Catch-up classes give refugee children second chance at learning

"Before I joined the Catch-Up Club, I couldn't read or write in English. Now I can read stories and write properly. I even enjoy singing in class!" – Fuanuti Nyamundu, P7, Kavule Primary School

Fuanuti Nyamundu, a bright-eyed Primary Seven pupil at Kavule Primary School, vividly remembers the sense of frustration and isolation she felt when she first arrived at school in Kyangwali Refugee Settlement.

Coming from a Congolese background, Fuanuti had no prior knowledge of English. Watching her classmates read, write and recite lessons fluently while she struggled to recognise letters and words left her feeling lost and hopeless.

"I used to sit quietly at the back of the classroom, afraid to ask questions. I felt like I was always behind. It was scary because I wanted to learn, but I didn't know how," she recalls.

For Fuanuti, and many other children in the settlement, the language barrier was more than an academic challenge, it was a daily reminder of the disruption they had faced in their young lives. Many refugee children arrive in Uganda speaking only French, Arabic, or Swahili, with little exposure to English, the medium of instruction in primary schools.

But two years later, Fuanuti's story has transformed. Today, she confidently reads English stories aloud, writes complete sentences, and even sings English songs in class. The difference, she says, lies in the after-school Catch-Up Classes, introduced under the Language for Resilience (L4R) project, a partnership between Windle International Uganda and the British Council.

How catch-up classes work

At Kavule Primary School, teacher Annet Nakasinde manages the catch-up classes for Primary One and Three learners. Each afternoon, after regular school hours, she calls in students who are struggling with English to attend 30–40 minutes of extra lessons.

"We identify learners who need support using an assessment tool. We have three levels. Children start at Level One, and those who score nine out of ten in their exercises move up to the next level. We want to make sure they have truly mastered the skills before promotion," Nakasinde explains.

The teaching methods are practical and interactive. Sentence cards, flash cards and picture cards help learners associate words with meaning. Small class sizes—never more than 20 learners—allow teachers to give individual attention. But learning isn't just about reading and writing. Nakasinde uses plays, songs and interactive exercises to make lessons fun.

"The learners enjoy it. They laugh, participate and learn while having fun. Many children come home and practice with their siblings and parents. That helps reinforce what we teach in class," she says.

Deputy Head Teacher Dagras Monday adds that these clubs improve more than just literacy.

"Catch-up clubs help learners to be self-reliant and improve their literacy skills. Children learn through play, which brings happiness and strengthens teacher-student relationships. Attendance has improved because learners feel safe and supported."

A unique aspect of the catch-up clubs is the emphasis on play. Teachers incorporate songs, stories, and small dramas into lessons.

"Children learn best when they are happy. Through plays and songs, they engage with the language naturally. They laugh, perform, and practice English without fear," explains Dagras Monday.

This approach helps children gain confidence and social skills, in addition to improving literacy. It also prepares them to participate in debates, classroom discussions, and school governance roles.

Voices from the learners

The impact of the catch-up classes is best seen in the eyes of the children themselves.

Philip Ifataj, a Primary Six pupil at Kinyakyeitaka Primary School, joined the club after arriving from Congo with no prior English knowledge.

"Before joining, I was shy and afraid to speak. Now I can debate, communicate with others, and even serve as prefect in charge of academics," he says proudly.

For Theogen Mapendo, a Primary Four pupil at Malembo Primary School, the club has opened new avenues for expression.

"I joined to learn how to read stories, write, and speak in the school parliament. Now I enjoy reading and writing with my friends," he shares.

Fuanuti echoes the sentiment. "I work in a team with other learners. We help each other, read together, and practice our English. I no longer feel behind."

Even children who initially struggled with self-confidence have flourished. Ifataj, for instance, who once avoided speaking in front of others, is now an active participant in debates and classroom discussions.

Challenges beyond the classroom

Despite their successes, learners face significant obstacles. High absenteeism is a persistent challenge, particularly on market days, when children accompany their parents, or on Fridays, when they are tasked with collecting firewood. Hunger also poses a barrier. The catch-up classes are held after school, and most learners do not have access to lunch, making concentration difficult.

Teachers, too, face hurdles. Shortages of instructional materials such as books, pens, and movable chalkboards limit the effectiveness of the lessons.

"Most learners in the settlement are used to receiving free materials from previous programs. Without adequate resources, participation can be limited, but we continue to motivate them and their parents," explains Ruth Adoch, coordinator at Malembo Primary School.

The teachers themselves often go beyond the call of duty. Sharon Bahati, an English teacher at Ngurwe Primary School, conducts the sessions twice a week.

"Many learners come hungry or are delayed by chores. Sometimes we teach under a tree without a movable chalkboard. Still, seeing them improve keeps us motivated," she says.

Building a sustainable program

The catch-up classes are part of the L4R project, which began in 2018. Initially, the project focused on research to understand the impact of refugees on Uganda's education system. Findings highlighted the urgent need for language support programs to help children adapt to new linguistic environments.

Since then, the program has grown into a comprehensive initiative that trains teachers, provides learning materials and introduces innovative teaching methods. Workshops for teachers cover topics like socio-emotional learning, gender inclusion, ICT and psychosocial pedagogies.

"Many learners arrive knowing only Arabic, French, or Swahili. Catch-up clubs help them integrate, communicate and enjoy learning. Teachers are more motivated because teaching becomes meaningful when learners understand the language," says Deputy Head Teacher Paul Moses Nyende at Kinyakyeitaka.

Currently, the program has benefited thousands of learners across multiple schools in Kyangwali Refugee Settlement. Teachers use Teacher Activity Groups (TAGs) to identify challenges and devise solutions, ensuring that learners not only improve academically but also socially.

Teacher and community impact

For teachers, the clubs are an opportunity to innovate and build stronger connections with students. Anatoli Amanyira, a Mathematics teacher at Kinyakyeitaka, observes, "Children in the club are sharper, more confident, and actively participate in class. Teacher-pupil relationships have improved, and the classroom environment is more engaging."

Community involvement is also key. Parents are sensitised on the importance of the classes and encouraged to support their children, helping to sustain the program even when external funding ends.

The impact of the clubs is evident in the success stories of learners who have graduated into mainstream classes.

Ifataj, once shy and withdrawn, is now a school prefect leading academic activities. Fuanuti, once struggling with basic reading and writing, can now read full stories in English and teach her younger peers.

"The catch-up clubs have given us confidence, knowledge, and hope. They have transformed our school experience," says Theogen Mapendo.

Looking Ahead

Launched in 2018, the L4R project—a partnership between the British Council and Windle International Uganda—supports refugee learners in Uganda with language and literacy programs. It trains teachers, introduces Catch-Up Clubs and Teacher Activity Groups (TAGs), and strengthens socio-emotional learning.

Since its inception, over 935 teachers across 81 schools have benefitted, helping children improve English skills, confidence and school participation. Refresher trainings in 2025–2026 aim to expand the program, reaching 990 teachers and school leaders to ensure continued support and lasting impact.

The catch-up classes continue to expand. Plans are underway to train more teachers and reach more learners.

"Even though some children feel this is a temporary situation, many refugees stay for decades. These programs prepare them for real-life opportunities and integration," says Amanyira.

Despite limited resources and logistical challenges, the dedication of teachers and the enthusiasm of learners ensure that the program continues to thrive.

For children in Kyangwali refugee settlement, the catch-up classes are more than an academic intervention—they are a lifeline. Through dedicated teachers, supportive parents, and committed organizations, slow learners are gaining skills, confidence, and hope for a brighter future.

"Now I can read and write English, and I even enjoy learning. I know I can achieve my dreams," says Fuanuti.

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5 ways catch-up clubs help learners

Boost literacy skills – Learners struggling with English receive focused instruction to catch up with peers.

Increase confidence – Pupils gain the courage to speak, read, and participate in debates and classroom discussions.

Encourage school attendance – Learners feel supported, safe, and motivated to attend school consistently.

Promote teamwork – Activities like plays, songs, and group exercises build collaboration skills.

Prepare for mainstream classes – Learners progress through levels and are promoted into regular classes once they catch up.