

Research for super-difficult circumstances: where to start and how to go on

Richard Smith, University of Warwick, UK



Prologue

TESOL Society of Bangladesh

BELTA 2020 (postponed)

My previous visit to Dhaka (2000?)

Michael West (1888–1973)

Warwick ELT Archive: the long view
www.warwick.ac.uk/elt_archive



Plan

1. Contextualized TESOL research
2. Difficult and super-difficult circumstances
3. Some ways forward

Contextualized TESOL research



Directory of UK ELT Research (2005–14)

Survey of ELT research in India (2013–16)

Research = ‘original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding’.

ELT / TESOL research = ‘any research whose data and/or findings relate directly to the teaching, learning or assessment of English as a Foreign, Second or Additional Language’



“Literature on ELT in India, even by Indian authors, still seems to predominantly borrow non-Indian (read, Western) frames of thinking to understand, analyse, and evaluate Indian ELT, with little effort to develop indigenous approaches and frameworks”

(Padwad, 2020)

Some propositions

Need to get away from applicationism – universalist / top-down solutions

TESOL research should be *useful* in addressing problems faced by teachers and learners in a particular context

Some propositions (contd.)

Needs for *practical* research, which involves identifying, understanding and sharing teachers' (1) successful practices or (2) problems and possible solutions, and which is thereby directly relevant and immediately useful to practitioners.

Contextualized research: *Out of* a particular context & *Into* a particular context and similar contexts



Who researches?

One form of research:

Practitioner inquiry - the systematic, intentional study by educators of their own professional practices ([Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009](#)).

**Difficult and super-difficult
circumstances**

Michael West's
*Teaching English
in Difficult
Circumstances*
(1960)

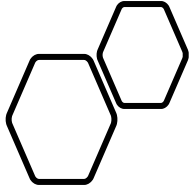
“over 30 pupils (more usually 40 or even 50), congested on benches [...], ill-graded, with a teacher who perhaps does not speak English very well [...], working in a hot climate.” (p. 1)

“The problem is one which has of late tended to become exacerbated owing to the rapid spread of education in these areas, too rapid for the supply of buildings and teachers to catch up with the number of pupils, and owing to the spread of education over a larger proportion of the population”. (*ibid.*)

From Anderson,
Padwad & Smith
(in press)

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

- large classes, typically over 40 learners
- a lack of basic resources, including textbooks, furniture, stationery, electricity, and even suitable classrooms
- low school readiness of learners
- inadequate pre-service and in-service training and support for teachers
- excessive workload for teachers and other staff.”



Alternative labels

‘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’



Photo © Christopher Tribble, 2004



Photo © Christopher Tribble, 2004





The problem in a nutshell

- The majority of English teachers worldwide work in 'difficult circumstances'
- These are *normal* circumstances in global ELT but have tended / still tend to be dysfunctionally neglected in 'mainstream' language teaching discourse and research (Smith, 2011).
- There are unfilled needs for development of becoming-appropriate / post-method / 'decentred' ELT approaches for TiDC, with research in a supporting role

Research group / network initiatives

Two revivals of interest in TiDC:

- Lancaster–Leeds Large Classes Project (e.g., Coleman, 1989): questionnaire-based research
- Teaching English in Large Classes research and development network ('TELCnet') 2008+: more devolved leadership / qualitative research

TELC-net: telcnet.weebly.com

TELC-net: The Teaching English in Large
Classes research & teacher development
network

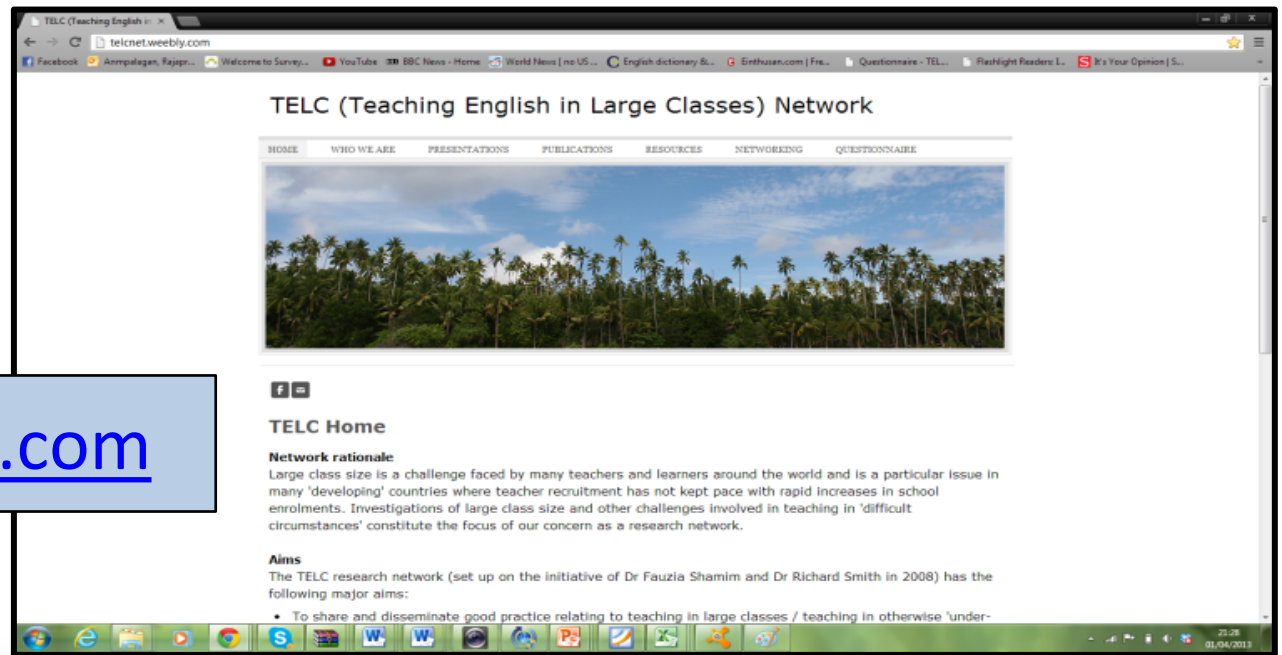
[HOME](#)[WHO WE ARE](#)[PRESENTATIONS](#)[PUBLICATIONS](#)[RESOURCES](#)[NETWORKING](#)

About TELC-net

Network rationale

Large class size and/or a lack of material resources are challenges faced by many teachers and learners around the

telcnet.weebly.com



facebook.com/groups/telcgroup/

Research principles

1. Leave behind conceptions of small-class teaching as norm and TiDC as a 'problem' → start with descriptions of practice, in particular 'good practice' as perceived by participants
2. Focus on issues of practical concern to teachers themselves – support teachers to develop appropriate methodology 'from the bottom up', for example through practitioner research.
3. A qualitative, exploratory 'case study' / narrative approach

(Smith 2011)

Research principles *now* (revisited)

1. Leave behind conceptions of **EdTech** as norm and TiDC as a 'problem' → start with descriptions of practice, in particular 'good practice' as perceived by participants
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(Smith 2011)

Research- informed teacher education: overall TELCnet ethos

- 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’



Many resources for
researchers, teachers
and teacher educators

Please explore the website:

telcnet.weebly.com

Join:

facebook.com/groups/telcgroup/

Emergency
remote
teaching:
another form
of 'difficult
circumstance'?



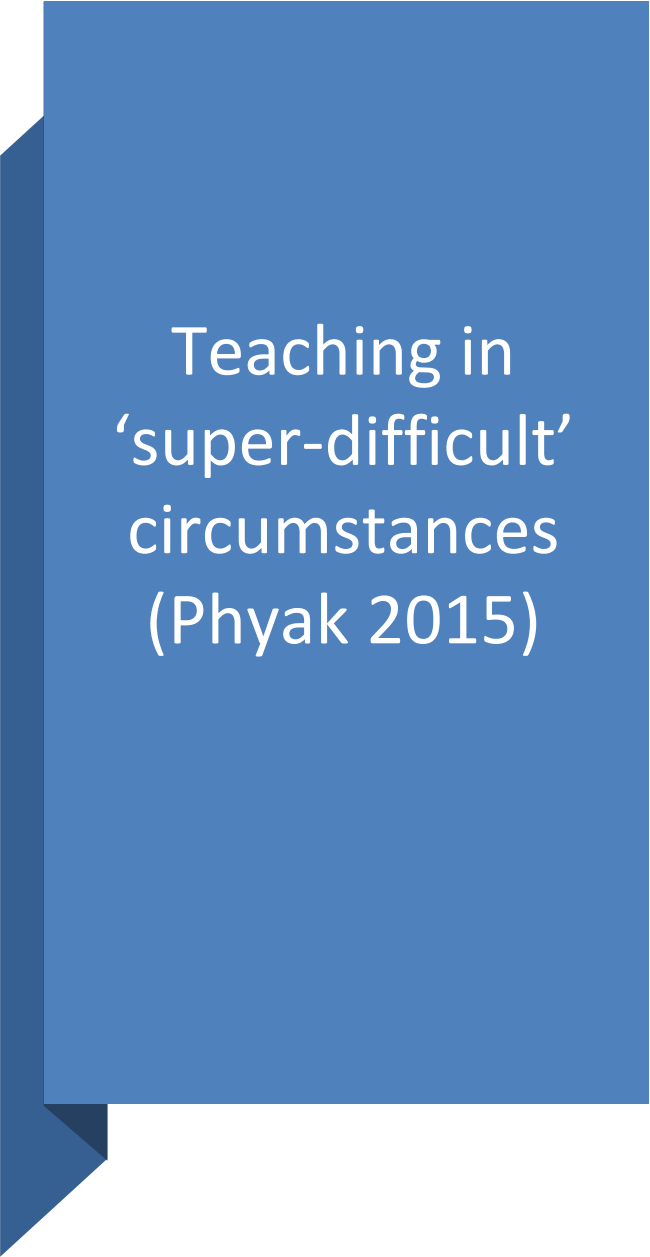
- Source:
- <https://www.techedmagazine.com/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning/>



Source: <https://thelogicalindian.com/amp/news/kerala-student-attends-classes-on-roof-for-better-internet-connectivity-21522>



Photo credit: Sunil Sharma



Teaching in 'super-difficult' circumstances (Phyak 2015)

“The teachers’ responses reveal a multitude of difficulties (e.g., psycho-social, educational and economic challenges) caused by the recent [April 2015] earthquake. Most importantly, the findings [...] reveal the “transformative agency” of EFL teachers who transgress the “schooled pedagogy” and can create their own “pedagogy of disaster” to help their students recover from the traumatic experience”

Some ways forward

Some ways forward for (contextualized) TESOL research

- a. Identifying, understanding and sharing successful practice (an 'enhancement approach')
- b. TA-research and teacher-research for difficult circumstances
- c. Enhancement mentoring for teacher-research

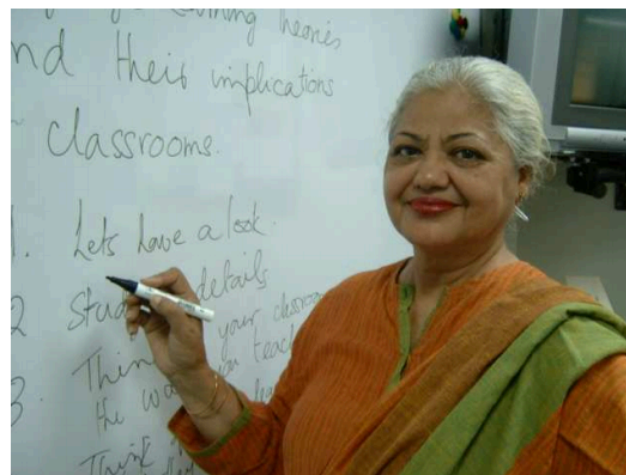
**a. Identifying, understanding and sharing
successful practice (an 'enhancement
approach')**

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

Richard Smith

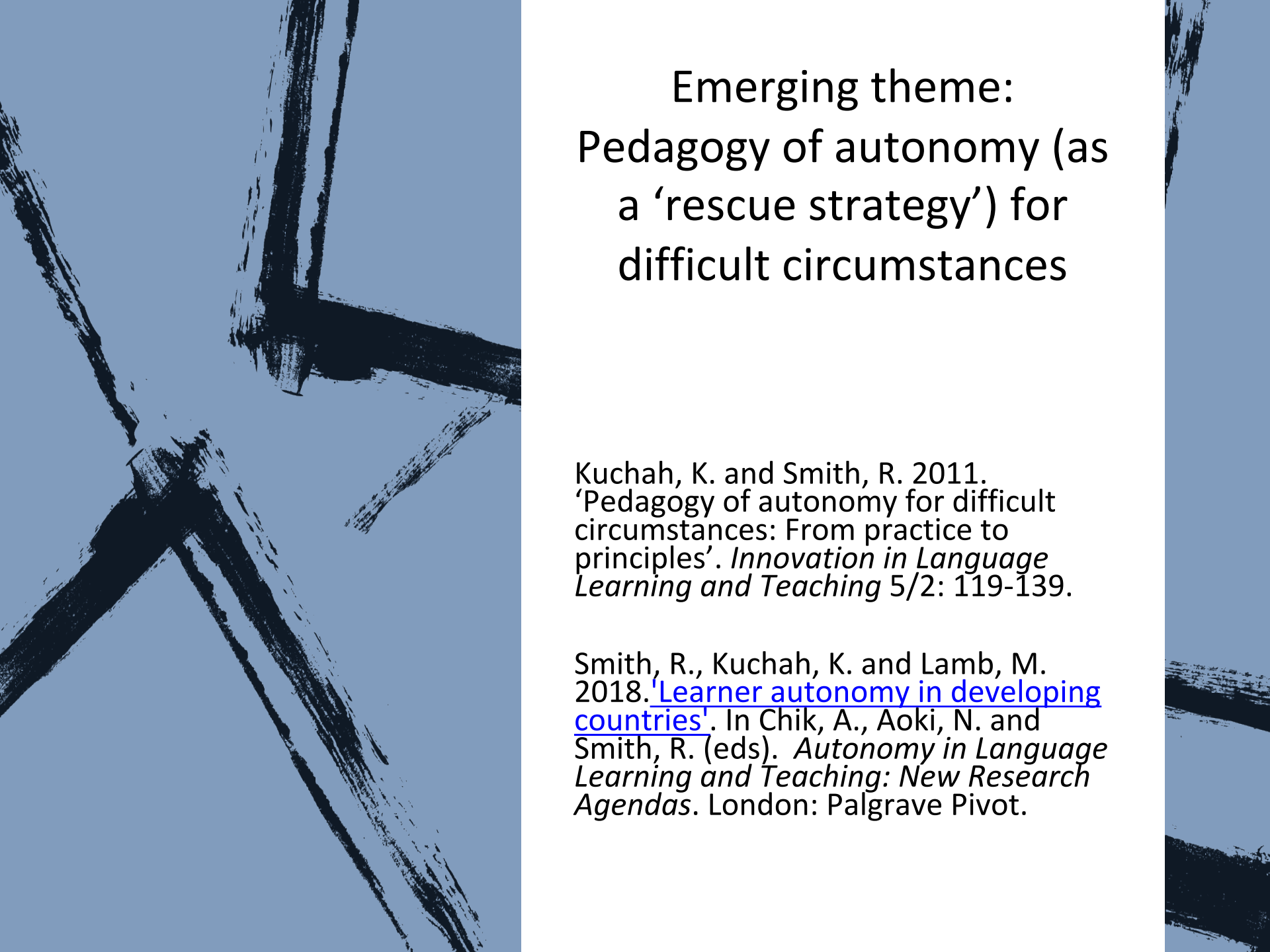
Introduction

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





Emerging theme: Pedagogy of autonomy (as a 'rescue strategy') for difficult circumstances

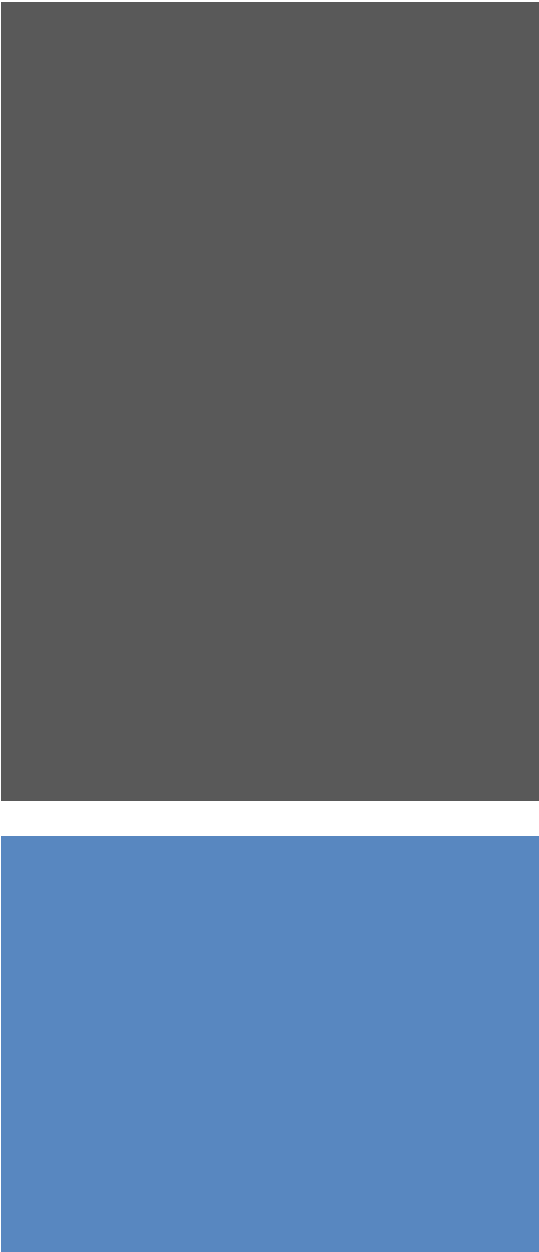
Kuchah, K. and Smith, R. 2011.
'Pedagogy of autonomy for difficult
circumstances: From practice to
principles'. *Innovation in Language
Learning and Teaching* 5/2: 119-139.

Smith, R., Kuchah, K. and Lamb, M.
2018. [Learner autonomy in developing
countries](#). In Chik, A., Aoki, N. and
Smith, R. (eds). *Autonomy in Language
Learning and Teaching: New Research
Agendas*. London: Palgrave Pivot.

Cf. Michael West

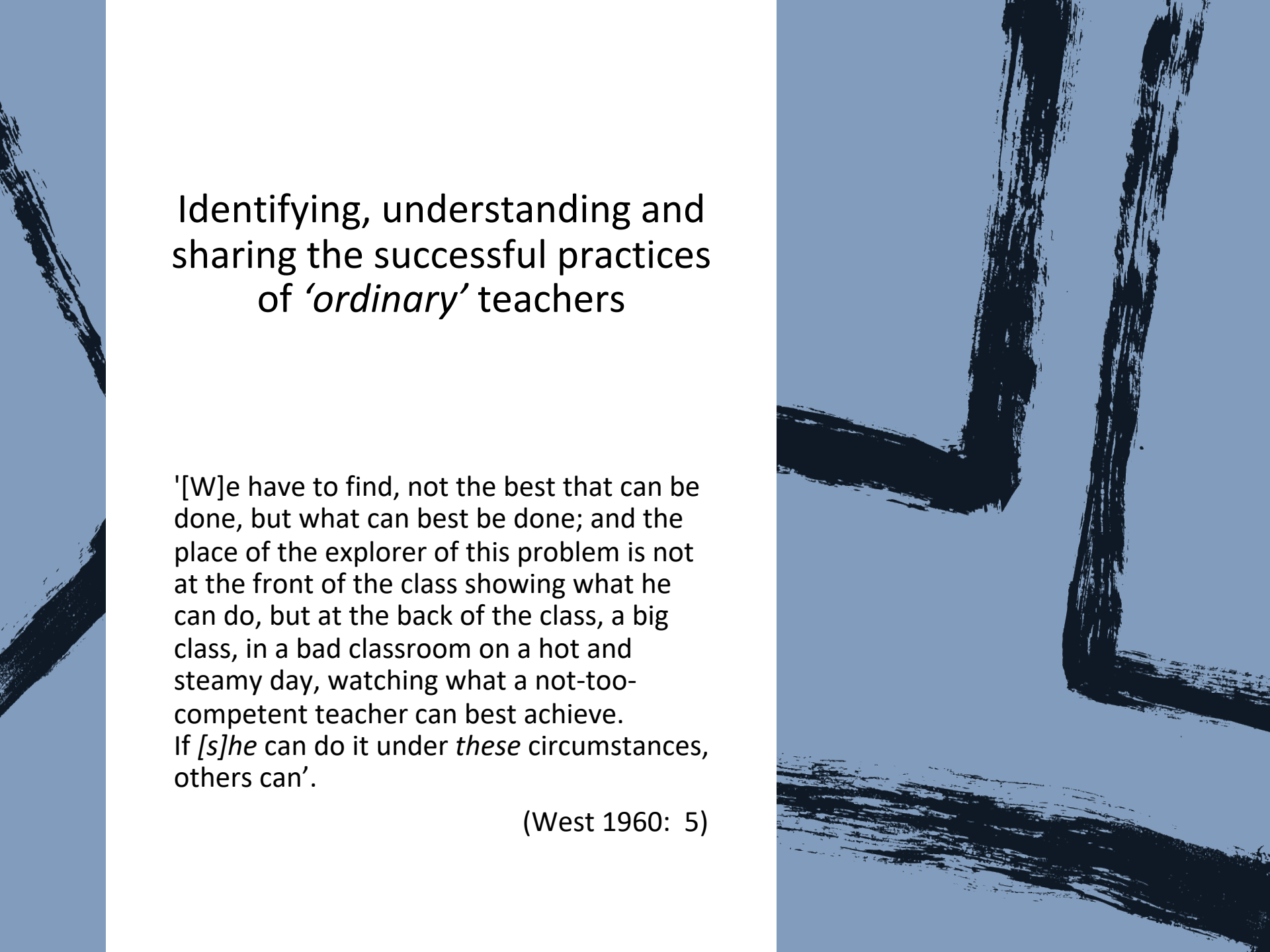
https://warwick.ac.uk/elt_archive/halloffame/west/extracts/

A language is learnt rather than taught, and too much teaching can be an obstacle to learning”



“[T]he larger the class and the more difficult the circumstances, the more important it is to stress learning as the objective. And the higher the elimination ['drop-out'], the more necessary it is to do so: if a pupil has learnt how to learn [s]he can go on learning afterwards.”

(West 1960: 15)



Identifying, understanding and sharing the successful practices of '*ordinary*' teachers

'[W]e have to find, not the best that can be done, but what can best be done; and the place of the explorer of this problem is not at the front of the class showing what he can do, but at the back of the class, a big class, in a bad classroom on a hot and steamy day, watching what a not-too-competent teacher can best achieve. If [*s*]he can do it under *these* circumstances, others can'.

(West 1960: 5)



**Teachers
sharing
stories of
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?











stan
primary

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



<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/low-resource-classrooms>

(Video)

► Overview



Secondary success stories

20 April, 2016

Teaching in low-resource classrooms: voices of experience

Edited by Richard Smith, Amol Padwad and Deborah Bullock

[bit.ly/low-
resource-
classrooms](https://bit.ly/low-resource-classrooms)
(book)



CRISIS-ELT

ABOUT

EVENTS & UPDATES

RESOURCES

LINKS

CONTACT

About Crisis-ELT

This site is a space for sharing of narratives and resources relating to English language teaching (ELT) in crisis situations (situations of natural disaster, war, pandemic, etc.). It is intended as a support for teachers who find themselves in a situation of general (not 'just' individual) crisis and as a resource for teacher educators wishing to prepare student-teachers and practising teachers for such situations.

ENTER

Crisis-ELT:

<http://crisis-elt.weebly.com/resources.html>

Teaching Children in a Post-Earthquake Situation:

Chetan Kumar Timilsena's Experience

Source: Timilsena, C. K. 2015. 'Teachers' anecdote: teaching children at post earthquake situation'. *ELT Choutari* (June 2015). Online: <http://eltchoutari.com/2015/06/teachers-anecdote-teaching-children-at-post-earthquake-situation/> (Adapted by Richard Smith, with the author's permission)

This reading and associated prediction questions were prepared as sample material for ELT teacher preparation programmes.



In the devastating earthquake and its aftershocks which struck Nepal at the end of April 2015 thousands of public and private schools collapsed or were damaged. A large number of children became orphans, homeless and also schoolless.

Chetan is an English teacher at Shree Ratna Rajya Higher Secondary School, a large public school in Kathmandu Valley which was heavily damaged in the earthquake and aftershocks. His school was closed for more than a month and finally, when classes could resume, there were many challenges confronting the teachers

[Qu 1. What challenges faced the teachers, do you think?]



In prospect: Documenting teaching in
pandemic circumstances (identifying,
understanding and sharing success)

E.g. ... (a starting point)



During the Coronavirus crisis we have been running a series of weekly online discussions relevant to teachers and teacher educators in the Global South, on 'Covid-19 and Teaching English in Difficult Circumstances'. We're now taking a break before perhaps resuming the discussions at the end of May. Details of any further discussions will be posted on our Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/telcgroup/>.

Recordings are here:

Discussion 5 (8 May 2020) [[summary here](#)]

Discussion 4 (1 May 2020) [[summary here](#)]

Discussion 3 (24 April 2020) [[summary here](#)]

Discussion 2 (17 April 2020) [[summary here](#)] [[text-chat summary here](#)]

**b. TA-research and teacher-research for
difficult circumstances**

TA- research

Cameroon English Language and Literature Teachers' Association (CAMELTA)

HOME

RECENT EVENTS

RESOURCES & USEFUL LINKS

CAMELTA CHAPT



TA = Teacher Association

Cf. Smith, R. and Kuchah, K. 2016. ['Researching teacher associations'](#). *ELT Journal* 70/2: 212-221



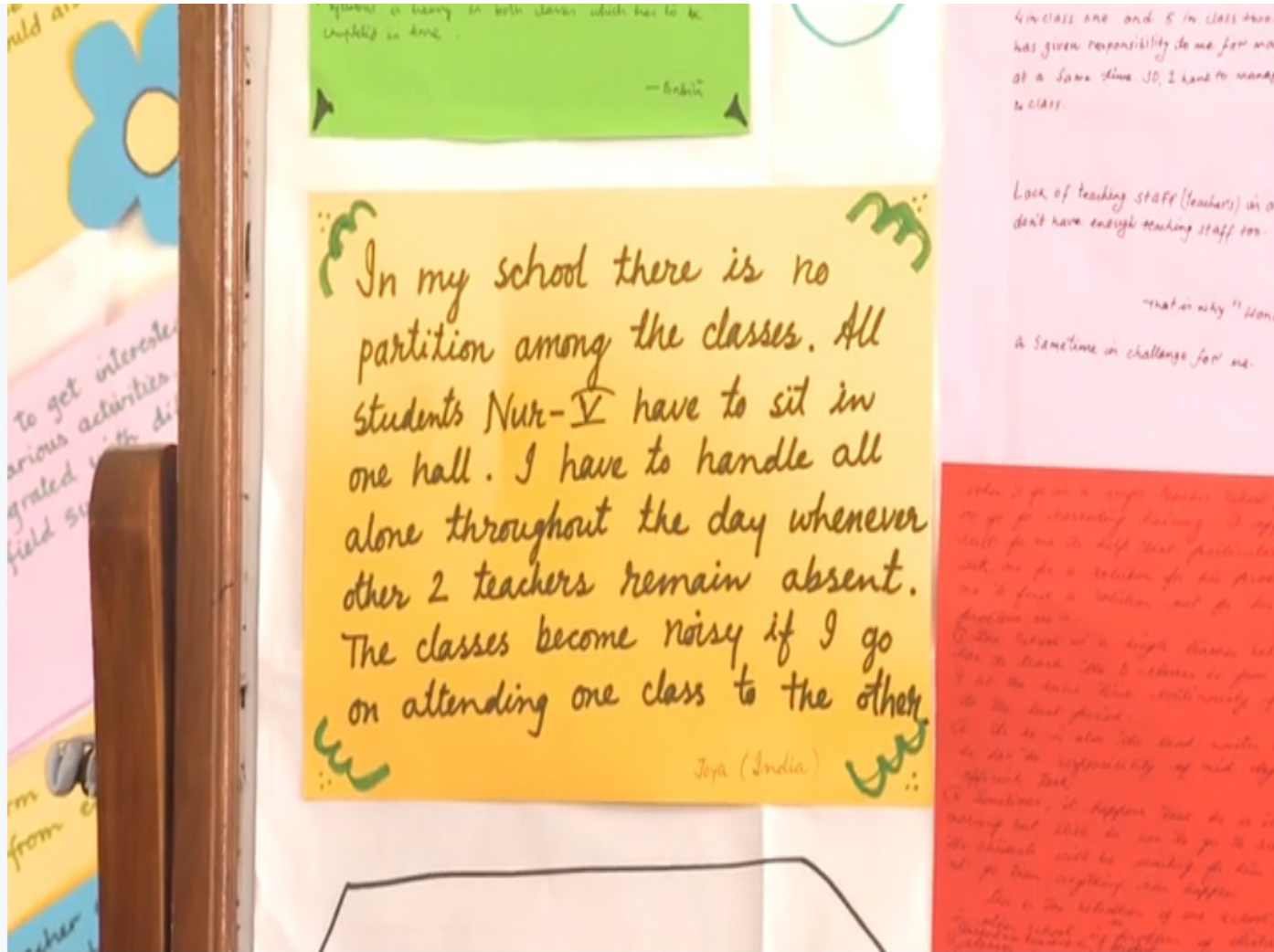
Gathering research questions: e.g.

- What accounts for students' absenteeism or poor attendance in English lessons at high school?
- Why do students indulge in collusion and cheating at tests and exams?
- Why do many teachers shun professional development meetings?
- What methods of teaching are appropriate in teaching a multigrade class?
- How can CAMELTA convince the ministry to accept new ideas on teaching?

Questionnaire (n=500+)

- 1) Please tell the story of a recent successful experience in your teaching - what was successful and what made it successful, do you think?
- 2) What are the major problems you face in your teaching situation - what is problematic and why?
- 3) Please describe anything you have done to address (some of) the problems in (2) above. Was this successful? Why / Why not?

Moving beyond problems



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?



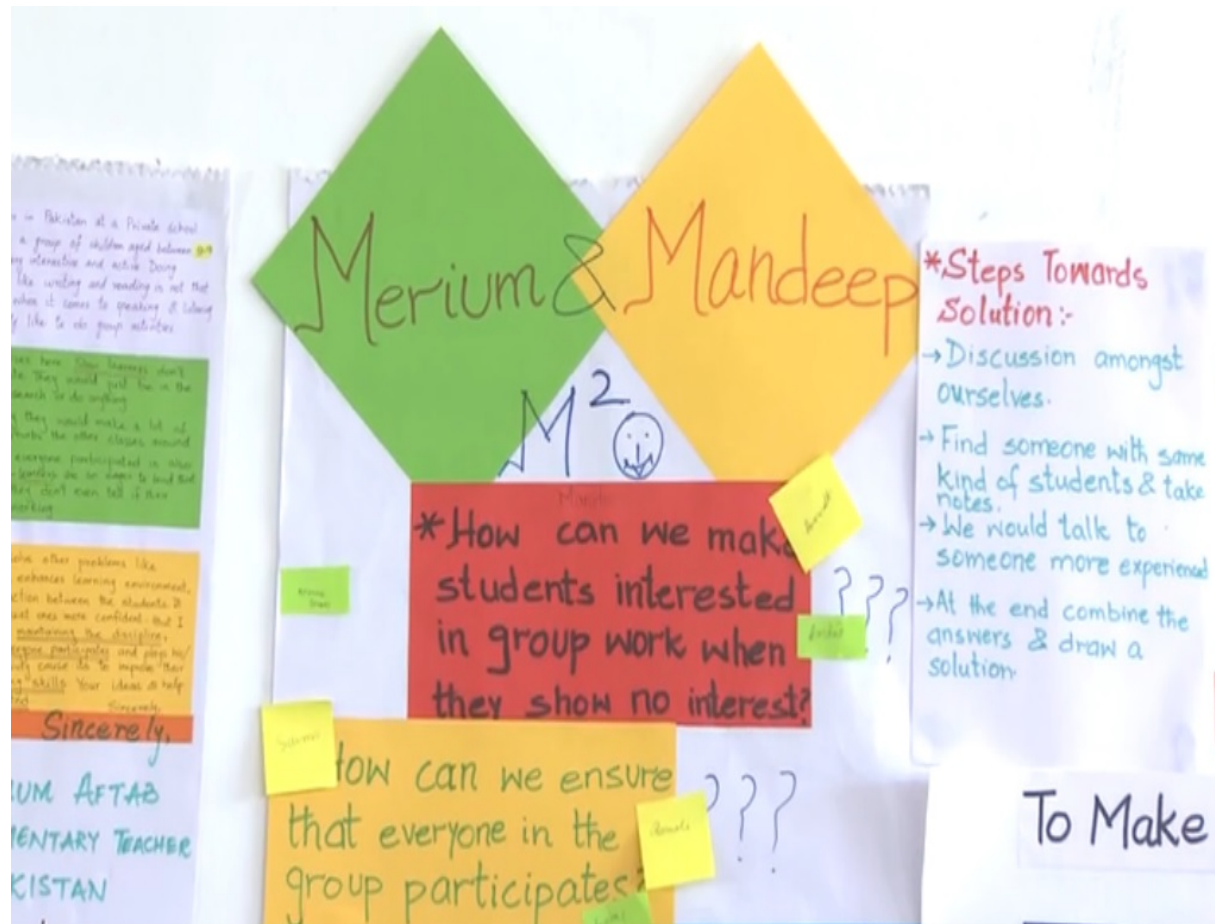
Not all students participate due to being in a large class.

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

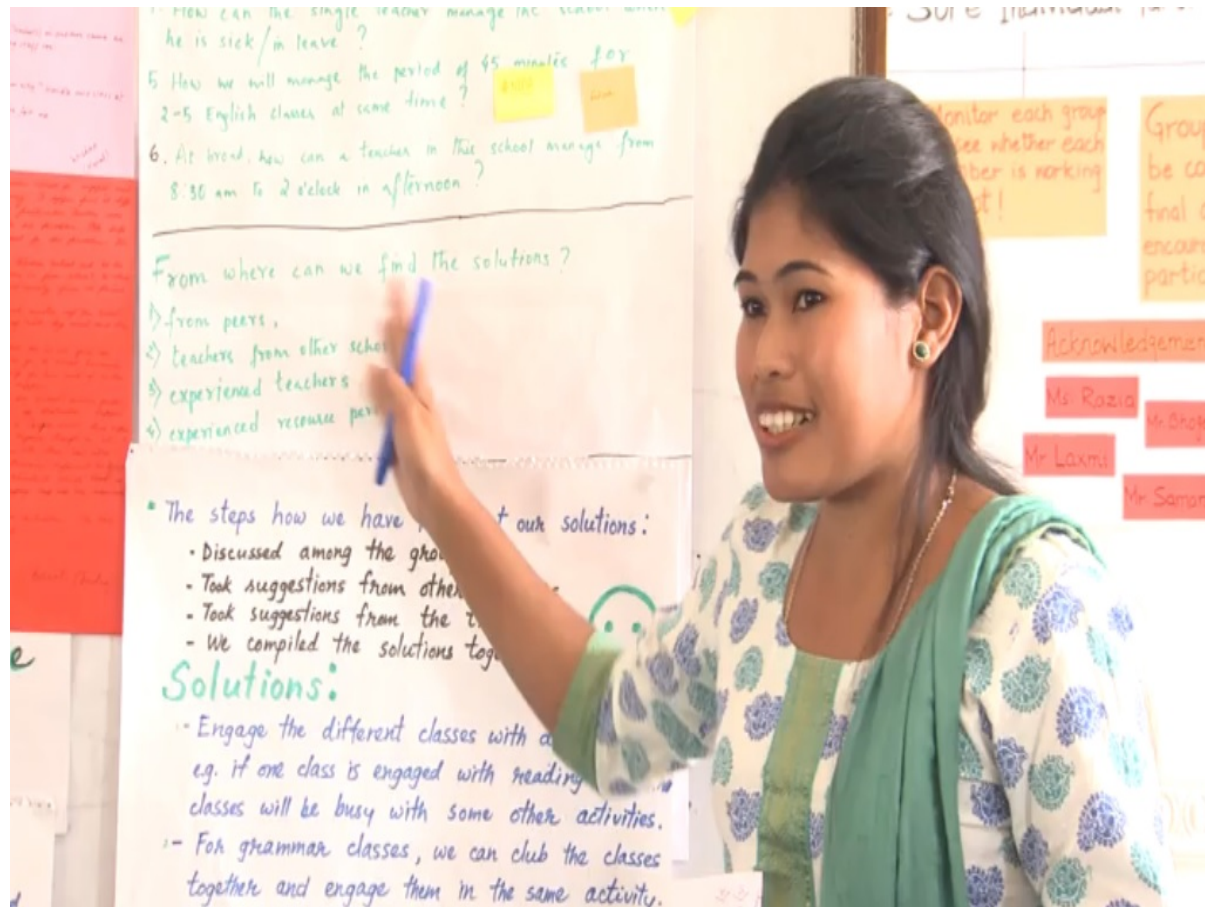
It is difficult to promote active learning in large classes when resources such as textbooks, flash cards are limited.

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



bit.ly/low-resource-classrooms

Teaching in low-resource classrooms: voices of experience

Edited by Richard Smith, Amol Padwad and Deborah Bullock





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 teacher ask them to go. (a check list in parents' interview)

at the end of April ☺

Why is it important to involve parents to get information?

Make school for parents more inviting by having a good first experience.

Parents are the first teachers of their children.

Parents are the first teachers of their children.

Parents are the first teachers of their children.

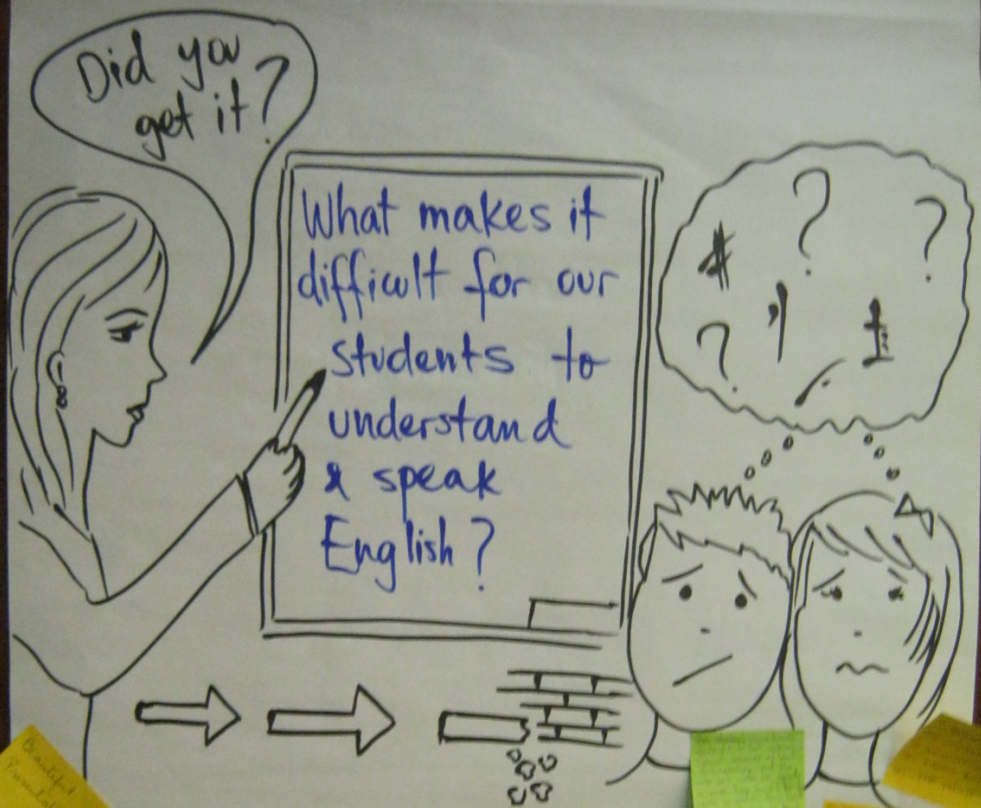
Parents are the first teachers of their children.

Parents are the first teachers of their children.

Parents are the first teachers of their children.

Parents are the first teachers of their children.

Lily Carr
Elizabeth
Rodriguez



ACTION RESEARCH
WILL GIVE THE ANSWER

To be continued

Karel
Arias
Carla
Cisternas

Beautiful
Presentation!

you could
add more
examples

you could
add more
examples

you could
add more
examples

you could
add more
examples

you could
add more
examples



TEACHERS' VOICES

CAPTURING THE DYNAMICS OF CHANGE

2017

ENGLISH  ACTION

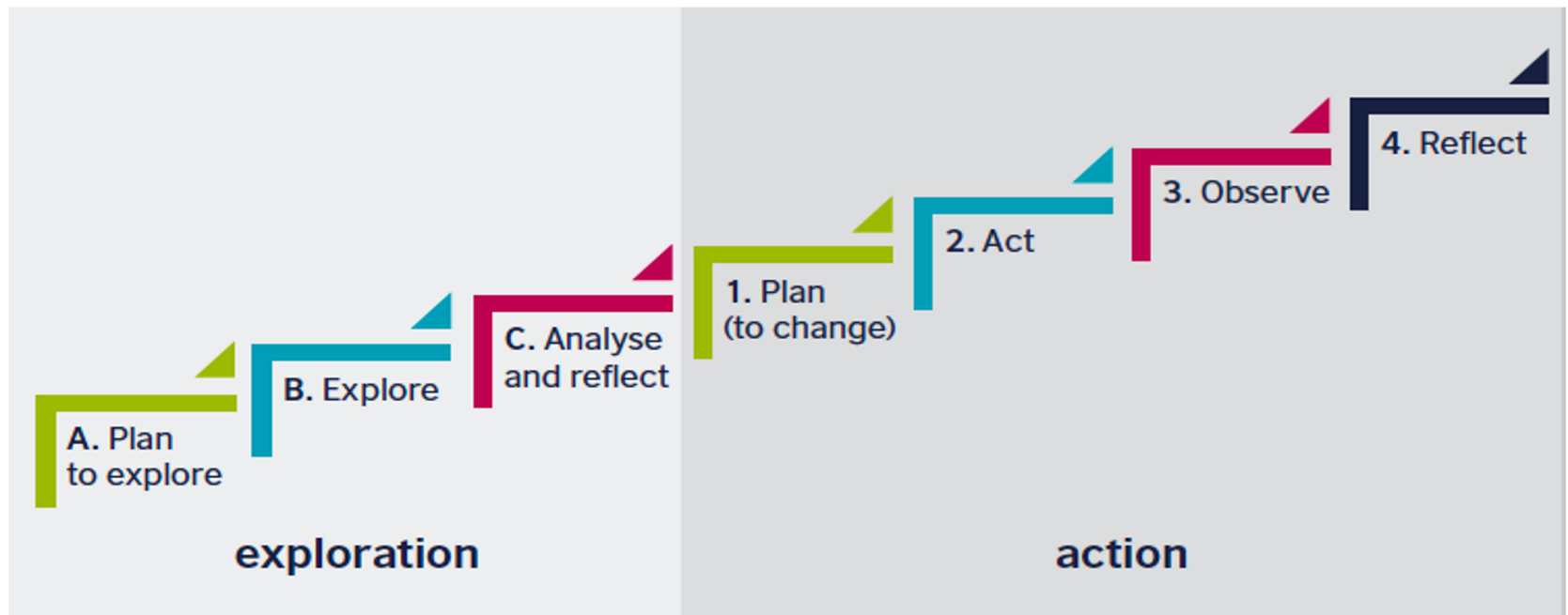


M
CAMBRIDGE
EDUCATION

 The Open
University

http://oro.open.ac.uk/55909/1/EIA%20Teachers%20Voices_2017.pdf

Exploratory Action Research





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

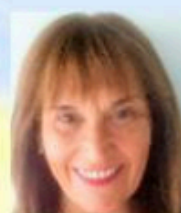
Classroom-based research for Professional Development

Electronic Village Online (EVO) 2021

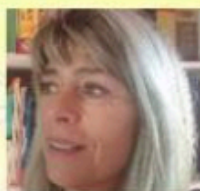


Lead-moderators

Team of moderators



Asli Lidice Gokturk Saglam (Turkey)
Mariana Serra (Argentina)
Rubén Mazzei (Argentina)



María Pilar Martínez (Arg)- Pinar Ayber (United Arab Emirates)- Silvia Severino (Arg)- Sandip Kumbhefal Abd (India) -
Esther Vazquez (Arg)- Ana María Otero (Arg) - Erkan Arkin (Cyprus)- Aysegül Salli (Cyprus)- Sidney Martin Mota (Spain)-
Jimmy Ronald Riojas (Peru)- Ece Sevgi Sole (Italy)

January 11th to February 14th 2021

Registrations January 3rd to January 10th 2021

Join us!



 **BRITISH
COUNCIL**

Richard Smith

Mentoring teachers to research their classrooms: a practical handbook

www.britishcouncil.org



Mentoring teacher-
research for difficult
circumstances?

(to address emergency
remote teaching
situations)



c. Enhancement mentoring for teacher-research

Session 1 - Your difficulties and achievements (1 hour)

Aims:

- establish a good relationship
- get difficulties / problems out in the open and 'out of the way', to move on to positives
- establish some areas of overall achievement

1. What is your context? (5 mins. total)

2. What main problems/difficulties have you been facing professionally, and how have you overcome them? (15 mins. total)

3. What have you gained professionally overall in recent (crisis) times? (20 mins. each)

Session 2 - Pinpointing success (1 hour)

Aims:

- become conscious of recent positive experiences
- think about / identify the main signs of success
- consider *reasons* for ('ingredients of') success
- identify areas of uncertainty as a possible basis for exploratory research

4. What particular successful experiences have you had recently? (10 mins. each)

5. What were the signs of your success? (10 mins. each)

6. What were the reasons for your success? (10 mins. each)

Session 3 - Exploring and building on success (1 hour)

Aims:

- to identify a positive pathway forward
- to formulate a realistic exploration/action plan

7. What do you want to explore further, to extend your success? (10 mins. each)

8. What could you do to extend your success? (10 mins. each.)

9. So, what do you take from [what have you gained from] this mentoring process overall, and what will you do from now, when and how? (10 mins. each)

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<https://www.iatefl.org/events/179>

ReSIG: Enhancement mentoring for teacher-research: a hopeful response to Covid-19

Join IATEFL ReSIG and Richard Smith, Erzsébet Ágnes Békés, Mariana Serra & Seden Eraldemir Tuyan for this webinar.

Event details



Date:

16/01/2021 - 15:00 UK time

What time is this in my location?



Fees:

Free of charge

Conclusion

Conclusion

Conference theme:

‘Contextualizing research in challenging times’

Contextualized research *for* (and increasingly *by*) teachers in difficult / super-difficult circumstances

Possible starting-points --> some ways forward

Q&A + discussion

Follow-up:

<http://telcnet.weebly.com>

www.warwick.ac.uk/trdc

<http://warwick.ac.uk/richardcsmith/resources>

R.C.Smith@warwick.ac.uk

@RichardSmithELT