

Key concepts in ELT: resilience

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Key concepts in ELT

Resilience

Tony Capstick

Noting that 'We live in turbulent times', in his editorial in *ELT Journal* 77/1, Graham Hall stressed that 'Languages [...] are central to migrants' and refugees' resilience in times of crisis or in difficult circumstances' (Hall 2017: 1). These circumstances range from crises related to war, conflict and environmental change, as well as the adversity that individuals face when families migrate to new cultural contexts. By providing access to information, employment and education, English language skills can increase individual learners' and their families' access to social and economic resources, while, as Coleman (2010) has emphasized, English can also act as a 'link' language to help communities work together and understand each other better. The concept of 'resilience' has emerged as a central one in educational – including ELT – interventions to address the problems of refugees and migrants nowadays, alongside the other languages in migrants' repertoires.

A commonly used definition of resilience is that in the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP), the regional-response document to the refugee crisis in Syria and its neighbouring countries. According to this, resilience is 'the ability of individuals, households, communities and institutions to anticipate, withstand, recover and transform from shocks and crises' (3RP 2015-2016 pg. 17). The main objective of early psychological research into resilience was to identify the individual personality traits and wider protective factors that might modify the negative effects of adverse life circumstances and, then, to identify the processes that could underlie positive adaptation (Luthar and Cicchetti 2000). Both vulnerability and protective factors are increasingly seen to relate to three levels of influence: the community, family, and the individual (UNICEF 2016). Although many current strategies in humanitarian responses to e.g. conflict, natural disasters and massive population shifts] are focused on structures, resilience is primarily to be understood on these three levels. In ELT there has been a particular focus on building individual

resilience, mirroring increasing concerns in mainstream general education about learners' mental health.

The response has seen increasing use of terms such as emotional resilience and academic resilience. The former relates to learners' capacity to cope with both the changing state of their own emotions and the role that teachers play in helping learners develop coping strategies which enable them to deal with their emotions and the emotions of others. Academic resilience is much more related to learners achieving good educational outcomes despite adversity. Both benefit from a 'whole-school approach' and therefore represent a link between individual resilience and the wider-community of teachers, parents and school leaders. Enhancing resilience in this way can begin with work in schools and universities but is often about providing learners with the skills to take responsibility for their own mental health that forms the foundation of resilience building approaches in ELT. Personal Development Planning is a central aspect of resources in this area, such as Stella Cottrell's work on successful self-management, and similar approaches linking study skills to developing self-awareness, decision-making and risk management (Cottrell 2015). Seligman's work on positive psychology is also an important resource for teachers looking to understand the concept of well-being in their work (2011). Seligman's work is central to understanding language use and language learning interventions in humanitarian response as well as in wider development initiatives (Capstick and Delaney 2016). The *Language for Resilience* report (ibid) provides five foundational principles to practical resilience-building with case studies of what these interventions look like in migrant and refugee settings. Activities range from teaching professionals, such as lawyers, the English for Specific Purposes that they need to be able to communicate with international colleagues, read research articles and participate in international forums, to providing out-of-school teenagers with the life skills courses that embed psycho-social support within a language learning programme that is linked to employability. Thus, benefits are found in educational participation and success in addition to recognising the role that parents and teachers play in supporting learners to take responsibility for their personal development and long-term well-being. There are also links between this enhanced

academic resilience and the increased employment opportunities and lifelong access to good community support structures as a result of educational achievement.

In the language classroom, resilience can therefore be developed through activities such as those described above and related employment outcomes. Capstick and Delaney also suggest that resilience can also be built through design of language learning interventions which respond to the specific linguistic situation prevalent in school settings (2016). They argue that what is essential for students to remain in school, to acquire age-appropriate levels of literacy, and to master the language forms (both spoken and written) of the national or official language, is to ensure that the classroom affirms both the spoken and written forms of the mother tongue. The benefits of this bilingual model for resilience are higher standards of academic performance in general, better literacy rates in national and international testing and better acquisition of both national and foreign languages, all of which enhance children's likely success in schooling and post-school economic prospects. Thus resilience is related to the language of initial education as well as the opportunity to learn additional languages, such as English, which may provide access to further education, training and employment. Opportunities to use home languages when learning new languages create inclusive learning environments that are less likely to further marginalise children based on their social, ethnic or gender groups (Benson 2005). In addition to benefitting learners' academic performance and language development, well-designed and implemented language programmes also foster intergenerational ethnic connections, increase family cohesion and support cultural identities (May 2012). This is achieved by helping English language learners bring home languages and cultures into the classroom. Having a positive attitude towards language diversity has become a feature of interactive displays, the stories that are read and studied, and the choices that are made for curriculum design and assessment (Conteh 2015).

In addition to resilience-based approaches in mainstream education systems, there is an emerging body of research exploring the role of resilience in supporting self-determination in the face of conflict as well as in post-conflict settings (UNICEF 2016). Language learning interventions such as English courses can help address the effects of trauma on learning. The language classroom becomes a safe space for

learners to work through the effects of trauma through the provision of creative activities, play and stories. The use of story-telling and art in language learning allow learners to express feelings in the indirect third person (Sutherland 1997) though the challenge for English language teachers is developing the confidence to use these kinds of method in the language classroom, particularly if the teachers are dealing with the effects of their own trauma. Supporting those fleeing conflict to develop competence in additional languages enables them to find a voice so that their stories can be told and understood as well as providing access to a wider range of employment and training opportunities.

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