

Foundational learning and language(s) of education





**Children cannot learn
if they are taught in a
language they do not
understand**

Why is language important?

- Children must develop foundational skills – literacy and numeracy – in order to access the rest of the curriculum.
- Language of instruction is fundamental to outcomes in foundational skills. The closer the language of instruction is to the child's home language, the easier it will be for them to learn, including learning to read.
- If an unfamiliar language of instruction creates barriers to learning at the foundational level, children will face ongoing problems throughout their schooling and become at greater risk of dropping out.
- An unfamiliar language of instruction adds to the challenges and barriers that girls face in accessing quality education.
- Literacy should be established in a child's most familiar language before they are expected to develop literacy in another.
- Additional languages can be introduced as a *subject* from early primary, but ideally only with a focus on listening and speaking until literacy is established in the main language of instruction.

What factors influence decisions around language-in-education policy in different contexts?

- Decisions about language policy are complex. Multiple drivers influence the choice of language of education.
- In many contexts, children start school learning in one language but transition to another language – often English – either during or at the end of primary / early secondary.
- In higher resource contexts, a bi- or multilingual approach from early schooling is possible, but this requires considerable investment and highly skilled teachers using high quality resources.
- In low- and middle-income contexts, research shows clearly that schooling offered in a language that is as close as possible to the child's mother tongue leads to the best learning outcomes.
- If there are proficient teachers, children can become highly competent users of other languages – including English – when they are taught well as a subject. A language does not need to be the medium of education for children to become proficient users.



How can transitions between languages of education be made?

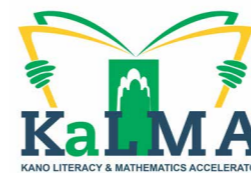
- Transitions in language of education need to be carefully supported – this is true whether the transition happens during or at the end of primary, or during or at the end of secondary.
- Learners will need to draw on their foundational skills in their first language during this transition, using them as building blocks to develop literacy in the new language.
- Learners need six to eight years of learning an additional language such as English as a *subject* before they have enough knowledge of and skills in that language to study other subjects using that new language as the medium of education.



Scan the QR code to read the British Council's position paper on English language and medium of instruction in basic education in low- and middle-income countries

Case study 1: Supporting foundational skills in Hausa, maths and English – the KaLMA project in Nigeria

The Kano Literacy and Mathematics Accelerator (KaLMA) project is an example of an appropriate approach to building foundational skills in Hausa – a mother tongue for many and familiar language for all – and maths, alongside English at primary level. The project was piloted in two local government areas (LGAs) of Kano state from 2019 to 2021, and then rolled out to a further five LGAs (2022 to present) as part of the larger Partnership for Learning for All in Nigeria (PLANE) initiative.



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Foundational skills are best taught in students' home language(s) with additional languages carefully introduced alongside

Background

In response to low levels of foundational learning in the upper primary grades, the **Kano Literacy and Mathematics Accelerator (KaLMA)** pilot was launched in October 2019 by the Kano State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB), Ministry of Education and Sa'adatu Rimi College of Education, in collaboration with the British Council and Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) Africa, via funding from the UK government's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).

Project objectives

The programme aimed to build foundational maths, Hausa and English literacy skills through a government-led, scalable and sustainable accelerated learning model piloted in two local government areas (LGAs), Dawakin Tofa and Wudil, in Kano State, reaching over 30,000 pupils. The results from the initial baseline of this programme, conducted in January 2020, confirmed the important need for foundational skills-focused programmes. In upper primary only seven per cent of pupils could read a basic paragraph in Hausa; three per cent were able to respond 'yes' or 'no' to a simple oral question in English, and just four per cent were able to solve a simple two-digit by two-digit subtraction problem.

The KALMA project's focus on improving learning outcomes for Hausa, English and maths was underpinned by stated outcomes for teachers and school/education leaders, with an emphasis on improving equality, diversity and inclusion. KaLMA had a strong gender component, and all learning materials were created to portray girls positively and to challenge gender stereotypes.

Approach

KaLMA is rooted in the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) evidence and approach. This involves assessing pupils on foundational skills and grouping them by learning level rather than age or grade level for two hours per day. During this time, they focus on foundational skills in reading and maths through a combination of individual, group and whole-class activities.

The pilot also included an innovative dual-language approach to developing foundational skills in English. This deploys the pupils' home language, Hausa, to assist their learning of an additional one, English, using a range of techniques.

The KaLMA project developed a home-based learning (HBL) component in response to the school closures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic with the aim of continuing to develop learners' foundational skills in the three subject areas. This used low-tech delivery mechanisms such as radio programmes supported by text message, Automated Voice Message (AVM) and Interactive Voice Response (IVR) sent to parents' and caregivers' phones.

Evaluation

KaLMA was evaluated through a mixed methods approach, with a baseline assessment carried out in January 2020 to ascertain literacy and numeracy levels of learners in two LGAs. Post-intervention learning outcomes were then measured against this baseline. Teachers were also assessed on subject knowledge at baseline to identify areas of support for the project. Midline assessments, focus groups with beneficiaries, interviews with teachers and a difference-in-difference (DiD) evaluation were conducted, with learning gains identified in schools in the two treatment LGAs when compared with control group schools in five non-treatment LGAs.

Overall, KaLMA has been successful in meeting most expected outcomes, in many cases surpassing set impact indicators. By the end of the project, there was an 18 percentage point (pp) improvement in children who could read at least a grade 1 level text in Hausa and in English, achievement exceeded the target set, with a 30pp improvement in children who could recognise short, familiar words in a straightforward text. The DiD results found a consistent, statistically significant and positive impact of the programme on maths outcomes. Although a lower percentage of girls (9 per cent) compared to boys (12 per cent) had foundational skills at baseline (2021), these levels increased at endline with girls and boys achieving the same results. KaLMA enabled girls to progress at the same rate as boys despite the cultural and contextual barriers to learning, such as few female role models and additional household chores expected of girls.

An unexpected and additional positive outcome from the KaLMA programme is the HBL component, which has continued despite originally being implemented as a response to the Covid-19 school closure.

Recent evaluations have shown that combining TaRL classroom activities with HBL resources boosts learners' progression through foundational skill levels. At Midline 2, HBL support in Hausa, maths and English was associated with a significantly higher progression rate on the part of HBL study pupils compared with all pupils taking part.

The HBL component has been especially successful because it mitigates against structural issues within the education system which contribute to a considerable loss of available learning time at school. In addition to the pandemic, in northern Nigeria this includes school closures which may be for security or religious / cultural reasons.



Scan the QR code to find out more about the KaLMA project





Case study 2: Focusing on effective teaching of English as a subject – the English without Borders project in Colombia

A desire for improved English language skills can often lead decision makers to push for a move to English medium education, where English is used to teach all subjects across the curriculum. This can cause multiple issues, including a reduced focus on and worse learning outcomes in home language literacy and foundational skills. This case study illustrates that rather than a wholesale change in medium of education, focusing resources on improving the teaching of English as a subject can achieve positive results without risking reduction in learning outcomes for other subjects.

Background

English without Borders is a home-based learning approach, offered to secondary students in public schools in different parts of Colombia. The course involves 90 hours of synchronous classes (live lessons with a teacher in a virtual classroom) and 40 hours of independent study (a total of 130 hours) over a period of five months. More than 4,000 students took part in the programme in the district of Bogotá in 2021, and 800 students participated in Baranquilla.

Project objectives and approach

The course aims to improve students' proficiency in English through additional exposure and opportunities to practise the language. It is taken outside school hours and supplements the two or three hours of English classes that are part of the regular school timetable. The students who take part are volunteers and must have access to the internet and a computer or tablet with headphones, a microphone and a webcam.



Evaluation

An evaluation of the programme was commissioned in 2021 from the Faculty of Education's Evaluation Centre at the University of the Andes. The study involved 4,166 students aged 14 to 16 (approximately 60 per cent female) from 250 public schools in the city of Bogotá: 125 formed the main study group, with 125 in a control group.

The participants took entry and exit tests to evaluate their English proficiency and completed a questionnaire. The results show a significant improvement in the target students' level of grammar and proficiency in both speaking and writing in comparison to the control group, whereas there was no significant improvement in listening or reading. A shift in the overall CEFR¹ levels in the target group from the entry test to the exit test suggest an overall increment of one level. Further analysis showed that there was an initial difference in performance across all aspects measured (grammar, listening and vocabulary) that favoured boys over girls. This was true for both the control and target groups. However, the entry and exit tests for the target group showed a significantly greater improvement for girls in grammar, and the girls also improved more in their overall score. Further research is needed to pinpoint the factors influencing this difference in attainment.

Representatives of Local Education Authorities noted that the English without Borders online programme had



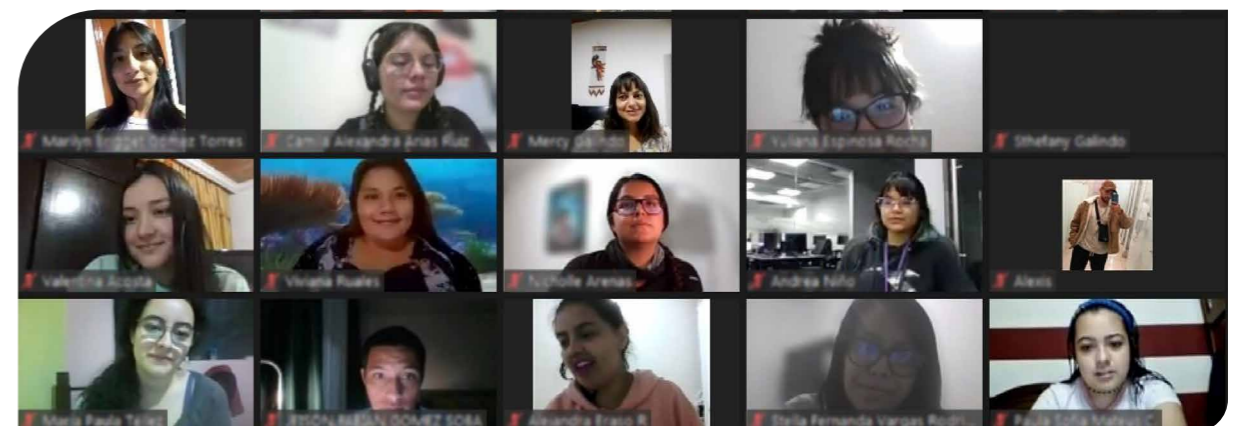
To meet the demand for English skills, focusing on teaching English well as a subject is preferable to switching the medium of education

had a direct impact on students. An independent impact evaluation commissioned by the Chamber of Commerce in Bucaramanga also showed that target institutions' results were higher than results in non-targeted institutions.

This case study shows that good English language outcomes can be achieved without a switch in the medium of education, providing that there are well-trained teachers who themselves have good levels of English and that there are adequate teaching and learning resources in place.



Scan the QR code to find out more about the English without Borders project



¹ Common European Framework of Reference – this is a standardised scale used to illustrate levels of language proficiency

Case study 3: Transitioning between languages – the LaST project in Rwanda

Many learners need to transition from one language to another during their educational career. This can cause issues with learning outcomes as they will first need to develop proficiency in the new language before they can access the content from the rest of the curriculum. There are several ways that these transitions can be supported including through the teaching materials used and targeted training of teachers. This case study outlines a successful approach to improving textbook-based input using home language support.

Background

Language Supportive Textbooks and Pedagogy (LaST) was one of the 26 innovative pilot projects supported by the Innovation for Education Fund, which was a partnership between the Governments of Rwanda and the United Kingdom. The project was led by the University of Bristol and implemented in Rwanda by the British Council in partnership with Rwanda Publishers and Booksellers Association and the University of Rwanda's College of Education.



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Transitions between mediums of education need to be carefully supported – this can include providing additional textbook input



Project objectives and approach

The purpose of LaST was to develop materials suitable for second language learners in maths, science and social studies. Rwandan materials writers and illustrators worked with UK experts and local publishing companies to develop quality, context-specific textbooks. The aim was to improve learning and teaching by making textbooks easier for both pupils and teachers to understand.

The textbooks included:

- bilingual vocabulary support
- good quality, contextually relevant illustrations
- activities designed so that learners spoke in L1 language (Kinyarwanda) first to try out ideas before using the L2 language (English)
- clearly labelled and relevant support activities to improve learners' reading, writing, speaking and listening skills
- teachers guides in Kinyarwanda and English to complement the materials.

Evaluation

LaST worked in 16 primary schools in four districts, with eight control and eight intervention schools. In order to ensure the results were relevant to the Rwandan context, the schools were a mix of rural, town and remote schools.

1,075 pupils were tested in these 16 schools, before and after the introduction of the new Primary 4 materials and accompanying teacher training. After just four months, learners in intervention schools achieved 16 per cent higher scores in vocabulary and comprehension tests than those in control schools which did not use the materials or receive the teacher training.

The development of the LaST textbooks was a collaborative process, with writers and illustrators from Rwanda and Uganda, local publishing houses and UK experts working together to create engaging, relevant and context specific language-supportive solutions.

A total of 1,800 books were produced and distributed, with 75 books per subject (Primary 4 maths, science and social studies) and 225 books in total per school sent out to eight schools in the Ngororero, Nyagatare, Kamonyi and Burera districts.



Scan the QR code to find out more about the LaST project

About us

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We work with governments and our partners in the education, English language and cultural sectors, in the UK and globally. Working together we make a bigger difference, creating benefit for millions of people all over the world.

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