



**Paul Bress**

*Paul Bress has a varied background that includes trainer training and conference organisation, and has extensive experience in producing training materials for the Universities of Kent and Leeds.*

# Happy teacher, happy students

## **Paul Bress considers a possible blueprint for working conditions for EFL teachers**

EFL teachers all over the world are experiencing greater and greater stress. This is the result of a variety of reasons, for example:

- There are increasingly rigorous quality control procedures in education institutions.
- Students have an ever-decreasing attention span.
- Students are being seen increasingly as consumers.

These three factors mean that every hour that a teacher teaches is more demanding than the equivalent hour taught a generation ago.

There have been a number of experiments in *manufacturing* over the years on making the workplace a rewarding place to work in. One such experiment was the Volvo experiment. This was, essentially, a move away from one person doing the same repetitive task again and again to that person having much wider responsibility. Workers in this experiment reported much more satisfaction, and productivity didn't decrease.

I suppose that most employers and directors of studies would like to have a teaching staff that are happy in the same way that the Volvo workers were. But what practical steps can they take to achieve this goal?

### *1 Restrict the number of contract hours to a 'reasonable' level*

Don't forget that for each contact hour there's more administration than there used to be. Moreover, the contact itself is more demanding as a result of the ever-decreasing attention spans of the students. Personally, I think my performance trails off after four contact hours in one day (even with the best will in the world!). Is it fair (on either students or teachers) to ask teachers to deliver more than that?

### *2 Organise staff development meetings once a month*

If you don't do this, you might find that your teachers become trapped in a 'reactive' kind of teaching. It's important (for everybody's sake) that they stay 'pro-active'. This different mindset constantly breathes new life into the teacher.

### *3 Negotiate courses of action with teachers*

Just as a teacher respects his/her students, so should students respect their teachers. Most teachers are caring professionals who are intrinsically motivated to do a good job. They appreciate a nurturing touch from their employers.

### *4 Give each teacher the opportunity for taking further responsibility*

Many teachers will simply want to remain in the classroom and teach – just like a nurse will want to remain tending to his/her patients. But some teachers will want to take on a wider role, e.g. extra pastoral or administrative responsibilities. Providing this opportunity can be very good for maintaining, or boosting, a teacher's self-esteem.

### *5 Pay teachers according to their qualifications, experience, and performance*

People train hard to become teachers, and they do professional work which involves never really 'switching off'. Although most people don't become teachers to earn a high salary, they do expect reasonable recompense for the efforts they make, and they will probably feel resentful if they don't receive this.

### *6 Give teachers a reasonable annual vacation entitlement*

How many times have you heard of teachers who suddenly fall sick at the start of their vacation? This probably means that they have been (subconsciously or not) fighting off an infection towards the end of term just so that they can continue to come to work. Then, when term finishes, they relax their defences and fall ill.

Teachers need, let's say, three periods a year in which they can really turn off from their teaching responsibilities.

### *7 Treat each teacher as a unique individual*

In the same way that each teacher cares for, and tries to bring out the best of, each member of his/her class, the principal/director of studies should try to care for each member of his/her staff. This means trying to understand what makes each teacher tick – and responding accordingly. In turn, this means that each employer–employee relationship is a unique one.

If you are the owner, or director of studies, of a school, you might be reading this article with a degree of scepticism. Your first consideration might be the market place (how much income you can generate and how much money you can afford to pay your teachers). And, of course, the bottom line is 'what the market can take'. But the more of the above suggestions you can incorporate, the more likely you are to have happier teachers and, consequently, happier students.

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