ELT teachers' stories of resilience

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Our research puzzle

After more than 20 combined years as ELT/TESOL practitioners, what has kept us in this profession? There are many answers to this question, and developing resilience is just one such answer. But what does resilience look like? We have relied on it all these years despite it being in the background, a shape in the shadows rather than something which has been made explicit and conscious. How have we, and those whom we are training, fostered, managed and sustained it? These were questions that Ana and I set out to investigate in the above-titled study, not from a personal perspective but from that of early career ELT teachers. We wanted to investigate everyday resilience using narrative inquiry, an innovative research methodology. What does this everyday resilience look like? What would the stories of teachers uncover to help us begin to describe and understand this? This was the beginning of our research puzzle.

Context

Teacher resilience is a relatively recent area of investigation and what has been researched tends to focus primarily on mainstream education, with very few existing studies on language teacher resilience in general (Hiver, 2018) and even fewer on ELT teachers' resilience in particular. Much research has focused on the problems teachers face, for example stress and attrition (e.g. Craig, 2017) but we wanted to seek causes of and solutions to those problems by understanding in greater depth the experiences of six early career ELT teachers, three in the UK and three in Brazil. We wanted to give these teachers space in which to tell their stories of resilience so we could learn more about what sustains them and enables them to thrive as well as how resilience enhances their teaching or is used as a resource.

Conceptualising teacher resilience

As teacher resilience is an emerging field and is potentially wide-ranging (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011), conceptualising it is somewhat complex. A search of the literature reveals, unsurprisingly, no single definition. Mansfield, Beltman, Price and McConney (2012) provide a range of definitions, from conceptualising resilience as a process and a capacity to overcome challenges to it being a trait and a quality. In our study, the notion of resilience is understood as "a complex, idiosyncratic and cyclical construct, involving dynamic processes of interaction over time between person and the environment" (Beltman et al., 2011, p. 195).

To investigate ELT teachers' resilience, we looked at various dimensions of resilience specifically in regard to how teachers themselves demonstrated their agency in exercising their resilience. We used the framework proposed by Beltman et al. (2011), which focuses on identifying factors that characterise teacher resilience, and which covers individual and contextual risk factors (i.e. challenges) and individual and contextual protective factors (i.e. supports).

Research design

Because teacher resilience is a complex construct, and to enable us to understand the experiences of the six teachers, we conducted a narrative inquiry, a research methodology that analyses experience as a storied phenomenon (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry, accompanied by visual methods (e.g. Rose, 2012), is a relational methodology where people in relation study people in relation (Clandinin, 2013). In this approach, narrative is both the method (the stories told) and the methodology (a way of understanding experience).

Our study focused on four research questions, of which numbers three and four will be addressed here:
What are the similarities and differences between teacher resilience as demonstrated by the six teachers in Brazil and the UK?
How can teachers' resilience be fostered in language teacher education?

The participants were six early career (i.e. less than five years' teaching experience) ELT teachers. From the UK: Laura, aged 48 with two years of EFL and ESOL experience; Louise, aged 63 with one year of EFL and ESOL experience and Sienna, aged 34 with five years of EFL experience.
From Brazil: Julia, aged 35 with four years of EFL experience; Maria, aged 38 with three years of EFL experience and Pedro, aged 23 with three years of EFL experience (NB. all names are pseudonyms).

The field texts (i.e. a narrative term for data) consisted of four recorded interview conversations for each teacher of 60-90 minutes over an academic year, emails and visual narratives (Rose, 2012). These visual narratives were based on four drawings per teacher, with their recorded explanations, and were used to gather a different perspective on the teachers' experiences and to generate even richer data. Here, however, the focus is limited to the interview data. To understand the experiences narratively, we needed to situate the field texts collected within Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional space of temporality, sociality and place. We then needed to construct the narratives and do to this, our analysis of these field texts consisted of the identification of narrative threads, these being "particular plotlines that threaded or wove over time and place" (Clandinin, 2013: 132). The findings of the study are presented in the form of six individual narratives,

each one structured around the threads which were shaped by the stories of resilience emerging from the data.

Findings
Similarities between the UK and Brazil
In answering research question 3, Table 1 provides one example of many from the data of each of the four prominent categories of factors (i.e. individual risk, individual protective, contextual risk and contextual protective) which characterise teacher resilience. These are further illustrated below with excerpts taken from the narratives. It is worth emphasising that the narratives are our interpretative constructions of the six teachers' experiences and therefore include both direct quotes and prose.

Table 1. Similarities across the six narrative accounts

Factors	Risk (challenges)	Protective (supports)
Individual	e.g. lacking confidence / stage fright + loneliness of teaching (Maria, Louise)	e.g. staying in teaching through a sense of enjoyment/fulfilment (Julia, Louise, Laura, Sienna)
Contextual	e.g. heterogeneous classes, especially illiterate/semi-illiterate students (Pedro, Louise)	e.g. commitment to the profession and by extension, to motivating students (all six teachers)

Individual risk: Lacking confidence/stage fright + loneliness of teaching

Brazil: After a month, lacking confidence in her ability to teach, Maria decided she had had enough: "I went to the principal and said 'I don't want this! (…) I can't handle it! It's too difficult! We see one thing at university, and then when you arrive here the reality is different!'" The principal, on the other hand, persuaded her to stay: "no, Maria, you won't quit! What did you spend four years studying for? Did you waste your time? (…) I'll give you a month, if you can't handle it, you talk to me".

UK: "It's very lonely I think being a teacher, very lonely…it's a lonesome profession really, it's not, through my life I don't feel lonely but there you are, the spotlight is on you, we're back to this analogy of stage really, spotlight is on you and have I learnt the right words? Is the script right?" (Louise).

Tait (2008, p. 60-61) talks about "resilience, personal efficacy and emotional competence each contribut[ing] to the success of novice teachers in their work, [potentially also leading to] greater commitment to teaching as a career" and of the thirteen indicators specific to resilience, here Maria and Louise exhibit two, namely persistence and the ability to reflect.

Contextual risk: Heterogeneous classes, especially illiterate/semi-illiterate students

Brazil: Apart from pupils' tiredness and lack of interest, Pedro had to cope with a series of difficulties. For example, he had to teach pupils with a wide range of abilities: "there are pupils that read a lot (…) there are pupils that are semi-illiterate (…) there are some that don't even know how to read and write." He also had to teach pupils with special needs: "it's complicated (…) I don't how to deal with them properly."

UK: Louise was allocated three families for ESOL: two elderly women (Kalima and Eilijah) and a married couple. Kalima lives with her son and daughter-in-law. She is illiterate in Arabic and has no motivation to learn English, describing it as "like learning to be a doctor." Louise's interpretation is "I suppose she thinks it's impossible, it's so difficult…it's like me learning brain surgery." At that point (December 2017) Louise had only taught her once and even that early on described it as "a really difficult lesson, and I was really, really depressed about it." Louise had tried to reassure her but "we got through very few words so I had an hour and a half and it was really difficult, and then I thought 'well I'm obviously doing it all wrong, and not quite sure what I should be doing,' and it was horrible, it was really horrible."

Again using Tait's (2008) indicators, those glimpsed here are having problem-solving skills (further in the narrative Pedro demonstrated another factor, i.e. positive adaptation in the face of adversity to demonstrate these skills) and the abilities to reflect and rebound.

Individual protective: Staying in teaching through a sense of enjoyment/fulfilment

Brazil: As time went by, Julia identified with English teaching, especially because of students' positive feedback: "some thanked me, I saw the sparkle in their eyes, this motivated me to keep teaching English (…) this is my reward." "I fell in love with English", she confided.

UK: I just thought "oh my God, I love this so much, why didn't I do this before, I should have done this years ago." Sienna loves the creativity of ELT, travel opportunities it gives, the lightbulb moments her students have and seeing their progress, "and you know that you may have had something to do with it."

Having a sense of pride in their work and finding it so rewarding are both reflected in the key resilience indicator of optimism (Tait, 2008).

Contextual protective: Commitment to the profession and by extension, to motivating students

Brazil: Despite some difficulties, Pedro began to enjoy teaching:

"I had been enjoying the profession a lot (…) I discovered I like it. It changed my way of seeing things a lot, my way of seeing the world, people. After I started teaching, I stopped being so hard (…) I'm still [hard] on myself (…) but I learned a way that works with others."

He found the profession rewarding: "I have the opportunity to influence people in a positive way (…) on the personal side (…) [and] also in terms of choosing a profession that gives them better life chances." The problem is "I'm not paid enough to make a living," Pedro complained.

UK: Although Louise gave up primary school teaching (because of the sheer volume of work and extensive time it took to prepare classes), she has never thought of giving up ELT teaching:

"I can't see myself stopping this…because…if I can be of any help, just giving [the students] a bit more confidence, and that sounds a bit goody-goody, but I don't mean that, it's just if I have something I can help them with, and then I would like to continue doing that."

Here, optimism and persistence (Tait, 2008) are clear indicators of the teachers' emerging resilience.

Differences between the UK and Brazil

Table 2 provides a summary of the main differences emerging from our data, excerpts for which are not provided due to space restrictions.

Table 2. Differences across the six narrative accounts

Factors	Risk (Brazil)	Risk (UK)
Individual	English language competence (Julia, Maria)	Time spent on planning (Louise, Laura, Sienna)
Contextual	Teaching subjects other than English (Julia, Maria, Pedro) ⇨ Coping with instability, e.g. temporary contracts (Julia, Maria) ⇨ Lack of continuing teacher education opportunities (Julia) ⇨ Lack of interest in English (Julia, Pedro)	-

How can we help foster and sustain resilience in ELT teacher education?

Responsibility to foster resilience lies with both the teacher and their context; it is not that it lies solely with one or the other. Specific implications from the study based on our reflections on the data as a collected whole include, but are not limited to:

- Resilience can be learned; it is not an innate source
- Strategies for resilience (e.g. the ability to seek help) can be taught and promoted in pre-service and teacher training programmes as well as CPD sessions
- Dealing with stressful situations (e.g. heterogeneous classes) can be added to pre-service programmes
- Peer or mentoring support can be more visibly promoted and encouraged on the job.

This is a small-scale study reflective of the nature of a narrative inquiry. The results are not generalisable, but this is not the goal of a narrative inquiry; rather, it is to "paint a complex picture of the issue in focus" (Benson, 2014, p. 164) and we hope that is what this brief article has begun to do.

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A feedback study for pre-service teachers

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Allow us to introduce ourselves: we are Julia Martínez and Carolina Orgnero, professors of English as a Foreign Language at the University of Río Cuarto (Córdoba, Argentina). Julia teaches Language in the 2nd year and Carolina, Technology in the 3rd year of the four-year undergraduate English language teacher education program. Our university encourages research across course subjects and this is why we decided to team up to participate in one of the funded projects called "PELPA" (Proyecto de Escritura y Lectura Académica para los Primeros Años- Academic Reading and Writing Project). The goal of this project is to foster a better understanding of academic reading and writing that could result in better teaching for our students. The purpose of this reflective report is to unveil some of the behind-the-scenes decisions and theoretical underpinnings that shaped the design and implementation of the research process that have contributed to interesting results. Here, we provide a brief overview of our project, as we have shared it in other publications (see Martínez & Orgnero, submitted for publication, for further reading).

The inquiry that guided our research project
Our students on the Teacher Training Program at the University of Río Cuarto have received feedback in prior courses of the program. Yet, we observed that they experienced difficulties related to different types of feedback –teacher, peer and self-assessment- and to the use of technology for academic and pedagogical

purposes. Our interest in understanding these difficulties framed the inquiry that guided our research project. Specifically, we sought to understand the difficulties students had with feedback, its role in the process of academic writing, feedback provided by means of technology, and the inter-related role of these components in increasing students' autonomy as learners. When students understand what feedback is, it helps them reflect about their thinking process, also known as metacognition (Ertmer & Newby, 1996). As students become strategic learners, they can make decisions that affect their learning, and thus, enhance their autonomy as learners.

The research project in a nutshell
The participants in this project were 2nd year pre-service teachers enrolled in the Language course (from now on the *writers*) and 3rd year pre-service teachers enrolled in the Technology course (from now on the *reviewers*) who voluntarily accepted to participate in the project. There was a total of 12 pre-service teachers.

The writers prepared expository essays and uploaded them to their virtual classroom that accompanies the face-to-face English course. The teachers downloaded the essays, deleted the students' names to preserve their anonymity and sent the essays to the reviewers who were asked to prepare a combination of oral and written feedback. The reviewers received an email with 4 attachments: the essay they had to review, a sample reviewed essay with written feedback, an audio file with comments provided on the same essay, and a rubric (see Appendix). Specifically, the example illustrated that reviewers could either opt to provide feedback in the margin or in a summary letter at the end of the essay presented in written format. The accompanying audio highlighted what worked and why, and what needed to be improved during the second round of revision. We also specified to the reviewers that they needed to prioritize the number of feedback comments so the authors would not feel overwhelmed (Orgnero, 2007). The reviewers received a holistic rubric that asked them to comment primarily on content and organization and, to a lesser extent, on language use because students usually received comments on this area. As can be appreciated, the logistics were quite complex since our study involved pre-service teachers from two different courses that had classes on different days of the week. For this reason, we ensured that everything was well planned due to the number of exchanges that were needed to avoid confusion during implementation.

The study followed a qualitative design, and data were collected in semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires. Content analysis was used to interpret the data by creating codes that were later grouped into categories which were merged to create themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Two main themes emerged from the analysis: