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.

Christiana: 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