

Learner and teacher autonomy in difficult circumstances

Richard Smith, University of Warwick, UK

Aims

- Consider ‘difficult circumstances’, but also what *can* be done in such circumstances ...
- focusing on engagement of learner and teacher autonomy ...
- as a way for you to reflect differently on the circumstances *you’re* in
and on what you can do,
as well as what can’t be done.

Some key concepts we'll travel through ...

Learner autonomy

Teacher autonomy

Teacher-learner autonomy

Difficult circumstances

Normal circumstances

Your circumstances

Your circumstances

Where do you teach? (please raise your hand!)

Primary school – private? public?

Secondary school – private? public?

University – private? public?

Language school / other kind of school

In Turkey? Elsewhere?

Your circumstances (contd.)

Small classes? Large classes?

Motivated learners? Unmotivated learners?

Freedom to teach? Constraints on teaching?

Well-resourced? Low-resource?

Easy circumstances? Difficult circumstances?



Photo © Christopher Tribble, 2004



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‘Difficult circumstances’

Michael West’s (1960) *Teaching English in Difficult Circumstances*

“a class consisting of over 30 pupils (more usually 40 or even 50), congested on benches ... accommodated in an unsuitably shaped room, ill-graded, with a [non-native speaker teacher], working in a hot climate. ... The pupils in such schools are more subject to Elimination [i.e. drop-out] than those who are more favourably circumstanced”

‘Difficult circumstances’ are ‘normal’

- Most (English) teaching in the world has always occurred and still occurs in primary and secondary schools, in such circumstances
- In this sense, these are ‘normal’ circumstances – but are dysfunctionally neglected!

Lancaster-Leeds project (late 1980s) ('problems' of teaching in large classes) →

TELCnet (2008+): 'enhancement' approach, not a deficit model

TELC (Teaching English in Large Classes) Network

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TELC Home

Network rationale

Large class size is a challenge faced by many teachers and learners around the world and is a particular issue in many 'developing' countries where teacher recruitment has not kept pace with rapid increases in school enrolments. Investigations of large class size and other challenges involved in teaching in 'difficult circumstances' constitute the focus of our concern as a research network.

bit.ly/telcnet-home

Two favoured approaches within TELCnet:

(1) Sharing success

(2) Teacher-inquiry

I'll share one example of each and then invite you to join in ...

***What
challenges
do teachers
face?***



<http://www.publicdomainpictures.net/view-image.php?image=7018&picture=primary-school-students>
Primary School Students by Peter Griffin

A story of success

Madhav's story (from Prem Phyak's research)

(a rural Nepalese secondary school)

Now, I am a teacher and I have been teaching different subjects for more than a decade. I am facing similar problem as my teachers faced. I have to teach more than sixty students in the same class and I know that some of my friends are teaching more than a hundred.

We have crowded classes with lack of resources. Although I am not satisfied with what I have done to solve my problem; the steps I have taken in the class have at least reduced dropout and repetition to some degree.

Nearly four different ethnic communities are in the catchment area of my school.

Students from Newari community speak Newari language as their first language and Paharis, Tamangs and Magars have their own language and culture. Using some aspects of their language and talking about their feasts and festival in the class, I address

their linguistic as well as cultural identity. As a result, they all feel welcome in the class even if it is crowded. They never feel that teachers do not care about them. It helps me make my students feel supported during my class. I find students working vigorously when I make groups mixing all ethnic identities. ...

- A few talented students generally dominate the large size classes. They can help the teacher to teach effectively. My way of mobilizing them helps me. I place them on different benches and assign them to help weaker students

It is, of course, a troublesome job for the teacher to have individual care in a large size class. A student hardly gets half a minute within 40-45 minutes 'class. After the presentation of the lesson, the students are supposed to do some class work. It is not possible to reach to each individual

To solve this problem, I just go through the answers of one student per bench and ask them to help their friends. I have found peer correction and self-correction techniques useful in such classes.

Large size class is not only a problem or burden of teachers but also an opportunity to explore new techniques and tools.

Please share a story of success –
and/or a problem you're facing
– in *your* difficult circumstances

(4 minutes each)

Further stories of success

Teaching in the low-resource classroom – videos on the British Council TeachingEnglish website

(soon to be published book: *Teaching in Low-resource Classrooms: Voices of Experience* (British Council))

Teaching in low-resource classrooms: voices of experience

Edited by Richard Smith, Amol Padwad and Deborah Bullock





Joya Senchowla

Hello, I'm Joya. I am a Primary Teacher in Majuli, Assam (India) and also a teacher trainer.



Hassan Mehmood

My name is Hassan. I teach secondary school students in Punjab, Pakistan. There are between 30 and 35 students in my classes.



Pankaj Dwivedi

My name is Pankaj. I work as a PhD scholar-cum-English-teaching assistant at the Indian Institute of Technology Ropar, Punjab, India.



Amarnath

I am Amarnath from Bihar, India. I teach 13–18 years old and have about 60 students in my classroom.



Mandeep Choudhary

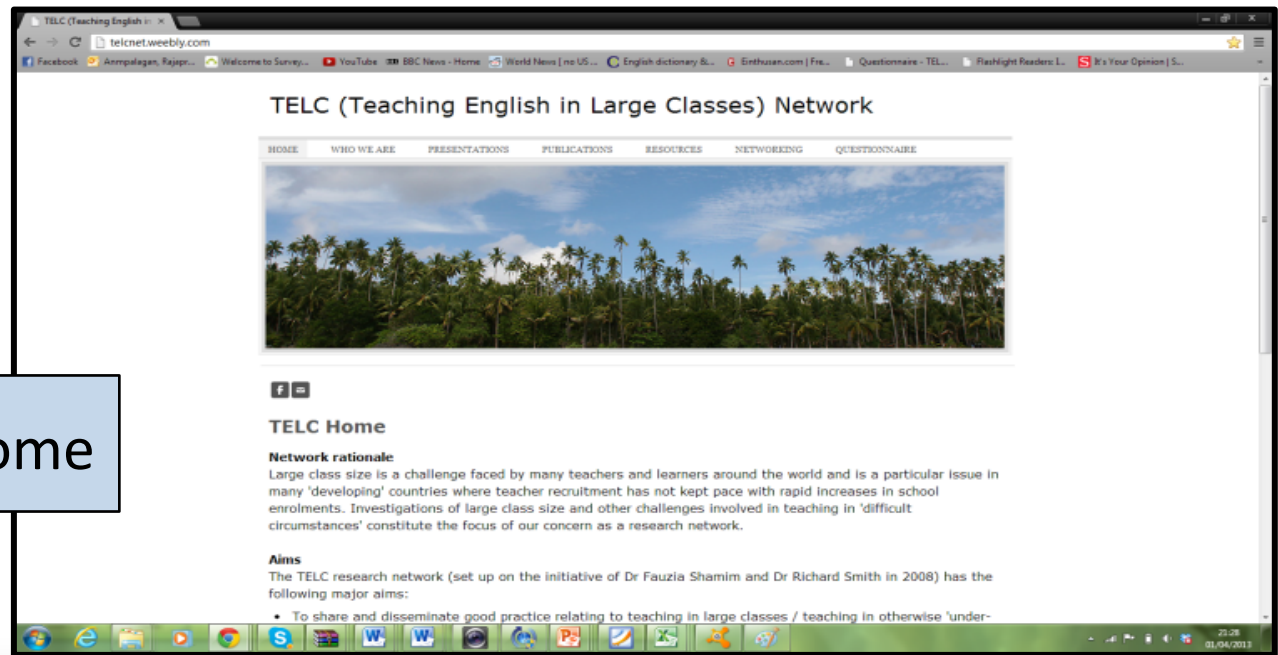
My name is Pankaj. I work as a PhD scholar-cum-English-teaching assistant at the Indian Institute of Technology Ropar, Punjab, India.



Indumati Mehta

My name is Indumati. I teach English in a rural high school in India.

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facebook.com/groups/telcgroup/

Both successes and problems can be starting-points for teacher-inquiry:

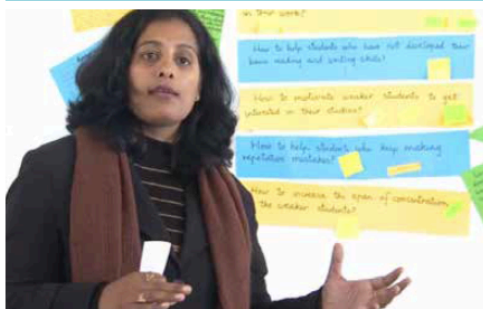
How can I replicate that success?

How can I/we solve that problem?

[Write down: How can I / we ?]

Teaching in low-resource classrooms: voices of experience

Edited by Richard Smith, Amol Padwad and Deborah Bullock



A story of teacher-inquiry

Champion Teachers: stories of exploratory action research

Edited by Paula Rebolledo, Richard Smith and Deborah Bullock



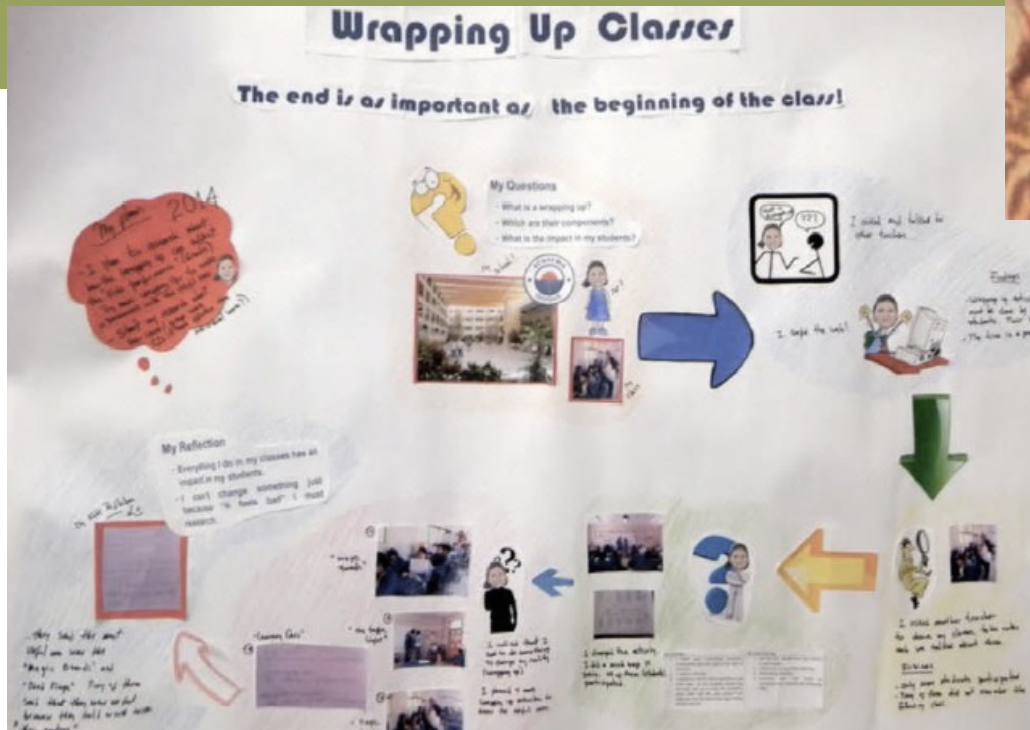
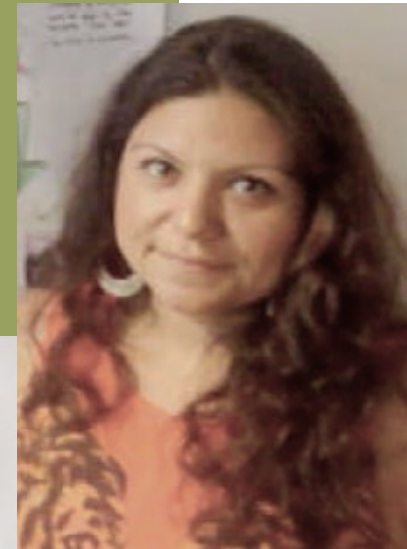
The Champion Teachers project in Chile (2013+)



1

Wrapping up classes

Andrea Robles López
Iquique, Chile



Some facts about teachers!

- Teachers work 40 – 44 hours per week and have limited time to plan.
- Teachers need to manage many things at the same time (sometimes many jobs!).
- Teachers teach large classes (40-45 Ss) per class.
- Teachers think research is something only scholars and professors do.



Andrea's research...

Wrapping up classes, the end is as important as the beginning of the class!

[slides here replaced by:

https://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/attachments/british_council_champion_teachers_1.pdf#page=10]

Andrea's reflections

- Discovering is more important than solving a problem.
- Teaching is learning!
- Teachers are powerful.
- Research helps you to know why you are doing something and not just acting because of a feeling.
- Research is not only for experts... teachers have much more things to say because we are the ones who are inside the classroom.
- Accept that we make mistakes or maybe we do not do thing in the best way...

Champion Teachers: stories of exploratory action research

Edited by Paula Rebolledo, Richard Smith and Deborah Bullock

Find more
Exploratory Action
Research stories here



TA-research (Cameroon)

CAMELTA (2013) – revised plenary title: ‘In difficult circumstances, the power of teacher-research’

->

‘In your circumstances, the potential of teacher association research’

A further 'success story'

Harry Kuchah's teaching experience in
Cameroon

[https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/
research/groups/lta/research/trdc/autonomy/
pedagogy_of_autonomy_for_difficult_circumsta
nces_from_practice_to_principles.pdf](https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/research/groups/lta/research/trdc/autonomy/pedagogy_of_autonomy_for_difficult_circumstances_from_practice_to_principles.pdf)

Some theory from practice

Difficult circumstances are often seen as *hindering* learner-centred teaching

e.g. attempts to develop students' autonomy

But ...

Stories of success in difficult
circumstances often involve engaging
learner autonomy

Kuchah Kuchah – pedagogy of autonomy

Gamini Fonseka – autonomy as a rescue solution

Zakia Sarwar – project work in large classes

Learner autonomy – a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes. This entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a socially responsible person.

('Bergen definition' , in Trebbi 1990)

Michael West – 'The larger the class and the more difficult the circumstances, the more important it is to stress learning as the objective.'

‘In one sense, we teachers in [unfavourably circumstanced schools] are fortunate because we are compelled to face realities. The teacher in the small, favourably circumstanced school may get away with a badly planned lesson with multiple aims in which he – or she – talks far too much and the pupils spend far too much time merely listening. But the teacher in a big class is forced to realize that language is a thing which is learnt by practice. It is learnt by the pupils. He cannot, if he is to get results, stand and talk and talk in front of the class. The pupils will soon get restless and anyhow they will not acquire practice in the use of the language. His job is to help the pupils to do the work.’

So engagement of learner autonomy in difficult circumstances is not surprising – it's *because of* difficult circumstances that it is often engaged

As a 'rescue solution', when teachers and learners have to fall back on their own resources

Emerging key concepts: 'resourcefulness', 'resilience'

Some small steps to autonomy (to
address difficult circumstances)

- Ask students what they do outside in relation to English, and/or what they could do, and/or what they have done before but have now stopped doing.

- Make sure the students get to hear about one another's ideas, and suggest further ideas for out-of-class learning that you may have heard of.

- Ask students to choose what they'd like to do to improve their English outside class, perhaps in replacement for (some of) their homework. Give them some kind of credit for out-of-class learning. Ask them to commit to some kind of contract for this learning.

- Find time for sharing, evaluation and replanning of out-of-class learning contracts

- Ask students at the end of a normal lesson what suggestions they have for classroom work (or 'points to improve' and 'good points' about the lesson)
- Summarize students' opinions / suggestions for classroom work and [a big step] act on (some of) them, then evaluate together.

- [a bigger step] Suggest the formation of learning groups which will take forward some of the suggestions more ‘independently’
- Evaluate (with possibility of reverting to previous arrangements) and replan, together with students

Teacher-inquiry to address difficult circumstances involves engagement and development of **teacher-learner autonomy**

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('Bergen definition' , in Trebbi 1990)

Teacher-learner autonomy – a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes. This entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a socially responsible person.

(based on 'Bergen definition', in Trebbi
1990)

Teacher autonomy

Teacher autonomy can be seen as ‘freedom from constraints’

But, more realistically, perhaps – teacher autonomy involves exploring, exploiting negotiating ‘spaces of freedom’ / ‘spaces for manoeuvre’ with others (including students)

for one’s own benefit, and for and with one’s students

Like learner autonomy, teacher autonomy can be engaged despite difficult circumstances.

In fact, engaging / developing teacher autonomy – along with engaging / developing learner autonomy – is how difficult circumstances can be addressed.



‘My research journey started with a feeling, just a feeling that something wasn’t right. Going from that feeling to asking why, and finding out what works is the key.’

Action research is important because it lights a spark in the darkness of the system; it lights a spark in the mentality of the people who do not want to change; and it lights a spark in the school by making people believe that they own the changes that can be made in any learning environment.'



We need to stop focusing on our concerns and pay more attention to our students' concerns. As a result of this project, I feel that I am more empathetic'



**I heard my
students.
I saw myself**



A small step into teacher-inquiry

Share a concern with students ('How can I/we?')

ask for their opinions – 5 minutes' anonymous writing at the end of the class.

Or just ask them for general 'good points' and 'points to improve' about the lessons.

Forthcoming:

Richard Smith & Paula Rebolledo: *A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research* (British Council)

Already published:

Kenan Dikilitaş & Carol Griffiths (2017). *Developing Language Teacher Autonomy through Action Research*. Basingstoke: Palgrave

Teachers research! Facebook group

The screenshot displays the Facebook group page for 'Teachers Research!'. On the left, a navigation menu includes 'Discussion', 'Members', 'Events', 'Videos', 'Photos', 'Files', 'Group Insights', and 'Manage Group'. Below this is a search bar and a 'Shortcuts' section with links to 'EVO - Classroom-base...', 'ARAS participants and ...', 'Teachers Research!', 'IATEFL Research SIG', 'Teaching English in Lar...', and 'HoLLT (History of La...'. The main content area features a header image of four people in a meeting, with 'Joined', 'Notifications', and 'Share' buttons below it. A post creation bar offers options for 'Write Post', 'Add Photo/Video', 'Live Video', and 'More'. Below this is a text input field 'Write something...' and buttons for 'Photo/Video', 'Poll', 'Feeling/Activ...', and '...'. A 'PINNED POST' section shows a link shared by 'Richard Smith' (Admin) on October 12 at 2:14am, titled 'Latest International Festival of Teacher-research event - video & written summary of projects in Action Research in ELICOS program (Australia), led by Anne Burns:'. On the right, the 'ADD MEMBERS' section has an input field '+ Enter name or email address...'. Below it, the 'MEMBERS' section shows '2,813 Members' and a row of profile pictures with a 'Write Post' button. The 'SUGGESTED MEMBERS' section lists 'Erkin Mukhammedov', 'Daniela Debacco', and 'ObidAllah Moghira', each with an 'Add Member' button.

facebook.com/groups/teachersresearch/



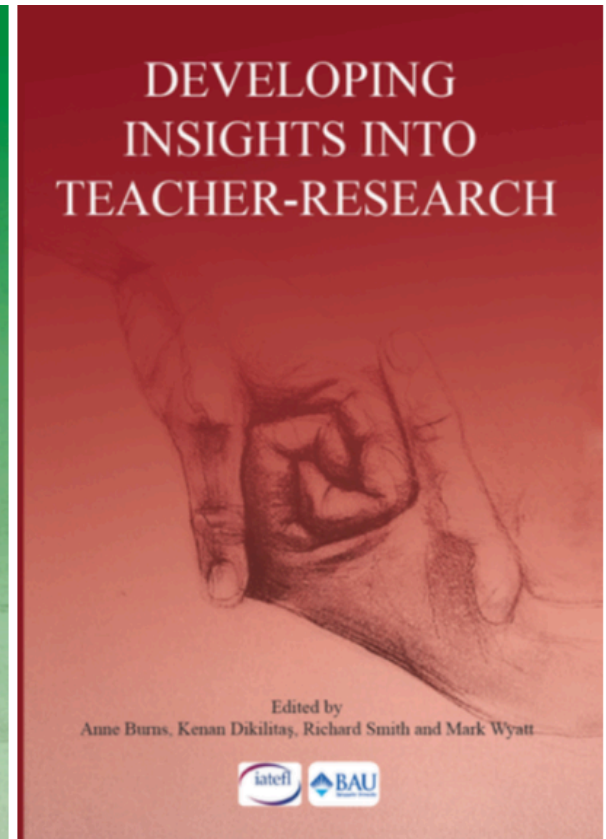
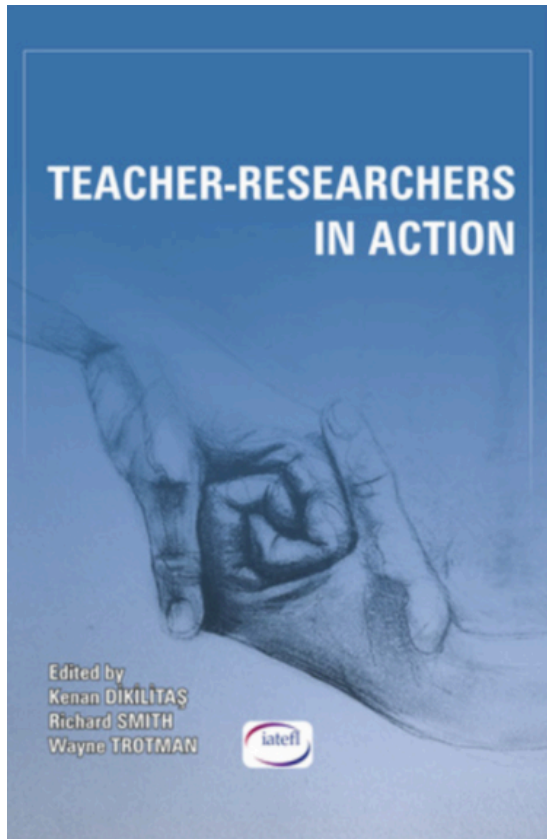
Teachers Research! Istanbul 2017

Bahçeşehir University, Istanbul

2–3 June 2017



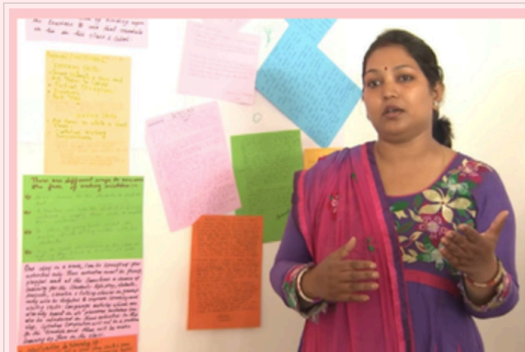
resig.iatefl.org/publications



Electronic Village Online (EVO) 2018

Classroom-based Research for Professional Development EVO

[HOME](#) [EVO2017](#)



**CLASSROOM-BASED RESEARCH FOR
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

We started EVO2017 on 9th January 2017 and ended on 13th February 2017. There were also some final presentations by participants in April 2017. Until we start registering participants for the follow-up EVO2018 (probably in November 2017), you are welcome to browse the 2017 materials by clicking on the links below.

This **EVO Project**, led by a **team of ten volunteer teacher educators and supported by several teacher associations**, provided a hands-on introduction to inquiry-based teacher development, especially (though not exclusively) for teachers working in difficult circumstances (large classes, low-resource classrooms,

etc.). The five-week workshop took participants through different stages of teacher-research, engaging them in practical activities to gradually build their confidence in teacher-research. There are further details below

trfestival.wordpress.com

The International Festival of Teacher-Research in ELT

Face-to-face and online events promoting teacher-research as an empowering means of professional development for English teachers working in difficult circumstances worldwide

ABOUT · **UPCOMING EVENTS** ▾ · EVENTS SO FAR ▾ · RESOURCES ▾ · STEERING COMMITTEE ·

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14–15 September – AINET International
Teacher Research Conference,
Nagpur, India

🔍 Search

Search ...



The first ever ELT Teacher-research Conference in India is being organised by the [All-India Network of English Teachers \(AINET\)](#) in collaboration with G. S. College of Commerce & Economics, [Nagpur](#) and with the support of the British Council, Regional English

Language Office, US Embassy, and IATEFL Research SIG. Teachers in schools, colleges and other institutions will share their studies and participate in an international exchange of ideas, experiences and developments in teacher-

Three recent PhD theses about ELT in Turkey:

Betul Khalil (2017) 'Teacher Autonomy in Turkish State Lower Secondary Schools With Reference to English Language Teaching: A Mixed Methods Study', Open University, UK

Melike Bulut (2016)

Pre-service EFL Teacher Learning during the Practicum: A Multiple Case Study in a Context of Systemic Dissonance, University of Leeds, UK

Ceren Öztabay (2015)

The Formally Stated, Observed and Perceived Realities of Research Education in Initial, University-Based English Language Teacher Education in North Cyprus: A Case Study, University of Warwick, UK

Identifying spaces of manoeuvre / freedom can occur, despite constraints and lack of trust (Khalil)

However, there's a dissonance between initial teacher education, the practicum and novice years of teaching (Bulut)

Opportunities to enhance teacher-research capabilities in teacher preparation are not being taken up (Oztabay)

Needs for leadership by universities ...?

Your circumstances, revisited

- Small classes? Large classes?
- Motivated learners? Unmotivated learners?
- Freedom to teach? Constraints on teaching?
- Easy circumstances? Difficult circumstances?

- How can I engage/develop my learners (their autonomy)?
- How can I (my autonomy) become more engaged / better developed?

Where we've been

- Difficult circumstances as normal circumstances
- Engaging learners' autonomy as a possible 'rescue solution'
- Engaging our own autonomy as learners of teaching ('teacher-learner autonomy')
- Finding spaces of manoeuvre, including via teacher-research
- Problems of dissonance – and lack of trust & cynicism – in the system. Needs for leadership!

Aims fulfilled?

- Consider ‘difficult circumstances’, but also what *can* be done in such circumstances ...
- focusing on engagement of learner and teacher autonomy ...
- as a way for you to reflect differently on the circumstances *you’re* in
and on what you can do,
as well as what can’t be done.

Best wishes!

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@RichardSmithELT

[http://www.warwick.ac.uk/
richardcsmith/inged2017](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/richardcsmith/inged2017)