

## Professional development

**Keeping yourself interested in your work and becoming a better teacher is important for you and important for your students – but it takes a bit of effort. Avoiding teacher burnout can involve making big changes like starting a new job, but more often it involves making small changes in yourself, your teaching and your contacts with other teachers. Here we look at some ideas for keeping the flame alive.**



### Professional development? But aren't I already a member of a profession?

You may have become qualified as a teacher, and you may have been practising as a teacher in a professional institution for some time. This doesn't mean that your development as a professional is over. Professional development is about being the best possible teacher you can be. This is particularly important if you are beginning to feel the symptoms of burnout setting in; it's time to take action now to avoid them. If you haven't felt any burnout yet, it's still a good idea to follow a couple of these tips before you do start losing enthusiasm. Teachers who successfully engage in professional development find they get a lot more out of their work, feel more satisfied about their classes and themselves and get along better with their colleagues and learners. In short, survival becomes a lot easier!

Here are some tips for developing professionally that you can start right now. They cost little or nothing but the benefits can be great.

**1** Start cooperating with colleagues. Research shows that where successful peer support exists, burnout and staff turnover is dramatically reduced. So start sharing with others. The cheapest and easiest way is to swap ideas for classes. One way to do this is to set up a sharing board in the staffroom. You can also set up a teacher discussion group. Organize a meeting every two weeks or once a month to discuss different ideas or challenges you face when teaching. See the box below for a list of ideas for teacher discussion groups.

**2** Watch another teacher teach. Observing one of your colleagues teach is a great way to get new ideas and see how others deal with everyday classroom occurrences. If you have ever wondered what happens in the other classrooms around the school, or how your colleagues deal with a difficult student, why not try to find out? Choose a colleague who you respect and ask them if they would mind if you observed them. You could use the observation to borrow ideas for your own classes.

Alternatively, ask a colleague you admire and trust to watch one of your classes. Observations often work really well if they are focused. Is there something about your teaching that is bothering you? Here are typical areas that language teachers find frustrating:

- Using the student's L1
- Classroom management and discipline
- Organizing group and pair work
- Giving feedback to learners
- Clarity of instructions
- Timing of activities

Focus on one of these or something else that you specifically find frustrating and ask the observer to watch you for that.

Some teachers have an obligatory observation by their director of studies every year. For many this can be a harrowing experience. Why not take advantage of this and take the initiative yourself?

## Professional development

If your annual observation is coming up, choose an area (like one of those above) and ask the observer to pay particular attention to it during their observation. Then discuss this, along with other aspects of the lesson, later on in feedback together. This shows that you are serious about your teaching and recognize that you have areas you wish to improve – something that most directors of studies would appreciate as a sign of professionalism.

**3** Join a network or community of English teachers. Setting up a discussion group, although rewarding, may be difficult and time-consuming. What if you work in near isolation (for example, in business classes)? What if nobody where you work wants to join you? Don't let this stop you. There are lots of teachers' groups that exist already. Why not join a teachers' association? Many countries will have an association of English teachers or language teachers. There are also international associations. Joining an association can have many benefits. First and foremost it puts you in touch with hundreds of other teachers in the same position as you. Often you will receive a publication from the association several times a year. And then there are conferences, where you can go and find out about recent developments in teaching or even present something yourself. One of the most attractive aspects about joining an association is that you can make new contacts which can help you advance professionally.

**4** Become a student again. If you only have an initial teaching certificate and are feeling that it's all the same old thing, why not go back to being a learner again? You could take a teaching diploma (like the Trinity College Licentiate Diploma in TESOL or the Cambridge DELTA) or a master's in TESOL. Diploma courses tend to be more practically orientated to your teaching, while master's courses are often, but not always, more theoretical. Either way, most teachers who go back to school regain a lot of motivation from being back on the other side of the classroom.

**5** Do research. Another exciting area open to teachers is action research – research done by teachers themselves. It's usually done to identify problems or areas the teacher would like to focus

on. These could be related to teaching, learning, or syllabus design. In action research, the teacher collects data related to his / her professional work. This is followed by reflection on what has been discovered and then application to the situation.

The *how* and *what* of action research is a large area. A good starting point would be one of the books devoted to the subject, such as *Action Research for Language Teachers*, by M. J. Wallace (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

**6** Change focus. Teaching can become monotonous if you let it get that way. You may have been teaching for five years (or 10, or 20), but is it really five years of experience? Or is it one year of experience repeated five times? This kind of situation can occur if you consciously (or subconsciously) teach the same kind of class every year – the same level, or age of learners, or same book. And it's called getting into a rut. Some of the ways mentioned above can help you get out of a rut, but sometimes a simple change of class profile will do. Here are some tips, from easiest to most difficult, that could help.

- **Change the coursebook**  
If you cannot change coursebook because of school policy, change the way you work with it. Start from a different unit or try different supplement activities. If you have supplemented a lot with extra material, try to go back to the original with a more open perspective.
- **Change the level**  
Teachers often become wed to a certain level. Ask to change completely. If you have been with advanced, drop down to elementary. If you are always working with elementary learners, move up to advanced.
- **Change the learner profile**  
If you teach adults, try to find some young learner classes to teach, or vice versa. If you teach general English, try to get some classes teaching English for Specific Purposes (academic English, or English for tourism) or find some classes teaching in a business. If you are used to teaching one-to-one classes and small groups, try to find a larger group to work with.

## Professional development

Change is difficult. It can sometimes be traumatic at first. Some of the changes above might mean finding a different place to work. You may be afraid of making the wrong decision. But if you feel yourself slowing down, it could be the best thing that happens to you.



### Career paths for English language teachers

All these ideas notwithstanding, some teachers may still feel that they need to do something different, but don't know what. What other avenues are open to English language teachers? Here are five paths that teachers often take, while remaining in the profession.

- **Remain a teacher – but become a better teacher**  
Engaging in any of the activities above can help to make you a better teacher. They can help to refresh you and give you a new perspective on teaching. Many teachers do have the opportunity to try something else but they return to teaching because they enjoy it so much. There's nothing wrong with being a teacher, even less so if you are a better teacher than you were before!
- **Become a senior teacher or mentor**  
Some schools have one or more senior

teachers – teachers with extra responsibilities. These may include running staff workshops, observing new teachers and acting as a mentor for them, organizing final exams, choosing coursebooks and helping the director of studies (see below).

- **Become a teacher trainer**  
Do you remember the trainers who taught you to be a teacher? It is quite likely that they came to that job after teaching for some years. Many teacher trainers still teach English part-time. To be a teacher trainer you often need to have a diploma in teaching (DipTESOL or DELTA are two examples) and be willing to help others learn how to teach. It can be as rewarding as, if not more than, teaching itself. Watching others teach and giving feedback can also have a very positive effect on your own teaching. Many teacher trainers work at universities or teacher training institutes. Publishers also use teacher trainers to give workshops related to their products.
- **Become a director of studies (DOS) or an assistant DOS (ADOS)**  
For those teachers who are more administratively inclined, the post of DOS or ADOS is quite attractive. Their responsibilities include the running of the department of languages, dealing with learners' complaints and parents, hiring new teachers, observing teachers and, in the case of private language schools, drumming up new business. A DOS or an ADOS usually spends more time in an office than in a classroom.
- **Become a materials writer**  
Have you ever felt that the book you were using in class was hopeless? Do you think you can do better? EFL / ESL materials writers almost always are, or have been, teachers. If you are interested in getting into materials writing, start saving material that you are already making for your classes. Write or call the local offices of publishers in your area and send them your CV with a sample of your material. Materials writers rarely start off by writing a major book by themselves; they more often start by writing components of

## Professional development

an existing course (for example, a workbook or resource material). You can also start by applying as a writer to one of the many websites for teachers or even create a website for teachers yourself.



suggestions on presentation and necessity of the worksheets.

**5** Revision circus. Teachers bring along a revision activity they like to do with students. They then teach each other the activity. This works well just before exam time.

**6** Organize a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis of your classes and compare.

**7** Teachers Anonymous. Choose a common problem area, such as discipline, and hold a meeting where teachers individually confess difficulties they've had in that area. Others then provide support and help.

### Teacher discussion group ideas

**1** Read and report. Everybody reads an article about teaching from a teacher's magazine, journal or website, and then the group has a discussion about what they think.

**2** Methodology experiment. Have everyone read about a teaching methodology (e.g. Total Physical Response, the Silent Way, Community Language Learning) and try out an activity using that methodology. Then meet and report on how it went.

**3** Language awareness brush-up. Before the meeting, have each teacher submit a grammar or phonology area that they are uncomfortable with. Discuss and clarify these as a group, or better yet, teach each other as though you were teaching your learners.

**4** Photocopy audit. Everybody brings in the photocopied worksheets they used / made the previous week. Teachers then compare each other's worksheets and make



### Become a member of a global profession

Two important teaching associations:

The International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL, [www.iatefl.org](http://www.iatefl.org)) is based in Whitstable, Kent, in England. It has more than 3,500 members in over 100 countries around the world. Members receive regular publications, including the association's magazine, *IATEFL Issues*, and two free publications per year. IATEFL also holds an Annual International Conference in England every year, for which grants are available

## Professional development

to attend. There are 15 special interest groups (SIGs) on a variety of issues of interest to English teachers. See website for more details.

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL, [www.tesol.org](http://www.tesol.org)) is an international organization headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia, in the United States, which has more than 14,000 members. Members receive a quarterly newspaper with articles on professional issues and concerns, access to different sections of interest (focusing on a particular aspect of English teaching, often their own website and e-discussion group) and the possibility of grants and awards to attend the yearly TESOL conference in the United States. See website for more details.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Richards, Jack and Farrell, Thomas. *Professional Development for Language Teachers*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- James, Peter. *Teachers in Action*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Wallace, Michael. *Action Research for Language Teachers*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Edwards, Corony and Willis, Jane (Eds.). *Teachers Exploring Tasks in Language Teaching*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Covey, Stephen. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Simon & Schuster Ltd., 1989.
- Bailey, Kathleen; Curtis, Andy and Nunan, David. *Pursuing Professional Development: The Self as Source*. Newbury House Publishers, 2001.