

English teaching online, in politically difficult circumstances

Phyo Wai Tun and Richard Smith

This article explores the practices of an expert online English teacher in the politically difficult context of post-coup Myanmar. While much existing research focuses on the limitations of teaching in such settings, this study documents successful, locally adapted practice. Findings show that the teacher did not rely on advanced technologies but used low-bandwidth tools and flexible strategies to manage regular power cuts and poor internet access. Her teaching was shaped by a strong sense of care for her students, with relationship-building and emotional support seen as essential to learning. At the heart of her approach was a deep understanding of the political and social context, which informed every aspect of her technological and pedagogical decisions. These findings offer practical implications for teacher education in crisis-affected settings, arguing for a shift towards the development of strategic, context-sensitive problem-solving skills.

Key words: online English teaching, politically difficult circumstances, Myanmar, teacher expertise, Global South

Why ‘English teaching online, in politically difficult circumstances’?

In developing countries, language teachers often face challenging circumstances as a regular part of their work. Teaching in public schools in the Global South tends to be characterized by factors such as large class sizes, lack of textbook and technological resources, low school readiness among students, minimal training or ongoing support for teachers, and excessive workloads for teachers. Unfortunately, these difficulties have tended to be largely overlooked in mainstream language teaching research and discussions, leading to a lack of acknowledgment and understanding of their impact (Smith 2011).

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Recently, increasing attention has been given to classroom teaching in difficult circumstances (for example, [Kuchah and Shamim 2018](#); [Anderson 2023](#)). However, there is a notable gap in the literature. Effective *online* teaching necessitated by *politically* difficult circumstances remains underexplored, particularly concerning successful, locally adapted teacher practices.

Whereas most countries have returned to face-to-face education since the Covid-19 pandemic, there are several parts of the world (for example, Gaza and Myanmar), where online education needs to persist, due to ongoing crisis. In Myanmar, where the present study was carried out, disruption to the education system caused by Covid-19 was compounded by the military coup in 2021. This *coup-vid* (coup + Covid-19) situation led to widespread school closures and displacements of teachers and students ([Maber et al. 2022](#)). In response, online language schools emerged as crucial educational institutions, offering flexible learning options for students who are unable or unwilling to attend traditional schools. Many students, parents, and teachers have turned to these online schools as an alternative to the government-run institutions, since most qualified teachers took part in the civil disobedience movement against the military and face threats to their safety due to political instability ([Maber et al. 2022](#)).

Online teaching in Myanmar has encountered many challenges under military rule, including the limited access to technology on the part of both teachers and students, slow internet speeds and frequent power cuts, which may be characteristic of other Global South contexts. Additionally, teachers and learners face *politically* difficult circumstances; that is, circumstances relating more directly to political instability, including safety concerns (for example, air raids in conflict areas) and censorship (specifically, official banning of online platforms (for example, Facebook) and video-conferencing tools (namely, Zoom) used for teaching and learning). Despite these constraints, online language schools have remained vital for students, and the teachers in these schools are playing a crucial role in sustaining quality education.

Why enquire into expert teaching in such a context?

While previous studies have often focused on the deficiencies of teaching in difficult circumstances, cases of successful teaching can potentially be used as a resource for teacher education and policymaking ([Smith 2011](#)), complementing or even replacing ideas introduced ‘from the outside’ which may be insufficiently tailored to the realities and affordances of the teaching context in question. The value of an ‘enhancement approach’, involving localized identification of successful or ‘expert’ teaching practices, has previously been illustrated by, among others, [Smith, Padwad, and Bullock \(2017\)](#), for teaching in low-resource classrooms in South Asia, and [Anderson \(2023\)](#) on local teacher expertise in India.

In the specific case of emergency online teaching, despite the challenging circumstances they face, teachers in conflict-affected settings have been shown to be among the most resilient and dedicated frontline educational agents. The teaching practices effective teachers develop in such circumstances can potentially benefit not only other teachers in similar situations

but also global education systems in more stable settings, preparing them for future emergencies.

What aspects of online teaching should be considered?

Existing literature on online teaching expertise has predominantly centred on ‘developed’ country contexts where modern facilities and equipment are the norm; for example, universities in the United States (Kumar *et al.* 2019).

The relatively few studies of online teaching in the Global South tend to focus on the disparities between teachers in these contexts and those in the Global North. For example, a study in Bangladesh by Roy *et al.* (2023) highlighted teachers’ lack of technological knowledge and pedagogical skills as major challenges. In their review of eleven studies on online distance learning during Covid-19 in developing countries, Ndibalema (2022) revealed instructor-related factors such as technological incompetence and lack of pedagogical ICT-based knowledge as major challenges. Consistently with an overall ‘deficit’ as opposed to ‘enhancement’ perspective, no studies, to our knowledge, have focused on the specific *expertise*, that is, *capabilities* and *attributes* of online English teachers in the Global South.

As a way in to understanding the complexities of online teaching in Myanmar and potentially contributing to teacher development in this and other comparable contexts, the present study employs the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework as an analytical lens (see Figure 1). The TPACK model assumes that effective teaching with technology depends on three core knowledge domains—Technological (TK), Pedagogical (PK), and Content Knowledge (CK), respectively—and the areas which intersect between them (Koehler and Mishra 2009).

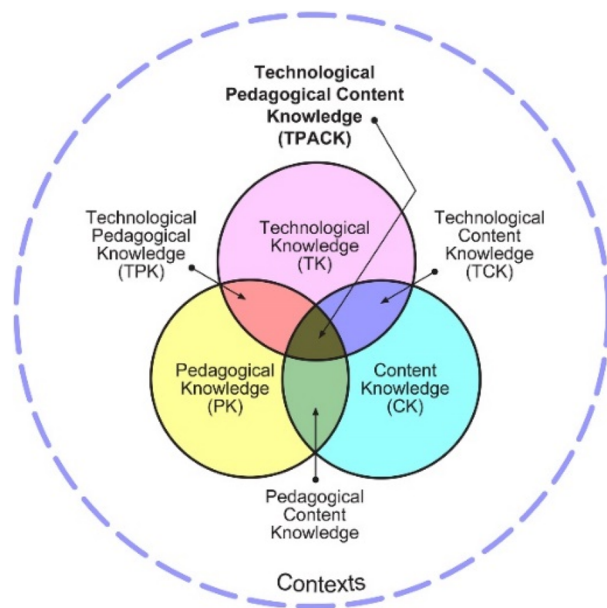


FIGURE 1
The TPACK framework and its knowledge components (Koehler and Mishra 2009).

However, the TPACK framework has been criticized for under-representing the role of context in shaping teacher knowledge and practice (Rosenberg and Koehler 2015). In response, Mishra (2019) proposed an updated model that explicitly also includes Contextual Knowledge (XK) (see Figure 2). The present study embraces this evolution, using the case of a teacher identified as expert (following procedures to be outlined below) to show that, in a crisis context, XK is not merely one factor among many but instead functions as the central, organizing principle of a teacher's entire professional knowledge base. In addition, we draw on the recent proposal to incorporate Affective Knowledge (AK) into TPACK (Tang and Pentón Herrera 2025), where AK is defined as teachers' emotions, moods, values, and relational orientations towards learners and technology, and we consider in our discussion how such affective dimensions interact with XK in this context.

Research questions and methodology

For the reasons given above, investigating the knowledge base and practices of expert online English teaching in politically difficult circumstances is both timely and important. Accordingly, this study was guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1. What are the practices demonstrated by an expert online English teacher in politically difficult circumstances?
- RQ2. What are the teacher's stated reasons for these practices?

Based on initial selection criteria developed by Anderson (2023), three prerequisite criteria were used as initial indicators to identify an expert online English teacher for this case study. Firstly, they had to be interested in the research, so as to avoid over-burdening. Secondly, they needed to

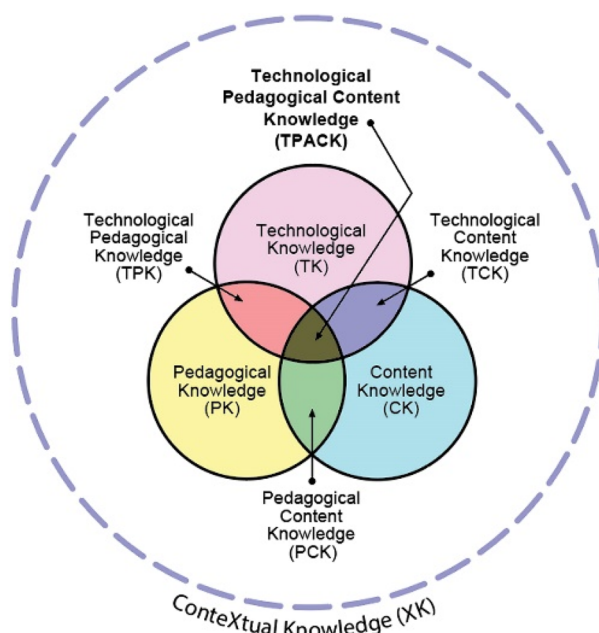


FIGURE 2
Revised version of the TPACK
framework (Mishra 2019).

have at least five years' teaching experience, including two years online. Thirdly, they had to have appropriate teaching qualifications. To these were added results of the self-reported TPACK survey developed by Archambault and Crippen (2009).

Recruitment began with elicitation of nominations from ten experienced teacher members of a professional network who were known to the first author for their commitment to professional development. This step provided fifteen potential participants who were thought to be effective online English teachers. An invitation email was sent to these teachers, together with an Expression of Interest form and the self-report TPACK survey. Of the fifteen contacted, eight responded and completed the survey. Upon considering these eight responses against a full set of criteria including not only the prerequisites mentioned above but also additional indicators of expertise such as evidence of active CPD, leadership roles and students' achievement, one participant, Sabal (pseudonym), was identified as outstandingly meeting all the criteria for an expert teacher in this context (see Table 1).

Data were then gathered through several methods to ensure a comprehensive picture of Sabal's practice. A thirty-minute background interview was conducted first, in Burmese, to establish rapport and gather background information. This was followed by three semi-structured, non-participant classroom observations (COs) of her online classes, with the observer's camera off and audio muted. All three classes were video-recorded. Three stimulated recall interviews (SRIs) were conducted, on the day following each observation, to explore reasons for classroom practices, with specific video-recorded incidents selected as stimuli. Finally, a follow-up semi-structured interview was conducted to gain a more in-depth understanding of emergent themes.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase, recursive process described by Braun and Clarke (2006). For illustration of the analytical chain (data transcript → lower-level codes → higher-level themes), see Table 2. The analysis process and emerging themes were transparently discussed between the two authors to ensure interpretations were firmly grounded in the data. Consistency of codes and themes was checked across data sources. Also, to further ensure trustworthiness of the analysis, Sabal was asked to confirm our interpretations.

TABLE 1
Indicators of expertise for the
participant teacher

Name (Pseudonym)	Prerequisites	Additional indicators
Sabal	- BA English - Over five (in fact, thirteen) years' English teaching experience, over two years online - High TPACK survey score	- MA English - Evidence of active CPD - Leadership role (Founder of a private language school) - Evidence of students' achievement

RQ1 findings: practices in politically difficult circumstances

Sabal used to teach in-person classes, for almost a decade. She did not choose to teach online because it was convenient or modern but because it was the only option left in coup-vid Myanmar. After the coup, schools across Myanmar either shut down or became places students were afraid to go. As Sabal explained, many families did not feel safe sending their children back to physical schools, especially in areas where there was fighting or a heavy military presence. In that situation, online learning became a lifeline to students for continuing their education. However, this came with its own difficulties such as daily power cuts enforced by the military, poor internet connectivity, and general uncertainty. She had to work around unstable infrastructure, help students who were learning on phones or shared devices, and keep lessons going even when the internet dropped or electricity failed.

The sections below describe how Sabal worked to build and maintain an effective learning environment for her students despite the challenges. Her practices showed adaptability across technological, pedagogical, and content-related domains.

Sample data extract	Illustrative lower-level code(s)	Overall (higher-level) theme
Practices		
'One of the rooms has got three partners [...] like group work' [note: the teacher had intended pair work but accepted three joining in one room on the same device] (SRI2)	Flexible regrouping when devices are shared	Technological and logistical adaptation
'I created a Messenger group for them, [to] communicate important information' (SRI1)	Using low-data channels; asynchronous backup	
'Myat, I can see you in the dark [...] I think you look naturally beautiful there' (CO2)	Affective check-in; humor during blackout	Teaching beyond the curriculum: prioritizing relationships and well-being
'Oh, I see. That's why you're a little bit late today' (CO2) [note: acknowledging a connectivity problem]	Empathizing with access issues	
So [...] they don't have any electricity for one week, OK. [...] you can always record [...] when there are so many students [...] absent. (SRI3)	Recording in response to crisis-induced absence	Contextualized content curation
'I taught adjectives to describe feelings. It is to check [...] if they remember the vocabulary [and] if they [are] feeling [...] OK today' (SRI2)	Multi-purpose activity, including well-being check	
Reasons		
'I want to know [...] lesson difficulty or social difficulties [...] [I] open the door to them' (SRI1)	Interest in academic and social difficulties; Desire to create supportive space	A pedagogy of pragmatism and empathy
'I just want to know if they understand which one is the keyword [...] some students are really silent [...] I let them participate together' (SRI1)	Participation-oriented teaching	
'[I] change the lesson plan according to the [life] situations they have' (SRI3)	Awareness of context; Adaptive orientation	Context as the decisive factor
'After they watched the recorded lesson [...], next day is our exercise day [...]—I need to check if they understand or not' (SRI3)	Focus on keeping students engaged when lessons had to be recorded	

TABLE 2
Analytical chain

The immediate challenges Sabal faced were infrastructural. Since daily power outages and poor internet connectivity were the norm, her teaching involved logistical problem-solving in response. She did not rely on a single, high-tech platform; instead, she assembled a practical set of low-bandwidth, flexible technologies. For synchronous sessions, she scheduled classes during early-morning or late-night hours, when electricity was more likely to be available. When connections were unstable, she switched to audio-only Zoom (using a VPN) to conserve bandwidth for herself and her students.

Knowing that even these arrangements might not hold, she built her lessons around the assumption of disruption, breaking these into smaller, focused segments that students could complete during short periods of stable electricity or internet. This proactive adaptability was also seen in her real-time responses to challenges. For instance, when three students, forced to share a single device due to a power cut, joined her class for a pair-work activity in breakout rooms, she instantly changed it into a group activity with rotating roles for them.

Much of the learning took place on asynchronous platforms. She used Telegram, a low-data messaging app, to collect written responses and audio recordings of speaking practice, and to send announcements. She also prepared and distributed downloadable materials that students could work with offline, allowing learning to continue regardless of connectivity. What stood out overall, then, was not her use of any advanced platforms, but her ability to combine and adapt simple tools in thoughtful ways.

In this context of political instability and social stress, Sabal's pedagogy extended beyond content delivery. Her practices revealed that, for learning to occur, the socio-emotional well-being of her students must be a primary concern. As can be seen in the lesson extract below, she used technology not just for instruction but to build and maintain supportive relationships through greetings, check-ins, and humour:

Teacher Hello! Good evening, everyone. (T turns on the camera)

Students Good Evening, Teacher. (Ss turn on their cameras)

T Good evening. What happens to you today? (T refers to three Ss who joined together via one device.)

Ss The electricity went off today, Teacher. (Ss are smiling and laughing.)

T Oh, I get that. I can see three names in one camera.

T What about Jasmine? (Refers to another S, whose camera is off. Jasmine turns on camera). OK Jasmine's here. Where is Nyi and Thandar? (Nyi turns on camera). Here they come!

T Hello, Nyi.

S Hello Teacher. (Thandar responds to the teacher via Nyi's screen.)

T Hello, OK. You two are together (T just realizes now that Thandar is joining with Nyi on the same device.). Is the light on or off?

S Off, Teacher.

T Oh, I see. That's why you're a little bit late today.

S Yes.

T Myat, I can see you in the dark. But I think you look naturally beautiful there. (T refers to a student who has camera on despite the electricity cut-off. S smiles.)

Messaging apps were used not only for homework reminders but also for checking in on students, creating what she described as a 'nurturing environment' where they felt safe to share their challenges.

Sabal's classroom activities seemed designed to empower students and build their confidence. She facilitated student-centered learning not as a pedagogical fashion but as a means to provide opportunities for students to showcase their abilities and share their ideas and opinions. This focus on active participation helped engage students who might otherwise feel isolated or demotivated by the difficult circumstances. In this crisis context, effective pedagogical practice and pastoral care were inseparable.

Contextualized content
curation

The political situation in Myanmar placed significant restrictions on access to information, with several online platforms and websites blocked. This forced Sabal to become a resourceful and critical curator of content. She explained that when students struggled, she would find supplementary materials:

'if they don't understand some words or vocabulary [...] I show them flash cards I created or use pictures from Google so that they can understand well'. (SRI1)

Where external resources were unavailable or unsuitable, she developed her own materials tailored to her students' needs. She noted that the standard coursebook was not engaging for grammar, so she created her own presentations:

'You know, most of the students are not interested in grammar [...] so, I use a PowerPoint. And also [...] I used that kind of animation [...] I will show only sentence by sentence'. (SRI2)

These efforts not only helped her counteract the blocking of content but also made lessons more relevant for her students. In situations where access to an essential educational resource was necessary, she carefully guided students in the safe use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). Her work as a content creator reflected not only her creativity but her commitment to making language learning accessible, meaningful and appropriate in a politically restricted environment.

**RQ2 findings:
teacher-stated reasons
for practices**

A pedagogy of
pragmatism and empathy

As interviews showed, Sabal's actions were not random adaptations but were guided by her philosophy and a deep, lived understanding of her students' needs and context.

At the heart of Sabal's teaching was a philosophy grounded in pragmatism and empathy. She explained that her priority was creating a supportive space, which she saw as a prerequisite for any learning:

I want to know. Do they have any difficulties? And what about the lesson difficulty or social difficulties? Right. So just give. [...] Open the door to them. They explain their difficulties, right? I just want to hear them. (SR11)

Her stated reasons for her choices consistently prioritized what was feasible and appropriate for her students. She selected teaching strategies not because they are prescribed by a particular method, but because they were, in her words, 'suitable for my students'. Her choice of technology followed the same logic. She explained that she chose tools based on how well they supported participation and communication. For example, when asked why she instructed students to use the simple Zoom annotation tool for a listening task (see Figure 3), she explained:

I just want to know if they understand which one is the keyword and which one is the [...] important fact [...] and the next [reason] is some of the students are really silent and maybe bored. I think, So, yeah, I let them participate together. (SR11)

This practical mindset extended to Sabah's approach to assessment. She used technology-based quizzes and short tasks not only to monitor understanding, but to do so in ways that reduced pressure, describing her aim as checking students' understanding 'in a fun and engaging way', rather than testing for its own sake. Her goal, she said, was to make sure 'all students actively participate even in difficult circumstances' (SR11). This belief placed student well-being and inclusion above strict adherence to any single method or tool.

Context as the
decisive factor

Sabah's understanding of the wider political and social context played a central role in shaping her teaching. She was aware of how the country's political instability led to power cuts, disrupted internet access, and heightened stress among her students. Rather than seeing these conditions as background obstacles, she treated them as defining components of her teaching environment.

This awareness was evident in nearly all aspects of her practice. Her use of, for example, Telegram was a response to low-bandwidth constraints. Her shift towards asynchronous activities was a response to inconsistent electricity and internet. Her development of locally relevant materials addressed both content accessibility and safety concerns in a censored online space.

What stood out most was her flexibility. She frequently emphasized her readiness to 'change the lesson plan according to the situations students have' (SR13), as had been borne out by observation. For her, context was not just something to navigate, it was the driving force behind her pedagogical decision-making overall.

Discussion

'Expert teacher' attributes
in this context

By drawing together Sabah's practices and the reasoning behind them, we can identify a set of attributes that characterize her as an expert online teacher in politically difficult circumstances.

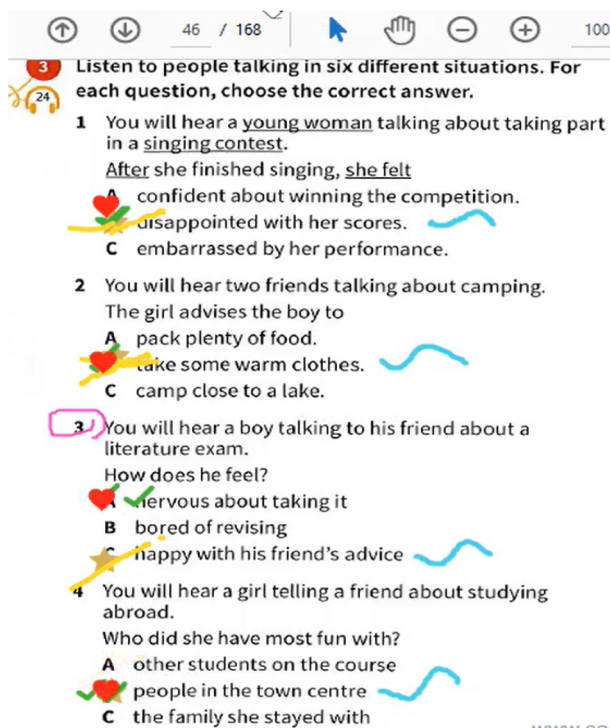


FIGURE 3
Screenshot of Zoom screen
shared by the teacher and
annotated by students with
different colors and
shapes (CO1).

Sabal's practice was marked by flexibility, and, more than this even, by proactive adaptability. Rather than merely responding to disruptions (for example, power cuts, poor connectivity), Sabal anticipated them and designed lessons around low-bandwidth tools (for example, Telegram, audio-only Zoom), offline materials, flexible schedules, and asynchronous tasks. She created a functioning learning environment from limited, unstable resources; an approach that combined technical understanding with practical resourcefulness.

Sabal always tried to adapt her strategies, technology or the content to the specific needs of her students. Indeed, adapting to student needs has also been described as one of the key characteristics of expert teachers in general (Anderson 2023), though without the attention we have given here to needs specifically relating to contextual factors.

The teacher's deliberate use of several technological tools and strategies to accommodate every student also reflected her commitment to communicating effectively and building relationships with her students. This aligns with a crucial aspect previously identified in the literature (for example, by Bailey and Card 2009): that effective online teachers prioritize fostering good rapport and communication with students. Here, though, we additionally see how this relates to differentiating means of communicating with students.

Effective and expert teachers are also known for their genuine care for their students and their learning journeys (Bailey and Card 2009). This characteristic is exemplified in Sabal's efforts to create a nurturing environment

Theoretical and practical implications

where students were encouraged to share not only their academic difficulties but also their personal challenges in a politically unstable context.

Sabal's teaching provides a counter-narrative to the deficit-oriented research that has often characterized studies of technology use in the Global South. Whereas previous studies have frequently highlighted technological incompetence or a lack of pedagogical ICT based knowledge (Ndibalema 2022; Roy *et al.* 2023), Sabal's case demonstrates a sophisticated form of expertise. Her ability to assemble a functional pedagogical approach from low-bandwidth tools is not a sign of deficiency, but rather a case of strategic and contextually intelligent practice. This supports the previous general argument (for example, Smith 2011) that identifying and valuing local, context-appropriate pedagogies should be prioritized over importing models from dissimilar environments; additionally, we have shown that this argument can be extended to online teaching, where it has not usually been applied. Thus, even though Mishra's inclusion of XK in his (2019) model acknowledges that contextual considerations are important, it may not go far enough in portraying the important, indeed governing contribution contextual knowledge may make to a teacher's decision-making in circumstances such as those described.

Additionally, AK, as proposed by Tang and Pentón Herrera (2025), also needs to be better acknowledged. Whereas they relate this mainly to a teacher's ability to regulate their own emotions in online teaching, we have found that a teacher's awareness of *students'* affective needs may be particularly vital in crisis contexts. Thus, Sabal's emphasis on building relationships and providing pastoral care confirms general findings from previous research on effective online teaching (for example, Bailey and Card 2009), but it also extends them. In the stable, high-resource contexts where previous research has tended to be conducted, fostering relationships appears as just one element of good online teaching. In the crisis context of Myanmar, however, Sabal's actions and reflections show that this relational work becomes a non-negotiable foundation for learning to occur. Her genuine care for students is not just a desirable trait but a necessary pedagogical counterweight to cases of isolation and stress produced by the political situation: AK is bound up with XK, in other words, and both are fundamental.

Even though they are based on a study of just one expert online teacher in Myanmar, these interpretations potentially carry important practical implications for teachers and teacher educators working in or for similar crisis-affected settings. The key takeaway is that cultivating pedagogical problem-solving skills may be more important than focusing on mastery of specific technologies. In difficult circumstances, this might involve: embracing 'right-tech' over high-tech by selecting simple, accessible tools; designing for disruption by prioritizing asynchronous and offline tasks; and making pastoral care a central pillar of pedagogy to create a safe and supportive learning environment.

Conclusion

This study explored the practices of an expert online English teacher working in the politically difficult circumstances of post-coup Myanmar.

The findings reveal practices defined not by mastery of high-end technology but by proactive adaptability, creative problem-solving, and a strong sense of pedagogical empathy. Sabal's work sheds light on what it means to teach effectively in a crisis, where the constraints of everyday life—electricity outages, censorship, and emotional strain—are as present in the virtual classroom as they are outside it.

While this study offers a deep look into one teacher's practice, its nature as a single case study means its findings need to be confirmed by further, wider research, which will ideally incorporate the views of students as well as practices and reflections of more teachers. Such research is needed to continue to challenge Global North-centric models of teacher expertise and amplify the voices and innovative practices of educators and learners in the world's most challenging circumstances.

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