



# My mix of hats

I'm currently perched on a very dignified bench in Brasenose College, Oxford, trying to look like I belong here. Am I studying at the university? Absolutely not. I'm here because I needed motivation. A push to keep me going as an English teacher with too many hats. So I applied for the English Language Teachers' Summer Seminar at Oxford University – a two-week haven disguised as 'professional development'. (Don't tell anyone, but really it's my version of a spa retreat . . . just with more grammar.)

A 'typical' day in my non-Oxford life is anything but typical. At 9 a.m., I'm in my extremely comfortable grey chair in Türkiye, caffeinated and teaching English online. My students range from absolute beginners who still say *'I goed'* with confidence (which I absolutely adore) to IELTS students desperately chasing a Band 7.5. I cap my classes at five a day, because I've discovered that over-scheduling is my mortal enemy. Too many back-to-back lessons and I start teaching phrasal verbs to my cat.

By 2 p.m., I swap my teacher's hat for a cycling helmet and head out to the mountains of Fethiye. The pine trees smell like nature's own air freshener, and the

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## Zeynep Koca

describes her full and varied career so far.

downhill rush makes me feel like I'm in a Tour de France montage (minus the actual fitness level). That adrenaline usually lasts long enough for me to drag myself to my second workplace of the day: a charming seaside cafe that pretends to be my office. Here, I morph into 'serious author' mode, writing coursebooks and mock exams. Some days the words flow like tea refills; other days, I stare at the blinking cursor trying to overcome my imposter syndrome. And just when you think I'm done – plot twist! – in the evening, I pull out my phone and record an ESL video for my social media page. This little corner of the internet is what changed my life, giving me the chance to wear all of these hats – teacher, writer and content creator – all in one day. Honestly, it's less of a career path and more of a juggling act with occasional crashes.

My career officially began in 2020, the year I graduated from university with a degree in English language teaching in Türkiye. Like many new teachers, I was faced with the challenge of finding the right school to work in. But in Türkiye,

the choice comes with an extra layer of complexity. Schools are split into two: state schools and private schools. The state school path is considered the 'standard' choice. It pays well, offers stability and is highly respected. But it also comes with a catch: a new teacher must relocate and spend five years working in eastern Türkiye before being allowed to transfer to their preferred city. Many view this as the most formative and heartwarming part of their teaching journey.

To the surprise of my friends and family, I did not opt for this route. I stayed in the capital, Ankara, where I was living at the time and joined a private school – an option many teachers avoid because of its demanding workload and extremely low pay. Looking back, my main reason was simple: I wanted unpredictability. The thought of having my life mapped out so early felt suffocating. I craved challenge, uncertainty and maybe even a little chaos.

At the private school, I taught English to 3rd and 4th graders. It was a prestigious, well-resourced institution where I was encouraged to design creative lessons, however I liked. For a new teacher, it was both exhilarating and intimidating. I had everything I needed: technology, materials and endless support for innovative projects. My students and I even competed in 'Destination Imagination' – a global creativity challenge and an incredible Zeynep Koca experience. It was fast paced, yes, but it was also some of the most rewarding teaching I've ever done.

Those first two years shaped me profoundly. I learnt how to juggle endless demands, create engaging lessons at lightning speed and adapt quickly to different classroom needs. I adored my students and thrived on their energy. But beneath all the excitement, I couldn't ignore the strain. The workload was heavy, and my salary didn't reflect the hours I poured into the job.

Meanwhile, something unexpected was happening in the background. I had started an Instagram page where I casually shared my classroom activities and lesson ideas. What began as a side hobby suddenly exploded – thousands of teachers and learners were engaging with my posts. Almost overnight, my tiny corner of the internet became a



lively hub. At the end of my second year, I resigned and shifted fully to online teaching, used my social media as a student hub, and began writing test books for an educational publishing company.

That leap changed everything. Over one summer, I balanced online lessons with writing exam questions, and then moved with my husband to Guildford, a town in Surrey, for his MBA studies. There, I entered another unfamiliar world: a mainstream British state school. Teaching high school English in the UK was completely different from anything I had done before. For the first time, I was teaching English literature rather than English as a foreign language. It was daunting, but exhilarating.

The contrast between my two experiences couldn't have been sharper. In Türkiye, teaching felt like organised chaos in the best possible way. With bright-eyed learners, endless resources and the freedom to experiment, every day was a chance to try something new. It was a place where energy and imagination thrived, and my students constantly surprised me with their enthusiasm and curiosity. Guildford, on the other hand, offered me something completely different: structured, mentoring

and the chance to slow down. There, I discovered the joy of literature teaching, of dissecting a single 200-page book and stretching it across weeks of strategically and suitably scaffolded lessons (I had to slip in some alliteration while describing my time in the UK).

Both settings gave me invaluable gifts: Türkiye showed me the thrill of creativity and the excitement of pushing boundaries in the classroom, while Guildford taught me the power of guidance, reflection and steady growth. Together, they shaped not just the teacher I am, but the teacher I want to keep becoming.

After returning to Türkiye from our one-year adventure in the UK, I threw myself back into coursebook writing, online lessons and social media. At first, everything went smoothly. I had a clear focus, I was productive and I was excited about my projects. Then something incredibly frustrating happened. Just as I had finished writing and editing a brand-new 5th grade coursebook – hundreds of pages of planning, drafting and polishing – the national curriculum changed. Completely. My 'freshly baked' coursebook was suddenly outdated before it even hit the shelves.



Without a doubt, this was the lowest point in my motivation. I didn't want to open another Word document, let alone design another mock exam or film another video. My creativity felt tapped out and my enthusiasm was running on empty. I needed something to shake me out of the slump. That's when I stumbled across the English Language Teachers' Summer Seminar at Oxford University – a two-week programme for teachers from around the world. I applied, Zeynep Koca was accepted and thought, 'why stop there?'. To give myself a complete reboot, I also applied for a summer school job in London. If anything could get me back into the flow, it was a return to the classroom.

The London experience was exactly the jolt I needed. For five weeks, my mornings were spent teaching English to international teenagers, and my afternoons were spent as their enthusiastic tour guide until 5 p.m. By the end of each day, my pedometer proudly displayed 30,000 steps, which was enough to remind me that working from home had its hidden luxuries. Herding thirty teenagers through Covent Garden will teach you patience faster than any mindfulness course. But the exhaustion was worth it.

I was teaching, laughing, learning and rediscovering the spark I'd lost.

And then came Oxford. I dare say those two weeks were some of the best of my life. Sitting in lecture halls, listening to some of the most inspiring tutors I've ever met was transformative. It wasn't just what they taught us – it was how. Their mannerisms, classroom management and teaching approaches gave me a new sense of perspective. I left refreshed and genuinely excited to return to my students, determined to bring that energy into my work.

Here's what I've learnt along the way: staying motivated is the defining factor for teachers who juggle multiple roles. Whether you're writing a coursebook, teaching, marking exams or leading a group of teenagers through the streets of London, your energy is what keeps everything moving. And in order to stay motivated, there are three crucial things to remember:

### 1 Fear is the real obstacle

We often blame laziness or a lack of time, but those are just excuses we tell ourselves. The truth is, it's fear that holds us back – fear of 'what if' What if I'm

not good enough? What if the video isn't good enough? What if the book doesn't sell? These scenarios can paralyse us before we even start. But once we recognise that fear is just a shadow, not a wall, we can take action. The first step – however small – dissolves the fear and sets us moving forward.

### 2 Don't forget to have fun

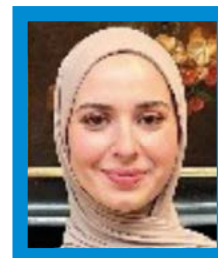
As adults, we sometimes forget that play isn't just for children. But when we inject a sense of playfulness into what we do – whether it's turning a grammar lesson into a game, writing a silly text for your lesson or simply laughing with our students – we rediscover the joy of teaching. Fun brings energy, and energy sustains motivation. And when we are genuinely enjoying ourselves, our students, readers and followers feel it too.

### 3 Change your scenery when you feel stuck

Sometimes, motivation isn't about pushing harder – it's about stepping outside your routine. Teaching in a London summer school and walking 30,000 steps a day, or sitting in a lecture hall at Oxford, gave me fresh energy that no amount of coffee at my desk ever could. A new environment, new people and new perspectives can reignite creativity in ways we can't always manage on our own.

### Final words

In the end, I've realised that happiness, motivation and renewal go hand in hand. Teaching across screens, books and city streets has shown me that when we dare to step past fear, embrace fun and occasionally change our scenery, success follows naturally. And if all else fails, 30,000 steps in London will cure anyone's writer's block.



**Zeynep Koca** is an ELT educator, content creator and coursebook writer. She holds a BA in English Language Teaching and a CELTA. She develops engaging classroom materials and digital resources, and writes

nationwide mock exams that support teachers and motivate learners across Türkiye. Her work blends pedagogy, creativity and real-world communication for lasting impact.