

English for Academic Purposes for Students in Fragile Environments

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Introduction

The primary aim of this chapter is to discuss the academic and non-academic obstacles preventing more students from challenging contexts from being accepted onto overseas Master's programmes. This has been an area of personal interest and concern for several years, since working on teacher training and IELTS preparation programmes in Syrian refugee camps and host communities in Jordan, with underprivileged Egyptians on academic English programmes, on reform projects with English departments at universities across Libya, and most recently coordinating and teaching online academic English programmes for students from Afghanistan, Iran, Syria and Tajikistan.

Investigation into this area is essential for several reasons. Firstly, there is an increasing need for greater understanding of the predicaments and needs of people living in conflict zones and fragile environments, internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees. By the end of 2021, there were 89.3 million forcibly displaced people globally (UNHCR 2021) and programme designers and educators should be more aware of learners' unique challenges (Nelson and Appleby 2015). Secondly, this chapter is an important contribution to the academic field; the fluid situations in some of these countries and absence of data in key areas concerning the difficulties faced by people still living in challenging contexts necessitates further investigation. Finally, in my experience, non-academic considerations are sometimes lacking in project/programme design, and interventions can cause additional and unnecessary stress to students already living in extremely difficult situations. It is hoped this chapter provides some insight into individual country situations, and the non-academic considerations that came through my research: trauma informed pedagogy,

resilience, motivation and investment, and community and identity. Although my experience is of specific countries and programmes, the themes explored are relevant to students from other fragile environments applying for a range of postgraduate programmes overseas.

Higher education in fragile environments

Firstly, I believe it is important to discuss the term 'fragile environment'. Different terms are used by writers, for example, 'challenging context' (MacRae 2017), 'conflict zone' (Harvey and Delaney 2017), 'fragile state' and 'failed state' (Nay 2013), all of which denote subtle or significant differences in meaning and situation. In this chapter, I use 'fragile' and 'challenging' interchangeably with 'environment' and 'context' as they are more general terms applicable to the contexts I discuss.

A variety of aspects can contribute to an environment being defined as fragile, and it is vital to understand how these aspects interplay, alongside the dynamic nature of these contexts, which make working in such environments even more challenging. The Fragile States Index (n.d.) subdivides twelve risk indicators into four categories (cohesion, economic, political and social), used to measure a state's improving or deteriorating situation. Such frameworks can help avoid generalisations (Scollon 2011), and recognise the unique situations in different regions, countries, cities, towns and villages. The contexts I discuss suffer from a complex mix of political instability, extreme poverty, conflict and violence, persecution of ethnic and religious minorities, and gender inequality to name a few. Furthermore, an understanding of the educational contexts is vital for effective and empathetic programme planning and delivery. Several themes are common to the countries featured in this chapter: academic quality in general and lack of teacher training; challenges in higher education and the effects of conflict; university entrance requirements; complex language mixes; and hostility towards English. However, considerable differences obviously exist, which must be considered when programme planning for mixed nationality groups.

One of the main themes applicable to some of these countries is academic quality in general. Several papers on Afghanistan, including Alamyar (2017), report that ineffective and outdated teaching methodology is widespread. This is also arguably the case in Egypt, Libya and Syria. In Egypt and Libya I witnessed the use of traditional teaching methods and my Syrian students discussed teacher-centred approaches, which is also my experience of working with Syrian

teachers. Building on the theme of academic quality, is teachers' low levels of English. Coleman's (2019) extensive British Council study, which surveyed 5,000 teachers at schools, madrasas and universities in fifteen of the thirty-four Afghan provinces, provides a useful background on English. The main findings were teachers' and students' extremely low levels of English, averaging A1 CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) (2018). However, another significant finding was considerable variation across the country (Coleman 2019), also applicable to other areas in this chapter.

Regarding higher education in particular, the Afghan system suffered significantly under the Taliban regime, and problems remain of severe staff shortages, underqualified staff and poor academic quality (Tobenkin 2014). Data on education in Tajikistan echo this, and describe teacher shortages and unqualified teachers (DeYoung et al. 2018); however, significant differences exist between east and west Tajikistan. In Syria, the effects of conflict on education and higher education have been devastating (Dillabough et al. 2018; Milton 2019; Shaban 2020). Effects also differ vastly by region, but include the politicisation of higher education, destruction of infrastructure, displacement and de-credentialisation of staff, detention of staff and students, emotional trauma, and the end of government funding (Dillabough et al. 2018; Shaban 2020). Education is more stable in government-controlled areas, however IDPs have added pressure to these institutions (Al Hessian et al. 2016), and approximately one-third of professors have left Syria (Milton 2019). Several small-scale studies on English in higher education report significant issues: professional development for inexperienced teachers and resources are concerns at Aleppo and Sham Universities (Abdulkerim et al. 2022), and poor English language skills at Tezpur University are blamed on inadequate teaching and absence of academic skills (Mohapatra and Khoja 2017). Conversely, Al Hessian et al. (2016) describe Ministry of Higher Education training activities; however, these may have lapsed due to significant pressures on the system and competing priorities. For the students the results are significant: literacy problems in Arabic, lack of study skills, learner nonconfidence, and, significantly, language as a barrier to higher education abroad (Capstick and Delaney 2018).

In Afghanistan and Iran, university entrance requirements play a key role in students' English levels. Because English is not included in the *kankor* (university entrance examination) in Afghanistan, students lack motivation for English (Coleman 2019) and enter university with low proficiency. A qualitative study of students' English proficiency at Kandahar University also blames English exclusion from the *kankor* and ineffective teaching for low English levels (Sahibzada et al.

2018). Unfortunately, English levels at Kandahar University are among the highest, so the situation at other governmental universities may be worse, resulting in under-utilised overseas scholarships (Coleman 2019). A host of new, private universities filled this gap after the US invasion (Tobenkin 2014), and evidence indicates students who attended these institutions have higher language proficiency (Alamyar 2017). However, with recent changes in government, these partnerships with overseas universities may end. In contrast to Afghanistan, in Iran, English is a requirement in the *kankor*, perhaps accounting for higher English levels at universities (Moharami and Daneshfar 2022). However, centralised policymaking where educators were not consulted, has resulted in English curricula lacking appropriate content (Atai and Mazlum 2012).

Like Afghanistan, Tajikistan's complex language mix – the official national language (Tajik), the former common language (Russian), and the first language of most people in Gorno-Badakhshan in the east (Shughni) (Bolander 2016; DeYoung et al. 2018) – can disadvantage minority language speakers in education (Bahry 2016). Adding to this, significant Aga Khan Development Network investment in English education since the 1990s (Bolander 2017; Mostowlansky 2017), notably at the University of Central Asia, has elevated English (rather than Russian) to second language status (Bolander 2017), and in 2001 English Medium Instruction (EMI) was introduced specifically to facilitate international higher education (ibid.). Echoing concerns in some literature (Bolander 2016, 2021; DeYoung et al. 2018), my Tajik students discussed the challenges of learning multiple languages, rather than feeling empowered by the 'dual identity' discussed by Tadayan and Khodi (2016: 131). Different alphabets (Persian and Cyrillic) compound reading and writing issues in English even at higher levels, which is relevant to the other contexts, particularly Afghanistan, where students also learn multiple languages (Coleman 2019). It would be interesting to investigate whether EMI at the University of Central Asia and Kabul University has actually disadvantaged students or resulted in significantly improved language levels.

A further explanation for low language levels is hostility towards English, partly due to Taliban rule in Afghanistan (Coleman 2019) and post-2005 government policy in Iran (Farhady et al. 2010). Security concerns can result in high levels of student and teacher absenteeism, as in Afghanistan (Coleman 2019). For Afghan students wishing to take international entrance examinations, insufficient good private language courses represent a further obstacle, particularly in southern regions (Sahibzada et al. 2018), partly due to security issues around teaching and learning English (Alamyar 2017). In Iran this led to a 'purification' (Borjian 2013: 137) particularly in further and higher education, still relevant

today (Moharami and Daneshfar, 2022), which resulted in the dominance of indigenised resources produced by local scholars, the closure of the British Council, the removal of international publishers, and the banning of private language institutions' foreign partnerships. Developing the theme of 'purification', a paper from the British Council's compilation on culture and learning English, claims Ministry of Education ESP-focused resources disadvantage university students taking international examinations, as they do not reference other cultures, teach students skills to manage authentic texts, or encourage critical/reflective thinking (Zandian 2015). Small-scale case studies undertaken at specific universities also discuss unsuitable course materials for a globalised world (Khajavi and Abbasian 2011; Samar and Davari 2011; Zohoorian and Pandian 2014), supporting Zandian's (2015) findings. To develop their academic English skills, the only option may be private courses, although these are only available to students who can afford the high costs (Aghagolzadeh and Davari 2017; Bolander 2017; Haghighi and Norton 2017). In my experience, successful students may have an academic culture shock and be overwhelmed by contrasting learning styles and very different academic demands in the UK.

Trauma informed pedagogy

Building on the themes in the previous section, it is essential to consider the most significant effects of instability and conflict on education: specifically language learning, and students' emotional well-being when planning interventions. For example, my Afghan students have discussed feelings of hopelessness, the psychological effects of the Taliban regime, and the effects on girls' and women's education. Less well reported by international media were government crackdowns in eastern Tajikistan which resulted in internet disconnection for several months and numerous arrests (Tondo 2022).

Moving to pedagogical interventions: similar to other areas of interest, most literature appears to focus on refugee education in host communities and camps, not education for students living in fragile environments (Capstick and Delaney 2018; Holmkvist et al. 2018; Ipek 2021; Palanac 2019; Shapiro et al. 2020). When planning and implementing pedagogical interventions, I believe of utmost importance is consideration of the principle of 'do no harm' (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP) 2018). The growing number of refugees and IDPs necessitates teachers (community-based and online) who have knowledge of how to support these students (Nelson and Appleby 2015).

I am aware of projects where there has been insufficient consideration of context, planning, risk assessment and continuing support after programme completion, and reports of such lessons learned are deficient in the literature. The most effective interventions build sustainability into the project design, commonly through training master trainers and cascade training programmes (Kennedy 2015), or through creating communities of practice (Wenger 1998), strengthening community cohesion and resilience (Capstick and Delaney 2018).

Another crucial consideration regarding additional support, is teacher training and professional development, absent in many fragile environments. A common literature theme is how supportive classroom environments can help address trauma (Capstick 2018), something personally witnessed with groups of Afghans, Libyans, Syrians and Tajiks. This highlights the importance of providing educators with specialised training in managing the results of instability, for example, trauma, mixed ability classes and lack of resources (Capstick and Delaney 2018). Crucial in these contexts are the psychosocial aspects of learning, which should be combined with language learning, not dealt with separately. Trauma can be addressed through creative activities in the safe space of a second language learning environment, and inclusion of psychosocial aspects into course materials (Capstick and Delaney 2018). Student counsellors are advocated by NGOs (UNRWA 2021); however, there should be consideration for online classes regarding platform security and student safety.

Discussion regarding the prioritisation of home languages, the predominantly negative impacts of EMI, and specific considerations for developing countries and fragile environments, are relevant and interesting considerations in the context of fragile states. A critique of several language initiatives in Bangladesh argues for the focus on literacy and numeracy in home languages, rather than English language education (Erling 2017b). Regarding Afghanistan, Coleman (2021) discusses the disadvantages of teaching English, and particularly the adoption of EMI. Firstly, most Afghan teachers do not have the language skills to effectively teach in English (Alamyar 2017). Secondly, in regions where Dari and Pashto (the official languages) are the medium of instruction, but not commonly home languages, English levels (and overall educational achievement) are lower, and introducing EMI could increase problems. Displacement in recent years due to conflict compounds the issue of children not being literate in the local languages of education, adding to vulnerabilities and absenteeism (Hatsaandh 2019). As part of their study into refugee resilience, Capstick and Delaney (2018) also stress the significance of the medium of instruction and importance of home languages, as these offer protection, community

solidarity and a foundation for additional languages. Kester and Chang (2021) attempt to fill a knowledge gap concerning EMI in conflict afflicted areas, and go beyond language development to discuss the dangers of EMI due to the association of English with colonialism, epistemic injustice and Western-dominated curricula.

Resilience

The term 'language for resilience' has been used in recent years to describe educational projects in fragile contexts, particularly by the British Council regarding interventions in the Middle East, predominantly Iraq, Palestine and Syria (Capstick and Delaney 2018). Resilience is defined in various ways; conceptualised best in the 3RP Annual Report (2017: 9): 'resilience refers to the ability of individuals, households, communities, and societies to withstand shocks and stresses, recover from such stresses, and work with national and local government institutions to achieve transformational change for sustainability.'

Because resilience is a major theme in the literature, and highly relevant to the contexts considered in this chapter, a separate section is warranted. Two interconnected aspects of resilience are relevant: academic and emotional (Capstick 2018). Academic resilience describes increases in educational and employment opportunities for individuals, enabling them to positively impact household and community resilience through increased economic resources (Capstick 2018; Nelson and Appleby 2015), particularly in host communities. A central theme is the importance of language for building intercultural understanding and positive community relationships (Erling 2017a; Imperiale et al. 2017), especially for communities learning together (Capstick and Delaney 2018). Furthermore, combining home languages with the host community language (or second/third languages), can result in Tadayon and Khodi's (2016) empowering 'dual identity', and enable intercommunity communication.

Emotional resilience, that is, how people can improve their wellbeing, deal with trauma, tell their stories, and be empowered through language learning (Capstick 2018; Capstick and Delaney 2018; Palanac 2019), is of particular interest. Promoting wellbeing through alternative teaching methods and providing psychosocial support, is mandated by the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees' Education in Emergencies programme (UNRWA 2021). Developing the notion of emotional resilience, reports evidence that foreign language learning, particularly English, can provide people with a

voice (Kramsch 2015) so their predicaments can be understood at an international level. The significance of English as a political tool is highlighted by a Palestinian teacher training programme (Imperiale et al. 2017). Participant feedback emphasised the importance of 'critical hope' (Freire 1994, cited in Imperiale et al. 2017: 34), namely, increased feelings of awareness, empowerment and resistance to better their situation, and ability to communicate their situation to the world through teaching and learning English. A context warranting further investigation is where movement is prohibited, and therefore monolingualism and 'enforced monoculturalism' (Imperiale et al. 2017: 33) are the norm, which is the case in Gaza and with girls' and women's education (or lack of) in Afghanistan.

Focus groups with various students, predominantly from Afghanistan, Syria and Tajikistan, echoed the themes in the literature. Students discussed additional resilience, commitment and motivation to succeed due to the possible positive impact on their communities after completing their studies. Their responses evidence academic and emotional resilience, and the empowering nature of language learning (Capstick 2018). Moreover, some students described actually being emboldened by conflict, leading to increased motivation, investment and resilience (Imperiale 2017; Shakhshir 2011), themes discussed in the following section.

Learner motivation and investment

Substantial research attests to the link between learners' motivation and engagement, and academic success (Gettinger and Walter 2012), underlining the significance of these factors. Furthermore, the specific nature of language learning and growth of communicative teaching methodologies necessitate engagement, the meaningful use of language and interaction (Hiver et al. 2021). When examining online programmes for students in fragile environments in particular, understanding of the interconnected themes of motivation, engagement, investment, learner identity, the role of community and online learning, is essential.

Firstly, in distinguishing between motivation and engagement, I concur with Reschly and Christenson (2012), who define motivation as an unobservable intent, and engagement as an observable action. Therefore, engagement is more measurable because it can be more easily monitored. Moreover, motivation can be a precursor and an effect on engagement, although I agree with Appleton et al. (2008) that motivation does not always result in engagement. Therefore,

engagement in particular tasks, activities and modules may vary, indicating motivation is more constant and engagement fluctuating, depending on different factors, including workload, teacher-student relationships and external pressures (Muir et al. 2019). In my experience, students do not lack motivation, but varying engagement may be due to their previous learning experiences and styles, and certainly practical and emotional contextual influences (Nelson and Appleby 2015).

Developing the theme of motivation, it is relevant to consider investment in learning, a more sociological framework than the psychological construct of motivation (Norton 2016). The difference between motivation and investment is important, as students may be motivated to learn, but not invested in the teaching methodology or community, affecting outcomes (Norton 2013). This notion of investment was previously described as cultural capital, gained through education and qualifications, which should lead to better career opportunities (Bourdieu 1991; Norton 2016). Furthermore, in line with poststructuralist theory, Norton (2013) argues by investing in language acquisition, learners understand that symbolic and material resources can increase their future social standing and power, something particularly prized in some communities (Bolander 2018, 2021). This link between cultural capital, investment and future opportunities, is supported by several project reports which highlight the importance of language for learners in fragile environments (Ameen and Cinkara 2018; Capstick and Delaney 2018; Tadayon and Khodi 2016; Kester and Chang 2021). However, research also highlights students' ambitions to return to their countries after their studies and to work to bring positive changes to their home countries and communities, arguably specific to students from more challenging contexts. Students also discussed being motivated to become strong community leaders, respected in their communities as graduates from renowned UK universities. Literature on investment is corroboratory regarding investment in education and language learning to increase social standing (Norton 2013; Bolander 2018, 2021).

Regarding engagement specifically in online learning – commonly the only option in fragile contexts – practical considerations are essential. In unpredictable and unstable environments, there can be copious distractions (Mercer and Dörnyei 2020), amplified when studying from home in places with frequent power cuts and unstable internet connections, highlighted in Gray's (2016) report on online learning in Libya. These practical challenges have affected many of my students, particularly when entire programmes are delivered online. Issues are mainly due to internet connectivity, internet cost and quality in Afghanistan and Iran, while Syrian students also struggle with only two hours of

electricity per day. More consideration into the timing of classes and consistently recording lessons could partly overcome some of these issues. Furthermore, studying from home rather than at a university or workplace, can create additional challenges. Some students are unable to find quiet places to study, and some cannot afford laptops so attempt to study using their phones. Students also discussed the emotional toll from constantly dealing with these issues, affecting engagement. Literature corroborates these discussions, and outlines the distress that can be caused by the learning environment (Hatsaandh 2019; Kester and Chang 2021). A much greater awareness of situations in-country is therefore vital for programme designers and educators, particularly for those outside the students' environments.

Furthermore, students' (and support staff's) digital literacy and acquaintance with platforms also affect engagement (Grey 2016), and so a pedagogical foundation in using educational technology is vital. Without sufficient training, students (and teachers) can be overwhelmed and actually disengage (Bedenlier et al. 2020). It would be useful to research the implementation and success of such training for students isolated at home, rather than at an educational institution. Furthermore, following the recent upsurge in online learning, innovative uses of learning technology have been developed to promote engagement, documented by several project reports. For instance, Akbari et al. (2016) report on the higher TOEFL scores and engagement levels of a Facebook group compared to a face-to-face class, and two British Council projects, PRELIM (Aylett and Clarke 2021) and B-MELTT (Orsini-Jones et al. 2018), demonstrate imaginative blends of synchronous and asynchronous learning using WhatsApp, Zoom and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). My experiences, specifically in Jordan and Libya, also show platform combinations and flexibility for different contexts are essential in promoting engagement. Furthermore, my students described how the different platforms had facilitated their learning and made their online programmes collaborative, beneficial and enjoyable. They discussed using Zoom to socialise after classes and how they found commenting on each other's work on Moodle collaborative and motivating.

Community and identity

Closely linked to motivation, investment and commitment is learner identity (Dörnyei 2009; Bourdieu 1991; Norton 2013). Dörnyei (2009) discusses motivation as driven by learners' aspiration to move from their actual selves to

ideal selves, described as the 'L2 Motivational Self System' (Dörnyei 2009: 9). Of additional importance are influences from the learning experience including the immediate learning environment (Dörnyei 2009), and more broadly the effects of culture and context on 'identity content' (Galliher et al. 2017: 2011). Language learning can be described as a 'social practice' (Norton 2016: 426) where identity is realised through unequal relationships, and as 'the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, [...] and possibilities for the future' (Norton 2013: 4). Research into specific groups supports Norton's identity theories, Hobsbawm's discussion of identity as 'multi-dimensional' (1996: 1067), and Arnett's 'bicultural identity' (2002: 777). For example, studies into language learning effects on immigrants discuss identity changes as unavoidable, but dual or multiple identities can be empowering and increase opportunities (Tadayon and Khodi 2016; Dörnyei 2010).

Regarding community identity, there are two overarching aspects: identity within a community, and identity in external host or wider communities. Data appears to be lacking on vulnerable, marginalised people living within their own fragile contexts, while literature focuses on immigrant/refugee communities. These studies discuss the importance of common language to reduce hostility and intercultural misunderstanding (Scollon 2011), and broadening conventional language teaching boundaries to prioritise communicative practice better equipping refugees for the globalised world (Baker 2022). Considering community identity in fragile contexts, shared language can foster feelings of belonging and safety, important in identity construction, and can strengthen group solidarity (Capstick and Delaney 2018). Furthermore, research into the complex mix of languages in Central Asia highlights the importance of language for maintaining identity within multilingual communities (Bahry 2016). Literature from the region also discusses the additional influence of religious identity on community and English language learning (Beben 2019), which transcends national borders, ethnicity and home languages (Bolander 2018, 2021). Echoing the literature, my students are generally very positive about the support they receive from their wider communities and describe technical help, support with internet connectivity and emotional support.

To link motivation, identity and community, it is essential to discuss where students live, and their learning communities. The socio-educational model of language acquisition emphasises integrative (second language culture/community insights) and instrumental (practical reasons, for example, work) motivation (Gardner 2002). Developing the notion of integration, in addition to this culture/community aspect, learners' conditions and contexts (Dörnyei

2003), or ‘person-environment fit’ (Reschly and Christenson 2012: 13), are crucial to understanding factors influencing engagement, and means of increasing it. Of additional importance is consideration of the interrelated aspects of learners’ environments, including family, community and culture (Shernoff 2013). The broader context of countries is also vital, especially when discussing fragile environments.

Regarding learning/classroom communities, social interactionism theory (Williams and Burden 1997) supports Gardner’s (2002) ‘integrativeness’ by stressing the importance of the social aspect and inclusion of L2 culture in the learning process. Access to other languages and cultures, building classroom relationships and supportive learning activities can increase group and individual resilience, lessen feelings of isolation, and increase wellbeing (Capstick and Delaney 2018). Dörnyei (2010) develops ‘integrativeness’ to self-identification as a global citizen through English language learning, which may increase instrumental motivation and investment, particularly for students in fragile environments. However, this integration can be lacking for students in their home countries, particularly online, who may feel detached from the L2 culture and classroom community. Collaborative activities and online discussions may promote engagement and integration (Robinson and Hullinger 2008), and the concept of virtual classroom communities or ‘imagined communities’ (Norton 2014: 160) can be perceived as integration. My students are overwhelmingly positive about their online learning experiences and discussed classrooms transcending national borders and the benefits of cultural diversity. In addition to classmate relationships, the student-teacher relationship is vital, and can be established through a strong teacher presence (Martin and Bolliger 2018) and a course designed specifically for online learning that connects students and teachers through engaging materials (Stone 2017). Teacher communication is also paramount (Muir et al. 2019), and could be achieved through more regular tutorials.

Conclusions and recommendations

To conclude, my experience and research highlighted the significance of the non-academic factors affecting students living in fragile environments, and the interconnectedness and importance of resilience, motivation, investment, community and identity to some of these students. In my experience academic factors are either the only or primary considerations and the non-academic

factors are sometimes overlooked by programme designers and educators. Interestingly, for some students, fragile home environments seemed to bolster their motivation and resilience, perhaps giving them greater impetus to serve and better their communities. These findings highlight the importance of not only understanding students' academic needs, but also their unique motivations, contexts, and resulting emotional and practical needs.

My overarching recommendation for programme designers is thorough needs analysis. This may sound obvious; however, due to the lack of data and students' differing academic backgrounds and needs, greater understanding is essential before programme design and any financial investment. Furthermore, non-academic factors are essential and individual student situations and contexts must be included when analysing needs. Additionally, I would strongly advise regular individual tutorials, perhaps with a trained counsellor. My students discussed the benefits of one-to-one academic support, and a non-academic aspect would allow greater understanding of students' challenges and needs. Through tutorials, possible psychosocial needs could be more easily identified, which may necessitate external expertise. I would also recommend specific training for teachers in working with students from fragile environments and conflict zones.

Based on my findings and experience in this field, there are clear directions for future research. The focus of current research is on education and non-academic interventions for refugee and migrant populations, while there is a significant gap in data regarding the situations of people still living in fragile environments. Another aspect noticeably absent in the literature was students' voices and individuals' feedback on their experiences and perspectives of interventions. I addressed this to some extent, however there is a need for a more substantive understanding of learners' needs in challenging environments, so their complex situations can be more thoroughly accounted for when designing and delivering programmes.

Finally, further research into the motivation and engagement of learners in fragile environments and their resilience would be extremely worthwhile and interesting for programme designers and educators. My work highlights the huge challenges these students must overcome to acquire proficient English skills. Investigation and greater understanding of whether the worsening situations in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and adverse conditions in other countries, provide learners with additional motivation and investment in helping their communities, could direct programme planning, and influence this vital provision of student support.

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