

Moroccan EFL teachers' experiences with the 2023 Al-Haouz earthquake

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This quantitative study examines Moroccan English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' experiences following the 2023 Al-Haouz earthquake, the country's most devastating natural disaster in six decades. Using an online survey (n=133) grounded in social-emotional learning (SEL), trauma-sensitive pedagogy, and resilience frameworks, the study explored teachers' experiences in relation to challenges, growth, coping mechanisms, and preparedness levels. Descriptive analyses revealed significant emotional and professional strain, including material loss, disrupted instruction, and limited institutional support. Yet, most teachers reported sustained commitment to teaching and strong reliance on personal and relational coping resources such as faith, community support, and helping others. Findings highlight teachers' dual roles as educators and emotional caregivers and underscore the urgency of integrating trauma-sensitive practices and SEL principles into national teacher preparation and crisis recovery plans. The study contributes to growing discussions on teacher well-being, autonomy, and resilience in disaster-affected educational contexts.

Key words: teacher resilience, trauma-sensitive pedagogy, social-emotional learning, education in emergencies, teacher well-being

Introduction

On 8 September 2023, Morocco experienced its most devastating earthquake since 1961. The 6.8-magnitude quake struck the High Atlas Mountains, near Marrakech, and was followed by hundreds of aftershocks. It resulted in over 3,000 fatalities and almost 6,000 serious injuries (Asharq Al Awsat 2023). As the country implemented post-crisis measures, teachers were among those who received psychological and social support

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to help ease emotional trauma and facilitate their return to regular school routines. The literature on trauma underscores that individuals exposed to disasters may experience both personal loss and vicarious stress as they aid others through recovery processes (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004). Within the English language teaching (ELT) field, such challenges can be compounded, as educators often carry the dual responsibility of language instruction and emotional scaffolding, particularly in environments marked by insecurity and psychosocial distress (Darragh and Pentón Herrera 2026).

Conceptual grounding

This section outlines the conceptual foundations that inform the study, drawing on frameworks of social-emotional learning (SEL), trauma-sensitive pedagogy, and resilience. SEL focuses on developing social-emotional competencies such as responsible decision-making (Pentón Herrera and Darragh 2024), while trauma-sensitive practices emphasize safety, connection, and emotional responsiveness in the classroom (Darragh and Pentón Herrera 2026). Both approaches aim to support teacher and student well-being during and after crises. Teachers frequently rely on various resources, such as adaptive coping strategies, collegial support, and pedagogical flexibility, to cultivate resilience and maintain instructional continuity in times of political or environmental crises (Darragh and Petrie 2019). To further understand how SEL, trauma-sensitive practices, and teachers' personal strategies take shape in times of disaster, it is essential to explore the deeper emotional and professional processes that shape educators' responses to crises.

Ongoing conversations about emotional coping, professional adaptation, and relational care in post-crisis teaching have identified teacher autonomy, resilience, and emotional labour as key to understanding how educators navigate crisis and trauma (see Darragh and Petrie 2019; Schvarcz *et al.* 2025). In crisis-affected educational contexts, teacher autonomy plays a critical role in sustaining pedagogical engagement and emotional stability. For example, Charitonos *et al.* (2025), in their study of online language teaching among educators in refugee settings, emphasize autonomy as the capacity to make contextually responsive instructional decisions that meet learners' emotional and linguistic needs. This view aligns with Gu and Day's (2007) resilience framework, which posits that teacher adaptability is shaped by the interaction of personal beliefs, professional identity, and external conditions. In post-disaster environments, autonomy functions as both a teaching strategy and a source of meaning-making, particularly for educators working in structurally under-resourced contexts such as rural Morocco, where agency can support both emotional grounding and instructional continuity.

The emotional demands of language teaching during times of crisis also warrant further attention. Gu and Day (2007) argue that emotional labour is central to teacher resilience, especially in uncertain environments. Recognizing emotional labour as an essential part of teaching can help shape how teachers interpret their work, sustain their practice, counter narrow views of pedagogy, and emphasize the importance of holistic support for teacher well-being. It also underscores the urgency of integrating emotional

preparedness and relational competence into national strategies for teacher education and emergency response.

While educational authorities in Morocco praised the swift return to classroom instruction after the earthquake, little is known about the experiences of educators whose mobilization, according to the Minister of Education, inspired students to resume learning (Kasraoui 2023). Existing research on teachers in post-crisis contexts tends to focus on students' needs, overlooking the emotional toll, pedagogical adaptations, and systemic barriers teachers face in navigating disaster recovery (Darragh and Pentón Herrera 2026; UNESCO 2018). This gap is often pronounced in contexts such as rural Morocco, where many EFL educators work under heightened structural and linguistic pressures. Thus, in this quantitative study, we explored the following research question: What were EFL teachers' experiences during and after the 2023 Al-Haouz earthquake crisis in terms of challenges, growth, coping mechanisms, and preparedness levels?

Research methods

Data collection and analysis

The Likert-scale survey used in this study covered several topics related to the participants' preparedness to ensure a comprehensive understanding of their experiences during the earthquake and its aftermath. It consisted of 27 questions written in English. Questions 1–11 covered demographic information such as gender, teaching experience, and work location, as well as teachers' previous experience with earthquakes. Only individuals who experienced the disaster or a similar one could complete the survey. The remaining questions were designed to form a coherent narrative that integrates personal, professional, emotional, and systemic perspectives to understand teachers' experiences in a disaster situation. Grounded in conceptual frameworks of (1) the teacher resilience framework (Gu and Day 2007); (2) education-in-emergencies principles (Mendenhall, Russell, and Buckner 2017); and (3) trauma-sensitive practices (Darragh and Pentón Herrera 2026), the survey traces a progression from individual dispositions (Q12), to lived impact (Q13–Q14), to emotional coping (Q15–Q16), to professional adaptation and recovery (Q17–Q19), and to barriers to motivation and identity (Q20). It also explored post-traumatic growth (Q21–Q23), pedagogical resourcefulness unique to EFL teaching (Q24), and perceptions of disaster preparedness and governance (Q25–Q27).

All in all, the survey offered a coherent, multi-dimensional account of Moroccan EFL teachers' experiences in the aftermath of the earthquake. Further, it highlighted how EFL teachers navigated crisis responses, sustained student relationships, and reconstructed meaning in their roles, while identifying the multilevel supports and systemic gaps that may shape Moroccan educator resilience in disaster-affected contexts.

We collected the data using the Qualtrics online survey platform, which enabled efficient distribution, timestamped responses, and reduced the risk of data entry errors (Kaufman and Lindquist 2019). The instrument was piloted with three EFL teacher supervisors from the affected regions, resulting in improved wording, flow, and clarity. The final survey was anonymously disseminated in May and June 2025 via the Moroccan

Association of Teachers of English Facebook group and through district supervisors, with one reminder sent two weeks later.

Survey data were analysed descriptively in Excel, with frequencies and percentages used to identify patterns across demographic, emotional, and professional domains. The inclusion of both closed- and open-ended items further enhanced reliability by enabling cross-validation of reported experiences. The descriptive analysis was informed by the study's conceptual frameworks. Patterns in the quantitative data were examined, reported, and interpreted considering the theoretical constructs guiding the study.

Demographic characteristics of participants

A total of 133 teachers responded to the survey, representing roughly 34.5 percent of the target EFL teachers' population in the affected areas. Fifty-six percent of respondents were male, and 44 percent were female. Seventy-four percent of respondents were under the age of 40. Nearly 73 percent worked in rural or suburban schools, and 91 percent worked in public schools. The respondents worked in secondary and/or middle school settings. The regional representation was the highest in Marrakech-Safi (74 percent), the most affected region. Finally, the respondents' demographics show that 52.1 percent of teachers have 1–10 years of teaching experience. Another 31.3 percent reported 10 years of experience. The remaining 16.6 percent did not specify.

Results

The findings reported here concern teachers' experiences of the earthquake impact and their emotional coping, professional adaptation, and perceptions of systems to support their professional growth post-crisis.

Impact of the 2023 Al-Haouz earthquake

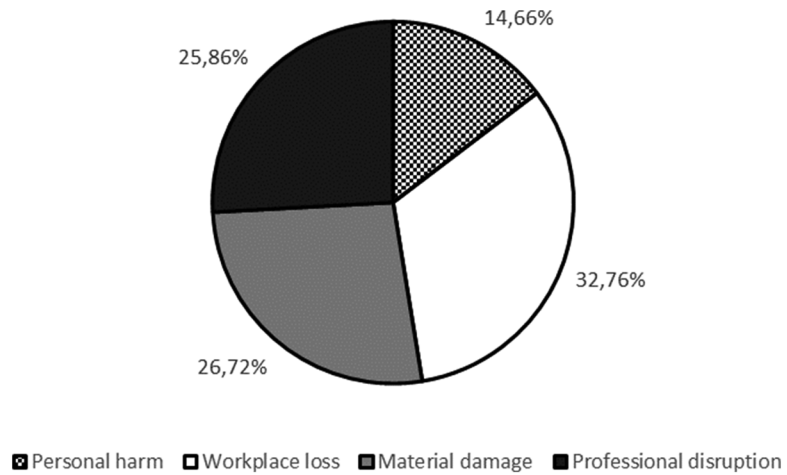
Figure 1 summarizes the reported impacts experienced by participants. The responses were grouped into four overarching categories: Personal harm, workplace loss, material damage, and professional disruption.

As shown in **Figure 1**, workplace loss represents the largest impact reported, which includes injury or death of students/colleagues and associated emotional distress. Material damage is the next most frequently reported impact, referring to damage to homes, teaching materials, and school infrastructure. The third most frequently reported impact is professional disruption associated with reassignment to a different school or student relocation. Finally, less than a fifth of teachers reported experiencing or witnessing direct personal harm, such as personal injury or loss, or that of their immediate family. It is worth noting that teachers' responses did not show any statistically significant differences based on their gender or teaching experience.

Teachers' emotional coping and professional adaptation
Stress coping strategies

Half of the teachers reported their full or partial ability to cope with stress in multiple ways. Around two-thirds reported seeking psychological and emotional support through talking to people close to them and/or mental health professionals. Nearly 50 percent found support in journaling, writing, meditation, or prayer. Finally, 38.5 percent found healing in helping others, and 22.9 percent took time off.

FIGURE 1
Distribution of earthquake impacts reported by Moroccan EFL teachers



Professional adaptation

Regarding teachers' instructional resilience—i.e. their capacity to maintain commitment and effectiveness in the face of challenging circumstances—75 percent reported that they found ways to continue teaching effectively, despite disruptions. Similarly, 72.5 percent adapted their strategies to support students' emotional needs. Most importantly, 92.2 percent still felt confident in their role as English teachers, and 88.2 percent remained committed to teaching notwithstanding emotionally challenging circumstances. Teachers reported a variety of activities (Figure 2) aligning with instructional resilience and trauma-sensitive practices, as defined by Darragh and Pentón Herrera (2026).

Figure 2 shows that teachers responded to the earthquake's emotional toll in various ways. Most teachers clustered around relational and emotionally supportive instructional activities (e.g. facilitating fun and using collaborative learning tasks). Nearly half of the respondents reported accommodating students' emotional needs by highlighting uplifting messages, allowing self-expression in their native language, minimizing anxiety during speaking activities, and using technology to promote connectedness. However, only a fourth of teachers allowed space for silence, pauses, or emotional check-ins, which is noteworthy given that such practices are rarely emphasized in local ELT professional development (Elmeski and Bentahar 2024).

Challenges faced by teachers

Teachers highlighted multiple challenges in the earthquake's aftermath, many of which overlapped with reported impacts. Beyond the loss or injury of colleagues and students, material damage and professional disruption, Figure 3 shows that the challenges faced by teachers are tied to both student engagement and teachers' socio-emotional well-being. Teachers reported reduced student engagement, decreased emotional presence and enthusiasm, lower student confidence in speaking English, and a weakened teacher-student connection. Teachers also noted the urgency of providing post-crisis emotional support or counselling for teachers and students.

FIGURE 2

Emotionally responsive and adaptive instructional strategies reported by EFL teachers

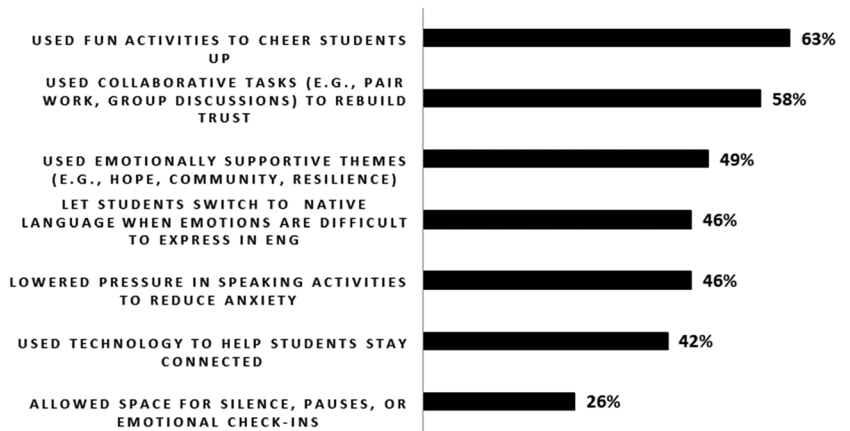
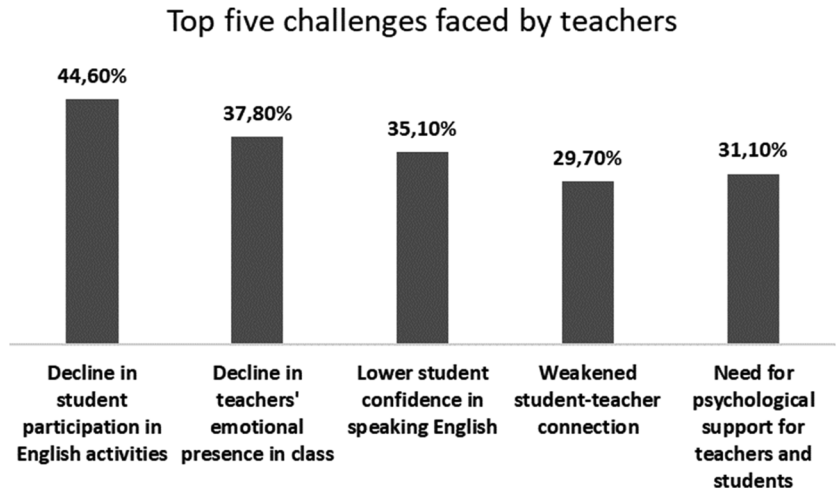


FIGURE 3

Top five challenges reported by EFL teachers post-Al-Haouz earthquake

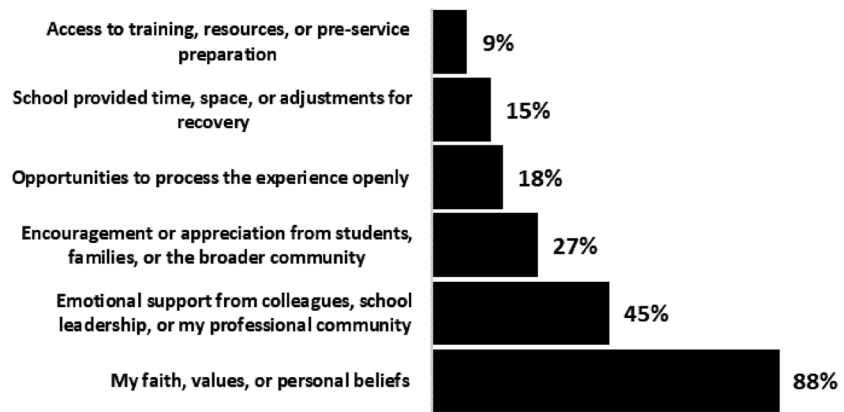


Preparedness for crisis response

When asked about teacher preparedness for future disasters, only 30 percent of teachers reported feeling prepared for similar crises. Most teachers relied on personal strategies (e.g. faith, family, and informal peer support) rather than institutional support (e.g. professional development and counselling) (Figure 4), suggesting that system capacity is a weak link in teacher preparedness and support during crisis response. This is further corroborated by survey responses showing that teachers relied on their own resourcefulness to bounce back. Agreement among teachers on personal confidence and commitment to teaching averaged 57 percent, yet only 31 percent agreed that they felt supported by their professional community. Similarly, when teachers listed their three most important needs to continue to teach effectively, should another disaster occur, the following three systemic priorities emerged:

FIGURE 4

Teachers' perceptions of the factors that affected their personal and professional growth



1. Sixty percent of teachers requested professional development targeting natural disaster response, trauma-sensitive pedagogy, and crisis management.
2. Sixty percent requested teaching materials to ensure learning continuity when school infrastructure is disrupted.
3. Fifty-five percent underscored psychological and emotional support—including counselling and recognition—as essential foundations for bolstering disaster preparedness.

EFL teachers' perceived systems of support

About 71 percent of the teachers reported professional growth post-earthquake. However, 29 percent could not think of any growth. Seventy percent of the teachers who noticed growth reported developing stronger relationships with their students; 61 percent felt more committed to their role as teachers, and 58 percent reported that they were proud to contribute to the school community. In Figure 4, personal/internal support anchors emerged as the most prominent systems of support (88 percent), and 45 percent of teachers reported receiving emotional support from colleagues, school leadership, and their professional community. Finally, less than one-fifth of teachers reported institutional support in the form of access to training and resources, or time and space for recovery.

Taken together, the findings suggest that despite limited institutional support, teachers exhibited significant emotional resilience and professional commitment in the earthquake aftermath.

Discussion

In reference to the research question, *What were EFL teachers' experiences during and after the 2023 Al-Haouz earthquake crisis in terms of challenges, growth, coping mechanisms, and preparedness levels?*, the findings point to a profession marked by dual roles—pedagogical and emotional.

Teachers reported adapting classroom strategies to reduce pressure, facilitate collaborative and enjoyable tasks, and provide space for student self-expression. Nearly three-quarters of participants (72.5 percent)

described modifying instruction to meet students' emotional needs, while others drew on personal coping resources (e.g. journaling, performing prayer, and helping others). These practices illustrate how Moroccan EFL teachers supported learning and emotional recovery during crisis conditions. This finding echoes previous publications underscoring how teachers in crisis settings often shoulder unrecognized emotional labour—the effort teachers invest in managing their own feelings as they support students emotionally—while striving to ensure instructional continuity (Schvarcz *et al.* 2025). The data revealed that most teachers developed or leveraged a repertoire of coping and instructional strategies to sustain their work, including fun activities, collaborative learning, and lowered performance pressure. Of note, these practices align with trauma-sensitive pedagogy and resilience frameworks. In this sense, the results demonstrate how practice connects to theory: teachers' concrete actions functioned as resilience strategies that also reinforced their professional identities (Charitonos *et al.* 2025; Gu and Day 2007).

For many Moroccan EFL teachers, autonomy functioned as an act of instructional decision- and meaning-making as well as ethical grounding during the crisis. While the survey did not include explicit items on teacher autonomy, the adaptive behaviours reported by participants, such as modifying instruction to support students emotionally and continuing to teach despite personal losses, suggest a high degree of context-responsive agency. Charitonos *et al.* (2025) emphasize that autonomy in emergency contexts involves responsive decision-making under constrained conditions, often without institutional guidance or precedent. In this way, autonomy becomes a form of pedagogical authorship, allowing teachers to define their roles beyond their reality constraints. This framing aligns with Gu and Day's (2007) assertion that autonomy and resilience are intertwined, shaped by teachers' ability to reconcile personal values with professional, and in the case of this study, context-specific demands. In Morocco, this autonomy may have enabled teachers to transform adversity into a reaffirmation of their purpose. Teacher autonomy in post-crisis settings should therefore be recognized not merely as survival or improvisation, but as an intentional, identity-affirming practice that sustains both instructional integrity and emotional coherence.

A key tension emerging from the data is the contrast between teachers' strong internal coping mechanisms and the perceived dearth of systemic or institutional support. While 88 percent of respondents cited personal or internal resources as the primary drivers of growth, only 15 percent reported receiving tangible support from their institutions. Such an imbalance reveals a pressing vulnerability in our field: teacher well-being remains contingent on personal resilience in the face of weak systemic designs (Pentón Herrera and Darragh 2024). Although internal strategies such as praying, journaling, or speaking with close others provided emotional relief, the absence of formal structures for support poses sustainability risks, particularly if disasters become more frequent or protracted (Gu and Day 2007; UNESCO 2018). This finding appears to be especially concerning in under-resourced contexts such as rural Morocco, where teacher attrition, professional isolation, and limited access to support services can further

compound stress. Therefore, the findings highlight the need to recalibrate policy frameworks to include sustained emotional, pedagogical, and infrastructural support for teachers as part of national crisis recovery strategies.

The findings also align with trauma-sensitive educational practices, particularly in the domain of instructional resilience. Nearly three-quarters of participants (72.5 percent) reported adapting classroom strategies to meet their students' emotional needs. The most frequently used methods, fun activities, collaborative work, and lowered performance pressure, reflect a clear teacher awareness of the affective dimensions of post-crisis learning. This conclusion also resonates with research suggesting that emotionally responsive teaching practices can restore safety, build relational trust, and facilitate cognitive engagement following trauma (Darragh and Pentón Herrera 2026; Pentón Herrera and Darragh 2024). However, only a small number of teachers (26 percent) intentionally created space for silence or emotional check-ins, indicating that the integration of trauma-sensitive practices and SEL may still be an area for development. Here again, theory and practice intersect—teachers' intuitive choices to create safe, supportive environments illustrate trauma-sensitive pedagogy in action, even if such practices were unevenly applied or unknown to them. These findings suggest that while many Moroccan EFL teachers intuitively adopted strategies to support students' needs, there remains a need for professional learning that deepens their understanding of SEL to align better with national teacher education efforts (Elmeski and Bentahar 2024).

Importantly, the coping mechanisms reported by the participants—including prayer, meditation, journaling, and help from others—should be understood through a culturally situated lens. These forms of emotional regulation reflect local and religiously grounded strategies that extend beyond Western conceptualizations of SEL. In Morocco, where Islam plays a significant social and ethical role, spiritual coping is not ancillary but central to how many individuals process hardship and rebuild meaning. Similarly, the act of helping others, cited by 38.5 percent of the participants, aligns with collectivist cultural norms that prioritize community restoration as a pathway to personal healing. These insights contribute to the broader SEL literature by reinforcing the need to localize and contextualize social-emotional approaches, particularly in post-colonial or Global South contexts where imported models are unlikely to resonate with teachers' lived realities. As such, trauma-sensitive practices and SEL initiatives in ELT pedagogy must be culturally anchored and spiritually inclusive to remain responsive and ethically grounded.

Another salient theme from the data is how teachers' sense of professional identity was reinforced rather than weakened by the crisis. Despite structural challenges, 92.2 percent of the respondents reported feeling confident in their professional roles, and 88.2 percent affirmed their continued commitment to teaching. This finding suggests many teachers interpreted their ability to teach amidst adversity not only as professional success but as a reaffirmation of their core identity. This finding also echoes Benesch's (2017) assertion that emotions in teaching constitute part of the broader

project of identity construction and pedagogical meaning-making. In disaster contexts, this act of identity affirmation becomes especially significant as both a source of personal coherence and a tool for emotional survival (Schvarcz *et al.* 2025). Here, the link between practice and theory is again visible: the act of returning to the classroom and adapting instruction functioned as professional continuity and as identity work, helping teachers sustain dignity and purpose in the face of crisis.

Considering these findings, we argue for the integration of trauma-sensitive practices, SEL, and teacher well-being into national emergency preparedness and recovery plans. Whereas Morocco's swift return to in-person instruction was praised (Kasraoui 2023), the lack of systemic support for teachers risks framing resilience as an individual rather than a collective or institutional responsibility. Instead, policies must adopt a broader view of teacher preparedness, one that includes pre-service and in-service training on trauma-sensitive pedagogy, psychological first aid, and context-informed SEL strategies (INEE 2024; UNESCO 2018). Furthermore, collaboration among the Ministry of Education, health professionals, and teacher associations can ensure that mental health support and instructional resources are available and accessible in crisis-affected regions. As the climate crisis intensifies and emergencies become more common, building emotionally resilient teaching systems is necessary, given its alignment with education-in-emergencies principles that emphasize preparedness, response, and recovery (Mendenhall, Russell, and Buckner 2017).

Limitations and future research

Combining paper and pencil options with the online survey may have increased the number of respondents, especially among teachers without regular Internet access. Relatedly, avoiding the end of the school year to administer the survey could have bolstered teachers' accessibility and response rate. Additionally, we recognize that the structured format of surveys cannot fully capture teachers' complex decision-making, emotional labour, and ethical challenges. This underscores the need for complementary qualitative approaches (e.g., interviews, reflective journals, and ethnographies) to further probe the relational and cultural dimensions of teacher resilience. Longitudinal research could also trace how coping strategies, emotional labour, and pedagogical responses evolve over time. Finally, future work should explore how trauma-sensitive practices and SEL initiatives can be locally adapted and sustained within teacher education and professional development programs (Elmeski and Bentahar 2024; Pentón Herrera and Darragh 2024).

Conclusion

This study confirms that Moroccan EFL teachers fulfilled the roles of educators, emotional caregivers, and community leaders in post-2023 Al-Haouz earthquake. Their responses reveal a deep professional and ethical commitment to maintaining learning environments amid trauma, uncertainty, and limited institutional support. Framing this resilience as an expected, rather than extraordinary, response highlights the urgent need for policies that proactively support teacher well-being and pedagogical

adaptability in disaster contexts (INEE 2024; UNESCO 2018). As climate-related and human-created crises—including wars, displacement, and systemic neglect—continue to disrupt education globally, emotionally responsive teaching must be integrated into national preparedness and recovery plans. Language education in emergencies involves far more than curriculum; it engages questions of healing, identity, and social-emotional connection. The insights from this study invite stakeholder to centre teacher voices, prioritise systemic care, and design ELT systems that are linguistically inclusive, trauma-sensitive, and social-emotionally grounded.

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