

Early-career Anxiety and Resilience in EAL Teacher Preparation and Development

Dr. Aide Chen, Western University

Overview

This qualitative study is a critical ethnographic investigation into the early-career anxiety and resilience experiences of English as an Additional Language (EAL) teachers in post-pandemic Ontario, Canada. It explores the intersection of language teacher emotions, teacher preparation, and professional development.

The terms *anxiety* and *resilience* in this study are not intended for clinical or medical interpretation. Instead, they are understood as emotional states within the broader context of subjective wellbeing, influenced by an individual's socio-ecological environment.

For the purposes of this study, early-career language teachers are defined as those with less than five years of language teaching experience. This includes both pre-service teachers (individuals currently undergoing their initial teacher education or who have completed it but have not yet started teaching) and in-service teachers (those who have completed their training, are certified, and are actively employed in teaching roles).

Research Questions

- What types of early-career teacher anxiety are socio-ecologically experienced by pre-service EAL teachers during post-pandemic times?
- What types of early-career teacher resilience are socio-ecologically experienced by pre-service EAL teachers during post-pandemic times?
- What types of early-career teacher anxiety are socio-ecologically experienced by novice in-service EAL teachers during post-pandemic times?
- What types of early-career teacher resilience are socio-ecologically experienced by novice in-service EAL teachers during post-pandemic times?

Methodology

This study took place between September 2022 and May 2023, during a period of significant impact from COVID-19 on language teacher wellbeing (Kush et al., 2022), with increasing emotional challenges (Gkonou et al., 2020) such as burnout among teachers (Pressley, 2021).

Seven participants participated in the study, including four pre-service and three in-service EAL teachers. The three in-service teachers were recruited with the help of TESL Ontario, while the pre-service teachers were drawn from a master's TESOL degree program in Southern Ontario, Canada.

Data collection methods included weekly reflective journals over a 12-week period, documenting the lived experiences that made participants feel anxious and/or resilient as early-career English language teachers. Following this, a one-hour semi-structured interview was conducted to facilitate deeper reflections and discussions. This approach allowed for a rich, longitudinal understanding of the participants' emotional and professional experiences.

Findings

Pre-service EAL teachers reported several types of anxiety, including challenges with academic English skills, peer pressure, limited practical teaching exposure, and concerns about time management and future job prospects. Their resilience was supported by factors such as a growth mindset, written reflections, peer support, institutional resources, and hands-on teaching experiences.

In-service EAL teachers identified unstable working conditions, specific teaching challenges, and perceived inadequate managerial support as key early-career anxieties. Their resilience was linked to perspective shifts, reflective journaling, student relationships, positive peer interactions, institutional workshops, and stable immigration status.

Conclusions and Implications

This study revealed that both pre- and in-service EAL teachers in Ontario experienced significant anxiety and resilience during their early careers, influenced by a range of socio-ecological factors. For pre-service teachers, early-career anxiety mainly stemmed from academic pressures and a lack of practical experience, while their resilience was enhanced through reflection, peer support, and practical teaching opportunities. In-service teachers' anxiety was driven by job instability and teaching challenges, with resilience built through perspective shifts, reflective practices, and supportive relationships.

The findings of this study have several implications for individual teachers, language teacher education programs, and TESL organizations in Ontario:

1. Individual Language Teachers: Teachers need to enhance their emotional reflexivity and leverage all available resources for professional growth. This includes but is not limited to reflective journal writing, nature walks, peer engagement, seeking institutional support, and gaining practical teaching experience.
2. Teacher Educators and Programs: Educators should create tailored learning materials for pre-service teachers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Programs should address student teachers' emotions (e.g., anxiety) potentially through positive psychology approaches, and facilitate accreditation processes especially for university TESOL programs not yet recognized by TESL Ontario or TESL Canada.
3. TESL Organizations: These organizations should go beyond surface-level well-being workshops and implement initiatives and policies that can help enhance early-career teachers' sense of control over their work (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). They should also find ways to meet English language teachers' needs in a more timely manner, such as introducing career development strategies, skill-based and multimodal teaching strategies, offering a wider range of job postings, and providing TESL-focused forums (TESL Ontario, 2021).

Notes

For more details, please refer to this dissertation at <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/9889/>

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact Dr. Aide Chen at achen343@uwo.ca and/or the Principal Investigator Dr. Julie Byrd Clark at jbyrdcla@uwo.ca

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