

Towards Understanding Difficult Circumstances in ELT

Krishna K. Dixit

Abstract

English Language Teaching (ELT) in India encounters many challenges. When a lot of attention is paid to the issues in learning and the challenges encountered by learners, the impediments in teaching and the issues that teachers face on an everyday basis cannot be overlooked. The present study is qualitative in nature and is an attempt to uncover the Difficult Circumstances (DC) in the teaching of English in the Indian context. Through a thematic analysis of the 3 teacher-participants' responses, the study analyses various factors that create difficulties in the classroom context. However, the study does not document the 'physical' or materialistic challenges that include the architectural peculiarities of the learning space or the infrastructural issues. On the other hand, an attempt is made to unveil the psychological challenges the teachers deal with as a result of the institution exercising its agency in ways that calls for correction. This study underlines the importance of investigating the non-materialistic factors that problematizes English language education.

Keywords: English language teaching, difficult circumstances, conducive environment, infrastructure, teacher perceptions

Introduction

English Language Teaching (ELT) as a sub-discipline under education has evolved over a period of time gradually identifying and labelling its constitutive elements. The primary consideration of elements essentially include the method of teaching (though discussion on methods of learning stand missing), materials, and assessment. The secondary

issues, often acknowledged to be prevalent in the Asian and African educational contexts include large classes, lack of adequate resources, absence of well-trained teachers, lack of high learner motivation, and 'acquisition poor environments' (Tickoo, 1997). These elements have fairly colonized the ELT discourse and ELT research in the last 50 years competing well with main contenders—methods and materials. The notion of 'difficult circumstances' has emerged as an umbrella term which suggests a context involving the demotivated learners, poorly trained teachers, large number of students in class, and absence of resources. This phenomenon can be discussed as a theorizing process of ELT in non-colonizer country contexts where ELT is a compulsory part of schooling, often as an outcome of colonized experience.

Difficult Circumstances (DC) is one of the fundamental constructs in ELT, though it has stayed in margins compared to methods and materials. It is conceptualized and operationalized by comparing it with a context which can be labelled as (for the want of any standardized term) easy circumstances. The geographical location of the 'easy circumstances' is largely associated with the developed nations. The majority of teaching contexts are measured and evaluated against the easy circumstances and declared as 'difficult circumstances' for teaching. In general, the construct refers to the physical locations of ELT both at the macro-level (institutions and surroundings) and classrooms at the micro-level. The acknowledged features of DC include large crowded classrooms (40+ students), inadequate resources, the inadequate language proficiency of teachers, demotivated students, and prescribed textbooks (West, 1960; Maley, 2001; Kuchah, 2018). An issue that receives comparatively little attention in the ELT domain is that the circumstances are discussed with reference to teaching and not teaching-and-learning. The learning seems to remain largely unattended. Besides, the acronym of the domain is ELT.

In this article I wish to present and discuss a small study involving three teachers and around 100 students in a rural setting in the Central Indian context. There are two motivational triggers to explore the issue of 'difficult circumstances':

- Are circumstances (difficult or easy) relevant only to teaching?
- What is the relationship between DC and teachers?

In this article an attempt is made to respond to the second trigger.

The learner and learning aspect vis-à-vis circumstances are of crucial significance in making sense of DC but that has not been specifically discussed given the data constraints.

Background of the Study

All three teachers involved in this study started teaching during the same year and all had seven years of teaching and (professional) learning experience. The teachers had masters' degrees in English literature and two of them also had professional qualification, namely, B. Ed. All the teachers were a happy lot as they found employment in degree colleges soon after the completion of their postgraduation degree and the only regret was that the employment was in colleges located in rural settings. This aspect had its own disadvantages as these teachers were looked upon as rural teachers largely unaware of all the developments / advances in the field. Keeping aside this slight discomfort, the teacherly life can be described as largely pleasant. The teaching contexts, the overall appearance of the college, classrooms, students, peers, the surroundings were all natural. They were far away from any critical thinking or questioning.

In the initial six years of teaching, we sensed a few discomforts or say difficulties in colleges such as frequent interference from the college authorities (one feature was weekly surprise visits to classrooms), taunts and sometimes guidance on how to teach (and be in college) by non-teaching staff, organization of events at the cost of teaching-and-learning time, non-supply of required texts to the students from libraries to mention a few. Intriguingly, except for the lack of resources other aspects such as large classes with over 100 students (on roll) with actual attendance fluctuating around 70, low motivation of students, local undeveloped surroundings were neither noticed nor found problematic for teaching. One aspect that troubled all three teachers was the neglect of their experience and their views by the administrators ranging from top to bottom. This often resulted in teachers' frustration. These three teachers frequently met and had long conversations about their teaching lives and gradually it came to their attention that most of the conversations revolved around their own teacher selves and their frustrations. The frustration was taking roots in the minds of teachers.

Meanwhile, there were a few developments in the life of one teacher

which eventually influenced the group. This teacher had participated in a Hornby ELT seminar and also took part in a project on adapting materials in teaching. These two events offered a required exposure to the ELT domain by providing specific terminology (or say needed pathologizing). Though the teachers were teaching English language but were not aware of ELT as a specific domain. The teachers now had concepts like learner autonomy, learner strategy, large classes, and difficult circumstances in their tool kit. The one that started drilling in mind was the notion 'difficult circumstances'. Obviously, the first step was consulting the literature to find out more about the concept. But a quick scrutiny of the available literature revealed that the literature on DC was mainly about the lack of physical infrastructure (physical structures of the institutions, classrooms, resources) and educational policy dictates (for example, the number of students in class, syllabus, and assessment). The teachers taught in classrooms with two or in some places without any windows at all, 10 to 12 rows of dirty (sometimes broken and quick-fixed) benches. There were neither fans nor lights. This classroom setting resonated with teachers' experience of their own student life. As per their account, they had also had similar classroom experiences and in a way that had conditioned their minds on what to expect as a classroom. So, the teachers hardly had anything to complain about the physical aspects of the classroom or its architectural conditioning. Senior teachers often advised their younger colleagues to focus on teaching 'covering the syllabus on time', being punctual, and being patient (non-reactive) with authorities. But the teachers frequently argued with seniors on the count of administrative interference in their work and the arguments always received a lukewarm response in the staff-rooms.

Data Analysis

The teachers decided to explore the notion of DC in the light of their own experiences in a systematic way. Only two activities were planned along with regular interactions among themselves and whenever possible they interacted with an experienced teacher who had an ELT master's degree from a UK university. The first activity was listing all those factors that made them unhappy or left frustrated for about four months. It was followed by a detailed qualitative analysis of the data to understand DC as experienced by them. Thematic categorization of the teachers' perceptions are given below.

- Frequent interference by members of management and the head of the institution in matters related to teaching and assessment. There was insistence on providing ready answers to comprehension questions, conducting weekly tests, submission of teaching plans to the head for approval, etc.
- Teaching prescriptions (and follow up) from members of management: In one institution a member of management insisted that the teachers should give ten words to students a day and by this enhance the vocabulary of students by 3,500 or more words every year
- ‘Sermons’ about coping with inadequate facilities and services: The authorities pre-empted the teachers’ thoughts and always took steps to nullify or invalidate teachers’ perspectives. They were aware of inadequacies in facilities but always shared stories of working effectively in all adverse conditions. Another instance could be, paying salaries once in three months or very late in the month.
- Insistence on improving results in annual examinations by providing readymade answers to students: This could be described as a dreadful annual ritual which started from the announcement of results and ended in teachers’ response to the show-cause notices issued by authorities. Sometimes, the ritual involved public shaming of teachers in faculty meetings and annual management meetings.
- Implementation of rules in letters only: The rule about seven hours in-person presence of teachers on campus (as mandated by the University Grants Commission and conveniently interpreted by the institution) was extended to 7.45 hours as it included a 45-minute lunch break. A frequently occurring instance was celebration of birth and death anniversaries of important personalities falling on Sundays or other public holidays. The authorities always ‘punished’ teachers who could not participate in such events. In this case the directions from the government note that observance of days be ensured but they are interpreted differently.
- Whim-driven changes: The colleges without training the teachers or arranging for trouble shooters suddenly introduced electronic white boards in two classrooms and ordered that every teacher must take one class with this new gadget. It resulted in re-configuring the time table towards the end of the academic year.

- Regular training (actually ‘sermonizing’) sessions by administration-favoured experts: This is another form of pain in the neck. The administrators have their own panel or team of experts and they are regularly invited to guide the teachers at least twice a year. Though it offers some positive input, the ultimate anticipated outcome is following the words of experts in letters rather than in spirit.
- Treating institutional evaluation as a weapon: The assessment and accreditation from a statutory body called the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) is mandatory for all higher education institutions. The administrators treat it as a weapon to whip the teachers. In some cases, it is left to teachers to arrange for the NAAC assessor visit on their own.

Findings and Discussion

The key factor in turning the circumstances towards hostile (i.e. difficult) emerges to be the ways of administration behaviour. One salient feature is the frequent interference in teachers’ work and invisibilizing students either by high hand policy or extreme patronizing actions. The administration’s behaviour shaping the circumstances as difficult can be understood in three ways:

- Firstly, they interfere with teaching activities. The teachers’ experience, their ideas and decisions about teaching are invalidated regularly. It is often impressed upon the teachers that they are expected to follow the orders rather than think on their own in matters of teaching.
- Secondly, the notion of change is dependent on administrative whims without any ecological considerations. It is a common experience that the needs of the context and the teaching-learning process are least important in change and innovation.
- Thirdly, the way administration conceptualized its role in the institution was problematic. The administration apparently behaved as if they had the faculty to think and the agency to execute the right decisions at the right time, always deciding and defining what is meant by being right. They are the only solution providers. This hegemonic attitude of the administration rests on teachers being in a receptive mode.

If we contrast this depiction of DC with the standard discourse of DC

found in literature it can be observed that the location of DC is not the physical place only. It is largely a perception inhabiting the minds of teachers with its typical local characteristics defying any generalization. It is constructed using a deficit point of view about the circumstances and actions. However, it needs to be mentioned that a scenario like the one discussed in this article is experienced by the majority of teachers in India.

Conclusion

Given this scenario, it can be observed that two key factors that shape DC are the routine administration processes and the notion of expertise. The daily administration appears to create obstacles in teachers' work rather than facilitating a conducive teaching environment. The insistence on the mute acceptance of administration stands out prominently in making teachers' (and by extension) students' lives full of challenges. To conclude, the proper location of DC appears to be in the perceptions of teachers and students rather than in material conditions.

References

- Kuchah, K. (2018). Teaching English in difficult circumstances: Setting the scene. In K. Kuchah & F. Shamim (Eds.), *International perspectives on teaching English in difficult circumstances*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Maley, A. (2001). The teaching of English in difficult circumstances: Who needs a health farm when they're starving? *Humanising Language Teaching*, 3(6). Retrieved from <http://old.hltnmag.co.uk/nov01/mart4.htm>.
- Tickoo, M.L. (1997). Towards an alternative curriculum for acquisition-poor environments. In R. Agnihotri & A.L. Khanna (Eds.), *Second language acquisition: Socio-cultural and linguistic aspects of English in India*. Sage.
- West, M. (1960). *Teaching English in difficult circumstances*. Longman.

Krishna K. Dixit teaches English at the Centre for English Language Education (CELE), Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University, Delhi.
krishnakdixit@gmail.com