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**Teaching in low-resource classrooms: Voices of experience, Richard Smith, Amol Padwad, Deborah Bullock (Eds.). British Council, London (2017). 68 pp.**

We have known for years that Richard Smith, the leading editor of the volume, is passionate about supporting language teachers in challenging conditions. We were really excited to read this volume of teachers' collective voices and consider it to be one of the most impressive resource books that the British Council has produced over the years. We believe that the booklet deserves our full attention because we, as language teaching researchers, run the risk of making teaching too complex for language teachers.

Last summer one of us published a review on a book that elaborates an English teacher's effort to use input-based tasks to teach particular grammatical forms to young language learners (Zhu & Gao, 2017). The reviewer was quite amazed by the careful documenting of elaborate pedagogical procedures that the teacher undertook to help young language learners learn a few grammatical forms. While the review praises the detail and precision documented in the research monograph, it also critically reflects on how such carefully documented research can impact on language teachers' professional development. In other words, we wonder whether frontline teachers would take up such complex research narratives to inform their pedagogical decisions. It is very likely that our teachers need a different type of pedagogical narrative like those in this booklet.

The booklet with online resources for teachers teaching in low resource classrooms (<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/low-resource-classrooms>) emerged from a professional development event attended by thirty-four teachers from Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, all teaching in highly challenging and poorly-resourced contexts. It contains eighteen chapters on 'Stories of Success', in which the teachers share how they overcame specific challenges in teaching. It also has seven chapters on 'Stories of Teacher-inquiry', in which the teachers explored solutions to the challenges together and undertook efforts to implement these solutions through inquiry-based teaching. A quick read of the chapters reveals that the challenges mentioned by these teachers are not unique to the poorly-resourced contexts they teach in. In fact, issues such as how to engage students with meaningful learning activities, promoting group work, and encouraging peers to learn from each other are universal, but they were addressed by these teachers in a especially 'back to basics' manner.

We found the ways that they responded to these challenges to be particularly illuminating and inspiring for those who work in similar and perhaps better-resourced conditions. We were particularly impressed by the simplicity of the pedagogical strategies that the teachers used to respond to their challenges. For instance, in the very first story of success (by Gulnaz Mondegarian), a high school teacher from Pakistan shares how she encouraged her students to be creative in speaking and writing. Like many students in other contexts, her students could only repeat what they had read and could not produce authentic, extended answers to the questions she raised about literary texts. They were also unable to express themselves in writing since they were constrained by the limited number of topics available in the course. To help these students, the teacher had them act out the texts they read to deepen their engagement and comprehension. She also gave them free writing tasks, so that students could write anything they had in mind for a few minutes. She reminded us of the teacher in the movie *Dead Poets Society* (1989), who taught in a highly privileged, well-resourced private school in the US. The results that she had achieved were highly positive; she found that her students become more involved and motivated in the learning process.

In another story of success (by Babita Hepila), a primary school teacher from India describes how she taught basic literacy skills to a group of students who could not 'even read the simplest words' (p. 31). After presenting a model reading, she had the students read aloud together and corrected their mistakes while continuing to encourage them read, before she translated the words into their first language. She never discouraged students from asking her questions about unknown words, and always asked them to read a text for homework so that they could develop a reading habit.

In the chapters on 'Stories of Teacher-inquiry', we do not find any over-complicated theorization or 'rigorous' data collection and analysis. Instead, these stories recount how the teachers shared their challenges and learnt from each other about how to overcome them. They also tried out pedagogical ideas they had learnt from their colleagues. Most of the pedagogical strategies that the teachers undertook to improve their teaching appeared to be basic but highly manageable. For instance, in response to the challenge of providing written corrective feedback in large classes, Fehmina Qaiser from Pakistan and Mohammad Rejaul Karim from Bangladesh used strategies such as 'peer checking' and 'a work plan to manage class work and homework', which they learnt from other teachers at the same professional development event. They managed to

develop effective feedback practices to support students' learning. It must be noted that the sharing prompted the teachers to reflect on their own corrective feedback practice. Quite a few chapters in the booklet document attitudinal changes; in the case of written corrective feedback, Fehmina reported that she no longer thought of correcting every mistake in the students' work. Instead, she developed critical language awareness, becoming more concerned with 'what mistakes might [the students] be able to correct themselves?' and 'what should they be looking to correct at this level?' (p. 39).

In another chapter Zainab Rao (Pakistan), Rupinderjit Dhaliwal (India) and Gulnaz Mondegarian (Pakistan) worked on how to teach mixed ability classes. While the pedagogical strategies they identified for mixed ability classes are probably familiar to many readers, such as differentiation and mixed-level group activities, it is their accounts of trying various strategies in actual teaching that are really inspiring. For instance, Dhaliwal gave students 'dialogue scripts' that they could prepare beforehand, in order to participate more meaningfully in group work. By facilitating these students' participation in group work, the teacher helped to improve their self-efficacy and made them increasingly willing to be involved in the learning process.

One might argue that the descriptions in such stories are a bit mundane. None of the teachers articulates any theories to explain why they adopted their particular strategies. Very few of the pedagogical strategies mentioned in the stories are beyond what teachers usually do in different parts of the world. However, pedagogical theories are often developed to make sense of the teachers' effective pedagogy. We do not think that teachers should feel obliged to implement pedagogical efforts to fit particular pedagogical theories, either. In addition, we note that pedagogical theories are confirmed in the teachers' narratives. For instance, the free writing task gave students control of the writing process and motivated them to express themselves creatively (Benson, 2007). We also understand that the editors are committed to presenting the teachers' voices and do not want to mix them with elaborate academic prose. For this reason, the booklet delivers a straightforward and powerful message about what constitutes good pedagogy in highly accessible language.

Reflecting on what may be learnt from the booklet, we believe that it has become necessary for teacher education programs to engage language teachers with some basics and encourage them to adopt innovative practices with minimal resources in teaching. In particular, we find the ideas in the narratives much more impactful and persuasive than those in extended academic texts, as frontline teachers could easily pick up what is described here for use in their own teaching. The booklet with many prompting questions also made us reflect on what we often produce for language teachers as researchers. We produce pedagogical tasks and lessons that have elaborate, over-complicated designs. Although we claim that they are 'well-informed' by sound research, this research was usually conducted in 'Western', 'educated', 'industrialized', 'rich' and 'democratic' societies ('WEIRD' research). The booklet made us recognize that our designs and solutions may not be relevant to teaching in many parts of the world.

The narratives in the booklet also reveal the importance of meaningful, engaging professional dialogues as a means for teachers to explore solutions to pedagogical challenges, if we fully recognize the contributions that these teachers could bring to the professional development event. We believe that language teachers (in both challenging and well-resourced contexts) will definitely benefit from reading this collection of narratives. For us, it has been a truly humbling experience to read and comment on this inspiring booklet.

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## References

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