Fail better: Lessons from practicum

By Maggie Wang, Canada

“Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

This phrase has been my personal motto for years. By the time I began my TESL practicum, I already believed that mistakes were not a sign of failure but a sign of learning in motion. I wanted my students to see that each stumble was a step forward.

During my placements, one in person at Malton Neighbourhood Services, and one online at the Welland Heritage Council, I carried this belief into my lessons. These were my very first times standing at the front of the classroom as the teacher. I thought I knew what it meant to welcome mistakes. What I did not realize was how hard it would be to extend that same grace to myself.

I have always believed mistakes matter for learners. They are not weakness but evidence of growth. I knew this because it took me nearly twenty years to shift my own thinking. For a long time, I treated mistakes as proof that I was not capable. Eventually, I came to see them as necessary steps in the process of learning.

I also knew that many adult newcomers might carry similar experiences. I do not want to generalize, but I cannot ignore that some students come from schooling where accuracy is valued above all else, and errors are penalized. For my learners in their 40s and 50s, these beliefs had been reinforced for decades. It made sense that they might see mistakes as shameful or avoid speaking up in case they got something wrong.

I felt it was important to create a classroom where errors were not something to hide but something to share.

During my practicum, I worked hard to model that message. When a student made a mistake, I never voiced disapproval. I did not want the moment to feel heavy or embarrassing. Instead, I would smile and say, “Nice try. Do you want to try again?” If they did not want to, I would turn to the class: “Does anyone else want to give it a shot?”

The impact was noticeable. No one laughed at their peers, and no one looked ashamed. Instead, students leaned forward, eager to participate. They raised their hands quickly, sometimes even blurting out answers before I finished asking. Over time, the atmosphere shifted. I only saw this group once a week, but across

three months, I watched their comfort grow. Adults who had started cautiously began volunteering freely. Mistakes no longer froze the room, they sparked curiosity.

For me, that was proof of what I had always believed: Mistakes, when handled safely, could unlock participation and confidence.

The irony was that I did not treat myself the same way.

As a student teacher, I over-prepared everything because I believed I needed to be perfect. I was told by my TESL instructors that what looks smooth in the classroom is usually the result of hours of planning and preparation. I scripted lessons, made backup worksheets, and prepared fillers just in case. Later on, I realized this could be a strength. But at the time, it was a reflection of my nervousness and anxiety.

Inside, I was unforgiving. When pacing slipped, I told myself I had failed. When technology caused confusion online, I replayed it in my head for hours. I judged myself far more harshly than I judged my students.

My first ever lesson at Malton Neighbourhood Services showed me this clearly. The class enjoyed the materials and participated actively. But a couple of feedback cards said the pace was too fast. Instead of focusing on what went well, I went home discouraged. Later, I realized that what felt like failure was really feedback: I needed to build in buffer time and to accept that I might not finish every task. Letting go of *covering everything* was the real success.

At the Welland Heritage Council, I designed housing lessons around authentic rental ads and tenant-rights websites. The content was strong, and students engaged with it, but online delivery was messy. Some could not open the shared documents, and others stayed quiet in breakout rooms. At one point, I skipped an activity entirely because my instructions had not landed clearly. Again, I thought I had failed. But when I reflected, I saw that students still learned: They practiced scanning ads, discussed red flags, and asked questions about leases. The class was not smooth, but it was meaningful.

What's funny is that during my first semester observations, I first thought everything looked perfect. Looking back, I noticed that even experienced teachers had their own slip-ups. I saw teachers make lessons fun and memorable with charades, gestures, and humour. I saw pronunciation taught through physical techniques and listening made accessible by slowing down recordings. And none of it was flawless. Timings slipped, explanations stumbled, and technology did not always cooperate. But the students did not mind. They laughed, participated, and learned.

That was the moment I realized: My *failures* were not evidence I was not cut out to teach. They were simply part of teaching.

The most important lesson I took from practicum was that my philosophy had to apply to me as well as my students. I wanted them to know mistakes were safe, and I saw their confidence grow when I modeled that. But I needed to learn that teaching is also a process of trying, stumbling, and trying again. When they say teaching is a collaborative process, I think it is important to remember to collaborate with students as well. Of course, as the teacher you have responsibility for the students, but you also need to build rapport with them. Let them trust you, and you should trust them too.

Both practicums, my first time stepping into the role of teacher, showed me that *fail better* was not just for learners. It was for teachers, too.

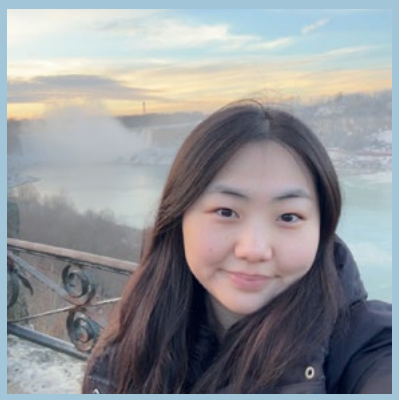
Practicum did not make me flawless. It made me reflective. I still prepare more than I need to, but now I see that as strength: Preparation gives me options. I still sometimes rush, but I give myself permission to slow down or skip. I still worry about the quiet student, but now I rotate groups and draw them in gently.

Most of all, I no longer see these moments as failure. They are part of growth.

“Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

It is no longer only what I want for my students. It is what I expect of myself, and what I want every new TESL student teacher to carry into their own practicum.

Author Bio



Maggie Wang is a newly certified OCELT with TESL Ontario and a recent graduate of Niagara College’s TESL program. Based in Toronto, she has taught in both in-person and online LINC settings and enjoys exploring different ways to engage adult learners. Maggie values curiosity in the classroom and is excited to continue growing as an ESL instructor.