

Resiliency in Education: The Case of Foreign Language Teachers

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The article covers the basics of resilience and the factors promoting sustainability within the field of education. With escalating demands on teachers in terms of increasing social pressures and expectations regarding quality of pedagogical provision, 'resilience' is a topical area of research. The main objectives of the study include ascertaining how prone to professional stress are educators compared to other professionals, pointing out the areas where the major mismatches lie, and revealing the factors influencing professional adjustment in the sphere of foreign language teaching. The correlation and interdependence of resilience, emotional intelligence, social support and other individual factors have been studied using a valid sample of specialists in language teaching: resilience was considered one of the central, individual protective factors, as well as a serious prerequisite for a successful and fulfilling life. The sample of the study comprised three groups: first, senior students (future teachers); second, university academics (senior professors) and thirdly, university junior specialists. To analyze the results, statistical and correlation methods were used: different types of interdependence were indicated through regression analysis, the Kruskal-Wallis test, violin plot, and others.

Keywords: resiliency/resilience, foreign language teaching, university academics, teacher stress, social support for teachers, individual flexibility

In the context of current changes affecting our lives at all levels, the nature of work is also changing in response to these social processes. Changes that include the permanent process of reforming the education system in Russia and poor facilities for professional development, contribute largely to an increase in pressure, having a disruptive effect on professionals' performance and emotional wellbeing. In such a changing context, the success of individuals may reside not only in their professional skills, but also in their abilities to cope with new rhythms, tensions and pressures at work, to adapt to the new conditions, and work in the atmosphere of trust, cooperation, and support. Jobs in different spheres are being redesigned, and the skills people need today are different from the skills needed in the past. Teachers' work has not escaped the need for change.

The current status of teaching can be characterized by several negative conditions. These are: first, the prevalence and influence of stress; second, the declining morale of teachers; third, the number of teachers leaving or intending to leave the profession. Each of these conditions provides insights into what is happening in teaching today, especially in Russia. Teachers find themselves under increasing pressure: there are greater demands, more complex responsibilities, and an expanding

knowledge base that is continually being upgraded. The problem is not unique to the USA, where the majority of studies on professional stress have been conducted over recent decades. The Canadian higher education sector has also undergone numerous changes: increased student enrolment, massive cuts in human resources, constant restructuring, etc. Overall professional stress levels of academic staff are very high, with a majority of respondents reporting a high level of agreement with 7 out of 10 measures used to assess stress (Lowe, 2003, pp. 10-11). Not less than half of tested university academics in Russia claimed that they suffered from emotional exhaustion, about 68% of school teachers noted the existence of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation (Valieva, Potapova, 2008). Statistical data indicate that teachers abandon the profession in increasing numbers and are three times more likely to quit jobs than similarly trained professionals (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

A great proportion of the stress and pressure experienced by teachers comes from the ongoing reforms in the system of education, which seem to focus more on the "technical" issues such as curriculum, while neglecting the central role of a teacher in the educational process. Kyriacou (2001) pointed out the major sources of stress for teachers: undisciplined behaviour of pupils;

poor career opportunities; low income and shortage of teaching equipment, poor facilities and large classes; time pressures and short deadlines; low societal recognition of profession; conflicts with colleagues and supervisors; rapid changes in curricular demands and adaptation of scholastic programs to changes in a rapidly changing society (Kyriacou, 2001). Rapid social changes have also led to new and varied expectations of professionals in teaching, often accompanied by a sense of role ambiguity. The net effect of this situation is decreased by personal accomplishment and professional satisfaction, the absence of which inevitably leads to personal exhaustion and dropout (Papastylianou, Kaila, & Polychronopoulos, 2009). Furthermore, teachers as well as other participants in the educational process lose their capacity to withstand problems and challenges, to stay resistant in the face of unexpected complexities. Faced with challenging classroom conditions, teachers might respond with hostility and enact punitive measures and reactions that may disrupt students' motivation and contribute to a self-sustaining cycle of classroom disruption. High levels of distress may lead to teacher burnout (Tsouloupas, Carson, Matthews, Grawitch, & Barber, 2010) and deteriorating teacher performance and student behaviour and achievement (Osher et al., 2007).

Teachers enter the profession with high expectations, a vision of the future, and a mission to educate the young. The great promise of teaching, the reward of personal satisfaction and sense of accomplishment are increasingly unfulfilled. "Certain aspects may be considered warning signs. Educators are not free from problem issues and tensions. There is clear indication of a possible progression toward feelings of stress and to burnout syndrome" (Aris, 2009, p. 841). The demands, pressures, and conditions they work under can stifle this zeal and present obstacles to achieving their mission. Growing disillusionment in teaching and the underlying lack of support and recognition for the contributions teachers make to society have become a distinctive feature of the profession. Moreover, "teachers who report high levels of burnout are at increased risk of physical and mental illness, resulting in higher levels of absenteeism, reduced quality of performance, and frequent irritable mood" (Jennings, Frank, Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2013, p. 376).

Special emphasis should be given to foreign language teaching as one of the more emotionally exhausting realms in the education sphere. In the domain of EFL teachers, burnout, as a consequence of the professional stress, has been a highly debated issue over recent years. "L2 scholars and educationalists contended that EFL teachers are even more susceptible to the syndrome in comparison with other educator groups given that they have to cope with the potential challenges of cultural and emotional barriers linked to language education" (Ghanizadeh & Jahedizadeh, 2016, p. 3). Garcia, Munoz, and Ortiz (2005) carried out a study to find the association of contextual and personality variables, and explore the most effective

ones in language teacher burnout (Garcia, Munoz, & Ortiz, 2005). Applied studies conducted in different countries revealed specific correlations between burnout constructs and personality characteristics. Thus, Turkish scientists found out that the language teachers with high levels of neuroticism and introversion experienced burnout more often than others (Unaldi et al., 2013).

Notably, the pressures of the profession manifest themselves very early. They are strikingly evident even in the teacher-training process, well before students become teachers in their own classrooms. There is evidence of perceived levels of exhaustion by student teachers (Gold, 1987), and even by students while still enrolled in the professional methods courses. Trainee-teachers may anticipate the pressures of their future profession, and they already increasingly experience perceived levels of burnout early in the teacher training process (Gold & Roth, 1993). Poorly evolved resiliency is a problem that must be addressed for both current and future needs to help those already engaged in profession as well as student-teachers. The incipient feelings of isolation and depersonalization will continue to accelerate unless some type of preventive or interventive strategies are developed and cultivated.

In the view of many professional observers and researchers, the problem has reached a critical level and demands a response. Resiliency predictors have been discussed at different international scientific congresses and forums: the 4th Conference on Community Resiliency 2013, Davos, Switzerland; Pathways to Resilience II: The Social Ecology of Resilience, 2010, Halifax, Canada; Pathways to Resilience III, 2015, Halifax, Canada, and has maintained a consistent focus on factors that are the prime correlates of this phenomenon. Among the main resiliency supportive factors, individual and organisational aspects are mentioned, as well as transforming and coping strategies. Thus, the topicality of the research is defined as peculiarities of resiliency, its constituents and sustaining in educational field, with attention paid to foreign language teachers, as being more susceptible to professional stress and burnout (Garcia, Munoz, & Ortiz, 2005; Valieva, Potapova, 2008).

Materials and Methods

The Resiliency Phenomenon

Over the last two decades, terms connected with personality characteristics emerged within the stress-coping paradigm – *resilience or resiliency*. Resilience is a term found in so many fields today that a single definition would be almost impossible. In business literature, resilience is often referred to as "hardness" or adaptability; in programs for youth, the discussion centers on risk and protective factors; in the social studies, the representation is about strength-based development. Resiliency may be defined as the power or ability to recover readily from

depression, adversity, or the like to the original form or elasticity: <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/resiliency>.

Resilience is a process of adapting well in the face of threats or even significant sources of stress (Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009). Likewise, scientists define this concept as an individual's capacity to withstand stressors and not manifest dysfunction, such as persistent negative mood (Neill, 2011), which is the mainstream psychological view of resilience. A resilient person can redirect unfavorable changes and conflicts from destructive areas and even use them for personal benefit. Resilient people are able to fight the influence of stressors at home, work, and sustain their strength even in an extremely dangerous situation. By contrast, a person with low characteristics of resilience is vulnerable in stressful situations.

Resilience is a complex construct consisting of many constituents. In our research, we use our conceptually authorized theory, which includes emotional, social and cognitive flexibility, as well as contextual aspects of personality identification that starts with the societal level up to the individual (Valieva, 2015).

Among many factors influencing the successful development of resilience are:

- supportive relationships within and outside the social group or the family (Valieva, 2014; Kozjakov, Fomina, Rybakova, Sizikova, & Petrova, 2015);
- capacity to make realistic plans and take steps to carry them out;
- positive self-view and confidence in strengths and abilities (Luthar, 2006; Masten, 2004).

The social environment of the workplace may be the setting for the development of or reduction in resilience in general. The available research into the antecedents of low resilience focuses on such a communication-related construct as social support (Valieva, 2010).

Social Support

The role social support plays in the stressor-strain relationship cannot be overvalued. Reviewing the literature on social support, the following concepts should be emphasized. It is acknowledged by most contemporary studies that social support is a multi-dimensional construct, and may be defined from structural and functional perspectives. The structural definition focuses on an individual's social embeddedness, but the mere existence of relationships does not mean they are supportive. Functional approaches, instead, are concerned with what purpose these relationships serve the individual and whether they are supportive or not.

According to Cobb, social support increases one's coping ability and facilitates adaptation (Cobb, 1976). He defines social support as "information that leads individuals to believe that they are cared for and loved, esteemed, and valued, and that they participate in a network of communication and mutual obligation" (Cobb,

1976, p. 304). Similarly, House and Wells consider that people may be said to have social support if they have relationships with other people, which is characterized by frequent interactions, positive feelings, and especially perceived ability and willingness to lend emotional and instrumental assistance in times of need (House & Wells, 1981, p. 53). Research thus far has tended to treat social support as a static, given factor. However, social support is fluid, just as are the stressors that it affects. Such variability means that social support fulfills different functions during different stages of a crisis.

Social psychologists have attempted to understand the components of social support, leading to the development of several classification schemes which help to distinguish between different functions and types of support. Hirsch, for example, described five possible elements of social support (in Baruch-Feldman, Brondolo, & Ben-Dayan, 2002): emotional support; encouragement; advice; companionship; and tangible aid. In their research, Pines and Aronson identified six basic and distinct functions that social support serves: listening; technical support; technical challenge; emotional support; emotional challenge; and sharing social reality (Pines & Aronson, 2004). Social support reduces the level of strain regardless of the intensity of work stressors experienced. Cohen and Wills propose that irrespective of the level of stress, social support is likely to have a beneficial effect on well-being as it provides a person with a sense of social integration (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Drawing on these studies, we think it is reasonable to classify social support into three basic categories: emotional; instrumental; and reality sharing. In addition, we have indicated that different work sources fulfil different support needs for an individual, and have included work, non-work, and family sources of social support in the authorized questionnaire.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) is not a new concept in psychology. Many early psychologists began their study of intelligence by directing their attention to cognitive aspects, such as memory and problem solving. However, other early researchers recognized that non-cognitive elements were significant (Davies, Stankov, & Roberts, 1998). Howard Gardner (2000) suggested the theory of multiple intelligences (MI), that is, that all human beings possess a number of intelligences, each of which appears to be housed in a different part of the brain. Gardner's ideas came to be known as the Theory of Multiple Intelligences. Within his concept of multiple intelligences, he proposed that the "interpersonal" and "intrapersonal" intelligences are as important as cognitive elements of intelligence (Gardner, 2000, p. 103).

Petrides and colleagues developed the trait model of EI. They proposed a conceptual distinction between the ability-based model and the trait-based model of

EI (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). Trait EI is “a constellation of emotion-related self-perceptions located at the lower levels of personality” (Petrides, Furnham, & Mavroveli, 2007, p. 155). In lay terms, trait EI refers to an individual’s self-perceptions of their emotional abilities.

Synthesizing the information above, emotional intelligence is an assortment of skills and competencies that have been shown to influence a person’s ability to succeed in coping with environmental demands and pressures. People with high EI have the ability to accurately perceive, evaluate, express and regulate emotions and feelings. The analysis of several EI models enabled us to formulate a model which is specifically suitable for teaching as it accounts for the specificities of this profession. The focus of the next part of our study is placed on the emotional competency that is comprised of a number of constituents. We have marked clusters of emotional competencies by breaking them up into five competences: self-awareness, self-management, self-motivation, empathy, and social skills.

The Sample and Procedure

The participants of the study were 65 teachers of foreign languages from Saint-Petersburg universities and 60 graduates of foreign language departments. The characteristics of participants are given in the table below. Significantly, mean scores on teaching experience for participants was 9.8, and ranged from 1.5 to 30 years (see Table 1 below).

Table 1
Demographic data

Demographic data characteristics	N	Mean	%
Gender	125		100
Male	16		12.8
Female	113		87.2
Age			
20 to 30 years	35		28
31 to 40 years	18		14.4
41 to 50 years	12		9.6
Students	60		48
Teaching Experience (years)	125	9.8	

The blocks of three questionnaires were distributed among the teachers and lecturers of St-Petersburg universities. The additional group of respondents was formed by student-teachers studying at the same universities. The questionnaires were self-administered and complete instructions were provided for the

respondents. To avoid response biases, certain procedure conditions were met. The respondents were tested individually to ensure privacy and, because of the sensitive nature of some items, questionnaires were completed anonymously, each being given a code number. The survey results are based on the sample of 125 participants.

It is relevant to mention that many teachers felt frustrated about filling in the questionnaires. They refused to complete the forms because they found the questions “too intimate” or they questioned the purposes for which the data would be used, afraid that the information obtained would be given to their managers.

Measurement Instruments

The set of questionnaires consisted of three sections. The first section captured the specificities of individual sustainability through the authorized Resilience Scale, which was designed by the author of the present study to assess its constructs. The validity and reliability of the Resilience Scale was estimated via a series of analyses (Valieva, 2014; Valieva, 2015). It was developed as a result of extensive literature review on models and approaches to resilience, and based on resiliency constructs identified by M. Unger, S. Luthar, S. Masten (Unger, 2004; Luthar, 2006; Masten, 2004) as well as the author’s own theory (Valieva, 2014). The scale comprised 30 items. The respondents were to choose the most suitable variant of the assessment. The Cronbach’s Alpha reliability testing on resilience scale displayed $p = 0.973$ (see Table 2 below).

Table 2
Reliability Statistics

Cronbach’s Alpha	Cronbach’s Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.973	.982	30

The second part was devoted to social support availability and necessity. Social Support was measured with a 22-item scale designed by the author asking directly about the availability of social support and readiness to provide social support. Types of social support were categorized according to A. Pines’s typology. Thus, the SS Questioner includes six support functions – listening, technical support, technical challenge, emotional support, emotional challenge, and sharing social reality. The items were arranged on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The Emotional Intelligence Scale formed the third section. The EIS was designed by the author of the present study to assess teachers’ emotional competencies. It was developed as a result of extensive literature review on Emotional Intelligence and based on emotional competencies identified by Daniel Goleman in *Working*

with *Emotional Intelligence* (1998, p. 383) and his ECI 2.0 (1995, p. 352) as well as Dr. Richard Boyatzis's Self-Assessment Questionnaire (SAQ) (Boyatzis, McKee, 2005). The Emotional Intelligence Scale (EIS) measures 5 constituents with two components in each: Self-Awareness, Self-Regulation, Empathy, Self-Motivation, Social-Readiness. The questionnaire consists of 10 statements, which respondents are asked to assess according to how the statements apply to them, ranging from 5 (very characteristic) to 1 (absolutely uncharacteristic). Of these 10 statements, 3 must be reverse-coded: "1" becomes a "5", "2" becomes a "4", "3" becomes a "3", etc. The average score for each cluster is calculated by adding the scores and dividing the total score by the number of questions.

Limitations of the Study

The present research has several limitations. The first limitation resides in the relatively small sample. Although considered valid, a larger sample of participants promises even more reliable results. Of special note is that all of the questionnaires were self-reported, thus, a significant subjective bias exists. The use of other methods to double-prove the results and increase their reliability is thus required. Another weakness is that the results of the study could be influenced by inaccurate perceptions of the situation. One of the possible methods is 360-degree feedback, which is a multi-source assessment, with feedback coming from different sources all around the employee. Another factor decreasing the validity of the research lies in the lack of time convergence of group testing, as respondents were tested in different periods.

Hypotheses

H1: The Resiliency phenomenon is supposed to have positive and negative inter-correlations between constituting constructs of different strength.

H2: Resiliency is rather dependable on the social context and on one's emotional competencies.

H3: The level of Resiliency strongly correlates with one's working experience.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study will be presented as follows: (1) description of the sample in terms of level of resiliency; (2) correlation analysis identifying the relationships between factors stated and resilience subscales as well as among all variables; (3) factor analysis reducing the number of variables and extracting principal factors associated with resilience.

To summarize the findings of the research on personality factors influencing resiliency we compiled teachers/students groups based on their working experience. The results are presented in Figure 1 using

mean scores for each variable.

The analysis shows 'low resilience' with graduates, and 'moderate resilience' with experts and young specialists.

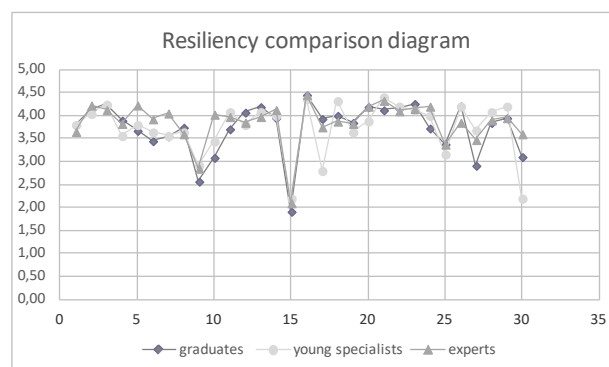


Figure 1. Resiliency in three groups.

Correlation Analysis. For correlation analysis, we identified the following variables: social flexibility (sf), cognitive flexibility (cf), self-identification within family, friends and sociocultural environments (id), empathy (emp), emotional intelligence (ei), social support availability and readiness to give social support, average resilience. The correlation matrix for research variables was first constructed using SPSS software to examine the associations among all variables as well as their relationship to the all subscales of mentioned constructs with correlations being significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) - ** and 0.05 level (2-tailed) - *.

Among the most significant correlations extracted by the system, we outline the following: 1 - positive correlation between resilience and cognitive strategies (0.849**). This fact coincides with the hypothetical statement about resilience constructs; 2 - positive two-sided correlation between emotional intelligence and availability of social support (0.627**). Emotional responsiveness is a key element of social support, and social support decreases teachers' responses to stressful situations and helps boost resilience in problematic situations; 3 - positive two-sided correlation between emotional intelligence and necessity of social support (0.685**). One of the greatest health benefits of emotional intelligence is avoiding isolation. People with high emotional intelligence are socially poised; they value community engagement and sense of belonging. About 12 significant correlations were identified in the research on this level. The strongest construct appeared to be social with social flexibility as a key component.

Regression analysis. General identification including three levels appeared to have strong influence on cognitive and social flexibility within resiliency paradigm with adjusted R-squared – about 0.129, $p=0$. Emotional flexibility did not indicate any significant correlation. Three special models for subgroups of foreign language teachers with different experience were identified. Social support was found to be positively correlated to cognitive flexibility and emotional intelligence with adjusted R-squared – 0.165, $p=0.01$ for cognitive flexibility and

support. Average resilience revealed positive correlation with emotional intelligence with adjusted R-squared 0.160, $p=0.01$.

The emotional flexibility correlation turned out to be less significant than we had supposed while the correlations between social and cognitive flexibility and community identification proved to be more reliable (see Figure 2 below).

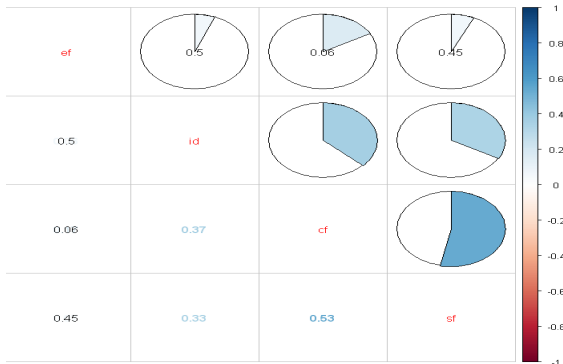


Figure 2. Correlogram 1.

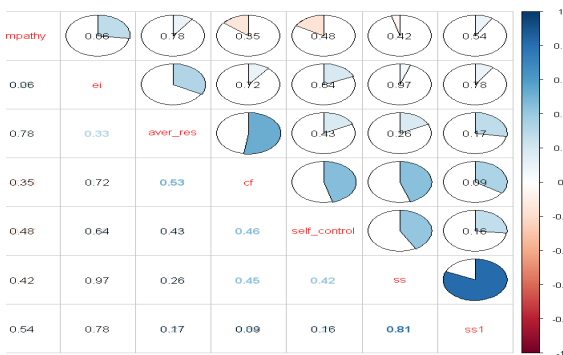


Figure 3. Correlogram 2.

The third figure above represents the correlation between cognitive flexibility, self-control, social support (both availability and readiness), emotional intelligence, average resiliency and empathy. The latter demonstrated considerably high independence and the lack of necessity to correlate with other constructs.

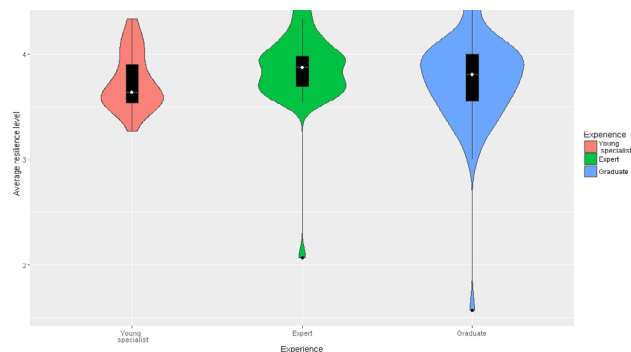


Figure 4. Violin plot. The density of the three groups' data according to experience.

Figure 4 above indicates density of the data at different values. Three groups (graduates, young specialists and experts) are compared through the violin plot. It includes a marker for the median of the three groups' data, around 3.5, and a box indicating the interquartile range.

In the final stage of our research, we attempted to reveal whether at least one sample stochastically dominates another sample. The Kruskal–Wallis test was used to illustrate the impact of working experience on average resilience. No significant correlation was found in any of the groups. Thus, the level of resilience appears unconnected with work experience.

Conclusion

The empirical study findings confirm our hypotheses that resilience is a complex construct, which is dependent on different external and internal factors. In general, our findings illustrate the intricate nature of resilience, as well as social support as a resource that may alleviate existing stressors and strains for some teachers.

Our investigation into a potential impact of work experience on the development of resilience revealed the lack of a significant correlation and, at the same time, many common factors shared by both experienced and young specialists. More revealing, however, are the findings about the correlation between resilience and dependence on social support and context, as well as on the constituents of emotional intelligence.

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