

Problems → Questions → Solutions:
Addressing Classroom Challenges

Plenary webinar at 35th SPELT (Society of Pakistan English Language Teachers) conference, Karachi, 26 October 2019

Richard Smith, University of
Warwick, UK

Plan

1. Difficult ('normal') classroom circumstances
2. TELCnet
3. Problems → Solutions (learning from examples)
4. Problems → *Questions* → Solutions (teacher-research)

1. Difficult ('normal') classroom circumstances

Is your teaching context
more like this ...?



Photo © Christopher Tribble, 2004

Or more like one of these...?





Photo © Christopher Tribble, 2004















- ‘Teaching in low-resource classrooms’
- ‘Teaching in large classes’
- ‘Teaching in difficult circumstances’
- ‘Teaching in challenging contexts’
- Teaching in public education systems in relatively low-income countries

= Teaching in *normal* circumstances for many (the majority of) English teachers around the world

But teacher education often
assumes this ...



Photo © Christopher Tribble, 2004

2. TELCnet

Teaching English in Large Classes
research and development network
(2008+)

TELC (Teaching English in Large Classes) Network

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TELC Home

Network rationale

Large class size is a challenge faced by many teachers and learners around the world and is a particular issue in many 'developing' countries where teacher recruitment has not kept pace with rapid increases in school enrolments. Investigations of large class size and other challenges involved in teaching in 'difficult circumstances' constitute the focus of our concern as a research network.

[bit.ly/telcnet-
home](http://bit.ly/telcnet-home)

***What
challenges
do
teachers
face in
large
classes?***



<http://www.publicdomainpictures.net/view-image.php?image=7018&picture=primary-school-students>

Primary School Students by Peter Griffin

1. I have too much homework to mark. It is impossible to give effective feedback to everyone

2. Not all students participate due to being in a large class.

3. It is difficult to get students' attention to stop them working on a pair or group task.

4. The noise level in my class is too high.

5. Students in a large class often have mixed abilities. It is difficult to cater for students with such different levels and needs.

6. It is difficult to achieve rapport with the students

7. Students' individual responses are difficult to hear.

8. It is difficult to promote active learning in large classes when resources such as textbooks are limited.

9. It is difficult to know/use students' names in a large class.

10. I am sometimes in despair at my inability to manage a large class.

Ideas for teacher educators

- In TELCnet we want to contribute to in-service and pre-service teacher education
- Ideas based on ‘bottom-up’ research
- Building on the experiences teachers bring, and the experiences they can share – not ‘top-down training’

3. Early work: Problems → Solutions

Literature review



Large Class Teaching Challenges and Possible Responses

Rajapriyah Anmpalagan & Richard Smith

Below are some strategies which have been proposed for addressing common challenges in large class English teaching. We drew up this list of challenges and possible responses in 2012 as a basis for a questionnaire study we carried out with teachers worldwide later in the same year. Here is a [list of teachers' own responses to these challenges](#), according to the questionnaire we sent out. We thank Mais Ajjan and Harry Kuchah Kuchah for their contributions to the initial discussion of challenges and responses for inclusion in the questionnaire and below.

Peer feedback to reduce the burden of marking homework

"I have too much homework to mark. It becomes almost impossible to give effective feedback for everyone."

Engaging students in peer feedback, in other words getting them to comment on / mark one another's work might reduce the marking burden for the teacher significantly. At the same time, it might encourage students to take greater responsibility for their own learning.

You could try coming up with clear assessment criteria together with your students. These criteria can form the basis on which students review one another's work and comment on it. For example, if students have written an essay:

1. They could share their work and give each other feedback based on the assessment criteria;
2. During this, the teacher can visit the different groups and give comments and suggestions when needed;
3. The teacher can highlight particular aspects on the board so that students can engage in further peer feedback.

Getting written feedback from students to cater for mixed abilities

“Students in a large class often have mixed abilities. It is difficult to cater for students with such different levels and needs.”

One way to address this problem might be by asking students for written feedback on lessons.

This could enable all students, including those who are shy, to give expression to their difficulties and enables you to take necessary actions in following classes. For example, you could:

1. Ask your students to take out a sheet of paper and just for a couple of minutes summarize main points of the class or note down any points that are unclear to them regarding the lesson;
2. Collect these notes and use them to learn how far your students have understood the lesson and their possible weak areas.

Source: Hasan, M.F. n.d. 'Effective teaching in large classes'. Online: <http://www.uobabylon.edu.iq/uobcoleges/filesshare/articles/large%20classes.pdf> 

Increasing availability to enhance rapport

“It is difficult to achieve rapport with the students.”

Rapport might be improved when teachers make themselves more 'available' and find ways to be more accessible to students on a personal level. For instance, teachers can:

1. Come early to class and chat with students who are already there or greet students as they enter the classroom;

Stories of remarkable teachers

Taking the Bull by its Horns: Zakia Sarwar's Pro-Autonomy Approach to Large Classes in Pakistan (Part I)

Richard Smith

Introduction

Zakia Sarwar is well-known in Pakistan and internationally as the 'mother' (one of the founders, and the leading light) of SPELT, the Society of Pakistani English Language Teachers. She devotes much of her time to this association, but until quite recently she has also been a research and professional development consultant at the Centre of English Language, Aga Khan University. She is also the Chair of the Committee on English Language Teaching in the national Higher Education Commission, which is now introducing Applied Linguistics into universities at BA level onwards for the first time since the country's inception in 1947. As a teacher educator and researcher, her main field of interest has been developing innovative methodology and materials for large classes, which constitute a widespread challenge in Pakistani education.



I interviewed Zakia at her home in Karachi in November 2007, at the end of the 23rd SPELT conference (where I had been invited to give talks on learner and teacher autonomy). Below I use excerpts from the interview as a basis for profiling Zakia's work in the same field. I shall also refer to the session she and Fauzia Shamim facilitated at the conference, the articles and book chapters Zakia has published, and subsequent correspondence I have had with Zakia via email. First, though, a little more about SPELT and its annual conference.

Teaching ELT in Challenging Contexts: An Interview with Harry Kuchah Kuchah

Posted on [11 January 2017](#) by [Sherry Blok](#)

The year 2016 was a golden year, with TESOL celebrating its 50th anniversary and educators across the globe making a difference in their classrooms and communities. It has been a honor for me to share some of their stories with you and highlight their unwavering commitment to the field. I am delighted to close the year with a very special interview with Harry Kuchah Kuchah. Inspired by the wisdom and intelligence of his great grandfather, Harry wears his name proudly. His best practices stem from his experience as a student himself of large classes in Cameroon, which has translated into a mission of embracing students as partners in teaching and learning and empowering teachers to become agents of change.



Harry Kuchah Kuchah

Harry Kuchah Kuchah (HKK): Currently I am at the University of Bath as a lecturer in TESOL and applied linguistics, but I still do a lot of teacher development work in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially in Cameroon, and Ghana and I have also written some materials for the British Council, Certificate in Primary English Language Teaching Programs in South Africa. I grew up in Cameroon, and I went to school in classes similar to where I do my research. That experience is what made me the teacher practitioner and researcher that I am today.

Sherry Blok (SB): What is the ELT landscape like in Cameroon, Harry?

HKK: The landscape is a huge range of things—the good, bad and the ugly, and in fact, the very, very ugly. You will find elite private schools with fewer children



Story of Madhav Timilisina (a teacher in a rural Nepalese secondary school)

(written reflections elicited in TELCnet research by Prem Phyak 2011)

“Now, I am a teacher and I have been teaching different subjects for more than a decade. I am facing similar problem as my teachers faced. I have to teach more than sixty students in the same class and I know that some of my friends are teaching more than a hundred.

Issues of multicultural education, quality education, sustainable education etc. are in the debate and World-class education has been a felt need but we have crowded classes with lack of resources. Although I am not satisfied with what I have done to solve my problem, the steps I have taken in the class have at least reduced dropout and repetition to some degree.

Nearly four different ethnic communities are in the catchment area of my school.

Students from Newari community speak Newari language as their first language and Paharis, Tamangs and Magars have their own language (except Paharis) and culture. Using some aspects of their language and talking about their feasts and festival in the class, I address their linguistic as well as cultural identity.

As a result, they all feel welcome in the class even if it is crowded. They never feel that teachers do not care about them. It helps me make my students feel supported during my class. I find students working vigorously when I make groups mixing all ethnic identities. [...]

A few talented students generally dominate the large size classes. They can help the teacher to teach effectively. My way of mobilizing them helps me. I place them in different benches and assign them to help other weak students. Another way that I use is to administer Proficiency test before I start the course. According to the score they obtain, they are placed in such a way that the weak students will get helping hands.

It is, of course, a troublesome job for the teacher to have individual care in a large size class. A student hardly gets half a minute within a 40-45 minutes' class.[...]
It is not possible to reach to each individual.

To solve this problem, I just go through the answers of one student per bench and ask him to help his friends. I have found peer correction and self-correction techniques useful in such classes.

Large size class is not only a problem or burden of teachers but also an opportunity to explore new techniques and tools.”

Web-page of many ideas for teacher educators: warwick.ac.uk/telc/training

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Training Materials - Teaching English in Large Classes

Most of the materials on this page were developed by Mais Ajjan, Harry Kuchah and Richard Smith for a group of Malaysian pre-service teacher trainees in January 2012 and by Richard Smith for subsequent workshops and webinars with in-service teachers, especially in Nepal. We are making them freely available here for use by other teacher educators but please let us know and give us feedback and suggestions if you do use them (to R.C.Smith@warwick.ac.uk).

We also encourage you to send in materials of your own for sharing here, to benefit other teacher educators and teacher trainees. Your contribution will be properly acknowledged.

You can access the main [TELC network website](#)  and join the [TELC Facebook group](#)  if you are interested more broadly in issues of large class teaching in developing/transitional country contexts.

Challenges of large class teaching (option 1.)

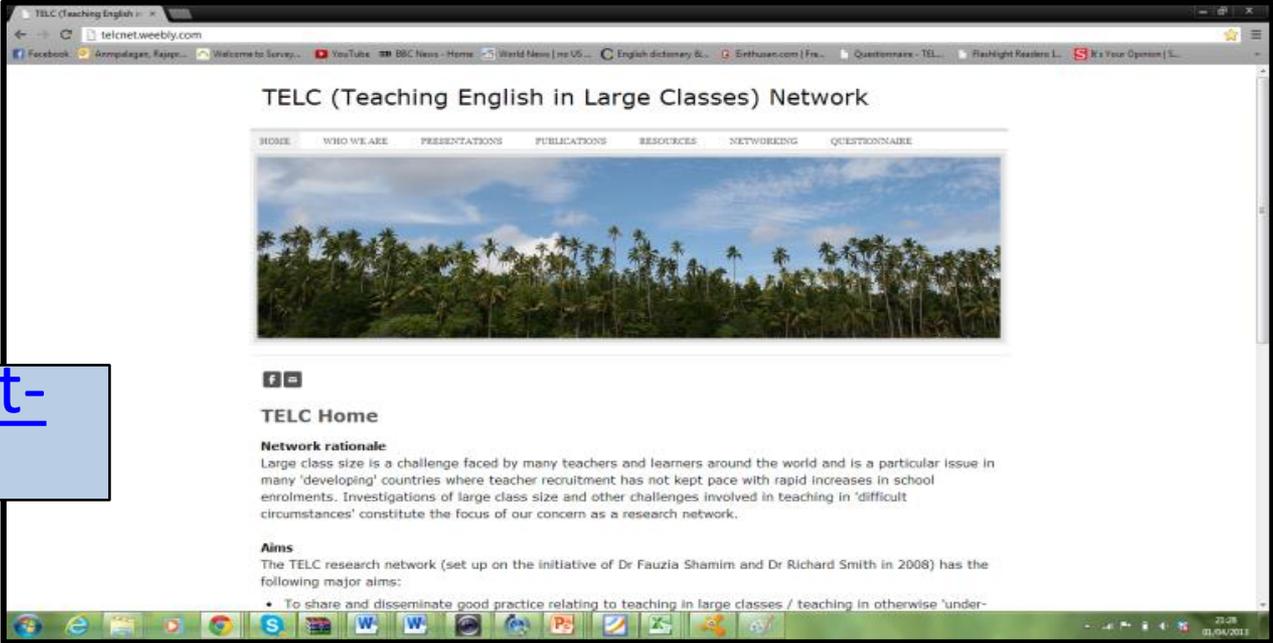
[Initial lecture notes](#)  (powerpoint slides for one hour session)

[Challenges of large class teaching according to Hornby School participants \(Shamim et al. 2007\)](#)  (handout)

[Challenges of large class teaching as summarized in Watson Todd's 2006 literature review](#)  (handout)

Task: Compare the two lists of problems and see which ones are common / which ones are unique to one list. Do you

bit.ly/telcnet-home



facebook.com/groups/telcgroup/

4. Problems → Questions → Solutions

- What can we do in teacher training / what can teachers do for themselves aside from providing/reading about success stories?
- Needs to take account of different contexts
- Building teachers' confidence in their ability to find solutions
- Needs to help teachers develop *agency*
- Encouraging teachers to inquire

Reflection/Discussion questions about success stories:

Madhav Timilisina says: 'A few talented students generally dominate the large size classes. They can help the teacher to teach effectively. My way of mobilizing them helps me. I place them in different benches and assign them to help other weak students'.

Have *you* found or heard of ways to mobilize the stronger students to help you overcome problems in large classes?'

Fast forward >>>> Two recent publications

Kuchah, K. and Shamim, F. (eds) 2018. *International Perspectives on Teaching English in Difficult Circumstances: Contexts, Challenges and Possibilities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Smith, R., Padwad, A. and Bullock, D. (eds.) 2017. [*Teaching in Low-resource Classrooms: Voices of Experience*](#). London: British Council. Accompanying video resource: <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/low-resource-classrooms>

A workshop for sharing good practice and developing / pursuing questions

Smith, R., Padwad, A. & Bullock, D. 2016. [Teaching in Low-resource Classrooms: Voices of Experience](#). London: British Council.

- - sharing success stories
- - teachers inquiring [using other teachers as a resource]



Teachers sharing stories of success



Building on success

Starting with success: Think of and share a successful teaching/learning experience in your recent experience? What made it successful / how could you reproduce this success?









[https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/](https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/low-resource-classrooms) [low-resource-classrooms](https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/low-resource-classrooms) (Video)

The screenshot shows the top navigation bar of the TeachingEnglish website. On the left, there are logos for the British Council and BBC. On the right, the text 'TeachingEnglish' is displayed. Below the logos, a navigation menu includes links for 'Teaching kids', 'Teaching teens', 'Teaching adults', 'Teacher development', 'Training courses', 'Events', and 'Magazine'. A search icon is located on the far right. The main content area features a blue header with the text 'Teacher development' and 'Low-resource classrooms'. Below this, a paragraph explains that English is often taught in 'low-resource' classrooms with limited materials, and the site aims to fill this gap. A photograph of students in a classroom is visible on the right side of the header.

Primary success stories



Teachers from Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan share their stories of successes in low-resource primary classrooms.

Primary success stories

31 March, 2016



Getting primary students interested in learning

English

A primary school teacher shares her story of how she has generated interest in English with a large group of primary pupils.

Primary success stories

31 March, 2016



Using role play and free writing to introduce creativity

A primary school teacher in Pakistan shares her story of how she introduces greater creativity through the use of role play and free...

Supporting publication



Overview



Secondary success stories



Secondary success stories

20 April, 2016

A - Z of Content

bit.ly/low-resource-classrooms (book)

Teaching in low-resource classrooms: voices of experience

Edited by Richard Smith, Amol Padwad and Deborah Bullock



Questions for discussion re. Fehmina Qaiser's success story

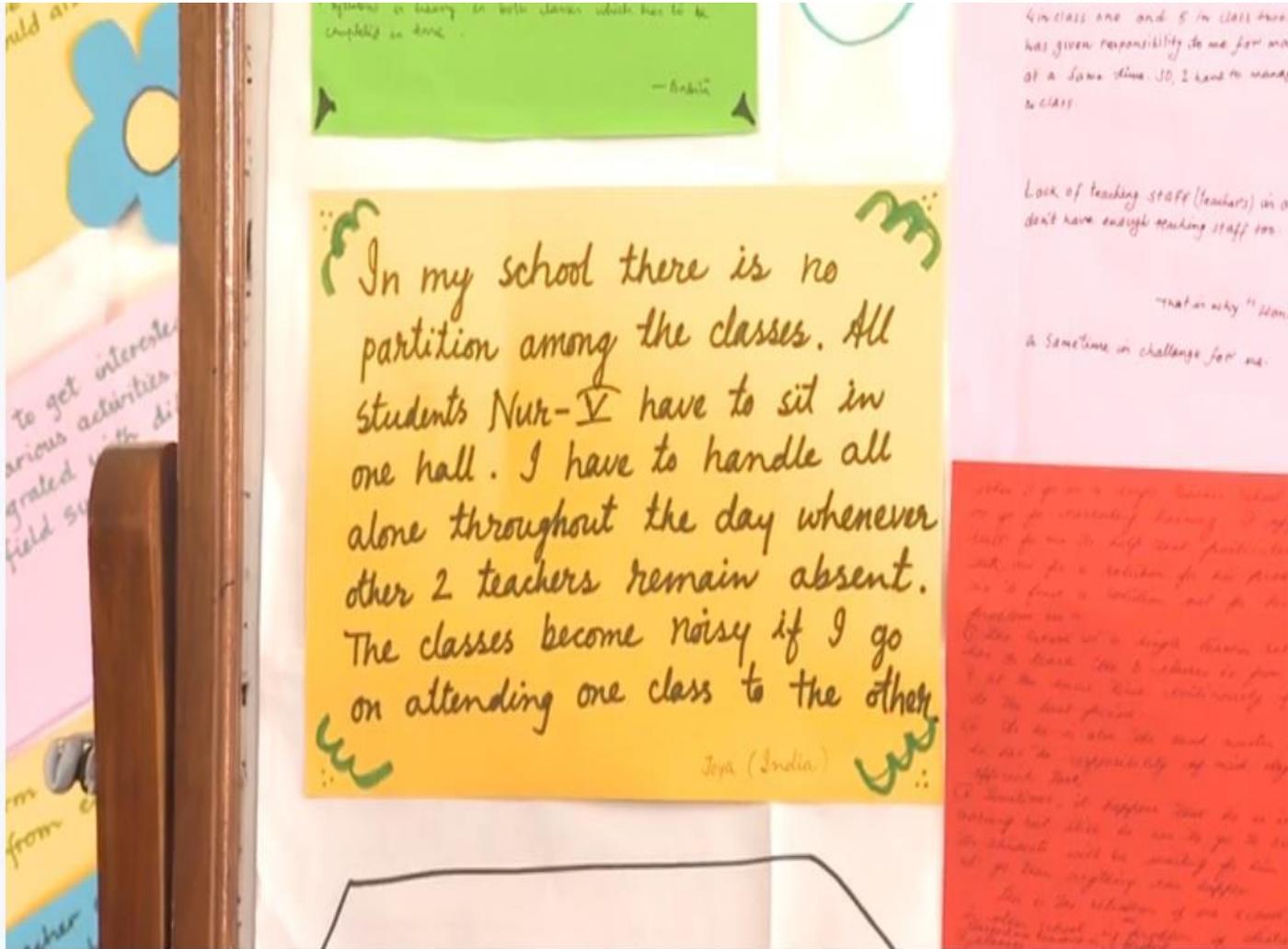
- Q1: Fehmina created simple resources from recycled materials. Have you ever thought about using recycled and natural materials to make resources? What materials could you make and how could you use them?
- Q2: Do you have very poor and disadvantaged students in your classes? How do their needs differ? What additional support do they need to keep them motivated and help them achieve?



Teachers inquiring / using one another as resource



Problems



Turning problems into ‘How can I...?’ questions

Teachers can assume agency by converting problems into questions – firstly, ‘How can I ...?’ questions which can lead to advice-seeking within local communities of practice

Turning problems into 'How can I...?' questions

I have too much homework to mark. It is impossible to give effective feedback to everyone.

How can I provide feedback to students? What are the different forms of feedback can I use?

It is difficult to get students' attention to stop them working on a pair or group task.

How can I attract students' attention during activities?



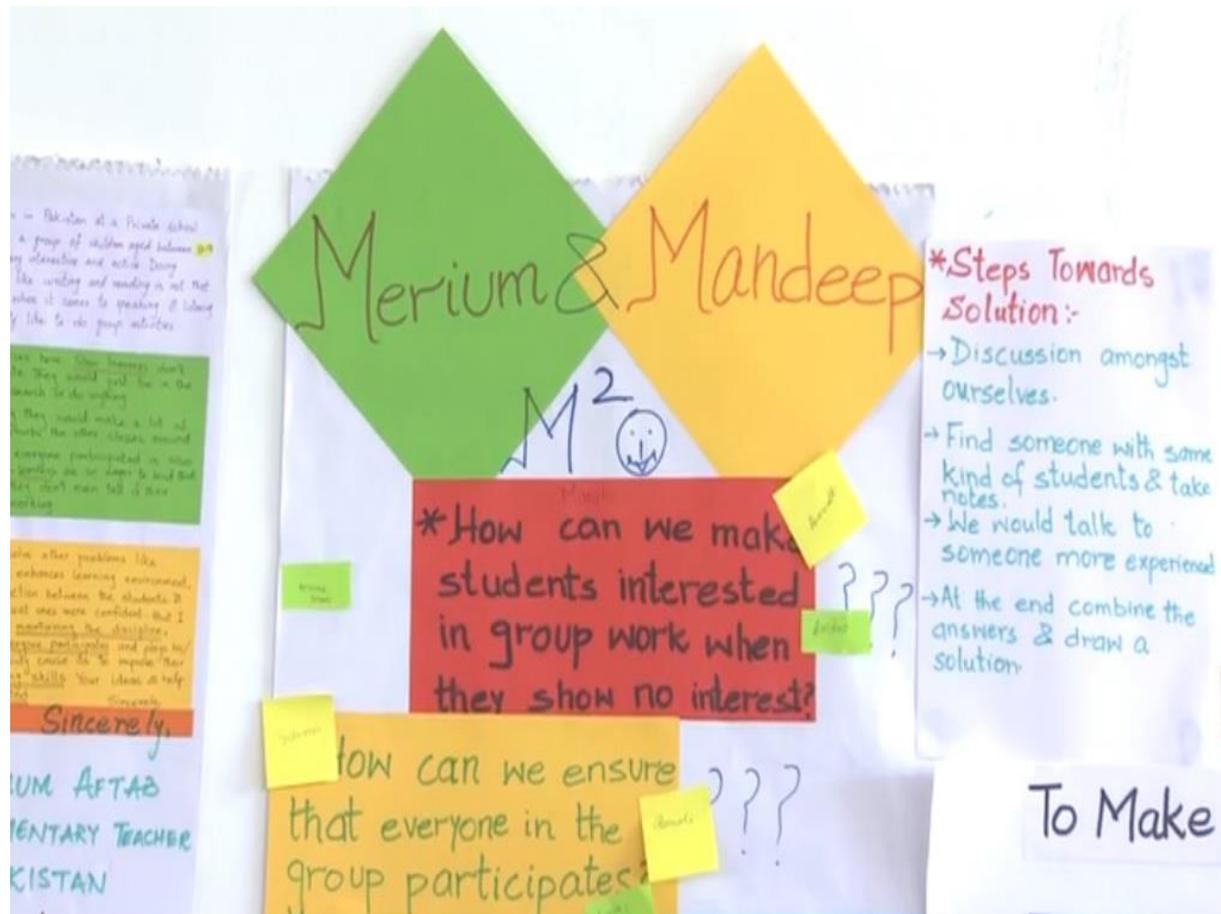
Not all students participate due to being in a large class.

How can I design activities or group work so all students participate?

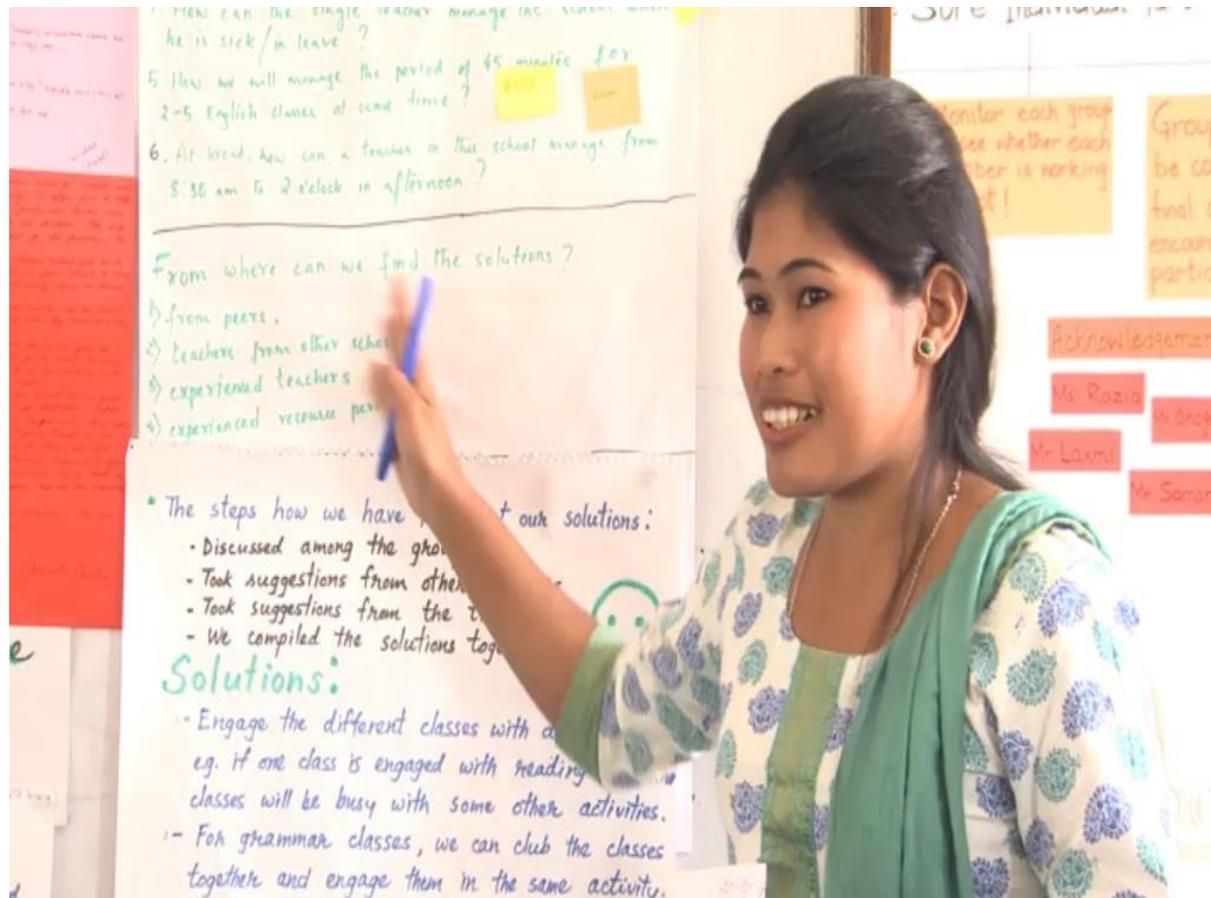
It is difficult to promote active learning in large classes when resources such as textbooks, flash cards are limited.

How can I help students to be active in their learning without using resources? What does it mean to be engaged in active learning?

Narrowing down to one main topic and seeking answers to questions from colleagues



Sharing findings



[https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/](https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/low-resource-classrooms) [low-resource-classrooms](https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/low-resource-classrooms) (Video)

BRITISH COUNCIL | BBC | TeachingEnglish

Home » Teacher development

Teacher development

Low-resource classrooms

Throughout the world English is often taught in 'low-resource' classrooms, but there are few training materials which are derived from and which reflect this reality. The materials presented here are intended to help fill this gap.



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31 March, 2016



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Supporting publication



Overview



Secondary success stories



Secondary success stories

20 April, 2016

A - Z of Content

bit.ly/low-resource-classrooms

Teaching in low-resource classrooms: voices of experience

Edited by Richard Smith, Amol Padwad and Deborah Bullock



Teachers inquiring in their classrooms

Teachers tried out ideas gathered from colleagues and evaluated the results (a kind of 'action research')

bit.ly/low-resource-classrooms

Teaching in low-resource classrooms: voices of experience

Edited by Richard Smith, Amol Padwad and Deborah Bullock



Chilean Champion Teachers



[Background](#)

[Our progress](#)

[FAQs](#)

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[Final reports](#)



A two-day workshop in January 2013 launched the British Council Chile 'Champion Teachers - Action Research Project',

Here are [Photos from this two-day workshop](#) for Chilean secondary school teachers, [further information in Spanish](#), and a [video about the project in English](#).

This first iteration of the project ended in January 2014 with another two-day workshop in Santiago. [Congratulations to all participating Champion Teachers!](#) [Here's a photo](#)

‘Teacher-research’ =

- ‘research initiated and carried out by teachers into issues of importance to them in their own work’
- ‘research done by teachers into issues which concern them’
- ‘Addressing questions that arise from your practice by gathering data, analysing it, and sharing what you find’

How CAN we involve Parents into the English Learning Process of their CHILDREN?

• They don't invest in resources for the English Subject. (to keep a record) at the end of MARCH

• They don't spend time with their kids to do Homeworks. (we will survey our students in Spanish)

• Parents don't go to school, when the English teachers ask them to go. (a check list in parents' internet)

at the end of April ☺

Handwritten note on the left side of the page.

Handwritten note at the bottom left.

Handwritten note at the bottom center.

Handwritten note at the bottom right.

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Handwritten names: Lily Carr, Elizabeth, Maria Rodriguez

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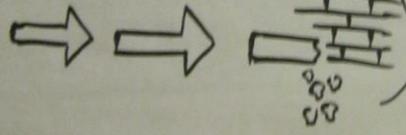
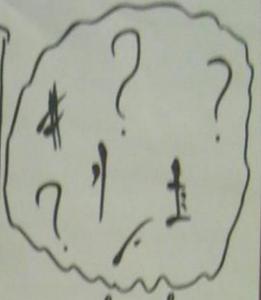
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Handwritten note on the right side.

Did you get it?



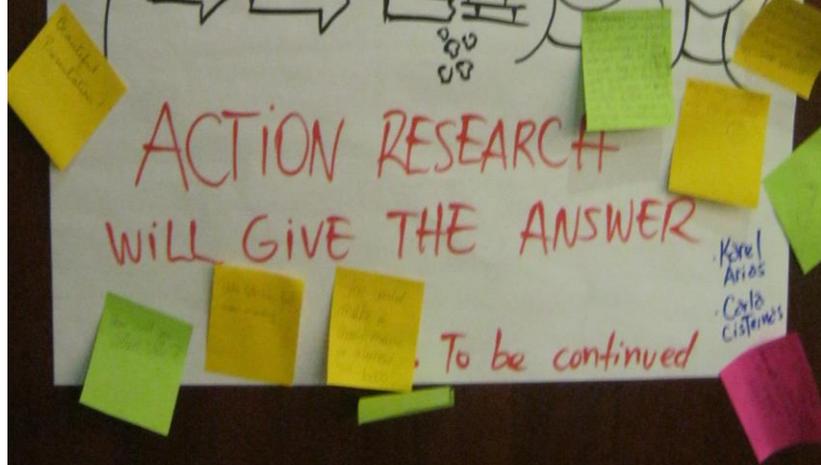
What makes it difficult for our students to understand & speak English?



ACTION RESEARCH
WILL GIVE THE ANSWER

To be continued

Karel Arias
Cristó Cisternas



From 'How can I ...?' to *exploratory* questions

Exploratory questions which, when pursued, can be particularly generative of transformative insights.

Example:

Topic: My students speak in English only to me but not to each other.

Exploring my perceptions

In what parts of the class do I think students speak to me?

Why do I think it's important for them to speak to one another in English?

Exploring others' perceptions

What do my students think about this?

Exploring behaviour

In pair work, which students do and don't speak in English?

In pair work, when do they start speaking in English?

Champion Teachers: stories of exploratory action research

Edited by Paula Rebolledo, Richard Smith and Deborah Bullock



bit.ly/champion-teachers

A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research

Richard Smith and Paula Rebolledo



bit.ly/handbook-EAR

Examples of exploratory action research from India and Nepal (not covered in the webinar)

AINET TRI-2

Why Students do cheating in the exam ?

REASONS



METHOD OF STUDY



DATA COLLECTION

OPEN GROUP DISCUSSION
INTERVIEWS OF TEACHERS
QUESTIONNAIRE : GIVEN 22 QUESTIONS
SELECTED 7 QUESTIONS

1. WHAT DO YOU DO TO GET GOOD MARKS IN BOARD EXAM ?
2. WHO HELPS YOU FOR CHEATING ? HOW ?
3. WHICH STRATEGIES STUDENTS USE IN THE BOARD EXAM FOR CHEATING ?
4. IF YOU ARE UNABLE TO ATTEMPT DIFFICULT QUESTION WHAT DO YOU DO ?
5. WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF STUDENTS DO NOT CHEAT IN THE EXAM ?
6. WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF CHEATING IN EXAM ?
7. WHAT ARE THE DANGERS OF CHEATING IN EXAM ?





And finally I hope

Let's rethink, re-imagine, reflect and research



I have difficulties in managing a large class

Shova Shahi



My school's name is Shree Krishna Sanskrit and General Secondary School, Itram-7, Birendranagar Surkhet, Nepal. I am teaching in this school since 2014. The medium of instruction in my school is English. I teach in class 6, 7, 8 and 9.

'Research questions'

- What particular difficulties do I have in the class?
- What causes the disturbance in the classroom?

'Research methods'

- Observation
- 'Self-observation' (taking notes)



Exploring for action, acting for change: stories of exploratory action research in Nepal

Edited by Janak Singh Negi



References

- Kuchah, K. and Shamim, F. (eds) 2018. *International Perspectives on Teaching English in Difficult Circumstances: Contexts, Challenges and Possibilities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Richard Smith, Amol Padwad & Deborah Bullock (eds). 2016. [Teaching in Low-resource Classrooms: Voices of Experience](#). London: British Council.
- Paula Rebolledo, Richard Smith & Deborah Bullock (eds). 2016. [Champion Teachers: Stories of Exploratory Action Research](#). London: British Council.
- Richard Smith & Paula Rebolledo. 2018. [A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research](#). London: British Council.
- Janak Negi Singh (ed.). 2019. [Exploring for Action, Acting for Change: Stories of Exploratory Action Research in Nepal](#). Melauli: Support Society Nepal.

[Earlier publications]

- Shamim, F. 2010. 'Plenary: Teaching and researching English in large classes'. In Beaven, B. (ed.) *IATEFL 2009: Cardiff Conference Selections*. Canterbury: IATEFL, pp. 36-47.
- Smith, R. 2011. 'Teaching English in difficult circumstances: A new research agenda'. In Pattison, T. (ed.) *IATEFL 2010 Harrogate Conference Selections*. Canterbury: IATEFL.
- Phyak, P.B. 2011. 'Teaching English in large multicultural classes: a narrative enquiry'. In Pattison, T. (ed.) *IATEFL 2010 Harrogate Conference Selections*. Canterbury: IATEFL.
- Kuchah, K. and Smith, R. 2011. 'Pedagogy of autonomy for difficult circumstances: From practice to principles'. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching* 5/2: 119-139.

[Interviews]

- 2008. Zakia Sarwar, interviewed by Richard Smith: ['Taking the bull by its horns'](#) *Independence* 44: 7–13.
- 2017. Harry Kuchah Kuchah, interviewed by Sherry Blok: ['Teaching ELT in challenging contexts'](#). TESOL International website.

[Links]

- **TELCnet (Teaching English in Large Classes research and development network) – <http://bit.ly/telcnet-home>**
- **Teacher-research for Difficult Circumstances (TRDC) – <http://warwick.ac.uk/trdc>**
- **International Festival of Teacher-research in ELT – trfestival.wordpress.com**
- **Teachers Research! Facebook group. Home page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/teachersresearch/>**

More information:

www.warwick.ac.uk/trdc

warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/people/smith/smith_r
[/](#)

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