

iatefl

THE BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF  
THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS  
OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

# VOICES

LINKING, DEVELOPING AND SUPPORTING ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING PROFESSIONALS WORLDWIDE



## September–October 2018 Issue 264

Conceptualising language: learner-generated visuals – Jade Blue  
Reflection: more than just description – Rasha S. Mohamed  
Blended learning in the English class: does it work? – Emmanuel Flores Flores  
Give me words and let me speak – Shimmi Sharma  
Burnout: the elephant in the staffroom – Monica Ruda  
Keeping tasks meaningful – Rania Jabr

# Burnout: the elephant in the staffroom

*Monica Ruda brings teacher burnout into the open.*



**Monica Ruda** is a Delta-qualified Senior Teacher and CertTESOL teacher trainer. Her TEFL experience started in 2010

in the Czech Republic, and continued in Italy and in the UK. She is now branching out, as a consultant for Cambridge Assessment and as a co-writer of an ESL activity book.

Why won't anybody talk about it? Because it's an awkward topic to discuss. Nobody wants to talk about something that scares them deep down. Nobody wants to share experiences or thoughts about something that makes them look vulnerable, or even a failure, in the eyes of others. But the road to 'Burnoutville' is a solitary slippery slope, and ignoring the risks can only get you to the destination faster.

## What is burnout, exactly?

A quick search on the Internet tells us that burnout is a psychological, stress-related syndrome, which mainly affects individuals who work with, and are responsible for, others. It manifests itself in emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment. Many might disregard these symptoms and assume they are the unavoidable side effects of being a teacher; but this is true only to a certain extent. So what's the difference between 'normal' teaching-related stress and burnout? If weekends and holidays are not enough to recharge your batteries, if you have lost interest in the quality of your work, if your friends and family have noticed a drastic deterioration of your everyday mood, if you have out-of-character outbursts of rage for trivial reasons ... then you are likely to be suffering from burnout.

*The road to 'Burnoutville' is a solitary slippery slope, and ignoring the risks can only get you to the destination faster*

## Why are ESL teachers prone to burnout?

Planning, creating and teaching lessons; a very high number of contact hours—especially in the summer; testing students and marking their homework; attending meetings and training sessions; dealing with admin and paperwork: these duties are the norm for a typical ESL teacher. Of course, the workload increases if you are (officially or not) a senior member of the teaching staff and are involved in writing syllabi, giving inductions and supporting new teachers, assisting with office duties, or planning and delivering training sessions. Such a hectic work life, potential lack of support from management and/or co-workers, and generally low pay could leave teachers

constantly running on empty and might gradually decrease their motivation levels. These conditions are enough to send anyone around the bend and—let's say it—to cause burnout.

## Can burnout be prevented?

Yes, but preventing burnout is a responsibility that falls both on the teacher as an individual and the management team, and it is in everyone's interest to take this on. Burnout is contagious: constant complaints and a negative attitude can spread in the staffroom and transform a productive and stimulating environment into a depressing and demoralising one. This domino effect could have a major impact on the students and on the whole school.

There are several tactics that the teacher could apply in the school, in the classroom and in their personal life to avoid burnout.

### 1. In the school

- Connect with others. Share lesson ideas and classroom anecdotes, but don't talk shop all the time—get to know the people who work in your school.
- Find 'your person'. Make time for that one teacher that really 'gets' you: take advantage of this special bond to vent and rant, laugh and joke for a few minutes every working day.
- Be organised. From schemes of work to students' homework, from CPD certificates to teaching material, keep everything in order in a way that is logical to you.
- Find a safe haven. Locate one or two spots on the premises or in the surroundings to escape to when you need a moment of peace.

### 2. In the classroom

- Build a relationship based on trust with your students. Agree on rules and ensure that everyone (including you!) respects them.
- Give structure to your lesson. Plan your lesson around the aims you want your students to achieve.
- Allow fun time. Set some time aside for classroom games; this will be beneficial for you as well as the students.
- Be creative. Following the book might be an easy option, but occasionally try some new activities. If you are short of time to create them yourself, search online for interesting ideas.

### 3. In your personal life

- Leave your work at school. That's an obvious one, and it's easier said than done: most teachers always have their thinking cap on. Change your behaviour gradually: stop

taking coursebooks home, and avoid planning lessons at the weekend and marking students' work in your free time.

- Discover yourself. Find a new interest to cultivate, take up a hobby or a sport, learn a new skill—anything that is not work-related. Make time for it, and do it frequently and regularly.
- Keep in touch with friends. Although it's often difficult to find the time and energy for socialising, it is important to connect with people who care about you outside your work environment.
- Know your priorities. Decide what is important in your life and make changes accordingly. Sometimes a change of role (promotion or demotion) within the company can give an energy and motivation boost.

### The role of managers

Managers play a key role in promoting a positive environment, which has a direct impact on teachers' well-being. The following are suggestions for managers.

- Create a community within the work place. Teachers' timetables should include allocated slots dedicated to sharing ideas and working together.
- Avoid waste. Time, energy and office supplies are often wasted on unnecessary admin tasks. These should be reduced to a minimum and should be shared among the team. It is also worth considering new and more efficient ways to carry out such tasks.
- Keep a balanced number of contact hours throughout the year. Of course, some months are busier than others and an increase in teaching hours is expected at these time, but adjusting to a considerable increase/decrease in classroom time every other week becomes extremely challenging and unsettling.
- Be alert and show that you care. The signs of burnout are visible: keep an eye out for that teacher who has suddenly become introverted and quiet, for example. An informal but meaningful chat might be just what they need to put things into perspective.

### What if you can't cope anymore?

You are a hard worker, who enjoys being challenged and welcomes responsibilities; above all, you are passionate about teaching. You never thought burnout would happen to you, but you were wrong. It has taken you some time (months!) to understand and accept what has happened to you. So here you are, stuck in a situation that you don't know how to handle and you don't know who to turn to for

help. And perhaps you don't want to make a big deal out of it—you are proud and you don't want to be perceived as weak. What are the next steps?

- Although prevention might be out of the question by this point, start making some small changes—in the school, in the classroom and in your personal life, as shown above.
- Talk to your friends and family. Clarify with them what is going on in your life (and in your mind): they are likely to understand and support you. They will also feel relieved by the fact that you have acknowledged the problem and are addressing it. Talking about burnout will make you feel better and will help you to see the situation more clearly.
- Analyse the causes of your burnout. Be realistic: is it something that can be changed? If so, who can change it? How much of your current work life needs to be changed? Are these changes feasible?
- Think about your options. Can you see yourself teaching for years to come? Would changing schools make a difference? Could changing roles within the same school improve your life? Would you benefit from a complete change of scenery?
- Talk to your line manager. Share your thoughts and your worries. Ask for and listen to their suggestions, but do not make any decisions there and then. Give yourself time to think things through.

### A final note

Learning about burnout is a great way to understand what's going on and to become aware of the issue, but that won't help you in your decision-making. Figure out what is making your work life miserable and what you would like instead: it could be a slower pace of work, a shorter commute or fewer responsibilities. If you decide that taking a break from teaching is what you need to be yourself again, don't be afraid – go for it! Within your teaching profession you have developed many transferable skills: public speaking, thinking on your feet, creativity and communication skills, to name a few. Take advantage of what you have learnt to discover a happier self, may that be by recovering your joy in teaching and branching out perhaps, or even finding a new career.

*Preventing burnout is a responsibility that falls both on the teacher as an individual and the management team, and it is in everyone's interest to take this on*

Wish IATEFL would host an event in your country?

Go to

<http://secure.iatefl.org/events/>  
to contact the IATEFL SIGs

### Join IATEFL now!

Membership of this international organisation of English Language Teachers offers you

- contact with colleagues and affiliated associations worldwide
- an annual conference and exhibition at membership rates
- the opportunity to join our 16 Special Interest Groups
- discounted periodicals
- IATEFL Voices 6 times a year

You can join online at [www.iatefl.org](http://www.iatefl.org) or download a form to complete and post in. If you have any further queries please contact us on [membership@iatefl.org](mailto:membership@iatefl.org).