

Attrition, Adversity, and Adaptation: A Qualitative Analysis of the Structural, Professional, and Psychological Challenges Facing Teachers of English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) is often represented in popular discourse as an accessible pathway to international mobility, cultural immersion, and flexible employment. However, a growing body of scholarship suggests that the profession is characterized by chronic attrition, precarious working conditions, and unresolved tensions around professional identity. This paper synthesizes findings from the existing empirical literature on foreign/second language teacher attrition and retention with a thematic analysis of publicly available, anonymized online discussion forum content in which current and former TEFL practitioners describe their lived experiences. Ten interrelated themes emerged from the forum data: financial precarity and wage stagnation; institutional disorganization and the absence of onboarding or managerial support; discriminatory hiring practices related to age, race, nationality, and perceived "nativeness"; credential inflation; visa- and documentation-related vulnerability; unpaid or under-compensated labor; workplace surveillance; contested professional identity; long-term career sustainability concerns; and recruitment-related fraud. These themes corroborate and extend prior peer-reviewed findings on teacher wellbeing, resilience, social capital, and turnover intention. The paper argues that TEFL attrition should be understood not merely as an individual psychological phenomenon but as the product of a globally fragmented, weakly regulated industry. Implications for teacher education, institutional policy, and future research are discussed.

Keywords: TEFL, teacher attrition, teacher retention, precarious employment, professional identity, native-speakerism

Introduction

The global expansion of English as a lingua franca has produced sustained demand for English language instruction across educational systems, private language centers, and higher education institutions worldwide. Governments in East Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and parts of Europe have implemented policies to lower the starting age of English instruction and to recruit native-English-speaking teachers (NESTs) through both public and private channels. Despite this demand, the profession of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) is widely reported to suffer from high rates of turnover, underqualified entrants, inconsistent regulation, and job dissatisfaction. While formal education research has extensively documented teacher attrition in domestic public-school

contexts, considerably less peer-reviewed attention has been paid to the experiences of the international, often itinerant, TEFL workforce.

This paper had two aims. First, it synthesizes recent peer-reviewed literature on attrition, retention, wellbeing, and professional identity among foreign- and second-language teachers across multiple national contexts. Second, it presents a thematic analysis of anonymized, publicly available online discourse produced by practicing and former TEFL teachers, in order to examine how the concerns identified in the academic literature manifest in teachers' own accounts of their working lives. By triangulating peer-reviewed scholarship with naturally occurring practitioner discourse, the paper seeks to provide a more complete picture of the conditions that shape whether a TEFL career is, in practical terms, "worth it."

Literature Review

The Value of Language Learning and the Imperative for Quality Instruction

Second-language acquisition confers well-documented cognitive, academic, and social advantages, including improved problem-solving, multitasking ability, and enhanced first-language literacy, and language learners have also been shown to demonstrate greater empathy, diversity awareness, and tolerance of difference. Because of these wide-ranging benefits, Parks et al. (2023) argue that the quality and stability of the second-language teaching workforce is a matter of direct public interest, particularly in contexts such as Canada and Quebec, where second-language instruction is embedded in national educational policy.

Attrition and Retention in Foreign and Second Language Teaching

A substantial cross-national literature has documented elevated attrition among foreign-language teachers relative to teachers in other subject areas. In the Israeli context, Carmel and Badash (2018) found that beginning EFL teachers face a persistent dropout problem, with roughly one-fifth of new teachers leaving within their first year and nearly a third departing within five years; the authors linked this pattern partly to the comparatively low social status of teaching, a factor also identified by Donitsa-Schmidt and Zuzovsky (2016, as cited in Carmel & Badash, 2018), and partly to the availability of more lucrative alternatives such as private-sector or technology-industry employment for English-proficient graduates.

Attrition among expatriate TESOL professionals specifically has received comparatively little empirical attention. Moodie and Greenier (2026), applying the unfolding model of voluntary turnover from organizational psychology to narrative interview data from fifteen former expatriate teachers, found that attrition frequently followed a gradual erosion of professional identity, compounded by limited career prospects and by ambivalence about whether TESOL constituted a viable long-term profession; the authors proposed that recruitment incentives, sustained institutional support, and a stronger emphasis on career development could mitigate this pattern.

Comparative work by Sulis et al. (2022) examined early-career foreign-language teachers in Austria and the United Kingdom and found that wellbeing, shaped by an interaction of intrapersonal factors (e.g., perfectionism, self-efficacy), work-life spillover, and the broader social status of the foreign-language teaching role, was a key predictor of intention to remain in or exit the profession across both national contexts. In the Vietnamese higher-education sector, Tran and Moskovsky (2024) similarly identified job-related stress, workplace conflict, heavy workloads, and diminishing enthusiasm as central drivers of turnover intention among university EFL instructors, while also noting that intrinsic motivation could act as a countervailing force that kept teachers engaged despite these pressures. Using

structural equation modeling with a large sample of Chinese EFL teachers, Liu (2024) demonstrated that turnover intention directly undermines teacher wellbeing and that resilience mediates this relationship, framing the phenomenon through a conservation-of-resources lens in which turnover intention depletes teachers' personal resource reserves. In Turkey, Yastibaş, Baturay, and Ertaş (2022) found that English-language teachers could not be neatly divided into "stayers" and "leavers"; many teachers reported simultaneously wanting to remain in and to exit the profession, with passion for teaching and dissatisfaction with working conditions operating as competing forces.

Wellbeing, Resilience, and Emotional Labor

Beyond turnover intention itself, several studies have examined the psychological resources that allow language teachers to persist in the profession. Wang, Derakhshan, and Rahimpour (2022) conducted a cross-cultural qualitative study of Chinese and Iranian EFL teachers and found that person-focused factors, rather than systemic, contextual, or process-related factors, were perceived as the primary challenges to sustaining professional resilience. Xu and Jia (2022) reported that self-efficacy and occupational stress independently predicted emotional exhaustion and work engagement among Chinese EFL teachers, although the two constructs were not significantly correlated with one another. Meihami and Esmaili (2024) examined novice teachers of Arabic and English as foreign languages in online instructional settings and found that online teaching provoked both positive emotions, such as curiosity and satisfaction, and negative emotions, including anxiety and frustration, with notable differences in emotional experience and regulation strategy between the two teacher groups.

Professional Identity and Career Development

Professional identity has emerged as a recurring construct in this literature. Teng (2020) theorized TEFL teacher identity as a negotiation among agency, authority, and vulnerability, arguing that internal factors such as emotion and self-efficacy interact with external constraints such as language policy and institutional structures to shape how teachers understand their own professional role. Karimi, Alamdari, and Ahmadian (2021), drawing on focus-group interviews with EFL teacher trainees in Iran, identified the difficulty of translating theoretical training into classroom practice, the search for professional identity, and weak connections between teacher-education programs and schools as central challenges of pre-service preparation. Yang (2021) applied self-determination theory to the continuing professional development (CPD) motivations of Chinese university EFL instructors and found that, although intrinsic and identified forms of motivation predominated, teachers reported a substantial gap between their developmental needs and the contextual support available to meet them.

Structural and Systemic Issues: Recruitment, Native-Speakerism, and the TEFL Industry

A smaller body of work has examined the structural conditions of the broader TEFL labor market. Mason and Matas (2016), in a large-scale mixed-methods study of Australian foreign-language teachers, found that professionally valued teachers with strong collegial and administrative relationships were less likely to leave the profession, but that strong social bonds among language teachers could paradoxically facilitate attrition by functioning as a bridge to alternative careers. Fang, Wang, Lin, and Huang (2022) examined native-English-speaking teachers in Taiwan's government-sponsored placement scheme and found that both the advantages and the challenges reported by participants were rooted primarily in school-level conditions—such as resource provision on one hand and lack of collegial collaboration

on the other—rather than in factors external to the school. Burke and Ceo-DiFrancesco (2022) addressed the shortage of world-language teachers in the United States and argued that reversing enrollment declines in teacher-preparation programs requires coordinated collaboration among teachers, teacher educators, and policymakers. In Indonesia, Pratama, Lestari, and Anam (2018) theorized that the accumulation of pedagogical and non-pedagogical burdens placed on EFL teachers—including administrative duties and publication requirements—contributes to burnout, absenteeism, and early attrition, and proposed that reinforcing teacher self-efficacy through professional development could counteract this trend.

Finally, Stainton (2018) offered a distinct theoretical contribution by examining the overlap between TEFL and tourism, proposing a typology of "TEFL tourists", leisure-minded, philanthropy-minded, career-minded, and expatriate-minded, whose differing motivations for entering the profession have implications for retention and professional commitment. Veronico (2024), using an action-research design with adult-education EFL instructors who had left the classroom, identified structural funding and regulatory problems that render the profession akin to gig work, and found that targeted professional development initiatives were valued by practitioners as a potential lever for improving career persistence.

Taken together, this literature converges on several recurring constructs: attrition is shaped jointly by intrapersonal factors (self-efficacy, resilience, identity) and by structural or contextual factors (compensation, social capital, institutional support, professional status). However, because most of these studies rely on interview or survey samples recruited through formal institutional channels, they may underrepresent the experiences of teachers operating in less formalized segments of the TEFL labor market, such as private language centers and short-term contract positions. The present study addresses this gap by analyzing informal, practitioner-generated discourse.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative document analysis of naturally occurring, publicly available online discourse, a method sometimes referred to as netnography or digital ethnographic content analysis (Kozinets, 2010). This approach is appropriate for capturing candid practitioner accounts that may not surface through structured interviews or institutionally sanctioned research channels, particularly given the geographically dispersed and often informally employed nature of the TEFL workforce.

Data Sources

Data consisted of publicly accessible discussion threads from an online community dedicated to English-language teaching abroad, in which self-identified current or former TEFL practitioners described their professional experiences, sought advice, or responded to peers. Threads addressed a broad range of topics, including career trajectories, compensation, workplace conditions, discrimination, credentialing, visa status, and recruitment practices.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis procedure described by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the dataset, generation of initial codes, collation of codes into candidate themes, review and refinement of themes against the dataset, definition and naming of themes, and final synthesis. Coding was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being imposed from a predetermined framework,

although the resulting themes were subsequently interpreted in relation to the constructs identified in the literature review (e.g., resilience, professional identity, social capital).

Ethical Considerations

Because the data were drawn from a public forum, no direct contact with participants was required. Nonetheless, in keeping with established ethical guidance for internet-based research (British Psychological Society, 2021), all data have been fully anonymized for this paper: no usernames, verbatim quotations, or other potentially identifying details are reproduced. Findings are reported only as paraphrased, aggregated thematic patterns, and all illustrative examples below are composites rather than direct citations of any single, identifiable post.

Results and Discussion

Ten interrelated themes emerged from the analysis.

Financial Precarity and Wage Stagnation. A pervasive theme concerned the erosion of TEFL as a means of financial self-sufficiency. Contributors frequently described salaries that had stagnated or declined in real terms over the past decade, even as the cost of living in many host countries increased. Several participants noted that certain institutional actors historically associated with favorable pay and working conditions had scaled back operations, narrowing the upper tier of the market. Participants also frequently distinguished between countries offering high absolute salaries but poor savings potential due to cost of living, and countries offering lower salaries but higher relative savings.

Institutional Disorganization and Absence of Onboarding. A striking number of accounts described the near-total absence of structured onboarding, supervision, or human-resources infrastructure at receiving institutions, particularly private and public schools in Southeast Asia. Teachers reported being expected to independently discover essential logistical information—classroom locations, curricular scope, technology access, and administrative procedures—without any formal orientation, and described conflicting or contradictory instructions from different staff members regarding basic employment requirements.

Discrimination Based on Age, Race, Nationality, and Perceived Nativeness. Multiple contributors described hiring practices that privileged young, white, native-English-speaking candidates over older, non-white, or non-native-English-speaking applicants with equivalent or superior qualifications. Several participants who identified as being of Asian heritage but who were native English speakers from majority English-speaking countries described being asked to prove their nationality or facing reduced job prospects relative to white peers. Others described age-related barriers, including uncertainty or informal ceilings around hiring teachers in their fifties and sixties, notwithstanding the absence of any codified legal maximum age in some jurisdictions.

Credential Inflation and Qualification Ambiguity. Contributors frequently noted a widening gap between the credentials required to obtain a given role and the compensation or status attached to that role. Several long-tenured teachers holding advanced certificates or postgraduate diplomas reported difficulty securing positions, while entrants with minimal or online-only certification reported comparatively rapid employment, generating perceptions

among participants that the credentialing system was inconsistently enforced and only weakly correlated with actual job quality.

Visa, Legal, and Documentation Precarity. A recurring concern involved the legal vulnerability created by employer-controlled visa sponsorship. Several participants described working in legally ambiguous conditions during probationary periods, being required to undertake visa runs to maintain legal status, or facing difficulty transferring employment because a previous employer withheld necessary documentation. Others described confusion regarding degree authentication and apostille requirements for immigration purposes, occasionally leading candidates to withdraw from job offers due to employer unfamiliarity with international credential-verification procedures.

Unpaid or Under-Compensated Labor. Several contributors, particularly those employed in private language academies, described substantial unpaid time spent on lesson preparation, correction of student work, and administrative reporting, which they perceived as functionally reducing their effective hourly wage below the nominal contracted rate. Some framed this as standard practice consistent with salaried teaching generally, while others characterized it as exploitative, particularly when non-teaching duties were assigned without corresponding allocated time or compensation.

Workplace Surveillance. A smaller but notable subset of accounts described the use of classroom cameras and microphones by management, including instances in which supervisors appeared to reference privately overheard conversations during performance evaluations. Participants expressed concern about the legality and ethics of covert audio monitoring of staff, distinguishing this from the more widely accepted use of video monitoring for safeguarding or quality-assurance purposes.

Contested Professional Identity: "Tourist" Versus Career Teacher. Consistent with Stainton's (2018) typology, contributors frequently drew distinctions between TEFL as a temporary "gap year" or lifestyle experience and TEFL as a legitimate long-term career. Several participants who had remained in the field for over a decade described tension between wanting external validation of their professional legitimacy and internalized stigma associated with popular narratives that portray long-term TEFL teachers as having failed to establish careers in their home countries. This theme intersected with expressions of anxiety about long-term financial security, retirement planning, and the absence of pension contributions in home countries during years spent teaching abroad.

Career Sustainability and Long-Term Planning. Many contributors, particularly those in mid-career, described uncertainty about pathways for professional advancement beyond classroom teaching, citing academic management, teacher training, curriculum development, examination administration, and entrepreneurship (e.g., opening independent academies) as the primary available trajectories. Others described a perceived narrowing of opportunity with age, alongside concern about the adequacy of savings relative to the cost of eventually returning to, or retiring in, a home country with a higher cost of living.

Recruitment-Related Fraud. Finally, several contributors described exposure to fraudulent recruitment schemes in which scammers impersonated legitimate institutions, conducted plausible-seeming interview processes, and ultimately sought either personal information or upfront payments from applicants under the guise of relocation or visa-

processing costs. Participants noted that such schemes had persisted over multiple years and had, in some cases, prompted legitimate institutions to issue public warnings.

The thematic findings both corroborate and extend the peer-reviewed literature reviewed above. Consistent with Carmel and Badash (2018) and Sulis et al. (2022), forum contributors repeatedly linked attrition-relevant dissatisfaction to the perceived low social status of the profession and to unfavorable working conditions rather than to a lack of intrinsic interest in teaching itself. The institutional disorganization theme (4.2) closely parallels Fang et al.'s (2022) finding that school-level, rather than external, conditions drive both the advantages and disadvantages experienced by native-speaking teachers, suggesting that inconsistent institutional capacity—rather than national context per se, may be the more proximate determinant of teacher experience.

The discrimination theme (4.3) extends the existing literature, which has focused primarily on psychological and motivational predictors of attrition, by foregrounding structural inequities in hiring based on race, age, and nationality that are seldom captured in survey-based retention research. This suggests that models of attrition centered exclusively on self-efficacy, resilience, or intrinsic motivation (e.g., Liu, 2024; Wang et al., 2022) may be incomplete without accounting for discriminatory labor-market segmentation, sometimes termed "native-speakerism," which can constrain teachers' options independently of their psychological resources.

The tension identified in theme 4.8 between TEFL as a temporary experience and TEFL as a career directly mirrors Stainton's (2018) typology and Moodie and Greenier's (2026) finding that the erosion of professional identity, compounded by ambiguous long-term prospects, undermines commitment to the field. Notably, several forum contributors explicitly articulated the social capital dynamic described by Mason and Matas (2016): collegial relationships that initially sustained teachers in the profession sometimes later functioned as a bridge toward departure, either into management roles outside direct instruction or into entirely different fields.

Finally, themes 4.5, 4.7, and 4.10, visa precarity, surveillance, and recruitment fraud—represent an important extension of the literature, as none of the previously reviewed peer-reviewed studies directly addressed legal vulnerability, employer-controlled documentation, or fraudulent recruitment as attrition-relevant factors. Given that expatriate teachers' legal right to remain in a host country is frequently tied to continued employment with a single sponsoring institution, this dependency may constitute a distinct and underexamined structural driver of both attrition and, conversely, involuntary retention in unsatisfactory positions.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the forum data cannot be considered representative of the global TEFL workforce; contributors to public online forums may be systematically more likely to hold negative experiences, more likely to be English-speaking and internet-literate, and more likely to be based in specific regions (e.g., East and Southeast Asia) than the broader population of TEFL practitioners. Second, because the data were collected from a public forum rather than through direct researcher-participant contact, it was not possible to verify demographic details, employment history, or the veracity of individual accounts. Third, the qualitative synthesis presented here is interpretive, and alternative coders might have derived a different thematic structure from the same dataset. Future research employing systematic, verified survey or interview methodologies with practitioners across a wider range of institutional settings, public schools, private academies, international schools, and higher education, would help to establish the prevalence, rather than merely the existence, of the themes identified here.

Implications and Recommendations

Several implications follow from this synthesis. First, receiving institutions and recruitment agencies should implement standardized onboarding protocols, given the consistency with which the absence of such protocols was reported. Second, professional bodies and sending governments could play a stronger role in credential verification and public awareness campaigns regarding recruitment fraud, given its apparent persistence over multiple years. Third, policymakers in host countries with substantial NEST or expatriate-teacher programs may wish to examine the extent to which visa sponsorship structures create dependency that constrains teachers' bargaining power and mobility. Finally, teacher-education programs preparing candidates for international placements should explicitly address the structural and discriminatory dimensions of the global TEFL labor market identified here, in addition to the pedagogical and psychological competencies emphasized in existing CPD frameworks (Yang, 2021).

Conclusion

This paper has synthesized peer-reviewed research on foreign- and second-language teacher attrition and retention with a thematic analysis of anonymized online practitioner discourse. The findings suggest that TEFL attrition is best understood as the product of an interaction between individual psychological resources, resilience, self-efficacy, professional identity—and structural conditions specific to a loosely regulated, transnational labor market, including compensation instability, discriminatory hiring, visa dependency, and inconsistent institutional support. Whether a TEFL career is, in the words of the popular discourse this paper examined, "worth it" appears to depend less on the profession in the abstract than on the specific institutional, legal, and social conditions within which any individual teacher is embedded. Future research that combines rigorous, verified qualitative methods with attention to structural labor-market conditions is needed to further clarify these dynamics.

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