

Effective Strategies of English Teaching in Cambodia's Underserved Communities: Bridging Digital Divide to Access Education Quality

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Abstract

Numerous disadvantaged populations lack equitable access to technology, and education is particularly challenging in developing contexts due to instructors often lacking technological proficiency. Nevertheless, digital learning can markedly enhance students' academic success in language acquisition, especially when facilitated by digital technology. This research utilized a panel data set to analyze and assess the strategies employed by teachers to effectively enhance English language proficiency among students in a disadvantaged and under-resourced community. The digital education of the English language was analyzed, encompassing aspects such as curriculum design, instructional pacing, and scaffolding strategies that use technological optimization. Best practices incorporated into digital English language instruction included digital curriculum specialization, teachers' technological proficiency, technology for personalized learning, multiple-gain assessment strategies, and partnerships with technology companies to support underserved schools. The discourse also encompassed the subject of maintaining reasonable expectations for the outcomes of technology pilot initiatives. The results indicated that educators utilizing digital resources to facilitate blended learning can decrease student dropout rates, improve performance on state English assessments, and concurrently provide students with essential skills for success in the 21st century.

Keywords: *English language teaching; underserved communities; digital divide; technology companies; 21st-century skills*

1. Introduction

Looking back at the last few years, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the disparity in digital access to quality education, underscoring the pressing need to address these gaps (Em, 2021; Sanders & Scanlon, 2021). For example, airlines affix instructions on oxygen masks, requiring users to put them on before assisting others. Similarly, this argument applies to the digital divide as well; people cannot use technology for education if they do not know how to use gadgets (Mongelli et al., 2020). As mentioned, many teachers and students are technology have-nots. Consequently, this paper

will then describe this situation while providing examples of effective English language teaching (ELT) in underserved communities (Em, 2022).

The best practices, derived from decades of research and international engagement with educators and students, can benefit teachers concerned about the digital divide's impact (Dias et al., 2020). Throughout, teaching is aside from technology tools and platforms. It is ultimately underlined by the purposeful use of time, instruction, and support (Broadbent et al., 2000). Sustainability and reliability of classroom environment, teacher attitudes, and thoughtful planning are equally as significant as technology itself when adopting and implementing new digital tools. There is a clear difference between simply knowing that digital technologies for teaching and learning exist and truly comprehending how they can be integrated, perceived, and utilized in practice (Burbules et al., 2020; Haleem et al., 2022).

By building on this perspective, the adoption and maintenance of new technologies and digital tools in education do not only depend on the technology itself but also factors such as classroom sustainability, reliability, teacher attitudes, and effective planning. Moreover, there is a distinction between simply being aware of the availability of digital tools for teaching and learning and truly grasping how they can be implemented, experienced, and integrated into practical use (Kwee, 2021). In this context, it is based on the Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions, and Equity (CREATE). Specifically, it is about the examination of English language teaching throughout learning process in developing countries. It emphasizes the global benefits of the integrated and inclusive instruction of languages and digital skills (Fuller et al., 2021). These skills, often emphasized as the essential for modern life, have been foregrounded due to their previously understudied relevance in persistence of COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, the crisis has exposed stark inequalities in access to digital resources and educational opportunities, revealing a clear divide between privileged and underserved populations. As a result, the aftermath has reinforced the critical urgency to address these disparities and work toward equitable access to quality education for everyone (Correia, 2020; Eruchalu et al., 2021).

For instance, on airplanes, passengers are instructed to put on their oxygen masks before helping others, and this principle can be applied to addressing the digital divide as well. Without the necessary technological skills, one cannot fully utilize technology for educational purposes (Tavares, 2021). Unfortunately, many teachers and students fall into the category of those who lack these essential critical skills. Therefore, this paper will explore the

practical strategies and share the real-life examples of ELT in underserved communities. Additionally, these proven methods, gathered from extensive research, best practices and interactions with the educators and students worldwide, can greatly assist teachers who are concerned about the impact of the digital divide. Finally, it is crucial to remember that teaching goes beyond technology tools and platforms; rather, it is about the deliberate allocation of time, delivering instruction effectively, and providing support (Morita et al., 2020).

To set the context, this recent study will draw upon the comprehensive examination of English language teaching across different stages of learning in developing the countries conducted by CREATE (Mazzotti et al., 2020). Specifically, this examination accentuates the global advantages of an integrated and inclusive approach to the language instruction and the development of digital skills. Further, these skills, long considered essential for modern life, have now assumed heightened significance as their previously underestimated relevance has been highlighted by the ongoing challenges of the persistent COVID-19 pandemic (Biletska et al., 2021; Rubach & Lazarides, 2021).

1.1 Background, Significance, and Purpose

The field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) is at a pivotal moment in history, marked by a growing global demand for English language learning alongside significant inequities in access to quality English language instruction (Rose et al., 2020). Consequently, there is a pressing need for a paradigm shift in English language teaching that establishes sustainable models, ensuring students in underserved communities have both access to English learning opportunities and a high-quality education (Adwan et al., 2021). To address these challenges, it is suggested that a widely successful and cost-effective model of connecting classrooms through global learning be broadly shared. Notably, this initiative traces its origins to 1999, when World Links, an international non-profit specializing in integrating technology into education, facilitated a connection between a high school teacher in California and educators in other parts of the world (Bowen et al., 2021). Over the following two decades, this model expanded significantly, demonstrating that collaborative online projects can broaden students' perspectives and increase 21st-century skills, including messaging, web search, website building, and video editing, among others. Moreover, it has offered valuable professional development opportunities for teachers (Latorre et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2023).

As a result, Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning has expanded to encompass the students and teachers in more than 130 countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has created a unique opportunity to reach middle-income and underserved communities where the families with school-aged children have broadband access. This is a means of those face obstacles such as full enrollment in schools or substandard English instruction that falls short of students' or parents' expectations (Bond et al., 2021). By building on this success, the program has already supported students in Los Angeles, Colombia, and Vietnam. This proposed dissemination project will provide tests over two years, scaling up in response to proven success. Overarching aim is to increase the students' global competency, thereby reducing inequitable learning for the 4.3 million youngsters in low-income settings where English proficiency is considered a pathway to opportunity.

Many of these children are homeschooled in the United States, taking advantage of the equitable broadband access and their desire for quality education. Furthermore, World Links has been providing community schools with a sustainable, efficient, and scalable model that offers underserved children access to technology and fosters responsible digital citizenship. As a result, this initiative assists the community in achieving the SELPA model and escaping the poverty trap (Betancur et al., 2024; Roberts, 2022; Selvi & Yazan, 2021).

One research study has indicated effective English language teaching for underserved student populations in Bangladesh, Brazil, and Mongolia, offered by BRAC, World Fund, and Mercy Corps, respectively (Chang, 2018). Moreover, it addressed the shortfall in relevant and recent studies focusing on effective technology use in learning environments, particularly distance education. COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented dependence on internet-based learning and instruction. Consequently, it has become more critical than ever to develop a deeper and broader understanding of the mechanisms that enable effective teaching and learning in distance learning settings (Azlan et al., 2020; Bozkurt et al., 2020). To this end, the study examined effective English language instruction and the use of technology, specifically analyzing ELT in underserved settings to ensure access and inclusion (Em et al., 2024). To achieve this goal, the research focuses on initiatives in Cambodia, utilizing a comprehensive theoretical framework to explore the intersection of successful teaching, integration of technology, and equitable educational access.

2. Understanding the Digital Divide

The digital divide can be understood in multiple ways and is often framed in terms of access to and availability of technology. This gap in information and communication technology (ICT) highlights the disparities that impact the individuals and communities (Pearsall et al.). While ICTs enable learning, communication, and productivity in many societies (Vassilakopoulou & Hustad, 2023; Ye & Yang, 2020), a significant portion of global population lacks access to these tools and the associated benefits of economic opportunities, health, and education. Disparities also exist in internet usage, with male, educated, and wealthier users experiencing greater advantages, such as employment opportunities (Martínez et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2020). These inequalities not only affect how the internet is utilized but also influence productivity and welfare, particularly for those lower on the socio-economic ladder. The digital divide is widely recognized as a problem both between and within countries, with ICT adoption being more prevalent in high-income nations than in low- and middle-income counterparts (Appiah & Song, 2021; Karaman et al., 2021).

The high-income countries benefit from the broader access to internet infrastructure, computers, and software, as well as the greater internet diffusion compared to low- and middle-income nations (Kumari & Singh, 2023). Despite the recent expansion of online open and distance learning (ODL), it continues to primarily benefit students from high-income countries (Avanesian et al., 2021). Further, access to advanced scientific knowledge remains largely limited to elite groups in low- and middle-income countries, as the institutions that disseminate this knowledge, such as universities, are predominantly located in high-income nations. These realities underscore the critical role of the digital divide in shaping open and distance learning (ODL) and its associated challenges (Marginson & Xu, 2023). From the outset, it is essential to distinguish our in-depth understanding of highly efficient English language teaching. On a global scale, the basis of effective language instruction is rooted in the concept of communicative language teaching, which is deeply influenced by Chomsky's significant interactionist approach to second language acquisition. Notably, it is widely recognized that the level of interaction in language classes directly correlates with their effectiveness (Alharbi J. M., 2023; Hamamouche et al., 2022). As a result, it is vital to offer students abundant opportunities to actively and meaningfully engage in language use, fostering the growth of their communication skills and strategies.

To further enhance this process, integrating pair and group activities in authentic contexts enables students to engage with both their peers and

instructors (Burdujan, 2024). Through these activities, students not only strengthen their skills in comprehension, speaking, and listening, but also build a well-rounded grasp of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Consequently, this enhances the overall communication abilities. However, it is important to note that the nature of English language teaching varies significantly depending on context (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020; Fishman, 2020). In particular, contexts where English serves as the medium of instruction for general education should receive immediate attention.

In response to this need, the English Plus curriculum emerges as a promising approach that promotes an integrated teaching methodology, combining both general education subjects and English language classes (Christison & Murray, 2021; Meng-yue et al., 2020). This method has been thoroughly tested, and its success is evident, particularly in Southeast Asia. As a testament to its effectiveness, foreign governments are increasingly adopting a similar model, influenced by leadership studies that support the use of mother-tongue-based bilingual education (MTE). Ultimately, this shift toward MTE signifies growing awareness and recognition of its positive impact on language acquisition and education as a whole (Monje et al., 2021; Waheed et al., 2020).

3. Challenges of ELT in Underserved Communities

The challenges faced by these communities in the field of ELT are undeniably substantial and multifaceted (Tavakol & Tavakoli, 2023). One of the most evident issues lies in infrastructure, where differences such as well-kept roads and consistent electricity are quite noticeable. In addition, the digital gap within these communities is deep, resulting in limited availability of current English learning materials and a shortage of qualified instructors (Hazeaa et al., 2021). Beyond infrastructure and digital limitations, certain communities have also struggled with challenges related to regionalism over the past few decades. Specifically, power has often been concentrated in the hands of a ruling elite that is culturally and politically distinct from the majority of the population (Heng et al., 2022). As a result, this dynamic has created unique barriers to the successful implementation of English language education (Shohel et al., 2022). For instance, the children were frequently taught English through rote memorization of grammar rules, with little emphasis on understanding and meaningful communication. This outdated approach was further reinforced by physical discipline or corporal punishment.

In some rural areas, Confucian-influenced societies exacerbated these obstacles by marginalizing women's voices and limiting participation in

communication activities (Jakubiak, 2019). Furthermore, English language programs often faced resistance and pushback from political leaders, who viewed English as a symbol of Western influence and a threat to the preservation of local cultures. This perception, in turn, hindered efforts to effectively integrate English into educational systems (Taylor, 2024). Historically, initiatives to advance English language education encountered significant resistance, particularly during the 1980s-1990s, when English was perceived as a marker of Western influence that threatened local cultures and hindered effective educational progress. To address these challenges, a comprehensive and thoughtful approach is required—one that considers the distinct social, cultural, and political dynamics of the communities involved. At the same time, the efforts must also strive for the meaningful inclusion of the marginalized voices while preserving the cultural identity (Henderson & Jones, 2021).

3.1 Limited Access to Technology

The utilization of technology to assist language learners is prevalent globally; however, variations in accessibility and proficiency levels persist (Haleem et al., 2022). For instance, in Cambodia, technology has broadened educational prospects, especially in remote areas, through institutions like Universities (Sok & Bunry, 2023). Despite these advancements, the benefits are mainly limited to urban areas due to factors like income and education levels, resulting in a digital gap with the far-reaching consequences for students worldwide (Jamil, 2021). To bridge this gap, it is very crucial to invest in technology infrastructure and digital literacy programs across the country to ensure equitable opportunities for all citizens. In this regard, collaboration between the public and private sectors can play a key role in making internet access and devices more affordable and accessible in underserved regions (Hambly & Rajabiun, 2021). Moreover, investing in advanced technological solutions and improving infrastructure connectivity will establish a strong ecosystem that promotes innovation and empowers learners to thrive in the digital era (Tang, 2022).

In addition to the infrastructure development, creating the technological ecosystems that are accessible requires strategic partnerships with tech companies and educational organizations. By working together, these groups can create game-changing programs that empower students through customized apps, online resources, and interactive platforms (Benitez et al., 2020). Importantly, promoting digital literacy among educators, students, and broader community is essential for effective utilization of technology in education and personal development. By equipping the teachers with the

necessary skills and resources, they can seamlessly integrate technology into their teaching practices and design dynamic learning environments that cater to diverse student needs (Liu et al., 2020). At the same time, students should receive a thorough education in digital literacy, enabling them to safely navigate the digital world, evaluate information critically, and use technology effectively for educational purposes. Furthermore, community involvement is critical, as it builds support networks and encourages lifelong learning beyond the classroom (Aguilar, 2020).

On a broader scale, global collaboration and partnerships play a crucial role in bridging the worldwide digital divide and ensuring equitable access to technology for all learners. In this case, the international organizations, governments, and educational institutions can foster knowledge exchange, resource sharing, and capacity building, leading to sustainable solutions that transcend borders (Buchholz et al., 2020). Specifically in Cambodia, these partnerships can facilitate development and implementation of innovative strategies to address the challenges, as such limited access to electricity and connectivity in remote areas (Vai et al., 2020). In brief, while technology aids language learners worldwide, Cambodia faces notable barriers to narrowing the digital divide. These challenges can be addressed through investments in infrastructure, digital literacy programs, and international partnerships. By prioritizing equal access to the technology, empowering educators and learners, and fostering global collaboration, Cambodia can overcome these obstacles and unlock the full potential of its citizens, ensuring a brighter future for generations to come.

3.2 Lack of Resources and Infrastructure

The shortage of the resources and infrastructure is closely related to the socioeconomic gap that persists in many countries, contributing to the digital divide. This issue has become even more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Vassilakopoulou & Hustad, 2023). Similarly, unequal access to information and technological resources greatly contributes to the widening of social and economic inequalities among the individuals and communities (Tewathia et al., 2020). For instance, while some students within a school community benefit from access to a wide range of technological resources, others lack even the most necessities, such as electricity, radio, mobile devices, internet connectivity, and a quiet place for learning (Koch, 2022). Numerous micro- and macro-level variables play a role in shaping the current realities and prospects in education and career paths (Pearsall et al., 2021).

Despite the extensive emphasis on high-tech solutions for education, as such educational software, apps, web-based online learning platforms, coding workshops, virtual and augmented reality environments, and educational games designed to enhance students' learning are highlighted, these innovations exclude a large portion of students in today's world (Ejaz & Mallawaarachchi, 2023; Em, 2023). In fact, these benefits are accessible only to those with the privilege of using the latest digital tools, further deepening and perpetuating the digital divide. Likewise, the lack of access to the technology places the underfunded public education systems and disadvantaged communities at an even greater risk of being marginalized (Qureshi, 2021). Given that education acts as both a means of enhancing socioeconomic status and an instigator of social mobility, it is crucial to guarantee fair access to the basic components, including technology and information (Rich & Pather, 2020).

4. Opportunities for Equitable Access

Incorporating technology in English language programs can greatly increase students' motivation to learn and provide them with greater access to learning opportunities. It offers a wealth of enhanced resources that benefit both teachers and students alike (Asso, 2023). Beyond these advantages, technology integration can also help overcome various barriers specific to English language programs (Nicoletti et al., 2022). Moreover, incorporating technology into subject matter instruction helps students acquire essential computer and information technology skills (Langa & Bhatta, 2023). In turn, this promotes the use of information and communication technology as a valuable learning tool. Notably, for non-native speakers of English, the benefits are even more significant, as they use the language as an integral part of learning the technology (Reddick et al., 2020). Simultaneously, technology serves as a crucial tool for developing English language proficiency (Lythreatis et al., 2022).

One of the most significant contributions of computer-assisted tools is their ability to bring about remarkable improvements, particularly development of listening and reading skills. This, in turn, promotes competence in both basic communication and academic language (Zolfaghari et al., 2020). By integrating computers in an active and structured manner, students can engage in communicative interactions where they actively use language to support one another in comprehending texts, practicing language skills, and applying knowledge gained from the reading (Tewathia et al., 2020). Furthermore, engaging in dialogue through computer with fellow students or teachers allows students to gain valuable experience in communicating

for authentic and meaningful reasons (see Reddick et al., 2020). At the same time, they receive genuine and constructive feedback, further enhancing their language skills (see Langa & Bhatta, 2023).

In addition, computers can be effectively employed to enrich the reading experience, improve the students' vocabulary, and enhance the reading comprehension. This can be achieved through interactive software that offers personalized instruction tailored to meet the unique needs and backgrounds of individual students (Coleman et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020). When it comes to speaking abilities, the computer can also be an invaluable resource. Specifically, it can provide training for more extensive speech, focusing on elements such as pronunciation, intonation, pitch, and fluency (Arakpogun et al., 2020). For example, the students can utilize the speech recognition software to engage in intensive pronunciation practice, enabling them to refine their spoken language skills effectively (see Eruchalu et al., 2021). Overall, incorporating technology into English language programs offers a wide array of benefits, fostering a more engaging and dynamic learning environment for students of all levels (Josef, 2021).

4.1 Innovative Pedagogical Approaches

For many years, teacher-centered pedagogical approaches have dominated English language teaching. In these classrooms, the teacher is the primary focus, while the students often passively listen and observe. The teacher controls the activities and dictates what is expected in exams (Mubarak et al., 2020). However, this approach can have the negative consequences, particularly for students with auditory or tactile learning preferences (see Lythreatis et al., 2022). Due to the emphasis on passive learning and visual elements, these students may struggle to absorb information effectively (Feng et al., 2023).

In addition to this, the process of traditional teaching and learning often encourages the rote memorization, which hinders students from developing critical thinking skills (Bevan, 2017; Huot et al., 2024). Unfortunately, students are frequently discouraged and penalized when they attempt to deviate from the predefined content or stylistic templates in their writing assessments. As a result, such practices further exacerbate their inability to think independently and creatively (see Zolfaghari et al., 2020). Given these challenges, it is evident that comprehensive transformation is necessary to align with the demands of the 21st-century students. Importantly, this transformation requires more than simply asking educators to take on the role of facilitators or to incorporate technology into their lessons (Asso, 2023). Instead, there is a pressing need for teachers who possess critical and

creative thinking abilities themselves. To achieve this, these teachers must be trained in the principles and practices of universal design for learning concepts, which aim to provide equitable educational opportunities for all students, regardless of location (Helsper, 2021).

By embracing these concepts, insightful and creative teachers can empower themselves and their students to overcome the digital divide that exists today. With the integration of information and communication technology in instruction (Pearsall et al., 2021), these educators can bridge the gap and ensure equitable access to education worldwide (see Feng et al., 2023). In this digital age, investing in the future by closing the digital divide has become an imperative, underscored by the rise of strategic philanthropy (Aissaoui, 2021). Thus, it is essential to acknowledge the constraints and flaws of traditional teacher-centered pedagogy and adopt a more inclusive and dynamic approach to English language teaching (Dargin & Mostafavi, 2020). Transformation demands teachers who are not only well-informed but also adaptable and innovative. With guidance and support, students can develop the critical thinking skills while navigating the digital landscape. Ultimately, by investing in these innovative teaching practices, we can pave the way for a future where equitable education is a reality for all (Esteban et al., 2020).

4.2 Community Partnerships

Community partnerships play a crucial role in bridging the digital divide, providing valuable digital resources that enhance English language teaching and learning, particularly in the underserved areas (Karasik, 2019). These partnerships are highly adaptable, taking various forms to meet the unique needs of each community (Antonacopoulou, 2022). One of the most impactful forms of community collaboration is comprehensive professional development for educators. Instead of simply providing digital resources to students, this approach equips teachers with the skills and confidence to integrate information and communication technologies (ICTs) into their classrooms. By doing so, educators can better address the specific needs and challenges of their communities (Hennessy et al., 2022). In this model, higher education institutions work closely with experienced EFL instructor trainers, embarking on transformative journey to introduce and incorporate ICTs into local teaching methodologies (Tay et al., 2021). The ultimate goal is to empower educators, enabling them to harness the potential of digital tools to expand learning opportunities for students (Hammond, 2020).

The community partnerships can enhance teaching and learning through the paid internships. The corporations, looking to refine marketing strategies or

development firms exploring cutting-edge ICT applications, can support these communities by financially investing in educators who utilize their products. This collaboration ensures that underserved communities remain at the forefront of technological advancements (Jain et al., 2020). As part of this initiative, community educators and corporate partners work together to conceptualize, design, and refine digital applications tailored to the specific needs of the community (Williamson, 2020; Dionisio & Vargas, 2022). These applications undergo rigorous testing and refinement before being released commercially, ensuring their effectiveness for both local and broader audiences (Heyer et al., 2021).

Similarly, the community service-learning projects in higher education can leverage ICTs to strengthen local economies. In this context, partnerships aim to integrate digital resources into various economic activities, fostering sustainability and prosperity. By doing so, higher education institutions not only support economic development but also equip community members with valuable digital skills for the modern workforce (Levkoe et al., 2018; Castro et al., 2020; Giesenbauer & Müller, 2020). Community partnerships serve as a cornerstone in addressing the digital divide and ensuring that no community is left behind. Through collaboration among higher education institutions, educators, corporations and development firms, the digital resources can be delivered effectively to physically and socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Ultimately, embracing ICTs and fostering innovation foster the partnerships empower educators, expand learning opportunities, and lay the foundation for a more inclusive and digitally connected future.

5. Conclusion

Numerous studies have documented the profound educational and societal disparities caused by socioeconomic marginalization. Given this reality, the urgent challenge is to develop the sustainable and scalable solutions to counteract its historical effects. One promising approach is leveraging the mobile technology to bridge the digital divide in English language learning. By expanding access to technology-driven tools, marginalized learners have the opportunities to engage in education and communication, fostering the personal and academic growth. Mobile learning holds significant potential to reduce educational inequalities by providing effective English language instruction and unrestricted access to information on the World Wide Web. Beyond immediate benefits, research on mobile technology in education could inform broader policy discussions. For instance, the adapted SETT framework could help educators advocate for the specific mobile tools by providing data-driven evidence of their effectiveness. By integrating this

framework into policy discussions, decision-makers could be encouraged to prioritize mobile technology initiatives and develop long-term strategies to meet the growing demand for digital learning resources. Finally, fostering an open dialogue between marginalized communities, policymakers, and financial stakeholders is essential to achieving equitable access to digital tools. Even small-scale, well-planned interventions can yield significant results, bringing us closer to a future where all learners, regardless of socioeconomic status, have the digital resources they need to succeed.

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