Language Teaching in Difficult Circumstances

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"Teaching in difficult circumstances" (TiDC) refers to teaching in contexts where a number of challenging factors are present (cf. West, 1960). These may include:

1. Large classes, typically over 40 learners;
2. A lack of basic resources, including textbooks, furniture, stationery, electricity, and even suitable classrooms;
3. Low school readiness of learners;
4. Inadequate pre-service and in-service training and support for teachers;
5. Excessive workload for teachers and other staff.

Because any of these factors can influence classroom practices independently of the others, several have their own bodies of literature, especially "teaching in large classes", but also "teaching in low-resource contexts" and "teaching in low-income/developing countries". TiDC can be seen as a superordinate label for all these, but also a referent to contexts where two or more regularly co-exist. Difficult circumstances are often contrasted with "privileged contexts" in the TiDC literature (e.g., Kuchah, 2018). While difficult circumstances may exist at any level of economic development, they are more likely, and often are relatively extreme, in sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian subcontinent. They can be further exacerbated by political crises and natural disasters (cf. Phyak's "super difficult circumstances", 2015).

Given the large numbers of teachers working in developing countries worldwide, difficult circumstances are the norm for many language teachers. However, they

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have tended to be "dysfunctionally" ignored in mainstream language teaching research and discourse (Smith, 2011). With the exception of the Lancaster-Leeds project led by Dick Allwright and Hywel Coleman in the late 1980s (e.g., Coleman, 1989), there seemed to be little interest in researching TiDC until 2008, when the Teaching English in Large Classes research and development network was founded by Fauzia Shamim and Richard Smith. There are now a number of publications and resources on the TELCnet website (bit.ly/telcnet-home) although there are still many needs for further research.

Research to date has involved investigating challenges (e.g., Kuchah & Shamim, 2018), learner needs or expectations (e.g., Khati, 2010) and context-appropriate (e.g., Kuchah, 2013) or methodologically-specific (e.g., Panhwar, 2016) initiatives. Emphasis has been placed on the particular value of engaging learner and teacher autonomy (Amritavalli, 2007; Smith et al., 2018), while a focus on multilingual practices has also become prominent (see Coleman, 2017). Recent teacher development initiatives range from grass-roots practical guides for teachers (e.g., Anderson, 2015; Shamim et al., 2010) to participatory approaches involving exploratory action research (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018), researching with children (Pinter et al., 2016), small and larger communities of practice (Padwad & Dixit, 2014; Smith & Kuchah, 2016), as well as usage of mobile phone technology for large-scale interventions (Solly & Woodward, 2018).

Desiderata include: a more robust and critical conceptualization of 'difficult circumstances'; further documentation of effective teaching practices in difficult circumstances (Westbrook et al., 2013); further development of bottom-up proposals for appropriate TiDC methodology (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2017); critical discussion of fundamental issues of agency, ethics and politics (including language policy: Mohanty, 2010); elicitation of more first-person narratives and, fundamentally, underpinning all of this, more involvement of learners and teachers themselves in the research and development process (cf. Smith et al., 2018).

The Research Questions

1. What challenges/issues/concerns are specifically related to difficult circumstances, and how are they being addressed in different contexts?
2. What are the opinions, beliefs and insights of students learning languages in difficult circumstances, and how can these usefully inform teaching practices?
3. What are the opinions, beliefs and insights of teachers teaching languages in difficult circumstances, and how do these impact their teaching practices?
4. What are the teaching practices of effective language teachers working in difficult circumstances, and to what extent do these differ both from those of less effective teachers and those of teachers working in more privileged contexts?

5. How can models, ideas and resources for good practice in difficult circumstances be disseminated effectively via pre-service and in-service teacher education?
6. What roles can professional development communities play in the lives and development of teachers working in difficult circumstances?
7. What are the roles of learner and teacher autonomy in meeting the challenges of difficult circumstances?
8. How can the existing languaging (L1, L2, translingual) resources of learners studying in difficult circumstances be engaged in the learning of new languages and the development of their multilingual competence?
9. How can teachers be encouraged to research their own practice and contribute to the development of appropriate methodologies?
10. In light of research, how can 'difficult circumstances' be better conceptualized, and how can they be improved?

Suggested Resources

Kuchah, K., & Shamim, F. (2018). *International perspectives on teaching English in difficult circumstances*. **London: Palgrave Macmillan**.

A thirteen-chapter edited volume of perspectives on teaching English in difficult circumstances from around the world, in four sections: 1. Policy decisions and the creation of difficult circumstances; 2. Developing contextually responsive pedagogy and materials for teaching English in difficult circumstances; 3. Difficult circumstances in non-mainstream ELT: Contexts of confinement, conflict and special needs; and 4. Approaches to teacher development in difficult circumstances. Kuchah's comprehensive introduction provides an authoritative overview of the history of research in the area of TiDC, as well as analyses from relevant current perspectives within English language teaching, while Shamim's conclusion considers potential future directions for the field. The range of authors and perspectives covering contexts as diverse as prison education and refugee camps is a reflection of the true diversity of difficult circumstances worldwide.

Ojha, L. P. (2015). *Teaching English in difficult circumstances*. **Special issue of** *NELTA ELT Forum*. **Online:** https://neltaeltforum.wordpress.com/2015/07/

This special issue of the online *ELT Forum* journal of NELTA is dedicated to the theme of teaching English in difficult circumstances and contains articles by practising teachers on how they have tried to deal with various practical challenges in their teaching contexts. These include teaching large classes, coping with a lack of resources, developing learner autonomy, improving strategies for reading lessons and a personal teacher's perspective on developing her own language proficiency for English language teaching. The issue also contains an interview with Richard

Smith in which he discusses common concerns associated with difficult circumstances and suggests some ways of addressing them.

Shamim, F., Negash, N., Chuku, C., & Demewoz, N. (2010). *Maximizing learning in large classes: Issues and options*. **London: British Council. Online:** https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/ELT-16-screen.pdf

This accessible, practical resource was developed by teachers and teacher educators at a Hornby regional school in Ethiopia. It includes a six-chapter introduction to large class contexts, challenges and potential solutions that draws extensively on the expertise of African and Asian teacher educators, including foci on increasing student involvement, managing large classes, assessment and feedback in large classes and maximizing use of resources. This is followed by 27 useful activities submitted by local teachers but potentially of use to language teachers around the world working in difficult circumstances, requiring few, if any resources. The book is written in non-academic English, making it accessible for all.

Smith, R., Kuchah, K., & Lamb, M. (2018). Learner autonomy in developing countries. In A. Chik, N. Aoki, & Smith, R. (Eds.), *Autonomy in language learning and teaching: New research agendas* **London: Palgrave Pivot. Online:** https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1057%2F978-1-137-52998-5_2.pdf

This chapter provides a rationale for encouraging learner autonomy in language learning in difficult circumstances, summarizing findings from historical and exploratory research in a range of low-income contexts around the world (e.g., Bangladesh, Cameroon, India and Indonesia). It discusses the nature of out of class learning, exploring the emerging role that ICT, especially through mobile phone use and participation in online social networks, is playing in facilitating autonomous learning. It also looks at participatory approaches to research in learner autonomy conducted both with and by teachers and learners. The chapter calls for more research, firstly into IT-mediated autonomous learning outside the classroom, secondly into grass roots projects developing learner autonomy, and thirdly for research both with and by teachers and learners themselves.

Smith, R., Padwad, A. & Bullock, D. (2017). *Teaching in low-resource classrooms: Voices of experience.* **London: British Council. Online:** https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/pub_30325_bc_teach_in_low_resource_report_a4_v4_online.pdf

A free resource that gives voice to 34 teachers of English working in difficult circumstances in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, who share their perspectives, challenges and solutions directly in this edited volume. It reports findings of an "enhancement approach", building on positive stories of success which document practical strategies and ideas that other teachers may benefit from. The book also includes stories of teacher inquiry, including both practical research questions and potential solutions regarding issues such as managing group work in large classes, correcting large quantities of written work, and teaching learners from diverse backgrounds in the same class. In line with the overall bottom-up approach

of the TELC network, the editors promote the idea that "there is particular value in teachers in difficult circumstances collaboratively sharing examples of successful teaching as a starting point for their own further development" (p. 3). Associated website and video resources are freely available online: http://www. teachingenglish.org.uk/low-resource-classrooms.

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