

Addressing Foundational Learning Gaps: The TaRL Language Learning from Familiar to Formal (L2F2) Methodology in Uganda's Multilingual Education Landscape

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Summary

In Uganda, despite advances in primary enrolment, many learners leave primary school without foundational literacy skills. The Language Learning from Familiar to Formal (L2F2) methodology leveraged in “Teaching at the Right Level” (TaRL) interventions helps learners in Grades 3 to 5 strengthen their literacy skills in the country's multilingual context.

Keywords

Multilingual education
Teaching at the right level
Uganda
Language transition
Literacy instruction

Background

In many parts of the world, children go to school, but they do not learn, partly due to the use of unfamiliar languages of instruction. Globally, approximately 40 percent of children lack access to education in a language they can understand ([World Bank, 2021](#)). This trend is also reflected in Sub-Saharan Africa, where most education systems mandate learners to transition from the mother tongue to the formal language of instruction after the initial years of primary schooling ([United States Agency for International Development \(USAID\), 2020b](#)). Typically, beyond Grade 4, all subjects are taught in L2, with L1 either offered as subjects or removed from curricula.

The formal language of instruction often reflects a nation's colonial past. For instance, many former British colonies use English as the language of instruction ([Ramachandran, 2017](#)). However, without relevant foundational skills in the L1, many learners struggle with the transition. This is compounded by teachers, who are products of the same education system and may lack proficiency in teaching English, making it difficult to meet curriculum expectations.

The Ugandan context illustrates how evolving language policies and education programs address the challenges faced by countries where a second language is used as the medium of instruction.

Ugandan Context

Uganda, a country with over 40 spoken languages, designated English as the official language and medium of instruction after independence from Britain in 1962 ([USAID, 2020a](#)). Resulting from challenges with the use of English, a 1992 white paper ([Uganda Education Policy Review Commission, 1992](#)) advocated using L1 as a medium of instruction until Grade 4, with English taught as a subject from Grades 1–4 and becoming the medium of instruction from Grade 5 onwards. A new language policy and curriculum reflecting this was enacted in 2007, mandating local languages for instruction in Grades 1–3, with English introduced in Grade 4, which serves as a transitional year (Altinyelken, 2010). The curriculum accommodates urban areas and regions without a predominant local language, allowing English to be used as the medium of instruction in these cases.

Despite policies supporting L1 instruction in the early years, several contextual factors hinder effective implementation (Ssentanda, 2014). These include inadequate bilingual teaching-learning materials and limited teacher professional development in pedagogical approaches to facilitate the transition from L1 to L2. Additionally, policies granting refugees free access to Uganda’s schools and promoting integration challenge educators who are unfamiliar with refugee languages. A study on language use in refugee-impacted schools in Uganda (Hicks & Maina, 2021) found that English is commonly used as the medium of instruction, posing challenges for many students, who are more familiar with French, Arabic, Kiswahili¹, or other refugee languages. While some teachers adopt bilingual methods, many still need professional development to effectively implement them. The use of teaching assistants proficient in both refugee languages and the medium of instruction is common but not widespread enough to provide all refugee learners the language support they need.

As a result, many primary school learners in Uganda are unable to read at grade level. Recent national assessments showed that only 42.7 percent of Grade 6 learners were grade-level proficient in English literacy (Uganda National Examinations Board, 2024). The 2021 Uwezo assessment showed 32 percent of Grade 7 learners were not proficient in local language literacy, highlighting the need for innovative solutions to help learners catch up on foundational reading skills. The Language Learning from Familiar to Formal (L2F2) methodology in “Teaching at the Right Level” (TaRL) proves to be a promising solution to address multilingual education challenges in Uganda.

L2F2 Methodology: A Promising Solution

TaRL is a rigorously evaluated approach ([Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab \(J-PAL\), 2022](#)) to accelerate learners’ acquisition of foundational skills. Developed by Pratham International and TaRL Africa, L2F2 is an innovative methodology that leverages TaRL principles to accelerate children’s foundational reading in both L1 and L2 by leveraging their proficiency in the L1.

The methodology’s design aligns with three primary objectives: expanding learners’ English vocabulary, fostering fluency in English through L1 support, and facilitating their comprehension of English text. Establishing a correlation between the L1 and English is key. As most Ugandan local languages use the Latin script, learners familiar with local language reading already recognize English alphabet sounds and shapes.

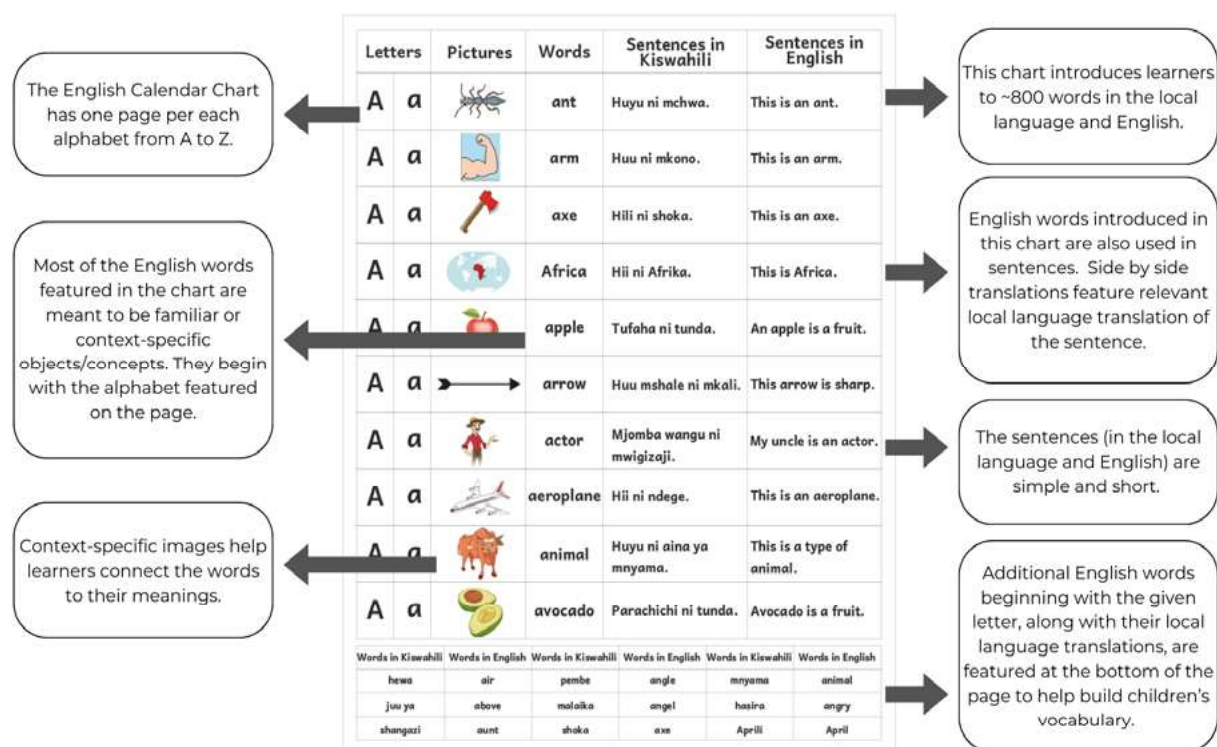
L2F2 teaching-learning materials are co-created and validated with local stakeholders for the L1 and the L2. These materials leverage pre-existing knowledge to help learners move from the known to the unknown using familiar pictures, words, and sentences in both languages. For example, the English Calendar Chart (Figure 1) helps learners build their vocabulary, recall words, and construct sentences in an independent and nonlinear way by making connections through the following pattern:

1. Learners are introduced to the English letter sounds and shapes.
2. Through carefully curated word associations and context-specific imagery, learners grasp how a given letter is used at the beginning of a word.
3. English words and sentences are paired with their translations in the local language, familiarizing learners with English sentence structures.

With continuous reading practice and internalization of the pattern, learners can read and recall letters, words, and sentences in English.

L2F2 progressively transitions children from L1 to L2. Assessment-driven grouping facilitates tailored instruction, while a balanced approach to language learning combines phonics with whole-language methods, teaching language skills in nonlinear ways. For example, children are explicitly taught letter-sound mapping through engaging activities while also being exposed to simple text reading. The methodology integrates new activities alongside evidence-based, play-based TaRL practices, enriching dual-language acquisition.

Figure 1. Bilingual chart in Kiswahili



Source: Developed by Pratham International and TaRL Africa

WVOB, a Belgian and Flemish non-profit organization working towards quality education internationally, and Young African Refugees for Integral Development (YARID) have applied the L2F2 methodology in Uganda to help learners catch up on their literacy skills. The following section highlights key program design elements, successes, and challenges in using L2F2 in the Ugandan context.

Case Study 1: UCatchUp Kasese

WVOB and the Hempel Foundation have supported the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), Kasese District Local Government, and the Kasese Municipal Council to implement an L2F2 program since 2022. The program, called “UCatchUp,” was initially implemented in 80 public primary schools, and scaled up to all 264 public primary schools in 2025.

UCatchUp is implemented by trained government teachers and is supported by existing government structures. Teaching-learning materials for both L1 and L2 were contextualized, translated, and validated in collaboration with relevant departments and agencies of the MoES, including the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC), and the district language board.

The program is implemented for an hour a day across three school terms. In Kasese, each school selects one of three languages (depending on their pupils’ L1) —Runyoro/Rutoro, Runyankole/Rukiga, and Lukhondo—as mediums of instruction. In UCatchUp classes, these languages serve as a bridge to reading English.

Before starting UCatchUp classes, teachers assess learners to gauge their reading levels in both L1 and L2. UCatchUp is structured into two phases: Phase I (between baseline and midline assessments), focuses on letter names, sounds, and basic word associations, guiding learners in simple sentences, in both L1 and L2. In Phase II (between midline and endline assessments), learners practice simple conversations and grammar concepts such as tenses and singular/plural usage. English activities are also used to introduce learners to synonyms, antonyms, and comprehension skills.

Results from the pilot consistently show significant improvements in learners’ literacy skills. In 2023, there was a 21.1 percentage point increase in the proportion of Grade 3 to 5 learners who can read simple sentences in English, rising from 33.2 percent at baseline to 54.3 percent at endline. In local language literacy, there was a 37-percentage point increase in learners who can read at least a simple paragraph, from 24.7 percent at baseline to 61.6 percent at endline.

Notably, baseline assessments reveal a higher proficiency in English than in the local language. In the 2023 baseline assessment, a larger proportion of learners could read a simple paragraph in English compared to the local language. Specifically, 17.8 percent of Grade 3, 36.7 percent of Grade 4, and 50.0 percent of Grade 5 learners could read a simple paragraph in English, while 16.1 percent of Grade 3, 23.6 percent of Grade 4, and 37.7 percent of Grade 5 learners could read a simple paragraph in the local language. The data indicate low literacy in both languages, suggesting

standard classroom practices may not effectively improve outcomes.

The disparity in performance at baseline necessitates further investigation. Discussions with teachers during the review of the assessment results suggest several hypotheses for further exploration. Teachers reported inconsistencies in their adherence to language policy, frequently opting to conduct instruction in English rather than the local language. Contributing factors include high parental demand for English as it is viewed as the language of opportunities, neglect of teaching the local language after Grade 4, and difficulty teaching local languages different from their own mother tongues. The findings illustrate the need for caregiver engagement to emphasize the importance of mother-tongue instruction. Additionally, teacher professional development should focus on adhering to language policy and using pedagogies such as L2F2 to improve literacy in both L1 and L2.

Case Study 2: Kyaka II Refugee Settlement Bridging Program

Uganda's Kyaka II refugee settlement is home to approximately 130,000 refugees, primarily from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Despite progressive education policies allowing refugees access to the Ugandan education system, refugees face significant challenges integrating into the education system due to language barriers.

YARID has implemented the Bridging Program in Kyaka II since 2020, facilitating the integration of out-of-school refugee children aged 9 to 14 into formal schools using the L2F2 methodology. Kiswahili is used as the medium of instruction as most of the enrolled learners are already familiar with it. The six-month program features a Grade 3 teacher from the host community and a refugee teaching assistant. The first 1.5 months focus on instruction in Kiswahili, the next 1.5 months on instruction in both Kiswahili and English, and the final three months on instruction in English.

In addition to cultural exchanges, the L2F2 methodology has improved children's literacy skills. Data from 4,461 children between 2020 and 2022 show a 37-percentage point increase in children who could read basic words in English, from 0 percent at baseline to 37 percent at endline. Stakeholders report positive feedback; headteachers find their work easier as students improve their English proficiency, enhancing communication and integration into formal classes. Parents appreciate their children learning and speaking basic English, while students gain confidence to participate actively. The L2F2 methodology has also strengthened the connection between learners and teachers, creating a supportive learning environment.

Several challenges have emerged. In the first 1.5 months, when instruction is in Kiswahili, learner interest is low as they

expected to learn English immediately. This phase is also challenging for Ugandan teachers who lack proficiency in Kiswahili, hindering effective communication with learners. To address this, the program employs teaching assistants fluent in both Kiswahili and English to provide language support for teaching and learning. Transitioned learners also face difficulties in formal schooling, struggling with the languages of instruction and large class sizes that differ from those in the Bridging Program.

Reflections on Implementation, Policy, and Research

The case studies highlight the potential and challenges of implementing multilingual education strategies such as the L2F2 methodology, emphasizing the need for context-specific adaptations and stakeholder involvement.

A key success of the L2F2 methodology is that it has strengthened learners' reading skills both in the local language and English through highly interactive classes, leading to the rapid progress of children's learning. The L2F2 methodology makes teaching enjoyable as it builds on what learners already know, helping teachers engage learners more effectively and capture their interest, and encouraging regular attendance.

However, challenges remain, including limited resources, teacher training needs, and the gap between policy and practice particularly due to caregiver resistance to L1 instruction, all of which impact the success of any innovative approach. The program models are being refined with stakeholder input to address the challenges and scale up the initiatives to reach more learners.

Future adaptation of this methodology for other L1s and contexts and with other prevalent L2s such as French and Portuguese could yield generalized lessons on multilingual education strategies for low-resource, low-capacity settings such as Uganda. While positive outcomes are evident in children's learning and government capacity to implement and scale the program, further research is needed to assess the L2F2 methodology's effectiveness on a larger scale.

Endnote

1. Also known as the Swahili language

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