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Series Editor's Preface

In September 2008, *The Guardian* newspaper in England described David Foster Wallace as “the most brilliant writer of his generation.” In its tribute to him, following his death by suicide at the age of 46, *The Guardian* presented a now well-known story that Wallace told at the beginning of his commencement speech to a graduating class at Kenyon College in Ohio:

There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, “Morning, boys, how’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, “What the hell is water?” (para. 1)

That water is what this *ELT In Context* series is about. As Wallace’s story illustrates so eloquently and so succinctly, when we are immersed in our context all the time, we stop noticing what we are surrounded by. Or if we were aware of it at some point in the past, we stopped noticing it some time ago. Wallace went on to explain that “the immediate point of the fish story is that the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about” (para. 2).

The writers in this series were asked to step back from the English language teaching (ELT) and learning contexts that they are most familiar with and look at those contexts with fresh eyes. But why do this? There are many reasons for reflecting on, exploring, and writing about our contexts, one of the most important of which relates to what we do every day as TESOL professionals and how we do it. As Diane Larsen-Freeman (2000) puts it,

a method is decontextualized. How a method is implemented in the classroom is going to be affected not only by who the teacher is, but also who the students are, the students’ and their teacher’s expectations of appropriate social roles, the institutional constraints and demands, and factors connected to the wider sociocultural context in which the instruction takes place. (p. x)

It is that wider context that we are exploring in this series.

To enable them to step back from contexts they are so familiar with, each writer was asked to follow a template, starting with the notion that individuals are a context in and of themselves. Therefore, in Chapter 1, the writers introduce themselves to the readers and explain how they came to be where they are now, doing what they do as, as TESOL professionals. This also helps address the notions of objectivity and subjectivity, as we cannot be objective about ourselves or those things we care about, have an opinion on, know well, and so on. All we can do is to be as objective as we can be about our own subjectivities, which is another function of the first chapter.

In Chapter 2, the authors summarize English language teaching and learning at the national level in their country, with a focus on the level of learners they are working with (e.g., students at the college or university level). Chapter 3 looks at ELT at the local level in each country, and Chapter 4 describes the particular language teaching and learning organization (LTO) where the authors work. To help our readers get as deep an understanding of the context as possible, the Chapters 5 and 6 present “A Day in the Life of a Teacher” and “A Day in the Life of a Learner” at the authors’ LTOs. We realize, of course, that there is no “typical” teacher or learner, as everyone is unique. So a composite of a number of teachers and learners is presented in each of those chapters, to help readers walk in the shoes of those in the LTO and to give readers a strong sense of the day-to-day realities of life inside and outside the LTO, which are often not written about, published, or presented.

In terms of context, having moved from the national and local levels to the institutional and individual levels, the authors were asked to go back to *The Big Picture*, using the focus question: What could readers from other LTOs, that are like yours but that are in another context or country, learn that would help them in their daily work in their own context or country? For example, if the book is about working with adult learners in one part of the Arabic-speaking world, what could TESOL professionals working with adults in other Arabic-speaking parts of the world learn from reading the book that would help them in their particular context? Or what could readers working with adult Arabic-speaking students outside the Arabic-speaking world (e.g., in the United States) learn that would help them? In the final chapter, the authors were asked to give a brief reflective account of what they learned from writing the book, about their own context and about the contexts of others.

These books are also aimed at TESOL professionals who are considering working in LTOs in the contexts and countries described in the series and who need a clear, concise, and up-to-date account of what it is like to live and work there. One of the challenges of doing that is the fact that teaching and learning contexts are changing all the time, some more quickly and more dramatically than others. However, taking that constraint into account, our goal has been

to create a series of books that remind us of the importance of the professional waters in which we swim every day, and to help prepare those who may wish to join us in these particular English language teaching and learning contexts.

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Introduction

Of all the books in the ELT In Context series, this book, by Nicole Takeda, on teaching English at a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Cambodia is one of the most detailed and thoroughly documented. It is also one of the most challenging, as it presents a large number of firsthand accounts of the considerable challenges and difficulties facing English language teachers working with learners living in poverty, on between one and two U.S. dollars per day. In spite of such extremely resource-poor environments, Takeda and her coworkers have created a haven of educational hope and possibilities, working since 2010 with teenagers from the lowest-income families, living in the slums of Siem Reap, in northwestern Cambodia, in a village school near Angkor Wat, the world's largest temple, a World Heritage Site, and considered by many to be one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

In a recent article, Aziram Hashim, Yat Chee Leong, and Pheak Tra Pich (2014) found that “English usage [in Cambodia] is socially-driven and institutionalized through teachers’ influences, everyday conversations in teaching and learning; the perception that it is ‘the people’s choice,’ and interactions between students and foreign and Khmer lecturers within and outside classrooms” (p. 506). In relation to everyday conversations about ELT in Cambodia, one of the features of this book that make it distinctive in the ELT In Context series is the nearly 120 interviews Takeda carried out with students, teachers, and administrators, all of which were completed for the purpose of writing this book.

In terms of the language-related social, economic, and political changes that have taken place in Cambodia, Hashim et al. (2014) note:

In the last two decades, the status of English has evolved from that of a foreign language that is not spoken by Cambodians within the country to a language increasingly used inside Cambodia. *However, it is mainly used in urban areas and among the middle class who perceive its status as that of an international language rather than as a second language.* (pp. 498–499, emphasis added)

This is a pattern seen in many countries, in which it is in the urban centers and in the communities that are already economically more developed that growth in the teaching and learning of English is seen most clearly and felt most keenly.

This is a concern as the already unsustainable economic disparities, in many contexts, between the “haves” and the “have nots” should not be further exacerbated by access to the teaching and learning of English. That is why projects such as the school created and run by Takeda and her coworkers are essential in helping to ensure that students have the opportunity to learn English in a clean, safe, professional environment with trained, qualified, and experienced teachers, free from the risks and dangers elsewhere in their lives.

In her study of “the causes of problems which the present Cambodian Teachers of English (CTE) are confronting” Vira Neau (2003, p. 264) found:

Significant problems have resulted from the country’s internal conflicts, especially the last three decades of civil wars (1970s–1990s) in which almost all educated people were liquidated, the entire Cambodian education system was completely demolished, educational institutions were turned into prisons for tortures and executions, and schoolbooks, education-related documents, and other national archives were burned down or scattered.

Given such problems, it is no surprise that Neau concludes with the understatement: “As a result, the current provision of English is being hindered by a number of broad constraints” (p. 264). It is those problems that Takeda and her coworkers have been addressing for the last 5 years, not only with courageous compassion but also with determined professionalism.

Takeda refers to a recent book by Sebastian Strangio (2014) titled *Hun Sen’s Cambodia*, referring to Cambodia’s current prime minister. Strangio reiterates the point that “Cambodia’s journey to the present has been tumultuous. Two decades after their overthrow by the Vietnamese army in 1979, the Khmer Rouge lived on” (p. x). Strangio goes on to observe that, on the positive side, eventually “after years of isolation, Cambodia opened up to the world” (p. x). However, he also laments the fact that

billions of dollars of aid had done little to improve the lot of ordinary people. Life in rural areas remained a struggle. Only a few households had access to electricity, sanitation, and clean water. Two in five Cambodian children grew up stunted. (p. xiii)

Although Strangio uses the past tense to show that the situation has improved and is continuing to improve, there is still a very long way to go, especially for those in rural areas, which is why Takeda and her coworkers chose, bravely, to create and run a school in such an area and why the work described in this book is so important. As noted above, Takeda carried out nearly 120 interviews with students, teachers, and administrators, and it is their words that are

some of the most powerful examples of how the work of English language teachers can change the lives of our students for the better.

As one of Takeda's students explained:

I can make decisions and set goals by myself. I am sure of what I want to be in the future. I've developed myself into a valuable person for my family and society through studying hard and building my confidence at BEA.
(p. 54 [ch. 7])

For students in many other contexts, such a statement would not be seen as anything out of the ordinary. But given all that the Cambodian people have been through, and survived, such statements are more than could have been hoped for some years ago.

Andy Culy 

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