

Who are resilient ELT teachers?

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Setting the scene

Think of a recent experience, within the last 3-6 months, in which you overcame a difficult teaching situation. How did you overcome this difficulty? Would you describe that as resilience?

In a study focused on resilience in early career ELT teachers which my colleague and I conducted with funding from the British Council (James & Brandão, 2019) we discovered that, on the whole, our participants did not seem to align their ability to overcome a difficult experience with being resilient. When asked to define resilience, many of them struggled, beyond the common understanding of ‘bouncing back’ from an adverse situation. The focus of this article is to look at three questions: 1) What is resilience in teaching? 2) Why is it important? 3) What is helpful for fostering teacher resilience?

What is resilience in teaching?

Much resilience in teaching has been researched from the context of primary and secondary education, not language teacher education or ELT. Gu & Day (2007) looked at data from UK-based primary and secondary teachers and defined resilience as a ‘multifaceted and unstable construct’ (p.1314), a somewhat generic description. They go on to clarify key features of resilience, one of which is the capacity to continue to bounce back. The addition of ‘continue’ is vital as resilience is not something we do once and then tick off our never-ending *To Do* lists. They also define resilience as being a dynamic interaction between internal factors of the individual, e.g. positive emotions such as joy which fuel what they term as psychological resilience, and external factors, e.g. the individual’s work environment and colleagues. So it is neither one nor the other but both. Additionally, they highlight that it encompasses a sense of purpose – often the rewards we gain from teaching – that it fluctuates over time and varies from person to person. Resilience is therefore not something which we are born with but rather something we have to continuously work at and develop.

Why is it important?

Teaching is a complex and demanding profession and recently there has been a recognition for the need to shift the focus of research into teachers' resilience from a negative perspective (i.e. the stress teachers face and issues that cause attrition) to a more positive one (i.e. what sustains them and enables them to continue in their profession). This is especially pertinent considering that resilience is 'closely allied to a strong sense of vocation, self-efficacy and motivation to teach' (Gu & Day, 2007, p.1302)? It is also important that teachers model resilience for their pupils and students; the authors state that it is unrealistic to expect our students to be resilient if we ourselves do not demonstrate resilient qualities.

What is helpful for fostering teacher resilience?

Some teachers' responses we have garnered are: management support, seeking help, sharing difficulties with colleagues; and outside the work environment: friends, family, yoga, running, nature and walking amongst others.

The relevant literature supported much of this. Johnson et al (2015) conducted a large Australian-based study looking at resilience in early career teachers, and echoed the undeniable fact that 'teaching is intense and complex and not just the responsibility of the individual' (pp.29-30). Their suggestions for fostering resilience are wide-ranging, but focusing on the area of teachers' work, some of their examples are as follows (pp.32-33) – the italics are those at whom the suggestions are aimed at:

- ensure that early career teachers have adequate time to plan, act and reflect on their teaching – *employers*
- be mindful that it takes time, energy and support to become a good teacher – *school leaders, directors*
- initiate conversations with (early career) teachers about what works; share ideas and resources willingly – *(more experienced) colleagues*
- find a good mentor; don't compare yourself to more experienced colleagues; attend to personal relationships – *early career teachers*

So...who are resilient ELT teachers?

In summary, then, they are those who:

- ...sometimes overcome difficulties (successfully) and sometimes not
- ...develop the capacity *to continue* to bounce back
- ...have a (strong) sense of purpose
- ...work at it (i.e. it's not an innate quality)
- ...recognise it's not (simply) an individual trait
- ...establish a collaborative rather than individualistic approach to seeking solutions
- ...find/have a good mentor
- ...don't compare themselves unrealistically with others
- ...attend to personal relationships outside work.

Going back to the beginning and thinking of the difficulty you overcame, would you now see yourself as a resilient teacher if you didn't initially?

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References

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