



TeachingEnglish

## British Council: TeachingEnglish

A podcast series for teachers  
of English



# Episode 6: How can I teach effectively in challenging contexts?

## Transcript



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Duration: 0:25:59

**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 six of Teaching English with the British Council in which we will try to answer the question: how can I teach effectively in challenging contexts? When discussing this question, the first thing we need to do is understand what we mean by challenging contexts. Clearly, this is not a straightforward thing to do, and language teaching challenges come in many different shapes and forms. From a teacher perspective, three examples of challenging circumstances are: the expectation that teachers use a medium of instruction which does not maximise the learning experience or outcomes, that teachers have insufficient textbooks and other learning resources, and that teachers and institutions are on the front line of challenging political and social change, but are not supported in managing these situations. They're expected to be catch-all experts for many of society's problems. Throughout this episode, we will explore these issues and many others facing teachers working in challenging circumstances.

First up, in this episode field report, we go to Nigeria to learn about an innovative British

Council project taking place in one of its most populous states. Working with partners including TaRL Africa, as well as local and national levels of government, this FCDO funded project is trying to address long standing issues at primary school, in children's learning to read, do simple arithmetic and develop skills in other languages.

**Narrator:** For hundreds of years, Kano, in northern Nigeria, has been a centre of commerce for trans-Saharan trade. Kano city has a population of around four million people, and Kano state about 20 million. Like many other places in Nigeria, and sub-Saharan Africa more widely, Kano faces many challenges in terms of children attaining foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Although more children than ever before are attending school, the quality of education which they are getting is mixed. The impact of COVID-19 has put additional pressure on an already fragile system, meaning that in Kano, many children finish primary school without these foundational skills.

*KaLMA classroom extract*

**Habeeb:** Hello, my name is Habeeb Saleh, and I am the programme manager of KaLMA, the Kano Literacy and Mathematics Accelerator. What we are trying to do with this programme is to help children in Kano improve their Maths, Hausa and English skills in a fun but effective way. The focus of the programme is on what children can *do* rather than what they *know*, and the methodology used is activity rather than curriculum based. We also make sure that activities are inclusive and gender sensitive.

*KaLMA classroom extract*

**Narrator:** At the heart of the KaLMA programme is an approach called TaRL – Teaching at the Right Level. The aim of TaRL is to improve children's learning outcomes as well as their learning experiences by grouping of children according to their learning level rather than their age or grade level. In the context of Kano, this was a very radical thing to do. However, lots of research shows that children learn more effectively when they learn with students who are at the same level. This also makes things easier for the teachers. We asked Hasiya, one of the KaLMA master trainers, about the impact which Teaching at the Right Level has had.

**Hasiya:** You see in relation to classroom experience, it has made the work of teachers easier, because it has brought about improved teacher-pupil relationship. It has also equipped them with design level wise activities and materials to work with. Through effective time management strategies, the key noticeable outcome for pupils also include improved literacy and numeracy skills, improved classroom participation through fun activities, cooperative learning and engagement with assorted learning materials. And the approach has also made pupils more confident and teachers more passionate in the teaching and learning activities having seen the interest and improvement of the pupils to learning over time.

**Habeeb:** From a language perspective, one of the most interesting and important parts

of the programme is the dual language approach. This approach uses the children's home language, which for most of the children in Kano is Hausa, to help them learn English. In Kano schools this was a very new approach since before the teachers would only use the target language. In KaLMA however, teachers use a more multilingual approach to learning language, which improves the learning experience as well as the learning outcome.

**Narrator:** One example of a dual language activity which children in the KaLMA programme love to do is *Jumping on the Letters*. Let's listen to Naja'atu using this activity with some of her students

*Jumping on the Letters extract*

**Narrator:** Before the children arrive, Naja'atu draws a 3 by 3 grid on the floor of her classroom, and writes a Hausa letter in each space, making 9 letters in total. Once the children settle, she tells them what they are going to do.

*Jumping on the Letters extract*

**Narrator:** Naja'atu now asks for a volunteer to say one of the letters on the floor. This is then repeated several times, so that all the children are familiarised with all 9 letters.

*Jumping on the Letters extract*

**Narrator:** Naja'atu now gets the children to use the letters by asking them to make words. They have to jump between the letters in order to spell these words out. In this example, she asks Ibrahim to spell out *biyu*, the Hausa word for the number 'two'.

*Jumping on the Letters extract*

**Narrator:** Once the children have secured the meaning and spelling of the word, they are asked to contextualise it, and use it in a meaningful sentence:

*Jumping on the Letters extract*

**Narrator:** When the children know what to do, they can work together in smaller groups and play the activity. They can either make their own letter grids on the floor, or use letter cards.

*Jumping on the Letters extract*

**Narrator:** This gives them more practice, and makes the learning child-centred. After this, the stages of the activity are repeated, but this time the focus is on English rather than Hausa.

*Jumping on the Letters extract*

**Narrator:** So, as we can see, the children are able to use a language which they are familiar with – Hausa – as a bridge to the unfamiliar language, namely English. One of the other benefits of this activity is that it keeps the children active and engaged throughout the session.

**Narrator:** Every KaLMA facilitator is given a booklet which contains lots of different dual language activities which they can use in their classrooms. These activities include telling stories, creating mind maps, using rhymes, dictating drawings and interpreting



pictures. There are also ideas about how more traditional and teacher-centred classroom activities such as copying and dictation can be made more fun and child-centred.

### *Basket Game extract*

**Chris:** Thanks to all those who contributed to this episode's field reports and you can find out more about the KaLMA programme in our show notes.

In the second part of this episode, we talked to Muhammad Wais, a programme coordinator of the NGO Wave of Hope at the Nea Kavala refugee camp in northern Greece, close to the Macedonian border.

Welcome to the podcast, Wais.

**Wais:** Thank you so much, dear friend.

**Chris:** So Wais, could you perhaps begin by telling us a little bit about your context, where you are, who's living there and where people are originally from?

**Wais:** Thank you so much for today, I'm in Nea Kavala now. Most of the people, the population in here are from Afghanistan. And there are some people from Africa and from Somalia, from Iraq and from Syria, and also from Iran, and they're living in the camp, but the population of Afghan community is too much and is high.

**Chris:** Could you tell us a little bit about the educational work that you're doing in Nea Kavala and why it's so important to the people living there?

**Wais:** Well, when we arrived in Nea Kavala camp, although we had lots of bad experience of Moria camp, in Lesbos island of Greece the situation slowly got the same. The number of people increased day by day, every day there are fights between people and this conflict getting worse and worse. Day by day, large number of young people were under lots of stress, due to the difficult living conditions in the camp, stuck in the asylum process, as well as restriction due to COVID-19. Many wanted to try some illegal ways, like addicted to drugs, fight with each other. We suffered a lot and as sensitive and humanitarian human being, we think, how to help these people? Finally, we decided to do something that both parents and the pupil and save them from this misery. And we just found the school, a branch of the Wave of Hope school in Nea Kavala. And in the beginning, we have the 300 students in which we was 16 or 17 volunteers. The teachers there was teaching them English, Farsi, German, French and also art classes that we started here at Nea Kavala.

**Chris:** And so you see education then, in Nea Kavala, as having two main purposes, one for the possible futures of the students that you're teaching, but also to keep them occupied and to give them positivity and motivation in their everyday life as well?

**Wais:** All the people in the camp that they're living, especially the young ages like children's are the futures of Europe, let's say, that's why I decided to just found this school in here and to in case, just do their life and make their dreams you know, it was an amazing action from my side as I'm thinking

**Chris:** And you put a lot of emphasis on learning languages in the camp. So they're learning Farsi which is the mother tongue of most of the children there but then also English, French and German as well.

**Wais:** Yeah, that was in the beginning. But right now, we are doing many things. The school is all our activities. In the beginning we face a lot of difficulties, a lot of bad days, but now everything is much organised. With the support of refugee aid, or like we make some training for our teachers, make more things like officially and that's very nice and we make it, like, much better and now we are doing many activities besides the education system. We have sport activities for the woman, man, children's like football, volleyball, yoga, gym or some stuff like this. And also Art classes like paintings, like some handmade or knitting something for the woman's and music classes, because that's an important one. And now we have a big space that we are doing weekly activity and also we are doing cinema every night for the children's that we're playing and some other stuffs, some other songs like Baby Shark for them to make them happy, let's say and

**Chris:** Baby shark is everywhere!

**Wais:** Yeah. Most of the kids love it. It somehow that they make their lives a little better, much happier, their condition in the camp.

**Chris:** English language though is still a core part of what you do in the camp, English language development. Could you say a little bit about why people see it is so important?

**Wais:** Because the English language is something that they can use it everywhere. And the other thing is that the people of their facing itself communication with their English language, we just said let's do this too in case the people can solve their issues or

they're asking their problems by communication because if they will, don't know anything, they cannot make communication. Because English is something that everyone knows as well as their traditional language. That's why we make the case they can use it everywhere and the most of the people they know from all the countries.

**Chris:** Can you say a little bit about how the English classes take place? What kind of things are teachers doing? What kind of materials they use, what's the teaching methodology, which they employ?

**Wais:** In the beginning we just had some classes from the seven in the evening until eleven in the night. Due to the warm situation in the place that we had, we couldn't have the classes also from eleven until three. The other volunteers had their classes early in the morning and after three. Besides the classes like there are some other activities for the women like beauty classes, and making nails, like kindergarten for the kids to just save place for the kids in case come and play for a while, to have fun for a while.

**Chris:** And it must have been quite challenging Wais, because if it's nine, ten o'clock at night, it's pretty cold. People are tired because they may have been working in the day. How do you motivate a class like that? How do you get them interested in learning English in that situation?

**Wais:** It was very difficult barrier because everyone was depressed. They had many stress about their future plans, about the legal status and to hear about the condition that they were facing in the camp about the future of their children's. There was many difficulties that we face. But still we continue and didn't give up and we just find a way to teach them, motivate them and this, teach them or help or support them with their English language.

**Chris:** You said some of your students were depressed at this time, struggling. Did you find that their mental situation, or how they, their mental health affected how they were able to learn?

**Wais:** As I mentioned before, we just find a way. Let's say we had some games like fun games or like one two times per week in case just not get bored about our classes. That's why most of our lessons was like we were trying to do it much funnier, much different to in case they can try to get it because otherwise we cannot push them to learn. But for the Children's, for the teenagers, there was some that we cannot we do face a lot of difficulties because their parents like their fathers and their mothers was had all the tensions of the families. The teenagers and the kids didn't aware of what,

what will happen. That's why we, we wrote all the time mentioned in them that you need to think about the future, all these days will pass and you will have a future. You need to focus on your future. You have to work for your future. It was something that we talked about that.

**Chris:** In my previous experiences of working with, with refugee groups often they can see English language classes as a safe space and a place where they can develop ideas or they can talk or they can feel sort of more comfortable. Is that something that you find in your work in Nea Kavala?

**Wais:** Yes, yes, that's true. Our classes inside the classes that we had, it was a class like open space. It was a big wrap, or a big tent, that it was broken all the side and the pupil was walking around in the building. And after that when we see the space, or make a space, this space that we had it was covered and there was see they had the all the independent ways to share their ideas and also for the teachers. It was very nice to mention the support and to have a good lesson for their students.

**Chris:** What would you say are some of the particular challenges for teachers working in Nea Kavala?

**Wais:** The teachers that their difficulties that the teachers are facing? It's their, their schedules they say, how to make the schedule because they don't have a specific books like in school they have or the other places they're using to continue. It takes time for the teachers that say, days and nights, they're waiting they're just doing preparing for the next classes because they will make by what should I do in my next lesson. Everyone will have a schedule or a book. You, everything will go much better and easier. If you will not have any book, if you continue by yourself, it's difficult for you to make the all the preparation for the next lessons, one hour or two, sometimes three hours even for myself. In the beginning, we had maybe faced many difficulties to prepare for the classes or the next classes. This is the difficult part in my opinion.

**Chris:** And just a final question, Wais, we heard earlier, field report from northern Nigeria. I was just wondering if you'd heard anything in that report that you thought was interesting or could be useful in the context that you're working in.

**Wais:** I think that's very useful and it's very good communication to increase the motivate the people that they're here, and we do also have project in our school that we call correspondents projects that the students in here will write letters and then they will send it to other students that they are in all over the Europe, all over the world. And then they will back send a reply, I think this is my, this very good things in case have



moved to motivated. It's a good feeling for everyone.

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

**Wais:** Thank you so much.

**Chris:** Teachers are the fundamental and essential building blocks of the whole educational process. Even when there are wider challenges, they still have the power to make significant changes in their own classrooms and to support their students in the best possible way. This is not to say these changes are easy, but we have to do whatever we can. Sometimes it may just be a very small change, which could have a big impact on a school, a class or even just an individual student.

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 seven where we will try to answer the question: how can I integrate the sustainable development goals into my teaching?

Until then, goodbye.