

UNDERSTANDING HOW TEACHERS MANAGE STRESS AND COPING STRATEGIES AT THE SCHOOL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES, CYPRUS INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Bahaa Arameen

PhD student at Cyprus International University

Bahaaar221114@gmail.com

ORCID ID: 0009-0004-3958-5082

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the factors contributing to stress and the coping strategies employed by teachers at the School of Foreign Languages at Cyprus International University (CIU). Eight teachers from CIU's School of Foreign Languages were interviewed. The data were obtained through qualitative research, and the thematic analysis method was used to analyze the teachers' responses. The findings revealed that key stressors, such as complex student needs and backgrounds, were the most frequently mentioned issues. Other stressors included long working hours and limited time between classes. To manage stress, teachers used strategies such as organization and planning, social support from colleagues, creating strong relationships with students, and focusing on mindfulness and work-life balance. The study highlights the importance of enhancing teacher well-being in order to establish a positive learning environment.

Keywords: Teacher stress, stressors, coping strategies, Social support, Complex student needs

Introduction

Stress is an unavoidable component of modern life, affecting people of all backgrounds and occupations. Within the educational setting, teaching is a rewarding profession but can also be stressful. During teaching, teachers deal with students from different cultural backgrounds, and they have to meet their students' needs. Such a job leads to significant levels of stress among teachers. Over the previous decade, teachers have experienced significantly higher occupational stress and burnout rates compared to other professions (Aloe et al., 2014; Betoret, 2009). Teachers are more receptive to stress since interacting with students and ensuring their good performance throughout the day is a demanding scenario. Teachers must perform several roles for their students, including administrator, role model, friend, philosopher, and guide, which adds to their stress (Ahmad, 2017). According to research, teachers face a variety of stressors. Major among these are: workload pressures and excessive non-teaching responsibilities, low socioeconomic status, teaching unmotivated students, experiencing difficult interactions with administrators and colleagues, and working under bad conditions (Troman, 2000; Kyriacou, 2001; Prilleltensky et al., 2016; Maphalala, 2014; Dhaneesh & Iswarya, 2023).

Stress

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines stress "as a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation. Stress is a natural human response that prompts us to address challenges and threats in our lives. Everyone experiences stress to some degree. The way we respond to stress, however, makes a big difference to our overall well-being".

Stress is triggered when an individual perceives a situation as exceeding their ability to cope with it. Stress can cause emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioral changes. Stress can be categorized by timeline (acute, daily, life events, or chronic stressors). Acute stress is heightened when an incident is perceived as unmanageable, unpredictable, and novel. Daily issues are minor but occur frequently. Daily issues can become chronic stressors if the threat is significant and frequent enough. Life events are defined as time-limited incidents with a specific onset, such as a breakup, vehicle accident, or medical diagnosis. Life events can have long-lasting impacts and become chronic stressors if not addressed. Long-lasting stressors can last weeks or months, such as financial instability, neighborhood safety worries, or chronic disease (Knapp & Sweeny, 2022; Brown & Harris, 2012; Epel et al., 2018). Stress and burnout among teachers can have a negative influence on physical health and may decrease the commitment of teachers and effectiveness to the point where they require professional support.

Coping and Coping Strategies

Coping is whatever humans do to regulate, tolerate, or reduce the impacts of life's stressors, such as perceived dangers, current challenges, or emotional losses (Lazarus, 2000). Thus, coping is a process-oriented, non-automated adaptive behavior that involves managing stressors (Backer, 2000). Coping strategies refer to methods, techniques, or approaches people use to keep their control or manage difficult situations at work or in other contexts. In order to deal with stress and stressful situations, teachers use coping strategies, such as cognitive, emotional, and behavioral strategies, to deal with stressful circumstances and reduce emotions of distress (Admiraal et al., 2000; Kyriacou, 2001; Alhija, 2015; Knapp & Sweeny, 2022). Generally, coping means

maintaining or adjusting to negative events or situations while keeping emotional equilibrium and a positive self-perception. Coping occurs in response to potentially difficult life transitions. Therefore, coping refers to adjusting to unexpected difficulties or obligations, requiring more work and energy compared to routine daily duties (Minz & Panda, 2023). Teachers employ coping strategies such as asking for advice, acting to make things better, and accepting reality (Poudel & Wagle, 2022; Nomtshongwana, 2023). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that secondary student teachers can effectively manage their stress by using constructive coping mechanisms including spending time with their families (Dotimas, 2022).

The Present Study

This study focuses on how teachers at Cyprus International University's School of Foreign Languages handle stress and cope with job requirements. One purpose is to examine how the teachers handle the diverse pressures they encounter within their language-teaching context. Another objective is to investigate what strategies teachers employ to maintain control or deal with stressful circumstances at work. More specifically, this study aims to shed light on the following research questions:

1. What are the major challenges or stressors that contribute to stress for teachers at the School of Foreign Languages, Cyprus International University?
2. What coping strategies do teachers at the School of Foreign Languages employ to manage stress and overcome difficulties in their professional roles?

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative analysis methodology to examine the perspectives of CIU School of Foreign Languages teachers regarding how they manage stress, the challenges they face, and the coping strategies they employ to reduce stress. The study involved in-depth interviews with eight teachers at CIU School of Foreign Languages in Northern Cyprus. The sample includes male and female teachers. The teachers' qualifications range from bachelors, masters, and PhDs.

Data Collection

The data were collected through answering the research questions. The interviews were semi-structured, and the participants were able to openly discuss their opinions and experiences. The interviews with CIU School of Foreign Languages teachers were conducted at the CIU School of Foreign Languages during work hours. The duration of each teacher's individual interview was about forty minutes. The researcher asked specific questions to the teachers and immediately wrote down their answers.

Data Analysis

This study used qualitative data analysis, which may include written records, YouTube comments, Twitter (X) tweets, classroom videos, focus group transcripts, or in-person interviews (Kaiser & Presmeg, 2019). In this study, data were obtained through face-to-face interviews and, then analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method for evaluating data by identifying and reporting common themes across a collection (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis revealed common themes and subthemes related to teachers' perspectives on stress and coping strategies. To ensure anonymity for participants, their names were not revealed.

CIU School of Foreign Languages Background

Cyprus International University (CIU) established its School of Foreign Languages (SFL) in 1997. This school serves students from various regions and nationalities, including Turkey, Iran, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Arab countries, and African countries. The School of Foreign Languages enrolls approximately 500 students annually, indicating a multicultural and international environment at CIU. The SFL employs around 40 teachers, both male and female, with qualifications ranging from Bachelor's (BA), Master's (MA), and Doctorate (PhD). The SFL facility provides over 20 classrooms, each with a smart board connected to the internet. Teachers use these boards to teach from virtual textbooks, browse the internet, make presentations, and play movies.

The SFL aims to prepare students for several English departments at CIU. At the beginning of each semester, students take a proficiency exam to determine their level. The SFL offers many levels, from beginner to advanced. These courses aim to enhance students' English language proficiency for academic and professional settings. The SFL carefully plans target language instruction and aligns course levels to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Pearson Assured have accredited the English Preparatory School since January 2015.

Findings

Based on the data collected from the interview questions, two themes emerged from the participants' responses. These themes are discussed in this section.

Theme One: Factors that cause Teacher Stress

A- Complex Student Needs and the Demands of Teaching

All the participants said that dealing with students causes stress in different ways. These include several aspects:

1- Students' level and proficiency levels:

According to the participants, teaching weak level of students is so stressful, one teacher said, "I think lower levels are more stressful to teach, as they still do not get used to applying English in their environment." "I remember the time that I had beginner classes, and I really was overwhelmed because no one could understand any English word. I had to pantomime everything! It was so stressful!" noted a veteran teacher.

In addition, the teachers mentioned that managing different group of students with different learning styles and personalities is challenging because students do not learn at the same speed. "The students with higher levels can be more under control by speaking with them rather than lower ones," shared another teacher. Another remarked, "Because of the weak level of the students, I have to explain the instructions in detail."

2- The challenges of teaching in a multilingual classroom

According to the participants, teaching in a multilingual classroom with different students from different cultural background and mother tongues is so stressful. The main problem is students tend to become friends with the students who speak their first language and they avoid communicating with other international students who do not speak their languages. One teacher said, "In my classes, sometimes, I hear five or more different languages; none of these languages is English! Arab students go together, African students together, Iranian, Turkish, etc. This is really makes me feel stressed!" Another remarked, "The same nationality students in the classes tend to speak in their mother tongue assuming the others will understand it. This becomes a difficulty for the teacher as we try to make them speak English as much as possible. "

3- Learners' Lack of Motivation

All eight teachers mentioned the lack of student motivation as a significant stressor. One teacher elaborated, "Some students are shy or introverted, making participation difficult." Another teacher highlighted the issue of dealing with unmotivated students, saying, "Some of my students see the class as an exam or a way to pass the level. I try to motivate them to love English, and I ask them to talk with students from other nationalities."

4- Unexpected questions from students:

While unexpected questions can be a sign of active learning and student curiosity, three teachers mentioned they can also add pressure. One teacher explained, "Some students ask questions at the last minute of the class, and this can be stressful!"

B- Long Working Hours

Long working hours emerged as a significant stressor for many teachers. One teacher, describing the relentless workload, saying, "One of my personal worries is having balance between work and personal life. As a teacher, I spend most of my time at university so I don't have time to learn another language or going to the gym".

C - The limited time of the lesson

This sub-theme was evident in the transcripts of the participants; they mentioned the difficulty of finishing the tasks sometimes on time. Teachers struggle to fit everything they want to cover within the allotted time. A teacher expressed this sentiment, saying, "I believe that the biggest challenge or stressor is being able to deliver the lesson and finish everything on time". Another said, "By the time I finish explaining a concept, there are barely any minutes left for student practice or questions."

D - The short time of the breaks between the classes.

Indeed, almost unanimously all participants said the break time between classes is too short. It is clear that many teachers struggle with the short breaks they get between classes. "There just isn't enough time to grab a coffee and breathe!" remarked one participant.

E- Midterms

Many teachers highlighted the extra stress they experience during midterms. This period usually comes by a major increase in work, as teachers are under pressure to prepare for exams while also grading a high number of student work. One teacher described the challenge, saying, "Midterms are particularly overwhelming. Checking, grading, and entering grades to the system is really stressful!"

F- Other Frequently Mentioned Stressors

1- Grammar lessons:

Three out of the eight teachers specifically mentioned grammar lessons as a source of stress. One teacher confided, "When students are about to learn grammar, they feel a bit more stressed compared to other activities like speaking and writing. I also feel stressed, whether they have learned or not". "Grammar lessons are particularly tough because students find them boring, so I have to use many methods to explain grammar rules for them," shared another teacher.

2- Early Morning Classes:

Early morning classes seem to be a challenge for some teachers. Not all teachers are morning people! Three out of the eight interviewed mentioned early morning classes as a particular stressor. As one teacher put it, "Because I can't get enough sleep, waking up early can be stressful to me."

3- Slowness of Smart Boards

While controlling student conduct and designing engaging lessons are huge responsibilities, technology may cause stress. Three out of the eight teachers interviewed mentioned the issue of dealing with slow Smart Boards. "The smart board sometimes freezes and does not work; this makes me feel stressed," noted one teacher.

G- Occasionally Mentioned Stressors

Observations:

While the pressure to be observed was not a common issue for most teachers, it is important to note because of the impact it can have. One teacher mentioned the stress of being formally observed and evaluated, saying, "Regular classroom observations during each term can be stressful."

Theme Two: Effective Coping Strategies for Teacher Stress Management

Another central theme was the approaches for coping with work demands and reducing stress. Based on the findings, the following sub-themes emerged:

1. Organizing and Planning

The most frequently mentioned coping strategy by the teachers was the practice of organizing and planning their work using to-do lists. Six teachers said that they write plans and follow them to manage their workload and reduce stress. One teacher mentioned, "Prioritizing tasks is one of my strategies to reduce stress." Another teacher remarked, "Having a to-do list keeps me organized, and I try to tick off each activity that I complete every day."

2. Socializing with Colleagues

The second most common strategy, highlighted by four teachers, was to take coffee breaks and engage in small talk with colleagues. "Having Coffee breaks and friendly conversations with the other teachers lets me know that I am not in this alone," One teacher said." If I feel stressed in my daily work routine, I try to drink a cup of coffee before the class begins," As another teacher noted.

3. Finding Motivation in Student Progress

Focusing on the positive results of their efforts helps teachers to find meaning and satisfaction in their job. Celebrating the achievements of students and observing their growth may be a tremendous motivation, making the difficulties of teaching easier. Four teachers mentioned being motivated by watching student improvement and successes." When I see my students learning from me and trying their best to speak English, it makes me happy and reduces my stress," mentioned one teacher. This intrinsic motivation, driven by student development, was a common theme among the teachers interviewed.

4. Building Friendly Relationships with Students

Four teachers mentioned the importance of building positive relationships with their students. Creating an entertaining and positive classroom atmosphere reduces stress levels for both students and teachers. "Every time I see my students happy in the classroom, it makes my day perfect," shared one teacher. Such a positive environment is perfect for encouraging communication, teamwork, and better-learning experiences and makes learning fun! In addition, encouraging and being respectful of all students allows them to be more active in lessons.

5. Taking Short Breaks and Deep Breaths

Three teachers highlighted the importance of taking short breaks and engaging in deep breathing exercises as a quick and efficient stress-management strategy. One teacher said, "I always prefer to take a deep breath and stay calm; this can reset my mindset and reduce my stress levels." These breaks enable teachers to get away from the immediate stressors and refresh their mental state, which helps to prevent burnout. Furthermore, short breaks might assist teachers stay focused throughout the day.

6. Engaging in Leisure Activities

Two teachers mentioned engaging in leisure activities, such as playing games on their phones or laptops, in order to relax and distract themselves from work-related stresses. These activities offer a mental break and a fun way to recharge, which can be refreshing and help teachers retain a positive mindset. "A great way to unwind from the classes is playing games on my computer; this helps me switch off from the classroom environment," said one teacher.

The range of coping strategies presented by these teachers demonstrates the significance of adapting stress management techniques to individual needs and preferences. By adopting these different strategies, teachers can create a more balanced and enjoyable work experience.

Summary and Discussion

This study aims to address:

1. The major challenges or stressors that contribute to stress for teachers at the School of Foreign Languages, Cyprus International University.
2. The coping strategies the teachers use to deal with these stressors.

Based on the data collected from the interview questions, this study has revealed that the most mentioned challenges and stressors by the teachers include:

- 1- **Student dynamics and demands:** This includes students' varying proficiency levels, the challenges of teaching in a multilingual classroom, students' lack of motivation, preparing for midterms, and handling unexpected student questions.
- 2- **Long working hours.**
- 3 - **Limited time of lessons and short breaks between classes.**
- 4- **Other frequently mentioned stressors,** such as early morning classes, the slowness of smart boards, and various observations.

The reason for this could be that the process of teaching and dealing with students and their different needs indeed causes stress in different ways. Each student brings their own set of skills, limitations, languages, cultural background, learning styles, and personalities to the classroom, which requires teachers to modify their teaching methods and approaches constantly.

This could be linked to existing research on teacher stress, such as the findings of Bottiani et al., (2019), which confirm that student disruptive behavior and high job demands are major stressors for urban middle school teachers. The stress associated with managing students of diverse competence levels is consistent with both findings, since both involve high job demands and require significant effort to maintain classroom control and encourage learning.

Additionally, this result is consistent with the work of Skaalvik (2017), who identified time constraint as a significant predictor of emotional fatigue in teachers, and low student motivation as a key stressor, particularly at higher-grade levels. The need for teachers to spend additional time and effort to teach lower-level students, while also managing various learning styles, can add to the time pressure they face, creating emotional fatigue. Furthermore, low learners' proficiency can be seen as a lack of student motivation, which increases teacher stress.

The highest level of stress reported by Tungdamnarnsawad (2019) was about the amount of workload appropriate for teaching, research, academic services, and cultural preservation, while the highest level of abilities in work performance of teachers was about facilitating student-centered learning. Vorlíček et al., (2022) found that the primary stressors perceived by teachers were problematic relationships with students and parents, student lack of motivation, student inappropriate behaviors, non-functioning policies, administrative overload, and underappreciation of education. Similarly, Axup & Gersch (2008) reported students' negative behavior as the most stressful for teachers.

Present study reveals long working hours as another frequently mentioned stressor by the teachers. Of course, long working hours, extended periods of sitting, paperwork, and managing work demands are major reasons for

stress in any job. The research results were consistent with the study of Tungdamnarnsawad (2019), which asserts that long work hours outside the classroom, dealing with the students, and complying with university administration and standard criteria for education can create stress, mental, emotional, and physical anxiety. Research frequently indicates a substantial relationship between long working hours and stress (Sato et al., 2009; Despréaux et al., 2017; Goh et al., 2015; Tamunomiebi, 2021). Long working hours are linked to an increased risk of stroke, heart disease, and diabetes, highlighting the serious health consequences of this stress (Despréaux et al., 2017; Goh et al., 2015). Therefore, organizations must recognize and manage these stressors at work to limit their effect on employee performance and well-being. (Tamunomiebi, 2021). Additional stressors mentioned by the teachers included limited lesson time, short breaks between classes, the pressure of midterms, and some other frequently mentioned factors such as difficulties with grammar lessons, the slowness of smart boards, and early morning classes.

To summarize, teacher stress caused by student dynamics and demands, particularly varied competency levels and learning styles, as well as the long working hours, is a serious concern. This is supported by broader studies that show comparable stresses in many educational environments, indicating an ongoing issue in the teaching profession. These stressors represent the wide range of factors that contribute to the total stress experienced by teachers in the School of Foreign Languages at Cyprus International University.

To address how teachers at the School of Foreign Languages at Cyprus International University deal with stressors, the teachers reported using a variety of effective coping strategies, including:

1. Organizing and Planning

Teachers reported that creating lesson plans, timetables, and to-do lists helped them feel more in control of their workload and reduced feelings of overwhelm. Creating plans to manage stress levels and complete tasks is the most frequently used method by teachers at the School of Foreign Languages to reduce stress. This is supported by Austin et al. (2005) and Kepalaite (2013), who found that planful problem-solving was one of the most commonly used coping strategies by teachers in their studies. Moreover, planful problem-solving is a coping technique frequently integrated into learning.

2. Socializing with Colleagues

Social support from colleagues gives emotional recognition, problem-solving ideas, and a sense of belonging. The interviewed teachers said that talking with colleagues helps them reduce stress by sharing experiences and receiving emotional support. This strategy provides an opportunity to share experiences, seek advice, and simply relax away from the stresses of teaching, as highlighted in Jain (2021). Subair et al. (2021) also found that teachers found talking with colleagues helped them manage stress. They further explain that having a nice, approachable, trustworthy, cooperative, and warm social network can help reduce stress. Overall, social support from colleagues has an important role in preserving CIU SFL teachers from the challenges of their jobs.

3. Intrinsic Motivation and Positive Relationships with Students

Finding motivation in student progress and building friendly relationships with students emerged as interrelated coping mechanisms. CIU SFL teachers emphasized that these interactions foster a positive atmosphere for learning while reducing stress for both teachers and students. This aligns with Li et al. (2022), who assert that positive teacher-student relationships lead to higher-quality teaching. Moreover, positive teacher-student interactions facilitate increased monitoring, scaffolding, and constructive feedback for students (Reddy & Dudek, 2014; van de Pol et al., 2010).

4. Mindfulness and Work-Life Balance:

The study at CIU SFL identified two strategies that highlight the importance of mindfulness and work-life balance for teachers' well-being:

- **Taking Short Breaks and Deep Breaths:** This technique shows the use of mindfulness practices in the moment. Deep breathing exercises can help teachers manage stress by increasing relaxation and emotional control. These short breaks provide mental relief from current stresses, allowing teachers to regain their focus and may prevent burnout.
- **Engaging in Leisure Activities:** The study also found that some teachers value work-life balance as a coping mechanism. Two teachers described doing leisure activities outside of work, such as playing games on their phones or laptops, to relieve stress and remove themselves from work. This is consistent with Clipa's (2017) findings that positive strategies for coping, such as engaging in fun activities, are the most frequently used. These activities provide a mental break and a way of relaxation that can be refreshing and contribute to a happy mood.

The variety of coping strategies given by these teachers highlights the importance of focusing on stress management techniques to each individual's demands and preferences. By applying strategies, teachers can create a more balanced and happy work environment.

Conclusion

This study investigated the factors that contribute to teacher stress and discussed some of the coping strategies that used by teachers at the School of Foreign Languages, Cyprus International University. The study showed that teachers deal with major stressors such as managing students with different learning styles and competency levels, long working hours, and limited time between classes. To manage this stress, teachers utilized some strategies like organization and planning, social support from colleagues, developing positive relationships with students, and focusing on mindfulness and work-life balance. These findings highlight the importance of increasing teachers' well-being in order to create a good positive learning environment for students. Furthermore, these strategies not only decrease stress, but they also increase job satisfaction and productivity. Future research could investigate the long-term consequences of such strategies and other elements that add to teacher stress in a variety of educational settings.

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