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Teaching in Emergencies: Building Resilient Practices as Language-Learning Teachers

Few teachers would have imagined at the onset of 2020 that the COVID pandemic would disrupt education for two or more years. For many around the world, the pandemic has been an enduring crisis in classrooms, affecting many facets beyond just learning spaces. But the pandemic also united many educators in their efforts to find solutions to the hidden but ever-present reality of educational emergencies. As teachers, we are often at the forefront of these emergencies: student trauma from abuse, mental illness, political unrest, etc. We, more than ever, are focused on student well-being for the sake of learning. The question is, what tools of resilience can we equip ourselves with in the midst of these ongoing emergencies?

My (Mia's) experience in emergency education is informed by my time teaching at a university in Yangon, Myanmar's largest city. Teaching online through lockdowns had already taken a toll on students by early 2021, and—like many English language educators around the globe—I was unsure how to support students through the isolation and uncertainty of the pandemic. No matter the country or the context for teaching, we have been confronted with finding our role, and our footing, when faced with this crisis.

In my classroom in February 2021, the pandemic was unexpectedly compounded by a military coup. Faced with emergency layered upon emergency, I needed practical tools that I could use in my classroom to support students. I sought out a cross-discipline collaboration with my co-author, Sara Levi, a licensed professional educator in school counseling and clinical mental health counseling, to identify resources and applications for English language educators teaching in emergencies. This article puts forward practical ways to support students' socio-emotional and language learning while also suggesting resources and steps teachers can take to respond to student crises.

TOOLS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS IN EMERGENCIES

The importance of student well-being cannot be overstated. According to McKinney and Keenan (2017, 6), students in emergencies "benefit from being engaged in learning

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activities through community approaches with an emphasis on well-being," and teacher trainees benefit from modules focusing "on healthy and safe learning environments and addressing stress; teacher well-being; [and] student well-being and resilience." Especially in the wake of the pandemic, teachers must make safe spaces for students to process the changing reality of our world. Thus, the classroom is not just a place to achieve learning objectives and proctor tests, but a place that must first and foremost allow students to step outside their lived realities, reflect, and recalibrate.

In the current global context, the classroom needs to be a place where students can grieve, fume, and decompress. Part of a teacher's task today is to prepare their students for the post-pandemic world, which is often fraught with conflict and uncertainty; we still don't know exactly what the post-pandemic world will look and feel like. As teachers, we know that education must be relevant to our students. If the learning does not connect to their life circumstances, students will ask, "Why does this matter?" Indeed, a teacher's challenge is—to the best of their ability—to empathize with students' needs.

Teaching in a pandemic context has made mental health a higher priority for educators. This presents new challenges. For many English language educators, we are teaching through digital media to nonnative English speakers with varying perceptions of what defines mental health. There are often language barriers, differences of cultural values, and contextual elements that as teachers we do not fully understand. With all this in mind, I asked experts what actions a teacher can take to teach during crises or in post-crisis situations. They pointed me to the following six steps and sources.

1. Making Time and Space

Making time and space for students' voices is a critical part of socio-emotional support in education. In higher education, this can translate into holding more office hours than usual. For educators in primary and secondary classrooms, it could mean after-school tutoring time or study hall. Not only does this provide a safe space for students to be after school, but it doubles as both educational support and a time for students to talk with a teacher about any stress they are experiencing.

Making time and space looks different in a digital classroom, where teachers let students know the hours during the week when they will be on video call and available to talk. But it can be more creative if a teacher finds what students like to do and uses various platforms to draw them together to watch a movie or have art time, which allows students to create digital or nondigital art individually and share their creations at the end of the session. There are many ways to make student-friendly spaces, whether using online platforms or in-person classrooms. Mental health experts agree: It is critical to have these resources supporting student mental health more widely available and integrated into schools (Repie 2005).

2. Positive Stress Management

In many countries, Western mental health practices are often not contextually appropriate or widely accepted. While this is changing in urban areas and with younger generations, getting mental health support can still be stigmatized. Thus, experts in this field remind us that educators need to examine cultural perceptions of mental health in their context (Altinyelken, Hoek, and Jiang 2020). Students are often excellent

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instructors in this area. They have a pulse on what is socially acceptable or where there might be creative workarounds. If educators have a basis of trust, they can ask students for their input and suggestions about what approaches to use for positive stress management.

From my experience of working with students from countries across Asia, meditation is a socially acceptable way to relieve stress. This idea originally came from my students in a migrant school in Thailand. These students requested that each day we start our sessions with five minutes of soft music and dimmed lights for them to sit with eyes closed and meditate. They entered the room, set the space, chose the music, and signaled the time. I was responsible only for setting the timer to mark the end of the meditation time. When I asked them in surveys if this time was valuable, every student rated it as indispensable.

This experience has since translated into every other context where I have taught. A meditative practice can be further integrated with other calming practices, including deep breathing and visualizing peaceful places. While these visualizations can prepare students for language learning, they serve another critical purpose: they calm the part of the brain related to fight or flight, allowing students to experience a sense of safety. When this part of the brain—often reacting unconsciously or subconsciously—is calm, it allows for other parts of the brain to respond thoughtfully and logically (Porges 2011). Thus, by addressing the socio-emotional needs of learners, teachers reinforce positive habits to de-stress and focus.

3. Contextualizing Curriculum
Student learning must focus on both academic targets and students' social and emotional needs because "academic and social-emotional learning are mutually reinforcing sides of the same coin" (Desrochers 2014, 34). As mentioned earlier, visualizations connect well with language-learning models. Depending on students' English levels, teachers can curate a visualization, or they can prompt a visualization by asking questions about students' favorite places. For instance, a teacher can have students close their eyes and imagine sitting against a tree in a place where birds are chirping under the warm sunlight. The words and images chosen should be contextual to the local area and what people generally accept as peaceful.

For advanced English learners, the teacher can ask students to imagine a place where they feel safe. The teacher should then encourage them to explore the imagined place through their five senses. Creating visualizations that are sensory teaches English language terms, concepts, and experiential learning in a way that literally soothes and supports a student during lessons and classroom activities. Teachers then discuss how students can use these calming activities to extend beyond the classroom, back into their lived experience in their personal worlds. For example, students may use this as an outlet outside the classroom when attempting to manage current acute stress or crisis, or when overwhelmed by past experiences.

Further contextualizing of the curriculum can be done in a variety of ways, but it should provide students with healthy ways to process the world around them. It is best if the assignment has choice and flexibility in both what the student focuses on and how it is ultimately graded. For example, when I taught reading during the first peak of COVID, students journaled about each text. I provided a few questions (aligned with learning objectives) that they could probe,

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but I also allowed students to create their own topic.

Having the flexibility of interpretation, students can customize the homework to their own needs. This assignment was graded on a set of basic criteria, including its focus, the extent to which it drew from real-life experience, and its connection to the text we had read. In course evaluations, students said that journaling gave them a place to process, to vent, and to question their experiences during the pandemic. For a few students, it became a healthy way to cope, and they continued to write even after the course ended. For me as a teacher, the greatest success is when a student says that they can use what they learned in the classroom to help them navigate the day-to-day uncertainties outside class. (See the sidebar, "Socio-Emotional Language Learning through Music and Visualization," for suggestions on the use of music visualization.)

4. Psychological First Aid

Research shows an ever-increasing need for mental health care that the medical system cannot meet (Everly Jr. and Lating 2017). Educators are often the first responders to student needs in an emergency. Psychology experts say educators must be ready for the surge of distress during or after a crisis through training in psychological first aid (PFA). Courses available through online learning platforms provide certified training or simply capacity building.

PFA, like medical first aid, is not a final solution. Medical first aid aims to train those outside of the professional health field with the basic skills to assess a situation in order to keep someone alive until the needed professional health care is available. In the same way, teachers are not psychological experts (Everly Jr. and Lating 2017).

Our work is to help stabilize a student in a crisis until they can meet with a professional mental-health-care worker. PFA walks a teacher through various models to support students while also informally assessing whether students need referrals for professional services. And for those working in high school and higher education, students in their later teenage years are at risk for the onset of serious mental health and behavioral disorders (World Health Organization 2020). If these are diagnosed and treated early by a professional, the individual diagnosed is significantly more likely to stabilize. As these issues are closely linked with higher suicide rates, early diagnosis and treatment is imperative. PFA gives educators foundational tools to support students and the ability to know when to refer out for further psychological services.

5. Follow-up Services

Depending on where in the world teachers are, further service providers may be limited. For example, in many countries, psychiatric and psychological services are not widely available, especially to those students in lower socio-economic brackets (Heltne et al. 2020). Some mobile applications are available online, providing free access to basic support for anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

It is key that educators know the available mental health referrals in their region. Administrators and educators can also collaborate with other local experts to identify the natural support in the students' community. In my situation, there was a need to reach out to psychology professionals with expertise on the Myanmar context for a list of services. In response, they took time to help me develop a handout of a variety of services available for educators at my

Socio-Emotional Language Learning through Music and Visualization

Language educators in emergency spaces must weave together students' academic and well-being needs. One of the tools that a teacher can use for this is music. Music for socio-emotional learning meets many needs: It allows students to relax, it helps them refocus for the learning activity, and it gives them a chance to share their own perspectives and values. Music also provides a starting point for English learners to bridge between their mother tongue and English.

Music visualization is customizable for any English lesson. It is easily differentiated to English levels and different cultures. Students in each classroom where I have used this visualization, from Bangladesh intermediate students to beginner English as a second language (ESL) students in the United States, have remarked on how much they enjoy using music as a link to language learning.

The core idea is to take the overall learning goal for the class and connect it to a piece of instrumental music. This music should not have words; the goal is for students to rest their mind rather than immediately interpreting English lyrics. The music should be calming and something that all students can engage with, independent of their English level. The teacher makes the setting match the music, turning down lights or allowing students to close their eyes.

Following are a few examples of how to use music visualization in a classroom setting.

For Beginner and Pre-Intermediate Students

Provide guidance for students by explaining the vocabulary or sentence-structure focus for the lesson. For example, I taught a lesson that focused on the following sensory sentence structures:
- I see …
- I hear …
- I feel …

If students need more support, I provide a word bank, possibly compiled from earlier classes. They can sort these words into the five sense categories ahead of time.

When I played an orchestral piece in a pre-intermediate class, I explained to students that I would play the song twice. The first time, I told them just to close their eyes, relax, and breathe. Afterwards, I asked students if they saw a place in their mind when they listened to the music. Most students affirmed that they imagined a place. At this point, I wrote the sentence frames on the whiteboard for them to think about while we listened to the music again. I explained that after they listened again, they could choose a partner to share what they saw, heard, and felt in the music. After they listened a second time, I provided extension activities to relevant student discussion groups, allowing them to discuss smell or even taste if they were ready.

When we came back for a whole-class discussion, students expressed what they saw, heard, and felt. A few students said that they could see mountains. Another student described what was new vocabulary for him: *fog*. One student said she could feel the ocean and smell salt in the air. Using all these senses provides neural connections for recall of vocabulary or sentence structures; for beginners, a teacher can give time to make vocabulary cards with drawings.

For Intermediate and Upper Intermediate Students

I have used music in two ways for higher levels of English learners. First, the previous activity adapts well, but I provide less scaffolded support. I will often only prompt one learning goal before listening to the music: the focus of the class will be for sensory imagery writing. I explain that students will listen to the music using all five senses. Then I ask each student to write one or more paragraphs with those sensory details. This is a timed activity, usually around five to ten minutes, depending on the students' needs and ability.

In the past, I have played the song again during this writing time. I too engage in this activity because I find that modelling writing is effective for my students. After the writing activity, I share what I wrote. Then we break into pairs or small groups, and students share with each other what they wrote. (Students who are ready for peer workshopping can make minor edits to each other's work, but peer review is something that must be taught in earlier classes.) I then encourage them to share another student's work that they found especially interesting or well written.

The other way that I use this activity is to connect it to other content learning, especially for reading activities and mood setting. I have found that students can immerse in a text better (especially cross-cultural texts) when music is involved.

For example, one of the favorite texts that we used in an intermediate class was *Les Misérables* (see Hugo 2008). Because I like to make classes engage with various media, I had students listen to instrumental excerpts from the Broadway musical *Les Misérables*. They were then able to engage with this music in journal entries as we progressed through relevant chapters. Ultimately, this made watching the final screen-adapted Broadway musical more rewarding for them because they had already connected the orchestral music to the story's setting. The students were then able to focus on the subtitles in the songs, having already heard the music and read the story.

For me, this music visualization is not just a lesson; I incorporate parts of this into a daily classroom routine and practice. As mentioned in the article, this practice gives students healthy coping mechanisms to deal with stress. When used at the beginning of each class as a breathing exercise, unwinding through music can become a habit, a tool for every student and teacher facing emergencies.

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institution and beyond. This resource gives a list of organizations, the services provided, languages that are available, and important contact information. This tool developed by local mental health experts was then shared across the university, building our institution's overall ability to support PFA for students and referrals.

6. Self-Care and Boundaries

Teachers are resilient people. They endure stress that few other professions encounter: long weekday and weekend hours, a never-ending workload, and the responsibility of serving as a bridge to social services. The question then is: Who cares for teachers working the frontlines?

When I began my teaching career with Teach For America, self-care was not part of my repertoire. Wanting to take part in changing the inequities of the inner-city education system, I never considered burnout as a possibility. Since then, I have worked in situations with students who are catatonic, who have watched their villages burn to the ground, and who fear returning to their war-torn countries. Teacher training does not usually address such issues.

Vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout are very much realities for educators. If we do not care for our own health, we are unable to care for others (Everly Jr. and Lating 2017). Crisis counseling experts emphasize the importance of setting clear boundaries; this is critical for a teacher's well-being. For educators who care deeply for their students, there may be a sense of guilt in referrals or handovers. However, when asked, experts reassure that it is a teacher's responsibility to transfer student cases to the person or service that can best support those students. This is necessary both for students and the educator.

CONCLUSION

The tools and approaches listed in this article have better equipped me to return to my classroom, even as it is besieged by pandemic and political instability. The ways to support students will look different for each teacher, but—with expertise from the mental health professionals in our individual contexts—a teacher need not be caught unawares by students in crisis. Teachers are often the first responders to students' pressing needs, and we stand on the frontlines in post-disaster trauma for children and young adults. In the wake of COVID and other global instability, we must continually widen our skill sets beyond academic teaching. We must now teach through a lens of socio-emotional wellness for all students. If we are able to do this effectively, our students will hopefully emerge more resilient and ready to build a society that reflects their own well-being.

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