



Occupational stress levels and licensure status of ESL Teachers

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Abstract

This study focuses on the causes of stress to ESL online teachers and their coping mechanisms to be able to get through it. The design used in the study is a descriptive correlational design making use of a random sampling in the selection of the participants. A standardized questionnaire with a twenty-five item statements were answered and distributed. A focused discussion is also utilized to gather data regarding their own coping mechanisms to help them alleviate stress. Results show a strong correlation of online ESL teachers' stress and their statuses of being a licensed teacher or not. Online ESL teachers show high levels of stress that have significant effects on their mental and physical health. The interview results suggested some coping mechanisms of the online ESL teachers that include spending time with family and friends, traveling, and other recreational activities.

Keywords: stress, ESL online teachers, causes, coping mechanisms, teacher's license

1. Introduction

Stress is a common element in almost all kinds of job and people from all walks of life have to face it. It is a normal occurrence and happens conversely in all activities may be at home or at work. In addition, it is also an increasing problem in any organizations and more often has an adverse impact to performance.

The effectiveness and efficiency of a group is determined by the dedication and enthusiasm of its labor force. The performance of such can be heightened if the work schedule of the employees are stressful. Moreover, if the working environment is also toxic, instead of being supportive, it could be a stressful place for any worker. Employees should work in a place wherein they don't have to complain about pressure, stress, and job security.

Teachers are never an exception. The teaching profession is considered to be one of the highly stressful profession (Johnson *et al.*, 2005; Newberry & Allisop, 2017).

One of the booming industries here in the Philippines most specifically here in Cebu, is the teaching of English to non-English speakers. Since 2014, there has been an increasing demand for teachers to teach English to international non-English native students in Cebu. Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), a government tasked in managing and supervising technical education and skills development in the Philippines listed more than 60 English as Second Language (ESL) schools in Cebu alone. Being ranked fourth among the countries who have most English speakers and top six among the countries with the highest English proficiency, there is no question that most international ESL companies really choose to build branches here in the Philippines. Despite these facts, there is still a massive attrition of teachers in Online ESL schools. ESL companies are still hiring more and more online teachers every year to compensate the plummeting population of their employees.

According to an article on Forbes.com, an estimated number of more than 100,000 native English speakers are teaching English in China. That said article was published in 2012

and that number has skyrocketed since. In both China and South Korea, approximately more than a thousand new English teachers are hired each month. In China, this figure will most likely triple in the coming years. Although the demand is so high, sadly the supply is too low. This may be because teaching English is no walk in the park. ESL teachers face numerous challenges in the classroom and teaching foreign students is just plain hard. Expectations and demands from the teachers have risen too in congruence with the increasing demand of ESL instructors.

It is undeniable that ESL teachers covers a large percentage of the labor force in Cebu. Teachers should be able to maximize their potentials well with the help of the company. But, a large number of teachers usually quit their jobs before reaching the regular employment status. Thus, this study could help enlighten the ESL companies or the industry as a whole why most of their employees resign after just a few months' work in a company. This seeks to help understand the struggles and challenges that some ESL instructors are experiencing right now. It could also help the ESL teachers on how to cope with the stress they are experiencing and discuss some interventional programs that the companies can offer to their employees.

In this regard and the purpose of this study, the researchers will outline the effects of stress to ESL teachers, its effect on the teachers' efficiency and some coping styles that some ESL teachers do or have to relieve work-related stress.

2. Materials and Methods

A descriptive correlational design was selected to describe ESL teachers' stressors, their work profile, working hours and shifts, the number of students they have, trainings, length of service and the interrelationships of these factors.

The primary source of data in this study are the online ESL teachers of a certain ESL company here in Cebu City. The said company has been in the business for 5 years with approximately 200 teachers both in the online and offline departments. A Simple Random Sampling was used as a sampling design in this study. The research tools that we

used in this study were focused-group discussion, interviews, and an adopted standardized Stress Level Questionnaire (ISMA UK, 2013) [7].

The Questionnaire used was a standardized tool with 25 statements the participants must honestly answer by placing a check mark on a scale that correspond with their answers. Each bracket of scores will give a descriptive narrative on the stress level of the respondent. If the score gathered is between 0-1.66: You are least likely to suffer from stress-related illness. 1.67 – 3.53: You are more likely to experience stress related ill health either mental, physical or both. You would benefit from stress management or counseling or advice to help in the identified areas. 3.54 - 5:

You are the most prone to stress showing a great many traits or characteristics that are creating un-healthy behaviors. This means that you are also more likely to experience stress & stress-related illness e.g. diabetes, irritable bowel, migraine, back and neck pain, high blood pressure, heart disease/strokes, mental ill health (depression, anxiety & stress). It is important to seek professional help or stress management counselling or to consult a medical practitioner.

A handful sample size of participants was selected to join the group discussion for the purpose of this study and the researchers would seek permission from the company to conduct the interview and give questionnaires.

3. Results

Table 1: Stress Level Questionnaire

Items	Weighted Mean	Interpolation
1. I frequently bring home work at night.	1.1	Low
2. Not enough hours in the day to do all the things that I must do.	2.8	Moderate
3. I deny or ignore problems in the hope that they will go away.	2.9	Moderate
4. I do the jobs myself to ensure they are done properly.	3.9	High
5. I underestimate how long it takes to do things.	3.25	Moderate
6. I feel that there are too many deadlines in my work/life that are difficult to meet.	2.95	Moderate
7. My self-confidence/self-esteem is lower than I would like it to be.	3.65	High
8. I frequently have guilty feelings when if I relax do nothing.	3.6	High
9. I find myself thinking about problems even when I am supposed to be relaxing.	3.75	High
10. I feel fatigued or tired even when I wake up after an adequate sleep.	3.6	High
11. I often nod or finish other people’s sentences for the, when they speak slowly.	3.35	Moderate
12. I have a tendency to eat, talk, walk, and drive quickly.	3.75	High
13. My appetite has changed, have either a desire to binge or have a loss of appetite/may skip meals.	3.9	High
14. I feel irritated or angry if the car or traffic in front seems to be going too slowly/ I become very frustrated at having to wait in a queue.	3.7	High
15. If something or someone really annoys me I will bottle up my feelings.	3.9	High
16. When I play sport or games, I really try to win whoever I play.	3.45	High
17. I experience mood swings, difficulty making decisions, concentration, and memory is impaired.	3.75	High
18. I find fault and criticize others rather than praising, even if it is deserved.	2.65	Moderate
19. I seem to be listening even though I am preoccupied with my own thoughts.	3.85	High
20. My sex drive is lower, can experience changes to menstrual cycle.	1.65	Low
21. I find myself grinding my teeth.	1.9	Moderate
22. Increase in muscular aches and pains especially in the neck, head, lower back, shoulders.	3.45	High
23. I am unable to perform tasks as well as I used to, my judgement is clouded or not as good as it was.	3.2	Moderate
24. I find I have a greater dependency on alcohol, caffeine, nicotine or drugs.	1.15	Low
25. I find that I don’t have time for many interests/ hobbies outside of work.	3.3	Moderate

The following score range scale is used to categorize the stress levels of online ESL teachers.

- *3.36 – 5.00 – High Stress
- 1.68 – 3.35 – Moderate Stress
- 0-1.67 – Low Stress

Most ESL online teachers reported stress levels in the high range. Out of the 25 questions in the stress level questionnaires, they showed high marks of stress levels in 13 questions which is more than half of the total questions.

This is somewhat scary to note because teachers should maintain a healthy emotional well-being but this survey shows the opposite.

Table 2: Correlation of Variables to Stress Level of ESL Online Teachers

Variables	Pearson’s Value	P Value	Decision	Interpretation
Age to Stress Level	.178	.453	Reject the null hypothesis.	No correlation.
Gender to Stress Level	.329	.157	Reject the null hypothesis.	No correlation.
Civil Status to Stress Level	-.263	.263	Reject the null hypothesis.	No correlation.
Educational Attainment to Stress Level	-.094	.639	Reject the null hypothesis.	No correlation.
Licensure Status to Stress Level	-.503*	.024	Accept the null hypothesis.	There is a correlation.
Months of Service to Stress Level	.151	.525	Reject the null hypothesis.	No correlation.
Monthly Income to Stress Level	.226	.339	Reject the null hypothesis.	No correlation.
Number of Students to Stress Level	.300	.199	Reject the null hypothesis.	No correlation.
Trainings and Seminars Attended to Stress Level	.069	.772	Reject the null hypothesis.	No correlation.

Table 2 revealed that the licensure status of the online ESL teachers is the primary cause of their stress. Age, gender, civil status, educational attainment, months of service,

monthly income, number of students, and training and seminars attended were not significant factors in online ESL teachers perception to stress.

According to the results of the interview, these are the top five common causes of stress of online ESL teachers

Table 3: Five common causes of stress of online esl teachers

<p>1. Number of Students</p>	<p>The number of pupils (whether too many or too little) causes stress to teachers. If their shift is fully booked especially with young ones who are in the beginner’s level, their level of fluency in English frustrates the teachers. For some, having very few pupils also would mean lesser incentives. <i>“inig check sa classroom page, full bookings, mga bata pa kayo unya hate na namu ang kids classes. Kanang beginners pajud nga dili makasabot. Usahay pud kung gamay rapud kaayo gamay ra ug incentives. Naa pud higher level nga lessons. Mag-ask sila ug daghan kaayong pangutana kay very inquisitive man. Naa pajud pop-up lessons para sa higher level like TOEIC lessons.”</i> The participants of the study had expressed that the very high and very low numbers of pupils causes them stress.</p>
<p>2. Attitudes of Co-workers</p>	<p>This focuses on the unpleasant attitudes of their co-workers. Healthy environment in work is supposed to be one of the things the teachers are supposed to look forward in reporting to work but it could not be helped factions do exist in work. <i>“Some are not friendly and they have their own world. It is difficult to build relationships especially when you are a newbie. We notice that majority have their own groupings already.”</i> Healthy working environment and acceptance are two of the feelings which makes teachers excited to report to work and make the accomplishment of the tasks easier and faster. But because of these, the teachers will have to adjust more and try harder to get into groups.</p>
<p>3. Monthly Meetings and Trainings</p>	<p>The company’s meetings and trainings also causes stress to these teachers. Meetings are necessary regardless of the organization people belong to. It is an avenue to exchange ideas, give updates, and formulate plans for the good of the group. But at times, sudden meetings or unannounced gathering leaves an impression on some teachers that something wrong might have happened or it appears negative to them causing them to wonder and stress. <i>“Kanang unannounced kulbaan mi kay basin kasab-an rami or naa miy nabuhat nga sayop. Most of the times, dili name mkareceive ug positive news man gud mao nang basta unannounced kay kulbaan mi.”</i></p>
<p>4. Traffic</p>	<p>The third theme of the study is on the transportation issue. As expressed by the participants, heavy traffic forces them to always wake up early to avoid coming to work late. <i>“We wake up very early always just to avoid the traffic but sometimes, unexpected events happen like accidents which causes our tardiness in coming to work despite waking up early.”</i> Waking up early but still arriving in work late because of unforeseen events such as accidents makes a bad start and a bad day for the participants.</p>
<p>5. Extra-curricular Activities</p>	<p>Having many extra-curricular tasks such as having TESDA trainings and Masteral classes which are not related to work or not a requirement in the work also causes stress to online ESL teachers. <i>“We also have our classes and trainings in TESDA and some of us are enrolled in the Masteral program. Like any other students, we have projects and requirements we need to comply and because of that, if the tasks are unfinished we sometimes bring it to work and juggle it with our schedules.”</i> Competition is getting higher, and the teachers have this desire to pursue post graduate courses or TESDA courses to keep abreast with demands of time. Having a certificate and a diploma in Masters help them in their professional growth.</p>

This table shows that there are many factors that causes stress to online ESL teachers. These causes are work-related issues and some are not within the control of teachers anymore. Occupational stress is very common in any job and being an online ESL teacher is certainly not an exception to that.

However, these online ESL teachers have different coping styles also to help them alleviate the stress they are having.

Based on the interview, these are the common coping styles of online ESL teachers in helping them to relieve stress.

Table 4: Coping Mechanisms of Online ESL Teachers to Relieve Stress

<p>1. Acceptance of the Variables that They Cannot Control (e.g. traffic, the number of students they have each day)</p>	<p>Online ESL teachers believe that this is the most difficult thing to do. Traffic and the number of students they have each day are the uncontrollable variables that are not within their control anymore. For some teachers, anticipating the traffic every day and leaving the house early are the common things they do so that they won’t be more stressed. The students are the ones who choose their teachers and the teachers have no choice but to accept the number of students they have for a day.</p>
<p>2. Spending Time with Their Families and Friends/Going to Vacation With Them</p>	<p>This is the most common stress-reliever that these online ESL teachers do to alleviate stress. Families and their loved ones are the motivational factors that online teachers have in order to work hard every day. Whenever they feel like giving up,</p>

	they always put in mind or remember that they have families and loved ones they need to support and that their families and loved ones are always there whenever they feel blue.
3. Stress Eating/Eating Out with Family and Friends	Once a month, online ESL teachers make sure that they eat out with family, friends or co-workers at least once a month. Connecting and talking with their friends and family will help them forget the stress they have at work. It also helps their emotional health.
4. Doing Hobbies like Going Running/Jogging, Shopping, etc.	This surely relieves stress of online ESL teachers. Another teacher said that buying something for herself as a reward surely helps her maintain her emotional well-being. She believes that giving themselves rewards sometimes will help them redirect the stress they are feeling to something different.
5. Filing for a Vacation Leave	Most teachers who leave in a far province or those who leave outside Cebu Island make sure that they file for a vacation leave once every three months. They often go to beaches or go mountain climbing. This will help them connect with nature and it's also a great stress-reliever for them which is found to be really effective.

These are the common activities that online ESL teachers have to do to help them relieve the stress they are feeling. Moreover, their emotional well-being is also given the utmost importance in these recreational activities.

4. Discussion

Table 2 shows that there was a significant correlation of the respondents' stress levels and their status of being a licensed teacher. In other words, those online ESL teachers who are licensed professional teachers are more stressed compared to those who are not LET passers. The LET conducted by the Professional Regulation Commission twice a year really do contributes to the stress levels of those who successfully passed them. Online ESL instructors are put to more stress when they are licensed individuals due to some factors. An explanation would be that they are putting too much negative pressure on themselves since they are obliged to perform better and produce positive results than those people who are not LET passers. Age, gender, civil status, educational attainment, months of service, monthly income, number of students, and training and seminars attended were not significant factors in online ESL teachers perception to stress.

This study revealed that teacher licensure really affects a teacher's emotions thus resulting to stress. Having the license proves that the teacher is capable of performing way better compared to those who are not. Licensure is an essential component to guarantee quality in the teaching labor force. It is the course of action of someone's knowledge of the teaching skills, pedagogies, and techniques on how to teach a certain subject (Mitchell, 2001; ETS, 2004) [6]. Obtaining the accomplishment of becoming a Licensed Professional Teacher (LPT) is the highest mark that brings a teacher in the professional field. Therefore, teacher licensure shows greater career advantage because it is a hiring standard acknowledged not only by the government and public schools but also to the private sectors as a guarantee of competence, quality, and expertise about the field (Acosta and Acosta, 2016) [2]. Passing the LET does not only bring prestige and honor to the test takers. It also gives them a more competitive advantage to those who didn't pass the exam. It shows the hard work a teacher does for the whole four-year education and demonstrates that the said person was able to *meet all* the standards required for the teaching profession (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2015) [11]. Almost all countries worldwide require their teachers to pass the licensure examination before they are considered "highly qualified" and eligible for employment as teachers, and be conferred the title of being a professional teacher. (Riney, Thomas, Williams, Kelley 2006; Aquino and Balilla, 2015) [4]. The private sectors prefer to hire licensed

professional teachers for the reason that they understand the teaching skills well thus associated with increased student achievement (Alexander and Fuller, 2004) [5]. However, this challenge doesn't give a positive pressure to the teacher. On the contrary, it is seen mainly as a negative effect, with a wide array of psychological results (e.g., job dissatisfaction, underemployment) and the physiological aspect as well (e.g., poor eyesight, high blood pressure) (Van Dick & Wagner 2001) [12]. Moreover, stress affects not only the teacher's physical and emotional attributes but also the workplace where he/she is teaching at (Wilson 2002; Claxton 1989) [13].

Most ESL online teachers reported stress levels in the high range. Out of the 25 questions in the stress level questionnaires, they showed high marks of stress levels in 13 questions which is more than half of the whole questionnaire. Table 1 shows that their stress levels does not only affect their behaviors but also their emotional and physical states. Teacher stress gives negative effects such as frustration and anxiety result teaching-related activities which are perceived to threaten their psychological or physical well-being (Abel & Sewell, 1999) [1]. Teaching is indeed one of the most stressful occupations not only in developing countries but in the world in general. The results in Table 12 shows the severe stress these teachers have that affects their physical health. Their appetite changes, and they feel an increase in muscular pains all throughout their bodies. If their minds and bodies are constantly on edge, they may face health problems. Exercise has been found to be especially effective in reducing stress but teachers don't have the time for it because of work overload (Long, 1998) [8]. Even in their free time, all they are thinking of is their work and their students and how to help them improve. Moreover, Adams, Heath-Camp and Camp (1999) [3] suggested that over half of all teachers worldwide reported extreme levels of stress and an increasing rate of occupational-related stress.

It can also be inferred that these online ESL teachers prefer to challenge themselves and tend to accept non-teaching related tasks. They like to keep themselves busy. They feel more challenged at work if they would be given some tasks. It feels more productive to them when they are busy doing something compared to just being in the sidelines doing nothing. As the performance of the company relies on the active participation of their work force, they are given trainings and seminars to achieve high job satisfaction. ESL online teachers faces a lot of stressors in their

workplace, from number of students, system, co-worker's attitude, financial and family problems, traffic, other personal endeavors, trainings and meetings, and more.

To cope with all these factors, the participants shared ways on how they are able to avoid stress in their workplace. They expressed the importance of having relaxation time such as eating with friends or co-workers and having enough sleep.

"It's important to have me-time, joyride, massage or spa, or vacation leave wherein we could not think of work but just relax our body and mind. After a stressful day in work, eating with colleagues or other friends, laughing at some encounters, and enjoying even a simple combination of milk tea and kikiam are enough to relieve the day's stress."

In addition, the participants made mention of the importance of time management skills. Murphy (2017) ^[10] in his theory on the ABCD system emphasized the prioritization of tasks and their level of importance and urgency within that day.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study show that for online ESL teachers, it is generally the case that their major source of stress were their statuses as licensed teachers. It is one of the most distinguishing factors that can cause a higher stress level to ESL teachers. A licensed teacher working in a private institution is always expected by the employers to perform better and produce better work results compared to those who are not LET passers. This expectation could lead to a stressful work place and a toxic working environment. If the stress level of the employees are high, it can affect their job performance and could lead to health-related problems and absenteeism. When teachers are asked to do some teaching tasks and non-teaching tasks, employers always want to be given the best outcome performances but instead of seeing this as a challenge, most ESL teachers find this as demotivating. Thus, some of them prefer to resign and choose a job with a non-toxic workplace.

Private companies may have an unfair expectation to their employees especially to those who are licensed teachers. To help them reduce the increasing turnover rate in their organization, they must create a very good working environment where they expect all their teachers to always perform their best, not just exclusive to the licensed ones. Moreover, they should not hesitate to give praise and recognition to their employees whenever they finish a big project or finish something ahead of deadline. The companies should always promote a positive and encouraging work place atmosphere.

Online ESL teachers have a lot of coping styles that they do in order to relieve stress. These include going out with friends and family, traveling to other places, and other recreational activities like eating out, doing things they love like sports and other hobbies. Family and friends are really a huge support group for anyone who is mentally and emotionally stressed. Confiding and talking to the people you value and trust is a key part in relieving stress emotionally. Many people manage stress by fostering closer relationships to family members and friends. In addition, an important approach to ease stress is to indulge in recreational activities like sports and exercise. This will help in keeping up with their overall health and increase their sense of well-being.

6. References

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