

How and why should we teach English in crisis and emergency situations?

Transcript



Episode transcript

The transcript highlights words that are classified under different CEFR levels

CEFR B2 words are highlighted in **yellow**.

CEFR C1 words are highlighted in **green**.

CEFR C2 words are highlighted in **blue**.

Further information about the underlined words can be found in the show notes.

Transcript

Introduction and discussion

We'am: Hello and welcome to Teaching English with the British Council – Series Two

Chris: A podcast where we try and provide solutions to some of the key questions being asked to English teachers around the world.

We'am: We are your **hosts** – We'am Hamdan

Chris: and Chris Sowton

In the first part of each episode we hear from a British Council project programme or **publication** about something which is being done to address this issue.

We'am: Across the ten episodes of Series Two we'll hear from Teachers, Trainers and Researchers in a wide range of **contexts**.... including.... Ukraine, Romania, Egypt and the **United Kingdom**.

Chris: In the second part a leading English expert and **practitioner** will provide **practical** solutions which you can immediately **try out** wherever you work.

We'am: Each episode of Teaching English is accompanied by a full transcript and show notes. These show notes provide **additional** information, a glossary of keywords and links to **relevant** websites.

Sting: This is Episode 6: How and why should we teach English in **crisis** and emergency situations?

We'am: Hello and welcome to episode six of Teaching English and in today's episode we will talk about how and why should we teach English in **crisis** and emergency situations.

Chris: This episode does contain some **sensitive** and **saddening** information in it. So please be **aware** of that if you're listening to this yourself or if you're sharing it with others.

We'am: Chris I know that you have a lot of experience working with **refugees**. So can you share a little bit about that?

Chris: Over the last few years I've worked quite a lot in challenging situations. I've worked in places such as Northern Nigeria, Somaliland, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, as well. And yeah, a lot of that time has been with **refugees** and asylum seekers. What I've always been struck with I think, in all the work that I've done in all of these places, is just how much

people want to learn. People will do anything to learn and it's not only what they get from the learning in terms of a qualification, but it's also the **process** of just having somewhere to go, something to do. One of the main reasons for teaching English in these situations is that people want it and then everything else sort of follows from that.

We'am: And as a person who experienced this, the situation of learning under **crisis**, and later I was able to come to the UK and **pursue** my studies I understood, maybe I did not understand the importance of learning English at a young age. But later in life, I understood that English should be taught and it's something we should **focus** because it is a way for us to **express** ourselves and sometimes it's a powerful tool to change the **narrative** and to change the discourse around difficult topics or **sensitive** topics.

Chris: Looking back at that We'am, does it feel now more of a sort of a political act, the learning of English in Palestine as you were growing up?

We'am: I think a lot of young people are learning English just to be able to deliver their messages. There are more Palestinians now who are able to write in professional English language. And I think in the past year, we have seen how the discourse around Palestine has **shifted** and it's mainly because of these people who are proficient in English and who can **express** themselves and deliver the **struggle** or talk about the **struggles** of their **nation**.

Chris: If I understand **rightly** We'am, your experience of learning English took place in the West Bank. In our interview today, though, we're going to be speaking to someone from Gaza. Could you explain a little bit about the difference between growing up in the West Bank and growing up in Gaza?

We'am: I'd like to believe that there is no difference. The difference is **visible** because of the systems that are in place by Israel and by the apartheid system. But we are one **nation** we have always been. Since 2007, Gaza was under complete lockdown. So for over 15 years, people from Gaza were not allowed to leave Gaza. I think in the West Bank, there is a bit more autonomy. We can leave the West Bank but unfortunately for people from Gaza, there are **restrictions** on **movement**, travels, and when I say **restrictions**, it is **beyond** imagination. Yeah, people are locked **literally** in Gaza and also in the West Bank.

Chris: And we spoke to Diana Abu Zayed who lives and works in Gaza.

We'am: Diana is an English language teacher, she works in an UNRWA school. She published three research papers in the field of applied linguistics and she is teaching primary level students, and she also has a **master's** degree in applied linguistics.

We'am: Welcome, Diana.

Diana: Thank you, We'am, I'm so happy to be here with you.

We'am: Why do you think it's important for teaching and learning to continue in **crisis** and emergency situations?

Diana: This is the key question. I want to tell you, We'am that in time of emergencies and **crisis** in general, we have questions more than answers. Just to keep that in mind before we start. Regarding your question, even in time of **crisis**, education is a **fundamental** human right and as a teacher, I believe that students need education in this time. More than any time else. Another point is that you don't know that period, or the length or the exact time of the **crisis**. And I believe that education is not just transferring the knowledge, it is something more than that. It's related to empowering the students supporting them, and this is the best time to do that.

Chris: And what are some of the challenges in terms of doing that in **crisis** and emergency situations?

Diana: We should as a teacher, keep in mind that the crises don't **affect** the students are all students at the same level. If we are ready, we can reduce the **impact** of this crisis. The second thing is the related to the people, their attitude if we are in a crisis, we can't do anything. We are **distracted**, we should give up. No, we should try to work on the **awareness** and attitude of the people about continuing education in this time. We have other issues related to technology and **digital literacy**. And the teachers themselves aren't you know well trained to deal with the students at this time and sometimes the teachers need to increase their well-being. So they need more courses and more, you know **counselling** skills at that time.

Chris: You talked a little bit there Diana, about teacher well-being and **counselling** skills and so on. Why do you think that is so important and how can teachers protect themselves in these difficult situations?

Diana: As a teacher, I believe that the teacher is the centre of the **educational process**. So if you have a **resilient** teacher, of course, you can deal with 100 students at least in a good way in a positive way. But if you have a traumatised teacher or stressed teacher that will **impact** all of his students. How could I as a teacher, taking care of myself. For me, along with the British Council with many courses related to trauma and how to deal with traumatised students. When you are confident you can deal with the students in this situation. For me, I have you know, some me time. We have our coffee or tea time, to try to relax myself, not to multitask a lot. I can talk with other teachers from different countries. They are in the same **context** like us and listen to their tips about how could I deal with this situation. And all the time I just try to put myself in my students shoes.

We'am: And in your opinion, do you see the benefits of teaching and learning English in a **context** such as Gaza?

Diana: Of course, this is very important. When we talk about teaching English, I imagine that we are in an island. And English language teaching is like the bridge. And you know how important is the bridge. English language is that communication, the connection with other words and with our staff as well. Because you know, I have the ticket to communicate with people from different nationalities, nationalities around the world, to tell them about our **reality** and our **circumstances** and to know more about their **reality** and **circumstances**. Regarding teaching English language itself, it has lots of **strategies** and approach that helps

the students **express** themselves, communicate with others and feel that they are not alone in times of crisis and hard times and by the way, we should keep in mind that the **crisis** is not always hard time sometimes it is a turning point.

We'am: Can explain a bit more about **crisis** being a turning point?

Diana: For example, we have COVID-19 and it can be hard at times, we can't **deny** that. But regarding education, it's a turning point. We move from face-to-face classroom to online learning. So it worked here for the people of Gaza because it was a turning point in education. And after COVID-19 the courses now **focus** more on technology more than before because of this crisis. It was a turning point in our education system.

We'am: Yeah, and I think **crisis** can also maybe show the **inequalities** around the world. So they become more **prominent** during times of **crisis**. So how can the **process** of language learning and the pedagogical approaches used to make positive **contributions** to students well-being?

Diana: We have some suggested activities like using a **journal** if they can write whatever they want to talk about, they can choose a topic whatever they want to write about. We have sometimes asked for students to write a story, to recite some songs that bring **relief** in those hard times. Let them lead a discussion, listen and give them a safe atmosphere for learning. I like using drama as well, because drama really can be related to our **context** and **reality**. I let the students choose a topic they can act, that they can choose a message. All of these **strategies** are very helpful, particularly in English language because they feel that they are the **ambassadors** of our context.

Chris: As you say there Diana, sometimes it can be very small things that have a lot of **influence** just giving a student a choice about whether they do an activity in speaking or writing or giving them you know, just giving them some kind of choice is so empowering in a situation and environment where they, in their day to day lives, have no choice. Just giving them something can really send a very positive message.

Diana: Yes, exactly. Just to tell them that their voice matters.

Chris: Exactly.

Diana: I want just to tell them this is a safe place, we can talk together, we don't have right or wrong answers. And by the way, I'm as a teacher, I've **suffered** a lot of dealing with traumatised students. Because two years ago, I don't have such counselling skills. Some students lose their parents in a war or in a political event. Teachers need these basic **counselling** skills and I believe not only that, we have in each school we have one **counsellor** and this is not enough.

Chris: And do you think there is some sort of **psychological protection** of using a different language, so in doing these activities in English, for example, that students will talk about things in a way that they wouldn't do if they did it in Arabic.

Diana: By the way, when you do something international it is more powerful. As I told you, they feel they are doing the impossible. Just to do the code-switching from Arabic and English is something happy and fun for the students. And they feel that they are more powerful because they have a wide audience, more than they would have in Arabic.

We'am: Yes, and I think that is particularly important in the Palestinian context

Diana: Exactly

We'am: because the crisis is ongoing for years, so it is very important to equip teachers also with the skills on how to deal with these situations.

Chris: And do you see a difference say, Diana, between the Palestinian context and say, events that are happening in Ukraine or South Sudan. Though with the Palestinian context it's been going on for many many years. In these other situations, it's on a shorter time period. Do you think the approaches are similar? Or are there differences?

Diana: In general, we have some common approaches. But regarding the Palestinian context, it's not because the time or the period of the hard times or the crisis are too long. It's not something temporary. We as teachers are waiting for unexpected events at any time. So must be ready for ups and downs all the time. As a teacher I have a plan B. For example, I have my own curriculum designed for crisis time, I have my own online and digital materials. If this happened that day today, I will send this to my students. I will not interrupt their education. But the Palestinian context is completely different and sensitive as is full of unexpected events anytime. For example, here we have the destruction of a school. We have some schools can be sheltered in any time. So losing the infrastructure is expected.

We'am: Yes, I think Gaza witnessed this many times in the past so teachers had to adapt and work in really difficult circumstances. And I salute you for that for being that strong educator. What's your role as a teacher or educator during these times, Diana?

Diana: For me, I believe I should be the unknown soldier who encouraged the students to learn. For example, in COVID-19 I did some sessions. I started with only nine students, later that number increased to more than one hundred students came to my sessions. Why did they keep coming to these sessions? Because they weren't 100% academic. We've played together, I used a show and tell presentation, I used drama with them, we talk about their favourite movies, I ask them to bring their favourite chocolate and we talk about food. I did also twinning activities with the students from Poland, Turkey, so if you have resilience teachers, they can advance and empower the role of education in that time.

Chris: And so do you see that students can become advocates to their parents that from what they learn in your sessions and other teachers' sessions, that they can go home and they can support their parents in terms of processing some of the trauma or becoming more resilient.

Diana: By the way, I believe students absorb the attitude of the teacher easier than the parents, because the effects of the teachers on the students are really great. So later when

they go home, as you mentioned, they can change that attitude of their parents. Oh their parents, they feel shy because the students are **motivated** and excited in this time more than them.

We'am: Yeah, and I believe that can take off some of the **burden** off of the shoulders of parents who are also maybe **struggling** to **process** these difficult **circumstances**.

Diana: Yeah, I agree. I told you that in preparation for **crisis** regarding not the education system but related to that people **resilience** and the courses and **trauma** and all of these things. Many **factors** are key **factors** that have **impact** on this topic, not only in education.

We'am: Yes. And one last question, is there an activity that works particularly well? In **contexts** like Gaza in a crisis situation?

Diana: For me, my students like show and tell presentations. I asked my students to bring for example, their favourite doll, they told me about it, it is a gift from my Dad and they tell us more about it. And it is also related to the lesson, they describe it, if we have body parts or if we have a lesson about colours. I believe that show and tell presentations give students the safe atmosphere of a speaking activity and it is a good way to communicate with their friends and tell them a lot more about themselves. Another activity is visualisation as well. I say to my students imagine that you are on a plane. And could you tell us your destination? Yes. I want to go for example, to Britain. What would you like to see there? The London Eye. And I can ask more questions like this. This activity is really fun and interesting for the students and related to their needs. Help them to forget **reality** and the **crisis** time.

We'am: Yes, I think it's a bit of an escape for them, which helps them maybe **process** what is going on as well.

Diana: And it is fun as well

We'am: Yes, exactly. Thank you very much, Diana. That was really interesting.

Chris: Thank you, Diana.

Diana: Thank you Chris and We'am.

We'am: I **specifically** like that Diana, when she answered the questions how and why should we teach English in **crisis**, she referred to education, the **process** of education that it should continue, she referred to the education **process** as a whole. And since English crosses cultures, countries and industries, it is often used as a common tongue if a person does not speak that **native** language, so it's a tool for **expression**. And I think people in **crisis** are in the **utmost** need for that tool. And she also talked about **processing trauma** and using language to **process trauma** through the use of drama. I wonder, Chris, whether that is similar or different to your experience and training and working with Ukrainian teachers?

Chris: Yeah, so over the past few months, I've been working a lot with the British Council in Poland and in Romania and **elsewhere** on training Ukrainian teachers in **trauma**-informed or

trauma-sensitive pedagogies. What we've been doing is trying to support teachers in how do they deal with students who are facing **trauma**, who are facing **crisis**, how can you teach language in that situation? Or how can language be used as a **therapeutic** tool to support them during these very, very difficult times? And yeah, I mean, my view is it absolutely can because for many, many children, the classroom is the safest place in times of **crisis** and emergency. Everything else in their lives may be **chaos**, but the classroom is a space that can be controlled. It is a space where a well-informed teacher can create a kind of sanctuary and that's what we are trying to do because it's not only good for the students, it can be good for the teachers who themselves are **suffering** often from **trauma**, and it's also good for parents in the whole **community**. The school can become almost an active political **agent** in trying to **combat** the **forces** of the Russian **invasion**. And one of the things I often say to teachers in this training is that they are frontline workers. They are **actively** involved in fighting against tyranny, and they should be told this because they are. They are just as **heroic** as anyone else in this fight. They are not **psychologists**, but they're expected to be, they're not nurses and doctors, but they're expected to be, they're not parents, but they're expected to be, they're expected to wear all of these different hats. And it's **incredibly** difficult. And it's **incredibly** hard. And yet they do it every day. Where just getting out of bed for a lot of people in this situation will be an act of huge **moral courage**. They're going far, far, far **beyond** that. Obviously, the two situations in Gaza and Ukraine have lots of **similarities**, but also lots of differences. But there really is, I think, a sort of a shared centre between them.

We'am: That was very heartfelt Chris, and as you said, it's a **statement** and I **agree with** that. I remember when I used to complain about crossing a checkpoint to go to school every morning. My Dad always told me that education is a **weapon**. It's a **weapon** in these **circumstances**. So I always remember his words and it just crossed my mind that he always said that. And you can see in these situations, teachers are very, very hard working and also students are very hard working. They want to learn not just because it's an escape for them, but because I think they realise the importance of knowledge and of learning.

Chris: And in the field report that we're listening to, in this episode. It **captures** a flavour of some of this training that I've been doing in Poland and Romania. We talk to teachers, we talk to trainers, and we talk to the people who are organising and running the course.

Olha and Olha: From the very first days, there were many students, many **primary** students who were with us in the city hall and just making masking nets and doing different things for the army and for our country. And even the parents they felt more safe when the kids were with us teachers because they relied on us to take care of them altogether.

Dasha and Oksana: Yes, Ukraine is at war with Russia at the moment. And we do have **displaced** students or we have **wounded** students and we have all sorts of different **trauma** in the families because of the war.

And this was a great challenge for our **educational** system because our teachers and our system hasn't been ready for such great **obstacle** to **overcome**.

Cristiana: My name is Cristiana, I'm a teacher educator, moderator of online courses and course **developer** with the British Council. I've been working with Ukrainian teachers for a very long time. We are trying to support teachers and **learners** in these difficult situations. We started with the teachers because we believe that teachers should be in a good **mental**, personal and professional **state** so that they can support the **learners**. And that means that we are offering lots of activities, **theory** first and then activities that they can take into the classroom. All of these are trauma-informed teaching activities, and we are trying to reach through the teachers thousands, thousands and thousands of learners who hopefully will be able to benefit from education, even under very difficult **circumstances**.

*Excerpts from UMT **workshop** Perry model and classroom discussions*

Olha and Olha: Nowadays there are **blackouts** because it depends on the day. We can work distantly or we can work offline, but in both cases, it's very, very challenging because if we are offline, we have no electricity, we have no heating in schools, and we have no lights in the **shelters**. And if we work this way **simply** no one can join the video lessons so it's a really big challenge because our students they had their routine, they are **adapted** to the war, now they have their **natural immunity** if it can be called like this a natural immunity to war, but they still **established** it and now they're **frustrated** due to the electricity **shortage**.

My student became more responsible and those who hated going to school they always ask when will we go to school? We would like to study we'd like to have a, gain a better education because in the future we will rebuild Ukraine. That would be our aim and I'm very proud of them. Because nowadays we have war, then we will have **victory** and we have to move on.

Olha: Even me, I discovered many feelings in myself inside myself yesterday. Fireworks that seemed normal for Poland, they, they are a **crisis** for us. I was waking up at five o'clock this morning because somebody was just doing fireworks. And for me I thought it was war that followed me here. And I understood that I have to work with my own feelings too. Because I'm not a robot.

Cristiana: We are trying to help the project grow and so British Council Ukraine **recruited** 16 experienced teacher educators and they're absolutely amazing. They are not only wonderful **professionals**, but they are they all have the human **qualities** required for this project. They are very empathetic. They know how to listen to the teachers, how to support the teachers. They know how to approach the teachers because they are going through the exact same situations as the teachers are and they know what the teachers need.

Dasha and Oksana: My name is Oksana, I'm an English teacher. Mostly teaching groups of teenagers I'm **currently** just working as a trainer for the British Council.

I am Dasha, I am an English teacher as well, I work in the **state** school and work with different age groups from **primary** to the high school students. Also I'm happy to be a teacher educator and to **participate** as a trainer for this project for the British Council Ukraine. This course is really essential one because it **enhances** teachers on the ground regarding teacher a trauma-informed approach and at the same time, it helps them to overcome their own

problems, issues and **reactions**, trying to keep everything in that same place and support their **communities**, their families, their students.

We hope they are going to become more **sensitive**. They will understand deeper how brains work.

They will be more confident in terms of teaching during wartime and I hope that they will make a **shift** to such social and **emotional supportive** activities and try to put their **learners** needs feelings and **personalities** at the very beginning of each lesson.

They will stop teaching the book and they will definitely go and start teaching students.

What is more important today our **participants** have mentioned that we are lucky, English teachers are very lucky lot because our subject helps us to bring really great difference to our classrooms. It's really a great opportunity for our students **recovery**.

Cristiana: I think the language helps us process what we are going through. Quite often we say that language and the words we use shape our **reality**. I'm a great believer in that and I see it everyday when we work with these teachers. If we use the correct terms for **identifying** how **we** feel, what we feel, we can **come up with** the right solutions. If we cannot name these feelings, if we cannot name what we are going through, we don't have any control over them. So language gives us control. Especially a foreign language is a very interesting **phenomenon** of foreign language is very helpful because creates a **neutral** ground. We are less **emotional** in another language so it gives us the space to look at our feelings from a more **objective perspective** and helps us work with what we are going through, name our thoughts, name our feelings. And of course it will do the same for the **learners**.

Excerpt from Positive Language lesson: *To use more positive words and less negative because we have a lot of negative all the time, to use more positive words. The words then have a positive meaning.*

Dasha and Oksana: I would say we are also traumatised so we are at their level and they feel that we are more facilitators than educators here. We are involved in we are growing together with them.

Olha and Olha: Knowledge and then we will do everything after the war after the situation is calmer and better.

Dasha and Oksana: So it's great opportunity for them to **recharge** their batteries.

Olha and Olha: Nowadays we have war, then we will have victory.

We'am: So a similar **theme** between this field report and what Diana said in her interview is **trauma** and **trauma**-informed activities. Diana mentioned that she always has a plan B. And here teachers **reflected** on how they use **trauma**-informed activities to **regulate** the **emotions** of children who experienced the **trauma**, but I think most **importantly** is providing support also for teachers who are holding all this **burden** on their shoulders. So it's very important to

train teachers using the right methods, and using also my maybe **trauma**-informed approaches to train teachers so they can be **equipped** to deal with the learners. Do you agree, Chris?

Chris: Absolutely. And I think too often, in the situations teachers forget about themselves. And they have to look after themselves. One of the things we talk about in the training, you know, is the **oxygen mask analogy** you know, you have to put the **oxygen mask** on yourself before you help other people and teachers have to recognise this that they will **burn out**, it's just too hard if they don't also look after themselves. They have to find time to find their own **joy**, and to look after themselves. However hard things are, it's not selfish, it's not **unrealistic**, it's not **unreasonable** to do these things and they have to realise that they will be more **effective** if they look after themselves.

We'am: Yes, definitely. And also, it's important not to **neglect** other people's **trauma** so **trauma** might not just be the **sudden** event it can be an **accumulation** of events that lead to **trauma**. And in many **struggles**, or in many emergency situations around the world, you'd find that this is very intergenerational, let's say. So it's not just an event and we need to do an **intervention** there. I think it's **accumulated**. So these methods, I think, work in all parts of the world.

Chris: Absolutely. And I think so much of it, though, is the **recognition** by teachers that there is something that they can do and again, something we always say at the start of the training is you will not fix these children

We'am: Definitely, you will not fix them but you always try to make their time in class at least enjoyable and fun.

Chris: And what you can do is show another way you can show a different way. You know, whether that's in Palestine or in Ukraine, or wherever it may be, is that you can model **kindness**, you can model good behaviour, you can show the **alternative** realities are possible within the four walls of your classroom.

We'am: I couldn't agree more. I think **empathy** is very important because I think people are **exposed** to **violence specifically**, when they see that you know, everything around them is falling, then they will feel that well the world doesn't matter. What is the reason you know, what is the purpose of this life? So it's very important to **reflect themes** of **empathy** and to show them that there is still **kindness** in this world and things will improve and be better.

Chris: Absolutely. There was something else that Christiana mentioned as well, which I thought was very interesting about how teachers just by being **aware**, and noticing things can have a huge **impact** on not just the class, but on the individual life of a child. Just have a listen to this **extract** We'am.

Cristiana: We had a family coming from Aleppo a few years ago, and you know that there was a lot of bombing and shelling. And whenever they would get close to school, one of the boys would start crying and yelling and just throw himself on the ground and refuse to continue. And we couldn't understand why because the other child was perfectly alright.

Look for the **trigger**, what **triggers** that behaviour? What he did was to go outside and watch the parents coming with the children. And the parents, because the children were kind of young, the parents would carry the backpacks. And when they would get closer, they would put the backpacks on the children's shoulders and send them in. And at that moment, when the backpack was put on the child's back, he started yelling. So the teacher realised that something, that that was the moment. So, he took the child aside, and he actually sat down, he said I sat in the dirt, they don't have paved roads there, so he sat in the dirt with the child and pushed the backpack away and he started talking and said 'don't you like your backpack? Would you like another one?' And the child started crying and told him that actually when he was going to school, the street was shelled and his best friend was killed and the only thing left of him was his backpack. So his **reaction** was to the backpack. When he saw the backpack he re-lived all that. So the teacher talked to the parents and said listen, no more backpacks, put his things in a plastic bag. You can work around it if you find the **trigger**.

We'am: That goes back to how you **process** also **trauma**. I think when teachers are **aware** of how **trauma** is formed in children and how it works in the brain, they are more able to find **practical** solutions on the spot.

Chris: Absolutely. And I think it's, and again, it comes back to this point about saying to teachers, you are not going to fix this situation, but what we can do is give you enough knowledge and support in order to **identify** these sorts of problems and work out what you can do. In these situations, again, in **crisis** and emergency situations, it's all about what can you control and what can't you control. There's so many things you can't control that often teachers feel well there's no point doing anything. But there are things you can control. There's always things you can control. You can control the type of language you use, you can control what's in your classroom. You can control how people work together. You can control what you say, how you model good behaviour, there's all sorts of things you do have the power to control in that situation. You could control listening to what a child says and using your knowledge to **identify** that it was the backpack which was the **trigger** for their behaviour.

We'am: Thank you for listening, and in our seventh episode, we will talk about how can **peer**-led training and mentoring support teachers' development.

Chris: See you next time.



**This episode was produced
for the British Council by:
Chris Sowton and Kris Dyer**