To Andrew

The Depressed Language Teacher

by

Terri Edwards Okazaki and Mario Rinvolucri

In this article two writers look at depression in the context of native speaking EFL teachers. Terri Edwards Ozaki describes how expatriate Teflers, working in cultures that are strange to them, experience depression, while the troughs Mario Rinvolucri outlines have been lived in UK. This article, therefore is about that tiny minority of Teflers who happen to be native speakers of English, probably less than an eighth of one percent of the 3 million teachers of English as foreign language around the globe. This article does not attempt to deal with depression as experienced by the nearly half million teachers of English in China, for instance.

Terri writes:

"Teacher burn-out" is a fairly well-documented phenomenon in main stream education but precious little has been researched or written about it related to ELT. When mentioned at all in relation to ELT the reference tends to be a short article on the web or in the kind of teaching magazine that many expat teachers abroad do not have access to, such as the Times Educational Supplement or the Guardian Educational Supplement.

ELT can be stressful enough in one's own country (all those manic summer courses spring to mind!) but for teachers working abroad there are particular stresses and strains that that may cause or factor into depression, and there may be precious few resources to help the sufferer.

Here are some possible causes of stress:

Culture shock
The language barrier
Home-sickness
Heavy workloads
Split-shift schedules
Pressure on personal relationships, particularly with spouse
The person may not be working,
They may be caring for children
They may have been left behind in another country
They may have been opposed to moving,
They may be forced to give up career and friends etc....

(I have witnessed such a situation: a colleague of mine who split up with his steady, long-standing girl-friend shortly after joining the teaching staff at British Council, Tokyo, actually took his own life.)

People may experience loneliness and difficulty making new friends
They may live in cramped and noisy accomodation

(I have a colleague who has moved from one ghastly flat to escape noisy neighbours, only to find that her new flat has an insomniac player of loud music next door. The woman is on the verge of a nervous breakdown)

A person may be trying to adjust to the written and unwritten rules of a new school
They may have had inadequate training and the situation can be made worse by busy colleagues who are unable to find time to help out newcomers.

a person in lousy depression
Etc....

Ask each student to work on their own and write a sentence each about ten things/people etc that have lost their power.

Group the students in sixes to listen to each other's sentences.

Finish the activity by giving of the following excerpt from The Pillow Book by Sei Shonagon, a brilliant Japanese woman writer from the 10th century AD.

A large boat that is high and dry in a creek at ebb-tide

A woman who has taken off her false locks to comb the short hair that remains

A large tree that has been blown down in a gale and lies on its side with its roots in the air.

A man of no importance reprimanding a servant.

An old man who removes his hat and reveals his thinning hair.

A woman, who is angry with her husband about some trifling matter, leaves home and goes somewhere to hide. She is certain he will rush around looking for her, but he does nothing of the kind. Since she cannot stay away for ever she swallows her pride and returns.

(Making LISTS may, at first, seem boring but it often generates a good flow of ideas that come tumbling easily.)

2. STARTING MANY HARES

Suppose you have to prepare students to write essays on a rather hackneyed topic, like Smoking should be banned in public places, give the group the title and ask:
One fifth of the students to write 8 grammatically-negative sentences about the topic

" " " " 8 declarative " " "

" " " " 8 interrogative " " "

" " " " 8 exclamations " "

" " " " 8 imperative " "

"

When the writing phase is done ask each group to share what they have written among themselves.
Ask them to now come together in groups of five, each group with one representative of each syntactic structure in it. These groups share.

After this brain storming phase each student spends 30 minutes writing an essay on the topic, but require that each author should put in three things they **do not agree with.**

Group the students in 3's to read each other's work. Person A and Person B have to try and suss out where writer C has written the three things she does not hold with.

(syntactic structures have a serious impact on the ideas we come up with.
Including falsity in what is written gives the teenage reader an exciting , interpersonal task, both in the writing and reading phases)

3. FROM WRITING TO READING

As homework ask students to search the web to find a short text on a topic they care about. Tell them, as homework, to change the text, playing with type face size, type face style, bold, italics, underlining, spacing, placing on the page etc…… to bring out the way they feel the text should be read aloud.
They bring a print-out of the text to the next class. (All this can also be done in the computer room at school)

In the next class, group the students in fours. Ask them to each read their texts to the others.
They swap texts and each student produces a new reading from the way the typography strikes him/her.

Allow 5 minutes for general feedback.

(I learnt this idea from John Morgan)

If you find the three exercises outlined above prove useful and generative with your students, you will find more of the same sort in CREATIVE WRITING, by Frank and Rinvolucri, a "book" published, for free, under TEACHER RESOURCE BOOK PREVIEW , in Issue 4, November 04 of **HUMANISING LANGUAGE TEACHING**, which you will find at www.hltmag.co.uk

Happy hunting……. and tell your friends about this windfall.

* "Fresh Angles" to get away from stale Saxons