Teaching English to young learners in difficult circumstances

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Introduction

There is a vast amount of EYL literature which promotes creative, interactive and fun ways of teaching English to young learners (e.g., Moon 2005; Read 2007; Superfine and James 2017) and which discusses the psychological, educational, sociocultural, methodological and ethical as well as pedagogical intricacies of EYL more broadly (e.g., Cameron 2001; Bland 2015; Pinter 2011), but very little, if any, specifically examines the conditions under which the growing numbers of young learners, especially in the developing world, are made to learn English. A number of studies from different contexts around the world (e.g., Butler 2007; Carless 2003; 2004; Kirkgoz 2008; Kuchah 2018a; Nguyen 2011; Nguyen et al. 2016) have specifically examined the disconnections between EYL policy and practice; others (e.g., Kumaravadivelu 2001; 2011; Rubdy 2008; Smith 2011) have called for contextually appropriate forms of ELT pedagogy to be developed, particularly in mainstream formal education institutions in developing countries. Both groups of studies argue that the dominant discourse of ELT methodology, as promoted by local MoE policy makers around the world, has been largely generated in ideal (North) contexts, so it does not reflect the challenging realities of the majority of language teaching and learning contexts in which they are being imposed. What is more, they suggest that the paucity of research from Southern contexts means that the predominantly Northern-derived discourse around English language learning and teaching continues to see developing world contexts as inherently problematic, deficient and incapable of generating innovative and effective language teaching principles. In this chapter, I examine the key factors that have contributed to creating difficult environments and conditions for young learner English language education, particularly in developing world contexts where policy decisions such as the lowering age for exposure to English language education (Cameron 2003) and, in some cases, English-medium instruction (Dearden 2014) has meant that more and more children are experiencing formal education in a language different from their home languages and in learning environments that do not meet the minimum conditions for effective language learning (Kuchah 2016a). Then I critically examine the literature on the different contextual challenges faced by EYL practitioners, particularly in contexts with limited exposure to English language outside the classroom, contexts of
conflict and forced migration, and in large, multigrade and under-resourced classes amongst others. The chapter also examines different pedagogic approaches as well as teacher education and research possibilities that are embedded in these realities and argues that EYL in these circumstances could benefit from a more sustained dialogue between all key stakeholders including, more importantly, from the development of student and teacher agency.

**Historical perspectives**

Language teachers around the world work under a variety of conditions and deal with a range of challenges in their day-to-day practices which make a definition of *difficult circumstances* elusive or at best, relative; for example, the circumstances which one teacher might consider challenging may actually constitute a favourable condition for another teacher within the same, or in another, context (Kuchah 2016a). The first known reference to *difficult circumstances* was made by Michael West (1960) in his book *Teaching English in Difficult Circumstances* in which he drew attention to challenges encountered by teachers teaching English language in classrooms:

‘consisting of over 30 pupils (more usually 40 or even 50), congested on benches . . . accommodated in an unsuitably shaped room, ill-graded, with a teacher who perhaps does not speak English very well or very fluently, working in a hot climate’.

*(West 1960, p. 1)*

15 years later, Nation (1975) echoed West’s concerns about the challenging circumstances under which English language was being taught in many parts of the world, explaining that in many countries ‘there are economic restrictions that do not allow each student to have a textbook. Classes are large (50 or more learners), absenteeism is high, and there is a wide range of proficiency and ability in one class’. (p. 21). Following these two authors – and with the exception of research initiatives such as the Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Research Project coordinated by Allwright and Coleman in the 1980s – it was not until the dawn of this twenty-first century that interest in English language teaching in difficult circumstances started to gain grounds in the mainstream literature, notably, it may be suggested, because of the focus on the importance of context in language education (Bax 2003; Holliday 1994; Kumaravadivelu 2001). Maley (2001) suggested that there were equally out-of-school factors affecting language education in developing world countries. He extended the concept of difficult circumstances by describing classrooms of 60 students who had to walk a distance of at least five miles after doing their morning chores and who were crammed in a dirty classroom meant for 30 students in temperatures of 40 degrees Celsius. These students were taught by a poorly paid teacher with rudimentary competence in English language. The textbook represents characters from an unfamiliar luxurious culture; the classroom blackboard is pitted and grey and sometimes there is no chalk.

More recent studies have also highlighted the challenges of teaching children living in dysfunctional societies (e.g., Lovitt 2010) and in contexts of conflict and crisis (Alyasin 2018; Okpe 2016; Phyak 2015). In Brazil, for example, Ball (2018) reports the specific challenges of teaching children who have ‘difficult home lives with fragmented family relationships and responsibilities beyond what is normally expected of children of their age’. A significant number of researchers and professionals (e.g., Alyasin 2018; Bertoncino, Murph, and Wang 2002; Copland et al. 2014; Kuchah and Smith 2011; Kuchah 2016a; Kuchah and Shamim 2018; Phyak 2015; UIS 2016; Verspoor 2008) have highlighted the
range of challenges affecting both the quality of education more broadly and English language education in particular. The work of these authors point to the fact that the notion of difficult circumstances in language education has become more complex; in fact the concept now seems to include not only micro (i.e., within the language classroom and school) and meso (i.e., within local communities) level constraints affecting teaching and learning, but equally encompasses macro level factors which have a direct or indirect impact on what happens at the micro and meso levels. These include broader policy issues that might affect English language teaching and learning in mainstream as well as non-mainstream educational settings in low-to-mid-income countries (Kuchah 2018a).

Despite the recognition of the existence of contextual challenges which negatively impact language education in developing world countries, there are emerging voices (e.g., Ekembe 2016; Smith 2015) against the conceptualisation of certain contexts as difficult. These scholars argue that the early conceptualisations of difficult circumstances were mainly Western/British scholars’ perceptions of developing world country contexts (see, e.g., Lamb 2002; Maley 2001; Rogers 1982; West 1960) rather than the perceptions of practitioners from within these contexts. They hold the view that labelling learning contexts as ‘difficult’ is not only patronizing, but also limits ELT professionals to pathologizing these contexts when indeed ELT could benefit more from acknowledging the diverse range of learning conditions and the pedagogical expertise of teachers in such contexts (Smith 2015). Ekembe (2016) suggests that the conceptualisation of some ELT contexts as ‘difficult’ is often guided by western conceptions of what is believed to be ‘standard’ rather than what may be considered adequate and sufficient by stakeholders within the specific context. This notwithstanding, there is growing evidence from practitioners in such contexts that even insiders (see, e.g., Khadka 2015; Kuchah and Smith 2011; Kuchah 2016a; Shamim et al. 2007; UNESCO 1997) perceive their circumstances as difficult although the nature and extent of these difficulties might be different from those which an outsider to the context perceives. The following two excerpts from teachers in Rwanda and Brazil, respectively, illustrate some of the challenges that teachers encounter in their daily work:

Picking up the pieces is no easy job and when it comes to teaching it is next to impossible [. . .] How can you expect children who have lost their relations to share a classroom peacefully with pupils whose parents took part in the genocide and in some cases actually killed their families? [. . .] School buildings are in a deplorable state [. . .] The pupils sit on wooden planks and find it hard to pay attention all day, having walked miles to school. There are no school canteens so most teachers and pupils go without lunch [. . .] Another difficulty is shortage of teaching materials; handbooks and textbooks are virtually inexistent. In Grade 6, I have one reader for eight pupils and a French and maths textbook.

(Thea Uwimbabazi, cited in UNESCO 1997, pp. 4–5)

Hunger is a terrible problem here. [. . .] In a classroom I once found a small boy banging his head repeatedly against the wooden partition. He had also been kicking his classmates. Later, I found out that he hadn’t eaten for two days. Aggression is quite common, but it always has a reason. In some extreme cases, mothers give their hungry children drugs to help them sleep at night.

(Vera Lazzarotto, cited in UNESCO 1997, p. 21)

Such accounts from practitioners in the field suggest that there are indeed circumstances outside the control of teachers and learners which affect their daily experiences of teaching
and learning in significant ways (Kuchah 2016a). These circumstances exist in a large number of contexts in which ELT takes place and as such require greater attention.

Maley (2001) and Smith (2011) argue that the field of ELT has long been dominated by ideas from otherwise privileged Northern contexts, and it is these ideas that were being promoted around the world, sometimes with little or no consideration of the sociopolitical, economic and cultural realities of the contexts in which they were being applied. Drawing attention to such realities is by no means conveying a deficiency in them per se; rather it helps language professionals to reflect more on the issues that affect language education in developing world contexts and to better appreciate and disseminate the resilience and creativity of practitioners in such contexts.

**Critical issues**

Various factors account for the less-than-ideal circumstances within which young learners experience English language education, particularly in developing world contexts. These can broadly be categorised under three main areas: the promotion and implementation of the *Education for All policy* with its impact on enrolments, resources and the quality of learning, especially at primary school levels in under-privileged and conflict-affected contexts; the phenomenal spread of English language around the globe and its increasing inclusion in primary curricula; and the promotion of communicative and interactive approaches to language teaching (cf. Shamim and Kuchah 2016). In what follows, I examine these factors and show the extent to which they have made teaching and learning circumstances difficult.

**The Education for All (EFA) and related challenges**

The world conference on Education in Jomtien, Thailand (UNESCO 1990) and the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal (UNESCO 2000) led to significant policy decisions that would shape the landscape and quality of education in developing world countries at the dawn of the new millennium. The Jomtien conference came more than 40 years after the declaration of human rights, including the right to basic education. Yet, it was noted that more than 100 million children still did not have access to primary schooling. The Dakar framework for action therefore set 6 key goals for achieving free and quality basic education for all by 2015. One of these goals required countries to ensure

that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality [emphasising that] all states must fulfil their obligation to offer free and compulsory primary education in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international commitments.

(*UNESCO 2000, p. 15*)

The implementation of free and compulsory basic education in many developing world countries has led to an exponential growth in the number of children attending primary school without a concomitant increase in human, material and financial resources. A large number of studies in sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Ampiah 2008; Muthwii 2001; Nakabugo 2008; O’Sullivan 2006; Sawamura and Sifuna 2008; Tembe 2006) have revealed that the implementation of the EFA policy has exacerbated existing challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of textbooks, lack of libraries, low teacher proficiency, qualifications and
motivation, and students’ limited exposure to English language usage. Underlying these challenges is the lack of financial resources; in fact, governments in developing countries are increasingly finding it difficult to cope with the growing numbers of children in state schools. UIS (2016) figures reveal that the total expenditure per student of 10 sub-Saharan African countries in 2014 amounted to only about 25% of what the UK alone spent per student in the same year.

Class size has continued to constitute a major topic in the literature on difficult circumstances, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. UIS (2016) data from 15 African countries, 10 of which include multigrade classes, showed that the average class size exceeds 70 pupils per class in Malawi, the Central African Republic and Tanzania. What is more, these official numbers are based on official figures which often give a seriously distorted under-representation of the reality of class size. For example, although the pupil-teacher ratio for primary schools in Cameroon was 46:1 in 2012 (UIS 2016), Kuchah (2013) found that class sizes actually ranged from 87 pupils to 124 in the four schools in which his study was conducted. More recently, Coleman (2018) compares official figures on classroom enrolments in Malaysia, eastern Indonesia and countries in Francophone West Africa with actual figures from classroom observations and reveals significant discrepancies between official figures and classroom realities which tend to conceal the true extent of teaching challenges. Coleman concludes that these additional difficult circumstances (undeclared numbers of students in classrooms) need to be systematically and consistently brought to the attention of stakeholders and education authorities so that they can be more explicitly addressed.

Over the last two decades, escalating conflicts and natural disasters have forced millions of people to flee their homes into refugee camps within or even out of their countries (IDMC 2015; Phyak 2015; Okpe 2016). Reports (e.g., by Nicolai et al. 2016; Save the Children 2015; Ekereke 2013) reveal that up to 300 million children are out of school or learning in displacement camps in circumstances that are far removed from traditional conceptualisations of schooling. These circumstances have been described as ‘super-difficult circumstances’ (Phyak 2015) and ‘expanding circles of difficulty’ (Kuchah 2018a). Okpe (2016), Alyasin (2018) and Phyak (2015) explain that such circumstances impose on teachers psycho-affective challenges leading to the development of pedagogical practices that are not often discussed in the mainstream EYL literature (e.g., Cameron 2001; Bland 2015; Pinter 2011). At the World Education Forum in Dakar conflict was also acknowledged as a challenge to the achievement of Education for All (UNESCO 2000), leading to the Dakar Framework for Action in which governments and agencies agreed to enable education in such contexts of conflict.

The global spread of English language and the primary school curriculum

The global spread of English language (Graddol 2006) has had a significant impact on language education policies and practices (Nunan 2003). One such policy is the lowering age at which children are taught English language in school (Cameron 2003). Johnstone (2009) describes the introduction of English as a foreign/second language in the primary school system as one of the most significant policy developments in recent years. In this regard, a number of studies (e.g., Copland et al. 2014; Nguyen 2011; Nunan 2003) have examined the policy rhetoric and actual classroom practices and have pointed to disconnections between them. Other studies (e.g., Kouega 2003; Escudero, Reyes Cruz, and Loyo 2012; Nguyen et al. 2016) have examined a variety of challenges faced by teachers and learners in
developing world contexts and have raised concerns for language policy, planning and practice. A second policy has been the growing inclusion of English as a medium of instruction in primary schools. Dearden (2014) provides evidence that 52.7% of public primary schools from a survey of 55 countries are increasingly adapting EMI without proper assessment and understanding of the difficulties involved in teaching and learning in a language that both teachers and students do not master (Williams 2011). A major driving force behind these policies, it has been suggested, is the assumed relationship between proficiency in English and socioeconomic development of a country (Dearden 2014; Pinon and Haydon 2010). There is a worldwide perception that an early exposure to English language education, even in state schools, leads to an increase in the human capital on which future national economic development and political power depends (Wedell 2011). In fact, in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and South America, English language education is a political imperative regardless of the inadequacy in provision (Baldauf et al. 2011; Forero Rocha 2005; Inostroza Araos 2015; Valenzuela et al. 2013; Williams 2011). Policy decisions have not sufficiently been informed by research with the consequence that there has been a lack of appropriate planning to implement them, causing confusion in the minds of teachers who are called upon to implement the policies (Baldauf et al. 2011). In Nepal, for example, Phyak (2018) suggests that the current English language teaching policy which promotes both the monolingual and the earlier-the-better assumptions itself has created difficult circumstances for both teachers and students towards achieving the national curricular goals for teaching English.

In addition to the top-down policy orientation discussed above, there are also bottom-up pressures from parents for English language education. Tembe and Norton (2011) report from Uganda that although parents in both rural and urban settings recognise the value of local languages, they are not necessarily in favour of teaching or using these in schools; instead, they would prefer that their children be exposed to an international language, English, in order to keep pace with the fast-moving world. Studies in Ghana (e.g., Mfum-Mensah 2005) and Nigeria (e.g., Iyamu and Ogiegbaen 2007) show that attitudes towards mother tongue instruction are divided and that parents, rural communities and even teachers see English and EMI as a means to attaining the benefits of the elite and urban communities (see also Kouega 1999; Kuchah 2016b for examples from Cameroon). In India, Pandey (2011) reports on the erection of a temple to the ‘Goddess of English’ by the socioeconomically marginalised Banka villagers in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh and cites the local Dalit Leader, claiming that

> English [is] the milk of a lioness . . . only those who drink it will roar. . . . With the blessings of Goddess English, Dalit children will not grow to serve landlords or skin dead animals or clean drains or raise pigs and buffaloes. They will grow into adjudicators and become employers and benefactors. Then the roar of the Dalits . . . will be heard by one and all.

(n.p.)

The deification of English language in this way shows the extent to which English language has had a pervasive role in shaping the thinking and aspirations of individuals, communities and countries, particularly in the developing world where education provision is already constrained by other practical difficulties which I will discuss below. Suffice it to say that the attribution of such a high status to English language both as subject and as medium of instruction in the early years of formal education raises questions of justice and human
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rights (Fraser 2013; Dearden 2014; Skutnabb-Kangas 2009; UNESCO 2003), especially when it comes to providing quality and equitable education (Tomasevski 2003; Kuchah 2016b) to children from poorer backgrounds, particularly in multilingual contexts where the language of instruction presents a barrier to parental involvement in education for children whose parents are not educated in the language of their schooling (Gfeller and Robinson 1998; Bamgbose 2014; Williams and Cooke 2002). There is also abundant evidence that in many developing world countries, school dropout is more likely to affect children for whom English is not spoken out of school (Ampiah 2008; Kuchah 2016b; 2018b; Opoku-Amankwa 2009; Pinnock 2009; Sawamura and Sifuna 2008).

The promotion of communicative and interactive approaches and practical challenges

The spread of the English language around the world and its subsequent inclusion in school curricula have been accompanied by policy decisions promoting communicative forms of teaching (Thornbury 2016). Various English language initiatives have taken aim at making English language teaching effective in mainstream educational contexts around the world. These have included the development of new curriculum, new materials, new teacher education curricula and the introduction of English at younger years (Wedell 2011; Cameron 2003). The goal of these initiatives is to shift away from academic approaches that have dominated traditional school teaching, and as a result the teaching approaches being promoted are thought to be those which would help learners develop communication skills. However, as researchers (e.g., Nunan 2003; Padwad and Dixit 2014; Vavrus 2009; Waters and Vilches 2008; Wedell 2011) affirm, these approaches ‘tend to be expressed in terms imported from the “western” literature of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), learner- or child-centredness and constructivist approaches to teaching and learning’ (Wedell 2011, p. 276). The extent to which teachers in mainstream educational contexts around the world understand or misunderstand such policy recommendations and how these are translated in their classrooms has been a major preoccupation in ELT. Nunan’s (2003) study of seven Asian countries (China, Hongkong, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan and Vietnam) indicates that although the emergence of English as a global language is having considerable impact on policies and practices in these countries, there are significant problems, amongst other things, in the disjunction between curriculum rhetoric and pedagogical reality. Despite considerable country-by-country variations, data reveal that teacher education and English language skills of teachers in public-sector institutions in these countries are inadequate for the successful implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) to which policy rhetoric subscribes. Nunan’s findings are consistent with those of other young learner related studies in Chile (e.g., Inostroza Araos 2015), Mexico (e.g., Izquierdo et al. 2016), Vietnam (e.g., Nguyen and Nguyen 2007; Nguyen 2011), Hong Kong (Carless 2003; 2004), Ghana (e.g., Ampiah 2008), Uganda (e.g., Tembe 2006; Muthwii 2001), Kenya (e.g., Sawamura and Sifuna 2008), Tazania (e.g., Komba and Nkumbi 2008; Vavrus 2009), India (e.g., Padwad and Dixit 2014) and Cameroon (CONAP 2008; Kuchah 2013) which examine teachers’ practical responses to policy, recommending communicative and learner-centred approaches to language teaching. The reasons for the discrepancies between official discourse and classroom reality discussed in the studies cited above are varied and range from the failure of policy makers to take into account factors like the existence of structural-based assessment demands, teachers’ language proficiency, training levels especially for
elementary level teaching and limited understanding of certain policy decisions as well as the existing teacher-dependent classroom cultures amongst others.

**Current contributions and research in EYL in difficult circumstances**

Following on from the perspectives of researchers who argue against the conceptualisation of certain contexts as ‘difficult’ or ‘under-resourced’ (e.g., Ekembe 2016; Smith 2015; Smith et al. 2017) it could be implied that the disconnections between policy and practice as well as the challenges faced by practitioners in developing world countries to implement imported innovative practices might be a result of the slavish adoption of pedagogic recommendations which are not rooted in the specific realities of the contexts within which they are being applied. Ekembe (2016) suggests, for example, that the perceived lack of resources in so-called under-resourced contexts might be a result of the difficulty in applying North-driven or North-derived methodologies in such contexts that are only different and not actually under-resourced per se. Understanding the specific differences within these contexts, therefore, requires locally focused efforts of a more broadly educational than narrowly linguistic nature, rather than the continuous importation of western innovatory methodological ideas which, as we have seen, have little to offer by way of solutions to the challenges of local EYL practitioners (Maley 2001). Capitalising on the experiences of state school teachers and teacher trainers who already have local knowledge about students and the realities of the classroom and local communities (Kumaravadivelu 2001, 2006) might give us insights into the possibilities which these contexts offer for understanding appropriate language pedagogy in context.

In line with these suggestions, current research into ELT in difficult circumstances has moved away significantly from the early ‘problems and solutions’ approach (Anmpalagan et al. 2012; Sarwar 2001; Shamim et al. 2007; Shamim 2012), which mainly identified isolated challenges (e.g., managing a large classes, marking assignments in a large class, developing resources in under-resourced classrooms, dealing with mixed ability learners, etc.) and suggested solutions in the form of tips and practical ideas. A major criticism of the problem-solution approach is that most of the solutions represent BANA (Britain, Australasia and North America) type ‘best practices’ in ELT more generally, which are desirable for teaching English effectively, irrespective of the specific challenges of the classroom (Shamim and Kuchah 2016). Besides, focusing on isolated classroom challenges fails to recognise the complex organic and dynamic nature of classrooms. On the contrary, recent studies are focusing more and more on the holistic nature of classroom encounters and their impact on teaching and learning. Such studies employ different qualitative data collection procedures to explore both teachers’ and learners’ classroom behaviours in order to identify patterns which promote learning. Also, inquiry-based approaches which encourage the voices of teachers and young learners to emerge (e.g., Kuchah and Shamim 2018; Nguyen et al. 2016; Smith et al. 2017; Smith and Kuchah 2016; Pinter et al. 2016) are beginning to show that the challenges faced by practitioners in developing world contexts actually offer opportunities for enriching our understanding of the complex terrain of English language education as well as for the development of alternative practices which can potentially enrich current theories in ELT (Kuchah 2018a). These classroom-based studies are mostly conducted by outsiders working with teachers and provide evidence of the value of teacher and learner agency in the development and dissemination of good practice in difficult circumstances (e.g., Alyasin 2018; Ekembe and Fonjong 2018; Okpe 2016; Hillyard 2018).
Teaching strategies in difficult circumstances

Several studies (e.g., Alyasin 2018; Kuchah 2013; Nakabugo 2008; O’Sullivan 2006; Phyak 2018) have attempted to investigate good practice in difficult circumstances through observation and interviews with teachers. O’Sullivan’s (2006) study in large primary classrooms in Uganda made use of classroom observation and videoed lessons and found that children’s answers to questions during lessons, their ability to complete written activities, their engagement in group tasks and their ability to read new words introduced and offer examples all showed evidence of children’s learning. She concludes that the effectiveness of these lessons is a result of four basic techniques exploited by the teachers. These include strategies for classroom organisation and management; effective use of basic teaching skills such as effective questioning and use of group work; the use of resources in the environment as well as whole class teaching and the frequency with which the teacher solicits students’ opinions and reactions to others’ opinions. In Tanzania, Garton et al. (2011) identify the use of realia as an effective strategy for engaging young learners in the language classroom. Underlying these strategies is the energy, animation and enthusiasm of the teachers which contribute to the positive hardworking atmosphere in the classes observed. In Nakabugo’s (2008) study, data from interviews and classroom observations of one hundred lessons by 35 early primary school teachers reveal that different teachers in different contexts (rural and urban) have developed strategies to cope with their difficult circumstances and promote learning. Strategies such as group work, the employment of the teacher’s enthusiasm and strategies for attracting children’s attention through storytelling, singing and questions and answers echo O’Sullivan’s (2006) argument that the effective use of generic teaching skills can be a very good way to enhance learning. Kuchah’s (2013) study involves young learners and their teachers in identifying good practice, and the findings reveal that teachers and learners possess convergent, and in some cases, divergent notions of good EYL practice; it is these notions, rather than what the MoE promotes, which have the most influence on what happens in the classroom (see also Kuchah and Pinter 2012). Using a variety of participatory data collection and analysis procedures, the study shows how encouraging practitioners to reflect on their own practices and challenging them with insights from students’ perspectives enables them to generate new insights about contextually appropriate EYL practices in difficult circumstances.

Studies exploring EYL in conflict-affected contexts (Alyasin 2018; Okpe 2016) have focused on teachers’ pragmatic responses to the psycho-affective challenges they and their learners face. In northern Nigeria where terrorist attacks have affected education more broadly, Okpe (2016) found through a survey of the practices of 50 language teachers that they make use of ‘restoration strategies’ which combine English lessons with counselling and other psychological activities to help restore children to their former psychological state. Alyasin’s (2018) study investigates the challenges and coping strategies of an English teacher in a Syrian refugee camp school in Southern Turkey and shows how the teacher develops pedagogic practices, based on her own previous experiences, her understanding of her learners and the specific contextual constraints in which they operate. Vignettes from the teacher’s classroom provide an ‘exemplary model for challenging difficult circumstances with the capacities available rather than surrendering to the chaotic realities of war’ (Alyasin 2018, p. 168).

Bilingual/multilingual practices

Studies have shown that bilingual practices such as translation (Cummins 2007; Hall and Cook 2012) and codeswitching (Clegg and Afitska 2011; Milligan et al. 2016; Madonsela 2017) have proven effective in helping learners bridge their linguistic and cultural worlds.
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2015) can be potentially beneficial to English language learning and classroom management more generally. These studies suggest that the use of students’ mother tongue or a familiar language as resources in the second or foreign language class can facilitate L2 learning. Milligan et al. (2016), for example, provide findings from an intervention demonstrating the role of language supportive materials and pedagogy – reflected in textbook design, textual characteristics, a range of activity types, the use of vocabulary, the use of visuals and the inclusion of bilingual practices – in improving learning outcomes in English as a foreign language and English-medium education in Rwanda. Teachers in this context have been obliged to transition from French medium instruction to EMI with very minimal support for such a major transition, and the introduction of language supportive materials seems a welcome support mechanism for their own challenges. Writing from South Africa, Makalela (2014) reports on the results of a literacy intervention devised to maintain and support the development of children’s L1 literacy while also promoting their literacy development in English language. Factors such as the creation of a print-rich environment in both the local language and English in class, the use of contrastive literacy teaching and the active involvement of parents in reading to their children all contributed to the enhancement of children’s English reading development. The use of students’ L1 in the English language classroom is particularly relevant in contexts where English-only policy recommendations pose significant barriers to the quality of learning for children who do not have access to the English outside the classroom (Ampiah 2008; Esch 2010; Milligan et al. 2016). However, translation and codeswitching pedagogies are based on the perception of the languages of bilinguals as separate codes (García 2011) which may be compared or contrasted (Cummins 2007; Swain 1985) to foster target language learning. Where they are used, the goal is often subtractive, that is, to transition into target language-only use (Mandalios 2012).

More recent theories of language acquisition, based on a dynamic model of bilingualism/multilingualism (Cummins 2015; Garcia and Wei 2014), see languages as interrelated and fluid in the human brain and recommend translanguaging as an effective pedagogical strategy to maximise the use of students’ and teachers’ linguistic, social and cognitive resources. Translanguaging refers to language practices which go beyond the boundaries of named languages and make use of the entire linguistic repertoire of the multilingual individual, rather than of one language at a time (Garcia and Wei 2014; Lewis et al. 2012; Copland and Ni, this volume). It involves meaning making through multiple discursive practices (Garcia 2009) based on functionally grounded hybrid and fluid language practice. Classroom-based studies (e.g., Makalela 2014; 2015; Phyak 2018) show that translanguaging can be an effective strategy for English language teaching and learning in under-resourced multilingual contexts. In Nepal, Phyak (2018) presents classroom vignettes of how teachers mediate classroom learning through the medium of English by employing translingual practices. Translanguaging, in this context, helps break students’ silence and increases their participation both in the English language and academic subjects, and as a result enhances both language and subject learning. In South Africa, Makalela’s (2015) investigation into the effectiveness of the introduction of teaching African languages – as additional languages – to speakers of other African languages reveals that using translanguaging techniques have both cognitive and social advantages, not typically associated with one-language medium classroom interactions. Through quantitative (test scores) and qualitative (strored reflections) data, the study shows that translanguaging strategies are effective in increasing the vocabulary pool of multilingual speakers as well as in affording them a positive schooling experience which affirms their multilingual identities. These are two significant benefits
which might be hampered by one-language-only policies that make L2 teaching challenging for teachers in contexts where resources in the target language might be scarce.

**Recommendations for practice**

Based on the discussion presented, the following recommendations may be made for the practice of young learner teacher education and TEYL in difficult circumstances:

- Policy makers and teacher educators need to acknowledge the expertise of teachers as a basis for implementing any form of innovation. This requires a major paradigm shift from a deficit perspective of teachers as incapable of implementing imposed innovative practices to an enhancement approach (Kuchah 2013; 2016a) which empowers and motivates teachers to be creative and critically reflective on their classroom practices.
- Classroom practices, such as those promoting interaction and fun, need to be rooted in the sociocultural realities of learners and, at best, elicited from them.
- Teachers need to be encouraged to make use of multilingual practices such as code-switching and translanguaging in order to benefit from the wealth of linguistic and cultural knowledge that children bring to the classroom. In addition, TEYL materials need to be language supportive in nature (see Milligan et al. 2016).
- Learners in contexts of conflict and disaster need more than just English language education; EYL for them has to be embedded in a pedagogy which addresses their socio-affective realities (see Ball (2018) and López-Gopar, this volume, for a discussion of how critical pedagogy can support this approach).

**Future directions**

There is now a growing body of evidence that teacher research – i.e., ‘systematic self-study by teachers (individually or collaboratively) which seeks to achieve real-world impact of some kind’ (Borg and Sanchez 2015, p. 1) – can help foster not only the professional development of teachers involved in it, but also the quality of teaching and learning. In fact, social constructivist models of teacher education (Johnson 2006; Borg 2015) have led to the mapping of different forms of teacher/practitioner research such as reflective practice (Griffiths 2000; Lockhart and Richards 1994), action research (Edge 2001) and exploratory practice (Allwright and Hanks 2009). These forms of research legitimise teachers’ knowledge and highlight the importance of reflective inquiry into the experiences of teachers as mechanisms for change in classroom practice (Johnson 2006) and present the teacher as a decision maker, an autonomous professional and a reflective practitioner (Stuart and Tatto 2000; Kumaravadivelu 2001). In the area of young learner English language education, research of this kind is scarce, and this is understandably so especially in sub-Saharan Africa where entry qualifications to teacher training institutions are often low and not dependent on English language proficiency and where the low socioeconomic status of primary level teachers means that many enter the profession only as a temporary passage to better opportunities (Mtika and Gates 2011; Akeampong and Stephens 2002). This notwithstanding, modest but significant attempts are being made to support primary level teachers interested in critically exploring their classroom practices and seeking solutions to their day-to-day conundrums.

One such example, which is the first of its kind in the field of EYL, involved 25 young learner teachers exploring their own classrooms in action research cycles with a focus on involving young learners as co-researchers (for details, see Pinter et al. 2016). The different
projects undertaken by these teachers are dependent on their contextual circumstances and available support:

There were two types of project undertaken in classrooms depending on the circumstances and the local levels of support available to each teacher. Some teachers simply elicited children’s voices and opinions and this led to more engagement with learning, more meaningful choices and children taking on more responsibility for their own learning. At the other end of the continuum some learners were enabled to undertake an actual inquiry into a matter of interest to them, through using questionnaires or interviews, for example.

\[Pinter et al. 2016, p. 7\]

The results of this project, drawn from a variety of data sources – including teacher diaries and presentations, teacher and learner interviews, as well as secondary data sources including posters, puppets, or books written by the children, activities produced by learners in class and audio or video recordings of classroom episodes – reveal that teacher-research activities which draw upon the opinions and reflections of children can be valuable in developing their cognitive and metacognitive ability as well as their autonomy and agency. This is even more valuable in developing world contexts where resources are limited and where teachers and students might be the only other resources or resource providers (e.g., see Kuchah and Smith 2011).

The ongoing collaborative work of teachers from Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan (see Smith et al. 2017) is another example which is based not only on sharing best practice through narratives of successful lessons but also on collaborative classroom teacher inquiry. Of the seven stories of teacher-inquiry reported in this collection, three specifically refer to in-country and between-country collaborations between young learner (elementary-level) classroom teacher inquiries and address issues such as correcting written work in large classes, managing multiple classes in one room without partitions (a form of multigrade classrooms) and increasing student participation as well as managing group work – challenges often identified in the literature on teaching in difficult circumstances. What is more, these inquiries are reported in language that is accessible to classroom practitioners (as opposed to the often obscure academic language of academic research journals) and follows a simple pattern including the identification of the (shared) problem faced by these teachers, what they do to set up their inquiries (e.g., formulating research questions, discussing their problems and consulting other colleagues), what they learn from colleagues, what they try in their classes, what they learned from these trials and their shared reflections on the benefits of the process both for student learning and for their own professional development.

Another example of inquiry involving teachers from both secondary and primary levels is the ongoing Teacher Association (TA) research project within the Cameroon English language teacher association (CAMELTA). Smith and Kuchah (2016, p. 215) define TA research as systematic inquiry which is derived from members’ expressed priorities and officially endorsed by a TA, and which engages members as active participants in what they see as a collective project to improve understanding and practice.

The project, initiated in August 2013, initially involved TA members writing down research questions based on their contextual challenges as a basis for developing a future individual
and collaborative research agenda (see Smith and Kuchah 2016, for details of the process and initial outcomes of the project). A recent further development has been the creation of the CAMELTA research group made up of teachers who are specifically interested in pursuing collaborative research on some of the key questions formulated in 2013. As Ekembe and Fonjong (2018) explain, in collaboratively investigating different aspects of classroom practice, the group also aims not only to enrich and share good practice, but also to demonstrate that some of the current practices of its members are good enough to generate pedagogic reflections that are consumable both locally and globally. Activities so far have included identifying relevant research questions from the online database, reading and discussing short articles, developing lesson plans, teaching and observing each other, collecting and analysing feedback from students and reflecting on these to develop principles for good practice in context. Through the use of mobile accessible platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook, group members are able to engage in ongoing discussions without having to travel to a traditional meeting venue all the time (see Ekembe and Fonjong 2018 for details of what the group has achieved so far).

There are indications that technology might be providing new opportunities for EYL and young learner teacher education. Tyers and Lightfoot (2018) describe and evaluate the outcomes of a British Council m-learning project aimed at enabling young people in India and Bangladesh to develop their English proficiency in order to improve their employability prospects. The authors report large-scale improvements in language proficiency and self-confidence in participants who would otherwise not have the opportunity to learn English in formal classroom settings. From Bangladesh, Solly and Woodward (2018) describe and examine a large scale in-service training (INSETT) project which makes use of Mediated Authentic Video with commentary from a local narrator to reach large numbers of teachers through their mobile phones. Through mobile technology, the project aims to reach 50,000 teachers and a cumulative student population of 7 million within a few years in a country where financial, infrastructural and resource challenges make it difficult for the government to provide affordable and effective face-to-face training at scale.

There is an urgent need for research into the exact challenges which young learner teachers face in difficult circumstances as a starting point for reflecting on what might be appropriate for these contexts. Such research should aim at celebrating and refining the positive contributions of teachers in these contexts, rather than at ‘pathologising’ the contexts. The three examples of bottom-up initiatives presented above indicate that curriculum, materials, and pedagogy can benefit from collaborative inquiry-based projects involving teachers and learners. Future research will need to build on the procedures and findings of these initiatives in order to generate a large bank of accessible ideas for good practice in difficult circumstance. In doing this, it is important to keep in mind that for innovative practices to be considered plausible, they need to involve practitioners, and to some extent, learners in the conception, generation and enactment process.

Further reading


This book offers a holistic practitioner and research-based perspective on English Language Teaching and teacher education in difficult circumstances. The 12 chapters in this collection examine the challenges and problems that emerge from the complex current ELT environment, and present examples of contextualised inquiry-based strategies and interventions to address these challenges.

This very practical and ‘teacher-friendly’ publication brings together a range of tasks and reflective activities to help teachers of large classes identify and analyse the difficulties they face as well as develop strategies for overcoming them. It also presents a collection of suggested activities which practitioners can use when teaching language skills in large classes.


This is an edited collection of stories of success and of teachers-inquiry authored classroom practitioners from Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. Each account of successful practice and teacher-inquiry addresses a specific classroom challenge which resonates with those reported in other challenging contexts around the world, and the associated video materials provide a further stimulus for reflection.

Related topics
Critical pedagogy, languages in the classroom, technology, classroom management

References


Teaching EYL in difficult circumstances


