to ensure the correct performance. If there is a high level of DF, an EFL teacher cannot manage them effectively, which exacerbates all EFL learning and teaching processes. Nevertheless, examining how and under what conditions the decisions were made can provide information about how to proceed (Moorhouse, 2020).

Methodology

Research design

A mixed-methods sequential explanatory design was used. It is a research approach that mixes quantitative and qualitative methods in two phases within a study (Ivankova et al., 2006). This design first collects and analyses quantitative data and then uses qualitative data to explain or elaborate on the quantitative findings (Wipulanusat et al., 2020). Its main objective is to comprehensively express the topic studied (Agranoff & Kolpakov, 2019).

Context and participants

The participants were EFL teachers at state schools in different cities in Türkiye. 364 EFL teachers took part in the quantitative part. They were selected through convenience sampling, which involves collecting data from accessible participants to ensure practicality in the data collection process in terms of time, effort, and administration. The participants were 76 male (20.9%) and 288 female (79.1%). 84 (23.1%) had been teaching for 0-5 years, 108 (29.7%) had been teaching for 6-10 years, 88 (24.2%) had been teaching for 11-15 years, 36 (9.9%) had been teaching for 16-20 years, and 48 (13.2%) had been teaching for more than 20 years. 252 of them (69.2%) had bachelor's degrees, 104 (28.6%) had MA degrees, and eight (2.2%) had PhD degrees. 52 participants (14.3%) worked at primary schools, 148 (40.7%) worked at middle schools, and 164 (45.1%) worked at high schools. In the qualitative part, purposive sampling was used to select the participants. This selection was not random; instead, it was strategically designed to ensure diversity across school levels, as different school levels may have different contexts and tasks. Six EFL teachers took part in the qualitative part: two males (33.3%) and four females (66.6%). They had 5 to 11 years of teaching. All of them had MA degrees. In terms of the school they worked at, two (33.3%) were working at primary schools, two (33.3%) were working at middle schools, and two (33.3%) were working at high schools.

Ethics and consent to participate

Ethical approval was taken from Gaziantep Islam Science and Technology University, Social and Humanities Science Ethics Committee (Protocol Number: 2025/23, and Decision Number: 20.05.04). The study also followed the Declaration of Helsinki, regarding informed consent, respect for individuals and their rights, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any stage without punishment. All participants were asked for informed consent, and they approved. Additionally, the first question of the scale was whether they wanted to participate in the study voluntarily or not, so all participants voluntarily attended the study.

Data collection tools

Personal Information Form

It was used to collect demographic and contextual data from participants, including gender, experience in profession (years), educational level, and the school level at which they work. This helped describe the sample and interpret the findings within the context of the study.

Decision Fatigue Scale

Based on Baumeister et al. (1998) ego depletion, Pignatiello et al. (2020) first introduced the DF as a concept. Hickman et al. (2018) developed the DFS as a 13-item scale, but after the required analysis, such as construct validity, they created a 9-item version of the DFS. It is a 4-point Likert (0=strongly disagree, 3=strongly agree) and one-dimensional scale. The lowest score that can be obtained from the scale is 0, while the highest is 27. Higher scores represent a higher degree of DF. Hickman et al. (2018) found that the reliability of the scale varied from .87 to .90. Pignatiello et al. (2022) calculated the Cronbach's alpha correlation coefficient of the scale as .95. It was calculated as .90 in this study. In the study, cut-off points were created by dividing the theoretical score range (0–27) into three equal intervals representing low, moderate, and high levels of DM. In other words, the scores between 0-9 represent low, between 10-18 represent moderate, and between 19-27 represent high DF.

Semi-structured Interview

It aims to understand which tasks cause the most DF, how DF manifests in EFL teaching practice, and what the coping strategies of EFL teachers with DF are. It was designed to strengthen the quantitative findings by focusing on the experiences of EFL teachers. In this way, it is possible to understand factors affecting and relieving DF, among them to make profession-based recommendations. The semi-structured interview questions were developed by two EFL teaching experts and one testing and assessment expert. The questions are:

1) What tasks of EFL teachers make you feel DF? Why?

2) How does DF affect you professionally? How does it influence your thoughts or behaviors while teaching?

3) What do you do to cope with DF as an EFL teacher?

Data collection and analysis

Quantitative data were first collected to establish the prevalence and level of DF among EFL teachers, forming a baseline for the subsequent qualitative phase. It was collected in June and July, 2025. They were gathered via Google Forms. The link to the form was sent through WhatsApp and Telegram groups after the required ethical permission. To prevent data duplication, a participant could respond to the form once. The items were marked as required, except for the phone number. The participants could not send the form if they did not respond to all the items. With the help of this mark, there were no missing values in the data. Their phone numbers were requested as the last question was to contact them if they volunteered to participate in the qualitative part. This part had a semi-structured interview with three questions. They were interviewed in August, 2025. Before the interview, all participants were informed about the voice recording to respect their privacy. All participants in this part were interviewed on the phone. Each interview lasted an average of twenty minutes.

The quantitative analysis was conducted using JASP. Descriptive statistics, including mean ($\bar{x}$), standard deviation (SD), minimum, and maximum values, were used. In the qualitative analysis, participants were coded and numbered according to their schools where they work (i.e., P1 means primary school, participant 1; M1 means middle school, participant 1; H1 means high school, participant 1). The interviews were transcribed, and thematic analyses were conducted on the answers, which were then categorized. The recordings of the interviews were re-listened to and revised many times, and coded with clear descriptions. Direct quotations were also included in the analysis to support the interpretation of the findings and to reflect the authenticity of the participants. Data triangulation has been implemented to bring the data together and integrate the findings with each other.

Results

Level of DF among EFL Teachers

To answer the first research question, descriptive analysis is used to report the DF levels of EFL teachers. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of the Participants Regarding DFS*

Item/Scale	$\bar{X}$	SD	The min-max score obtained
1. I can't make a decision because I'm too tired and stressed.	2.14	.83	0-3
2. Making decisions is difficult because I can't concentrate.	2.21	.82	0-3
3. It's hard for me to take in information and use it to make decisions.	2.21	.90	0-3
4. I don't have enough confidence in myself to make good decisions.	2.29	.89	0-3
5. It takes too much effort to make decisions.	2.12	.84	0-3
6. Someone else should make decisions for me.	2.48	.81	0-3
7. I can't make up my mind about which option is the best.	2.12	.87	0-3
8. I have made decisions without carefully thinking about them.	2.16	.92	0-3
9. My mood has made it difficult for me to make decisions.	2.21	.81	0-3
DFS Total	19.98	4.60	0-27

According to Table 1, item-level means ranged between 2.12 and 2.48 on a 0-3 scale, indicating that participants frequently experienced DF symptoms such as difficulty in concentration, lower confidence in DM, emotional interference, and a tendency to avoid DM. The highest mean was observed in the item "Someone else should make the decision for me." ($\bar{x}$=2.48). The mean score obtained from the scale was 19.98 with an SD of 4.60, indicating a high level of DF among participants. The total score varied from 0 to 27, indicating there was variability in participants' DF levels. It means that some of the participants showed no DF, while others reported it at the highest level.

The causes and effects of DF in the EFL teaching process and the coping strategies with DF among EFL teachers were investigated in detail to map quantitative results and find a way to explain DF in a field-specific context. In this part, the study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria to ensure trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enabled through prolonged data engagement and iterative coding, while two researchers independently reviewed and coded the interview data, enhancing dependability and confirmability. Detailed descriptions of the research context and methods were provided to ensure transferability. Member checking was enabled by all participants reviewing transcripts of their answers to ensure accuracy. The researchers recognized their backgrounds in EFL, and coding decisions were discussed collaboratively, focusing on participants' statements rather than assumptions of the researchers to prevent bias.

Participants were asked a set of questions about DF. They also showed similar results to the qualitative part, indicating they have experienced DF in EFL teaching. The results of the interviews were categorized based on the answers of the participants. At first, they were asked whether they were affected by DF in their professional life. All six participants (N=6) declared being affected by DF to varying degrees. Two participants responded with a firm *"Of course,"* indicating a strong and immediate recognition of the issue. Three others simply said *"Yes,"* confirming its presence without further emphasis, while one participant stated that they experienced DF *"every day,"* highlighting its ongoing nature. These responses demonstrate that DF is a common and shared experience among participants, regardless of how frequently or intensely they perceive it. The themes from qualitative analysis have been explained below.

Main Sources of DF among EFL Teachers

Table 2 presents the tasks causing DF among EFL teachers.

Table 2. *Thematic Analysis of Tasks Causing DF*

Theme	Number of Participants
Administrative workload and nonteaching tasks	6
Parental pressure/negligence	5
Students' lack of motivation	5
Assessment	4
Material burden	2
Toxic work environment	2

Administrative Workload and Non-Teaching Tasks

All participants reported that administrative duties create DF, often overshadowing their core role as teachers. M1 complained*: "We're always expected to prepare documents and fill in unnecessary forms that no one even reads. These aren't related to real teaching."* H1 added: *"Sometimes I feel like I'm working for the school's image rather than my students. I don't believe these extra reports and activities help learning."* Any teacher needs to take part in those activities; sometimes they have to. Nevertheless, they find those administrative tasks that are not directly related to teaching to be rather than helpful applications. They are turning into DF among them.

Parental Pressure and Negligence

Parental behaviors emerged as a cause of DF. P1 shared: *"Some parents want to control how I teach. Even parents who can't read or write call and ask questions like they are experts. They are so smart alecks that they try to teach me how to teach."* P2 remarked, *"Parents don't value English. When they think it's unimportant, students also lose motivation. We end up trying harder to make them care."* It shows the unbalanced approaches of parents towards English. Some parents try to be a part of teaching English, while others ignore it. This illustrates how certain parents attempt to assert authority over pedagogical decisions without the requisite knowledge, which not only undermines teacher expertise but also creates psychological pressure that causes DF.

Students' Lack of Motivation

Many participants suffer from demotivated students. Although motivation seems to be an innate factor for learning EFL, they may have some extrinsic motivation sources. Contrarily, participants think that the students do not have a desire to motivate themselves. H1 reported *"English is not a topic in the exams that play a gate-keeping role. For example, the students do not have to study English as university exams do not include English as a subject. So, they think English is something useless and impractical. Their behaviors in the classrooms are also being shaped negatively because of that. This lack of motivation affects me badly because although it is not necessary for an exam, it is crucial to take part in a job even in Türkiye. They do not predict what is coming."* Additionally, M2 implied *"My students always ask me about when and why they need to learn English. I'm fed up with hearing that question. I explain to them the specific purposes of English, but they are too young to understand their work-life needs. I cannot motivate them because they think it is in vain."* While motivating students is highly important to make them proficient in EFL, the students' demotivated psychology creates DF among participants.

Assessment

Participants expressed that preparing and grading exams takes a toll on their DF. M1 explained: *"I feel upset when students fail again and again, even after we review together. It makes me feel like I'm doing something wrong."* H1 expressed assessment anxiety: *"When I prepare exams, I worry a lot—what if they're not valid, what if they're too hard? It's not just tiring, it's stressful. Language teaching includes different skills like writing and speaking. Each skill*

includes a different proficiency in the assessment. I am tired of evaluating an excessive number of students in a limited time." This explains how the teacher's psychology is affected by the exam process, both in the preparation and the results, in addition to the shortage of time and the excessive effort. Although assessment is a part of education in all teaching contexts, it is seen as a burden and cause of DF among participants, especially due to its skill-based nature.

Material Burden

Keeping students engaged, especially younger learners, was identified as emotionally and physically demanding. P2 said: *"I try everything—songs, games, visuals. It entertains them, but I'm not sure they're learning. And it takes so much time and energy to prepare."* She also added, *"You have to be like a clown sometimes, always smiling and acting excited, so they will follow. It's exhausting."* Although primary school EFL teachers do not have DF in terms of assessment, material preparation is a vital element for teaching English to young learners, as they need to learn by doing within a context through games, pictures, and songs, which occurs as an affective factor of DF among participants.

Toxic Work Environment

The institutional atmosphere, particularly unsupportive or judgmental colleagues and administrators, adds significantly to DF. H2 shared a powerful insight: *"It's not the job itself but the people. I'm afraid of making even a tiny mistake because someone will use it against me. It drains me."* This expression highlights the importance of a healthy work environment. M1 also reported that *"The people at work are always snide. Whatever I do, they are not happy with the decisions I make and the actions that I take. I try to make them happy to have a chance to collaborate. This thinking makes me mentally devastated."* Those participants addressed that interpersonal tensions and professional insecurities heavily exacerbated their DF.

Effects of DF on EFL Teachers' Teaching Practices

The effects of DF on teaching among EFL teachers have been investigated with the interview question 2. The thematic analysis of the responses is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. *Thematic Analysis of the Effect of DF on EFL Teaching*

Theme	Number of Participants
Teachers' loss of motivation	6
Reduced instructional clarity	5
Avoidance	3

Teachers' Loss of Motivation

Participants expressed feelings of worthlessness, frustration, and disappointment, particularly when faced with DF because of recurring classroom difficulties or a lack of recognition for their efforts. H1 reflected on a lack of psychological energy: *"There are times when I lose my enthusiasm... I focus only on delivering the core objectives and finishing the class."* P2 echoed a similar sentiment: *"It disappoints not harvesting to reap... I have to force myself to stay positive and energetic."* Additionally, both M1 and P1 described feelings of personal

inadequacy or disengagement, noting how DF distanced them from forming meaningful interactions with students.

Reduced Instructional Clarity

Several participants described experiencing confusion or mental disorganization while teaching, particularly when cognitive resources were already depleted by administrative or non-teaching burdens. M1 shared, *"I feel confused even in teaching a very basic level of vocabulary or grammar… I experience a slip of the tongue many times in a lesson."* Similarly, P1 noted a loss of classroom awareness: *"Suddenly, I became aware that I couldn't listen to the students; I could only see those who were raising their hands."* DF seemed to distract from the process of teaching and cognitive processing during teaching, leading to difficulty managing spontaneous classroom interactions or monitoring student understanding.

Avoidance

Another prominent theme involved avoidance or passive behavior resulting from DF. Teachers reported procrastination, overthinking, and choosing safer, less effortful strategies to minimize cognitive load. H1 admitted, *"When I have to decide while struggling with decision fatigue, I often feel overwhelmed and end up avoiding the problems."* H2 added, *"I always stop what I am doing and stick with just the predetermined pacing... I opt for being a passive technician."* These statements reflect how DF can limit creativity, spontaneity, and agency, pushing toward minimal effort with professional tasks instead of dynamic engagement.

Those participants addressed that interpersonal tensions and professional insecurities heavily exacerbated their DF.

Coping Strategies Used by EFL Teachers to Manage DF

The coping strategies with DF among EFL teachers have been clarified with the interview question 3. The thematic analysis of the responses is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. *Thematic Analysis of Coping Strategies with DF*

Theme	Number of Participants
Collaboration	3
Passive recovery	2
Self-regulation	2

Collaboration

Three participants highlighted the importance of social support in managing DF. P2 described a multi-faceted approach including collaboration and delegation: *"I cooperate with my colleagues… keep in touch with the parents… share my duties on classroom management with the students I trust."* M2, while valuing support, also expressed a sense of isolation: *"Even if I get useful ideas from my best friends and colleagues, I am still too much responsible for the decisions that I make."* This highlights the emotional toll of responsibility despite external input. This frequent finding of collaboration highlights the importance of a healthy work environment to cope with DF.

Passive Recovery

Some participants reported needing complete mental and physical detachment from professional responsibilities. They coped by stepping away from all work-related tasks, even if temporarily. M1 shared, *"I only go home, don't do anything for a while about my profession. I watch entertaining videos. I wait for a while, looking at the walls."* This passive strategy suggests a method for regaining cognitive energy. Similarly, P1 said, *"I cannot cope with it at school. I should go home. I cannot stand the voices of my family. I want a silent place. I try to relax. I take a nap if I have a chance."* The emphasis here is on isolation and physical rest, especially short naps, as essential coping mechanisms. P1 also expressed, *"I try to shut my brain up. My brain tries to make new decisions, but I try not to care about them."* This shows a deliberate attempt to block out the DM process itself to cope.

Self-Regulation

Other participants dealt with DF by staying planned and methodical. H1 emphasized being proactive and reflective: *"I try to stay planned and prepared for my lessons. I always have alternative plans in case something changes unexpectedly."* She found writing and talking to others beneficial: *"Writing down my thoughts on paper helps me organize my mind… Talking to an experienced colleague often gives me clarity."* P1 also mentioned consciously limiting extra duties: *"Sometimes, I must admit that I am a human and I have limited capacity. I must organize myself; otherwise, nobody will help me. I've learned to skip some of the unnecessary or unproductive requests from administrators. By doing so, I could find extra time to recover and rest my brain."* This explanation also addresses the feeling of loneliness in coping with DF.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The quantitative findings showed that the participating EFL teachers experienced a high level of DF, with a mean total score of 19.98. The interviews helped explain the work-related conditions behind this result and how DF was reflected in teaching practice. All six interview participants reported experiencing DF, although they differed in how frequently and intensely, they described it. Their accounts linked this experience to administrative workload and non-teaching tasks, parental pressure or negligence, students' lack of motivation, assessment responsibilities, material preparation, and toxic work environments.

The two phases also converged in relation to difficulty with DM. In the quantitative phase, the highest-scoring item was "Someone else should make decisions for me" (M = 2.48). The interviews provided context for this finding. When mentally depleted, some teachers reported avoiding problems, postponing decisions, or relying on predetermined lesson plans rather than adapting their teaching. These accounts suggest that the wish to transfer DM responsibility may be associated with cognitive overload and reduced capacity to engage in effortful instructional choices.

The qualitative findings further showed how DF affected teaching. Participants reported loss of motivation, reduced instructional clarity, and avoidance. These effects were evident in accounts of difficulty concentrating, slips of the tongue, reduced attention to students, limited classroom adaptation, and a tendency to complete only the basic requirements of a lesson. Teachers responded to these difficulties through collaboration, passive recovery, and self-regulation. Figure 2 brings these findings together by presenting DF as a process in which work-

related and contextual demands contribute to cognitive depletion, which then affects instructional practice and leads teachers to adopt different coping responses.

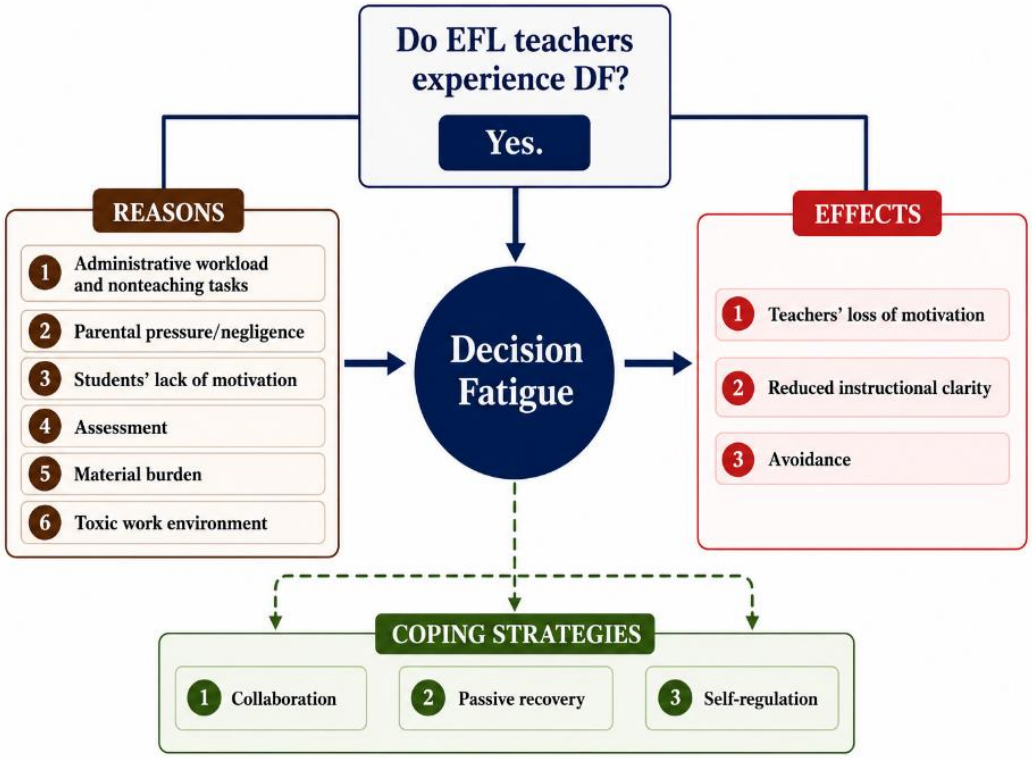

Figure 2. EFL teacher DF framework

As shown in Figure 2, the quantitative phase established the reported level of DF, while the qualitative phase explained its main sources, its effects on teaching, and the ways teachers attempted to manage it. Overall, the findings indicate that DF was not described as an isolated feeling of tiredness. It was connected to recurring instructional, administrative, and interpersonal demands and was reflected in teachers' motivation, classroom attention, and willingness to make adaptive instructional decisions.

Discussion

Although direct comparisons should be interpreted cautiously because previous studies examined different occupational groups and, in some cases, different contexts, the present findings provide an informative benchmark. The mean DF score observed in this study ($\bar{x}$ = 19.98) was substantially higher than the relatively low levels reported among endocrinologists (Sarıakçalı, 2025) and nurses (Wang et al., 2025). Similarly, Fernández-Miranda et al. (2023) reported relatively low levels of DF among healthcare professionals. It was, however, lower than the mean score reported by Yiğit and Bayar-Türkoğlu (2025) among employees from various professions. The findings indicated high DF among EFL teachers, as reflected by the mean score of 19.98 on DFS in this study. This suggests that DF is not a marginal experience but a prevalent one among them. While statistical differences prevent direct statistical comparisons, these findings may suggest that EFL teachers experience a considerable degree

of DF, positioning teaching among jobs characterized by substantial cognitive DM demands. These qualitative findings may help explain why teachers reported a relatively high overall DF score.

The highest DF has been reflected in reliance on others to make decisions, reflecting reduced professional engagement under cognitive strain. It can passivize EFL teachers in the teaching process. The maximum DFS score of 27 in this study may also indicate that EFL teachers experienced DF in their professional lives. The quantitative findings showed that participants reported a high level of DF, while the qualitative data helped explain the mechanisms underlying these scores. Rather than reflecting temporary fatigue, teachers consistently described cognitively demanding situations in which continuous instructional and administrative DM depleted their mental resources. These narratives suggest that the high DFS scores could be rooted in job-related tasks rather than isolated stressful events. They were consistent with the qualitative themes of non-teaching tasks, toxic work environment, teachers' loss of motivation, reduced instructional clarity, and avoidance behavior in the interviews. DF is a sign that occurs if the decision is made in a short span (Polman & Vohs, 2016). EFL teachers reported a high level of DM without carefully thinking about them in the DFS ($\bar{x}$=2.16). The qualitative finding also highlighted that EFL teachers may need to assess many students in various skills in a short time. It can be associated that DF can arise because of time constraints, specifically in assessment.

Factors affecting DF should be understood well prior to setting a strategy (Taylor et al., 2018). Those factors to set an effective strategy against DF have been analyzed. Multitasking and workload cause more DF (Dong et al., 2024). One of the key factors reported by EFL teachers causing DF, as revealed in the qualitative part, is the burden of administrative workload and non-teaching tasks. Although the administrative workload was not directly measured in the quantitative phase because of the limited nature of DFS, every interviewed participant identified non-teaching responsibilities as a major contributor to their DF. This finding may provide an explanatory context for the relatively high DFS scores observed by illustrating how repeated low-value administrative decisions can gradually exhaust EFL teachers' cognitive resources. Dong et al. (2024) stated that tasks not related to the profession cause DF. Several participants indicated that DM becomes overwhelming when their time and energy are wasted on tasks that are not directly instructional. Assessors are more likely to experience higher DF if they have many responsibilities, which are seen as workload (Taylor et al., 2018). Tasks such as excessive paperwork, frequent reporting, event organization, and meetings may take precedence over instruction. These tasks can distract EFL teachers and drain their cognitive resources, leaving them with reduced skills to make effective instruction. The constant non-teaching tasks may also force them to make numerous micro-decisions while completing the tasks. Nevertheless, reducing those tasks or minimizing the time spent on non-teaching activities can alleviate the cognitive burden and DF on EFL teachers and allow them to concentrate more on their core teaching responsibilities and to efficiently use their energy on their students.

DM for others can be as depleting as DM for oneself, especially when it involves work or seems boring (Polman & Vohs, 2016). Nevertheless, the level of depletion and DF may vary depending on situational factors. The qualitative findings revealed that assessment-related tasks were perceived as a significant cause of DF among EFL teachers. Tasks such as grading, designing objective and engaging assessment tools, providing detailed feedback, and creating assessments suitable for curricular objectives may demand considerable cognitive effort. Stacey et al. (2024) state that DM and timing stress are causes of work intensity among teachers. The

recurring need to make high-stakes decisions that impact student progression may lead to DF, particularly when done under time constraints or institutional pressure. Critical thinking and problem-solving skills can be influenced by DF (Taylor et al., 2018). EFL teachers noted that assessment was not limited to the evaluation of students but extended to choosing the "right" assessment method, maintaining objectivity, and defending their assessment decisions. EFL teachers also reported that these responsibilities intensified the sense of DF, especially when assessments were frequent or when institutional expectations lacked clarity. Another reason for this result may be due to the lack of implementation of correct assessment techniques while evaluating students, because EFL teachers may not use appropriate assessments for their students (Farhady & Tavassoli, 2021). Although a low-level assessment literacy can be the cause of DF, educational programs of EFL teachers should be revised to overcome this problem, which affects teachers' well-being. Another problem is that teachers may tend to be more lenient if they lose their attention on students while assessing them (Klein & Pat-El, 2003), decreasing the consistency of their assessments. This leniency may be related to DF, as repeated DM can make it harder for teachers to apply assessment criteria consistently and impartially. After extended periods of classroom management, grading, and multitasking, teachers may choose options that require less mental effort, such as giving students the benefit of the doubt or assigning more lenient grades to avoid possible disagreement. Such practices may weaken the validity and reliability of assessment decisions and lead to less objective evaluations of student performance.

Although parental pressure was not measured directly by the DFS, the interview findings suggest that interactions with parents may constitute an important contextual source of DF reflected in participants' DF scores. It was revealed that parental behaviors, particularly among primary school teachers, are a prominent source of DF. EFL teachers reported facing both over-involvement and disinterest from parents, each contributing to imbalanced and stressful teaching environments. The presence of both excessive parental interference and complete disengagement may create an unpredictable teaching environment. Such differences in parental involvement can disrupt classroom routines, complicate teacher DM, and make it harder to maintain consistent pedagogical practices. Teachers can feel DF because of constantly adapting their approaches, not based solely on student needs, but also in response to external, conflicting parental expectations. They described having to repeatedly justify instructional decisions and respond to those conflicting parental expectations, thereby increasing the number of daily decisions required beyond classroom teaching. This imbalance may increase DF, as teachers may expend significant cognitive energy managing unpredictable parental behaviors in addition to their instructional responsibilities.

Another significant theme that emerged was the lack of student motivation. Student motivation affects EFL teacher motivation (İpek & Kanatlar, 2018). While the quantitative data showed that participants experienced high levels of DF, the qualitative data suggest that one of the causes of these scores is the continuous need to compensate for students' lack of motivation. Motivation is related to all classroom agents. Demotivated students were seen as a source of DF, and as a result of DF, EFL teachers stressed their loss of motivation. Teachers, particularly at the primary level, reported that when students lacked interest in learning English, it placed additional demands on them to adapt lessons, approaches, and invest more energy in maintaining student motivation. The findings reveal a cyclical relationship between motivation and DF. Students' lack of motivation was perceived as a cause of DF because it required teachers to continuously adapt instructional strategies, redesign materials, and make additional

pedagogical decisions to maintain classroom engagement. As DF increased, however, teachers reported experiencing a loss of motivation, reduced instructional engagement, and avoidance. This loss in EFL teacher motivation may subsequently impair classroom dynamics and further reduce students' motivation, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of DF. Similarly, Pourtoussi et al. (2018) indicate that students' (de)motivation affects EFL teachers' (de)motivation, highlighting the reciprocal nature of motivation in EFL instruction. As motivation is crucial in shaping classroom dynamics, its absence forces teachers to spend excessive time designing their teaching methods and techniques again and again. Closely connected to this was the material burden, which was identified as another source of DF, as they had to make numerous micro-decisions regarding students' level, student engagement, and learning goals. These decisions, made under time pressure and often after teaching hours, may lead to DF. The intersection of low student motivation and the high demands of material creates a cycle of DF: EFL teachers feel demotivated to overcompensate for demotivated students by investing even more time and cognitive resources into planning. Nevertheless, Dubey (2019) suggests designing the content of the lessons that includes fewer decisions for students to prevent DF and maximize learning outcomes.

The qualitative findings extend the quantitative ones by highlighting that DF is not only a result of workload but is also influenced by the social context in which decisions are made. In return, a work environment can create stress on workers, causing them to be more vulnerable to DF (Dong et al., 2024). This suggests that both workload and the quality of professional relationships contribute to DF. Natal and Saltzman (2022) indicated that work environment triggers DF in cases of being ignored, undervalued decisions, or unsatisfying feedback. Relationships with colleagues decide the EFL teachers' motivation (İpek & Kanatlar, 2018). The qualitative findings indicate that DF is not only a result of cognitive overload but is also socially constructed through psychologically unsafe professional environments. In such contexts, EFL teachers can assign cognitive resources not only to instructional decisions but also to impression management and self-protection, increasing the cumulative burden of DM. When EFL teachers operate in psychologically unsafe environments, even routine pedagogical decisions become psychologically taxing, and motivation is lost, as stated in the interviews. Decisions are made under stress because of the toxic elements of the work environment. In such settings, DM may become a defensive act rather than an instructional one. Additionally, the findings imply the multi-dimensional nature of DF. Yiğit and Bayar-Türkoğlu (2025) highlight that DF is not limited to the mere act of searching for alternatives but extends to various contextual variables, including the DM environment, control mechanisms, perceptions of decisions, and success-failure dynamics. This broader perspective is particularly relevant to the EFL teaching context, where decisions can be influenced not only by instructional responsibilities but also by administrative workload, parental pressures, student motivation, and the institutional climate. Overall, these studies may reinforce the present findings and highlight the need for culturally grounded interventions that address the specific challenges faced by Turkish EFL teachers.

According to the findings, DF was found to interfere with EFL teachers' cognitive functioning during instruction. Excessive decisions in a short time with limited information can cause DF, as those sources are not enough to proceed (Lee, 2020). When mental resources were strained by administrative or external tasks, EFL teachers had difficulties in maintaining instructional clarity. Even basic teaching activities became harder. Furthermore, DF disrupted

teachers' situational awareness, making it harder to monitor students' needs, interpret student responses, or manage spontaneous classroom interactions, which may pose significant pedagogical concerns. When DF is experienced, EFL teachers may struggle to notice subtle cues, provide timely feedback, or adapt their instruction to students' needs. These findings suggest that DF not only affects EFL teachers' psychology but also undermines the quality of implementation decisions.

Accordingly, DF may significantly decrease EFL teachers' motivation and instructional engagement. On the other hand, the literature strongly implies that EFL teachers' motivation directly affects students' motivation (Papi & Abdollahzadeh, 2012). When persistent classroom challenges went unresolved and professional efforts were unacknowledged, participants described experiencing DF, which in turn led to a sense of detachment from their teaching roles, lowering their enthusiasm for lessons and a change toward minimalistic teaching, prioritizing task completion over meaningful interaction. For EFL teachers, whose work often depends on interpersonal communication and emotional compliance with students, this detachment can significantly undermine classroom dynamics and student motivation. Furthermore, teachers described difficulty maintaining a positive attitude when their motivation was low. The perceived need to display positive emotions despite feeling mentally depleted placed additional demands on them and may have intensified their DF. This cyclical effect urges the critical need for supportive structures that validate teacher effort and support psychological well-being. As Yavrutürk (2025) stated, DF depletes individuals' mental and emotional resources, thereby affecting productivity at both individual and societal levels. This observation has been strongly reflected in the experiences of the EFL teachers, who described how the cumulative cognitive burden of constant DM may lead to demotivation to teach, reduced instructional clarity, and avoidance behaviors.

When considering that life is rife with decisions about whether to invest mental effort in achieving frequently worthwhile goals or to show less effort for reasons that are often not evident beyond a lack of desire (Westbrook & Braver, 2015), any teacher can feel DF causing ego depletion, which is similar to the power-saving mode of phones. It refers to "the state of diminished resources following exertion of self-control" (Baumeister et al., 2007, p. 352). DF could lead to a reduction in EFL teachers' engagement and proactive behavior. Interestingly, the qualitative findings provide a plausible explanation for the highest-scoring DFS item ("Someone else should make decisions for me"). Participants frequently described avoiding complex instructional decisions and relying on predetermined routines when they felt DF. This convergence between quantitative and qualitative findings may highlight that the tendency to relinquish DM reflects a coping response to prolonged cognitive depletion rather than a lack of professional competence. When they experienced DF, EFL teachers may tend to avoid, such as procrastinating on decisions, overthinking routine tasks, or reverting to pre-set instructional plans. These behaviors appear to be self-protective strategies aimed at reducing DF. Rather than engaging in reflective or adaptive teaching practices, participants described defaulting to rigid routines or opting for the simplest path forward. It reflects a shift from being autonomous professionals to functioning as passive doers, highlighting the restrictive effect of DF on the profession. The tendency to avoid pedagogical risks or creative DM may undermine the responsiveness and innovation necessary for effective instruction. In EFL teaching, this low agency can narrow instructional repertoire and decrease classroom dynamism, ultimately affecting both teaching quality and student engagement.

The value of collaboration in coping with DF was highlighted in the interviews. Although ambiguous descriptions in the roles and excessive bureaucratic workload increase DF, administrative autonomy, encouraging communication, and balanced workload may decrease DF among teachers (Sunkur Çakmak, 2025). The participants in this study highlighted collaboration with colleagues as a primary coping strategy, suggesting that a collegial, supportive communication atmosphere can overcome the sense of isolation that often accompanies DF and provide emotional and cognitive relief. Working with supportive colleagues is vital to motivate EFL teachers (Erkaya, 2013), to prevent their loss of motivation, which is one of the results of DF. The work environment could be both a source or/and a solution to the DF of EFL teachers. Participants adopted various strategies such as delegating classroom responsibilities, maintaining communication, and drawing inspiration from collaborations. While collaboration may be attributed to partial relief, the cognitive responsibility still largely rests on the individual, reinforcing the need for a supportive institutional culture. DF shows itself under psychologically and cognitively challenging situations, causing deterioration in self-regulation and quality DM (Sarıakçalı & Kırpık, 2022). Some participants employed passive and isolative methods for recovery. These coping strategies involved withdrawing from DM processes and seeking quiet, solitary environments. Activities such as napping or simply doing nothing were perceived as essential. This form of passive recovery may indicate a deliberate suspension of cognitive skills related to teaching, reflecting the depth of DF.

Consistent with Sarıakçalı and Kırpık (2022), participants reported using proactive planning, organization, and self-regulation to cope with DF. Participants who adopted this approach emphasized the importance of being prepared, flexible, and reflective. Participants mitigated DF by anticipating potential challenges and preparing alternative plans. Moreover, they reported the practice of mental organization through techniques like journaling or consulting experienced colleagues. Self-regulatory behaviors also involved setting boundaries, such as declining unnecessary tasks, which helped teachers manage their workload, protect their DM capacity, and reduce DF.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Studies

The data were collected from participants from different cities. Although this geographical diversity may vary the responses in the results, it also creates contextual differences across practices at the institution level, resources, and local conditions. The results cannot be generalized because of the cultural, regional, political, or even student-level differences. The research provides a snapshot in time. DF may fluctuate across academic terms or in response to external stressors (e.g., institutional change, exam periods), which a cross-sectional design cannot fully capture. Profession-specific approaches can contribute to more insightful results for institutions, organizations, and policymakers. To decide the exact source of DF, subscales such as administration, teaching, and psychology-based items can be added to the existing scale as an adaptation of the scale in teaching settings.

Conclusions

Teachers make many instructional, administrative, and interpersonal decisions during the working day, often under time pressure and changing classroom conditions (Stacey et al., 2024). Repeated DM may reduce the attention and mental effort available for later choices and may affect behaviour and decision quality (Pignatiello et al., 2020). Difficult working conditions can add to this pressure and have professional and psychological effects (Dong et al., 2024). In this study, the participating EFL teachers reported a high mean level of DF. The interviews connected this result to administrative and non-teaching duties, parental pressure or limited involvement, students' lack of motivation, assessment responsibilities, material preparation, and difficult workplace relationships. These findings show that DF is shaped not only by how many decisions teachers make but also by the conditions in which those decisions are made.

DF was reflected in lower motivation, reduced instructional clarity, avoidance of demanding choices, and greater reliance on predetermined routines. These effects are directly related to EFL teaching because teachers regularly need to adjust explanations, respond to student errors, select materials, manage interaction, and assess different language skills. When their mental resources are reduced, they may have less capacity to respond to classroom needs and make careful instructional adjustments. The study therefore connects DF with both teacher well-being and classroom practice. It also shows that reduced classroom adaptation or reliance on routine may sometimes result from accumulated decision demands rather than limited professional knowledge or commitment.

Participants managed DF through collaboration, passive recovery, and self-regulation, but these responses placed much of the responsibility on individual teachers. The findings point to several institutional actions. Schools can reduce unnecessary forms, reports, meetings, and event-related duties, provide sufficient time for assessment and material preparation, and create regular opportunities for teachers to share planning and classroom decisions with colleagues. Administrators can also respond to critical or intimidating workplace behaviour, clarify responsibilities, and allow teachers greater control over additional duties and instructional decisions. These steps follow directly from the sources and coping strategies reported by participants and may reduce avoidable decision pressure while supporting teacher well-being and more consistent EFL instruction.

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