

STRESS AND RESILIENCE AMONG EFL TEACHERS: AN INTERVIEW STUDY OF AN INDONESIAN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER

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Abstract: While stress remains a classic problem in teaching, the concept of resilience is central to help teachers find the joy of their teaching and make them stay longer at the job. This study involved one EFL teacher who had more than a five years' teaching experience, and was regarded as capable, not only of maintaining her positive commitment, but also of demonstrating exceptional achievement during her career thus far. An in-depth semi-structured interview was conducted with these two key aims: (1) to identify sources of stress that she dealt with; and (2) to introduce aspects that helped her become resilient within that stressful circumstance. The results indicated that curriculum changes had largely contributed to the participant's stress. The key features that aided her to tackle day-to-day problems as a teacher include supportive institution and conducive social relationships. Additionally, the teacher appeared to have a strong positive emotion as influenced by people around her, e.g. her students. These findings could contribute to better understanding of how the negative effects of stress can be reduced by promoting key features of resilience, particularly in the Indonesian teaching context. As a conclusion, several key findings were highlighted followed by a recommendation for further research.

Keywords: positive emotion, teacher stress, teacher resilience

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Research has argued that service-based professions such as teaching are among the most demanding at any field (Travers & Cooper, 1996). Teachers are fre-

quently demanded to cope with high workload, regardless of whether it is related or unrelated to their teaching. When the class ends and the students leave the school, teachers' work has not really finished yet. More frequently, teachers have to take their work home which is ironically not recognized as a paid hour. They must dedicate one or two hours to planning upcoming class activities or to marking piles of students' work. In some situations, parents might ask to see the teachers to inquire about their children's learning progress. This can possibly end with arguments and complaints toward the teachers. It is not hard then to imagine that teachers' work could drain their energy not only physically but also mentally.

Strikingly, some teachers are capable of demonstrating their endurance in such tough moments, as exemplified by a study from Howard & Johnson (2004). Hence, this article is keen to investigate the aspects that help durable teachers overcome the tiring period of their profession and commit to their job for a long span of time, especially those who work in Indonesian context. To begin with, this article studies the previous literature in order to offer a general synopsis related to teacher stress and resilience. Following this, the next section explains how the present study was approached and carried out to properly answer the research questions. In the findings and discussion section, emphasis is placed on the major sources that bother the participant and the central features that help the participant to reduce stress during her teaching. To conclude the article, several limitations are acknowledged to provide a recommendation for future research. .

Before going too far, it is necessary to clarify what I really mean by stress in this article. Although there is no fixed agreement on the original definition of 'stress', Joseph (2000, p. 14) cautiously suggests that "the word comes from old French, *distresse*, meaning to be placed under narrowness or oppression". If we link this term specifically just to teachers, Kyriacou (2001, p. 28) describes 'teacher stress' as "the experience by a teacher of unpleasant, negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration or depression, resulting from some aspect of their work as a teacher".

Some research (e.g. Travers & Cooper, 1996) has identified the dominant factors that contribute to teacher stress, such as, disruptive students, uncooperative parents, poor working conditions (workload and salary), relationships at work (with students, colleagues, and principal), or role conflict and role ambiguity. If we narrow the latitude only to EFL teachers, a study conducted by Mousavi (2007) reveals an interesting report, with 87.6% of non-native teach-

ers admitting that their stress mainly stemmed from inadequate language competence.

Indeed, what we have seen so far are the negative facets of stress that should be avoided by teachers. Nevertheless, Joseph (2000) also points out that the presence of a stressful environment does not necessarily entail a negative impact. Whilst some teachers are more vulnerable, some others are more tenacious and perceive stress as a positive force or challenge, with this attitude finally making them more resilient. Hence, stress might be beneficial for such teachers to boost their motivation in making their best effort at work. This is an interesting point when it comes to stress, and one which we will discuss in depth throughout this article.

As mentioned earlier, when someone is in regular contact with stress, one possible outcome, besides burnout, is a resilient behavior. Resilience can be defined as a ‘bounce back’ force after surpassing difficult times in one’s teaching career (Dworkin, 2009). It has also been linked with personal ability to maintain stress at a tolerable level. Broaden-Build-Theory, developed by Fredrickson (2004), offers a fruitful illumination of resilient behavior from a psychological perspective. She acknowledges that individual endurance can be built using a set of positive emotions such as joy, interest, contentment, and love. In this theory, she focuses on one’s personal capacity to use a positive emotion and build a block that protects him/herself from a negative effect. Most importantly, this theory suggests that positive emotions are beneficial as they are the primary fuel when it comes to generating a resilient individual.

While the above theory places emphasis on people’s internal ability to employ positive emotions, current studies (Doney, 2013; Gu & Day, 2013) attempt to understand resilience as a result of multiple interactions surrounding the individuals. In other words, it is a dynamic and unstable construct (Gu & Day, 2013). This is not to say, however, that the positive emotion perspective proposed earlier is misleading or old-fashioned. We are simply trying to widen our focus by looking at the contextual factors surrounding the teachers in order to complement the internal attributes (such as positive emotions) that have adhered to the individuals.

To be considered resilient, an individual should be surrounded by stressors that might threaten his/her development. From this perspective, what differentiates resilient teachers from other teachers is the fact that they have a strong shield known as “protective factors”, such as, conducive social relationships and positive feelings (Doney, 2013). Later, the interplays between protective

factors and stressful circumstances occur and “stimulate responses to help [teachers] counteract negative effects” (Doney 2013, p.659). Here, the level of someone’s resilience is flexible and fluctuating. As such, with whom the individual interacts and how conducive the circumstances are would influence his/her resistance.

Having reviewed some relevant literature, there is a need to formulate a working definition of the important constructs being researched in this article, namely stress and resilience. In this study, stress refers to any negative feelings or unhappy emotional state experienced by teachers during their teaching career. Generally, this experience stems from excessive workloads or difficult social relationships concerning their teaching life. On the other hand, resilience is defined as teacher’s capacity to protect themselves from negative and high-pressured environments around them. More importantly, it implies their ability to perform their teaching job well despite the stressful circumstances. As what the literatures suggest, this capacity is built from the teachers’ internal characteristics and their interaction with their environment.

There has been an increasing number of studies focusing on teachers’ resilient behavior (e.g. Doney, 2013; Gu & Day, 2013; Howard & Johnson, 2004). Howard and Johnson’s (2004) study could be included in the first batch of studies in the area. It investigated teacher resilience in Australia as a response to a high-rate of burnout among teachers. The researchers offer a novel perspective by looking at “what’s going right” with the teachers rather than focusing on “what’s going wrong” as most other research has done in the past (p. 402). In other words, they wish to shift from the question of why teachers leave their jobs to how resilience can be promoted in order to help teachers enjoy their work. In concluding their study, they suggest several requirements for a teacher to be resilient. These requirements, so-called the *key features*, are the ability to depersonalize a stressful or unpleasant moment, a positive belief that teaching has a moral purpose, and there is sufficient support from the social environment and a feeling of pride in past achievement.

Although research on teacher resilience has shown a growing trend, there is little information regarding how EFL teachers overcome their emotionally draining time. Perhaps, this gap could be filled by a study from Hayes (2008) whose investigation examines four EFL teachers in Thailand. However, this study does not specifically investigate the secret recipes of how the participants became resilient. It mainly recalls the experiences of senior teachers during the early stage of their career. As an example, one respondent (Arune) comment-

ed about the absence of an induction program and formal socialization when she first arrived at the school. She stated that it was stressful especially because she did not know the culture in the school. This is similar to what Wee Jin experienced as a novice teacher in a Singapore school (Farrell, 2008). He revealed that he did not have a close relationship with the other teaching staffs since they just talked within their cliques. In his observation, there were three cliques in his school: the new teachers, the older teachers that had moved from other schools, and the old teachers that had taught in the school for a long time.

Another interesting case is that of Lada and Sudarat, who returned to their childhood school and acting as a new teacher (Hayes, 2008). Despite their coming back with a very different role, the other colleagues (their former teachers) still treated them like students. They perceived that the teachers did not show adequate respect. For instance, Sudarat remembered one occasion when an older teacher scolded her students in front of her in the classroom. Of course, such acts could threaten Sudarat's face in the eyes of her students. Consequently, she felt humiliated, ran to the toilet, and wanted to leave the job.

The results of the studies conducted by Farrell (2008) and Hayes (2008) essentially indicated several aspects that help the teachers go through the difficult moments at the beginning of their career. Arunee, for instance, refused to dwell on the unhappy working situations. Thus, she had to be proactive; she was even reported to "search out their (her) informal mentors" to seek help regarding her circumstance (Hayes, 2008, p. 68). With regard to Sudarat's case, fortunately, her students stood behind her. They enjoyed her class. Thus her students' affections had been a source of her resilient ability that enabled her to continue in her profession. Instead of being helpless, she transformed her students' affection into a propelling force that kept her settled in the school.

The two studies obviously provided some insights into the area of teacher resilience. Nevertheless, they do not specifically aim to explore the characteristics of resilient teachers. Hayes' study, for instance, exposes how novice teachers overcome difficult periods at the beginning of their teaching *merely* from social relationships dimension. It emphasizes on teachers' efforts to initiate a collegial connection with senior teachers in their school, including their attempts to understand the norms and cultures applied in the school. The study, however, does not discuss profoundly other aspects which might lead the teachers to feel stressed (e.g. students' misbehavior) and the ones that make them resilient. Furthermore, while studies of teacher resilience experienced by EFL teachers are rare, studies which specifically involve Indonesian teachers

are even rarer. The present study, therefore, is conducted to fill the gaps by offering a more comprehensive facet of stress and resilience of an EFL teacher in Indonesia, concerning, more specifically, issues which might trigger stress in teaching as well as elements that help the teacher to stay positive in a potentially stressful environment.

METHOD

This study is a case study involving one EFL teacher of a junior high school in Indonesia. Time and resource limitations prevented me from reaching the ideal number of participants (6-10) as suggested by Dörnyei (2007). However, the study still offers a rich description of stress and resilience experienced by the participant, leading to a better understanding of these two constructs. In addition, I established a clear boundary or criteria to determine which participants that could be included in the study. This is important as an effort to compensate for the small size of participant in this study.

The selection of the participant in this study hinged on the following criteria. Foremost, to be called resilient, the participant must be exposed to the “risk factors” of stressful circumstances that possibly drive them to an emotional exhaustion, commitment downfall, or burnout (Doney, 2013). Second, the teachers should have 5 to 10 years of teaching experience, as suggested by Kyriacou (2001).

Anggita (pseudonym) is an eligible EFL teacher who matches the selection criteria. She started teaching in 2005 at a private junior high school before moving to a public school in 2009. She teaches in a relatively disadvantaged area, as exemplified by the fact that her province has the 4th lowest human capital index in Indonesia. Despite living in such an area, interestingly, Anggita has been successful in sustaining her positive commitment by regularly demonstrating an outstanding level of achievement. For instance, in 2014, the local government granted her a master degree scholarship to upgrade her qualification. Furthermore, she was also recently awarded a bronze medal when presenting her paper at an International ELT conference in Malaysia.

The data collection in this study was done through a semi-structured interview. The advantage of this method is that the interviewer has a structured guidance in hand, although it is possible to deviate from this guidance if interesting issues come up during the conversation. Dörnyei (2007, p. 163) adds that a semi-structured interview is particularly appropriate if the researcher has been

familiar with the context and phenomenon and “does not want to use ready-made response categories that would limit the depth and breadth of the respondent’s story”.

In order to achieve the objectives of the research, I modified the interview guide employed by Howard & Johnson (2004) for a similar study in Australia. It comprised three main sections. The first section covered the personal information of the participants, while the second part concerned the source of stress encountered by the participants. Meanwhile, in the last section the participant was asked questions regarding ways she copes with the stress. To anticipate additional information that the participant wanted to share, the interviewer also allowed her to convey her final remarks before leaving the conversation.

The interview was recorded for the purpose of data analysis. Before the interview began, the participant was already informed that any data resulting from the interview would be kept securely in a specific computer folder and would be terminated as soon as the research ended. She was also clearly informed that her real name would not be used throughout this article to ensure her privacy. Finally, in an attempt to make the participant feel as comfortable as possible, she could use both Indonesian and English.

As the primary data was in audio form, it had to initially be converted into written data via a transcription process. Afterward, I brought the data to a coding process suggested by Creswell (2012, p. 44). The very first process involved reading the raw transcription that consist of many pages. Secondly, the text transcription was split up into smaller segments so as to help identify/underline interesting information related to the topic. Following this, I assigned codes to the underlined points which were to act as the initial labels. The next step was to identify similar or redundant codes and cluster them into fewer codes. Finally, the codes were reduced again to create broader categories, known as themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section describes the findings with regard to the two research questions concerning the teacher’s sources of stress and key aspects to become resilient. It also discusses the findings in light of relevant literature. Some of the teacher’s statements in the interview are quoted verbatim to support the description of the findings.

Sources of Stress

Travers and Cooper (1996) posit that change can predominantly contribute to the stress state experienced by teachers. This is particularly true when the change is immediate and beyond the teacher's capacity. The findings of the present study seem to prove this phenomenon.

In January 2013 the Indonesian Ministry of Education officially launched a new curriculum, namely Curriculum 2013 (C-'13). However, this raised some polemics among practitioners, and especially teachers. A lack of socialization and teacher training was considered to have led the teachers to become perplexed and feel unprepared to cope with the curriculum change. The Ministry then temporarily terminated the implementation of the curriculum to conduct some evaluation and revision. The curriculum continued to be implemented in some schools, but some other schools returned to the earlier curriculum, called *Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan Pendidikan* (KTSP) or School-based Curriculum.

Anggita commented that the dynamic changes in the curriculum policy placed her and her colleagues in uncertainty because although they were requested to use KTSP, some aspects of their teaching were still influenced by Curriculum '13.

“We use, usually use K-13 (C-13) and it changes again into KTSP. But, the process in the classroom should be following K-13 curriculum. So, it a little bit makes us confused sometimes because KTSP is a little bit different from K-13”.

She also added that:

“... you can imagine that the lesson plan should follow Curriculum '13, but the [teaching] material is from KTSP. So, we have to, let say have to balance it”.

In addition, the influence of Curriculum '13 entailed extra energy-draining tasks, among which is the obligation to fill in journals containing the teacher and student's account on a daily basis. Indeed, Anggita must take notes of every problem for each student in a journal every day. Furthermore, she had to copy the notes into a computer file for her school database. As a result, Anggita felt overwhelmed and highlighted its inefficiency by terming this as a 'double-job'.

“So you can imagine, huumm I’m teaching 3 classes with different a, different let say, let say different characters, so we have to put it, it all in the book. So, besides that, after that we have to edit in, in a, input it in the computer to file it again. So, like double, double task ya, handwriting and also put it, put it in a, the computer”.

Apart from the curriculum polemics, Anggita was already quite busy with responsibilities as a classroom teacher, an extra-curricular coach, a vice principal, and a wife. In addition, Anggita still needed to complete her administrative tasks as a teacher, such as designing lesson plans, selecting teaching material, and marking the student’s work. Again, living in a disadvantaged province means that she is faced with students who have very low proficiency in English.

In light of all this, having to fill out so many journals could potentially harm her psychological well-being, or even physical health. If this stressful atmosphere lasts for a long period, it could even affect her long-term commitment to teaching. Some cases frequently reported by previous scholars (Travers & Cooper, 1996; Macdonald, 1999) include mental illness, job dissatisfaction, or, in more extreme cases, teacher burnout. Likewise, a milder impact might also appear in the form of teacher’s lower absenteeism (Travers & Cooper, 1996). A current report from Transparency International, for instance, ranks Indonesia 6th in terms of the absenteeism rate (Patrinos, 2013). Indeed, in a developing country such as Indonesia, obtaining a job especially as a state teacher is not easy. Hence, these teachers might not think to resign once they have become state teachers. Thus they somehow continue to attend school despite not necessarily going to the classroom.

Interestingly, Anggita did not perceive language competence as the factor that triggered her to feel stressed. In fact, as mentioned in the literature, I expected that a non-native English speaking teacher was more prone to stress as a consequence of inadequacy in language competence or lack of self-confidence. In this respect, the result was not in line with Mousavi’s study (2007) whose participants were mostly reported to complain about this problem. One possible reason is because Mousavi’s participants were all MA students who were studying in the UK universities. Consequently, these student teachers might be more aware of their language proficiency and would compare their proficiency to native speakers. Meanwhile, the participant in this study has little contact with English native speakers and only communicate in English with her stu-

dents, who were linguistically inferior to her. Thus, I believe that the language competence or proficiency would not bother her mind too much.

To conclude this section, it was indicated that Anggita's stress mainly stemmed from the curriculum change which left her with confusion and piles of extra works. She complained about the curriculum inconsistency as well as ineffective jobs that she had to do as a result of this change. Although she occasionally commented about her low level students and her status as a housewife, it did not seem that these issues affected her as much as the curriculum change.

Key Aspects to Become Resilient

Given the conditions, this study unveils three major themes that help the participant in this study become resilient and survive throughout the high-pressure moments. From the interview, the three key aspects are strong institutional support, collegial and family relationship, and positive personality. Although the relationship between these aspects and the main source of teacher stress does not seem straightforward in this study, they still play an important role to prevent Anggita from being helpless. They contributed to lessen Anggita's stress level so as to avoid her stress being accumulated. Being involved in teacher association, for example, enabled Anggita to meet new teacher colleagues, which was good to maintain her teaching motivation. Moreover, these resiliency features are not intended to serve as a cure or remedy. But rather, the teacher could benefit by developing these positive aspects and focusing on these strengths rather than dwelling on the stress which resulted from the curriculum change and her teaching workload.

Institutional Support

While some studies indicate the shortcoming of social support (e.g. Farrell, 2008; Hayes, 2008), Anggita is fortunate to have robust support for her teaching career. Foremost, she highlights the importance of teacher training initiated either by the teacher association (MGMP) or the Department of Education (Dinas) in her district. She comments:

“ ... because there is [a] place [to] make for example questions for the test [examination] together, so it can, it can reduce our burden, because we can share, we can share something (...) new knowledge of teaching, and also

new knowledge of a, for the material yaa” (cut and edited slightly from the original source).

The MGMP is a module-teacher association whose members are grouped depending on the subject that they teach. For example, an English teacher will be a member of MGMP specializing in English teaching. The organization usually holds a meeting session almost every month even just for a small session. Further, if the training is organized by the Department of Education, the institution usually will collaborate with the international program from the British Council and Kang Guru (Australian Government) and the session will take place in other provinces. Anggita admitted that such training is useful because she can meet new scholars and acquaintances, thus increasing her teaching motivation. Moreover, she stated that it presents her with the opportunity to exchange ideas with her teaching counterparts.

Basically, this experience has been elucidated in preceding studies. For instance, Joseph (2000, p.77) reveals that “this [training] will assist a teacher in career planning and development and may also lead to increased job satisfaction, reduced stress, and higher levels of motivation”. In addition, if necessary, activities in the training are not only limited to professional skill improvement but may also include certain training for stress-reducing action.

Continuous Collegial and Family Relationship

Another interesting story from Anggita’s career life is her ability to use collegial and family relationships to help her and serve as, what Hayes (2008) calls, informal mentors. Anggita said that although the training has ended, she keeps in touch via social media with her peers from Kang Guru. Anggita uttered:

“[We are] talking about a – a, some techniques how to handle the students, some kind of techniques of how to, let’s say, fulfil the administration ...”.

Additionally, her greatest source of support is not necessarily peers or her boss. She pointed out that her father who has a teaching background was helpful when she dealt with the unpleasant moments of teaching. More importantly, her father’s vast experience in teaching enabled him to advise Anggita on selecting academic reading that might enhance her theoretical knowledge of EFL. The following extract informs us that the presence of mutual relationships even with her father is crucial. Such informal mentors not only increase her profes-

sional knowledge, but also help nurture psychological aspects such as her motivation.

“ ... my father always support me in every single let say if I have some difficulties in in this part for example in teaching so my, my father can, can motivate me, okay you can read this, read this ...”.

Interestingly, this finding appears to affirm the results of similar studies in the past (e.g. Howard & Johnson, 2004). According to them, the presence of strong social support from in-charged stakeholders, professional associations, colleagues, and family is a key feature of teacher resilience. It appears that such a strong social connection helps to create a less anxious workplace atmosphere. Consequently, teachers may gain optimal benefits from people around them. Moreover, the presence of people to talk with could mean that teachers obtain immediate assistance with the problems they are facing in the classroom. Hence, the emotional tension can be released and is not accumulated. This is particularly beneficial since accumulated tension can occasionally lead to an explosion and this could damage, in the context of the study, Anggita's subjective well-being.

Positive Personality

Anggita's personality cannot be taken for granted in terms of what she has achieved in her career. The findings indicate that Anggita has a strong sense of positive emotion. She admitted to being quite sensitive to what her students are feeling during the lesson. For example, once her students are in a state of boredom, she expressed that she is quite flexible and does not force other stressful material onto them. Instead, she decides to shift to lighter activities that might revive the classroom atmosphere and alleviate the students' adversity.

“When I used English in the class, and they, they feel that, oh it's like a why is this teacher talking like this, it's also like a strange, so then when I just, I have to make my own creativity, so I have to more creative, like I have to put it in singing, giving them song, so they, just to energize them. When a, if not, if not it's really [depressing]”.

Previous research has indicated an agreement regarding what Anggita is experiencing. With reference to Broaden-and-Build theory, Fredrickson (2004, p.1369) believes that positive emotions enable the teacher to “broaden [their] momentary thought–action repertoires, widening the array of the thoughts and

actions that come to mind". As such, it is not surprising that Anggita could use more alternatives to "energize" her students. She is not trapped with a strict lesson plan. When needed, she could employ less-threatening activities like singing with the students. Additionally, this positive emotion has created a reciprocal connection between her and the students. As she has made the classroom alive, she can cultivate the benefit by absorbing the positive emotions from her students. In short, she has used it as a means to recharge her motivation and take joy from her teaching so as to sustain her long-term commitment.

Another interesting aspect of this story is the fact that Anggita's personality has been quite significantly influenced by people around her. Her teaching family, for instance, has unconsciously grown a seed of love for her teaching profession.

"... because I am also from teacher family, my parents are teachers, so I have, let say, I have an enthusiastic in teaching, so I like, I like teaching students (...) I teach them as I teach my, my, my, my children, so that's aa I try to that, and I also let say motivate my students to study, to continue their study".

As part of Anggita's positive emotion, a sense of love to her work and her students plays a central role, especially in the disadvantaged circumstances in which she works, which could potentially raise her stress levels. Her love of teaching and her students has driven her to become a caring person. It enables her to recognize her students' limitations. Thus, she is not easily frustrated when her students fail to reach the target. Indeed, she even plays a complementary role, becoming a parent to her students and loving them while also showing concerns for their future outlook.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Drawing on the findings and discussion, it is clear that the participant perceives change of curriculum as the main source of her stress. In the context of EFL teaching in Indonesia, the polemics concerning the curriculum seem to have not been resolved yet. Luckily, a number of internal and external factors aid the participant in retaining her joy in teaching. A supportive institution, conducive social network, and strong positive emotions have been well documented as her key features of resilience. It is hoped that this article will have multiple benefits especially for other teaching sites which share issues similar to the emerging phenomenon in this study. It should be noted, however, that

the single case in this study could not represent the total population of Indonesian teachers. Therefore, the result of this study simply serves as a starting point, and in the future a larger project should be conducted in relation to the stresses experienced by Indonesian teachers and their efforts to improve their resilience.

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Appendix

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Can you describe a brief summary of your teaching?
2. Do you hold any responsibility at school?
3. Do you take any extracurricular activity?
4. Can you give me some examples of your day to day stress?
 - a. Anything else?
5. Do you have something that you regret in the past?
6. How can you handle the stressful situation?
7. Do you have any achievement to be proud of?
8. What/who is your main support during your teaching career?
9. Before we end the interview, do you have one or two things to say?

(Adapted from Howard & Johnson, 2004)