



Developing resilience through critical incident reflection: A qualitative study of pre-service EFL teachers during teaching practicum

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ABSTRACT

In response to growing concerns about teacher well-being and attrition, recent research has reconceptualised teacher resilience as a dynamic, process-driven concept that develops through engagement with challenges and reflective meaning-making. However, studies examining how resilience develops during the teaching practicum, especially in EFL contexts, remain limited. Using a qualitative, document-based approach, this study investigates how pre-service EFL teachers interpret critical incidents encountered during teaching practice and how these reflective processes relate to the development of resilience. The data consist of written reflections on critical incidents and reflective reports produced by ten fourth-year pre-service EFL teachers. The documents were analysed thematically using an inductive, iterative approach. Results indicate that participants most often reported critical incidents involving pedagogical mismatches, classroom management issues, instructional dilemmas, and emotionally charged classroom moments. The analysis further suggests that resilience-oriented reflective patterns can be observed through a process that appears to involve emotional appraisal, pedagogical sense-making, reflective reframing, adaptive orientation, and the gradual fostering of teacher agency. Rather than indicating weakness, emotional engagement appeared to act as a catalyst for professional development. The study contributes to resilience research by framing resilience as a process of reflective, agency-driven meaning-making rooted in everyday classroom experiences, while acknowledging that what is captured here is best understood as resilience-oriented reflective processes rather than direct evidence of resilience itself. Pedagogically, the findings emphasise the importance of structured critical incident reflection in promoting resilience-related learning in pre-service EFL teacher education.

Keywords

teacher resilience, critical incidents, reflective practice, pre-service EFL teachers.

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Introduction

Teaching is widely recognised as an intellectually, emotionally, and socially demanding profession, particularly for those at the beginning of their careers. When entering school settings for the first time, they often encounter complex classroom realities that challenge their expectations, pedagogical knowledge, and emotional preparedness. Research consistently shows that these initial experiences can significantly shape teachers' professional journeys,

affecting not only instructional methods but also their long-term commitment to the profession (Gu & Day, 2007; Johnson et al., 2014).

In response to rising concerns about teacher attrition, emotional exhaustion, and early-career burnout, teacher resilience has become an important concept in educational research. Rather than viewing resilience as a personal trait or individual toughness, contemporary research frames it as a dynamic, context-dependent process that develops through engagement with professional challenges and supportive environments (Beltman et al., 2011; Mansfield et al., 2014). This shift has redirected attention to how resilience is cultivated, maintained, and demonstrated within teacher education programmes. In EFL contexts, these challenges are further intensified by linguistic demands, limited classroom interaction, and learner diversity, making resilience particularly vital for pre-service language teachers.

Conceptualising teacher resilience

Teacher resilience is often described as teachers' capacity to sustain professional commitment, effectiveness, and well-being despite challenges and adversity. However, recent frameworks emphasise that resilience is not merely about coping or survival, but about ongoing professional learning, adaptation, and growth (Mansfield et al., 2014; Mansfield, 2021). In their comprehensive framework, Mansfield and colleagues regard teacher resilience as a multidimensional concept shaped by personal resources (e.g., motivation, beliefs), contextual factors (e.g., school culture, mentoring), and relational supports.

Similarly, Gu and Day (2007) suggest that resilience is deeply rooted in teachers' moral purpose and professional identity and develops over time through reflective engagement with their practice. From this perspective, resilience is closely linked to teachers' sense-making processes-how they interpret classroom events, respond emotionally, and reframe challenges as opportunities for learning.

Although this conceptual advancement is notable, scholars have observed that much of the resilience literature focuses on in-service or early-career teachers, with comparatively less attention to how resilience develops during initial teacher education (Johnson et al., 2014; Mansfield, 2021). Understanding resilience at the pre-service stage is therefore vital, as teaching practice often marks the first sustained engagement with the emotional and pedagogical challenges of real classrooms.

Recent empirical studies further suggest that resilience is closely linked to teachers' emotional regulation, reflective capacity, and the development of professional identity. For example, Fiorilli et al. (2020) demonstrate that teachers' ability to interpret emotionally challenging situations and regulate their responses is central to maintaining motivation and well-being. Similarly, Wartenberg et al. (2023) argue in a recent review that resilience should be examined through teachers' lived experiences and interpretive practices, especially during periods of professional transition. These developments indicate a growing consensus that resilience is best understood as a developmental and context-sensitive process, reinforcing the importance of qualitative approaches that focus on teachers' meaning-making.

Furthermore, although closely related, resilience, coping, adaptation, identity development, and agency are conceptually distinct constructs. Coping involves immediate strategies for managing stress, whereas adaptation entails behavioural changes to meet contextual demands. Teacher agency is the capacity to act intentionally and make instructional

choices. Identity development denotes long-term changes in how teachers view themselves professionally. By contrast, resilience in this study is understood as a process that weaves these elements together through reflective meaning-making, enabling teachers to turn challenging experiences into opportunities for professional growth.

Critical incidents and reflective practice in teacher education

One promising approach to examining the development of resilience in teacher education is the concept of critical incidents. Critical incidents need not be dramatic or extraordinary; rather, they are everyday classroom moments that become “critical” through teachers’ interpretation and reflection (Tripp, 1993). Such incidents often disrupt routine practice, elicit emotional responses, and prompt deeper reflection on teaching decisions and professional identity.

Reflective engagement with critical incidents has long been recognised as a powerful tool in teacher education, enabling pre-service teachers to articulate tacit beliefs, confront uncertainty, and connect theory with practice (Farrell, 2015). Importantly, critical incidents often arise precisely at moments of difficulty-when lessons fail, classroom control is challenged, or pedagogical dilemmas arise. These moments, though unsettling, can serve as fertile ground for building resilience. Resilience research supports this view by emphasising that exposure to manageable challenges, together with structured reflection, can foster adaptive coping, professional judgement, and agency (Beltman and Poulton, 2019; Fernandes et al., 2019). However, empirical studies explicitly linking critical incident reflection to resilience development among pre-service EFL teachers remain limited.

Existing studies suggest that the teaching practicum is a particularly vulnerable phase, as pre-service teachers face the realities of classroom teaching while still developing their professional identities (Fathi & Saeedian, 2020; Hong, 2010). During this period, challenges related to classroom management, instructional decision-making, and emotional stress are often intensified by limited experience and constrained professional authority. Research in EFL and teacher education contexts indicates that resilience during the practicum does not develop uniformly but varies with opportunities for reflection, mentoring, and supportive learning environments (Aspfors & Bondas, 2013; Yuan & Burns, 2017). However, much of this research relies on survey or interview data, offering limited insight into how resilience is built through pre-service teachers’ everyday classroom experiences. As Mansfield (2021) notes, there remains a need for studies that trace the development of resilience within practicum settings rather than treating it as an outcome measured at a single point in time. Therefore, critical incidents are especially useful for examining resilience because they capture moments when emotional disruption, pedagogical uncertainty, and professional judgement intersect, making them key sites for observing adaptive and reflective processes in real time.

Reflective writing and critical incidents as lenses for examining resilience

Reflective writing is widely recognised as an essential pedagogical and methodological tool for promoting professional learning in teacher education, particularly during teaching practice (Barkhuizen, 2016; Farrell, 2019). Through reflection, pre-service teachers can articulate emotions, analyse pedagogical choices, and connect theoretical knowledge to classroom realities. Recent research shows that reflective narratives provide valuable insights into

teachers' internal sense-making processes, making them particularly useful for exploring developmental constructs such as resilience (Nuraeni & Heryatun, 2021).

Critical incident reflection, in particular, provides a focused perspective for analysing how teachers respond to moments of disruption, uncertainty, or emotional challenge. Instead of viewing such moments as failures, recent scholarship regards them as opportunities for professional learning that can promote adaptive thinking and agency when supported by structured reflection (Beltman & Poulton, 2019; Korthagen, 2017). Nonetheless, empirical research explicitly connecting critical incident reflection to the development of resilience among pre-service EFL teachers remains limited. To address this gap, the present study investigates how pre-service EFL teachers interpret critical incidents during teaching practice and how these reflective processes support the development of resilience. However, reflective writing may be affected by concerns about self-presentation, retrospective bias, and differing levels of reflective ability, which can limit how well these texts represent participants' real-time experiences.

Resilience in pre-service EFL teaching contexts

In the field of English language teaching (ELT), pre-service teachers often face additional challenges involving language proficiency, classroom interaction, and learner diversity. Teaching practice can therefore feel particularly disruptive as pre-service teachers manage not only pedagogical decisions but also their emerging identities as language educators.

Although studies have begun to explore resilience-enhancing practices in teacher education, such as mentoring, reflective tasks, and resilience-focused interventions (Beltman & Poulton, 2019; Mansfield, 2021), there remains a lack of qualitative research that captures how resilience is constructed through lived classroom experiences during practicum, particularly through pre-service EFL teachers' reflective accounts. To address this gap, this study examines how pre-service EFL teachers interpret critical incidents during teaching practice and how these experiences help build their professional resilience. Guided by a qualitative, document-based approach, this study examines the following research questions:

1. What kinds of critical incidents do pre-service EFL teachers report during their teaching practice?
2. How do pre-service EFL teachers interpret and reflect on these critical incidents in their written reflections?
3. How do these reflections demonstrate the development of resilience during initial teacher training?

By focusing on pre-service teachers' reflective meaning-making, this study seeks to deepen understanding of resilience as a developmental process embedded within everyday classroom experiences.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a qualitative, document-based research design to explore how pre-service EFL teachers build resilience through engagement with critical incidents during teaching practice.

The study adopts an interpretivist epistemological stance, emphasising how participants construct meaning from their lived experiences rather than measuring predetermined variables. Document-based qualitative research is particularly suitable for examining reflective processes, as it provides access to participants' naturally occurring written accounts, capturing their interpretations, emotions, and professional reasoning in context. In this study, reflective texts were treated not merely as reports of experience but as sites of meaning-making through which resilience can be observed as a developmental process.

Context of the Study

The study was conducted as part of a fourth-year Teaching Practice course (ELT 401) within an English Language Teaching (ELT) programme at a Turkish state university over a 12-week autumn semester. Teaching practice is a vital component of initial teacher training in Türkiye, in which pre-service teachers are placed in public schools to observe lessons, deliver supervised teaching, and engage in systematic reflection.

As part of the course requirements, participants completed weekly reflective writing tasks, including structured critical incident reflections on classroom events they found significant, challenging, or instructive. These reflective activities were designed to support professional development and were not originally created for research purposes, thereby increasing the ecological validity of the dataset.

Participants

The study involved ten fourth-year pre-service EFL teachers enrolled in the compulsory Teaching Practice course. Participants were aged 20-22 and had completed all core methodology and language-related coursework before the practicum. They were assigned to public middle and high schools, where they observed lessons and undertook supervised teaching over 12 weeks. Participation in the study was voluntary, and only the reflective documents from those who provided informed consent were included in the analysis.

Data Sources

The dataset consisted of weekly reflective writings and critical incident reflection forms produced by participants during the practicum. Overall, the corpus contained approximately 80 reflective entries spanning the 12-week period. The dataset was evenly distributed across participants, with each pre-service teacher contributing 7-9 reflective entries, depending on attendance and submission pace during the semester. All entries from participants who provided informed consent were included in the analysis; no entries were excluded on the basis of length, content, or perceived analytic value, to preserve the variability of reflective depth across the corpus. A small number of entries that were identical re-submissions of the same reflection (e.g., resubmitted after course feedback) were retained only in their final submitted form to avoid double-counting. The reflections documented participants' experiences concerning:

- instructional challenges
- classroom management issues
- emotional responses
- pedagogical dilemmas
- professional learning moments

All reflections were written in English and captured participants' authentic voices as emerging teachers. The documents were treated as naturally occurring data, generated within the normal flow of coursework rather than specifically collected for research, thereby enhancing the credibility and authenticity of the data.

Analytical Approach

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following an inductive, iterative approach that allowed patterns to emerge from the data rather than being predetermined. The analysis proceeded through six recursive phases: (1) Familiarisation with the data involved reading all reflection texts multiple times to gain a deep understanding of participants' experiences and identify initial patterns. (2) Initial codes were generated inductively, focusing on types of critical incidents, emotional responses, reflective interpretations, and evidence of adaptive thinking. (3) Searching for themes entailed systematically grouping codes into broader categories that reflected recurring patterns across participants' accounts. (4) Reviewing themes involved examining them against both coded extracts and the full dataset to ensure internal coherence and consistency. (5) Defining and naming themes included refining and clearly specifying each theme to capture different aspects of participants' reflective meaning-making processes. (6) Producing the report involved selecting representative excerpts to illustrate each theme while maintaining variation across participants.

Throughout the analysis, resilience was conceptualised as a process-oriented construct, identified through observable reflective patterns such as reframing challenges, adaptive pedagogical thinking, and the emergence of professional agency. Rather than viewing resilience as a fixed psychological trait, the analysis focused on how it is constructed through reflective interpretation of experience. To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, the analysis involved: iterative movement between data and codes, constant comparison across participants, and careful selection of representative excerpts. A clear audit trail of analytical decisions was maintained throughout the process. This audit trail comprised dated coding memos from initial coding, theme revision logs documenting how candidate themes were merged, split, or relabelled across analytic iterations, and a record of decisions regarding excerpt selection. In addition, a peer debriefing process was conducted: a colleague familiar with qualitative research in teacher education read a sample of coded extracts and the developing thematic structure, and offered alternative interpretations that were used to refine, rather than confirm, the analysis. Discrepancies between the initial coding and the peer reader's reading were discussed until a defensible interpretation was reached, and these discussions were also documented in the audit trail.

Ethical Considerations

Although formal institutional ethical approval was not required, the study adhered to established ethical principles for educational research. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants for the use of their written reflections in the research. Because the data were course-generated reflective documents, particular care was taken to safeguard voluntary participation. The researcher was also the instructor responsible for the practicum course, creating a potential dual role and the risk of perceived pressure to participate. To minimise this risk, several measures were taken: (a) the invitation to

participate in the research was issued only after the course had ended and final grades had been formally submitted, so that participation could not influence assessment; (b) participants were informed in writing and orally that consent was entirely separate from course requirements and that declining or later withdrawing consent would have no academic consequences; and (c) participants were given the option to consent to some entries while excluding others. The reflective documents had therefore already been graded and returned to students before they were considered as research data, and only the documents of those who provided written informed consent at this later stage were included in the analysis. All data were anonymised, and participants were assigned pseudonyms (e.g., PST1–PST10) to protect confidentiality. The study utilised only course-generated reflective documents, with no additional data collection or intervention beyond standard educational practices. The research process was guided by principles of respect for participants, confidentiality, responsible use of educational data, and transparency in reporting.

Results

Types of critical incidents reported during teaching practice (RQ1)

Analysis of the critical incident reflections showed that pre-service EFL teachers described a range of classroom events that disrupted their planned teaching or challenged their expectations during teaching practice. These incidents were not extraordinary or crisis-driven; rather, they were everyday classroom moments that became significant when they disrupted routine instruction or exposed gaps between planning and classroom realities. Four primary types of critical incidents were identified:

Mismatch in teaching approach and student preparedness

The most frequently reported critical incidents involved a misalignment between lesson plans and students' actual levels of preparedness. Pre-service teachers described entering lessons with clear instructional objectives, only to realise that students lacked prerequisite knowledge or struggled to follow the planned activities.

One participant explained:

“I was supposed to teach comparative adjectives, but I realised that my students did not even know what an adjective was.” (PST3)

Similarly, another participant remarked:

“I planned the lesson according to the curriculum, but when I started teaching, I understood that the students were not ready for this topic.” (PST7)

A third participant reflected on the implications of this mismatch:

“I had to change my plan immediately because students could not follow the activity.” (PST1)

These incidents usually occurred during the implementation phase of lessons and were regarded as critical because they required immediate re-evaluation of instructional objectives and timing. Beyond individual lesson issues, these accounts reveal a broader pattern of misalignment between pre-service teachers' planning assumptions and learners' actual readiness within the curriculum and development. Several participants implicitly viewed the curriculum as the main reference for lesson design, while classroom realities demanded more

flexible, learner-responsive adjustments. This suggests that early teaching experiences expose pre-service teachers to the limitations of prescriptive planning and promote a shift towards adaptive pedagogical thinking. While some participants responded by simplifying content, others described feeling temporarily immobilised, indicating varying levels of pedagogical confidence at this early stage of professional development. In the context of EFL teaching, such mismatches underscore the importance of linguistic scaffolding and level-appropriate instruction, especially for novice teachers who may depend heavily on prescribed curricula.

Classroom management and student engagement challenges

A second category of critical incidents involves classroom management problems and unexpected student behaviours. Participants described times when they found it difficult to keep students' attention, control noise levels, or respond appropriately to disengagement.

As one participant reflected:

"I had difficulty controlling the class, and I felt that students were not listening to me as I expected." (PST2)

Another participant pointed out the difficulty of maintaining engagement:

"Some students lost interest during the activity, and I did not know how to regain their attention." (PST9)

Similarly, a third participant associated the issue with instructional pacing:

"I think I talked too much, and students got bored." (PST6)

Such incidents were often seen as critical because they questioned participants' authority and preparedness to teach in real classrooms. Notably, these incidents were rarely seen solely as behavioural issues. Instead, participants frequently linked engagement challenges to instructional pacing, task design, or their own classroom presence. This indicates an emerging shift from externalising classroom problems to taking internal pedagogical responsibility, marking an early phase of professional accountability. However, participants varied in the confidence with which they expressed such attributions, with some offering tentative explanations and others demonstrating more advanced pedagogical reasoning.

Instructional and pedagogical dilemmas

Participants also reported critical incidents involving instructional decision-making dilemmas, especially when they were uncertain about the most suitable pedagogical response. These incidents often focused on language use, explanation strategies, and error correction.

One participant described this uncertainty as follows:

"I could not decide whether I should explain the grammar rule clearly or let students discover it themselves." (PST4)

Another noted:

"At that moment, I was not sure if I should use Turkish or continue in English." (PST6)

A third participant pointed out uncertainty in feedback strategies:

"I did not know whether I should correct the mistake immediately or ignore it." (PST8)

These dilemmas emphasise the complexity of pedagogical decision-making in EFL classrooms, where pre-service teachers must continually balance methodological ideals with real classroom demands. Rather than providing clear solutions, participants' reflections demonstrate an emerging understanding of teaching as a series of contingent choices influenced

by learners, context, and real-time judgment. Remarkably, such dilemmas often coincided with heightened emotional responses, showing that pedagogical uncertainty and emotional experience are closely linked.

Emotionally charged classroom moments

The final category included emotionally charged incidents that provoked strong affective reactions from pre-service teachers. These instances involved feelings of embarrassment, stress, or emotional reactions to classroom events.

One participant recalled:

“I felt very embarrassed when I realised that I could not manage the situation in the way I expected.” (PST5)

Another participant described the emotional intensity of an unexpected moment:

“Everything happened suddenly, and I was emotionally affected because I did not know what to do.” (PST1)

A third participant reflected more deeply:

“This situation affected me emotionally because I felt unprepared.” (PST10)

These incidents were recognised as critical not because of their severity but because of their emotional significance and impact on participants’ perceptions of themselves as emerging teachers. These emotionally charged moments acted as crucial turning points in participants’ reflective narratives. Instead of staying at the level of emotional reaction, most reflections moved towards interpretation and learning, indicating that affective disturbance served as a catalyst for deeper professional understanding. However, the depth of reflection varied: some participants quickly reached insight, while others remained closer to descriptive emotional reporting.

In response to Research Question 1, the findings show that pre-service EFL teachers most often reported critical incidents related to (a) pedagogical mismatches between planning and student readiness, (b) classroom management and engagement challenges, (c) instructional dilemmas, and (d) emotionally charged classroom moments. These incidents collectively reflect the daily complexities of teaching practice and form the experiential basis for future reflective interpretation and professional development.

While the first research question focused on identifying the types of critical incidents reported by pre-service EFL teachers, understanding these incidents alone does not explain how such experiences contribute to professional learning. The importance of critical incidents lies not only in what happens in the classroom but also in how teachers interpret, emotionally process, and reflect on these events. Accordingly, the second research question examines the reflective meaning-making processes through which pre-service teachers make sense of the critical incidents they encountered during teaching practice.

Interpreting critical incidents through reflection (RQ2)

Analysis of the reflective texts revealed that pre-service EFL teachers did not merely describe classroom events; instead, they engaged in interpretive reflection that combined emotional responses, pedagogical reasoning, and self-evaluation. Their reflections demonstrated three main interpretive patterns through which critical incidents were made meaningful.

Emotional evaluation of classroom experiences

A notable aspect of the reflections was participants' immediate emotional reactions to critical incidents. They often highlighted their feelings when describing classroom events, using emotional language to emphasise the incident's significance.

For example, one participant wrote:

"I felt very stressed and confused at that moment because everything happened suddenly." (PST1)

Similarly, two participants reflected:

"I was embarrassed because I could not manage the class." (PST5)

"I felt nervous because I did not know what to do." (PST2)

These emotional appraisals often appeared at the beginning of reflections, suggesting that affective responses served as an entry point for deeper contemplation. Emotions such as anxiety, embarrassment, and frustration were not seen as peripheral reactions but as vital to participants' understanding of the classroom experience.

Pedagogical sense-making and attribution

Beyond emotional responses, participants sought to explain why the incident occurred, often attributing it to pedagogical factors such as lesson planning, instructional choices, or student characteristics. This kind of reflection involved analysing the incident in relation to teaching practice rather than seeing it as a random or isolated event.

One participant explained:

"I realised that the problem was not the students, but my lesson plan. I did not consider their level carefully." (PST7)

Another participant connected the incident to instructional decisions:

"I think the activity was too difficult, and this caused students to lose their attention." (PST9); another pre-service EFL teacher's reflection was

"I think I did not explain the topic clearly." (PST3)

Through these reflections, participants demonstrated an emerging ability to contextualise classroom challenges within pedagogical reasoning, shifting from surface descriptions to explanatory understanding.

Self-evaluation and developing professional awareness

A third interpretive pattern involved self-evaluation, where participants assessed their own performance and professional readiness. Many reflections included explicit statements questioning teaching competence or highlighting areas for improvement.

As one participant noted:

"At that moment, I questioned myself as a teacher and wondered whether I made the right decision." (PST4)

Another participant reflected more explicitly on professional growth:

"This incident made me realise my weaknesses and what I need to improve as a teacher." (PST6) and

"I understood what I need to improve." (PST8)

These evaluative reflections frequently used metacognitive language (e.g. I realised, I understood, I noticed), suggesting that participants were not only recounting experiences but

also positioning themselves as reflective practitioners. In response to Research Question 2, the findings show that pre-service EFL teachers interpreted critical incidents through a reflective process characterised by (a) emotional appraisal, (b) pedagogical explanation, and (c) self-evaluation. Instead of just describing the incidents, participants actively engaged in making meaning, linking classroom events to their evolving understanding of teaching practice.

From reflection to resilience: developmental patterns in pre-service teachers' accounts (RQ3)

Building on the interpretive processes identified in RQ2, the analysis further examined how pre-service EFL teachers' reflective engagement with critical incidents revealed emerging forms of resilience during teaching practice. Instead of portraying resilience as emotional endurance or personal strength, the findings demonstrate resilience as a developmental process that unfolds through reflective reframing, adaptive orientation, and increasing professional agency. In this study, resilience is viewed as a process where pre-service EFL teachers turn challenging classroom experiences into professional growth through reflective interpretation, adaptive decision-making, and the development of teacher agency. This process was not linear; instead, participants moved back and forth among emotional reactions, reflection, and adaptation, suggesting that resilience evolved through recurring cycles of experience and meaning-making.

Table 1. Analytic framework for identifying resilience development through pre-service teachers' reflective accounts

<i>Analytic Stage</i>	<i>What is Observed in the Data</i>	<i>Typical Linguistic / Reflective Markers</i>	<i>How This Signals Resilience (Operational Definition)</i>
1. Disruptive Classroom Experience	An unexpected or challenging classroom event interrupts planned teaching (e.g. level mismatch, loss of control, instructional uncertainty, emotional discomfort).	"I was supposed to... but..." "I did not expect that..." "Things did not go as planned."	<i>Not resilience yet.</i> This stage represents exposure to difficulty, which is a necessary condition, not evidence of resilience.
2. Emotional and Cognitive Engagement	The incident is accompanied by emotional reactions and initial meaning-making efforts.	"I felt stressed/embarrassed/confused." "I was not sure what to do."	<i>Precondition for resilience.</i> Emotional engagement indicates that the experience is taken seriously rather than ignored or dismissed.
3. Reflective Reframing	The participant retrospectively interprets the incident as a learning opportunity rather than a failure.	"I realised that..." "This incident showed me..." "If I were to teach again..."	Core resilience indicator. Difficulty is cognitively reframed and integrated into professional learning.
4. Adaptive Pedagogical Orientation	The reflection moves from explanation to adaptation, often involving future-oriented teaching decisions.	"Next time, I would..." "I will change my approach. "I should consider the students' level."	Resilience as adaptive capacity: the ability to adjust practice in response to challenge.
5. Emerging Teacher Agency	The participant positions themselves as an active decision-maker capable of handling future challenges.	"I understood that my decisions matter." "I can handle similar situations." "I will reinforce this practice."	Resilience as professional agency: confidence grounded in reflective experience, not emotional immunity.

The analytic framework presented in Table 1 did not emerge solely inductively, nor was it imposed deductively from the literature. Rather, it was developed through an iterative dialogue between the data and existing process-oriented conceptualisations of teacher resilience (e.g., Mansfield et al., 2014; Mansfield, 2021; Ungar, 2021). The stages of disruption, emotional and cognitive engagement, reflective reframing, adaptive orientation, and emerging agency were initially derived from recurring patterns observed in the reflective texts during inductive coding. These data-driven categories were then compared with broader resilience frameworks in the literature, informing the labelling, ordering, and operational definitions of the stages. The framework should therefore be read as an analytically refined heuristic for tracing resilience-oriented reflective patterns within this dataset, rather than as a pre-existing model applied to the data or as an exclusively bottom-up taxonomy.

Reflective reframing of disruptive experiences

A key sign of emerging resilience was participants' ability to reframe disruptive classroom experiences as chances for professional learning. In many reflections, incidents initially described with negative emotions were retrospectively reinterpreted through reflective insight.

For instance, one participant noted:

"At first, I thought I failed, but after reflecting on this incident, I realised that it taught me how important it is to consider students' level before planning a lesson." (PST6)

Similarly, another participant explained:

"This incident showed me that unexpected situations are part of teaching, and I need to be prepared to learn from them." (PST4)

These reflections show a move from self-blame or frustration towards a learning-focused view, emphasising resilience as a cognitive and professional rethinking process rather than emotional suppression. This move from seeing failure as negative to viewing it as a learning opportunity signifies cognitive reframing, a key marker of resilience.

Adaptive pedagogical orientation

Beyond reframing past experiences, many participants showed resilience through a future-oriented adaptive attitude. Reflections often shifted from explaining what went wrong to describing how teaching practices would be adjusted in similar situations.

One participant reflected:

"If I were to teach this lesson again, I would start with more basic examples and check students' understanding before moving on." (PST3)

Another participant similarly emphasised the importance of adaptation:

"Next time, I will change my approach and try different activities that are more suitable for students' level." (PST9); participants 2 and 10 also state that

"I learned that if it is necessary, I will simplify the content." (PST2)

"I will use different activities." (PST10)

Such statements suggest that resilience was shown through adaptive pedagogical thinking, where challenges were integrated into developing instructional strategies rather than seen as isolated failures. This again illustrates resilience as adaptive capacity rather than emotional endurance.

Emerging sense of teacher agency

A further aspect of resilience observed in the data was the development of teacher agency—the perception of oneself as an active and capable decision-maker in the classroom. Several participants expressed increased confidence in their capacity to address future challenges after engaging reflectively with critical incidents.

One participant wrote:

“This experience helped me realise that my decisions as a teacher really matter in the classroom.” (PST8)

Another participant stated:

“Even though it was challenging, I understood that I can manage similar situations in the future.” (PST10)

These reflections show that resilience involves not only managing challenges but also developing a sense of professional control and ownership over teaching practice. This highlights the emergence of agency as a key element of resilience.

Uneven and partial trajectories of resilience-oriented reflection

Although the patterns described in 3.3.1–3.3.3 were observable across the dataset, they did not appear with the same depth or completeness in every reflection. Several entries stopped at the level of emotional reaction or descriptive recounting and did not progress to reflective reframing, adaptation, or agency. These cases are reported here as a deliberate counter-illustration to the developmental account presented so far. In one such entry, a participant described a difficult lesson largely in affective terms, without moving towards pedagogical interpretation: “The lesson did not go well. I felt very tired and a little upset. I do not really know what to say about it. Maybe next week will be better.” (PST5). The reflection acknowledges emotional disturbance and gestures vaguely towards the future, but does not engage with the cause of the difficulty, the participant’s own teaching decisions, or possible alternative actions. Compared with the reframing and adaptive moves shown in 3.3.1 and 3.3.2, this entry remains close to the level of emotional appraisal alone.

Another entry described a partial trajectory in which interpretation was attempted but quickly abandoned: “The students were not interested. I think the topic was boring for them. There is nothing I can do about the syllabus.” (PST7). Here, the participant offers a brief causal attribution but externalises responsibility to the syllabus, thereby foreclosing the possibility of pedagogical adaptation. There is little movement towards reframing the experience as a learning opportunity, and no future-oriented decision is articulated.

Within-case variation was also observed: in several cases, the same participant produced richer, more reflective reframing in some entries and considerably thinner accounts in others, suggesting that resilience-oriented reflection did not develop linearly within individuals over the 12 weeks. Some participants moved from descriptive to interpretive reflection over time; others oscillated; and a smaller number remained largely descriptive throughout. These uneven trajectories indicate that the analytic stages summarised in Table 1 should not be read as a developmental ladder that every pre-service teacher climbs in the same order or to the same depth. They are better understood as analytically distinguishable moments, some of which are realised in any given reflection and some of which are not. Their unevenness across the corpus is itself an empirical finding and is discussed further in the Discussion.

Resilience as a developmental process in initial teacher education

Importantly, resilience did not appear as a fixed trait or a consistent quality across participants' accounts. Instead, it developed gradually from disruption to reflection, and from reflection to adaptive professional learning. Not all reflections demonstrated the same depth of resilience-oriented meaning-making; however, even partial shifts towards reframing, adaptation, or agency indicated early stages of resilience development.

Taken together, the findings suggest that resilience among pre-service EFL teachers is built through engagement with challenges, reflective interpretation of experiences, and the development of professional judgement within the context of teaching practice.

In response to Research Question 3, the results show that pre-service EFL teachers' reflections reveal resilience as a process-oriented concept. This resilience is characterised by reflective reframing of critical incidents, an adaptive pedagogical approach, and the development of teacher agency. These findings suggest that resilience during initial teacher education is not defined by the absence of challenges but by how teachers interpret and learn from disruptive classroom experiences. Importantly, even partial progress towards reframing or adaptation was considered evidence of emerging resilience, emphasising resilience as a developmental journey rather than a simple, binary outcome.

Discussion

This study contributes to the literature on teacher resilience by conceptualising resilience in pre-service EFL teacher education as a process of reflective meaning-making rather than a personal trait or psychological capacity. By analysing pre-service teachers' written reflections on critical incidents during teaching practice, the study illustrates how resilience-oriented reflective patterns can be traced through reflective reframing, adaptive pedagogical approaches, and the growth of teacher agency. Methodologically, the study offers a conceptually and methodologically promising approach to resilience research, examining resilience through observable reflective patterns in naturally occurring practicum documents. It complements rather than replaces trait-based or intervention-focused approaches. Given the small, single-context dataset, this contribution is best understood as an analytical proof of concept rather than a generalisable advance. Empirically, the study addresses a relatively underexplored area by foregrounding the voices and classroom experiences of pre-service EFL teachers, a group that remains underrepresented in resilience studies. Pedagogically, the findings emphasise the importance of structured critical incident reflection, which refers to guided reflective activities such as critical incident analysis forms, scaffolded reflection prompts, and mentor-supported reflective discussions, integrated into practicum courses as a tool to support professional learning and resilience development in initial teacher education programmes, particularly within linguistically and emotionally challenging EFL environments.

This section discusses the study's findings in relation to existing research on teacher resilience, critical incidents, and reflective practice in initial teacher education. Drawing on the three research questions, the discussion focuses on pre-service EFL teachers' experiences of everyday classroom disruptions, how they interpret these experiences through reflection, and how these reflective processes contribute to the development of resilience during teaching

practice. The findings are interpreted through resilience and reflection frameworks to highlight their implications for pre-service EFL teacher education.

Critical incidents as opportunities for professional learning

Consistent with earlier research on critical incidents (e.g., Farrell, 2015; Tripp, 1993), the findings confirm that the incidents reported by pre-service teachers were neither extraordinary nor crisis-driven. Instead, they were everyday classroom disruptions such as mismatches between lesson plans and student readiness, classroom management challenges, and pedagogical dilemmas that became significant through reflective interpretation. This supports the argument that professional learning in teacher education often arises not from success but from moments of uncertainty, disruption, and emotional discomfort (Korthagen, 2017).

Importantly, the types of incidents identified in this study closely mirror those reported in previous research on teaching practice in EFL contexts, particularly challenges in classroom management, learner engagement, and instructional decision-making (Gan, 2013; Yuan & Burns, 2017). This suggests that such incidents may reflect recurring structural problems in initial teacher education rather than individual shortcomings.

Reflection as the link between experience and resilience

A key finding of the study is that critical incidents alone do not foster resilience. Instead, it is the reflective engagement with these incidents that turns experience into professional learning. Participants' reflections consistently followed a pattern transitioning from emotional appraisal to pedagogical explanation and self-evaluation, demonstrating that reflection acts as a mediating mechanism between experience and development. This finding resonates with Schön's (1983) idea of reflective practice and Farrell's (2015) work on reflective language teaching yet expands these frameworks by clearly connecting reflection to the development of resilience. Consistent with Beltman et al. (2011) and Mansfield et al. (2014), the findings show that resilience is not about avoiding emotional challenges but about understanding and working through them.

Notably, emotional responses such as stress, embarrassment, and uncertainty were not indicators of low resilience; rather, they served as gateways into reflective processes. This supports sociocultural perspectives on emotion, which view affect as central to cognition and meaning-making rather than as a separate or disruptive force. Therefore, resilience develops not despite emotional engagement, but through it.

A further interpretive question concerns what these reflective patterns actually evidence. Because resilience in this study is operationalised through reflective markers-reframing, adaptive orientation, and the articulation of agency- and is then identified in the data using those same markers, there is a genuine risk of circularity and real interpretive overlap with adjacent constructs such as reflective competence, pedagogical awareness, and general professional learning. The patterns observed in the dataset could plausibly be read in any of these terms. We do not claim that the present analysis cleanly separates resilience from these neighbouring constructs. What it does claim is that, when taken together with the conceptual framing of resilience as a process of meaning-making in response to disruption (Mansfield et al., 2014; Mansfield, 2021; Ungar, 2021), these reflective patterns can reasonably be read as resilience-oriented reflective processes—that is, as reflection that is doing resilience work—rather than as definitive proof of resilience as such. The findings are therefore best understood as

illuminating the discursive and reflective dimension of resilience development, while leaving open the question of how that dimension relates to behavioural and longitudinal indicators of resilience. We return to this point in the limitations.

Resilience as reflective reframing and adaptive professional judgement

One of the main contributions of this study is its operationalisation of resilience through observable reflective processes. The findings show that resilience is demonstrated through a progression from disruption to reflective reframing, and from reframing to an adaptive pedagogical approach. Reflective reframing was evident when participants reinterpreted initially negative experiences as opportunities for learning. This aligns with contemporary resilience frameworks (e.g., Mansfield, 2021; Ungar, 2021), which emphasise adaptation and transformation rather than endurance. However, the present study extends this perspective by showing how such reframing is discursively constructed within reflective narratives, thereby making resilience empirically traceable through language.

Moreover, participants' future-oriented reflections expressed through statements such as "next time I will..." illustrate resilience as an adaptable form of professional judgment, where past experiences shape future instructional decisions. This supports the idea that resilience is not a passive trait but an active, agentic process rooted in pedagogical reasoning.

The rise of teacher agency as a central aspect of resilience

Another significant finding is the emergence of teacher agency as a vital aspect of resilience development. As participants reflected on critical incidents, they increasingly viewed themselves as capable decision-makers, showing a shift from uncertainty to professional confidence. This supports Gu and Day's (2007) argument that resilience is closely linked to teacher identity and moral purpose, but also extends it by illustrating how agency develops through micro-level reflective processes during the practicum. Rather than being a pre-existing trait, agency appears to be constructed through repeated cycles of experience, reflection, and adaptation. Significantly, this finding helps differentiate resilience from related concepts such as coping or adaptation. While coping may involve short-term emotional regulation, and adaptation may refer to behavioural adjustments, resilience in this study involves a broader process that includes interpretation, transformation, and agentic action.

Implications for pre-service EFL teacher education

The findings have significant implications for teacher education, especially in EFL settings. Firstly, they indicate that resilience should not be regarded as a solely personal trait to develop in isolation, but rather as a process that can be pedagogically enhanced through structured reflection. In this study, structured reflection refers to guided activities such as critical incident analysis forms, scaffolded reflection prompts, and systematic reflective writing integrated into practicum courses. These practices offer pre-service teachers opportunities to engage with challenges in a meaningful and analytically productive manner.

Second, the findings emphasise the importance of normalising difficulty and emotional struggle within teacher education programmes. Instead of shielding pre-service teachers from challenging experiences, programmes should create supportive environments in which such experiences can be explored, interpreted, and transformed into learning opportunities.

Finally, because of the specific demands of EFL teaching, such as managing language use, addressing diverse learner needs, and navigating classroom interaction in a foreign language, the integration of reflection-based resilience development is especially important. Supporting pre-service teachers in understanding these complexities may lead to more sustainable professional growth and long-term commitment to teaching.

Limitations

Although this study makes valuable contributions, it also has several limitations that should be carefully considered when interpreting the findings. First, the data were gathered from reflective documents produced within a single institutional context. While this setting allowed for an in-depth exploration of pre-service EFL teachers' experiences, it also means that the findings are specific to that context, shaped by the particular characteristics of the teacher education programme, practicum structure, and educational environment. Therefore, the patterns identified in this study should not be taken as representative of all pre-service teacher education contexts but rather as context-sensitive insights that may be relevant to similar settings.

Second, the study relied solely on written reflective documents, which capture participants' retrospective and self-mediated interpretations of classroom experiences. Although reflective writing offers valuable insights into meaning-making processes, it may not fully represent participants' in-the-moment reactions, embodied practices, or interactional behaviours during classroom events (Yuan & Burns, 2017). Consequently, the findings mainly reflect how participants reconstruct and interpret experience, rather than how they act in real-time teaching situations. This distinction is crucial when considering the nature of the claims made about resilience.

Third, resilience in this study was inferred from reflective discourse rather than measured as a psychological construct. While this aligns with the study's process-oriented and sociocultural conceptualisation of resilience, it also means that resilience is examined as a discursively constructed and interpretive phenomenon, rather than as a stable or quantifiable attribute. Therefore, the findings should be understood as illuminating how resilience is articulated and developed through reflection, rather than providing evidence of its level or magnitude. Taken together, these limitations suggest that the findings are best understood in terms of analytical transferability rather than statistical generalisation. Instead of offering generalisable claims, the study provides a theoretically informed account of how resilience may develop through reflective engagement with critical incidents in practicum settings. Future research could expand on this work by incorporating multiple data sources (e.g., classroom observations, interviews), longitudinal designs, and cross-context comparisons to further explore resilience development across different educational environments.

Conclusions

This study adds to the growing body of research on teacher resilience by examining pre-service EFL teachers' reflective experiences during their teaching practice. The findings suggest that resilience is better understood not as a fixed personal trait, but as a developmental, contextually influenced process shaped by engagement with critical incidents, emotional reflection, adaptive thinking, and the gradual development of professional agency.

Analysing how pre-service teachers interpret everyday classroom disruptions, the study highlights the importance of reflection in transforming challenging experiences into opportunities for professional growth. In this context, resilience appears to be less about avoiding difficulty and more about teachers' capacity to reframe, adapt to, and learn from complex classroom situations. The findings also highlight the potential value of incorporating structured reflective practices into initial teacher education programmes. Creating pedagogical spaces where pre-service teachers can confront uncertainty, emotional challenges, and instructional dilemmas in a supportive environment may foster resilience over time. However, further research across diverse contexts and using multiple data sources is needed to achieve a clearer understanding of how such processes develop in various teacher education settings.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix

Critical Incidents Reflection Form

- 1- Please reflect on your observations and teaching in general. (your general comments, what you have learnt as a trainee)
- 2- Give a brief description of a teaching/learning incident you experienced recently. This may be something you observed or participated in.
- 3- What were the consequences (effects or outcomes) of this event?
Effects:
Outcomes/consequences:
- 4- Did an educational dilemma exist? If so, describe it.
- 5- Is this incident significant enough for you to reinforce it? Why or why not?
- 6- What, if anything, would you have done differently? Why?

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