

ELT



Ireland bulletin

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Questioning our actions is at the heart of reflection, and it is important when we question we are critical of all our actions and those actions which influence. Questioning gives us a better and more robust understanding of our working environment. It is not enough to simply ask why for everything, not only because you may never get a suitable answer, but also this approach is more childlike and less actual criticism.

Before you find an answer for each 'wh-' question, try to establish as many possible 'wh-' questions that can be asked, and write them down. If I apply this approach to my situation where I went into a class unprepared and hoped to get by on my experience, I might come up with a list which looks something like this:

Who?: Who were the students? Who will have problems with my approach? Who am I answerable to? Who else does this? Who will benefit?

Where?: Where is the school/classroom? Where could I have found extra resources before the class? Where was I that made me so unprepared?

When?: When did the class happen? When did I see the students last and when will I see them next? When will the class finish?

What?: What resources are available at such short notice? What can I teach from the text book pages? What are the potential pitfalls to this approach? What do the students need to learn today? What's my alternative?

Why?: Why did I not prepare? Why am I so confident of my ability? Why might the students or management have a complaint?

How?: How many students are there? How can I get the students to do the work for me? How can I make the most of a bad situation?

These questions do not necessarily need to be answered. The objective of your analysis is to understand the justification, the significance, and the overall meaning of your actions. By applying a diversity of both critical and honest questions, you will aid your thought process and find more answers from which you can reflect and learn from.

Reflection can require as much thought and discipline as the individual believes necessary, or it may need more or less. Reflection is a thinking process that can be enhanced by more formalised and regular writing, such as journal entries, regular reviews, and even group discussion. There is no rule, except that you should be looking to change something about the way to do things, be that now or in the future. In time the most effective strategy will prove itself. As a practice which may not be commonly encouraged in English language teaching, overcoming our assumptions and questioning our actions can provide a starting point for an effective and mirror-free approach reflective practice.

ELT Burnout and what to Do about it

by Stephen Cloak (Cloak Consulting)

Burnout is something that ELT professionals often complain of jokingly, but behind such light-hearted comments, there is a condition which needs to be taken seriously. Stress is part and parcel of an ELT professional's life. However, chronic stress, if not managed carefully, can lead to burnout, which can in turn wreak havoc on health, happiness, relationships and job performance. This article aims to help the teachers and academic managers identify the signs that they are suffering from this condition, and what they can do to deal with it.

According to the literature on this topic, burnout is "a condition caused by depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and a diminished sense of accomplishment" (Clandfield 2016). The HSE says that this condition can have negative consequences on a person's professional performance and that burnout is often associated with chronic job stress and it likely occurs in anyone who works with people in some capacity (HSE.ie 2012). David Ballard, an expert in the field, describes job burnout as "an extended period of time



When it feels too much.

Pic by Pixbay

where someone experiences exhaustion and a lack of interest in things, resulting in a decline in their job performance” (Ballard 2014). In the same article Ballard says that professionals experience burnout when faced with situations “that place demands on them which exceeds the resources you have available to deal with the stressors.” Burnout is not a phenomenon associated exclusively with education (Buck, C. 2006), but as educators often deal with the demands of a range of stakeholders, it is not surprising that teaching is seen as being one of the top five most stressful careers in the world (Coombe 2008).

In order to catch burnout and combat it early, it's important to know what to look out for. Lisa Gerry in an article for Forbes highlights seven signs that indicate professionals may be experiencing burnout, basing herself on Ballard. The following list explaining how to recognise burnout in yourself is taken from Gerry's article but is adapted to the ELT field.

“burnout can wreak havoc on health, happiness, relationships and job performance”

Exhaustion: Feeling tired all the time can be a sign of burnout. Whether emotional, mental or physical exhaustion is the feeling of not having enough energy, to face the next class.

Lack of Motivation & loss of educational vocation: When you lack any enthusiasm for teaching. It also may be harder to plan pedagogical activities that enrich the learning experience for learners.

Frustration, Cynicism and Other Negative Emotions: The feeling that what you are doing in the classroom doesn't really matter anymore. You may also have become disillusioned with everything and everyone in the staff room. While every educator has an off day when classes don't go as planned and learners fail to engage, it's important to notice if these are becoming the norm for you.

Cognitive Problems: Burnout interferes with our ability to concentrate. When we're stressed, our focus narrows so that we only pay attention to the negative elements of our work.

Slipping Job Performance: While no teacher can maintain the idealistic expectation that they had on their first day after their CELTA course, we can discover if we're in a temporary slump or experiencing chronic burnout by comparing our job performance now to our performance with a few terms before.

Being Preoccupied with Work, When You're Not at Work: Educators often engage emotionally with learners. So it's not easy to switch off the minute the class bell metaphorically rings. Even though you might not be teaching or supporting a student at a given moment thinking about it takes energy. You need time to yourself after the task stops when you stop thinking about it altogether in order to recover. Spending time and mulling everything over interferes with your recovery from the stresses of your day.

Generally Decreased Satisfaction: The ELT profession has a very flat hierarchy. Development is often internal and tacit with little external evidence of advancement. If we feel that our efforts at work go unnoticed or unrewarded we can start to feel less happy and satisfied with our career choice and that we are stuck in the rut.

One tool that is often used in the United States to measure burnout is the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter 1997). It asks professionals questions related to their work. Here are examples of the kinds of questions it asks. You may want to think of your own situation and how you would answer.

On a scale of 0 (never) to 6 (every day), rate the following sentences:

I feel frustrated by my job.

I feel fatigued when I get up and have to face another day at work.

I feel students blame me for their problems.

I don't really care what happens to some students.

I feel exhilarated after working closely with my students.

I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.

I feel I'm positively influencing other people's lives through my work.

I can easily create a relaxed atmosphere with my students.

In his article about burnout in ELT, Lindsay Clandfield (2016) suggests using this tool and if you find that you are getting a high score and are therefore running the risk of burning out, he suggests a number of strategies for addressing it. The first is to reduce the workload when possible. Next you should try new approaches. This could mean changing the book or material you use, or changing the group, level, or type of students you work with. This can lead to a more extensive development of your personal pedagogy giving a renewed interest to what you do every day. The final point he makes is to take better care of yourself outside the school, things like improved diet and exercise can have a better effect than any medication.

This is a complicated issue which this short article has only briefly examined. The role of burnout in ELT is something that needs more research. By raising awareness of the signs of burnout caused by excess stress we hope to have contributed to making a start on tackling this problem.

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Getting EAQUALS: A brief "How to"

by Nadine Early (ATC)

In December 2014, our school began the application process for membership of EAQUALS (Evaluation & Accreditation of Quality in Language Services) in earnest. EAQUALS is an international association of institutions and organisations involved in language education. It exists to promote and guarantee excellence in language teaching and learning. Currently, EAQUALS has accredited-member schools offering courses in a variety of languages in 31 countries (EAQUALS 2016). Our decision to join was made in April 2014 when I attended the EAQUALS annual conference, along with the school's Managing Director. The conference was thought-provoking and inspirational and was the catalyst for change in our organisation.

In August 2015 we underwent a successful first inspection, becoming accredited members a few weeks later.

This article will outline the process we went through to become an accredited member of EAQUALS. It will look at the application procedure and some of the accreditation services offered by EAQUALS to facilitate applicants prior to inspection. It will conclude by looking at the benefits we feel we have gained from going through inspection and becoming an accredited member.

To achieve its aim of guaranteeing excellence in its member schools, EAQUALS has published a demanding set of criteria known as the Quality Standards (EAQUALS 2016). Becoming a member involves undergoing a rigorous inspection to verify if your school meets these standards. EAQUALS' holistic approach and its commitment to quality across the whole of the organisation are evidenced in the twelve categories into which the thirty-nine Quality Standards fall.



A plaque on the wall that equals quality

Pic by the author