

Ukrainian EFL Teachers' Coping and Resilience During the War: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine has caused immense destruction and upheaval, severely disrupting the country's education system and placing extraordinary personal and professional burdens on teachers, many of whom face trauma, displacement, and chronic stress while striving to maintain continuity of learning. In this qualitative study, we examine the responses to the war of nine tertiary-level Ukrainian English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers. Through inductive thematic analysis of their group discussions across a ten-month online professional development project, we identified six themes that cut across their perspectives on coping and resilience, which we present in this report. These are: 1) student engagement and relationships, 2) pedagogical adaptation, 3) structural and resource constraints, 4) teacher emotional and psychological experience, 5) resilience and positive coping strategies, and 6) personal and professional growth. The implications for instructors and decision-makers situated in higher education institutions in conflict/crisis areas are discussed.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 20 July 2026

Revised: 21 August 2026

Accepted: 29 August 2026

KEYWORDS

Ukrainian EFL Teachers, Cooperative Development, Teacher Resilience, Teacher Coping Mechanisms

How to cite this article (APA 7th Edition):

Pearson, W. S., & Krynska, N. (2026). Ukrainian EFL teachers' coping and resilience during the war: A qualitative study. *Language Teaching Research Quarterly*, 56, 43–65. <https://doi.org/10.32038/ltrq.2026.56.03>

Introduction

The Russian Federation's war against Ukraine (we adopt this term so as not to obscure agency and responsibility) is "an attempt to seize territory from Ukraine and thwart its independent, democratic trajectory" (Blinken, 2023, para. 2). As of the time of editing this manuscript, the war has entered into its fifth year and has resulted in catastrophic destruction, suffering, and loss of life (Dunayev et al., 2024; Kireitseva et al., 2023;

Kurapov et al., 2023). Indeed, the effects of the war on education in Ukraine are difficult to overstate (Lavrysh et al., 2022; Westerlund et al., 2023). Yet, in spite of the severe impact wreaked upon people and infrastructure, there has been a consensus among the authorities, educators, and students that education can and must continue, including at the tertiary level (Shuliak et al., 2024), not least because education plays a pivotal role in saving and sustaining lives, shaping civic values, and laying the foundations for societal reconstruction after the war (Pustovoichenko et al., 2024; Romanowski, 2026; Westerlund et al., 2023). This is also the case for English language instruction (Korniush, 2023), where there is a national commitment to sustaining and enhancing the quality of provision (Lőrincz & Komar, 2023), exhibited through the adoption of English as an *International Language of Communication* in 2024 (Bondarchuk et al., 2024).

It is no understatement that Ukrainian teachers' personal and professional lives have been turned upside down as a result of the conflict, with many enduring psychological trauma, fear, stress, depression, burnout, isolation, demotivated and anxious students, limited access to educational resources, reduced or intermittent working hours, and displacement (Kurapov et al., 2023; Lavrysh et al., 2022; Lőrincz & Komar, 2023; Moroz, 2024; Nadyukova & Frenzel, 2025; Pustovoichenko et al., 2024; Romanowski, 2026; Rybinska et al., 2024; Shuliak et al., 2024; Sichka et al., 2026; Simkova et al., 2024; Westerlund et al., 2023). Emergency remote teaching, established as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, has become permanent (Melnik et al., 2025), albeit impacted by power and Internet disruption. Nadyukova and Frenzel's (2025) recent mixed methods study revealed heightened levels of stress among 724 Ukrainian secondary school teachers, stemming from a range of teacher, student, and environmental challenges, notably, firsthand experience of traumatic events (e.g., attacks, deaths of family members). Elevated stress, anxiety, and depression were also exhibited in Rybinska et al.'s (2024) survey of 34 university lecturers, with approximately 40% having experienced trauma. Likewise, for half of the 100 Ukrainian lecturers in Westerlund et al.'s (2023) questionnaire study, the enduring conflict has caused burnout, with the need to monitor one's own and students' psychological states being a major implication for teachers (Velykodna et al., 2023). An additional one-third of teachers have endured displacement, usually to a location within Ukraine considered safer (Westerlund et al., 2023) or to the EU, UK, or US (Romanowski, 2026; Szczepaniak-Kozak & Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2024).

Teacher Resilience and Coping

The will and ability of teachers to continue in the face of persistent or severe challenges is embodied in the concept of *resilience* (see Day & Gu, 2014), which refers to being "capable of assessing adverse situations, recognizing options for coping, and arriving at appropriate resolutions" (Bobek, 2002, p. 202). These states and processes constitute optimal responses to what are termed *stressors* (Boon, 2021). In educational settings characterised by peace and stability, these are typically chronic and systemic (Ghasemi,

2025), relating to teacher workload, involvement (or lack of) in decision-making, student behaviour, and administrative demands (Day & Gu, 2014; Drew & Sosnowski, 2019; Gu & Day, 2013). Stressors differ notably in what are termed conflict- (or crisis-)affected contexts (Sharifian & Kennedy, 2019; Sharifian et al., 2023; Sichka et al., 2026; Xerri & Pentón Herrera, 2026). Here, they are better understood as interlocking experiences of chronic instability, systemic breakdown, and trauma (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010), which can be encountered firsthand or indirectly via the teacher's students (Korniush, 2023), and are usually severe in scale and scope (Nadyukova & Frenzel, 2025). As such, we agree with Day and Gu (2014) that teacher resilience encompasses not simply returning to previous operational states (*bouncing back*), but as the capacity to *bounce forward*, i.e., adapting to challenges in ways that achieve a new level of professional and personal functioning.

For governments and institutions in non-conflict contexts, teacher resilience has become an important topic of debate, driven by concerns over the efficient deployment of human resources and the costs associated with teacher burnout and attrition (Boon, 2021; Drew & Sosnowski, 2019). In conflict settings, teacher resilience is seen more urgently through the lenses of education continuity (Henderson & Milstein, 2003) and staff and student wellbeing, to which we add safety. It is also the case that being a resilient teacher is important for developing resilient students (Bobek, 2002; Henderson & Milstein, 2003). In wartime, this connection becomes crucial, as teachers are expected to model coping strategies and provide essential affective support to help students navigate trauma (Rybinska et al., 2024). As resilience is considered a dynamic, developable trait (Gu & Day, 2013; Luthar et al., 2000), teachers can and must be supported in cultivating appropriate mental processes and behaviours (Boon, 2021). Key to inculcating resilience is establishing transparent, achievable expectations and fostering trust-based relationships (Ghasemi, 2025), both of which can be nurtured through professional development (PD) (Melnik et al., 2025; Sharifian & Kennedy, 2019). Yet, during periods of conflict, the heightened need for PD typically coincides with resource limitations and systemic disruption, which restricts its provision.

Regardless of context, coping plays a central role in the development of teacher resilience. Coping refers to the often idiosyncratic (Sharifian et al., 2023) mechanisms and/or strategies employed by individuals to deal with stressors, and failing this, to mitigate their emotional impact (Kyriacou, 1987). As such, coping mediates the effects of adversity on the teacher's self, and by virtue of its role in teaching and learning contexts, one's job satisfaction, educational outcomes, relationships with students and colleagues, etc. (Luthar et al., 2000). For teachers working in conflict-affected contexts, effective coping is crucial for sustaining professional functioning, not least through protecting their psychological wellbeing. It is believed that approaches to coping that involve proactively responding to stressors, e.g., problem-solving, goal-setting, peer support, cognitive reappraisal, seeking unity, mindfulness, and reflective practice (Bondarchuk et al., 2024;

Lavrysh et al., 2022; Rybinska et al., 2024) better enable educators to regulate their affective responses. This may allow them to further meet the emotional needs of others (i.e., students and colleagues) and perhaps mitigate the effects of trauma if it is present (Henderson & Milstein, 2003).

Ukrainian Teachers' Resilience and Coping during Wartime

A notable theme in the academic literature on Ukrainian teachers' responses to Russia's war is the indomitable will to continue (Bondarchuk et al., 2024; Kenworthy & Opatska, 2023; Lavrysh et al., 2022; Lőrincz & Komar, 2023; Nadyukova & Frenzel, 2025; Sichka et al., 2026; Westerlund et al., 2023), underscored by a heightened sense of the teacher's importance in crisis and conflict contexts (Sichka et al., 2026; Westerlund et al., 2023) and the value of community (Korniush, 2023). This is partly due to societal expectations placed upon teachers during times of conflict, including acting as role models, counselling and mentoring students, and ensuring student safety (Rybinska et al., 2024; Sharifian & Kennedy, 2019; Sharifian et al., 2023). It is also the case that many educators are driven by an internal sense of duty to support students, even at considerable cost to their own emotional wellbeing (Lavrysh et al., 2022; Nadyukova & Frenzel, 2025; Westerlund et al., 2023). Despite working under what seem like insurmountable challenges (Korniush, 2023; Westerlund et al., 2023), it has been reported that many Ukrainian EFL teachers are still able to find joy in the mainstay of their profession, engaging their learners and imparting knowledge and skills (Nadyukova & Frenzel, 2025).

In terms of coping, given that Ukrainian educators cannot directly affect the war itself as a source of stress, it is unsurprising that studies highlight the role of habituation to stress (Nadyukova & Frenzel, 2025; Pustovoichenko et al., 2024; Rybinska et al., 2024), perhaps through downward social comparisons (i.e., that the situation is likely worse for someone else) (Nadyukova & Frenzel, 2025). Ukrainian teachers have also developed coping mechanisms through continuing pre-war work routines, particularly teaching, participating in projects and papers, and attending conferences, all of which bring important meaning to professional life and stability to students (Lavrysh et al., 2022). In a recent study, Sichka et al. (2026) used action research to explore how an English teacher at a tertiary institution in southwestern Ukraine (the study's first author) implemented and evaluated three trauma-sensitive, social-emotional, and resilience-building in-class discussion activities. The 44 students rated these positively, describing them as engaging and a distraction from everyday worries, while fostering connections and language development.

Nevertheless, regularly facing students and responding to their emotional difficulties during wartime takes a toll on teachers, leading some to display positive emotions for their students whilst suppressing their true feelings (Nadyukova & Frenzel, 2025). Over the long term, this may have a damaging effect on teachers' health and ability to continue in the profession. Ukrainian teachers' coping has also been profoundly affected by the

transfer of learning to online provision, mirroring the COVID-19 pandemic (Kostikova et al., 2023; Sichka et al., 2026; Simkova et al., 2024; Westerlund et al., 2023). While synchronous and asynchronous online teaching and learning is essential for education to continue in Ukraine (Shuliak et al., 2024), there are likely costs to bear in terms of teacher workload and the need for PD.

The Study

This study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature investigating Ukrainian teachers' responses during wartime, particularly their coping and resilience. While there have been several studies on the war's impact on Ukrainian educators (e.g., Jones & Murray, 2025; Kostikova et al., 2023; Lavrysh et al., 2022; Nadyukova & Frenzel, 2025; Pustovoichenko et al., 2024; Shuliak et al., 2024; Stepanova et al., 2025), few have addressed English language education (e.g., Jones & Murray, 2025; Shuliak et al., 2024; Stepanova et al., 2025). Investigating the conflict's effects on English language educators is especially important because English is positioned as a strategic tool for the country's international integration (Bondarchuk et al., 2024). Legislation that positions English as a language of international communication will continue to have far reaching effects, particularly by making English language learning mandatory at all levels of education. However, this development is likely attenuated by the wartime exodus of teachers (both English as first and second language users), whose departure disrupts curriculum continuity and increases the pressure on those who remain to sustain effective teaching and learning under extremely challenging conditions.

Additionally, much of the existing literature on teachers' responses adopts quantitative methods (mainly surveys), which while providing useful insights from larger samples of Ukrainian educators, leaves practitioners' compelling accounts of coping and resilience unheard. We feel that a qualitative approach is essential for investigating teachers' responses because it can illuminate their lived experiences and emotional realities. In support of this goal, qualitative research's ability to resonate (Tracy, 2010), i.e., to meaningfully reverberate with and affect the reader, is a key methodological consideration in light of the sensitive and complex subject matter. Thus, the study sought to answer the following research question: What do Ukrainian university EFL teachers' accounts from a professional development programme during wartime reveal about their coping and resilience?

Methodology

This study comprises a thematic analysis of the group discussions of nine Ukrainian EFL teachers across a longitudinal professional development project situated within a Ukrainian higher education English language teacher association. We inductively coded the transcripts of these discussions to generate six themes that cut across participants' lived experiences that embody teachers' coping and resilience in a time of great crisis.

The findings reported in this paper form part of a wider study (see also Krynska & Pearson, in press).

Context

The present study was situated within a project run within the Ukrainian language teacher association, PAELT (*Professional Association of English Language Teachers of Ukraine*). Membership of the association is available to English language instructors in the Ukrainian tertiary sector, upon payment of a modest annual fee. The association's mission statement (translated from Ukrainian) highlights that:

Our goal is to be a professional association of English language teachers in higher education institutions, and for methodologists and researchers. We are open to communication with English language teachers both in Ukraine and around the world in order to adopt the best teaching experience to further improve the quality of education and support teachers through partnerships with other organisations.

The data included in this study were contributed by nine PAELT members who either worked at Kharkiv National University of Radio Electronics (Харківський національний університет радіоелектроніки, NURE) or Kharkiv National Automobile and Highway University (Харківський національний автомобільно-дорожній університет, KhNADU). NURE's institutional profile is associated with STEM, including IT, computer science, telecommunications, electronics, cybersecurity, engineering, while KhNADU offers programmes that prepare students for careers in automotive engineering, transportation, infrastructure, construction, and related technical fields. As such, the teachers participating in the project were providing English instruction that served as additional support for students' study and future employment prospects. At the time of research, NURE was placed within the top 1,500 institutions globally according to the *Times Higher Education World University Rankings* (Times Higher Education, 2026), while KhNADU did not hold an active rank.

Participants

The nine participants were all well-established English language teaching (ELT) professionals at their respective academic institutions and possessed a strong academic background in language-related disciplines and teacher education. Six held the rank of Senior Lecturer and three were Associate Professors, whilst eight had 15 or more years of experience. The participants had graduated from Ukrainian universities and held a Master's degree either in English Linguistics or ELT or a PhD degree in linguistics or pedagogy ($N = 3$). Each taught English for STEM to undergraduate students (majoring in IT, engineering, automated management systems), with an annual teaching load that equated to 560 to 600 hours. Additionally, they were all engaged in research in their

departments, dedicating 200 to 400 hours per academic year. All but one of the participants were female, who varied in age from 30 to 60 years old.

Participants attended the CD sessions from a combination of locations including temporary residences abroad as well as within Ukraine, reflecting the realities of the forced relocation of Ukrainian educators (Rybinska et al., 2024; Szczepaniak-Kozak & Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2024). They engaged with the sessions using either Ukrainian or English, depending on individual comfort and fluency (with translanguaging common). All sessions were recorded and transcribed, with the transcripts member checked by the participants to ensure the accuracy of the material and so that they felt comfortable with having their perspectives shared with an international audience. Approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the first author's institution (approval no.: 6751215).

Procedure

The project was originally designed and implemented by the second author (also the President of PAELT), with funding provided by the AS Hornby Educational Trust¹. The project constituted a series of 12 online group discussions (conducted via Google Meet) that took place from May 2023 to February 2024, organised and mediated by the second author. The aim of these sessions was to build a trusted, collegial, and non-evaluative space for PD and peer support within the association using cooperative development (CD) (Edge, 1992) during an extremely challenging time in their lives. After two induction and training sessions on CD delivered by outsiders well-rehearsed with the approach, the sessions followed a standard format. Initially, the second author and participants negotiated and adopted the roles of *Speaker*, *Understander* (the second author plus one or two participants), or *Listener*, guided in the expectations of their roles by the author (for a discussion, see Edge, 1992). Speakers were invited to explain, discuss, and reflect upon one or more salient and contemporary issues, concerns, or topics of their choosing in their institutional context. Understanders provided empathetic, non-judgmental support (Edge, 1992), while Listeners listened and contributed when actively invited. The data took the form of stories and personal accounts of recent events or developments in their contexts, often resulting in longer turns from Speakers. At other times Speakers were guided by Understanders in a more interactive back-and-forth (for an extract from one session, see supplemental material – part B). Participants also shared reflections on the CD process itself through discussion mediated by the second author (see Krynska & Pearson, in press).

Data Analysis

Given CD's focus on encouraging teachers to professionally develop on their own terms (Edge, 1992) and the shifting context of the war over the time data was collected, participants' contributions were naturally extremely diverse. As such, rather than simply

¹ The A.S. Hornby Educational Trust is a UK charity that promotes ELT (<https://www.hornby-trust.org.uk/>).

re-telling participants' varied and idiosyncratic stories and personal accounts, we sought to identify commonalities that cut across their lived experiences so as to describe and explain teachers' coping and resilience during the war. As such, our approach encompassed thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2021; Terry et al., 2017) that drew upon analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995). This involves breaking down stories and accounts into smaller units, which were then re-aggregated into themes (we identified six in the data) that describe and characterise such stories and accounts more broadly.

Analysis involved undertaking multiple passes of the data for the purposes of familiarisation, coding, and eventually, theme generation and refinement (Terry et al., 2017). Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, we were cautious about imposing interpretations that did not reflect participants' lived experiences (Tarsoly & Čalić, 2026). As such, we aimed for our themes to embody and reflect participants' emic perspectives (Olive, 2014), in other words, the interpretations, understandings, and significance that the teachers themselves ascribe to events, practices, or experiences within their own contexts—rather than the imposition of outside interpretations (Willis, 2007; Yin, 2010). The first author undertook the initial round of coding (drafting candidate codes), followed by the second author checking draft codes and considering additional material in the transcripts. We adopted a semantic approach (Clarke & Braun, 2021; Terry et al., 2017), identifying meanings that were explicit rather than risking mischaracterising our participants. To this end, we descriptively coded relevant material, paraphrasing participants' words but endeavouring to remain as true as possible to what we felt were their intended meanings. The list of codes and themes (and sub-themes) can be found in supplemental material – part A.

Given our contrasting insider/outsider statuses and participation (or lack of) in data collection, we did not feel it was appropriate to address analytical rigor through an inter-rater reliability approach. We felt that our differing positionalities (see below) and access to contextual knowledge would lead to divergent interpretations of the data. Instead, we discussed the emerging codes both via written comments on the transcripts and through in-person conversations. The second author was able to draw upon her participation in the CD sessions, while both authors reviewed recordings of these to check uncertainties. Typically, such interactions took the form of resolving uncertainties over participants' intended meanings through written comments embedded in the transcripts:

First author: *What does this mean?*

Second author: *A student turns up after being absent for long time and wants to continue study*

Furthermore, discussions often centred upon whether draft codes sufficiently captured participants' meanings:

First author: *The teacher overcame feelings of helplessness by wanting to be a resource to students and to motivate them.*

Second author: *Teacher's feeling of helplessness was overcome by talking and sharing.*

In addition to the participants initially checking the accuracy of the transcripts, we carried out a second round of member checking by inviting them to comment on a draft of the findings section of the article, so as to better ensure that we were not imposing categories of participant experience without their involvement (Tarsoly & Čalić, 2026) and that the meanings we captured did not undermine their dignity or integrity (see supplemental material – part C). The participants agreed with our interpretations and did not offer any amendments or additional material.

Researcher Positionality

We recognise our differing professional and personal backgrounds as shaping our engagement with the data and its interpretation, making researcher positionality an important consideration (Holmes, 2020). The first author, a British male lecturer in language education with no previous affiliation with PAELT or role in data collection, approached the analysis from an etic position. His distance from the context in which the data were co-created required familiarisation with the project and transcripts but also enabled him to bring a degree of analytical distance and to question interpretations that might otherwise have been taken for granted. The second author, a Ukrainian female academic, EFL teacher, and President of PAELT, occupied an emic position, having designed the PD initiative and conducted primary data collection. Her close relationships with participants and shared experience of wartime displacement supported nuanced interpretations of culturally specific references and emotional meanings, while also facilitating participant engagement. At the same time, her proximity to the context necessitated sustained reflexivity to avoid imposing her own experiences on participants' accounts. Dialogue between the researchers helped balance contextual insight with critical distance and, we believe, strengthened the credibility of the analysis.

Findings

As shown in Figure 1, we interpreted six themes in the data, with only one containing sub-themes. We present raw frequency counts and the percentage of codes to indicate the amount of data that contributed to each theme, and in the case of *Student engagement and relationships*, sub-theme.

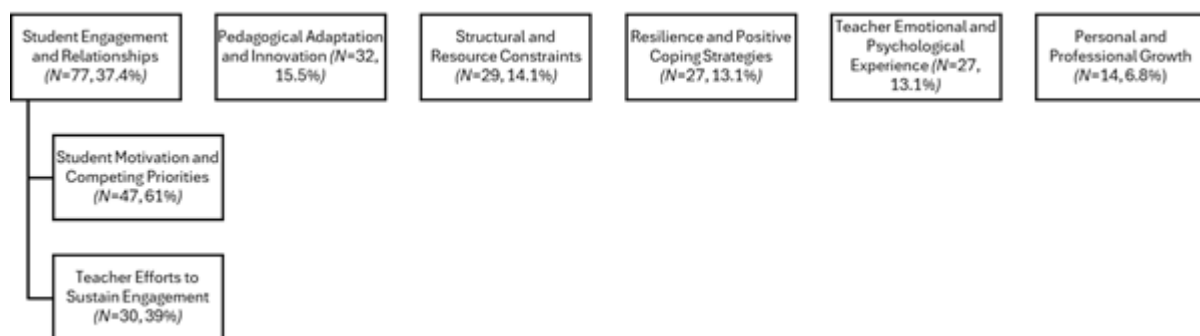
Student Engagement and Relationships

Student engagement and relationships (N=77, 37.4%) was the largest theme and the only to comprise sub-themes, *Student motivation and competing priorities* (N=47, 61%) and *Teacher efforts to sustain engagement* (N=30, 39%), reflecting the bidirectional, context-sensitive interplay between student agency and teacher mediation. Teachers discussed

many instances of low or variable student engagement, often shaped by competing personal, economic, and emotional pressures. Several explained that students perceived feelings, such as *“work is more important... money [is] more important than study”* (Veronika), particularly for those students needing to contribute to or support their families (perhaps after forced relocation). Low student engagement was further exacerbated by students failing to see *“why they have to work so hard”* when employment prospects appeared limited or uncertain (Sofiya). As such, instructors faced resistance and apathy from some students—*“because we are making our students doing something... they don’t really want”*—alongside heightened workloads associated with managing disengagement (Kateryna). Additionally, several students *“disappear[ed] after the first meeting”* (Oksana) or re-emerged only to request assessment credits, placing additional demands on instructors’ time to locate them or respond to their queries.

Student motivation was frequently perceived as extrinsic, tied to the teachers’ often intensive efforts to sustain engagement or contact through coping strategies (see below), the university’s ranking, or the symbolic value of the diploma that they were working towards. Students sometimes communicated these struggles directly to teachers, sending messages *“telling me that they experience difficult challenges”* (Anastasiya). Some instructors struggled with blurred boundaries, as they felt students expected 24-hour availability (Veronika), with tensions between empathy and accountability when students cited poor Internet access or wartime difficulties as mitigation against institutional expulsion. Yet, studying also functioned as a refuge for learners, offering escape and a sense of normality (Oksana), evidenced by unexpectedly high participation in one academic conference (Mariya). Other teachers reflected that the situation brought out previously unseen personal qualities in their students: *“after everything happened, then I could see some qualities that they were developing on a great extent”* (Anastasiya). In another example, a previously disengaged student *“decided to make a goal... to learn English”* after realising its importance for accessing up-to-date programming knowledge, becoming more engaged in class (Anastasiya).

Figure 1
Thematic Structure of the Findings



A second sub-theme highlighted the efforts teachers undertook to develop and maintain student participation and motivation during these difficult times. Teachers sought to motivate students through leading by example and sharing personal experiences, emphasising that learning is a long-term investment: *"I am trying to explain, I'm trying to show my own example...knowledge is...the luggage which you carry very easily during your life. But in order to get this luggage you need to work very, very hard"* (Mariya). Additionally, as Mariya noted, *"In our university there are a lot of teachers who are partners to their students and that's the usual situation"*, highlighting an adapted relational approach in which instructors and students eschewed hierarchical roles. Yet, teachers described the experience of engaging students during wartime as taxing, sometimes likening it to begging: *"I'm feeling myself like a poor relative who wants to get some bread and some water from somebody"* (Mariya). While some instructors acknowledged the limits of their influence—*"I don't expect [full attendance]"* (Sofiya)—others self-ascribed blame: *"She [anonymised] blames herself that she's not good teacher, that she's bad at motivating students, and she probably does not work good enough to how push them forward. The problem is much deeper, I think"* (Sofiya).

Teachers employed various adaptive strategies to sustain engagement in both online teaching and learning, navigating technological limitations, variations in the degree of student participation, and inequitable student conditions. The provision of asynchronous online resources provided a partial solution for those students unable to attend synchronously. In such sessions, Sofiya highlighted the importance of cameras to be on because *"they really feel lonely...most of the classes, they have with cameras off...and I insist"*. However, the asynchronous nature of learning meant that *"maybe half of our students attend"*, with the result being an increase in workload and stress for teachers as they felt obligated to support students through checking their individual work: *"I don't feel comfortable because I know that then I should spend my time on them...it's my duty"* (Veronika). Veronika also noted the burden to assist the University administration to locate students who failed to attend online sessions: *"It's my obligation to do something because if they get lost I will get another problem"*. For some teachers, this meant *"We are in touch with them every day if they are our students"* (Mariya), often through alternative channels, such as Telegram.

Pedagogical Adaptation

The second most common theme encompassed changes teachers made to their pedagogical approaches (N=32, 15.5%), often brought about by the move to online teaching. Teachers faced challenges in adapting to synchronous and asynchronous online teaching, particularly due to connectivity and power issues. Most persevered despite technical and logistical difficulties—*"As soon as I got the Internet connection back I was in another city already... we decided to have some meetings in Telegram... it was kind of speaking practice"* (Anastasiya)—or a lack of training: *"DL [distance learning] is just something terrible. I know only how to form the group and that's all"* (Veronika). Platforms

like Google Classroom and Moodle were used, but technical issues and time demands often created additional burdens that required rethinking approaches or graft: *"Each [student] sends it [written work] to me... I should find it among all of these amount of links... it takes time, a lot of time"* (Veronika). Teachers adapted by sharing links to self-study materials and tests out of internal obligation, but student engagement varied widely: *"If the links are still available they do that part... sometimes if I have time or if they have the time and connection, we can meet and I ask... if it's impossible for them and for me, then just links and tests and that's all"* (Veronika). Asynchronous tasks required careful selection of materials appropriate for learners' levels and wellbeing: *"I started looking for new resources... interactive worksheets or interactive tasks... I learned a lot"* (Anastasiya). Even simple adaptations, like creating English-only sessions, presented challenges: *"But sometimes they turn to me using Russian in class and I said, sorry don't understand"* (Anastasiya). Anastasiya also reported that she learned to better gauge student readiness for particular topics: *"I see that their faces and understand that they're not ready to grasp this information... we have to discuss this and proceed with that topic"*, although this required students to have their cameras turned on (which was not always feasible).

Structural and Resource Constraints

A notable theme in participants' discussions were their efforts coping with severe *Structural and resource constraints* ($N=29$, 14.1%). Participants described how students often struggled to access learning, typically due to *"poor Internet connection or have one laptop or one phone for all the family"*, and how students lacked familiarity with using technology to support learning (Polina), creating an additional burden. Teachers also had to navigate administrative requirements, with Polina noting *"Yes, so of course we can use both variants [online and paper registers] but it's much more work then. You should fill up this paper variant and you should fill up this online variant"*. The lack of institutional support was another recurring concern: *"I don't have a chance for personal development, everything I do as a teacher is for my personal development, I finance it myself"* (Sofiya), highlighting the tension between personal investment and the absence of university-funded professional growth. These structural challenges were compounded by logistical and workload pressures. Sofiya described being *"trapped... because of low salary, because of the lack of opportunities, so we are kind of trapped with our schedule"*, and having to manage cross-border teaching while coping with personal and family difficulties: *"All right, it was difficult time for me. I was traveling through three countries... And also in my daughter's family, there are a lot of problems"*. Teachers expressed frustration with the mandatory use of some digital platforms: *"in our university we use Moodle, almost every university and lyceums and schools also use Moodle. But why not the Google Classroom? Because it's much more comfortable"* (Polina). However, they also recognised the constraints that their institutions were working under, with Serhii lamenting that *"Google demanded, I think 50 million for the Google disk (Drive) for the University"* in order that it be used on a large scale by staff.

Teacher Emotional and Psychological Experience

The emotional toll of teaching during the initial years of Russia's war was profound, reflected in this theme ($N=27$, 13.1%), which captured recurring instances of stress, strain, and at times, helplessness. Teachers initially felt overwhelmed by the gravity of the situation and their responsibility for student welfare, particularly in the first lessons: *"I didn't know what to say. It was something, I don't know how to explain this. And how to begin studying after all this disaster"* (Alina). In contrast, Kateryna was so affected that she highlighted *"I don't remember the first lessons at all"*. In these early days, Anastasiya emphasised *"I was thinking how I would be actually... able to help my students yet to get through all of that"*. Feelings of helplessness were common, with some teachers struggling to support students, or providing reassurance only externally to bolster morale: *"I felt that obligation in order to help them and the strong desire to help them and I felt helpless sometimes to be honest"* (Anastasiya). Maintaining positivity under continuous stress proved tiring: *"And everybody was very depressed. I think, but we had to be very strong, we have to be very positive and to make stay positive, our students"*. Added to this was the fear that *"I was afraid to say something that would offend the students"* (Mariya). Teachers also faced emotional strain due to the uneven engagement of students with online learning, describing the frustration of grading inconsistently: *"Someone spends a lot of time and gets this result and then another person... they have the same mark attending all the classes"* (Oksana). The extra workload compounded these pressures, leaving among others, Oksana feeling overwhelmed: *"Different students like make the teachers and lecturers feel annoyed or consumed because of time-consuming working extra, this workload is not normal, not appropriate"*. Yet, brief moments of pride in students' resilience offered solace: *"We were very proud of the students who presented in the underground shelters"* (Mariya), highlighting small victories amidst immense adversity.

Resilience and Positive Coping Strategies

Participants described a range of *Resilience and positive coping strategies* ($N=27$, 13.1%) that supported the continuation of teaching and learning during the first 18 months of the war. Across these challenges, teachers initially felt helpless, but they overcame these feelings—or at least managed them externally—to boost the morale and motivation of their students, with one reflecting *"I was helping my students. So first helpless, but then we could encourage each other"* (Anastasiya). Many drew on previous experiences, such as the pandemic, to facilitate online learning: *"And we were online because of the pandemic and so it's usual maybe a way of work now for us because we are accustomed to it. We have learnt many online platforms"* (Veronika). Participants also emphasised the importance of maintaining routines, with one teacher noting *"They got used to having English classes here on those days... at least they had that routine again"* (Anastasiya). Teachers created direct communication channels through Telegram and Google Classroom to support students, allowing them to respond quickly to challenges: *"In case they had any questions, they could post or text it... they knew where to find me in the quickest way"* (Anastasiya).

The teachers also highlighted the emotional dimension of coping and resilience, and their active attempts to normalise the situation for students. Anastasiya reflected on the sense of responsibility that teachers felt: *"I felt that obligation in order to help them and the strong desire to help them and I felt helpless sometimes to be honest"*. The teachers deliberately maintained routines, offering regular classes and structured online activities to provide stability: *"They got used to having English classes here on those days... at least they had that routine again"* (Oksana). They encouraged student sharing and reflection, helping students process the disruption around them: *"So after hearing all of those stories, I understood that we are on the same page, we are in the same boat and we have to be like a team"* (Anastasiya). She also noted that continuing academic work offered students a sense of normality: *"Studying Programming, English, other subjects helped them to be on the move, not to go into themselves"*. Teachers expressed pride in students' perseverance under extreme conditions, with Mariya reflecting:

We heard those sounds [explosions] and some of them were not so far as we wanted to expect but 60 of our students were the most strong I think and then I said, I remember, that they are the bravest students that I had ever seen.

Personal and Professional Growth

Amongst the severe upheaval and disruption, we were heartened by the theme *Personal and professional growth* ($N=14$, 6.8%), which cut across several stories. Participants spoke of developing greater empathy (Veronika), humility (Anastasiya), and attentiveness to students' emotional readiness (Alina), Anastasiya noting, for example, the need *"to understand if the person is ready...for such kind of activity or not"* and learning that sometimes it is better *"not to say everything out loud"*. Professional identity was also reshaped through the linguistic shift from Russian to Ukrainian. Although described as challenging—particularly when *"explaining grammar"* or recalling *"the name of the part of speech"* (Veronika)—Anastasiya reframed this as, *"an opportunity to master"* Ukrainian, positioning teachers as learners alongside their students. This vulnerability appeared to strengthen solidarity and empathy, reinforcing a co-learning ethos rather than hierarchical authority. Growth was further evident in teachers' adoption and mastery of new digital platforms and attention to raising their awareness of online safety in light of the overt focus on computer-mediated learning (Polina), even using their personal expenses to fund PD courses (Sofiya). Collectively, these accounts suggest that, despite profound uncertainty, teachers experienced meaningful development that reshaped their professional identities and sense of purpose.

Discussion

This study explored what Ukrainian university EFL teachers' accounts during Russia's war against Ukraine reveal about their coping and resilience. As reported in both the general literature on teacher resilience (Bobek, 2002; Henderson & Milstein, 2003) and

studies on the conflict in Ukraine (Jones & Murray, 2025; Kornius, 2023), our findings underscore the vital role teachers, even those delivering ancillary English language education, play in directly or indirectly supporting the resilience of their students (and, of course, colleagues). Of particular note was teachers actively using their autonomy to enact adaptive professionalism within severe contextual constraints (Jones & Murray, 2025; Nadyukova & Frenzel, 2025; Szczepaniak-Kozak & Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2024). Set against institutional processes being severely impacted by the full-scale invasion, we found that these Ukrainian EFL teachers felt a strong moral obligation to redefine their professional boundaries by expanding their roles from being primarily pedagogically orientated to encompassing a wider range of functions (see also Xerri & Pentón Herrera, 2026), particularly through offering psychological support and being a relational partner and logistical coordinator (Kornius, 2023; Lavrysh et al., 2022). This reflects a dynamic witnessed across diverse conflict and crisis contexts, where close bonds with their students become teachers' primary source of purpose (Xerri & Pentón Herrera, 2026), persisting in the present study despite significant relational barriers (e.g., student disengagement, shifting priorities, and interrupted communication).

As found elsewhere (Sichka et al., 2026; Xerri & Pentón Herrera, 2026), the (online) English language classroom constituted an important site to foster coping strategies and counter the dehumanising effects of war. This is because the ELT approaches referenced by the participants, through prioritising dialogue and interaction, resembled trauma-informed pedagogy and social-emotional learning. Such approaches transform the ELT classroom into a sanctuary based upon mutual understanding and validation, whilst providing simultaneous opportunities for highly meaningful language use, contributing to improved wellbeing (see Sichka et al., 2026). This was often without clear or sufficient institutional guidance or support or the apparent provision of more structured wellbeing services that are typical of peacetime contexts. This is not to say that top-down direction is a panacea for establishing relational support in conflict ELT contexts. Indeed, the teachers in the present study perceived the institution's mandates on online learning management platforms as too rigid. A careful balance needs to be struck, ensuring that official policies flexibly support practitioners' use of social-emotional learning approaches.

Professional adaptation was mediated by severe structural and resource constraints, variable student engagement with teaching and learning, and the heightened importance of interpersonal relationships with students. Teachers faced a reality where, naturally, English language learning was secondary to students' needs and wants, namely, safety, employment, and supporting their families (Lavrysh et al., 2022). This impinged heavily on student motivation and engagement in the online classroom (see also Tsyntar, 2024; Westerlund et al., 2023). Teachers nevertheless persisted in embedding relational pedagogies that prioritised empathy for and with students over enforcing accountability (albeit, with notable consequences for their workload and stress). Indeed, the blurring of

boundaries, leading to teachers becoming more like partners to their students (Lavrysh et al., 2022), was considered a necessary adaptation to instil compassion and sustain regular contact. This necessitated pedagogical innovation through creating flexible, asynchronous learning and assessment options and using alternative communication channels like Telegram to accommodate students' inability to engage with synchronous teaching and learning.

These pedagogical adaptations and structural role shifts point to a reframing of the expectations placed upon ELT teachers in conflict settings. The traditional boundary of the subject expert is supplanted by a requirement for high-level emotional intelligence and adaptability to what is feasible within stark contextual uncertainties and limitations (Xerri & Pentón Herrera, 2026). However, we note that framing teacher resilience as a moral imperative to adapt or innovate may inadvertently encourage unsustainable workloads and normalise the acceptance of structurally inadequate conditions (Boon, 2021). When educational continuity is maintained primarily through an individual teacher's profound emotional labour, overwork, and sacrifice, resilience risks becoming an exploitative mechanism that absolves higher education institutions and education policymakers of their duty of care towards teachers.

Rather than reflecting a fixed personal trait (Boon, 2021), these findings underscore a conception of teacher resilience in conflict ELT contexts as a dynamic capacity constructed through the interaction between one's individual agency and severe contextual constraints (Gu & Day, 2013). In conflict-affected settings, this negotiation becomes an ethical imperative. Teachers need to balance institutional demands—in the present study, academic accountability—against immediate concerns over physical safety, trauma, and systemic disruption. Thus, the study provides evidence that ELT teacher resilience in conflict-affected contexts aligns with a bounce forward conception, which emphasises practitioners' capacities to "maintain equilibrium and a sense of commitment and agency" (Gu & Day, 2013, p. 26). While these findings align with Gu and Day's (2013) view, we would like to add that defining resilience solely as maintaining equilibrium risks understating the transformative nature of teachers' practice during wartime. In contexts of extreme disruption, teachers do not merely preserve stability, but are forced to actively adapt their pedagogies.

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal a conception of resilience that is more in line with bouncing back, highlighting the complexity of the phenomenon. The teachers' accounts emphasised the severe emotional toll of working under continuous disruption, uncertainty, and in some cases, threat, characterised by initial helplessness, stress, and a perceived obligation to project emotional stoicism (Jones & Murray, 2025; Nadyukova & Frenzel, 2025; Sharifian et al., 2023; Sichka et al., 2026; Xerri & Pentón Herrera, 2026). A salient coping strategy was the efforts to achieve some semblance of stability by returning to established routines. By attempting to maintain regular and structured

online classes and professional activities, teachers explicitly or implicitly attributed importance to cultivating a sense of normality that served as a psychological buffer for both themselves and their students from the realities of war (Lavrysh et al., 2022; Shuliak et al., 2024; Westerlund et al., 2023). Teachers were able to draw upon prior technological and pedagogical experience developed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jones & Murray, 2025; Kostikova et al., 2023). However, as found elsewhere (Westerlund et al., 2023; Xerri & Pentón Herrera, 2026), conflict-specific mediating factors (i.e., disrupted communication, confusion, isolation, and a lack of guidance and support) added layers of complexity to teachers' professional lives. As such, these accounts reflect understandings of teacher resilience as requiring sustained emotional labour and self-regulatory work to preserve pedagogical continuity and counteract emotional exhaustion (Day & Gu, 2014; Mansfield et al., 2016). They also show that teachers' localised professional achievements, for example, holding classes in bomb shelters and encouraging students to reflect on and discuss their feelings and experiences (see also Sichka et al., 2026) contributed to promoting wellbeing and resilience (Sharifian et al., 2023).

The teachers' stories of coping and resilience culminated in reports of personal and professional growth. Working within severe constraints did not extinguish their drive. Rather, it catalysed an intrinsic, proactive, and self-directed approach to professional self-development (Xerri & Pentón Herrera, 2026). This capacity to convert constraints into catalysts is a characteristic of teacher agency in times of crisis (Szczepaniak-Kozak & Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2024). The teachers' dedication to directing their own PD was exemplified in a willingness to invest their own resources in training, demonstrating the importance of establishing a sense of agency and control in a highly uncertain situation (Moroz, 2024). In this sense, the perceived need to support colleagues and students in wartime rendered PD not as optional but as a necessity, compelling teachers to invest in their development as a means of discovering new aspects of their professional identity and sustaining the capacity to continue under extreme conditions. Yet, we note the troubling framing of individual financial sacrifice as professional agency since it masks the reality that educators are left to personally underwrite the financial costs of continuity in times of crisis. Additionally, while this financial burden reflects a material form of agency forced by institutional gaps, teachers' self-determination was equally asserted through symbolic resistance. Specifically, reframing the linguistic shift from Russian to Ukrainian as an opportunity to master the language highlights the powerful rejection of Russian, as a language associated with trauma and aggression (di Salvo et al., 2026). In doing so, the educators reclaimed their linguistic and professional identity, transforming an administrative shift into a conscious act of decolonial resistance and self-determination.

Conclusion

The findings highlight that coping and resilience are central features of Ukrainian EFL teachers' professional lives during wartime, revealing how teachers sustained both themselves and their students under prolonged adversity. The themes present a portrait of teacher resilience as the ongoing deployment of coping strategies in response to emotional strain, pedagogical disruption, and severe institutional/structural constraints. Interpersonal coping (with both colleagues and students) was considered particularly salient. The teachers reported that they invested notably in building and sustaining student engagement, often through extending their availability, adjusting expectations of themselves and of others, and reframing learning in terms of seeking stability and normality. Coping was also pedagogical, involving pragmatic (re)adaptation to online, (a)synchronous teaching, drawing upon prior experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic (Chugai & Havrylenko, 2023), albeit in the face of unreliable infrastructure and minimal institutional support. The teachers described feelings of great uncertainty and stress, especially in the early stages of the conflict, yet demonstrated heightened resilience through the establishment of teaching and learning routines and peer (i.e., colleague) engagement/encouragement. Resilience also flowed from their pride in students' perseverance, often resulting from the teachers' own substantial efforts. These accounts indicate that teachers' resilience was enacted through sustained emotional and pedagogical labour that, while enabling them to continue functioning professionally, also took a profound emotional toll, the outcomes of which (given that data collection ended in 2024) are uncertain.

We cautiously put forward two implications for ELT policymakers and practitioners in higher education in conflict settings, mindful of the resource constraints and operational realities facing institutions and the limitations of generalising across disparate settings. First, where feasible, stakeholders could establish formal crisis-responsive workload protocols rather than relying on individual instructor endurance. The findings show that tracking disengaged students across informal channels and handling redundant administration creates unsustainable labour. Institutions, through negotiation between teachers and decision-makers and ensuring flexibility is foregrounded throughout, could instead implement standardised minimum teaching models, low-barrier micro-PD, clear communication boundaries, and shared course repositories to mitigate the stress placed upon teachers. Second, there is value in incorporating student-centred, trauma-sensitive and/or mindfulness teaching practices, structuring safe, positive opportunities for student affective expression (Korniush, 2023; Nadyukova & Frenzel, 2025; Sichka et al., 2026). To address teacher role inflation, such approaches should be complemented by psychological support programmes staffed by specialist practitioners, featuring individual counselling, group therapy, and resilience training (Pustovoichenko et al., 2024).

As a limitation, we highlight the situated nature of the data, which emerged within a specific professional community and in a carefully cultivated space of trust facilitated by the second author across particular stages of Russia's War against Ukraine. Participants' accounts were inevitably shaped by these contextual features, the CD approach used to facilitate teachers' PD, and the interpersonal relationships that developed between the second author and the participants over time. A second, related consideration stems from the interpretive role of the researchers, particularly the dual project lead and analyst roles of the second author. Although this insider status facilitated nuanced understandings of participants' perspectives and experiences, it also required vigilance to avoid privileging familiar interpretations or assumptions. In sum, the themes presented constitute co-constructed products of researcher-participant interaction rather than neutral or objective reflections of participants' experiences, consistent with our interpretive epistemological stance.

With over two years having passed since data were collected, we feel that new research is vital to examine teachers' coping and resilience trajectories across more recent phases of the conflict. As with our own study, we suggest researchers adopt longitudinal approaches, capturing how teacher resilience as a dynamic, context-sensitive state and process (Gu & Day, 2013; Luthar et al., 2000; Mansfield et al., 2016) manifests and evolves. Here, we feel that it is important to emphasise the merits of multiwave data collection (Ortega & Iberri-Shea, 2005), avoiding relying solely on participants' responses at a single point of data collection (given the vagaries of war) and instead, capturing small but significant moments of teacher coping and resilience that constellate into a greater whole. There is also value in adopting multimethod qualitative approaches, such as classroom observations to witness pedagogical adaptations and relational support as they happen or reflective journals to trace teachers' real-time emotional processing.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to each of the participants, who generously contributed their time, experiences, and insights during an incredibly difficult time in their lives. We are also thankful to them for granting us permission for the secondary analysis of the data incorporated into this study.

Funding

No funding was received for the secondary analysis that constituted this study.

CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

William Pearson: Conceptualisation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project Administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing

Nataliia Krynska: Conceptualisation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project Administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing

Generative AI Use Disclosure Statement

Google Gemini was used to check a proof of the manuscript for errors and stylistic inappropriacies.

Ethics Declarations

World Medical Association (WMA) Declaration of Helsinki–Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Participants

This study was conducted in accordance with the British Educational Research Association's *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, fifth edition*. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University of Exeter (Approval no. 6751215). All participants provided their voluntary, informed consent prior to the data being included in the study.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Data Availability

Research data supporting this publication are available as supplementary information accompanying this publication at <https://doi.org/10.24378/exe.33406621>

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