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An investigation into the impact of a workplace English language programme in Egypt

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Introduction
Within the long-term objectives of English language reform in higher education (HE) institutes across Egypt and increasing employability in the global job market, the Center for Advancement of Post-Graduate Studies and Research, Cairo University (CAPSCU), Cambridge English Language Assessment and the British Council (Egypt) implemented a multi-phase upskilling programme targeting 1,000 students and 100 teachers. The programme aimed at the following: enhancing the workplace language skills of socially disadvantaged undergraduates, developing teachers’ pedagogical knowledge and application, providing both students and teachers with a competitive edge in the job markets through internationally recognised certification and the introduction of 21st century skills such as digital-age literacy and effective communication in HE, and, lastly, the integration of international standards for teaching, learning and assessment within the local context. This paper reports on a mixed methods research study aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of this initiative and its impact at the micro and macro levels. The research focused on language progression, learner autonomy, motivation towards digital learning and assessment, improvements in pedagogical knowledge and teaching practices. Standardized assessment, attitudinal and perceptions surveys and observational data were used to investigate the above. The findings suggested a positive impact of the upskilling programme, illustrated how international collaborations can provide the necessary skills for today’s global job market and highlighted areas for consideration for upscaling the initiative.

Context
Higher education in Egypt witnessed a profound transformation in 1959 with the constitutional amendment mandating education as a basic right for all Egyptians. The ‘Free for All’ education resulted in an expansion of the number of state universities from four in the 1950s to 19 in 2014, currently enrolling over 2 million students. However, this expansion was not accompanied with a corresponding development that would equip the students with the skills needed in increasingly competitive local and global job markets. Several projects, initiatives and plans thus emerged in an attempt to address the different factors leading to unemployment. One of these initiatives is Pathways to Higher Education, Egypt (PHE-EG) - a scholarship programme aimed at enhancing the soft skills of socially disadvantaged undergraduates and widening their employment opportunities (for detailed information on PHE-EG, see pathways-egypt.com, Said and Kaseb 2013). PHE-EG is funded by Ford Foundation and managed by the Center for Advancement of Post Graduate Studies, Cairo University (CAPSCU).

One of the soft skills believed to greatly sharpen an individual’s competitive edge in the tough employment market is that of English language ability. Euromonitor International’s consumer perception analysis reveals that ‘67% of Egyptian employees believe English is the most important language for doing international business. Moreover, the average salary gap between non-English speakers and English speakers is around 70–80% in Egypt’ (see Ramaswami, Sarraf and Haydon 2012:124). Similarly, an argument has been made that ‘professionals cannot take their place in a knowledge economy if they lack sophisticated spoken and written English skills. Within professions such as medicine, nursing, teaching, accountancy and engineering, high level English ability is viewed as mandatory’ (Hawthorne 2007:9). It was in response to this growing need for English language skills that in 2009, CAPSCU, through its PHE-EG administrative arm, issued a call for proposals to deliver an English Language component as part of its soft skills programme focusing on the improvement of English language teaching and learning. The upskilling programme was funded by Ford Foundation through CAPSCU and delivered by Cambridge English Language Assessment as the main contractor and British Council-Egypt as the subcontractor. The latter was tasked with the delivery of the Training of Trainers (TOT) course and the mentoring programme. The programme was divided into three iterations and took place between December 2010 and May 2014.

The Cambridge English Upskilling Programme
The goals of the Cambridge English Upskilling Programme (CEP) were to enhance the workplace language skills of approximately 1,000 undergraduates and recent graduates so that they could have better career opportunities and to enhance the teaching methodology of 100 teachers, with focus on pre-service and inexperienced ones. Key to the successful implementation of the programme was not just the realisation of the goals but also the:

(a) Utilisation of international standards for teaching, learning and assessment, hence the use of the Council of Europe’s Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001) as a learning ladder and target setter.

(b) Introduction of 21st century skills such as digital-age literacy, effective communication, inventive thinking, and high productivity. This was realised through the use of...
a blended learning course (BLC) for students, the TOT course and teacher observation/mentoring schedules.

(c) Attainment of an internationally recognised certification which acts as capability evidence in the local, regional and international job market. This was realized through the attainment of a Cambridge English workplace certificate known as BULATS (Business Language Testing Service) and the Cambridge English Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT) certificate. For information on these qualifications, see: www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams-and-qualifications/TKT and www.bulats.org.

(d) Potential for mainstreaming the initiative to reform English language provision in higher education institutions nationwide and supporting a standards-based model that can be embraced on a national level by adopting the CEFR as the underlying framework of the initiative.

The impact of the upskilling programme and areas for improvement were researched through a mixed methods design study.

Investigation points
In order to examine the effectiveness of the CEP on PHE-EG English language provision and to investigate factors which may lead to mainstreaming of the initiative, the following three broad research questions were formulated:
1. What is the impact of the CEP on participating teachers?
2. What is the impact of the CEP on participating students?
3. What are the factors which need to be considered for mainstreaming the initiative?

The next sections provide details of the research sample and the methods used for addressing the above research questions.

Methodology
Research sample and selection procedures
The participant sample represented 12 out of the 23 state universities involved in PHE-EG programmes. The 12 universities covered different regions across Egypt.

A total of 1,006 students completed the CEP. In order to ensure accurate and fair selection of student participants as well as guarantee their commitment, a set of standard procedures for all PHE-EG programmes were first employed (e.g. attending an interview, submission of essays). This was followed by the administration of the Cambridge English Placement Test (CEPT), which was used for selecting students at the target language ability for this specific English language programme. PHE-EG selected students who achieved CEFR A2 level.

The majority of students (79%) were aged between 20 and 22. Gender distribution was approximately equal (males=49% and females=51%). Most students were from Tanta, Minia, Beni-Suef and Fayoum universities. The largest percentage of students was enrolled at faculties of Commerce (28%), Arts (20%) and Education (19%). Most students were in their fourth year of studies (39%) or had already graduated (27%). This implies that students were likely to be seeking employment or further education and as such, were in a better position to evaluate the extent to which the BLC and the BULATS certificate can have an impact on their future employment and education prospects.

A total of 102 teachers participated in the CEP. Teacher selection followed a two-stage process. Firstly, potential applicants were interviewed and scored against four criteria (linguistic competency, motivation, ability to deal with difficult situations and mixed-ability classes, and willingness to train for PHE-EG after finishing the course) using a 5-point Likert scale. Secondly, those who were shortlisted and attended the TOT were then given TKT as the end-of-course assessment. Based on their TKT results, they were selected to teach on the programme.

The majority of teachers fell in the 31-50 age range, were PhD holders and had more than 15 years of English teaching experience. There were 70 female and 32 male teachers. Most trainers also reported having a range of teaching qualifications and certificates.

Research design and methodology
A mixed methods research design (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011) was adopted for this study, where both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. The former consisted of score data from external assessments and attitudinal/perception surveys whereas the latter comprised of document review of teacher observation reports as well as open-ended commentary on surveys. Table 1 overleaf summarises the types and sources of data collected for investigating the impact of the CEPT on teachers and students.

Surveys were designed to elicit student and teacher views on the upskilling programme and were administered at the end of each iteration of the CEP. For students, the surveys focused on the impact of the placement test, blended learning course and workplace certification on English language learning, motivation, confidence in using English, attitudes towards independent learning, and future professional opportunities (28 questions). The teacher surveys focused on the impact of the TOT and TKT on changes in teaching practices, attitudes towards blended learning and professional development opportunities (21 questions). Teachers were also asked to evaluate the language learning progress of students as a further source of evidence for triangulation against score data and students’ self-assessments of their own progress.

Survey items were adapted from the Cambridge English Language Assessment ‘impact toolkit’ and were further modified for the specific local context with input from teams in Egypt and the UK. Expert judgement was used in making further amendments to the surveys prior to implementation. Close-ended questions/statements were positively worded on a 5-point Likert scale. Open-ended questions and comment boxes were also included. The surveys were created with SurveyMonkey (online) and were in English.

Using a ‘convergent parallel design’ (see Figure 1) each strand of data analysis was completed independently. However, in answering the study’s overarching research...
questions, the findings from the two strands of analyses were merged. This approach enabled us to build a rich picture and the triangulation of information derived from multiple data sources enhanced our confidence in the findings (see Greene, Caracelli and Graham (1989) for a discussion on reasons for mixing methods).

Focus on teachers: Key findings and recommendations

Findings from four sources of data are brought together to evaluate the extent to which the programme had an impact on the enhancement of teachers’ pedagogic knowledge and skills, their ability to apply acquired knowledge in practice, attitudes towards teaching and learning, and professional development. These sources include score data, classroom observation data, teacher self-evaluation data and student evaluation of their teachers.

Score data from international assessment showed that teachers performed well on the assessment test with 90% achieving performance Bands 3 and 4 on TKT. The strongest performance was observed for Module 2 (lesson planning) on the basis of the percentage of teachers achieving Band 4, while the weakest performance was observed for Module 3 (classroom management) with performance on Module 1 (background to language teaching) falling in between (see Figure 2).

Classroom observation data revealed varying strengths in practical application. Possible areas for improvement were listed as decreasing teacher talking time, increasing paired interactions, varying the pace of the class and including more engaging materials. The following is an example of a typical comment from the observers:

Figure 1: Convergent parallel design procedural diagram (Adapted from Creswell and Plano Clark 2011:118)
Self-evaluation data reflected a positive impact of the teacher upskilling programme on a) an increased awareness of new teaching techniques and strategies, b) a better understanding of a 21st century skills approach to language teaching, c) increased interaction in the classroom, d) promotion of active learning, e) awareness of student learning styles and ways of catering for them, f) placing greater emphasis on the development of learner autonomy, and g) development of greater self-awareness of positive and negative aspects of teaching. An illustrative comment by one of the teachers is reproduced below:

"[The course] made me appreciate the use of active learning techniques & helped me revise the roles I can play in the class; I used to overlook some of these roles; made me rethink of ways to empower learners."

Students' evaluations of their teachers according to the survey responses suggested a highly positive attitude towards their teachers with the majority of respondents (95%) believing teachers to be well qualified, providing them with opportunities to interact with other students and also providing helpful feedback. Open comments by students further illustrated their appreciation for the teachers on the course. To sum up, findings demonstrate a very positive impact of the programme on teachers in introducing new teaching techniques and strategies, increased familiarisation with blended courses and ways of promoting learner autonomy and increased awareness of different student learning styles. In light of these findings, this article recommends more emphasis on the following aspects of learning and teaching:

- increasing shared responsibility for learning between teachers and students
- fostering learner autonomy and encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning
- reducing the ‘lecture style’ kind of teaching
- decreasing teacher talking time
- increasing paired and group interactions
- varying the pace of the class
- selecting more engaging supplementary materials.

**Focus on students: Key findings and recommendations**

Findings from different sources of data are brought together to evaluate the extent to which the programme had an impact on students’ English language progress, attitudes towards digital learning and assessment, future professional and academic opportunities, and the development of learner autonomy. These sources include students’ score data, self and teacher assessments of progress, student and teacher close- and open-ended responses from surveys.

Survey findings point to a highly positive impact of the Blended Learning Course (BLC) on students. Both students and teachers have attributed improvements in students’ English language skills and knowledge to a positive impact of the BLC.

Students believed the BLC to have had the strongest influence on their listening, reading and writing skills, with average ratings above 3.0 (maximum 4). Amongst the four skills, speaking was observed to have the lowest average of 2.97. From the perspective of teachers, students displayed most improvement in business-related vocabulary, followed by reading and general vocabulary. The least perceived improvement was reported for the skills of grammar, speaking and listening (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Teachers’ perceptions of improvements to students’ language skills**

These perspectives were substantiated, to some extent, in the results of the score data. Figure 4 shows the percentage of candidates across the different CEFR levels on the CEPT and BULATS tests of Reading & Listening (measured in both tests). It can be seen that while the proportion of candidates across the different CEFR levels is fairly similar on the two tests, the percentage of candidates achieving a B1 band on BULATS is higher than CEPT. These are positive results, indicating an improvement (albeit small) in candidate abilities on the skills of reading and listening following the BLC.

Another approach was to examine improvement at the
individual candidate level by extracting those candidates who had achieved a minimum of one band level higher on BULATS Online compared to CEPT. Results showed that 21% of candidates had moved to an upper CEFR band level following the BLC and 1.5% had moved up two levels. A breakdown of the CEFR levels of these candidates (based on CEPT results) suggested that, as expected, the BLC has the strongest impact on candidates at Levels A2 and B1.

A snapshot of candidate performance on the BULATS test and broken down by skill is displayed in Figure 5, where results suggest a mode (the most frequently occurring level) of B1 on all four skills, which is in line with the PHE-EG target exit level.1 When focusing on subject specialisations, the findings similarly show that the majority of candidates across groups display a mode of B1 (see Table 2). Writing appears to be the students’ strongest skill in most subject groups with 30–37% of candidates displaying abilities at Levels B2 and above. This is not the case for the Commerce and Accounting group, where the strongest group’s weakest skill is speaking with less than 10% of candidates achieving Level B2 and above. Arts and Humanities, in contrast, was the strongest group in terms of speaking skills with around 25% of the candidates at Level B2 and above. Stronger performances in speaking in this group may be a reflection of the more language-oriented nature of the subjects.

Survey results suggested a positive impact of the BLC on students in increasing their confidence and motivation to use English, increased familiarity with the notion of self-study and increased preparedness for the BULATS test with agreement rates hovering around 90% (see Figure 6). Correspondingly, the disagreement rates are generally low, falling below 10%. The lowest agreement rate (81.7%) was observed for the statement (f) ‘I felt well-prepared for taking the BULATS test’ but which is nevertheless still quite high (see Figure 6).

Students also reported having a positive attitude towards blended learning approaches following their experience with the BLC. Both teachers and students believed that the online component of the BLC had a positive influence on promoting learner autonomy. However, relatively high average ratings of 2.8 and 3.1 for the statements ‘I found it difficult to manage my learning on my own’ and ‘It’s easier for me to learn when the teacher tells me what I have to do’ in the student surveys as well as in the open comments by teachers, suggested that there was also a need to provide students with support in the online part of the course.

Results also suggested that in spite of all the efforts to facilitate digital learning, technical issues with the online...
Several recommendations are made in light of the findings. It is recommended that PHE-EG should:

- Aim to have students exit the course with a minimum B1 level across all four skills and to also have a higher proportion of students graduate from this course at B2 level so that they are able to function independently in the workplace as far as language proficiency is concerned. These aims can be achieved by:
  - increasing the number of face-to-face hours (which is also the most common emerging theme from the surveys with reference to improving the BLC)
  - allowing for more practice time
  - increasing all types of opportunities for student-student and student-teacher interactions in the English language.

- Continue efforts to promote learner autonomy and provide support in time management for the online component of the course.
- Cater for differences in student learning style: for example by including a wider range of task types both in the classroom and the online environment.
- Ensure access for all by providing necessary infrastructure and technical support for the online component of the course.
- Play on the strengths of face-to-face and online approaches and minimising any weaknesses.

Focus on mainstreaming the initiative: Factors for consideration

As mentioned earlier, the initiative was implemented in 12 out of the 23 state universities participating in PHE-EG programmes. The 12 universities are geographically distributed across Egypt. One of the requests from the bid issuer was for the winning bidder to provide recommendations for mainstreaming of the initiative and upscaling it to nationwide implementation. The suggestions made below are based on the qualitative and quantitative data gathered during the course of the initiative and on new knowledge and experience gained during implementation. They cover the areas of online/digital learning, careful selection of participants, usefulness of external assessment on professional prospects and learning, test administration, and enhancing value for students. These are followed by more overarching strategies which can help guide the mainstreaming of the project on a national scale.

Online/digital learning

While the digital element of the upskilling programme can help learners become autonomous and responsible for their own learning, it is important to provide institutional support to ensure successful implementation. Examples of the steps taken by PHE-EG to support students in their learning are summarised below:

- Motivating students to show up for online sessions: Teachers on the course were highly supportive and persuasive and tried to motivate students to attend by all possible means, including making themselves available at
many different times for students who could not make it on the designated dates.
• Asking students and teachers to come up with an action plan for the implementation of the 50-hour online training: This was carried out by teachers and students with teachers posting on Facebook groups and other online fora, making various suggestions on how to divide the work over the online period.
• Focusing on online exercises: Teachers laid stress on the exercises and helped students with completing them.
• Providing technical support to students in accessing and navigating online materials: Both the administrative team and the trainers provided technical support upon request. Moreover, university labs were made available to those students in faraway residences who could not have access to the internet once the face-to-face part of the course was completed.

The survey findings also highlighted:
• Technical issues: In spite of all the efforts devoted to facilitating digital learning, technical issues with the online delivery were commented on as one of the most problematic aspects of the programme.
• Access to the online course: Given that PHE-EG deals with under-privileged students, many did not have access to the internet once the face-to-face tutoring had finished and as a result, many of the students did not finish much of the course and depended only on the face-to-face part of the course, leading to a number of drop-outs.
• Need for more practice time: Students expressed a need for more practice time for different features of the course, with a stronger preference for more face-to-face classroom teaching.

Two insightful comments (reproduced below) touched on the ways in which technology may differentially affect students who are either familiar/confident with using technology, who may have problems accessing the internet or who may not be used to online courses. Some of these problems raise very important issues from a socio-economic standpoint and need to be carefully considered and addressed for future mainstreaming of the programme.

‘The idea is great; however, it is met by socio-economic difficulties. Some of my students did not own computers; others could not join the online sessions. Some females in villages within Upper Egypt could not go to an internet café or to the university after the course to practise the online part so, they missed an important aspect of the course.’

‘Generally speaking the course allows trainees to absorb training on their own time, as it is self-paced learning, and it also emphasizes the importance of practice, leaving valuable classroom time for more skill-building activities. As for me, I felt very comfortable and confident with the technology so that it becomes an aid in communicating with my students. But that was not the case with all students; the motivated students made the best out of this opportunity and they worked well and completed all the assignments independently. They have become more active in their learning and gain technological empowerment that expands beyond the required course. Some students, however, especially living in remote villages, had no access to internet at their homes and it was not easy for girls in particular, to go to internet cafes. Others had some technical problems with the internet connections. Some students had no internet problems but were not used to this independent type of learning, and consequently didn’t take it seriously and didn’t attend all the online sessions. I’d like to conclude by saying that for me and for many of the students, this experience increases the interaction not only between me and the students but also among them.’

**Strategy 1**
In order to ensure access for all in upscaling the initiative across HE institutions in Egypt it is imperative that the necessary infrastructure and technical support for the online component of the course are secured; a training element on digital literacy for teachers should be included; efforts in supporting students with time management and autonomous learning strategies should be strengthened.

**Careful selection of participants**
In order to further support capacity building and the professional development of pre-service teachers, it is recommended that PHE-EG continue their efforts in selecting teachers who display the expertise necessary for delivering the students’ upskilling programme but who can also benefit the most from the career opportunities that international certification can offer, e.g. early career teachers, language instructors. If course participants are predominantly PhD holders with strong theoretical backgrounds in teaching, it might be preferable to put more emphasis on practical communicative approaches to teaching, micro-teaching and on how to deliver the blended learning course successfully.

The student selection process was shown to be effective as illustrated in the high agreement rates by both teachers and students for the statement the CEPT accurately placed students on the course. These findings suggest that CEPT is fit for purpose and substantiates the decision made by PHE-EG to include a screening test for student selection.

**Strategy 2**
Existing selection procedures for students should continue without any change. Thought may be given to grouping of students according to specialisation post-selection. Decide on which layer of the teaching cadre would benefit the most from teacher training and the subsequent international certification.

**Usefulness of external assessment for professional prospects and learning**
The notion of using external assessment has resource implications when upscaling the initiative. Findings from the surveys indicated that participants attribute a strong positive impact to BULATS certification in enhancing their future employment prospects. Moreover, students believed that taking the BULATS test motivated them to study harder during the course. Both findings show that external assessment is functioning as intended and lends strong support to retaining the use of external assessment for the future mainstreaming of the initiative.

**Strategy 3**
Continue the use of international assessment for selection purposes, benchmarking purposes or certification purposes. Such use ensures accurate placement, deeper learning growth impact and accountability of the training provider; provides motivation for learning, and is a desirable factor in job applications. Thought may be given to...
using a recent version of the CEPT which covers the four skills.

Test administration
The online tests required broadband width and internet connection which PHE-EG in Cairo University ensured were available. From a technical perspective, quality of recordings was generally satisfactory, with examiners reporting most speaking samples to be clear and audible with occasional strain on the examiner but with little impact on marking reliability. For one of the sessions, however, serious technical issues were reported for sound quality, with the microphone cutting off for six candidates and affecting reliability of marking accordingly. Background noise did not appear to be a problem except for one test session, where slamming of doors, phones ringing, sound of other candidates, etc. were observed. As explained by CAPSCU, these were due to the evacuation of the building as a result of some revolution-related turbulence at the time. These factors can potentially affect candidates’ test performance and attempts should be made to minimise background noise. The other frequently recurring problems were a distortion of sounds due to candidates speaking too loudly or having the microphone too close and also candidates starting to talk too soon, leading to the cutting off of the beginning of the recordings. These findings have practical implications for future administrations of online Speaking tests.

Strategy 4 Share lessons learned with regard to technical issues related to the smooth running of online testing. Set up standard operating procedures for examiner co-ordination, monitoring and evaluation.

Enhancing value for students
Students were provided with a list of options as reasons for enrolling on the upskilling programme. The most common reason given was the focus of the BLC on developing and enhancing students’ English language abilities within a workplace context.

Strategy 5 Enhance the value of the initiative by linking up participants with potential employers at least for internship purposes. Contact students post-programme and once they have entered the job market to evaluate the extent to which the BLC and BULATS certification have helped them secure employment and to gather testimonials.

In sum, the findings from the study demonstrated the positive impact of the upskilling programme on the stakeholders on the one hand and also identified possible areas for improvement. It also illustrated ways in which international assessment can be successfully used in local contexts to match the workplace language needs of today’s global citizens. These results and the lessons learned can therefore be drawn upon in planning a road map for the national level implementation of the programme through international collaborations, building on the strengths of the initiative and taking corrective action to minimise limitations.

References