

# **EFL Foreign Teacher Stress in Korea: Causes and Coping Mechanisms**

## **A survey study and brief literature review**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Survey study of 53 foreign EFL teachers in Jeonju City, South Korea looks at causes of teacher stress and coping mechanisms between the years of 2004 and 2006. Results show foreign EFL teachers report moderate levels of stress and attribute stresses in roughly equal measures to student misbehavior and school director/administrative sources. Survey results also suggested primary coping mechanisms include drinking alcohol, sports, conversation with friends, hobbies including watching TV and movies, and listening to music. A strong correlation ( $r=.622$ ;  $t= 4.53$ ) was found between foreign EFL teachers' perceptions of stress in Korea and perceptions of stress at their teaching job. No significant correlations were found between foreign EFL teachers' perception of stress and gender, length of time teaching in Korea or plans to renew teaching contracts. Teachers interviewed in 2006 were an average of five years younger than those interviewed in 2004 and reported slight but not significantly higher levels of stress. Further research is suggested.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past four millennia Chinese, Greek, Latin, Arabic, French and English have all basked in the sunshine of being an international "lingua franca." During the latter part of the Twentieth Century, English became the world's undisputed number one language of international communication. Consequently teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) and teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) have grown into enormous industries.

The differences between EFL and ESL cannot be understated. First of all, EFL students especially in Korea rarely have the opportunity to practice English language outside the classroom. "It is not used to provide human needs, it is not the vehicle for academic survival, nor is it used for social interaction... In short, there is no acculturation process to propel the language learning. There is no compelling need to communicate in English." (Evans, 2000)

In contrast, foreign ESL students living in the United States are more likely to be motivated by physical and social needs to learn English.

Teaching highly motivated students is easier than teaching students who are essentially a “captive audience” required by educational institutions to study English.

#### Teacher stress

Stress is a common problem experienced by teachers (Friesen et al. 1988). Teacher stress, specifically, has been defined as “a response by a teacher of negative affect (such as anger, anxiety or depression) accompanied by potentially pathogenic physiological changes (such as increased heart rate or release of adrenocorticotrophic hormone into the bloodstream) as a result of the demands made upon the teacher in his role as a teacher (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977).

According to Byrne (1998) over fifty percent of beginning teachers will leave the field of education within seven years and never teach again. Furthermore, more than two thirds of beginning teachers will leave at some point during the first four years. Similar results were found by Wilkins-Cantor, Edwards and Young (2000) who found that forty percent of teachers leave the teaching profession in the first five years. Worse still, Decicco and Allison (1999) found that eighty percent in the top quartile of academics leave education in the first five years.

#### Causes of stress in teachers

Causes of teacher stress are varied. McDonald (1993) in a study done at a student teacher practicum found that sources of teacher stress include: role clarification, expectations, conformity, time, evaluation, assignments, peer discussions and inconsistent feedback.

Research by Nisbet (1999) suggests that contributing factors including a lack of administrative support, low pay and crowded classroom add to teacher stress. Fredrick (2001) asserts that a school’s administration is the key determinate in whether a teacher stays or leaves the profession.

Numerous studies have found that student behavior and confrontations with students are the primary cause of teacher stress (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Byrne, 1998; Morris, 1998;

Woods & Weasmer, 2002).

#### Symptoms of stress in teachers

Clement (1991) found that “stress makes teachers ill and drives them to drink.” Abel & Sewell (1999) define stress as a process in which external forces threaten an individual's well-being. Teacher stress is also defined as a condition where negative effects, such as frustration and anxiety result from aspects inherent to teaching which are perceived by teachers to threaten their psychological or physical well-being (Abel & Sewell, 1999). Adams, Heath-Camp and Camp (1999) went so far as to suggest that over half of all teachers reported extreme levels of stress.

#### Coping mechanisms

Numerous studies have looked at teacher coping methods for stress. One study that took place at a rural Australian teacher's practicum identified five coping mechanisms: communicating with others, self help, relaxation/recreation, teaching and managing and organization (Hemmings and Hockley, 2002).

A study on Stress Inoculation Training (SIT) with and without exercise found SIT with exercise to be more effective than either alone or with just SIT and minimal exercise (Long, 1988).

### **METHODS**

In this study, foreign EFL teachers from Canada, the U.S., Australia and New Zealand teaching in South Korean public and private schools and universities were asked to fill out survey questionnaires that contained 1-10 rating scales and open ended questions inquiring about the sources of their stress and their methods of dealing with that stress (see Appendix 1).

The initial group of foreign teachers (N = 25) was surveyed in the fall of 2004. A second group was surveyed in the fall of 2006 (N = 28).

The Foreign teachers surveyed were employed in the central plains region of South Korea, specifically a medium sized city named “Jeonju,” located in South Jolla Province. Foreign teachers were randomly selected in shopping malls, downtown intersections, grocery stores and the local “foreigner bar,” named “Deep-In.”

## Hypothesis

It is predicted that a) foreign teachers will demonstrate moderate stress levels in Korea and in their jobs, and that there will be a significant correlation between perceived stress in Korea and on the job b) foreign EFL Teachers will find student misbehaviors and lack of management support to be more or less equal sources of stress, and c) foreign teachers use alcohol consumption, sports, talking with friends and watching TV and movies as primary coping mechanisms. The null hypothesis asserts no significant correlations will be found.

## RESULTS

### Measures of stress

Most 2004 and 2006 foreign EFL teachers reported stress levels in the moderate range, both in regards to living in Korea and on the job. There was a significant correlation between individual respondents' answers to stress related to living in Korean and stress related to teaching in Korea ( $r=.622$ ,  $t=4.53$ ). In other words, there was a general tendency for those who found life in Korea to only be mildly stressful, to also find teaching mildly stressful, and those who found life in Korea to be very stressful, to also find teaching to be very stressful. Age was not a significant factor in foreign EFL teacher perceptions of stress.

Year	Foreign EFL teacher perception of stress in Korea on a 1-10 scale	Foreign EFL teacher perception of stress at teaching job in Korea on a 1-10 scale	Foreign EFL teacher average age
2004	4.4	4.2	31
2006	4.7	4.9	26

Table 1: Table describing foreign EFL teachers perceptions of stress in Korea and on the job and age in 2004 and 2006.

Whereas the teachers were an average of about 5 years younger in 2006 than 2004, they also perceived slightly higher average levels of stress.

Of the 53 respondents from combined 2004 and 2006 surveys, only 8 or 15% reported experiencing very high (8-10) levels of stress experienced at the teaching job. Twenty one or 39.6% of respondents reported very low (1-3) on the job stress.

### Sources of stress

On the average, most but not a significant number of foreign EFL teachers surveyed in South Korea found their primary source of stress to be at school.

Survey question 3	2004	2006
Community as the primary source of stress	40%	30%
School as the primary source of stress	60%	67%
Home as the primary source of stress	0%	3%

Table 2: Primary sources of stress for foreign EFL teachers in South Korea

Sources of stress at school were roughly evenly divided between student misbehavior and school director.

Survey Question 4	2004	2006
Student misbehavior	55%	48%
Other teachers	9%	4%
School director	36%	48%

Table 3: Foreign EFL teacher sources of stress at school in South Korea

No significant correlations were found between foreign EFL teacher time in Korean and stress levels or sources of stress (survey question 5).

Survey Question 6	2004	2006
Yes, will renew contract and stay teaching in Korea for another year.	28%	52%
No, will not renew contract and will not stay in Korean another year.	48%	34%
Don't know if will renew contract and stay another year.	24%	14%

Table 4 Foreign EFL teachers predictions regarding whether they will continue to teach in Korea after the completion of their current contract.

Whereas in 2004 almost half the foreign EFL teachers reported they would not continue to teach in Korea after the end of their current contract, the 2006 survey suggested that more than half would continue teaching in Korea after the end of their current contract. The differences were not significant. As reported above, average teacher age in 2006 was about 5 years younger than 2004.

Question 7 was open-ended asking teachers their most stressful experiences teaching in Korea. The answers were clustered into three groups: Management support, student problems and community problems.

Survey question 7	2004	2006
Student misbehaviors	45%	30%
Community	10%	18%
Management support.	45%	52%

Table 5 Foreign EFL teachers' answers to open ended questions regarding sources of stress while teaching in Korea.

Answers to this question strongly parallel answers to questions 3 (where do you feel the most stress) and 4 (at school what is your primary source of stress). Again, student misbehaviors and lack of management support were reported in more or less equal measures. Differences were not significant.

In regards to foreign EFL teacher's methods of coping with stress, the answers fell into nine categories as follows:

Survey question 8	2004	2006
Drink alcohol	30%	27%
Sports/exercise	35%	21%
Talk with friends	13%	19%
Watch TV/movies./listen to music	13%	19%
Read	0%	5%
Travel	0%	3%
Spend time alone	4%	2%
Pray	0%	2%
Confront the stress causing people	4%	0%

Table 6 Foreign EFL teachers coping mechanisms.

Though nationality was not asked on the 2004 survey, it was on the 2006 survey. There were no significant correlations found between nationality, self-reported stresses and or coping mechanisms.

## **DISCUSSION**

Foreign EFL teachers in Korea and job related stress

According to Adams, Heath-Camp, and Camp (1999) teachers face a growing level of occupational-related stress with over half of all teachers reporting extreme levels of stress. DeCicco & Allison (1999) reported that with increasing frequency, teachers report experiencing health problems which are directly related to occupational stress and burnout.

In comparison, most foreign EFL teachers in Jeonju reported only moderate levels of stress. Of the 53 respondents from combined 2004 and 2006 surveys, only 8 reported experiencing very high (8-10) levels of stress experienced at the teaching job. This is considerably less than that reported by Adams, Heath-Camp, and Camp (1999) in the U.S.

One explanation could be the pervasiveness of Confucian philosophy in Asia. Confucian values include propriety, righteousness, loyalty and filial piety centered on the central axis of Confucian philosophy: humanity.

All however is not goodness and light. The San Francisco Chronicle (November 25, 2001) reviewed a study by UNICEF suggesting among 17 Asian nations and territories, young Koreans were found to hold the least respect for their elders in a country where honoring one's seniors is a cultural cornerstone (Magnier, 2001)

Fortunately, however, violence against teachers is still rare in Korea. In the United States on the other hand between 1996 and 2000, 599,000 violent crimes against teachers at school were reported. On average, in each year from 1996 to 2000, about 28 out of every 1,000 teachers were the victims of violent crime at school, and 3 out of every 1,000 were victims of serious violent crime (i.e., rape, sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault). Some teachers are at greater risk for victimization. Male teachers are more than twice as likely to be victims of violent crime, and teachers at middle/junior high schools are at greater risk than those in elementary or senior high

schools. Violence against teachers is also higher at urban schools. (DeVoe, Peter, Kaufman, Ruddy, et al. 2002)

DeVoe et al. also found that teachers in the U.S. face threats of violence and intimidation. In the 1999-2000 school year, 9 percent of all teachers were threatened with injury by a student from their school, and 4 percent were physically attacked by a student. (DeVoe, Peter, Kaufman, Ruddy, et al. 2002)

In sum, it is not surprising that foreign EFL teachers in Korea should report lower levels of stress compared to those in the U.S. The survey questionnaire used in this study did ask about teachers most stressful experiences. No teacher surveyed mentioned being assaulted or threatened by a student.

#### Relative stresses at school vs. the community

That foreign EFL teachers should find stress levels at school and in the community almost comparable is not surprising given that the vast majority of EFL teachers in Korea do not speak Korean language and that their teaching stint in Korea is, in most cases their first experience in a foreign country.

#### Sources of stress at school

That sources of stress at school were divided between student misbehavior and school directors parallels other research on teacher stress. Nisbet (1999) asserted that contributing actors include a lack of administrative support low pay and crowded classes. Other research states that problems with student behavior or confrontations with students are the primary cause of teacher stress (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Byrne, 1998; Morris, 1998; Woods & Weasmer, 2002).

#### EFL teachers contract renewals

It is impossible to interpret the mixed results of EFL teachers' responses to the likelihood of their renewing their contract without a follow-up study. Many may be returning to their home countries due to factors other than stress, like having finished paying a student loan, family/relationship needs or home sickness.

#### Coping with stress

Research by Pines and Aronson (1988) suggests that teachers can reduce stress by changing the nature of the stressful situation. This can include confronting the source of



stress. Only one of the 53 respondents in the EFL Foreign teacher stress survey mentioned “confronting the stress causing people.”

More commonly used by the teachers responding to this survey were indirect strategies that have been cited in the literature as effective (Greer & Greer, 1992; Pines & Aronson, 1998). These strategies include: talking about the sources of stress with friends, hobbies and exercise. Exercise is has been found to be especially effective in reducing stress. (Long, 1998)

Finally, alcohol usage was found to be one of the major coping mechanisms used by foreign EFL teachers in Korea to mitigate the effects of on the job stress. Though this finding would seem to confirm Clements’ (1991) research the only place in Jeonju where large groups of foreigners regularly meet is the Deep-In bar, thus offering not only alcohol, but also foreign companionship, commiseration and a wide selection of Western music.

#### FOLLOW-UP STUDIES

It would be interesting to administer the same survey questions in big cities like Seoul and Busan to see if foreign EFL teachers there experience the same levels and causes of stress and employ the same coping strategies.

Certainly a study should be designed to examine exactly what administrative failures cause foreign EFL teachers the most stress. Also a look at community sources of stress might be invaluable in assisting foreign EFL teachers in adjusting to their new life in Korea.

Likewise, it would be interesting but perhaps not very polite to find out just how much drinking foreign teachers engage in compared to comparably aged teachers in the U.S. and other countries.

A follow-up survey on this current research could also look at the foreign EFL teacher training prior to coming to Korea. For example, does a TEFL training program influence teachers perceptions of stress or coping mechanisms?

Questions could also survey EFL teachers’ reasons for not renewing their contracts. For example are they related to stresses in Korea or other exogenous reasons?

A study is currently being designed by this author to examine a) which sports and exercises foreign EFL teachers are engaged in, b) what sports or exercises those currently not involved in those activities would like to try, and c) what is inhibiting teachers from engaging in more sport and exercise activities.

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