Practical tips for early-career language teachers to build resilience

By Aide Chen, Canada

While resilience has become a buzzword across many helping professions, research on language teacher resilience is still in its early stages, with much yet to be explored about how teachers, particularly those new to the profession, navigate challenges and sustain themselves in their teaching careers. To help bridge this gap, I draw on insights from my PhD dissertation, which examined the experiences of early-career English as an Additional Language (EAL) teachers in Ontario, Canada, focusing on how they built early-career resilience (Chen, 2023). Synthesizing these findings, this article introduces the what, why, and how of early-career teacher resilience: What does teacher resilience mean? Why is it important to pay attention to it now more than ever? And how might new teachers begin to build and sustain it?

What is teacher resilience?

The word resilience comes from the Latin resilire, meaning "to leap back". Long before the term entered the field of education, it was used in disciplines such as physics and psychology. In physics, resilience describes a material's ability to absorb energy under stress and return to its original shape without breaking (Gordon, 1979). In psychology, it refers to how people cope with and recover from extreme hardship, such as surviving the Holocaust (Frankl, 1959) or growing up in poverty and abuse (Werner, 1977). Despite disciplinary differences, these early uses of resilience share a common theme, namely enduring pressure and recovering effectively. In education, resilience echoes this theme and is often defined as the ability to "bounce back" from adversity while continuing to grow, whether personally, academically, or professionally (e.g., Ungar, 2004). This definition aligns with the core principles of positive psychology, which emphasizes the development of "positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions" to help people flourish in the social environment (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5).

As positive psychology gained traction in applied linguistics and education (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012), the concept of teacher resilience began to receive increasing attention. One widely cited definition describes it as "the capacity to maintain equilibrium and a sense of commitment and agency in the everyday worlds in which teachers teach" (Gu & Day, 2013, p. 26). While this definition highlights teachers' inner strength,

researchers now recognize that resilience is not only a personal trait but is also shaped by teachers' social and professional ecosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) involving students, colleagues, supervisors, labor markets, policies, ideologies, and even time factors (Chen, 2023). In this sense, teacher resilience is deeply personal, but also social and political.

Understanding resilience through this ecological lens challenges the assumption that struggling teachers, especially those early in their careers or from marginalized and international backgrounds teaching in Ontario, are simply "lacking" resilience. Instead, it directs our attention to the supports, resources, and structural conditions that allow teachers to survive and thrive. This perspective is especially relevant today, as many educators face mounting uncertainty, job insecurity, and emotional strain in their professional lives. Against this backdrop, the next section discusses some of the real-world conditions necessitating teacher resilience.

Why does teacher resilience matter?

Teaching EAL can be incredibly rewarding as there is nothing quite like the satisfaction of connecting with students and seeing them thrive (Corcoran et al., 2023). But alongside such rewards also come real challenges. In Canada, EAL teaching is notably precarious—a major structural problem that has persisted for decades (Auerbach, 1991; Breshears, 2019; Corcoran et al., 2023). EAL teachers often rely on short-term or part-time contracts in settlement agencies, adult education centers, or postsecondary institutions where the pay is typically low and unpaid work is common (Breshears, 2019; Valeo, 2013). An illustrative example is the federally funded Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program, where instructors frequently juggle multiple jobs and temporary contracts (IRCC, 2010). This pattern is not unique to LINC. Rather, it reflects wider labor trends across the profession that prioritize flexibility over stability (Kalleberg, 2009), leaving teachers with limited bargaining power and a persistent sense of career uncertainty.

The difficulties do not end there. Broader social and global changes continue to (re)shape teachers' work in complex ways. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, triggered a sudden move to remote and hybrid teaching, pushing language teachers to quickly adapt to new digital tools without much training or support (MacIntyre et al., 2020). For early-career teachers, this pressure was intense, as many were expected to demonstrate technological competence just to remain competitive in the job market (TESL Ontario, 2021). At the same time, geopolitical tensions, such as shifting ties between Canada and major student-sending countries like India and China, along with the rise of anti-Asian racism, have further disrupted enrollment rates in English language programs (Zhang et al., 2023). More recently, the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence has also unsettled the North American job market. As companies accelerate their adoption

of AI technologies, the demand for upskilling has risen sharply (Dobbs et al., 2025), while the number of entry-level jobs has declined due to slower hiring practices (Lichtinger & Hosseini Maasoum, 2025).

On top of these external pressures, EAL teachers must navigate the emotional demands of classroom teaching. Like teachers in other fields, they deal with limited resources and heavy workloads; however, their role carries added complexities when tailoring lessons for students with vastly different proficiency levels, bridging cultural differences, and supporting learners as they adjust to new linguistic and cultural environments (Mercer, 2020). These responsibilities require a high level of emotional investment. Teachers often put aside or even suppress their own emotions in order to meet their students' needs (Gkonou & Miller, 2017; Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018).

For early-career teachers who themselves speak English as an additional language, an added layer of challenge comes in the form of self-doubt. Influenced by ideologies like native-speakerism and pressures around professional accountability, many of these teachers grapple with imposter syndrome, linguistic insecurity, and reduced self-efficacy (Horwitz, 1996). These internal battles make it harder for them to take pedagogical risks and can undermine their sense of belonging in the profession (Auerbach, 1991; Tum, 2014).

Taken together, these realities help explain why language teaching has been described as "a profession in crisis" (Hiver & Dörnyei, 2017, p. 406) marked by high turnover rates (Mason, 2017) and persistent job insecurity (Corcoran et al., 2023). This is where language teacher resilience becomes essential. Building resilience, both individually and collectively, can help teachers sustain their well-being and their careers over time. That said, resilience is not about eliminating stress or pretending challenges do not exist. Nor should the burden of handling systemic issues fall solely on individual teachers. True resilience must be supported through collaborative efforts, where teachers, administrators, and policymakers work together to create communities of practice that promote professional growth, connection, and care. While this article will not focus on large-scale structural reforms, I will share three practical strategies that can help build early-career resilience among EAL teachers in Ontario, Canada (and potentially in other contexts as well).

How to build early-career teacher resilience?

In the following subsections, I focus on three key strategies that can help early-career language teachers strengthen their professional resilience, including finding career opportunities, maintaining reflective journals, and leveraging support from broader ecological systems. While these strategies are practical and actionable on an individual level, they are also deeply interconnected and influenced by larger structural contexts. That said, this list is by no means exhaustive because systemic changes, such as improvements

to teacher preparation programs, a more stable and inclusive job market, and immigration policies that support rather than hinder teachers' long-term well-being and career development, are equally if not more important in building a sustainable teaching profession.

1. Finding career opportunities

Getting a foot in the door, whether through practicum placements or job hunting from scratch, is often one of the biggest challenges for early-career language teachers in Ontario, Canada. One way to make the process feel less overwhelming is to approach it playfully (like gaming): there are tasks to complete, goals to unlock, and strategies to try, but you can also stay lighthearted and flexible along the way.

Start by reflecting on your current skill set, including both what you have learned through formal education and transferable skills from past work, volunteering, or life experiences. Consider how these strengths align with different career paths in the field. Beyond classroom teaching, opportunities may include curriculum support roles, tutoring services, private language schools, TESOL consulting, newcomer settlement agencies, or college/university-affiliated English programs.

Even if your long-term career goals are not fully defined yet, this stage can still be productive. Use a spreadsheet or job-tracking tool to keep everything organized. Track details such as job titles, required qualifications, salary ranges, application deadlines, start dates, and web links. Make a habit of updating your CV and cover letters regularly and tailoring them to the specific roles you are applying for. It also helps to regularly check centralized job boards (see below) as well as the career pages of institutions that interest you.

- TESOL International: https://careers.tesol.org/
- TESL Ontario: https://careers.teslontario.org/
- Jobs in Education: https://jobsineducation.com/
- Education Canada: https://www.educationcanada.com/search.html
- UniJobs Canada: https://www.unijobs.ca/
- School Boards: https://www.tvdsb.ca/en/our-board/employment-opportunities.aspx
- Job Bank: https://www.jobbank.gc.ca/home

Most importantly, building resilience in this phase also means managing the emotional ups and downs of the job search. It is not uncommon for applicants to send out dozens or even hundreds of applications before receiving an interview. This can feel discouraging. But instead of interpreting rejection as a personal failure, try to see it as part of the process. Give yourself permission to feel disappointed, but also take time to reflect, regroup, and adjust your strategy if needed. This kind of emotional flexibility is key to staying motivated and growing professionally, especially in a field where career paths are often nonlinear and unpredictable.

2. Keeping reflective journals

If you have already landed a teaching job—congratulations! That is a big milestone. But as you will soon discover, the real work begins in the classroom, where new and often unexpected challenges arise. One simple but powerful tool to help you navigate these ups and downs is reflective journaling.

Let us start with the how before diving into the why.

Think of journaling as a way to capture moments that feel meaningful, whether they are uplifting, frustrating, confusing, or inspiring. You do not need fancy tools. A notebook, a notes app, or even voice memos on your phone can work just fine. Try to set aside just 5-10 minutes each week, ideally after an emotionally charged or memorable experience. Write freely and without judgment; this is not about grammar or perfect phrasing, but about being honest with yourself and building self-awareness. If you are not sure where to begin, these prompts can help get you started:

- What made me feel proud or happy in my teaching today?
- What felt frustrating or disappointing?
- How did an interaction with a student or colleague make me feel?
- What is one workplace rule, challenge, or moment that has been on my mind?
- How is my personal life (e.g., family, time, values, beliefs) shaping the way I teach?

Once journaling becomes a habit, its deeper value begins to emerge. Reflective journaling offers benefits across three dimensions: emotional, analytical, and critical.

Emotionally, it gives you a safe, private space to process your feelings, especially those that might otherwise go unspoken or ignored. In my research (Chen, 2023), for example, an in-service teacher named Noel used her journal to vent anxieties about juggling multiple short-term contracts and feeling professionally unstable. Another teacher, Maria, shared how overwhelmed she felt trying to manage both in-person and remote learners during the pandemic without sufficient institutional support. Whether you are dealing with frustration, joy, anger, or pride, journaling helps you better understand your emotions and respond to them in manageable ways, which is an essential part of long-term resilience.

Analytically, journaling allows you to identify patterns in your teaching and track your professional growth over time. One pre-service teacher, Alyssa, began journaling about her anxiety around academic reading and class presentations. Through regular reflection, she was able to manage her stress more effectively and gradually build her confidence. Other in-service teachers used their journals to troubleshoot lesson plans, reflect on student dynamics, or evaluate how well a new tech tool worked. In this way, journaling becomes a practical tool for problem-solving, decision-making, and continuous professional development.

Critically, journaling can also be a way to question and push back against systemic issues in the profession such as unpaid labor, unstable contracts, burnout, or unrealistic expectations. Even when solutions are not immediately available, writing things down can help you name and validate your experiences. When shared in safe and trusted spaces, whether with peers, mentors, or researchers, these reflections can foster collective awareness and spark subtle acts of resistance. In this sense, journaling is not just a personal practice but also a political one. It allows you to reclaim your voice, connect with others, and begin to foster change.

3. Leveraging resources from ecological systems

Another key piece of building resilience is knowing where to find support and how to make the most of it.

A good place to start is by revisiting materials from your teacher education or professional development programs. These "old" resources (e.g., course readings, workshop slides, practical tools) can take on new meaning when applied in real classrooms. They are not just static content but can evolve alongside your teaching practice and offer fresh insights when revisited with experience in mind. Depending on the institution where you work or study, you may also have access to credible, research-informed materials such as peer-reviewed journal articles, Cambridge Elements, or Routledge books, which are often available for free through academic libraries or membership portals. But even without institutional access, there are still plenty of useful options. Open-access platforms like Google Scholar, ResearchGate, LinkedIn, and even AI-powered tools can help you discover relevant and practical content at no financial cost. Staying informed in this way is not just about "keeping up", but about empowering yourself to learn, adapt, and make research-informed decisions in your teaching.

Equally important are the people around you. Building a supportive network of colleagues, mentors, and peers can be game-changing, especially during the often isolating early years of teaching. These communities of practice, whether formally or informally, can provide emotional support, share practical strategies, and create a much-needed sense of connection and belonging.

Peer support can take many forms, such as:

- Sharing job leads, teaching tips, or career advice
- Attending training sessions or well-being events together
- Collaborating on lesson planning or classroom observations
- Exchanging ideas on content, pedagogy, or technology

In my research, for example, one in-service teacher, Maria, co-developed lesson plans with a colleague when institutional support was lacking during the pandemic. That collaboration helped them navigate a

particularly stressful time. Another teacher, Noel, joined a local Toastmasters club. While not directly related to teaching, it helped improve her public speaking skills and boosted her confidence in the classroom. These examples show that sometimes, the most meaningful support does not come from formal systems; it comes from the relationships we build (inter)personally.

That said, it is important to recognize that not everyone benefits equally from these networks. Building and maintaining informal support communities often requires emotional labor that goes unpaid and unacknowledged. Teachers who are introverted, navigating a new cultural context, or dealing with financial constraints may (or may not) find it harder to access and sustain these connections. This is why we should be cautious about framing networking, or any career development strategy, as a one-size-fits-all solution. While networking can be incredibly valuable, it only truly works when it is accessible, fair, and responsive to different needs. Acknowledging that what works well for one person may not work for another is key to creating more inclusive, supportive professional spaces. That diversity of experience should be respected.

Conclusion

Resilience is not about being unaffected by stress, but about learning to navigate it, recover from it, and keep growing. Practical strategies like intentional job searching, reflective journaling, and tapping into supportive networks can help early-career teachers stay grounded amid uncertainty. But to be clear: Resilience is not about asking individual teachers to adapt to problematic systems. Real, lasting resilience in the TESOL field requires systemic change. That means reimagining teacher education, transforming hiring practice, and creating workplaces where emotional well-being and professional growth are not afterthoughts, but priorities. When we commit to these changes individually and collectively, we move beyond mere survival in the profession and begin to create the conditions where language teachers can truly thrive.

Notes:

- All personal names mentioned in this post are pseudonyms used to protect participant confidentiality.
- Special thanks to TESL Ontario for their invaluable support in sharing my call for research participants, and to the participants themselves, whose generosity and insights greatly contributed to the depth and richness of this study.

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Author Bio

Aide Chen is a language educator and EAP instructor in Canada. He earned his PhD in Applied Linguistics from Western University. His research explores language teacher education, emotions and identities, and critical reflexive pedagogy. His publications include Critical Emotional Reflexivity for TESOL: The What, Why, and How (2023, with Byrd Clark), the forthcoming book Early-Career Anxiety and Resilience Among EAL Teachers: A Critical Ecological Ethnography (Multilingual Matters), and the edited volume Generative AI for Supporting International Student Well-Being in Higher Education (IGI Global).