Why strengthening language instruction is vital for resilient refugee education systems

In many refugee settlements, thousands of refugee children flee across borders, bringing with them their native tongues, many of which differ from the languages of instruction in their host communities.

This linguistic diversity, while culturally enriching, often becomes a barrier to learning and integration. Learners often struggle to follow lessons, with teachers facing difficulties managing multilingual classrooms, and this results into schools grappling with inclusion gaps.

When Bassa Mbuta fled conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo and arrived at Imvepi Refugee Settlement in 2021, he joined Primary Six at Equatorial Primary School without knowing a single word of English. Every lesson felt foreign, with the teachers speaking too fast, the words on the blackboard making little sense, and even asking for help was a challenge. Surrounded by classmates who already understood the language of instruction, Mbuta often sat in silence, lost between the words he heard and the ideas he wanted to express, something that made him feel lost in translation.

However, recognizing the challenges learners like him face, under the Language for Resilience (L4R) project, Windle International Uganda (WIU) in partnership with the British Council, launched a program in refugee settlements across the country.

The program aimed to strengthen language instruction and support both teachers and students in refugee-hosting schools.

Initially grounded in research conducted in 2018, the first study revealed a pressing need for language support programs, particularly the establishment of a bridging program to help refugee learners adapt to new linguistic environments. Language barriers were found to hinder classroom participation, limit academic performance, reduce learners' confidence, and affect inclusion in refugee settings.

A follow-up study in 2019 further examined language use in classrooms within refugee-affected schools, recommending targeted teacher capacity building and the proper placement of learners based on language proficiency. These findings informed the development of two handbooks for teachers and school leaders, designed to strengthen language instruction and promote inclusive education practices. Building on these research insights, the program evolved to emphasize capacity building for teachers and school leaders.

According to Andrew Emmanuel Omara, Executive Director at Windle International Uganda, he explained, "Addressing language as a barrier in learning is key to providing inclusive, quality education for refugees and marginalized learners."

Upon this backdrop, communities were engaged through workshops and training sessions. In 2021, the British Council organized a three-day workshop bringing together 239 teachers and school leaders from various refugee settlements. This effort was scaled up in 2022, engaging 129 school leaders, 203 teachers, and 81 community leaders.

The trainings covered diverse areas including language development, socio-emotional learning (SEL), gender inclusion, ICT, and psychosocial pedagogies, aiming to enhance the quality of education and strengthen community participation in refugee contexts.

The program continued through 2023 and 2024, training 935 teachers across ten modules designed to meet learners' diverse needs.

For Bassa Mbuta, he was able to overcome the language barriers that once held him back. With the support and engagement provided through the L4R program, he gradually improved his English, actively participated in class, and gained the confidence to express himself. His dedication, combined with targeted teacher guidance, paid off. Last year, he attained aggregate 12 at the Primary Leaving Examinations (PLE) and was recognized as the best pupil in his school.

Furthermore, new tools such as English Catch-up Clubs and Teachers Activity Groups (TAGs) were introduced to promote interactive learning and collaboration among educators. These interventions have demonstrated significant results, improving language instruction, fostering inclusion, and building resilience among both teachers and learners.

Looking ahead

As the Language for Resilience (L4R) project enters its next phase, Omara says that the focus will remain on sustaining and scaling the progress achieved in refugee-hosting schools. Between 2025 and 2026, the program will conduct refresher trainings in five refugee settlements, targeting 990 teachers and school leaders.

These sessions are expected to strengthen the implementation of Teachers Activity Groups (TAGs) and English Catch-up Clubs, ensuring continued collaboration and peer learning among educators.

Some participants new to the initiative, and others who attended the 2024 training will receive follow-up support to reinforce their skills and knowledge.

Omara also added that through deepening teacher capacity and expanding community engagement, the project hopes to further improve learning outcomes, inclusion, and resilience across refugee education systems.

Ultimately, the L4R project demonstrates that language is not only a medium of instruction, but also a bridge to opportunity, confidence, and belonging for thousands of refugee learners.