

Introduction

Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.

Paulo Freire

Background to Teaching in Challenging Circumstances

The inspiration for *Teaching in Challenging Circumstances* is Michael West's *Teaching English in Difficult Circumstances*, a work which evolved out of his experiences as an educator in British India during the first half of the 20th century. Despite the six decades which have passed since its publication in 1960, many of his conclusions about English language learning in Bengal feel very familiar today, and there is much which we can learn from his experiences. He noted, for example, that despite students spending around ten hours a week on English study, very few students 'had real reading ability in English, nor were they able to speak more than disjointed sentences, and they could write only very slowly and laboriously', with the effect that their 'results were extremely poor'. This state of affairs is instantly recognizable throughout the modern world, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, where millions of students are daily receiving a language education where both the outcome and experience is unsatisfactory.

West's response to the situation he found in Kolkata and beyond was to support teachers in developing a pragmatic, practice-oriented pedagogy. This approach prioritized practices such as the comprehensibility of input, the recycling of new language, and linking language learning with the wider curriculum. His emphasis on a more liberal, democratic form of education was radical in its time, and indeed he purposefully 'stood away from and was opposed to the dominant beliefs and practices of his day' (Smith, 2016). One such contentious area concerned the negative impact which an assessment-focused culture had on classroom practice. This pressure resulted in a situation where teachers 'can't do what they want to do because it doesn't help students pass examinations'. Again, West's critique is as fresh and relevant today as it ever was.

For West, the role of the teacher is nuanced. One particular area which he was critical of was classroom performativity, that is, where the teacher 'is thinking too much of what he does so as to impress the Supervisor rather than of what the pupils are doing'. He challenged the notion of teacher-centredness, and undertook pioneering action research where he measured TTT (teacher talking time) and PTT (pupil talking time) in his classroom, the aim of which was to identify how the PTT could be maximized. He was also critical of teachers whose methodology consisted solely of lengthy explanations followed by written exercises, noting wryly that 'a marked enthusiasm for grammar is one of the commonest symptoms of a bad teacher'. For West, it is the learner who is central. He argued that 'language is a thing which is learnt by practice – it is learnt by the pupils' and that when TTT dominates, students 'will not acquire practice in the use of the language.' In short, West saw the role of the teacher as being to 'help the pupils do the work' because language 'is learnt rather than taught, and too much teaching can be an obstacle to learning.'

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The World after West

While we may still recognize many features of the educational landscape that West described, much has changed for the better. This is most evident in terms of access to education. In 1960, global literacy was only around 60%. The comparable rate today is closer to 90%. When West was writing, the Gross Enrolment Rate in secondary schools averaged 29%, a figure which now stands at almost 80%. Educational massification has thus been one of the dominant themes of the post-1960 educational landscape.

Clearly, the expansion of education to the widest possible audience is to be warmly welcomed. However, the speed of the transition – over just a generation – has had significant impact on the quality of education which can be provided. One of the chief successes of the Millennium Development Goals was to massively increase the number of students in school. One of their great failures was the relative lack of support for teachers, institutions and systems to cope with the huge additional demands. The classrooms of the 2020s are crammed full of students who probably wouldn't have been there in 1960. Yet while the numbers have changed in much of the global South, the facilities, resources and pedagogy have not – at least not in a genuinely meaningful way. West's description of lessons being comprised of 'lecture ... grammar ... textbook-study ... written translation' remains very familiar.

Another aspect of education which has not changed significantly during this time is the so-called 'hidden curriculum.' In many classrooms, the main focus of learning has been reduced to the maintenance of control, the consumption of information, and the passing of exams. As a result, in many contexts, education has not been a mechanism for achieving social, cultural, economic or political change. Instead, it has enabled pre-existing hierarchies to reassert their primacy. More than half a century ago, in *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner (1969) listed several factors that made up the hidden curriculum, many of which remain highly relevant in challenging contexts:

Passive acceptance is a more desirable response to ideas than active criticism; Discovering knowledge is beyond the power of students and is, in any case, none of their business; Recall is the highest form of intellectual achievement, and the collection of unrelated 'facts' is the goal of education; The voice of authority is to be trusted and valued more than independent judgement; One's own ideas and those of one's classmates are inconsequential; Feelings are irrelevant in education; There is always a single, unambiguous Right Answer to a question.

Clearly, in many parts of the global South, educational access and quality has improved. In other parts, however, the needle has barely moved. In Niger, only 1 in 3 women aged 15–24 are literate. South Sudan spends less than 1% of its GDP on education. If you speak a minority language anywhere in the world, the chances that you will be taught in that language are minimal. Such problems of inequity are not confined to the global South. As UNICEF make it clear in *An Unfair Start* (2018), it also affects the world's richest countries:

Some children do worse at school than others because of circumstances beyond their control, such as where they were born, the language they speak or their parents' occupations. These

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children enter the education system at a disadvantage and can drop further behind if educational policies and practices reinforce, rather than reduce, the gap between them and their peers.

As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, a global levelling-up of education is needed, both between nation states and within nation states. To quote West, ‘We are compelled to face realities’.

What are ‘challenging circumstances’?

The shift from West’s use of the term ‘difficult’ circumstances to ‘challenging’ circumstances is a conscious and deliberate one. As Harry Kuchah Kuchah (2018) argues, the ‘use of the word “difficult” may itself be patronizing and limits ELT professionals to pathologizing these contexts’. Kuchah (2016) further notes that in such situations context is crucial, asking the foundational question: ‘Who decides what is “difficult”?’. Educational contexts are often conceptualized in positivist, binary, outcome-oriented terms, where specific inputs inexorably result in specific outputs. The reality tends to be very different.

The issue of ‘large classes’ is one such area where this dichotomy is apparent. West himself talked about the difficulties of class sizes of ‘30, 40, 50’. Some 15 years later, Paul Nation (1975) suggested an increase to this figure stating that a large class was one which – specifically – contained ‘50 or more learners’. Having such a seemingly arbitrary cut-off point, however, does not make sense. Can we conclude that a class of 49 is not a large class? What even is a large class? Is the term ‘large class’ itself a social construct? By implication, the connotation of the term ‘large class’ is one which contains more students than can be taught effectively. But if a teacher uses a transmissive, teacher-fronted pedagogy and the students are demotivated, hungry, tired and barely understand the language of instruction, it may be difficult to teach a class of five students. On the other hand, if they develop a ‘pedagogy of partnership’ which entails ‘involving students in the sourcing and selection of teaching materials from the local environment as well as involving them as partners in the teaching process’, in Harry Kuchah Kuchah’s description (2016) of his experience in Cameroon, then it is possible to teach ‘a class of 235 students in a classroom meant for 6 students with fewer than 20 textbooks and temperatures of up to 46 degree Celsius.’

This example is indicative of the prevailing ‘deficit model’ often found in challenging circumstances. This term refers to the widespread practice of focusing on *obstacles* and that which *cannot* be done rather than on *opportunities* and that which *can* be done. This does not mean being naive or utopian: it simply means providing people with the best education possible within the context. Seeing education in relative rather than absolute terms will help enable this process. The spectre of this deficit model, which is haunting the global South, has to change. The repeated use of negative language about weak, fragile, helpless educational institutions will not lead to the step changes which are necessary. Whilst the class struggles faced by teachers around the world must be recognized, it’s also crucial to recognize their inherent strengths and resilience, and that what teachers are able to achieve in many challenging circumstances is remarkable. Otherwise, teachers in challenging circumstances may feel downtrodden, marginalized and fatalistic. Returning to our example of large classes, we should therefore not be asking questions such as how we ‘deal with’, ‘cope with’ or ‘handle’ large classes, but rather how we can empower and give responsibility to students, how we can draw on the wide range of experiences and knowledge in this group, and how students can use outdoor space in order to optimize their learning opportunities.

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This said, there are clearly certain factors which directly affect the ability of the institution or the teacher to be effective. Several such factors, each of which can have a significant impact at the institution and classroom level, are listed below. This is by no means a comprehensive list, and as noted above, context is crucial. However, as a general rule, we can say that when several of these factors co-appear, the more challenging the circumstances are likely to be. Typical contexts include those where:

- 1 There is conflict between the official language of instruction and the teachers' / students' ability in that language, and where as a result minority languages may be sidelined or even discriminated against.
- 2 There is a clear mismatch between the educational philosophy of different stakeholders. For example, whilst the head teacher / inspectorate prefers a 'chalk and talk' approach, the classroom teacher may wish to be more student-focused.
- 3 Institutions and teachers are not involved in the process of shaping policy which directly affects them. This denial of agency can mean that they have to implement policy which has been made without proper understanding or appreciation of the context in which they are working. Educational non-specialists and bodies are allowed to unduly and negatively influence how education takes place (e.g. private capital, political parties, powerful individuals).
- 4 Textbooks and other learning resources are insufficient – whether in terms of content, condition, level or number.
- 5 Teachers are not sufficiently trained and supported to be the most effective teacher they can be within their context.
- 6 Institutions and teachers are not permitted to take initiatives which they believe would optimize their students' learning experiences and outcomes.
- 7 Funders don't appreciate the situation in which learning is taking place, and set unrealistic, short-term time frames for interventions to succeed.
- 8 Teachers and institutions are on the front line of challenging political social change (e.g. mass migration), but are not supported in managing these situations.
- 9 The presence of different educational models (formal / informal / non-formal institutions, low-cost private schools, religious schools, etc.) creates a confusing and volatile educational landscape for stakeholders.
- 10 Teachers are expected to be a 'catch all' for wider problems in society (e.g. psychologists, social workers, medical doctors and so on), but they do not receive the necessary support in this, and few / zero service providers are locally available.
- 11 Teachers and other staff are paid poorly, late, or not at all, and their position at work is precarious – e.g. they don't have secure, strong contracts which are fully recognized in law, or aren't allowed to join a trade union.
- 12 Absenteeism is high, of teachers but also of students and other members of staff, potentially as a direct result of lacking job security.

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In education systems, one size rarely fits all. The importance of context means that the contents of this book should not be treated as a set of specific answers, but rather as a series of suggestions – suggestions based on good practice from around the world. The constant across all these suggestions is that *Teaching in Challenging Circumstances* seeks to increase the agency of teachers and students, addressing the following central concern expressed by Ian Kidd et al. (2017):

Who has voice and who doesn't? Are voices interacting with equal agency and power? In whose terms are they communicating? Who is being understood and who isn't (and at what cost)? Who is being believed? And who is even being acknowledged and engaged with?

The importance of language teaching

Although many of the suggestions made in *Teaching in Challenging Circumstances* could be applied in classrooms of different subjects, its primary focus is the language classroom. Language is vital in terms of human development. As Suzanne Romaine (2013) notes, it is 'at the very heart of significant fault lines in the development process'. The ability to use languages provides opportunities for people to 'contribute to their full potential and be active participants in breaking out of the poverty cycle' (Wisbey, 2016). The absence of this ability is a significant barrier to sustainable and equitable individual and societal development.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1970) is explicit about the centrality of language in challenging the 'culture of silence', through which learners acquire a negative, passive and suppressed self-image from their oppressors. The continued inability of students in challenging circumstances to develop language skills (in particular of dominant national and international languages) ensures that economic, political, social and cultural marginalization continues. That said, and despite the best intentions of educators and other stakeholders, systemic inequalities are not automatically erased by language learning. As Marr and English (2019) point out, 'the gates to symbolic and cultural capital do not swing open to anyone who just happens to learn a second language'. This echoes Bruthiaux (2012), who argues that for the 'severely poor ... the global spread of English is a sideshow compared with the issue of basic economic development and poverty reduction.' Nevertheless, for many learners in such circumstances, functional literacy in a language like English is difficult to separate from the acquisition of other 'life skills', such as digital literacy and higher education. As such, it is surprising that this is barely mentioned in either the Millennium or the Sustainable Development Goals. It is even more incredible when one considers the high percentage of classroom time which is spent learning languages, most particularly English.

Who is this book for?

This book is primarily for teachers who are working in some of the challenging circumstances identified above, recognizing them as key workers in the battle against political, social and economic inequality. Even in 'favourable' circumstances, where there are sufficient resources and support systems in place, teaching is a demanding and complex job. In challenging circumstances, these demands and complexities are even harder to manage.

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However, as noted above, *Teaching in Challenging Circumstances* acknowledges and celebrates what teachers can do. It views them as the fundamental building blocks of the whole educational process. It argues that even when there may be policy or institutional level barriers, they still often have the power to make significant changes in their classroom practice, to support their students in the best possible way. This is not to say that such changes will be easy, and often changes which you try to implement will not work as expected. As West (1968) notes, ‘you should keep on experimenting’. Learning, and developing as a teacher, is an ongoing process. The key thing is not to be discouraged, but to learn as much as possible from the challenge. To echo the Irish writer Samuel Beckett: ‘Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.’

What's in this book?

Part I begins by examining the importance and (economic, social and cultural) value of language learning in challenging circumstances (Chapter 1), and the general ways in which teachers can create a good environment for language learning so that it is safe for the students (Chapter 2), and education is inclusive (Chapter 3) and interactive (Chapter 4). It argues that whatever else is being expressed through policy or institutional norms, there is usually a way in which the teacher can make their own classroom a model for positive social change.

Part II looks at the day-to-day reality of teaching in the classroom in challenging circumstances, and how you can be effective in terms of planning (Chapter 5) and managing lessons (Chapter 6). It then looks specifically at two particularly pertinent issues, namely teaching inexperienced students (Chapter 7) and using different languages (Chapter 8).

Part III concentrates on the issues of teaching large classes, exploring how teachers can manage the seating (Chapter 9), manage students of different abilities (Chapter 10) and of different ages (Chapter 11). In addition to discussing how different seating layouts and systems can facilitate this, the chapter looks at how outside space can be used effectively and responsibly to maximize learning (Chapter 12).

Part IV turns to the specifics of teaching language skills and systems, and identifies some of the main challenges of teaching receptive (reading and listening) skills (Chapter 13), productive skills (speaking and writing) (Chapter 14), grammar (Chapter 15) and vocabulary (Chapter 16) in challenging circumstances. It includes a wide range of different interactive, effective and zero-resource activities which can be used.

Learning materials and resources are often in short supply in challenging circumstances, meaning that teachers have to teach language without textbooks. **Part V** explores solutions to this difficulty, including creating your own resources (Chapter 17), using the local environment (Chapter 18) and using technology (Chapter 19).

Part VI analyses the flip side of this, identifying how language can be taught most effectively when textbooks are available (Chapter 20), whilst also noting some of the inherent problems this poses, such as bias (Chapter 21). Furthermore, it looks at when and how textbook materials can be supplemented (Chapter 22).

In challenging circumstances, institutions are often not optimized to help students achieve their potential. This can lead to a negative mindset and culture of learned helplessness. **Part VII** addresses these issues, specifically: how you can motivate, empower and give agency to your students (Chapter 23), how you can check their learning effectively and humanistically (Chapter 24), how you can create

assessments (Chapter 25), and how you can help students perform at their optimal level in exams (Chapter 26).

A good educational institution is embedded within its community. **Part VIII** looks at how you can make these specific links with key stakeholders such as parents and guardians (Chapter 27), and the wider local community (Chapter 28). Then, we look at the flip side of this process, and how the outside world can be brought directly in to the classroom (Chapter 29).

Finally, **Part IX** looks at how you can support and care for yourself and others within your place of work (Chapter 30). It also makes suggestions about how you can reflect on your own teaching, so that you can become the best teacher that you can be (Chapter 31), and how you can access wider development or training opportunities (Chapter 32).

How is each unit structured?

Each of the 32 chapters is structured in a similar way. Each is introduced with a relevant quotation which sets the scene. This is followed by **The short version**, in which five key points summarize the key information presented in the chapter. Several questions are then posed in the **Introduction**, to enable you to reflect on your current practice. A short lead-in then sets the scene more generally, prior to the main content of the unit, which looks at typical *challenges* which you might face, and particular *techniques* which can be used in the classroom to address them. Activities and examples are scattered throughout. At the end of each unit, a short **Reflection** section looks at what next steps you can take to apply this knowledge to your classroom setting.

As far as possible, *Teaching in Challenging Circumstances* is written in straightforward English. At times, however, the use of the specific term is both needed and helpful. In such cases, the term is marked with ► as well as highlighted in bold, and a simple definition is provided in the ► **Glossary** on pages 190–199.

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I Creating a good environment for language learning

1 Teaching in your situation

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

The short version

- 1 Your main focus as a teacher is to maximize your students' learning experiences and learning outcomes. You need to identify the most effective way to do this in your institution and context.
- 2 Understanding what your students want from education should influence your classroom practice.
- 3 Understanding what other educational stakeholders want from education is also necessary – but this may be different from what your students want.
- 4 There is often a wide gap between why people learn languages and what or how they learn about languages in the classroom. This gap needs to be bridged.
- 5 When teaching languages, consider both *what* you teach and *how* you teach.

Introduction

- 1 Think about your teaching situation. What do students, teachers and parents think is the purpose of education?
- 2 What do these groups think is the purpose of language learning?
- 3 How closely does your ► **curriculum** (including materials, methodology, assessment) reflect this purpose?

What is the purpose of education?

Whilst there is no clear, simple answer to this question, it is important nonetheless to think about it. It's too easy to focus on the 'micro' (what happens in the classroom on a day-to-day basis) without thinking about the 'macro' (the big picture). However, the macro *should* influence the micro.

Therefore, it can be useful to understand the views of all your institution's ► **educational stakeholders**. Common responses by some of these different groups in challenging circumstances are given below.

Students	Teachers	Parents
<i>It's where I feel most safe. I like playing with my friends. It's better than being at home. I want to get a good job. I like learning new things.</i>	<i>It's a job. It's the right thing to do. I can help the community I'm living in. There's nothing else to do. I love teaching.</i>	<i>They can pass exams and get a job. They can get a certificate. School makes them feel better about their life. I have time to myself when my children are at school. I feel proud when they go to school.</i>

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The views and attitudes of different stakeholders towards education will depend on the type of institution you teach in. Stakeholders are likely to have different expectations about the purpose of education depending on whether they work in a formal, an informal or a non-formal institution. As a teacher, you need to be aware of all these different views – as well as your own personal opinions. In your classroom, you will often need to balance these different views.

Note: the role of the state

In ► **formal education** systems, the nation state is also a key stakeholder. Depending on its priorities, it may see education as:

- a way to build national unity, or to advance a particular ethnic or social group;
- a mechanism to promote a wide curriculum, entrepreneurship and life skills, or to give people just enough knowledge to participate in the economy at a low level;
- an instrument for genuine change, or to reinforce existing social divisions.

What is the purpose of learning languages?

Developing language skills, as well the process of learning a language, are both extremely valuable. There are many direct and indirect benefits arising from this, especially in challenging circumstances. Some of the main economic, social, cultural and psychological benefits of learning and acquiring languages include:

- helping people assimilate in different communities, and brings people together;
- improving people's general opportunities to get work, as well as the quality of the work they can do;
- helping people manage their trauma, for example by providing the mental and physical space needed to process it;
- enabling people to pass exams and obtain qualifications and certification;
- empowering people to access learning and training opportunities which might otherwise not be available to them.

If displaced people cannot use the language of school, work and/or society then, as with many less privileged groups in society, their chances of socioeconomic mobility and social integration are greatly reduced. This means that the disaster of having to flee their home country is often followed by a lack of access to basic rights for displaced adults and their children, compounding trauma and disadvantaging their life chances.

Tony Capstick

When talking about 'learning languages', this is often interpreted as 'learning English'. Although English is, by far, the most common language learned by students around the world, it's also important not to ignore other languages. In some challenging circumstances, it might be more useful to learn a dominant regional or national language as opposed to English – e.g. when students need to acquire the school's ► **language of instruction** in order to participate fully, or where the language of business and commerce is neither English nor the student's ► **L1** (first language).

What kind of language?

It is important to make a distinction between ‘language knowledge’ and ‘language ability’. In challenging circumstances, it is often the former which is prioritized. In reality, however, it is language ability which would really benefit students in some of the ways listed above. As a result, there is often a significant gap between *the reasons why people learn languages* and *what / how they learn about languages* in the classroom in terms of:

- **what students learn:** curriculums and ► **syllabuses** often focus on knowing about grammar (e.g. how to form the present perfect continuous or when to use a definite or indefinite article), remembering long lists of vocabulary, and imitating text structures and text types (e.g. writing compound vs complex sentences, or letters of complaint). One of the main reasons for this is that such language is easy to test (e.g. using ► **cloze** or ► **matching tasks**). Whilst some of this language is useful, in general it is not an accurate reflection of the kind of language which they would need in their everyday lives.
- **how students learn:** the process is often based on memorization, ► **rote learning** and repetition. Students are passive recipients of knowledge, rather than active agents. They learn language individually rather than collectively. Accuracy is valued above fluency.

Note

The ‘natural way’ to learn language is similar to the way in which you learned your L1. The emphasis is on communication, and the kind of language which you need in your daily life. There is less focus on areas such as formal grammar and writing. Developing ► L2 follows a similar path to developing L1, that is, listening – speaking – reading – writing. This approach decreases the stress and anxiety which many students feel when learning languages. Furthermore, what is learned is generally of more relevance and use.

What kind of English?

If you teach in formal education systems, you may not have any choice in terms of what English you teach. It will be determined by the curriculum, the textbooks and the assessment which you have to follow. Teachers often worry about whether they should be teaching British English or American English, or some other specific form of the language. However, if the goal of learning language is the ability to communicate meaningfully with others (as it should be), differences in certain words, or accent, or minor grammatical issues, are unimportant. English should therefore be seen from a multilingual perspective. It should be considered as an additional language resource which complements the student’s existing language resources (see ► **Chapter 8**).

Ideally, the kind of English you would be teaching your students is English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). This form of English prioritizes the use of English as a tool of international communication, rather than the accurate imitation of British or American English, or indeed any other variety. It is more democratic, and focuses on what speakers of English do in real life (rather than prescribing what they ‘should’ do). Whilst there is no universal agreement about what ELF is, some of its key features include:

- an accent which can be generally understood (but is not ‘native-like’);
- reduced vocabulary (including greater reliance on general verbs such as *do*, *have* and *make*);

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- simplified verb usage (e.g. not using third person -s);
- non-standard use of articles, prepositions and pluralization.

You may have greater flexibility to teach this form of English in informal or non-formal situations. However, even if this form of English is not considered acceptable in formal institutions, as a teacher you can make choices in your own classroom (e.g. about what you correct and how you correct).

Reflection

- How similar are the views of the educational stakeholders in your institution about the purpose of education? Are your views similar or different? How can you manage these different views?
- What kind of English do you teach in your institution? What influence can you have over this?