



TeachingEnglish

British Council: TeachingEnglish

A podcast series for teachers
of English



**Episode 10: How can my
colleagues and I support each
other?**

Transcript



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Duration: 0:26:02

Chris: Hello, and welcome to Teaching English with the British Council, a podcast in which we try and provide solutions to some of the key questions being asked by English teachers around the world.

Sting: Teaching English with the British Council

Chris: I'm your host, Chris Sowton. In each episode, we address one such question and attempt to answer it in two ways.

In the first part of each episode, we hear from a British Council project, programme or publication about something which is being done to address this issue. Across the 10 episodes of the series, we hear from teachers, trainers and researchers in a wide range of contexts, including India, Lebanon, Uruguay, and South Africa.

In the second part, a leading English expert and practitioner will provide practical solutions which you can immediately try out wherever you work. Each episode of Teaching English is accompanied by a full transcript and show notes. These show notes provide additional information, a glossary of keywords and links to relevant websites.

Sting: Teaching English with the British Council

Sting: This is episode 10: how can me and my colleagues support each other?

Chris: Welcome to Episode 10 of Teaching English with the British Council in which we will try to answer the question: how can me and my colleagues support each other? The last two or three years have been very challenging for the entire world. Within the field of education, teachers have faced challenges which they have never faced before and had to adapt accordingly. For some this has been an extremely lonely and isolating process. Professional relationships have either not existed or taken place only through a phone or computer screen and many teachers have discovered or rediscovered the importance of having strong relationships with their colleagues and through teacher networks. One such network which brings together thousands of teachers across the world is the British Council's Teaching English website, www.teachingenglish.org.uk,

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which contains hundreds of high-quality resources to help you in the classroom, as well as articles, videos, publications and courses to help you with your continuing professional development as a teacher or teacher educator.

Teacher associations, organisations and groups come in many different shapes and sizes, national and local, formal and informal, face to face and online. In this episode's field report, we hear from three teacher networks across the world about how they bring together and support teachers in a wide range of different ways.

Kari: Hi, my name is Kari Johnson. I am the president of Wisconsin TESOL which stands for Wisconsin Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages. Our organisation provides professional development opportunities and a network for educators of English learners, and multilingual students of all levels and ages around the state of Wisconsin, which is located in the Midwest region of the United States. In addition, we support educators by frequently sharing resources and teaching ideas. We also have a new teacher mentor programme, our writing and art contest for multilingual students, and we provide advocacy resources for our members. As our members live hours away from each other and cannot always travel to a central location for a larger conference, this year our organisation is focusing on providing more regional conferences, and mini workshops. These workshops have a Swap Shop theme where every educator brings one or two resources or ideas and shares them with the other participants. Then everyone leaves with several new resources to help their students. I love being a member of Wisconsin TESOL as I am connected to other professionals who have like-minded goals and a passion for working with multilingual learners. In my teaching position I am the only English language specialist in my school, and it can be an isolating feeling. With Wisconsin TESOL I am never alone and have other members to connect and network with. Educators should join a teacher association as it is a fantastic way to engage in professional development opportunities, learn new information, collaborate with others, make connections with those in similar situations, and build lifelong friendships with other educators.

Gabriel: Hello, my name is Gabriel Diaz Maggioli I am the president of IATEFL, the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language. IATEFL is a thriving international community of English language teachers with over 4000 members in more than 130 countries throughout the world. Our offices are based in the UK where we are a registered UK charity and are subject to UK charity and company law in order to carry out our mission. We have a large network of over 150 volunteers which include eight trustees, five executive committees, working parties and committees for each of the sixteen Special Interest Groups. We also have an office staff of nine people who handle membership, finances, Special Interest Groups activities, newsletters, mailings on the conference. Our activities and administration are supported financially by membership subscriptions, by our annual International Conference surpluses,

sponsorship advertising and donations. We run weekly free webinars on various topics in English language teaching, and we have recently successfully launched a series of short, synchronous online specialist courses conveniently priced to be affordable to almost every teacher around the world. Now we are looking forward to our 55th international conference to be held face to face in the beautiful city of Belfast in May 2022. If you asked me why I belong to this organisation, well ever since I became a teacher back in 1985, I have counted on the support of this association as a source of further learning of inspiration, and also more importantly as a space for personal and professional growth. Because the association is so international, being a member and actively participating in the many activities has allowed me to develop a truly international personal learning network of like-minded colleagues who support one another in their development. That is why I consider that IATEFL is the quintessential English Language Teacher Association for teachers to join, whether you are a new teacher or a seasoned professional, whether you're a teacher trainer, administrator, a researcher, any role you take in our professional you can always find opportunities for support within IATEFL there's also sources of inspiration, of further professional development and there are myriad ways of connecting and supporting colleagues around the world. Our events, Special Interest Group publications, our webinars and the international conference are a true forum where all the voices in the profession have a space to be heard.

Larisa: Hello, my name is Larisa Guzun. I'm the Executive Director of Moldova English Teachers Association. And I would like to say several words about our association and what we do. We are initiating and implementing projects dedicated to education in Moldova and trying to collaborate with as many associations, with similar associations from around the world. For example, one of the recent interesting projects that we have initiated and implemented is Eco Call 2020 which was launched in August 2020. And the aim of which is to help students understand how important it is to solve the issue, dedicated to the issues caused by the climate change around the world. This is one of the most important things that we have recently done, and we managed to gather hundreds of students from Moldova but also from different other countries around the world and help them express their opinion about what is this issue and how it might affect them in the near future. Making and creating this kind of project is uniting a lot of people and a lot of teachers who care for the future, who usually dedicate all of their life to teaching and educating the future generation trying to show them that this is a very important topic and education in this field, in this terms, is one of the biggest things, one of the most important things that we can do as an association, because together we are power.

Chris: Thank you to all our contributors to that field report. As ever, please remember that you can access a full transcript and show notes from the British Council website.

In the second part of this episode, we talk to Pauline Blake-Johnston. Pauline is an ESOL lecturer and manager with a particular interest in working with refugees and asylum seekers, especially at lower levels where language learning is used as a tool of empowerment. She's very active in teacher networks in Scotland, where her roles include being the chair of NATECLA Scotland, the National Association for Teaching English and Other Community Languages to Adults, Vice-Chair of the Board of Glasgow ESOL forum, and a committee member of IATEFL ESOL Special Interest Group. Pauline, welcome to the podcast.

Pauline: Hi Chris. It's a pleasure to be with you today.

Chris: So Pauline, as we heard in your introduction, you've got lots of experience working with various teacher networks and teacher groups. Why for you, are they so important?

Pauline: For me? It's about people. Our job involves working with people and working in teams, to I think, put together the best environment for our learners. So without having good people around you I think it's difficult to operate as a teacher, a lecturer, a tutor, a volunteer within our profession. But I feel that teaching associations can actually give individuals at any point in their career, whether it be beginner, middle point and feeling even like an experienced teacher, that ability to access really high-quality CPD, which in the changing landscape of your ESOL, ESOL changes all of the time, English language teaching is in flux all of the time. I think there are always new techniques, new skills to learn. The pandemic brought the idea of teaching online and what that could mean for people really to the fore and without people sharing their knowledge base at a time of crisis we could never have really gotten ourselves through it. I think it's really important to network with like-minded people, to talk about day to day stuff, whether that's in your team, whether it's through a teaching association or organisation, having people who are working in the same job, similar backgrounds experiencing the same daily pressures, weekly pressures, end of year pressures, exam pressures, I think it's really good to have solid sounding boards, places that you can go to to talk those over. But I also think that teaching is quite stressful in any environment. I think there's a lot of demands in our profession. In Scotland in particular, we're in a situation where we're potentially having our standalone ESOL strategy amalgamated back into an adult learning strategy, lots of changes afoot. There has been funding cuts as well. So people are working under pressure. And I think that having professionals around to offer support at times of change, which can be unsettling for individuals.

Chris: You talk a lot about stress and teachers having those networks in order to support each other. How can we divide those two things? One, it seems to be teacher associations can provide that sort of, I suppose, staff room opportunity where teachers can share those stresses and problems and so on. How can we also make them

developmental so that they can be for improving and developing and upskilling as well?

Pauline: I mean, besides blowing NATECLA trumpet, one of the strengths that they have is that they've sectioned up the UK into branches. So it has like a national presence and works at very high levels providing all sorts of opportunities for teachers, but it also breaks it down to almost like a local network as well. Scotland's slightly different because we're like a big country, but in England, they have regional areas, and it makes it far more community-minded. It's almost like a community of practice then, where people they feel they've got somewhere they can go, somewhere to approach, they know the faces, the faces become familiar...

Chris: because that's something that I think sometimes teachers can feel perhaps slightly intimidated by. They see teachers' associations as these expert learned institutions, but actually the reality is often very different. And you used a phrase there a community of practice.

Pauline: This isn't my first career, I had a career change and came into this and coming into it with years of a different career behind me I knew that I wanted to look outwards, not inwards and understand where I fitted so I had the confidence to join NATECLA and join IATEFL but they are intimidating if you are new to the career or feel like you're struggling in your profession or a teacher and I think trying to make us approachable should be quite a key role that all teacher associations should foster and accept and develop and I think that they should make it a priority to make themselves really accessible. People want to feel that they have a place to go to ask a question rather than it's this annoying, unseeing body of people just producing either booklets or webinars, but you never actually see the people pulling the strings. I think people particularly, maybe in our profession because it is very people-based want to see who's running the show, I think.

Chris: And what kinds of things can those big organisations do to make their associations more inclusive?

Pauline: I feel that the strength and the area that I work in, which is in a branch network, is a really good model. I think it's really strong. We had a very clear directive in our branch about how we wanted to be, how I wanted the branch to look and feel to the teachers in Scotland. Sadly, it was informed by my own experience of attending conferences and events where the welcome was poor, and you didn't really know who was who and what was going on. And I remember very early on speaking to what then was a very small committee saying I just don't want that, I want people to come to say our annual conference and go away going 'well that was great, I felt really welcomed' because people do attend events on their own and it can be incredibly out facing. So I

feel the idea of breaking it down and making it more accessible. We have a word in Scotland it's 'couthie' - 'couthie' meaning down to earth. Down to earth. So not this sort of highfalutin, exclusive club but actually the recognition, which is the reality we're all in this together. We're all teachers together, you can access what you need in support from us.

Chris: With as well Pauline, this sort of digital space offers opportunities to be couthie, as you say. As you say, you know, it is quite a leveller, it is actually maybe less intimidating for some people to approach others online than face to face.

Pauline: I think I've probably with the majority when we went into the pandemic and this notion of being online all the time is just, I just don't see how this is going to work, I don't see how it's gonna work. And it's really interesting that even within the first 12 months or so I had changed, I don't love the teaching online, but I get some elements that work and that definitely works for people. In terms of NATECLA Scotland, we've been able to 100% increase the offer that we can give teachers around Scotland in terms of what we can provide online but also as you say it levels out and people feel that we're more approachable because we're just so wee face on a zoom speed and we can have a chat and we can extend our welcome and people feel that they know us. I do agree that in the last two years, the real grassroots connection to practitioners across Scotland has increased thanks to being online so much.

Chris: And it's really up to people who are in those communities or people who give webinars or whatever, to sort of emphasise that to people, certainly when I've done webinars and so, I often get people following up afterwards connecting with me on Twitter or LinkedIn or something like that, and it's absolutely fantastic because you can really engage directly with people and I think as a, as a sector we are pretty open and I think we have to be that it's in the DNA of teaching English as a second language. So encouraging people, if they have a question or they want to know something, ask people, get involved, contact them because most people will be, give a positive response.

Pauline: I think this, having been online more has actually encouraged people to connect more that they do see you in a webinar and go 'oh, Chris said I can email him and so I will' and ask a question. It actually takes people and gives them that ability to really connect with each other as you say, at grassroots level. You're right down to the teachers working in classrooms, which is if that's the CPD, say that you're delivering, that's what you want. You want to get right to those people and make it accessible.

Chris: As we've seen over the past two or three years, the issues of things like teachers' rights and ensuring fair pay, these kinds of things within the sector is really

important. What can teacher associations do for those sorts of issues for teachers?

Pauline: One thing that I've seen in action that sort of heartens me is a teacher association, the people that are running it who are often volunteers I might add, and often in workplaces, individually may find it difficult to speak out on quite a political issue within a team, but working within a national body and being able to use the name can heighten a cause, can offer support, can be part of the solution as well.

Chris: But they can also do that from a mutual platform because as you say, people have their jobs, they have families, they have to provide for them and so on, but if it can be done from that more neutral perspective as a collective body, then that can represent the issues without bringing individuals into it.

Pauline: You know, for some people that is really important, they desperately want to support, they want to be part of change, for example, or they want to be part of a statement that perhaps NATECLA will make, they can do that, they can contribute but from a neutral position, which I think is perfect.

Chris: And, could you say just a little bit, Pauline, about some of the more interesting projects or initiatives which you've personally been involved with through your work in a teacher association?

Pauline: I'm very biased, because obviously I believe in a teacher association, but it's afforded me opportunities I don't think I would have had as part of my everyday teaching job. Through NATECLA itself, I was offered the opportunity to talk and lobby at Westminster when they were pushing to get useful strategy for England. So I was invited as a Scottish member to come down and talk about what it was like to work under a strategy. So it was an incredible opportunity for me, but we go from something which feels quite high-level woah! where you say to people, they go, Oh, my goodness. And then like, you know, effectively it was chatting to people in a room and trying to get my point across. I've had many opportunities to talk at webinars at conferences, both internationally, nationally, I have the utter honour to work and support volunteers and ESOL across Scotland and I was part of the writing team that wrote a new framework for good practice for volunteers in ESOL in Scotland, which was incredible. I have opportunities with experience to sit on a great charity that I love Glasgow ESOL forum, who work within the ESOL sector in Glasgow and support them and navigate them through very challenging times. Right down to the joy of running the NATETCLA Scotland branch and having our annual conferences and getting to know practitioners in other parts of Scotland, being able to support practitioners in very rural parts of Scotland, the islands, the highlands, for example, that are not in the central belt where a lot of activity happens, to mentor new teachers. I mean to be honest, my list is

endless, and do very much advocate for a teaching association.

Chris: and I guess as well when you've got, you're wearing so many different hats and working with so many different groups, your own personal development and professional development is also increasing exponentially as well because you're, you're learning from all of these things. You're accessing all these things are then you're able to then bring those different experiences together.

Pauline: Yeah, I am not ashamed to say, I'm a magpie and I do like shiny things, but I love to go to events and I love to look at them, go for the what the event is and to get what I want out of it. But I also like to go and see how does it run? How do they introduce staff? What's the marketing like? Because I think I like that idea, I'll use that the next time we do something, to gain tiny ideas, maybe a little seed of an idea from an event and then it grows either into what we might do as NATECLA Scotland, maybe the IATEFL, ESOL SIG committee, maybe just my team at work. I've seen this in a webinar, I've seen this at a conference. So I think that you don't always come away with a huge idea but a little seed or something and you think oh, I could do this or I would change it to contextualise it to Scotland or this which suit practitioners I know better. So I constantly gain ideas from the people that I meet and see.

Chris: For what you're saying there Pauline, as well, that coming back to your team and working with your team. It's important to emphasise that teacher associations can be very informal things as well. It can be just you and a couple of colleagues, in your staff room. So even if wherever you're teaching, you don't have teacher associations or it's difficult to join or it's expensive to join you can still have those networks within your environment.

Pauline: Yeah, I agree. I think we never stop learning from our colleagues. We tell ourselves we don't know anything, but actually there'll be something you know, or have done, or have tried that you can say as an offhand comment to a colleague, and they'll go that's just blown my mind, that's amazing.

Chris: Absolutely. And final question, Pauline, what would you say to someone who is thinking about joining a teacher association isn't quite sure whether they should do it or not. What would your advice to them be?

Pauline: I would say that at any point in your career, you will need support, ideas, suggestions, information. And nine times out of ten a teacher association is going to provide that for you. I think that they can become a real source of help in your profession. I think it's comforting to know there are like-minded individuals out there and

actually it might lead you to suggest something that could be developed in your own area or inspire you to be involved in a bigger way, either in a teaching association or within your career. So I would say do it now. It's worth it.

Chris: There you go: do it now. Thank you so much for your time today.

Pauline: Oh, it's been a pleasure, Chris. Thank you again for having me.

Chris: Thank you for listening to this episode, and indeed this whole series of Teaching English with the British Council. This is our last episode of the series, but we hope to be back with you very soon with another series. In the meantime, you can download all 10 episodes of the series plus all the show notes from www.teachingenglish.org.uk. And if you haven't already, you can also listen to the British Council's other English language teaching podcast, The Climate Connection, which you can download from the same website and your usual podcast providers. Until next time, goodbye.