BRITISH COUNCIL

Chris Sowton

Addressing today's challenges – and accessing tomorrow's opportunities – in the world of ELT

January 2023, NileTESOL Plenary Talk

“Teaching English with the British Council” podcast

Listening to, sharing and celebrating teachers’ voices from around the world

teachingenglish.org.uk/professional-development/podcast

Series 2 episode list

1 How can we use football to teach English?

2 How can we teach use virtual reality to teach English?

3 How can we teach difficult or taboo subjects?

4 What is the difference between academic English and general English?

5 How can we use 'story' to teach English?

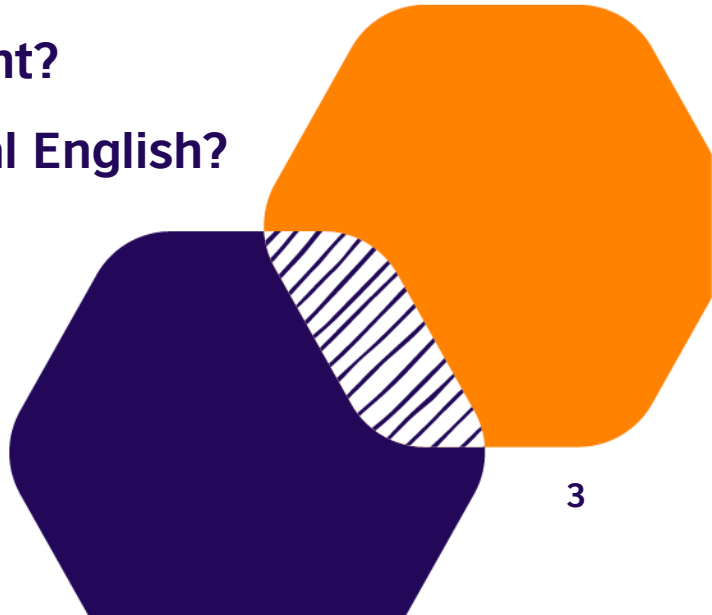
6 Why - and how - should we teach English in crisis and emergency situations?

7 How can peer-led training and mentoring support teacher development?

8 What is 'English for Specific Purposes' and how is it different to general English?

9 How can the ELT sector become fairer for all teachers?

10 What are your top tips for teaching English?



3 contemporary challenges – and how the ELT community can address them

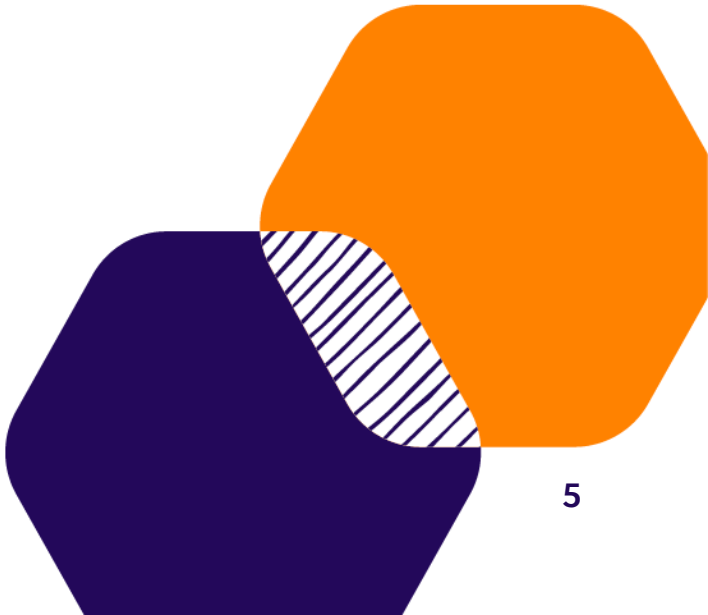
1 Dismantle the barriers between the English “haves” and “have-nots”

→ **The challenge:**

- **English remains a tool of division in many contexts rather than a mechanism which can promote mobility and inclusion**

→ **Some solutions:**

- Change the narrative in terms of who “owns” English
- Repurpose the function of English
- Make assessment epistemically just



Change the narrative in terms of who “owns” English

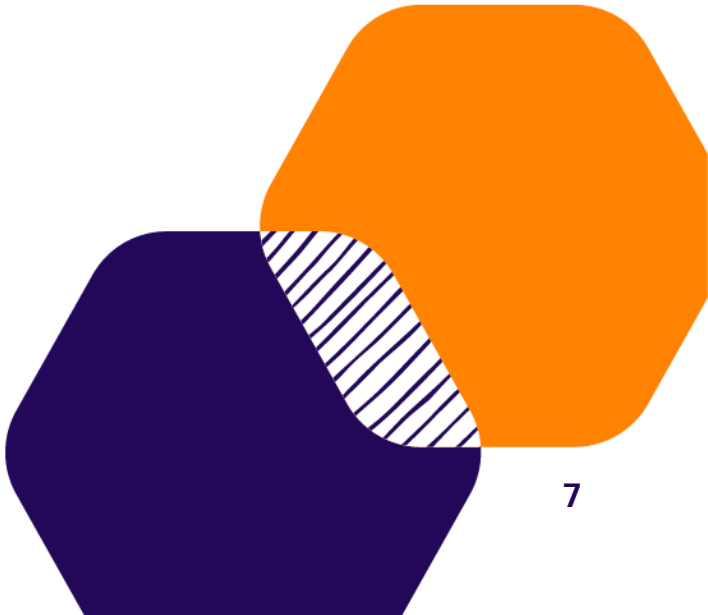
- **Who owns English? Very hard to say. Where would the “English language” academy be situated?**
- **What type / variety of English to learn?**
  - Prestige varieties (acrolects): BE / AE
  - Other varieties: e.g. Indian English, Gulf English
  - English-based creoles: e.g. Tok Pisin, Singlish
  - Macaronic Englishes: e.g. Spanglish, Taglish
  - Constructed Englishes: e.g. Global / simplified English
- **“NESTs” vs “NNESTs” and discrimination**

Repurpose the function of English

- **English often seen as a positional good – as a proxy for something (background, status, connections etc.)**
- **English as a Lingua Franca vs English as a Lingua …**
  - *Economica*
  - *Bellica*
  - *Emotiva*
  - *Cultura*
  - *Frankensteinia*
  - *Divina*
  - *Diabolica*

Phillipson (2008)

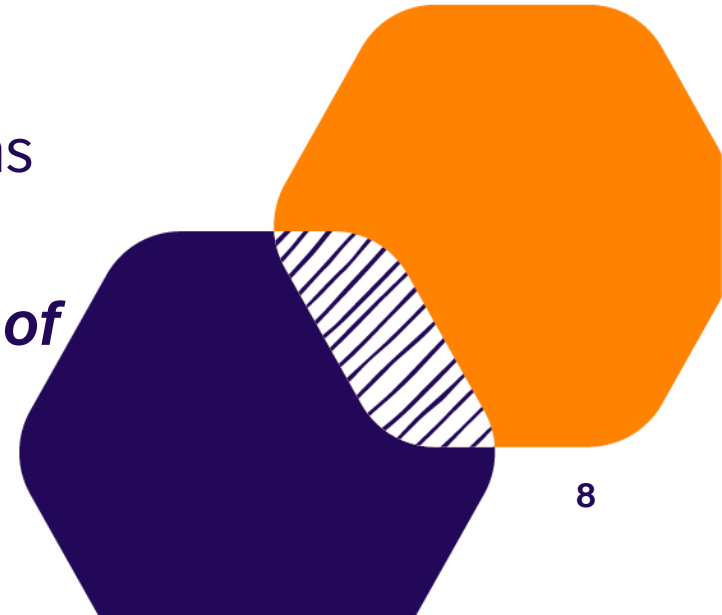
- **Rapid rise in EMI around the world (e.g. in low-cost private schools) – the learning *of* English and learning *in* English becomes the overriding goal of all education**



Make assessment epistemically just

- **Epistemic justice – without which there is a “culture of silence” and a “pedagogy of the oppressed” (Freire, 1970)**
- **Major standardised tests are often not epistemically just:**
  - Culturally, learners with wider life experiences / knowledge of the host culture perform better (e.g. Freimuth, 2015)
  - Psychologically, the content of such tests may be damaging
  - Economically, e.g. in Ethiopia the IELTS test costs 3 months average salary to do
- **More widely, assessment is often focused on *knowledge of* the language rather than the *ability to do* the language**

I was teaching a class of teenagers and one university student guy. They did a test on can/can't and one of the pictures showed a couple dancing the samba. In Brazil, people usually do not associate samba to dancing in couple, so the young man wrote "they can't dance the samba", but the answer in the book was "they can...".



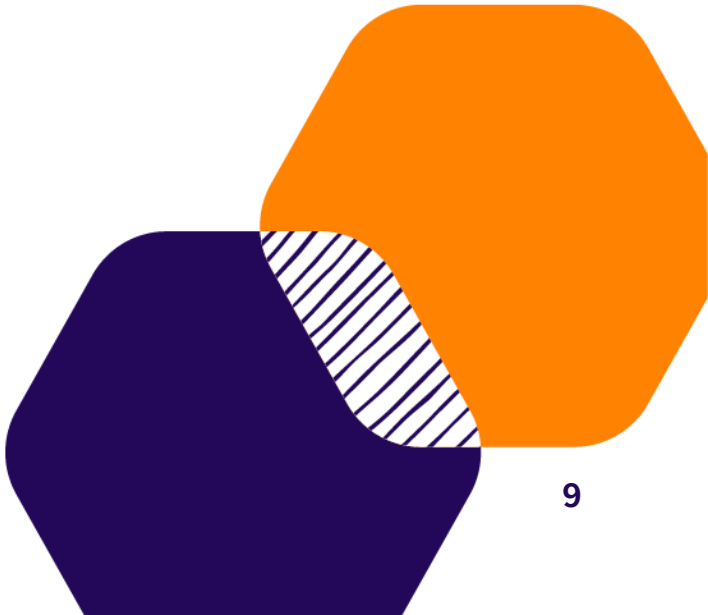
2 Embrace and meaningfully integrate digital in the learning process

→ **The challenge:**

- **Whilst there is much talk about the value of digital in learning, there remains considerable suspicion and scepticism about its actual use by students**

→ **Some solutions:**

- Let classrooms imitate the world and the workplace
- Acknowledge – and accommodate – the seismic impact of digital



Let classrooms imitate the workplace and the world

- The purpose of education is to prepare young people for their future lives – it makes no sense to downgrade one of the most important components of their lives – technology.
- We need to trust students to manage the use of their devices in classes.

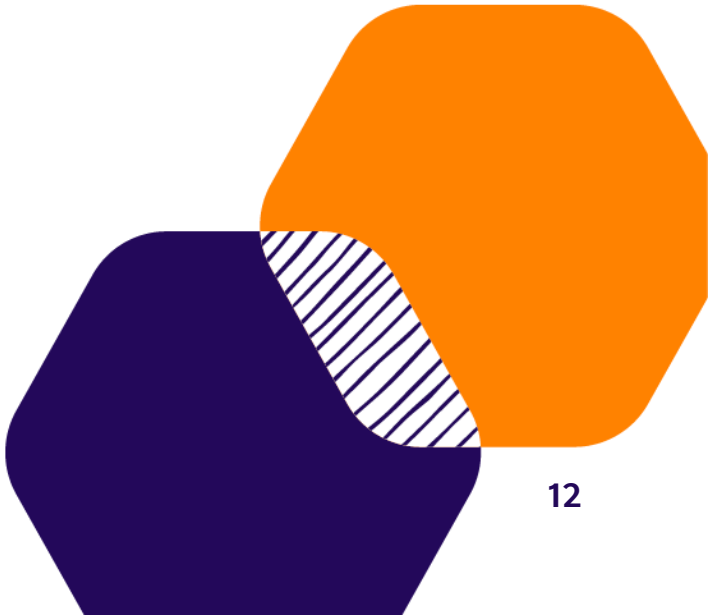
Acknowledge – and accommodate – the impact of digital

- VR and AI will have seismic changes on (language) education
- The impact of tools such as ChatGPT (https://openai.com/blog/chatgpt/) are likely to revolutionise the field of ELT

David Read (Ep 2)

Write a description of the River Nile

The Nile is a major north-flowing river in northeastern Africa, and is the longest river in the world, with a length of about 4,135 miles (6,650 km). It originates in Burundi and flows through Sudan and Egypt before emptying into the Mediterranean Sea. The Nile is a crucial water source for the countries it flows through, providing irrigation for agriculture and serving as a major transportation route. The river is also home to a diverse array of plant and animal life, and has played a significant role in the history and culture of the regions it passes through.



Write a story about a boy who lost his pet dog

Once upon a time, there was a young boy named Jack who had a pet dog named Max. Max was a loyal companion to Jack and they had many adventures together. They would play in the park, go on long walks, and even sleep together every night. Jack loved Max more than anything in the world.

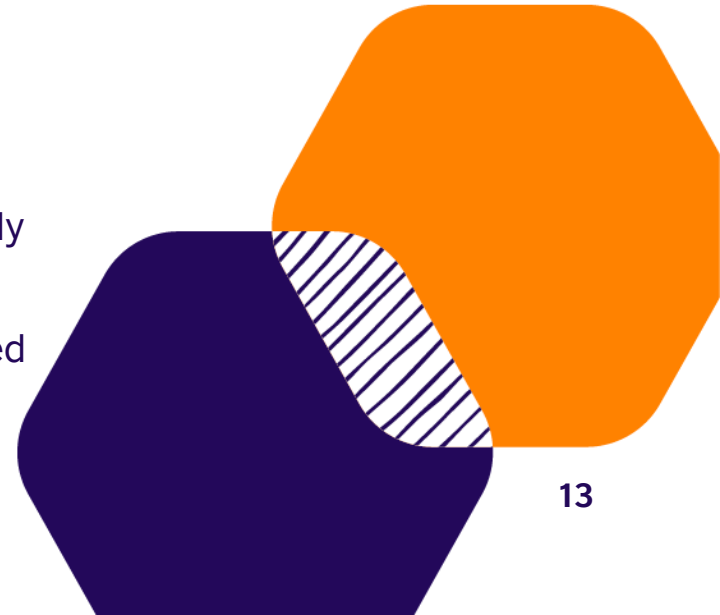
One day, while out on a walk, Max got loose from his leash and ran away. Jack searched everywhere for his beloved pet, but Max was nowhere to be found. Jack felt lost and alone without Max by his side. He went to the animal shelter and put up flyers, asking for anyone who had seen his pet to contact him.

Days turned into weeks, and still, there was no sign of Max. Jack began to lose hope of ever finding his pet again. He was heartbroken and couldn't imagine life without Max.

But just when Jack had given up hope, he received a phone call. It was a woman who lived on the other side of town. She had found Max wandering the streets, and she had taken him in until she could find his owner.

Jack was overjoyed and couldn't wait to be reunited with his best friend. He rushed to the woman's house, and as soon as Max saw Jack, he let out a joyful bark and ran to him. Jack hugged Max tightly and promised never to let him go again.

From that day on, Jack made sure to always keep a close eye on Max and never take him for granted again. Max had found his way back to his loving home and the two of them lived happily ever after.



Write an email to my wife apologising for missing her birthday

Subject: Apology for Missing Your Birthday

My dearest [Wife's name],

I am writing this email to express my sincerest apologies for missing your birthday. I know how much your birthday means to you, and I am deeply saddened that I was not able to be there to celebrate with you.

I understand that my absence must have been disappointing and hurtful for you, and for that, I am truly sorry. I should have made sure to be there for you on such an important day, and I take full responsibility for my actions.

Please know that I love you more than words can express and I regret not being able to make it to your birthday. I promise to make it up to you and make sure that your next birthday is the most memorable one yet.

I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me, and I look forward to celebrating many more birthdays together in the future.

Forever yours,

[Your Name]

Write comprehension questions about this text

1. What is the main point of the text?

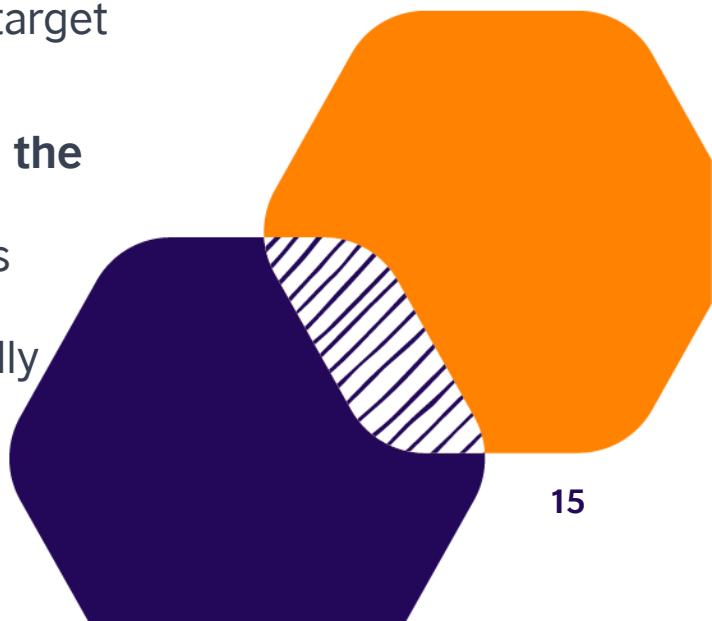
a) The internet is becoming more immersive and 3D
b) Virtual reality is a new opportunity for learners
c) The metaverse is a risk for language schools and teachers
d) The development of technology is changing education

2. How will the metaverse benefit learners?

a) It will provide a new way to interact in the digital world
b) It will allow them to travel to other countries to learn languages
c) It will eliminate the need for physical language schools
d) It will give them the opportunity to meet people from other cultures and practice target languages

3. What does the author suggest for language schools and teachers in regards to the metaverse?

a) They should immediately close their physical schools and open metaverse schools
b) They should observe the developments and start teaching in VR little by little
c) They should ignore advancements in technology and continue teaching traditionally
d) They should immediately invest in VR technology and teaching methods.



Acknowledge – and accommodate – the impact of digital

- VR and AI will have seismic changes on (language) education
- The impact of tools such as ChatGPT (https://openai.com/blog/chatgpt/) are likely to revolutionise the field of ELT
- Responses to these tools is often suspicious – indeed negative – but it's simply the 'analogue algorithm' of writing being replaced by a digital one
- The real risk is that it becomes another tool for the "haves" to gain advancement at the expense of the "have-nots"
- Assessment needs to reflect these changes

David Read (Ep 2)

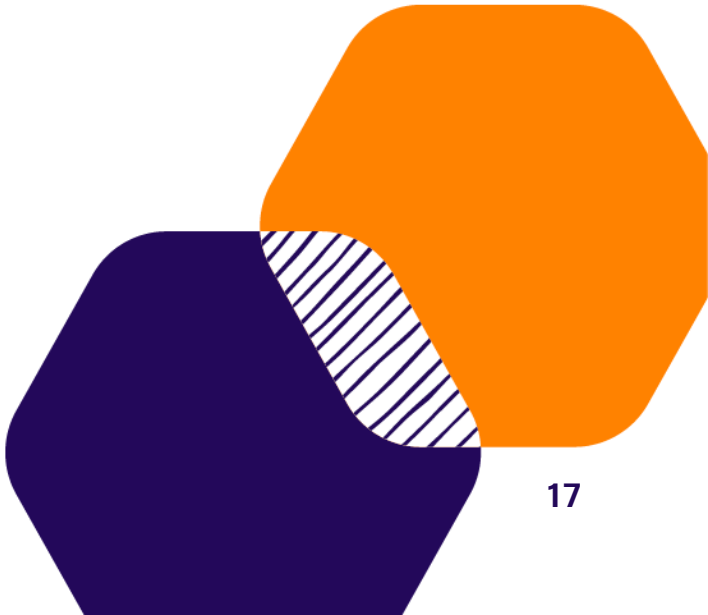
3 Engage learners' imaginations and centralise discovery

→ **The Challenge:**

- **The way our students learn is often restricted and tightly bound, and does not engage their natural curiosity**

→ **Some solutions:**

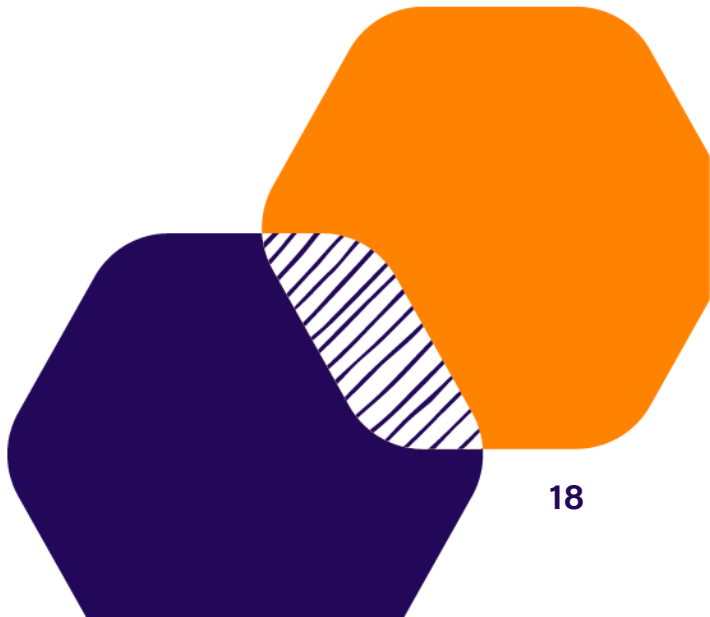
- Focus on what learners are interested in
- Use story
- Eat PARSNIPs and create critical consciousness
- Create critical consciousness



Focus on what the learners are interested in

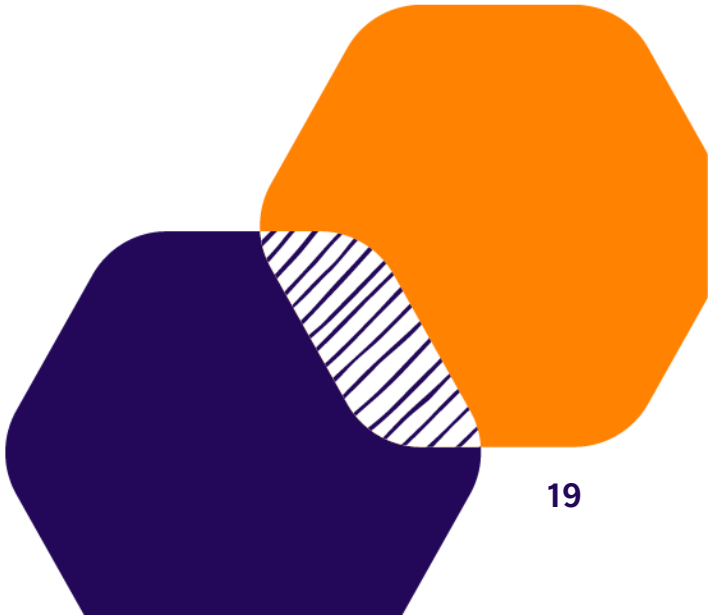
- **Ask the learners directly**
  - Provide online (e.g. Padlet, Mentimeter) or offline mechanisms (e.g. suggestion boxes) for doing this
  - This will increase motivation and retention of information
  - Even if the textbooks you use do not contain this information, ask open questions or invite the students to find those links
- **Create semi-formal structures for them to discuss and report back**
  - e.g. class councils (also good for developing citizenship skills)

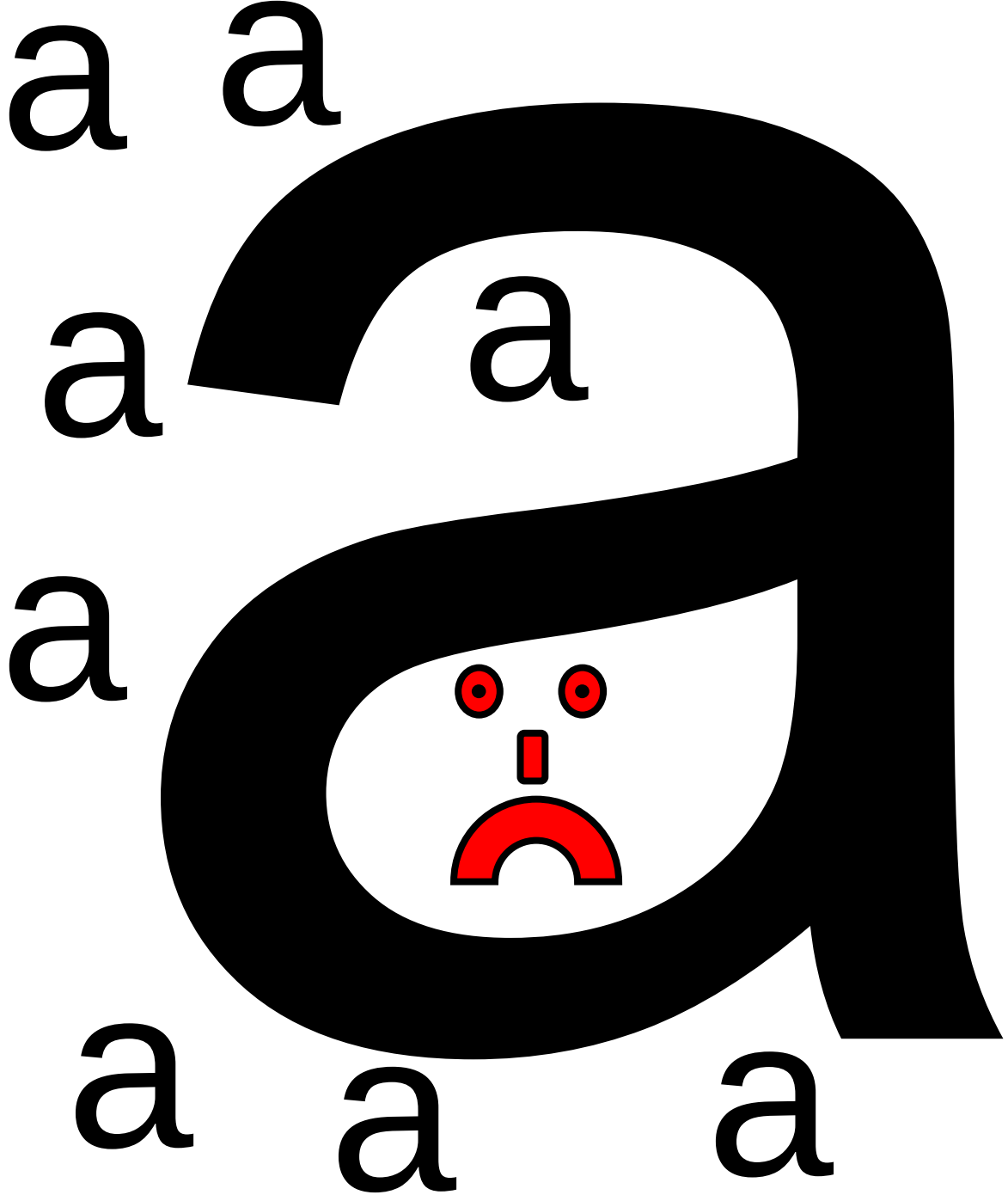
Muhammed Ghoniem (Ep 1)



Use story

- Story engages the imagination and places students at the centre of the learning process
- Story is also a very good way to include mainstream a trauma-informed approach
- This is an example of how to use story to teach basic literacy (used in Lebanon)





(student holding an ‘a’ at the front)

Once upon a time there was a letter ‘a’. The ‘a’ lived on her own.

Q: How do you think the ’a’ felt?

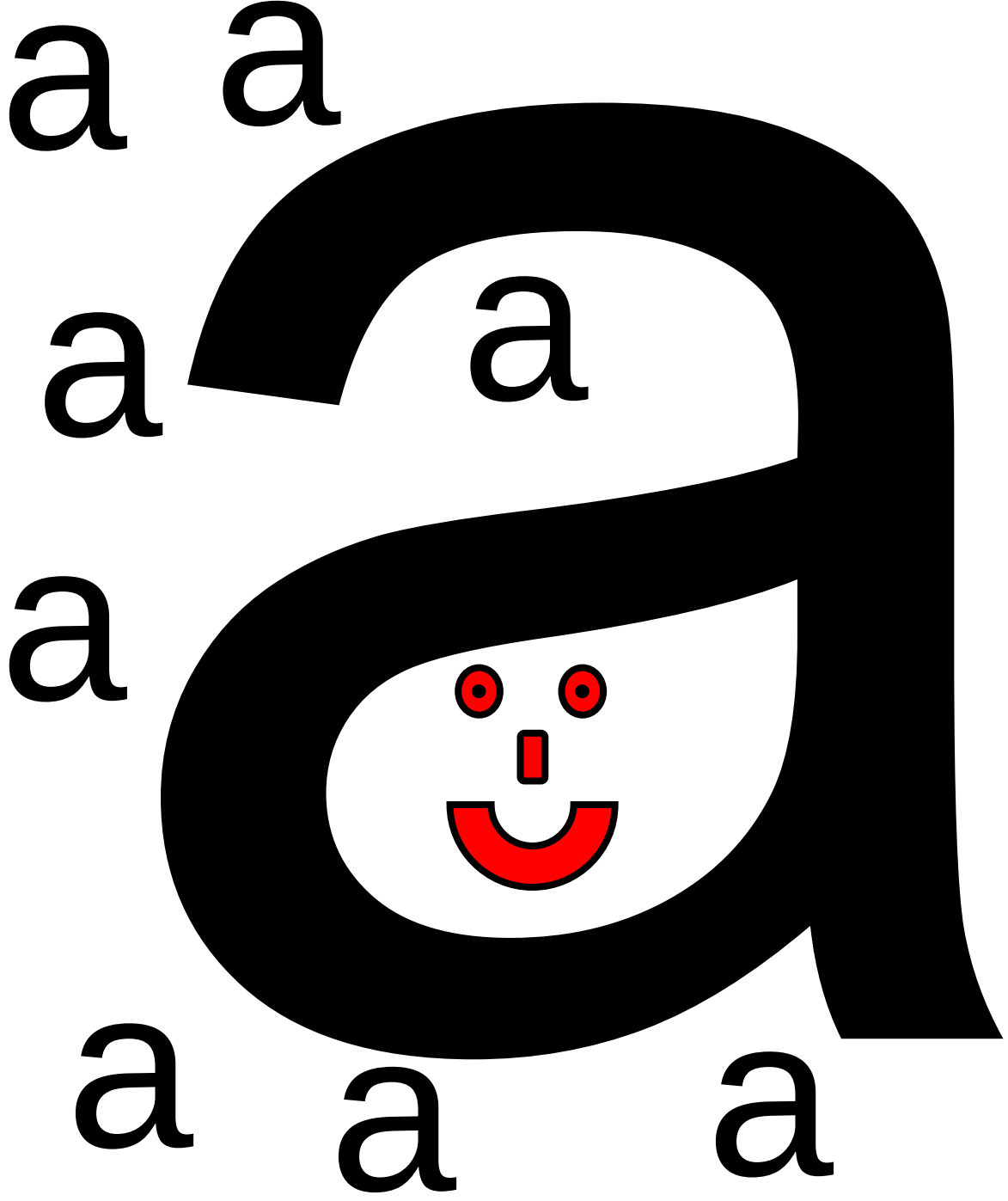
(student draws a sad face on the ‘a’)

Q: How can we make the ‘a’ feel better?

(students draw as many ‘a’s as they can in 10 seconds)

Now there were lots of ‘a’s

Q: How does the ‘a’ feel now?



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Now there were lots of ‘a’s

Q: How does the ‘a’ feel now?

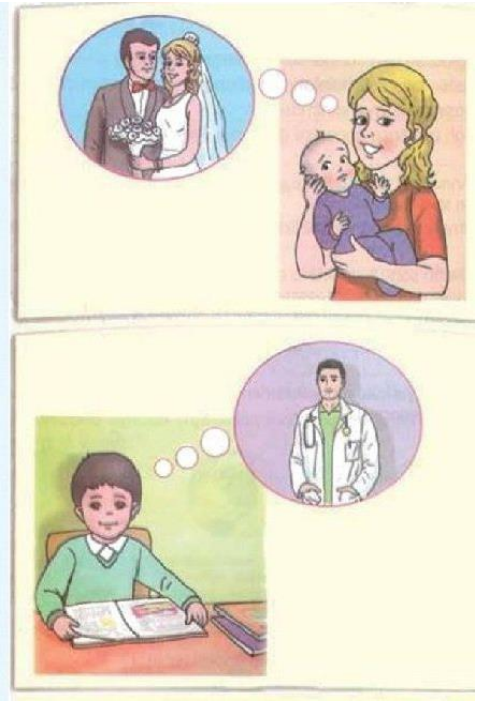
(student changes sad face to a happy face)

Eat PARSNIPs

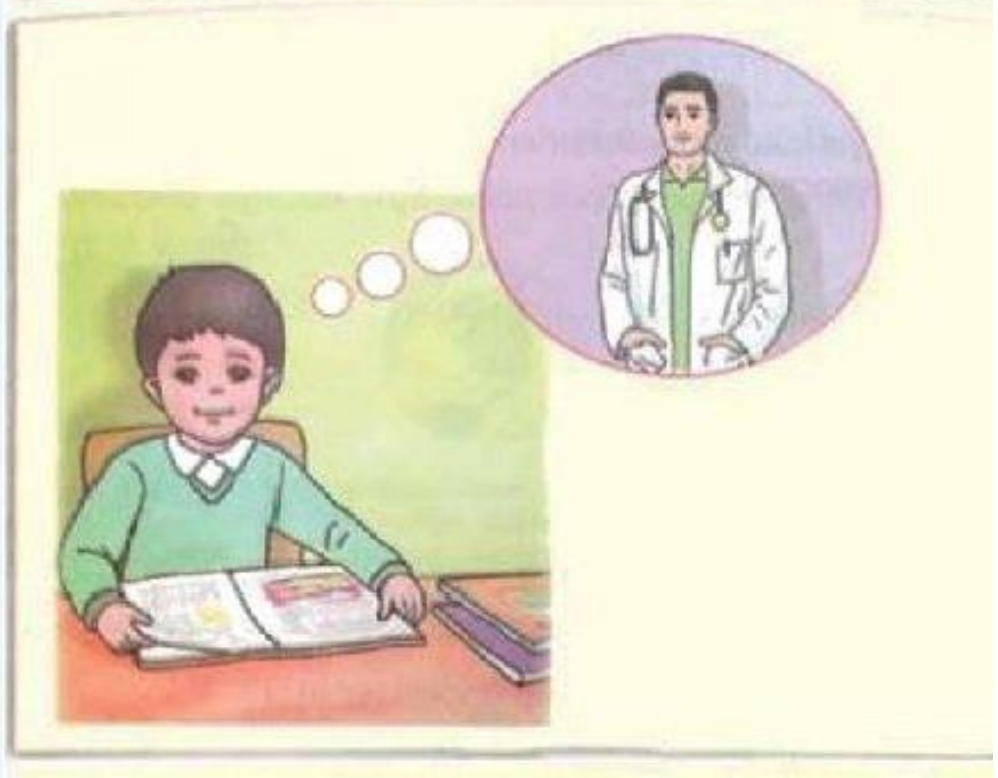
- **PARSNIPs are those topics which it is often taboo to talk about in the classroom, and which publishers do not include:**
  - Politics
  - Alcohol
  - Religion
  - Sex / Sexuality
  - Nudity / Narcotics
  - -Isms
  - Pork
- **We should eat PARSNIPs. If we don't talk about these issues, we are doing our learners a disservice. It's also what they're interested in much of the time.**
- **For many people, English is at its most useful and functional *when* discussing controversial issues.**

Rose Aylett (Ep 3)

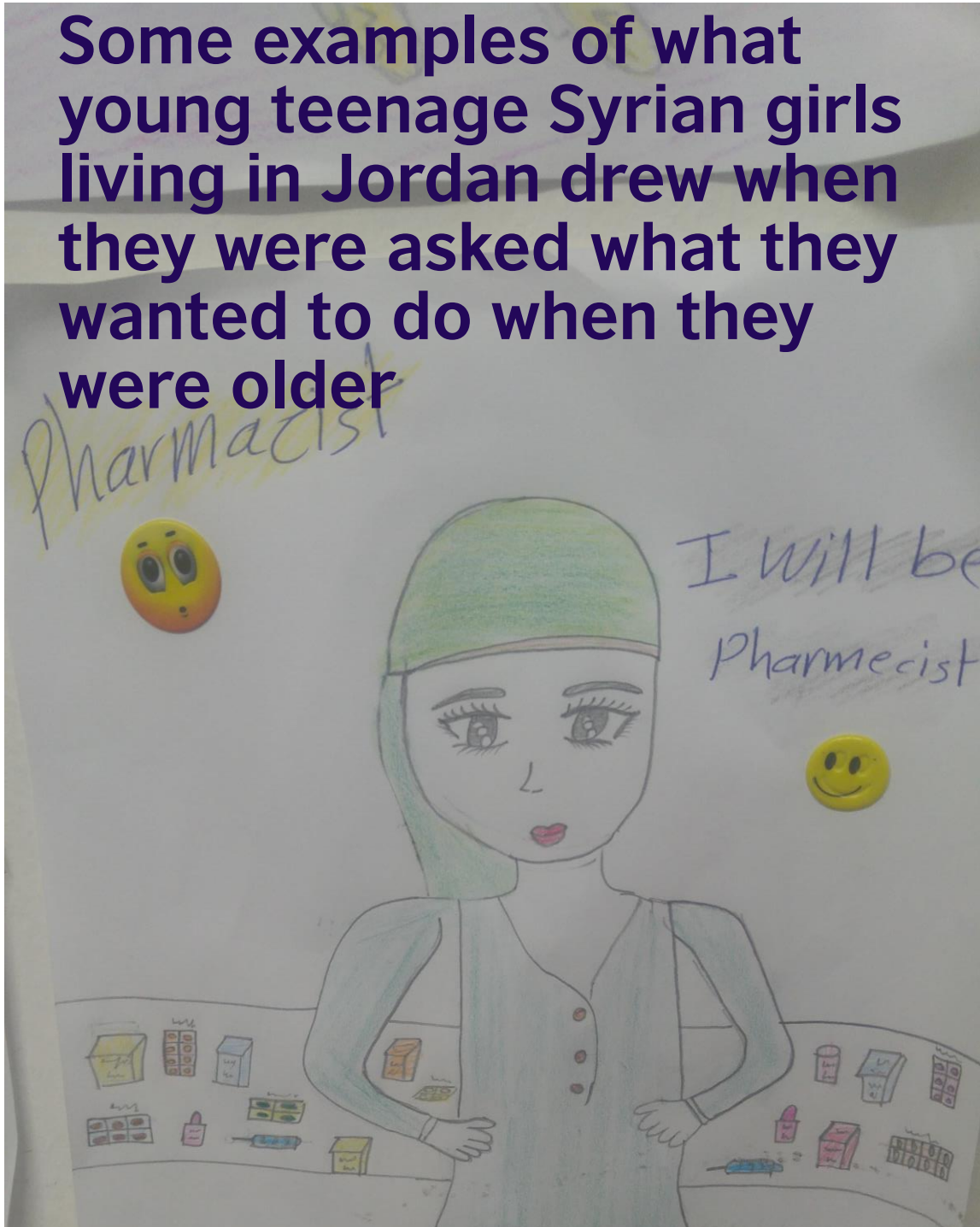
Creating critical consciousness

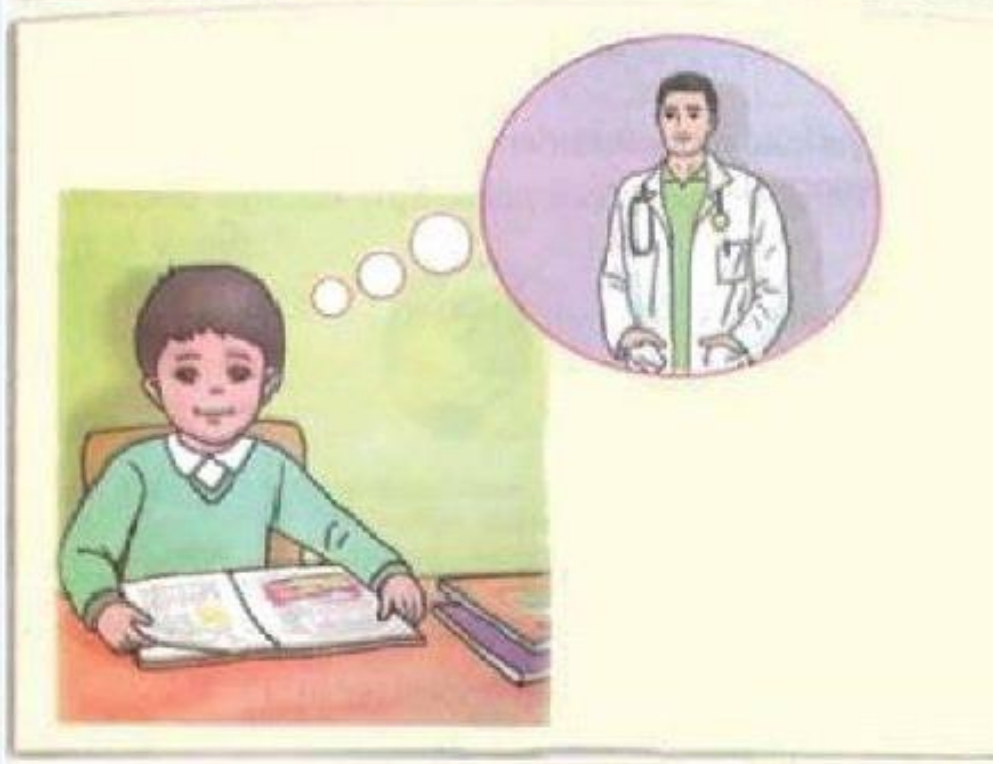


- **What do we mean by this? It means developing an understanding of the society in which we live, and becoming active, engaged members of it. To achieve this, challenge the content of textbooks by asking questions such as:**
  - *What does this text say about your community / society?*
  - *Do you agree? Why / why not?*
  - *What are the problems of portraying your community / society in this way?*
  - *What does the text not say about your community / society?*
  - *Why do you think these facts have been omitted?*
  - *What would be a more accurate way of portraying your community / society?*
- **Textbooks can give direct or indirect messages about young people's aspirations, and what they are capable of. We need to let them dream.**

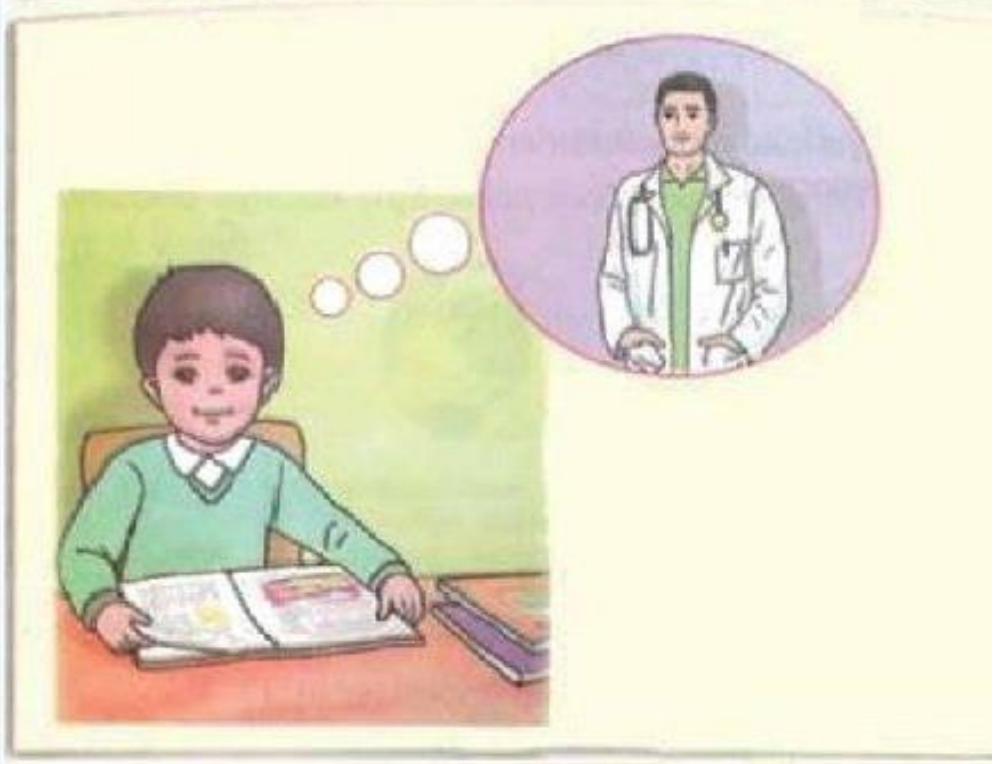


Some examples of what young teenage Syrian girls living in Jordan drew when they were asked what they wanted to do when they were older

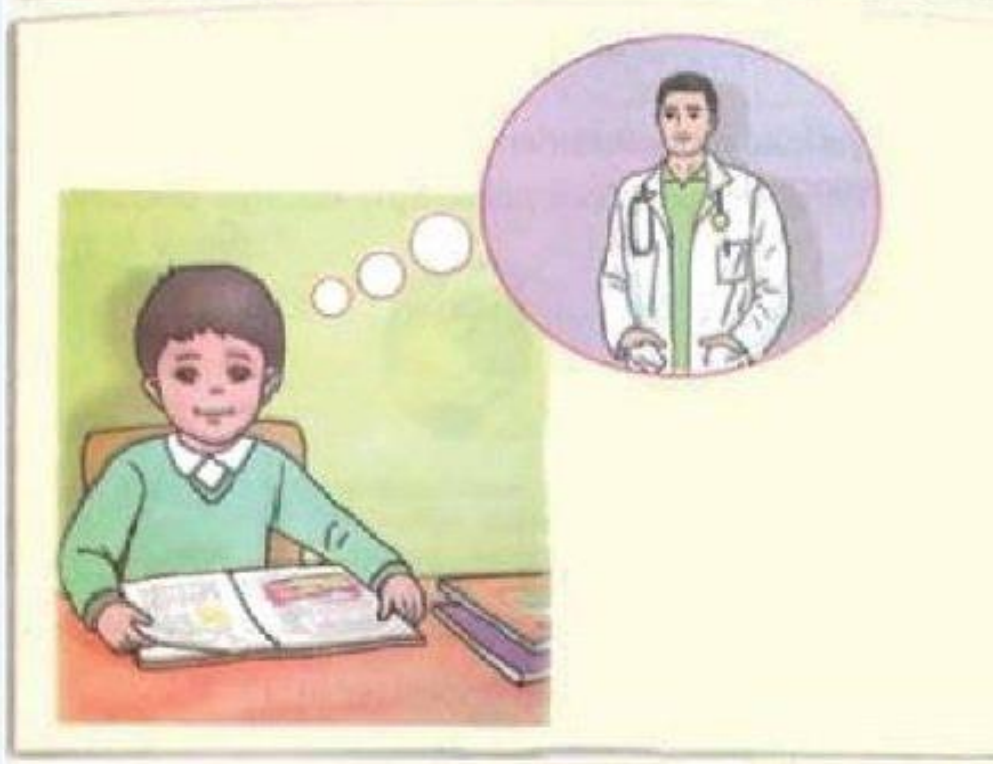


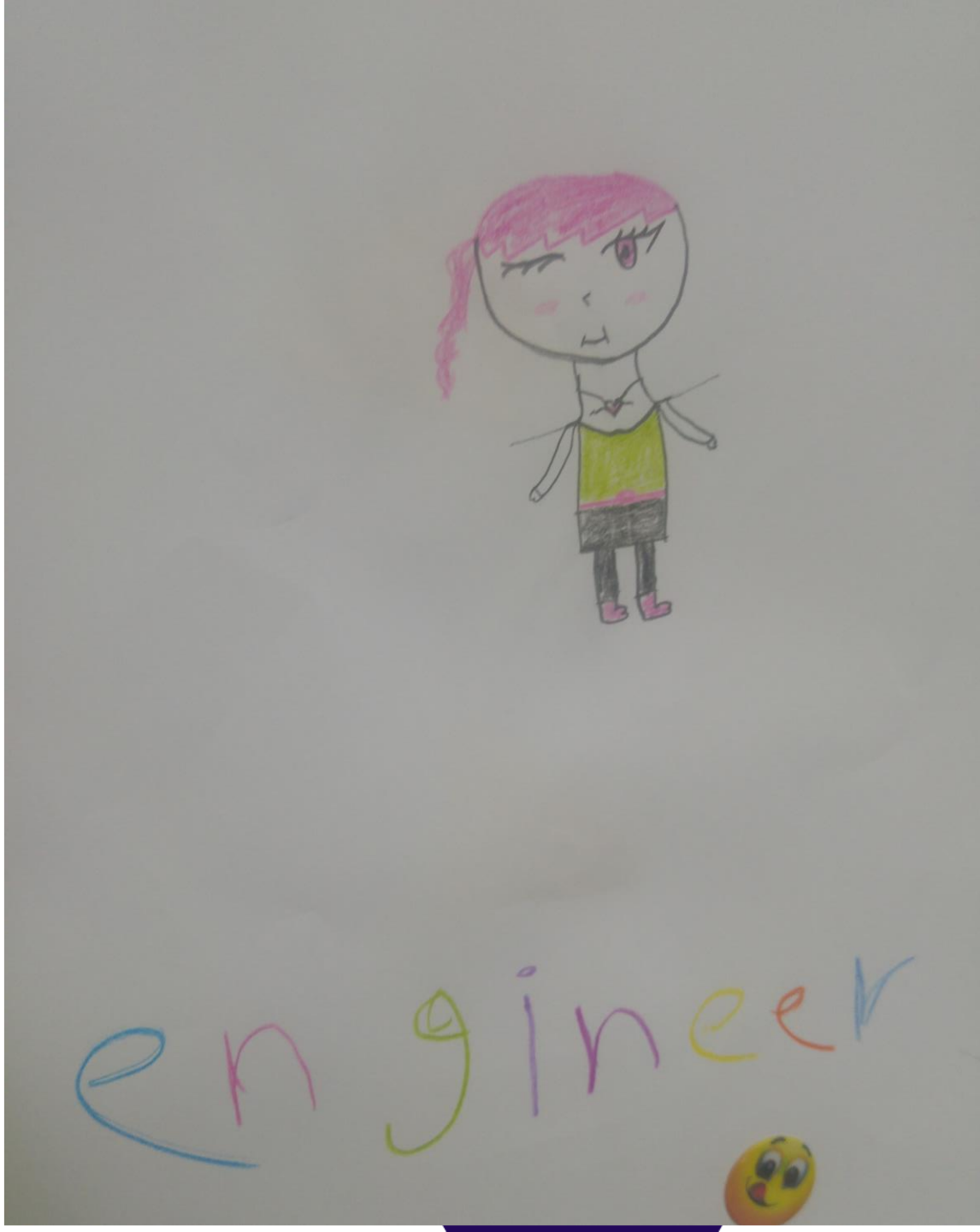


I will be a Lawyer



I will be
foot ball trainer




engineer

3 contemporary opportunities – and how the ELT community can access them

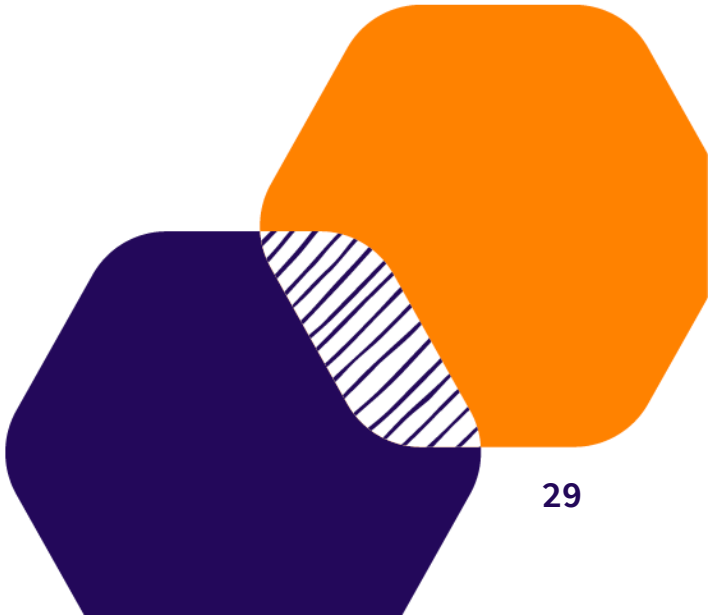
1 Make classrooms safe spaces

→ **The Opportunity:**

- **There is wider and greater acceptance that the classroom – especially the English language learning classroom - can be a therapeutic as well as learning space**

→ **Some ways of developing this opportunity**

- Build on the humanistic history and nature of ELT.
- See English language learning which can be an effective tool in crisis and emergency situations.



Trauma-informed / trauma-sensitive pedagogy

- This approach is useful in any teaching and learning situation, but more so in crises / emergencies.
- Some core aspects of TIP:
  - Know that you cannot ‘fix’ the learner, but you can play a role in managing and mitigating it
  - Understand what is happening ‘under the surface’
  - Listen to the content of what learners say, not just the form
  - Model kindness in the classroom – offer an alternative
  - Allowing – encouraging – learners to be honest about how they feel
  - Fostering a strong class identity
  - Being aware of – and minimising – psychological triggers

Dasha Artsymieieva & Oksana Lozhnikova (Ep 6)

Put on your own oxygen mask before helping others – if you don't look after yourself, you can't support others

You can't support every learner to the extent you want to. It's simply not possible. You have to be realistic.

Sometimes it can feel as if your brain is on fire. You have to regulate yourself before you can help your learners.

In supporting your learners, you can absorb their trauma, which can negatively affect you. Be aware of this.

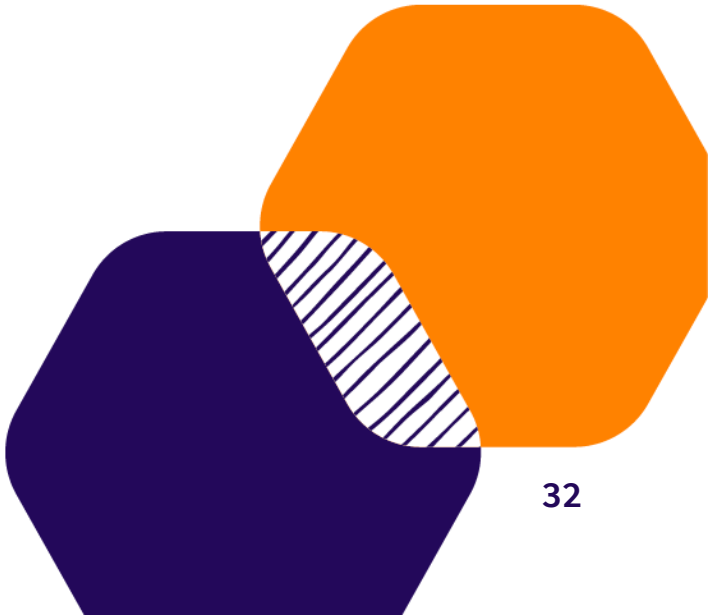
2 Use a more participatory pedagogy

→ **The Opportunity:**

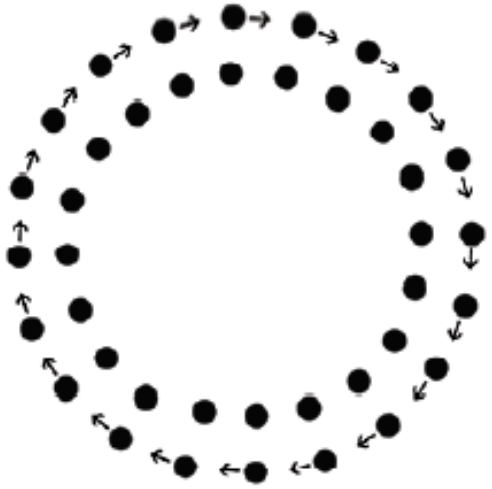
- **There is a greater awareness and acceptance of learner-centeredness, but we can go even further**

→ **Some ways of developing this opportunity**

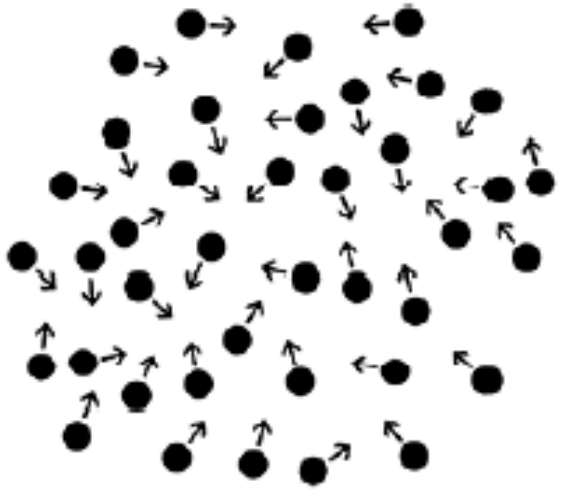
- Move beyond the ‘tyranny’ of pairs and pairwork
- Reflect critically about classroom layouts and don’t be afraid to make changes
- Reflect critically about homework – and don’t be afraid to change it



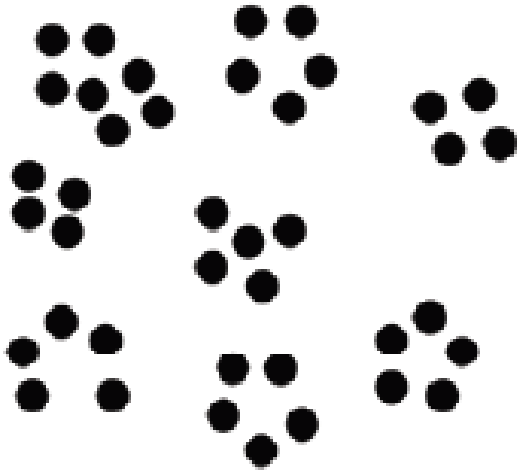
The ‘tyranny’ of pairs and pairwork



Onion ring (doughnut)



Mingle



Share

Look at this photo and reflect on these questions:

- Is individual or collective work prioritised?
- Is writing or speaking prioritised?
- Does the layout make students feel as safe as possible? Are they connected? Are they encouraged to share?

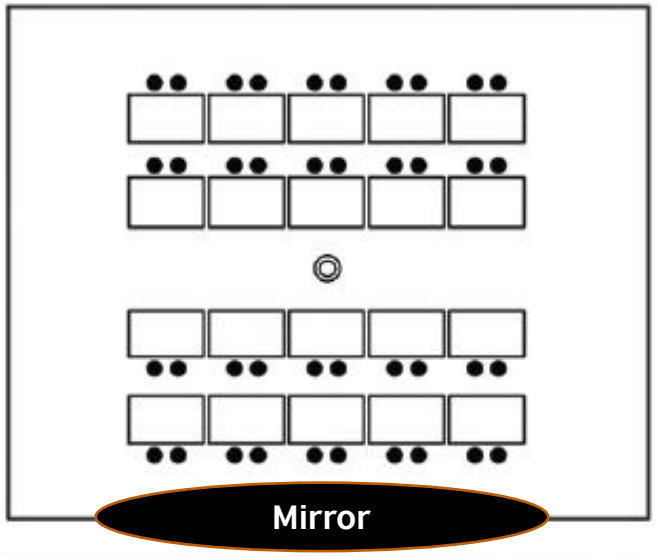
Look at this photo and reflect on these questions:

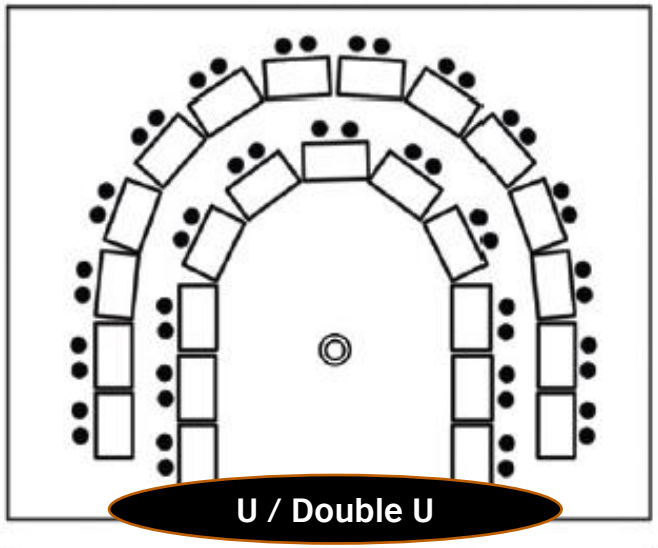
- What physical changes could you make to your classroom to make it feel safer?
- What classroom layouts could you use to send a different message?

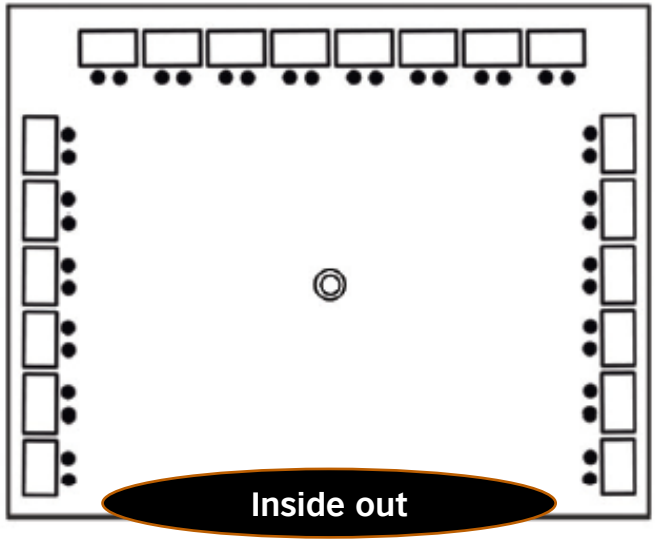
Some ideas

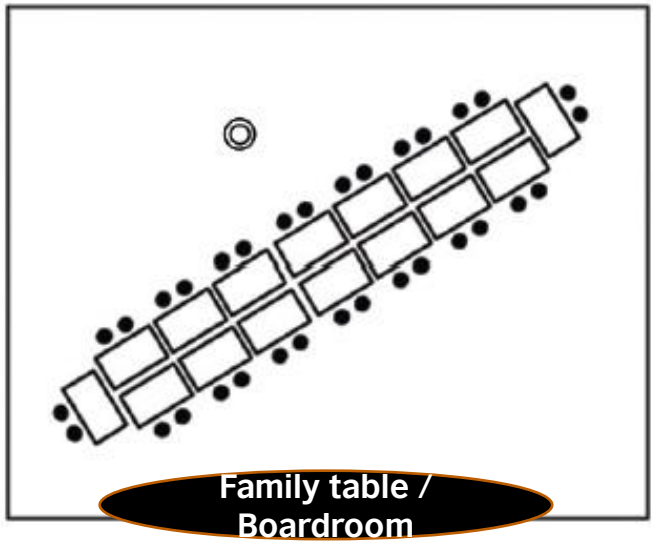
→ Students' own work on the walls
→ Commonly-used classroom language
→ Student-only box of learning items
→ Seedlings / plants

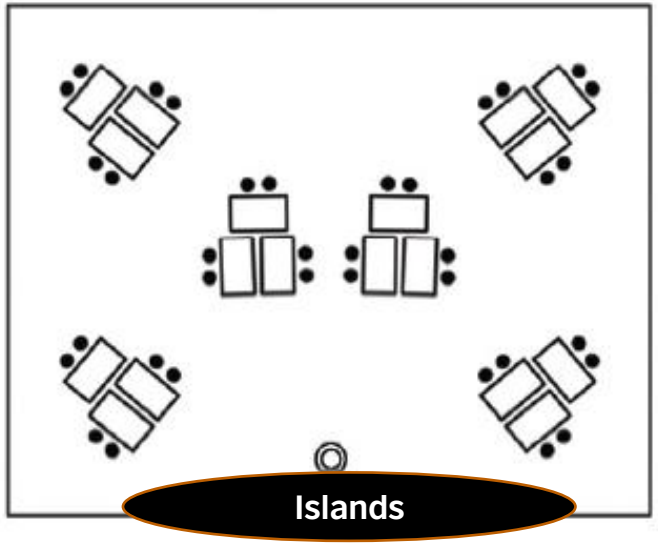
Reflect critically on classroom layout











Sowton, C. (2021), Teaching in Challenging Circumstances

Reflect critically about homework – and don't be afraid to change it

- Let's be honest, nobody likes homework – students, parents and teachers. So let's change how it's done.
- Let's think out of the box in terms of what we ask learners to do.

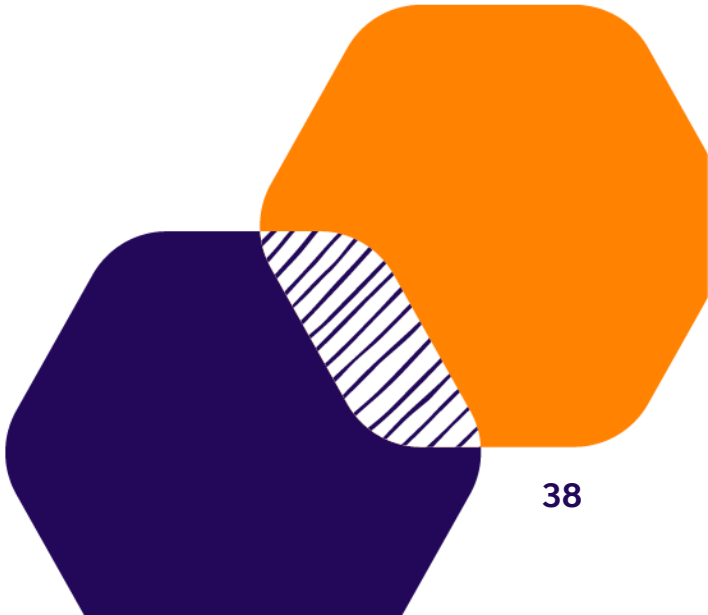
3 Decentralise teacher professional development

→ **The opportunity:**

- **Teachers attend more training, and have greater understanding of ELT issues, than ever before – but this knowledge is often not distributed**

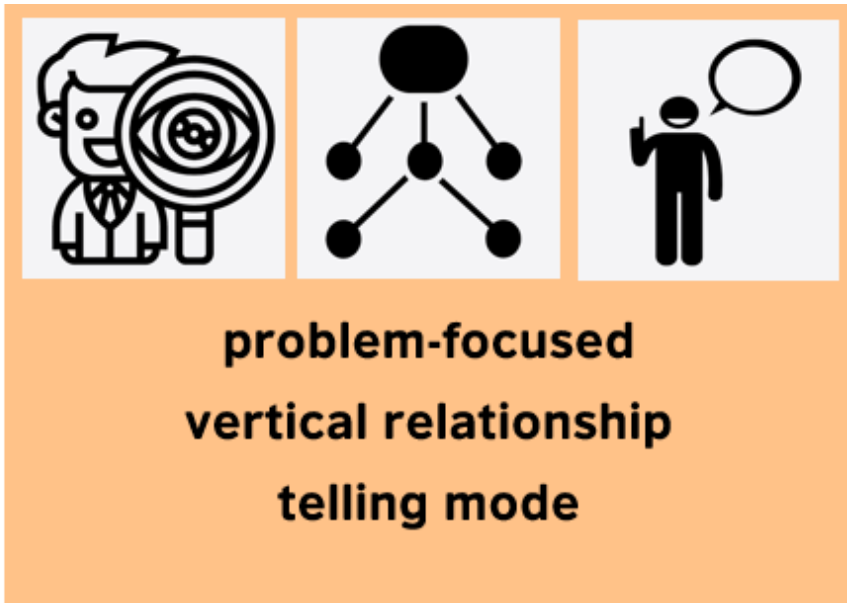
→ **Some ways of developing this opportunity**

- Practise peer observations
- Embed a cascade mentality withing TPD



Practise peer observation

Observation vs Inspection



Follow the WWW / EBI modality

Embed a cascade mentality within TPD

- Training should not be seen as a one-off for one individual.
- Institutions should support training for teachers, whether financially or in terms of time
- And in the spirit of that, here is a QR code which you can use to download this presentation as a pdf, which you're free to share.

https://tinyurl.com/niletesol

In summary

3 challenges – and how the ELT community can address them

1 Dismantle the barriers between the English “haves” and “have-nots”

2 Embrace and meaningfully integrate digital in the learning process

3 Engage learners’ imaginations and centralise discovery

3 opportunities – and how the ELT community can access them

1 Make classrooms safe spaces

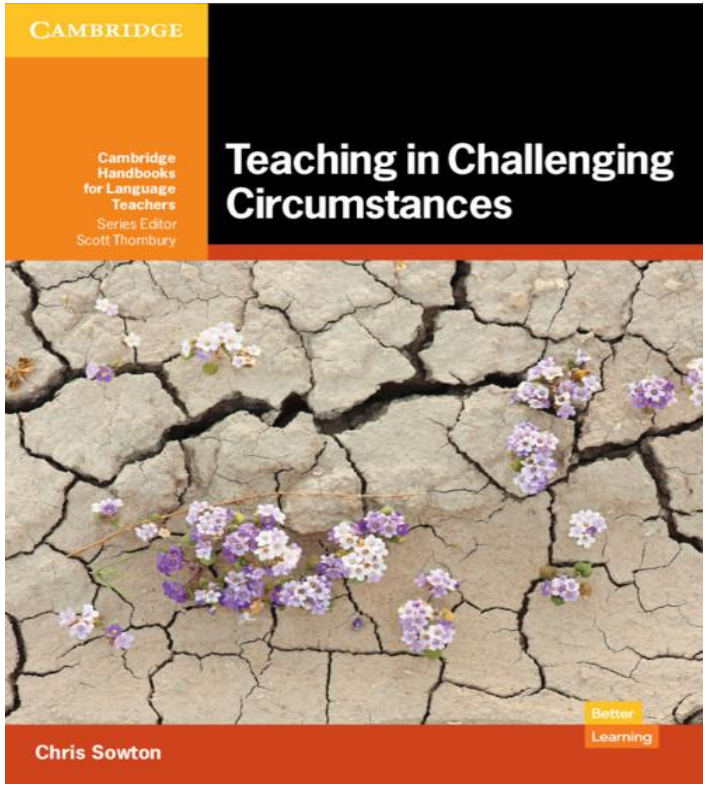
2 Use a more participatory pedagogy

3 Decentralise teacher professional development

Laura Phelps (Ep 3)

Teaching in Challenging Circumstances

https://tinyurl.com/TeachingInCC



Thank you, and please do connect with me on social media

www.britishcouncil.org

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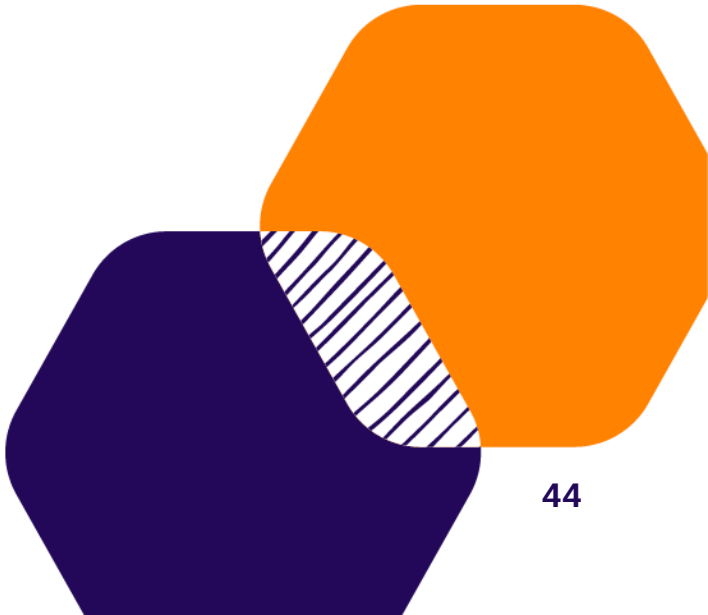

Audio transcript

Nergiz Kern: “The research suggests that one of the real benefits of VR is this idea of transferring contextualization, that language transfer is much stronger from VR to real life than from the classroom to real life.”

Rose Aylett: “We've obviously all got different views on things and this is what makes the world such a rich, diverse and interesting place. I think disagreement isn't a bad thing per se, however, in a classroom context with students who don't know each other very well and who are perhaps not able to express themselves as clearly as they might otherwise want to, this has the potential to lead to classroom conflict, which is obviously something we want to avoid. Something I'd recommend initially is setting kind of ground rules. So using or agreeing, a code of conduct with your group of students.”

Dasha and Oxsana: 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 t our classrooms. It's really a great opportunity for our students recovery.

Audio transcript

Muhammed Ghoniem: “This is Muhammed, I am originally from Egypt but I’ve been teaching in Turkey for seven and a half years. Well I do think football is good for teaching English for the kids because you know, everybody nowadays they do have a favourite team and favourite players in the Premier League. So whenever this subject pops up in our lessons, they always talk about the likes of Ronaldo, Marcus Rashford, Mo Salah, Harry Kane and all those famous players. So I do think it’s really good and it’s important for you to take advantage of this love for the game and you can use it during your lessons if we have the football club as well so it helps a lot to improve their levels in English. So mostly I like to use the vocabulary section like the football phrases section.”

Laura Phelps: “I remember when I first started teaching, one of my managers said to me, you know, it's really important to remember that beginner learners are not beginner thinkers, I found that's really something that stayed with me and like, of course, it's I think sometimes that when you have these kinds of issues that people do have things to say about that are really relevant to their own lives.”