



TeachingEnglish

British Council: TeachingEnglish

A podcast series for teachers
of English



**Episode 4: How can I
teach refugees, migrants
and internally displaced
people effectively?**

Transcript



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Duration: 0:29:49

Chris: Hello, and welcome to Teaching English with the British Council, a podcast in which we try and provide solutions to some of the key questions being asked by English teachers around the world.

Chris: I'm your host, Chris Sowton. In each episode, we address one such question and attempt to answer it in two ways.

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. Across the 10 episodes of the series, we hear from teachers, trainers and researchers in a wide range of contexts, including India, Lebanon, Uruguay, and South Africa.

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

Chris: Welcome to episode 4 of Teaching English with the British Council in which we will try to answer the question: how can I teach refugees, migrants and internally displaced people effectively?

According to the most recent data from the UNHCR (the United Nations High Commission for Refugees), more than 82 million people worldwide have had to flee their homes because of violence, conflict, persecution or human rights violations, more than 1% of the global population. 42% of the world's forcibly displaced people are children which obviously has huge implications for education. In this episode, we explore some of those implications, in particular with regards to language education.

In a 2016 report for the British Council, Tony Capstick and Marie Delaney explored the way in which language and language learning can help vulnerable people affected by conflict and displacement. Their Language for Resilience report identified 5 particular areas in which this could take place, namely: home languages and literacy development, building the capacity of teachers and strengthening educational systems,

addressing the effects of trauma, learning together and social cohesion, and access to education, training and employment. Together these principles were described as Language for Resilience and have informed British Council programmes around the world in places as diverse as Uruguay and Uganda. But the area of the world in which Language for Resilience has been most important in recent times is the Middle East and North Africa and in today's field report we hear from 3 programmes in that part of the world. From Egypt, Jordan and the occupied Palestinian territories.

Harry: My name is Harry Haynes, I'm based in Amman in Jordan, and I'm the regional lead for Language for Resilience. So, Language for Resilience developed as a response to the Syrian crisis and its language programmes that support resilience of individuals and communities. But since that time, we broadened the meaning out to help others who are not necessarily refugees who, but who are affected by a conflict, hostility or misunderstanding. We're working at the systems level primarily, and we're working with non-formal education. So we're strengthening the non-formal education system by giving teachers the skills to provide quality English lessons, and the reason for that is to allow individuals, and to the benefit of their community as well, to progress to livelihoods for a start. We've got some really exciting work in Palestine, for example, directly linked to livelihoods in the digital economy, and we're going to be working on that in Iraq as well very soon. And pathways to higher education. So for better or worse, English is a real barrier to higher education in many countries and often displaced people or marginalised people don't have the English skills to be able to access higher education. There's also the psychological value of the programmes that we run. So the language classes give people the opportunity to come and share, talk about their experience in a safe space, and also to engage with other communities. So for example, when we were working in Turkey on a very interesting project the English classes were one of the few times when the Turkish community and the refugee community came together and all the feedback we got was that was a really positive experience for people from both cultures. And it can cause resentment in a community that's already vulnerable if all benefits seem to be going only to the new refugee community. So it's very important to build the local community in and to get their buy-in to the whole programme and to share opportunities, so to do that English is key in that particular case.

Reema: Reema Qaralleh, English for education systems culturally for Jordan and Iraq. I'm working with a team on a project, which is called Community Language Support project. This project is a capacity development project, and it aims to improve the delivery of high-quality English language programmes to marginalised and displaced people in Jordan. And it is part of the British Council wider work in the area of Language for Resilience, which is a support for the importance of languages for refugees and even for the host communities. It allows people to, you know, to develop their language ability and to build their English language proficiency. This is good for them to communicate with other people easily and it will support their work as well.

Community Language Support project is a supportive project. This support was in the form of training, resources, giving materials for community centres, which offered English language training in very different places in Jordan. We are giving this training through strong diverse community-based learning opportunities. So Community Language Support project supports teachers and community centre managers to provide high quality, engaging and relevant English language provisions to marginalised and displaced learning. One of the things that happened last year because this is the second time that we are doing CLSP we did that last year, and 352 participants got the training of CLSP and one of them really give us a great feedback about that. A Sudanese participant, he took the training and he told us that it was a constructive training and it gave him many chances to be part of the community and even to develop his language proficiency. So it will be great for him to, you know, to give the training in a good way. So in Jordan, we have different refugees from different places around the world. We have refugees from Syria, from Iraq, from Yemen, from Ghana, from Sudan. So it is a chance to give them English language training since it is the way to communicate internationally, and it is a good chance for them to develop their language to open the doors around the world not just even in Jordan. So it is like intercultural, intercultural communication way for them to have. The British Council as well supports the host community by doing training, supporting teachers, as one unit together, a high-quality language learning environment will be created. This will support the country itself. This will support the host community as well not just the teachers.

Hala: My name is Hala Ahmed. I'm the head of English for education systems, British Council Egypt. So the English for interfaith dialogue is a natural extension to along the existing partnership between Al Azhar and the British Council. It started back in 2007. It involves a scaling-up of our work with Al Azhar and to position the British Council at the forefront of cultural relations in the area of supporting interfaith and intercultural dialogue through educational programmes. This is a partnership that we are so proud of and it generally seeks building as scholars English language capacity as the leadership and the cultural understanding skills and our vision in this programme is for Al Azhar's students staff and scholars to be able to engage in interfaith dialogue and intercultural exchange with people from different cultures nationally and overseas through the medium of English. And just to give you a bit of background Al Azhar is the largest Sunni learning entity in the Muslim world, and it's regarded worldwide as the main Muslim advocate of moderate and modernist Islam as opposed to other extreme Muslim ideologies. This particular programme, the English for interfaith dialogue is for ambitious Al Azhar students and scholars who seek broadening their views of the world and getting a better understanding of the other. This actually constitutes the overall goal of the project, which is to empower Al Azhar students, staff and scholars with the relevant English skills to enable them to engage in interfaith dialogue and intercultural exchange opportunities. This will, so to help them build bridges towards understanding other faiths and religions, but also be in a better position to tell the other about tolerant Islam. This was also regarded by Al Azhar itself as a pressing need to position Al Azhar as the moderate Muslim entity, and to leverage the career prospects of future Al Azhar

Imams and scholars who are pursuing jobs or academic studies overseas in countries like the UK. This is all eventually contributing to the achievement of Al Azhar grand ambitions.

Runna: My name is Runna Badwan and I'm the English projects manager in Palestine. In Palestine is a British Council project that aims to improve the English language skills and soft skills of Palestinian youth so that they're better able to access opportunities in the digital economy. And the idea and inspiration for this project really came through one of our partners Gaza Sky Geeks, because they've done a lot of work, helping unemployed graduates who have a lot of talent and a lot of skill to become digital freelancers and coders and find those opportunities. This project was inspired by that and is aiming to do work with partners like Gaza Sky Geeks, to help those youths find those opportunities in the digital economy. Well a lot of youths have gone through university, you know, they've done their 12 years of school, gone to university gotten a bachelor's degree, maybe even a master's but they still can't find a job. Part of that is because of just the context and the economy here and just very limited opportunities and for a lot of people, the only way they can find a job is by looking outwards. For a lot of people they think a programme like this are those improved language skills, they could be the key that unlocks the door. And that bit of hope goes a long way. For refugees learning English or learning the local language can be that first step and getting back to normal. It's how they're able to get to know the new environment that they're living in and being able to read and understand the signs that they see as they're walking down the street, or their small interactions that they have with somebody in a supermarket or a clothing shop, with a taxi driver or a bus driver. Those small interactions that they have in English can be the highlight of their day. English can do so much for them in their new environment. And it goes beyond the work that we do in our projects really, it really does change their lives. The one thing with language honestly, I mean for a lot of refugees, they come when they're in a new, whatever new society they're living in, it's a new society, but they're bringing they're still carrying all that trauma that they faced before. And if they're not able to communicate with people about it and express themselves in English or the local language, it can be really difficult for them to move past it. So the language not only can help them to adapt to their new society, and to a new way of life, but it can also help them to kind of to process and come to terms with what they went through by giving them the means to talk about it, with others, which can be really important.

Harry: For me, language resilience is about pathways, it's adaptive, and it's about hope.

Reema: For me, language for resilience is all about diversity, intercultural and high quality.

Hala: So language for resilience for me is opportunities, ambitions, and persistence.

Runna: For me language for resilience is about hope, opportunity, and empowerment.

Chris: You can find out more about the British Council's Language for Resilience programmes in the show notes or at www.britishcouncil.org/language-resilience-hub

During the second part of this episode, we talk to Brian Lally. Brian has a broad range of educational experience including teaching, leadership, teacher and headteacher training, safeguarding and child protection and programme management. Over the last few years he has been working on a range of projects encompassing non-formal schooling and higher education provision for Syrian refugees in the Middle East, and is currently nearing completion of his PhD on educational experiences of Syrian refugees in Lebanon: Voices from the Margins. Brian, welcome to teaching English.

Brian: Thanks, Chris. Nice to be with you.

Chris: So perhaps we could begin, Brian, by asking for your reflections on the field report, which we've just heard, and how this compares to your own experiences working with refugees, migrants and IDPs.

Brian: I thought it was really interesting getting those little snapshots from across the region. One thing that did strike me from the off though just the very word resilience and in language context is interesting. Resilience we've been hearing a lot of in the refugee context. And I've also been starting to question the use of that word itself because I wonder sometimes is that displacing a certain amount of responsibility for very difficult conditions? For example, we're already starting to hear some hints of almost refugee blaming: that their circumstances are challenging, and if they're not succeeding, well, maybe it's because they're not resilient enough. And I just wonder about the actual use of that word itself. Are we basically saying that we're expecting people to put up with things that they should not be putting up with? My concern is really that the terminology might actually displace some of the responsibility and I think that's difficult. I think it's one thing absolutely, we should be acknowledging the realities of the difficulties that people are facing, but rather than just giving them skills to, kind of, cope with things that they really shouldn't be coping with. Does resilience kind of lends itself more to a narrative of, well, let's just find a way to cope rather than actually solve the underlying problems.

Chris: And what would you describe it as, Brian, if you could, from your own

experience working with refugees in the region? Where do you see the value of language learning and education? How, instead of say, language for resilience, what term would, would you use?

Brian: I would pick out some of the things that actually that you've contributed to the field report picked out of. The one that really stood out was how many people kept circling back to hope. Not just education in emergencies, but language education and foreign language and English in particular, I think is so much linked to people's ability to be connected, not just to their immediate circumstances, but to the broader outside world because whether we like it or not, English is a lingua franca now, not just in terms of employment, but in terms of international communication, whether it's through social media, or being plugged into news networks, or even how you navigate some of the international systems as a migrant or as a refugee. And I think the idea of teaching people the communicative skills, in most cases, in terms of English, to allow them to be not just barely competent, but to confidently navigate that space. That is inherently a hopeful thing to do. It's also quite aspirational for many of the families that I've been working with there is no intergenerational tradition of speaking English or even attempting to learn English or even actually perceiving a value in English. There is a question of novelty, of ambition, of striving for something new and different, and something better, that can be tied up with English if it's taught well.

Chris: What would you say to a teacher working in those conditions? How can they create hope in a situation which can often feel pretty hopeless. As we know teachers have so much to do as it is, we're putting a lot of pressure on them as well if we're asking them to create that hope for, for young children in, in refugee scenarios.

Brian: I think part of this is just the very existence of education in these contexts is itself a statement of hope, some of the places where learning happens, just the fact that they're even in existence at all is a massive statement of commitment, of hope, of ambition, of not being forgotten, and of not wanting to be left behind. So for teachers who so often get vexed by notions of quality of what's been delivered and what's possible, I think sometimes it's good just to take a step back and say hang on a second, the very fact that you are turning up for work and delivering anything to these children in these spaces is a very, very big statement in itself. You know, learning centres, schools, whatever you want to call them, these are totems of, of ambition, these are totems of optimism, these are totems of hope in very, very difficult contexts. And I think if we're only stressing about the nature of the curriculum, or you know what the attendance rate was, or how many children pass some artificial random test in Maths, I think we're missing possibly that much more important, broader points about the value of the very existence of these institutions. And of course, these institutions only matter because of who is in there. And for the people running them, these teachers, the fact that they are showing up is just such a massive symbol to the

children, that they matter, that they have a future, that things are possible, that they've not been completely abandoned, in spite of what so many other, other things in their lives may tell them to the contrary. You know, these children do have worth and that's before you even open your mouth as a teacher never mind to the real exciting things that teachers can do in their teaching spaces. Just showing up just really counts.

Chris: And how can teachers protect themselves in those situations because you know, they are dealing with these students who have a range of issues. They may be there by themselves, they may have lost family members, they may have migrated to those areas, they may have little experience of education so that may translate into poor behaviour in the classroom. All of these sorts of things, when the teachers themselves are also refugees and are dealing with their own trauma, and then they are taking on the trauma of others vicariously as well? How can teachers protect themselves in those situations so that they can both be the kind of person they want to be but also provide that support to the students that they teach.

Brian: My advice, though, would be just focus on what you can do, because that's the only way that you can't be overwhelmed by the huge challenges both in scale and scope of what's in front of you. Do what you do really well. Don't worry about what you cannot do, because that is just going to lead to anxiety and not actually achieve anything for those that you, you want to be serving

Chris: In terms of actual, sort of, specific classroom practices, from what you've said, you're saying is somewhere in between a sort of very exam or grammar-focused approach to learning language and then on the other extreme, this sort of the smothering with love that we have tried to find a middle way through that. What would be some of the practical suggestions or recommendations you could make to teachers working with these groups about what they could do in the space of their own classrooms.

Brian: Firstly, I would say make them safe spaces. So the fact that these schools exist is brilliant, but the teachers role is to capitalise on that, that totemic aspiration that totemic hopefulness of the existence of the school and make what goes on in those places appropriate for that. So this means that children need to be seen and heard in their teaching spaces. What teachers need to do is meet these kids where they're at in terms of their learning. And very personally in terms of their behaviours for learning. We can't build education in emergency systems for children, where those children are not compliant in ways that teachers might be hoping for or expecting, where children are not ready for learning, they're not ready for the routine of being in school or the routine of being in a classroom. Teachers have to acknowledge this. The second dimension to this I would raise because I've heard this an awful lot: teachers will say very regularly, I can't teach them they're just too traumatised or they've got no attention, they've got

ADHD. We've got lots of unqualified people, diagnosing children, all of a sudden kind of putting labels on children to explain certain behaviours. As an observer sitting at the back of the class my conclusion is quite different. Often, I'm seeing children responding normally to bad teaching. For example, teachers complaining that a classroom of five-year-olds all sitting absolutely jam-packed into rigid desks and why are they not sitting in silence listening to me talk at them for 50 minutes. Why are they fidgeting and getting restless? Well, because they're five-year-old children not built to sit and listen and why are we even thinking this is a good idea in the first place. This is not a diagnosable trauma situation necessarily this can very often be children responding normally to bad quality teaching. What teachers should actually be doing, I think it's very simple, actually, you make it a safe space where kids are seen and heard. You have a culture where, where it's not just okay to be wrong and to make mistakes, but actually to inculcate an environment in which getting something wrong is a superpower. It's how we learn together. It's breaking this stereotype of the teacher as somehow the arbiter of the perfect answer. Actually, you've got an explorative approach to learning which is truly child-centred, which is absolutely meeting them where they're at, which is acknowledging the reality of, of the challenges of their existence, but also the opportunities of their existence to really push them, but boil it down to: what are the children learning, and how do you know? That's it. Within that there is a space for materials and resource development, which is relevant and meaningful. Some of the materials are just so divorced from the reality of kids' lives as refugees in this region. There's one whole unit of work I saw in a school which was focused on in the Victorian times, there was a sail ship that went from London to India, and about trade and commerce and why?

Chris: That's quite, that's quite a sort of a sort of an amusing story, but in my own experience, as well, it could actually be a lot more damaging because it can, for example, there's a unit on My House or My Family...

Brian: Right.

Chris: These kids may be coming from places where they've lost their house and they've lost their family

Brian: Right. I mean, the other example I was gonna give was, and this is a very common thing we find in English language contexts is to talk about things like birthday parties, and, and actually some of the communities in which I have been working, well, there is no tradition of celebrating birthdays, nevermind the resources to do it, it's just not been a cultural feature in the landscape of these families. So all of a sudden, you know, you're talking about beautifully illustrated images of balloons and presents and birthday cake and lots of kids around and maybe going to the park or going swimming or things to celebrate a birthday and it's so divorced from the realities of kids' lives. It's

not just irrelevant, it's damaging because you're presenting this idealised version of a life which these kids have been denied. So you know, you're coming to school and you've been presented with this picture of look what you could have won! But because of the circumstances, the accidents of the circumstances of your birth, or the political and social factors which have led to being a refugee or, or a migrant in this country, that's just not possible, sorry, kids. But we're going to have to study these privileged kids that have these things that you don't and can't have

Chris: You can reinforce that trauma, which they're already feeling.

Brian: It reinforces trauma. It emphasises marginalisation, it further displaces children right at the point at which we're trying to include them.

Chris: So it's, again a message for classroom teachers is choose the materials carefully or if you're not able to do that, certainly with older or older learners, you can actually critically evaluate those materials and sort of, sort of critically discourse on that.

Brian: Right. And this is also where we need dialogue with the school leaders. So if the school leaders understand the issues around context of course that's the starting point for, for trying to change things. If the school leaders understand those basic questions: what are the children learning, how do you know? Well, of course, that's the way into discussing not just different materials, but different approaches to as you say puppetry or to learning through play. This is how the community makes the education for the community relevant.

Chris: One final question, Brian, I asked our other contributors to share three words for how they saw language for resilience. Maybe I could just ask you more broadly, to give three words that sum up how you think, and why you think language learning is important in the context that you work in.

Brian: I mean, obviously, I'm not going to use the word resilience. I am going to echo the word hope, because I think schools are, educational space is about hope. It's about empowerment. It's about possibility.

Chris: Brian, thank you very much for your time today.

Brian: My pleasure.

Chris: In my own experience of working with refugees and migrants, you can sometimes feel overwhelmed by some of the stories you hear and the journeys which people share with you. What you also see is how important languages for people who have had to leave their home through no fault of their own. As educators, we can help these learners develop their language skills so that they have the opportunity to lead full, meaningful lives.

Thank you for listening to this episode of teaching English with the British Council. We hope you enjoyed it. Please do like, subscribe and review. And please remember to download the show notes and transcript.

Join us next time for Episode 5 where we will try to answer the question: how can I teach online effectively? Until then, goodbye.