

# Bridging the language gap: Challenges and opportunities for English education in underdeveloped countries

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## Abstract

In an increasingly globalized world, English language proficiency is crucial for accessing international opportunities in business, education, and diplomacy. For underdeveloped countries, enhancing English education represents both a challenge and a potential catalyst for socioeconomic advancement. This paper examines the challenges hindering effective English language instruction in these regions, proposes principles for context-sensitive curriculum development, and analyzes successful case studies. Special focus is given to an initiative in northern Pakistan to illustrate localized strategies. Recommendations are provided to promote sustainable and inclusive English language education frameworks.

## Introduction

English serves as the lingua franca in international communication, science, and commerce. For underdeveloped countries, acquiring English proficiency can offer access to global markets, academic resources, and employment. However, systemic educational barriers such as outdated curricula, inadequate teacher training, and limited infrastructure hinder effective language acquisition (Karim & Mohamed, 2019). Many underdeveloped regions lack the educational infrastructure to support English language learning. Textbooks, audio-visual aids, and technological tools are often unavailable, particularly in rural areas. Schools frequently operate without language labs or consistent electricity, severely limiting the implementation of modern language instruction methods (Shaheen et al., 2013).

A significant portion of English language instructors in these regions are non-native speakers with limited fluency. Teacher training programs are often outdated or insufficient, resulting in educators who lack confidence, methodological training, and the ability to facilitate student-centered learning environments (Rae & Kirkwood, 2010). Imported English curricula from developed countries often ignore local cultures and experiences. As a result, students struggle to relate to the content, leading to disengagement. An overemphasis on grammar and rote memorization instead of practical communication further limits learning outcomes (Power et al., 2012). Limited access to English outside the classroom stifles language development. Unlike in urban centers, rural students rarely encounter English in daily life, whether through media, signage, or conversation. This lack of immersion hinders fluency and long-term retention (Walsh et al., 2013).

Curricula must reflect the learners' cultural, social, and economic realities. Incorporating familiar scenarios, local idioms, and regionally relevant topics can make English more accessible and engaging. Language instruction should emphasize real-world communication over rote grammar. Techniques such as group discussions, role-playing, and problem-solving activities enhance speaking, listening, reading, and writing proficiency (Karim et al., 2021). Investing in continuous teaching is essential. Local training institutions should offer modern pedagogical courses, mentorship opportunities, and access to updated teaching resources. Even in resource-constrained settings, technology can expand learning opportunities. Mobile-based learning platforms, audiobooks, and offline educational apps can be leveraged to provide flexible, low-cost support to students and teachers (Shaheen & Walsh, 2012). Assessment should be formative, ongoing, and aligned with curriculum goals. It must prioritize language usage and comprehension over memorization, guiding both teachers and students in identifying learning gaps and strengths (Shaheen & Lace, 2013).

## Case studies regarding English language development in underdeveloped countries

An additional example can be found within the Ismaili Muslim community through the Time and Knowledge Nazara (TKN) initiative. This voluntary program mobilizes skilled Ismaili professionals globally to support educational and development projects, including English language education in underdeveloped regions. TKN volunteers conduct English workshops and training programs, particularly in parts of South and Central Asia and East Africa, where access to quality English instruction is limited. These workshops not only improve learners' proficiency but also equip parents with communication skills that enable better job prospects, enhanced family literacy, and increased participation in community initiatives (The Ismaili, n.d.).

In northern Pakistan, various initiatives have demonstrated the importance of contextual and culturally relevant approaches to English language education. In Gilgit-Baltistan, the Aga Khan Education Service (AKES) implemented a community-centered English language program that integrated bilingual instruction and tailored teacher training. By leveraging local cultural references and building on the community's linguistic strengths, the program improved student participation and performance. In Chitral, non-governmental organizations partnered with local educators to introduce low-cost English learning modules and mobile-based resources in remote schools. Teachers were trained using regionally adapted curricula, and students were encouraged to participate in English drama and conversation clubs, creating a more immersive and engaging learning environment. These examples highlight that language education initiatives grounded in the local context, supported by community engagement, and adapted to resource limitations can lead to meaningful and sustained improvements in English proficiency.

Similar successes have been observed globally. In Bangladesh, the English in Action (EIA) project used mobile phones and digital audio content to deliver professional development for teachers and multimedia lessons for students. The program reached thousands of teachers and millions of learners, significantly improving spoken English performance in both urban and rural settings (Power et al., 2012). In Rwanda, a government-led transition to English as the medium of instruction included a comprehensive teacher training component and language support materials. While the initiative faced challenges, it underscored the importance of political will and systemic alignment for language education reform.

In Ethiopia, the Ministry of Education collaborated with international agencies to implement the English Language Improvement Program (ELIP) in universities. This program enhanced the proficiency of tertiary-level English instructors through workshops, peer collaboration, and updated teaching resources (Shaheen et al., 2013). In Vietnam, the National Foreign Language 2020 Project aimed to elevate English language proficiency by reforming curricula, strengthening teacher training, and introducing national assessments (Hung, 2013). Though results varied, the project highlighted the importance of coordinated national policy and investment in achieving long-term language education goals.

These case studies reflect a diverse range of strategies that have been successfully adapted to local conditions. They emphasize that effective English language development in underdeveloped countries requires an integrated approach—one that combines community involvement, contextual relevance, teacher capacity-building, and support from national education systems.

## Policy recommendations

Governments and NGOs should support the formation of teams comprising local educators, linguists, and cultural experts to develop context-sensitive English curricula. Collaboration with international donors

and educational bodies can provide essential funding, training materials, and technical assistance while ensuring that local need drive implementation. Creating English-speaking clubs, producing local media content in English, and designating English-use zones in schools can reinforce learning beyond formal instruction (Karim & Mohamed, 2019). Programs should be evaluated regularly using both qualitative and quantitative data. Flexibility and responsiveness to feedback are essential for continuous improvement.

## Conclusion

English language education offers significant promise for underdeveloped countries seeking to integrate into the global economy and knowledge systems. Yet, without thoughtful curriculum design, robust teacher training, and contextual adaptation, this promise may go unfulfilled. Case studies such as those from underdeveloped countries demonstrate that locally grounded, resource-aware, and community-supported initiatives can overcome systemic barriers. Through sustained investment and innovation, underdeveloped nations can empower their populations with the linguistic tools needed for global engagement and development.

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#### Author Bio

Zubeda Kasim Ali worked as an Assistant Professor for the Faculty of English at the Aga Khan University of Nursing for 20 years. She currently works as a Resource Person for the Time and Knowledge (TKN) Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) in the development of English language proficiency. The participants of the program are residents of underdeveloped countries. She assists students who are applying to schools and those looking to develop their English language schools, for example.