

## **International assessment and local contexts: A case study of an English language initiative in higher education institutes in Egypt**

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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 Postgraduate Studies and Research in Cairo University (CAPSCU), Cambridge English Language Assessment and the British Council (Egypt) have implemented a multi-phase upskilling program aimed at 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, integrating 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. Standardised assessment, attitudinal and perceptions surveys, and observational data were used. Findings suggested a positive impact of the upskilling program, illustrated how international collaborations can provide the necessary skills for today's global job market, and highlighted areas for consideration for upscaling the initiative.

**Key words:** Upskilling program, workplace English, learning-oriented assessment, blended learning, Higher Education in Egypt

## **Background**

Higher education (HE) in Egypt witnessed a profound transformation in 1959 with the constitutional amendment mandating education as a basic right for all Egyptians. Education was made affordable to increase the literacy rate. The 'Free for All' education resulted in an expansion of the number of public universities from four in the 1950s to 23 in 2014, currently enrolling over 2 million students. However, this expansion was not accompanied by a corresponding development that would equip the students with the skills needed in increasingly competitive local and global job markets. Results of the 2006 Egyptian Labour Market Panel Survey (Strategic Planning Unit and Ministry of Higher Education, 2008) demonstrated that the majority of unemployment in Egypt is among university graduates and that the supply of labour force is much higher than what the Egyptian market demands, and highlighted the need for national plans to access regional and international labour 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 (Pathways-Egypt) – a scholarship program aimed at enhancing the 'soft skills' of socially disadvantaged undergraduates and widening their employment opportunities (for detailed information on Pathways-Egypt, see <http://pathways-egypt.com/>; Said, 2002). Pathways-Egypt is funded by the Ford Foundation and managed by the Centre for Advancement of Post Graduate Studies in Cairo University (CAPSCU).

One of the soft skills believed to greatly sharpen an individual's competitive edge in the challenging employment market is that of English language ability, which reflects the global spread of English and its significant role as a lingua franca and the dominant language of communication in various professional domains (Seidlhofer, Breiteneder, & Pitzl, 2006). The average salary gap between non-English speakers and English speakers is reported to be around 70-80% in Egypt (Ramaswami, Sarraf, & Haydon, 2012). It is also argued that 'professionals cannot take their place in a knowledge economy if they lack sophisticated spoken and written English skills' (Hawthorne, 2007, p. 9).

It was in response to this growing need for English language skills that CAPSCU, through its Pathways-Egypt administrative arm, initiated an

upskilling program for teachers and learners. Before describing the upskilling program in more detail, a broad overview of reforms in HE and capacity-building in the developing world is first presented, followed by a discussion of English language initiatives within this wider context where the CAPSCU initiative can also be framed as an example case study. The conceptual framework of *learning-oriented assessment* (LOA) is subsequently put forward as the guiding principle behind learning and assessment in the upskilling program.

## Literature review

### Reform initiatives and capacity-building in higher education

The CAPSCU upskilling program in Egypt can be placed in the context of initiatives to reform HE and build capacity in the developing world. Globalisation and the emergence of knowledge-based economies have focused attention on HE as a driver of economic growth and development. Previously regarded as an inefficient public service that largely benefitted privileged elites, there is now a growing body of literature attentive to the potential of HE as a lever for boosting productivity, competitiveness and innovation (Bloom, Canning, & Chan, 2006; Lane & Johnstone, 2012; Wolff & Gittleman, 1993). It is also regarded as an important factor for socio-economic development at a national level and for reducing inequalities in emerging economies (van Deuren, 2013; World Bank, 2002).

In order to cater for growing social aspirations, adapt to changing demographics, widen HE access, and increase relevance to the labour market, there may be need for reforms and improvements in HE systems in developing countries. Capacity-building describes reform processes whereby institutions increase their abilities to perform core activities, add value and achieve different objectives across a range of contexts (UNESCO, 2012). Different modalities for how HE institutions may deliver reform measures and build capacity can include novel approaches to teaching and learning, use of technology, increasing staff qualifications and enhancing infrastructure (see Brinkerhoff & Morgan, 2010; CHET, 2002; Dill, 2000; Ubels & Fowler, 2010; van Deuren, 2013; Wandiga, 1997 for more information on the topic).

English language skills have been identified as an important technical and professional competency in capacity-building frameworks (UNDP, 2008), the enhancement of which can be a facilitator of wider socio-economic development (Coleman, 2011; Erling, 2014; Erling & Seargeant, 2013). It is argued that an increase in the body of graduates proficient in English can allow

labour markets and countries to correspondingly increase their opportunities for taking advantage of globalisation and attracting international firms and capital (Erling & Seargeant, 2013). Reforming HE institutions to enhance the quality of English language provision can create positive benefits in education systems and respond to the demand of citizens who need English language skills to access information and economic opportunities. Capacity-building for English language therefore refers primarily to enhancing the language skills of students on the one hand and the teachers who deliver English Language programs or English as a medium of instruction programs on the other. However, interventions may also involve building the English language capacity of university management in order to enhance international engagement and to facilitate internationalisation.

### **The Upskilling Program**

In response to the growing need for English language skills in the workplace and within a capacity-building framework, the Pathways-Egypt Upskilling Program for teachers and learners in HE was initiated with the following key objectives:

- a) Enhancing the workplace language skills of undergraduates and the teaching methodology of teachers on the one hand and the introduction of 21st century skills such as digital-age literacy, effective communication, inventive thinking, and high productivity on the other. This was realised through the use of a blended learning course for students and Training of Trainers course (TOT) and teacher observation/mentoring programs for teachers. Course materials were informed by the literature on learning-oriented assessment (Boud, 2006; Carless, 2009; Purpura, 2004).
- b) Utilising international standards for teaching, learning and assessment, hence the use of the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (2001) as a learning ladder and target setter.
- c) Providing internationally recognised certification, which acts as capability evidence in the local, regional and international job market. This was realised 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 <http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams-and-qualifications/tkt/> and <http://www.bulats.org/>.
- d) Investigating the potential for mainstreaming the initiative to reform English language provision in HE institutions nationwide. The impact of

the upskilling program and areas for improvement were researched through a mixed methods design study in order to inform the future mainstreaming of the program.

### **Student upskilling**

Student upskilling involved three main components: a placement test for student selection, a blended learning course and an end-of-course assessment.

In order to ensure accurate and fair selection of student participants, a set of standard procedures for all Pathways programs were first employed (e.g. attending an interview, submission of essays). This was followed by the administration of a placement test which was used for selecting students at the target language ability for this specific English language program. The assessment measure used was an adaptive online test, namely, the Cambridge English Placement Test (CEPT), which measures listening and reading across the CEFR levels (for test details, see <http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/cambridge-english-for/exam-centres/support-for-centres/placing-students-in-the-right-exam/>). Pathways-Egypt selected students who achieved CEFR A2, which is broadly a low intermediate level.

The Blended Learning Course (BLC) is a CEFR B1 level course aimed at providing students with the opportunity to improve their reading, writing, listening and speaking skills whilst also building their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary specific to workplace contexts in order to prepare them for the language demands of the job market. The B1 threshold is based on a study by Ramaswami et al. (2012) which identified B1/B2 (intermediate) as the English language level required for recruitment and access to the majority of jobs (67%) in the local labour market in Egypt.

The BLC has a blend of content knowledge, specific skills, and literacies incorporating elements of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills such as communication, collaboration and information and computer technology (ICT) literacy. The course incorporated LOA elements, e.g. assessment tasks designed to support learning, student involvement in assessment such as peer-or self-evaluation, and explicitly forward-looking feedback. The course duration was split into online self-study and classroom sessions with a tutor. The online component was designed to enable students to work independently and to promote learner autonomy. Additionally, professional guidance, monitoring of student activities, evaluating of assignments, providing feedback and communicating with students through online forums and other social media platforms were

amongst the activities provided by the teachers in order to support student learning in the online part of the course.

One of Pathways-Egypt's mandates was to provide an end-of-course standardised and internationally recognised examination to ensure the validity of results, track student progress and verify the targeted proficiency level (minimum of B1) and to support job applications. Accordingly, at the end of the blended course, students were entered for the online Business Language Testing Service (BULATS) which covers the four skills and reports performance according to CEFR levels.

### **Teacher upskilling**

Teacher upskilling involved a pedagogic course, standardised certification and non-standardised assessment in the form of observation/mentoring.

The pedagogic course, delivered by British Council-Egypt, focused on teaching methodology within a larger objective of enabling participants to not only teach the blended course but to also cascade their training to other teachers in the Pathways-Egypt project. The course covered content areas such as (a) managing the learning process, (b) planning and preparation for teaching, (c) facilitating effective teaching and (d) improving teaching and learning. In addition, it included aspects of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, namely: (a) digital-age literacy related to the delivery of the online part of the student BLC; (b) effective communication such as teaming, collaboration and interactive communication; (c) inventive thinking, e.g. adaptability, managing complexity and self-direction; and (d) high productivity, mainly focusing on prioritising, planning, and managing for results. While this course covered some aspects of the standardised assessment (the *Teaching Knowledge Test* or *TKT*) it was not a test preparation course, but rather, an integral part of the program designed to create a sustainable, economical, practical and scalable approach towards the upskilling of teachers.

The standardised assessment/certification at the end of the pedagogic course was *TKT* (see Khalifa, 2008 for an account of *TKT* development and validation). The test has three modules (Module 1= language systems and background to language learning and teaching, Module 2 = lesson planning and use of resources, and Module 3 = managing the teaching and learning process). The construct underlying *TKT* is subject matter knowledge, pedagogic knowledge, pedagogic content knowledge and knowledge of context (Grossman, 1990; Spratt, 2015; Tsui, 2003; Tsui & Nicholson, 1999).

*TKT* results are reported in terms of band performance with candidates gaining a certificate for each module taken. Band 1 reflects limited knowledge of *TKT*

content areas, Band 2 shows basic but systematic knowledge, Band 3 indicates breadth and depth of knowledge and Band 4 illustrates extensive knowledge of *TKT* content areas (see <http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/images/22185-tkt-band-descriptors.pdf> for *TKT* band descriptors).

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 Pathways-Egypt after finishing the course) using a five-point Likert scale. Secondly, those who were shortlisted and attended the training course were then given the *TKT* as the end of course assessment. Trainers who achieved a minimum Band 3 (out of 4) on the test were selected to deliver the blended course.

The teacher training course was followed by teacher observation and mentoring carried out through observations and feedback sessions at regular intervals by the British Council master trainers and as part of the non-standardised assessment activities. The observations focused on the application of the different elements of the knowledge, skills and attitudes gained as a result of the training course. Observation elements included: teacher talking time, interactive skills, clarity of instructions, methods of feedback, trainer-trainee relationship, and students' different learning styles. One-to-one feedback sessions focused on positive elements perceived and on areas where improvement is required. Best practices were highlighted and distributed among all trainers to maximise the benefits.

### **Program evaluation**

While the literature review clearly identified different areas of reforms, capacity-building and component activities, little agreement was found on how to assess or measure such initiatives. The current upskilling program served as a pilot study for future mainstreaming of the initiative to HE institutions across Egypt. It was therefore critical to adopt a coherent and systematic approach for evaluating the success of the upskilling program and for highlighting its strengths and weaknesses. To this end, a decision was made to conduct a comprehensive research study with a mixed methods design which focused on the impact of the upskilling program on the two main stakeholder groups (i.e. the teachers and students) and aimed to identify areas for improvement and factors for consideration for future upscaling of the program. This would allow any further decisions to be based on evidence-based research. The research study is described in more detail later.

### **The role of assessment in the program**

As the previous sections have demonstrated, there are several assessment components in the upskilling program. These are brought together here to illustrate the role that the different types of assessment activities carried out at different stages of the program played in allowing Pathways-Egypt to meet its objectives within a HE context.

At the beginning of the program, assessment is used for placement purposes, accurate and fair selection of students and ensuring that the BLC is at the right level for them and thus aiming for positive impact. The alignment of both the assessment and the course to the CEFR allows for these dual objectives to be met. For teachers, the original screening is carried out by Pathways-Egypt through non-standardised assessment i.e. interviews and application of Pathways-Egypt selection criteria, whereas the final selection for delivery of the BLC is based on results of standardised assessment on an international teaching test. Additional non-formal assessment of teachers in the form of observations/mentoring is also carried out to ensure that training and pedagogic knowledge is implemented in practice, and that any weaknesses are identified and addressed through personalised feedback, all of which ascertain course delivery to international standards. The certification of teachers also enhances their professional development opportunities at the national and international level.

During the BLC, non-formal assessment of students is carried out through learning materials, task designs, pair/group work and teacher feedback, all of which reflect the implementation of the LOA approach discussed earlier. At the end of the blended course, the use of an international standardised exit-test allows for certification of students in a workplace context and potentially enhancing their future professional opportunities while also providing measurable evidence of language ability. This can also help Pathways-Egypt to evaluate the success of the program and examine the extent to which set objectives have been met. Lastly, the implementation of a research study to evaluate the program and collect feedback from the main stakeholders (i.e. teachers and students) can highlight strengths and weaknesses of the initiative, all of which are designed to enhance learning, maximise positive impact and minimise limitations in a continuous and iterative way.



## **The research study**

### **Research questions**

The following research questions were formulated to investigate the impact of the upskilling program:

1. What is the impact of the upskilling program on teachers?
2. What is the impact of the upskilling program on students?
3. What are the factors which need to be considered for upscaling the initiative?

### **Research sample**

The research sample represented 12 out of the 23 public universities participating in Pathways-Egypt programs. The universities are geographically distributed across Egypt.

A total of 30 (out of 100) teachers participated in the research study. The majority of teachers were PhD holders holding a lecturer post and had more than 15 years of English language teaching experience. There were 22 female and 8 male teachers. The majority fell in the 31-50 age range. Most trainers also reported having a range of teaching qualifications and certificates.

A total of 771 (out of 1000) students participated in the study. The majority of students (78.2%) were in the 20-22 age category and were enrolled in the faculties of Commerce (27.8%), Arts (20.2%), Education (18.8%) and Engineering (11.4%). There was a balance in the gender of participants (M=49.6%; F=50.4%). Most students were in their fourth year of studies (39.4%) or had already graduated (26.6%). This can be taken as an indication that participants would be in a position to evaluate the extent to which the course and international assessment were likely to affect their future professional and academic opportunities.

### **Research design**

A mixed methods research design (Creswell & 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 document review of teacher observation reports as well as open-ended commentary on surveys.

Surveys were designed to elicit student and teacher views on the upskilling program. For students, the surveys focused on the impact of the placement test, BLC 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 training course 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. For example, varying computer skills and issues with Internet access in remote areas/villages were highlighted as potentially problematic and were therefore included in questionnaire items. Expert judgement was used in making further amendments to the surveys prior to implementation. Close-ended questions/statements were positively worded on a five-point Likert scale. Open-ended questions and comment boxes were also included. The surveys were created with SurveyMonkey (online) and were in English. Reliability statistics suggested strong internal consistencies with Cronbach alpha values of 0.94 and 0.95 for student and teacher surveys respectively lending support to the use of the instruments in this study.

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 allowed for portraying a rich picture while the triangulation of information derived from multiple data sources enhanced confidence in the findings (see Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989 for a discussion on reasons for mixing methods). Table 1 summarises the types and sources of data collected for investigating the impact of the initiative, corresponding to the study's three research questions.



**Table 1.** Overview of key investigative points and data type/sources

Areas of focus	Data type	Data source
Impact on teachers (e.g. in terms of changes in teaching practices, teacher evaluation, perspectives on blended learning approaches)	Quantitative Qualitative	1. Reports and observations by master trainers 2. <i>TKT</i> test score data 3. Teacher surveys 4. Student evaluations of teachers (in student surveys)
Impact on students (e.g. in terms of language progression, attitude towards English language learning and assessment, motivation, confidence and autonomous learning)	Quantitative Qualitative	1. Test score data (CEPT and BULATS) 2. Teacher evaluations of student progress (in teacher surveys) 3. Student surveys
Factors for consideration when upscaling the initiative	Quantitative Qualitative	All of the above sources

## Results and discussion

Focusing on teachers, students and factors for consideration in upscaling the initiative, the following sections synthesise and discuss the results of quantitative and qualitative analyses of different sources of data corresponding to the three research questions outlined earlier in the paper.

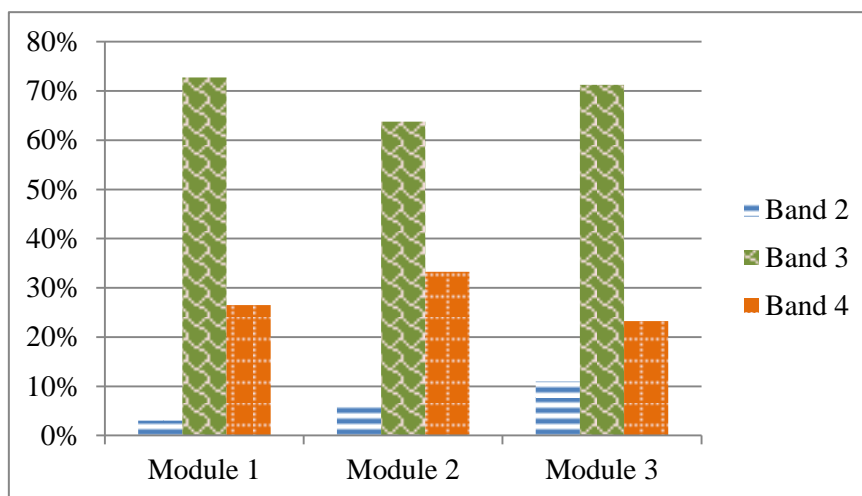
### Focus on teachers

The impact of the upskilling program on enhancing teachers' pedagogic knowledge, the application of that knowledge in practice and increasing professional development opportunities was investigated using four sources of data: teachers' score data on *TKT*, classroom observation data by the master trainers, survey data from students' evaluation of their teachers as well as teachers' self-evaluations. Findings as related to the two main strands of enquiry are summarised below:

#### *Impact on pedagogic knowledge and application*

The distribution of *TKT* score data is summarised in Figure 2. 90% of teacher trainees achieved either a Band 3 or 4 across modules with stronger performances in Module 2 (lesson planning) where 32% achieved a Band 4 while weaker performances were observed for Module 3 (classroom management) with 10% of candidates receiving a Band 2 and performance on Module 1 (background to language learning and teaching) falling in between.

These are positive results and can be taken as evidence of teachers' pedagogic knowledge.



**Figure 2.** TKT Results (N=100)

Module 1= Language systems and background to language learning and teaching

Module 2= Lesson planning and use of resources

Module 3= Managing the teaching and learning process

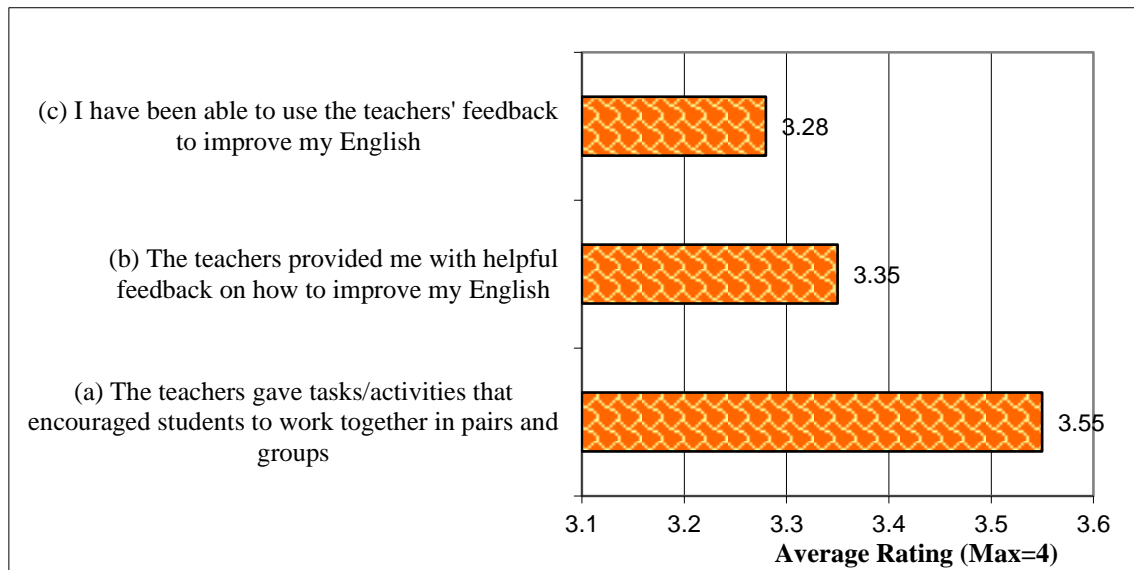
The British Council Master Trainers conducted teacher observations to evaluate the extent to which the knowledge gained via the training course and preparation for *TKT* has been implemented in the classrooms (see the teacher upskilling section for details of observation elements).

Findings from classroom observations showed varying strengths in the teachers and feedback on performance was highly positive. Generally speaking, it appeared that teachers were successfully implementing their TOT training in the classroom. An illustrative example of an observation by one of the master trainers is reproduced below:

Teacher 12 showed a marked improvement. He moved around the class interacting with the students and monitoring very effectively. He put the students into small groups, kept to the time allotted to the task, and the students were obviously engrossed in the task. He used peer correction, which was appropriate and maximised student talking time. He still needs to work on cutting down his teacher talking time and backing up information visually.

While feedback reports were written for individual teachers, the examination of reports highlighted possible areas for improvement, e.g., decreasing teacher talking time, increasing paired interactions, varying the pace of the class and including more engaging materials.

Students' evaluations of their teachers according to the survey responses also suggested a highly positive attitude with approximately 95% of the respondents agreeing with the following statements: 'the teachers on the course were well-qualified' and 'I liked the teachers on the course'. Figure 3 sheds light on other statements students made.



**Figure 3.** Student perception of teachers' competencies (N=750)

In the surveys, teachers were asked to rate the program on a five-point Likert scale from 0 = no opinion to 4 = strongly agree. They were also asked to comment on the impact of the upskilling program on their beliefs and practices as well as professional development opportunities. In terms of pedagogic knowledge, teachers reported the following as the most salient impact of program: (a) awareness of new teaching techniques and strategies; (b) a better understanding of 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 open comment is presented below:

[the upskilling program] 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.  
[Teacher from Beni-Suef University]

Another emerging theme was an awareness of and a positive attitude towards blended learning approaches to language teaching as seen in the following open comments and the average ratings from teacher surveys in Table 2.

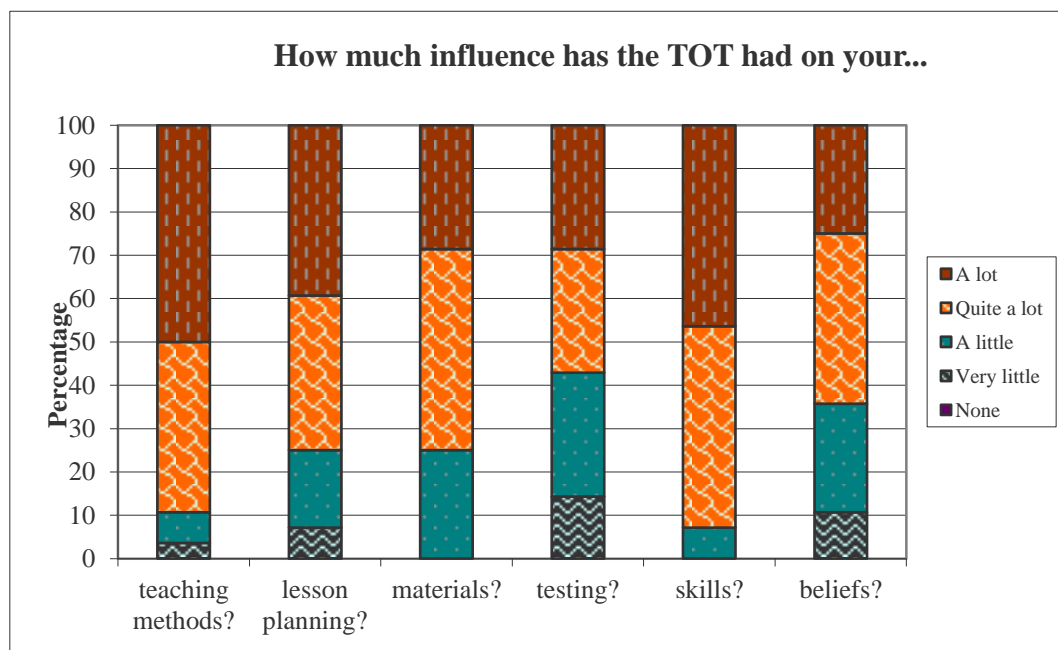
The blended learning component was totally new for me and I benefitted a great deal from it. I felt the course brought me up to date with modern methods of teaching and the possibilities of independent and guided distance learning. [Teacher from Tanta University]

I became more oriented towards blended learning and using the internet in teaching. [Teacher from Cairo University]

**Table 2.** Teacher perspectives on the impact of the upskilling program (N=30)

Statements	Rating Average (Max=4)
Strongly Agree=4; Agree=3; Disagree=2; Strongly Disagree=1; No Opinion=0	
(a) The upskilling program has made me more enthusiastic about teaching blended language courses	3.15
(b) The upskilling program has a positive effect on my attitude to blended learning courses	3.35
(c) The upskilling program has made me more enthusiastic about taking online language courses	3.32

Figure 4 also demonstrates that teachers believe the TOT course to have had the strongest influence on their teaching skills and methods, lesson planning and materials development with relatively smaller influence on beliefs about teaching and testing-related matters.



**Figure 4.** Teacher perspectives on the impact of the TOT (N=28)

### *Impact on professional development*

The teacher surveys also included four statements aimed at evaluating the impact of the upskilling program on teachers' professional development. Findings were once again positive, with the majority of respondents reporting feeling more confident in presenting at TEFL seminars and conferences. They also believed that the upskilling program had opened new professional opportunities for them. The following open comments further confirm the quantitative findings:

Last but not least, I came to know a number of people in the field and I have since benefited professionally from a number of joint activities with them, as for example joint papers delivered at conferences, joint supervision of the theses of post-graduate students, and serving with them on theses examination committees. I have thus found attending the upskilling program most enriching on both the professional and personal levels.

Taking the upskilling program, I discovered that I have the potentialities of a good trainer; and that has encouraged me to consider training as a parallel career for me here in Egypt. I took other TOT courses and I have become a certified trainer in my University.

The majority of respondents (N=22) believed that as a result of the upskilling program they would have more professional opportunities in Egypt and also in other countries. One possible explanation for why the agreement rate is not higher is that most of the teachers involved in this study were lecturers or assistant lecturers at universities and as such, it was unlikely for *TKT* certification to have an impact on their employment opportunities. In order to enhance the professional development opportunities provided by *TKT* certification, it is therefore recommended for the initiative to select teachers who display the expertise necessary for delivering the blended course but who can also benefit the most from the career opportunities that *TKT* certification can offer (e.g. early career teachers, language instructors).

To sum up, the quantitative results of the teacher surveys and the qualitative analyses of open comments demonstrate a very positive impact of the training course/*TKT* certification component of the upskilling program on teachers in introducing new teaching techniques and strategies, increased familiarisation with blended courses and ways of promoting learner autonomy, increased awareness of different student learning styles and providing opportunities for professional development.

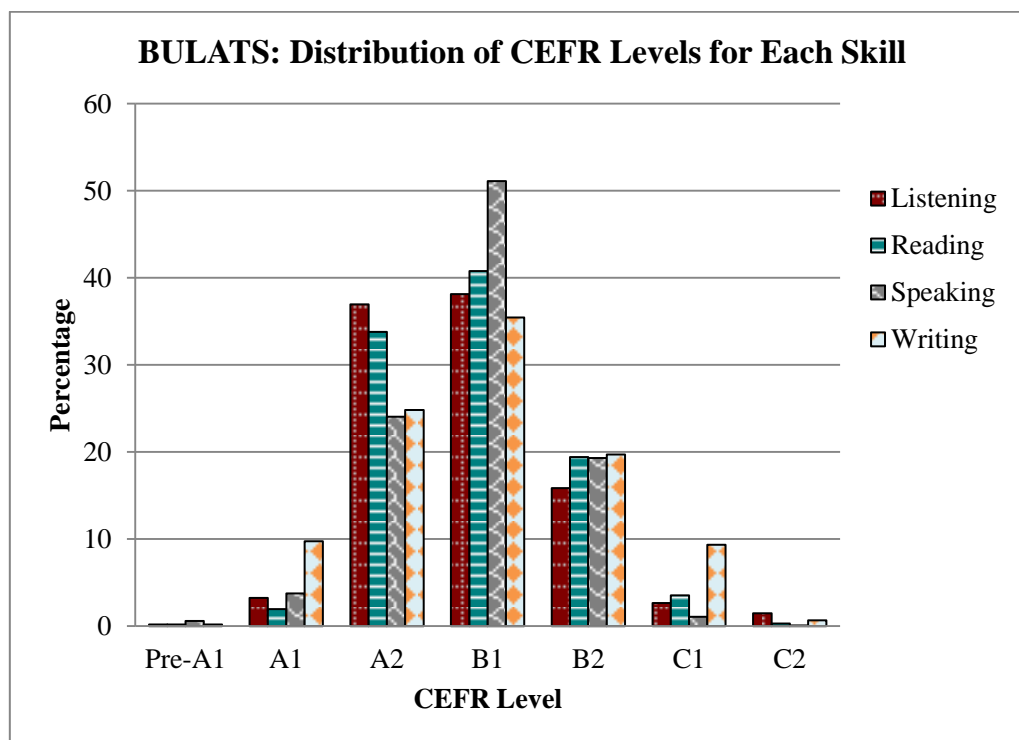


### **Focus on students**

Amongst the main objectives of the upskilling program was to enhance the workplace language skills of undergraduate students and to increase their professional opportunities in the future. Additionally, it aimed to increase student motivation and confidence to use English while instilling a positive attitude towards learning. Another key intended impact was to develop responsible and autonomous learners with 21<sup>st</sup> century digital skills and hence the introduction of a novel blended approach to learning English with its emphasis on self-study in the online component of the course. In evaluating the impact of the upskilling program on the above, three sources of data were considered: score data, teacher surveys and student surveys.

The three sources of data used to examine learner progression were test score data from the end-of-course assessment (BULATS), students' self-evaluations of their progress and teachers' perspectives on student improvement.

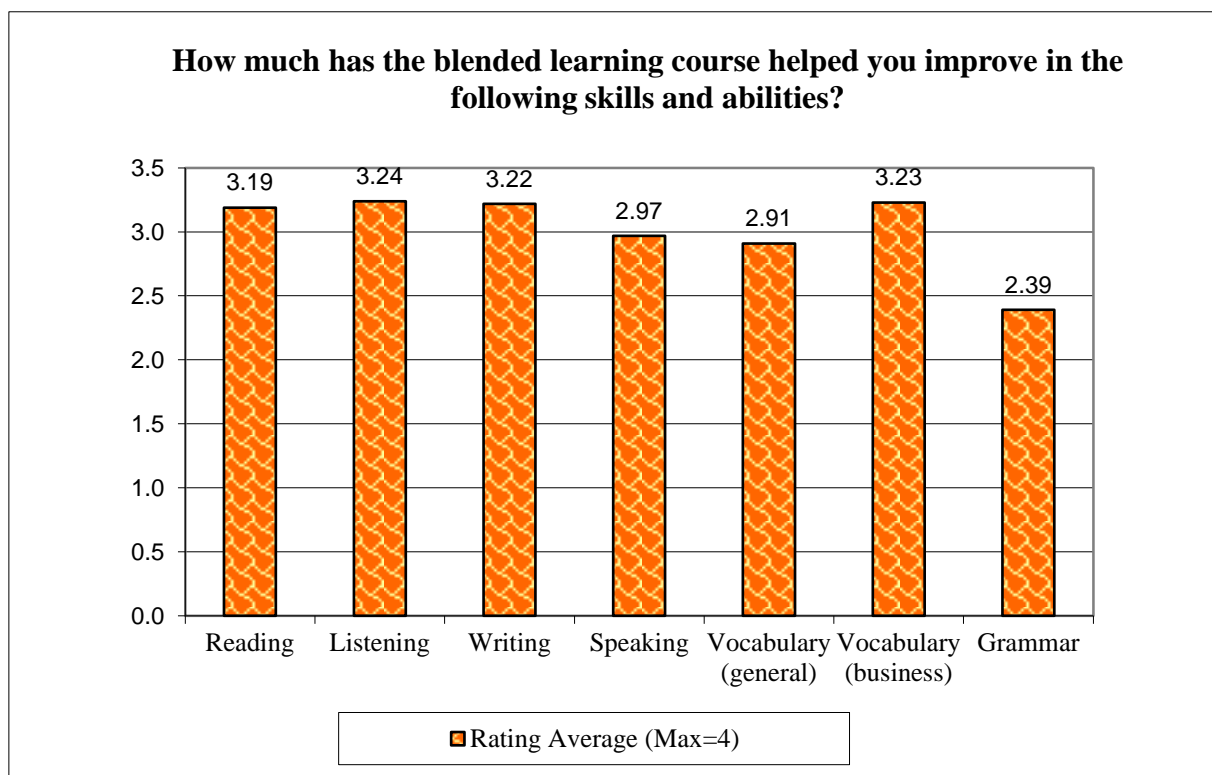
The distribution of band scores for candidates on the four skills on BULATS Online are summarised in Figure 5. The mode of each skill is B1 which is in line with the Pathways-Egypt target exit level. However, a larger proportion of candidates are at A2 level in the skills of reading and listening compared to speaking and writing suggesting stronger performances in the performance skills compared to the receptive skills. Candidates' writing performances appear to be stronger than their speaking at the higher levels. This data provides a snapshot of candidates at the end of the course.



**Figure 5.** Band score distributions of BULATS candidates across language skills (N=1000)

The perceived impact of the upskilling program on different language skills and abilities was elicited by asking students to evaluate on a five-point Likert scale (A lot (=4) to No change (=0)); the extent to which the blended course had helped them improve their four language skills (reading, listening, writing and speaking) and knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Average ratings for each skills/language area are summarised in Figure 6.

Findings show that students believed the blended course to have had the strongest influence on their listening, reading and writing skills with average ratings above 3.0 (Max=4). Amongst the four skills, speaking is observed to have the lowest average of 2.97. Students believed their business vocabulary to have improved a lot with average rating of 3.23 while general vocabulary had a lower average rating of 2.91. The lowest average rating was assigned to grammatical knowledge (Average=2.39). This is as expected, given that the blended course is communicatively-oriented with no explicit grammar-instruction component. Instead, grammar is taught in context and in integration with all four skills.

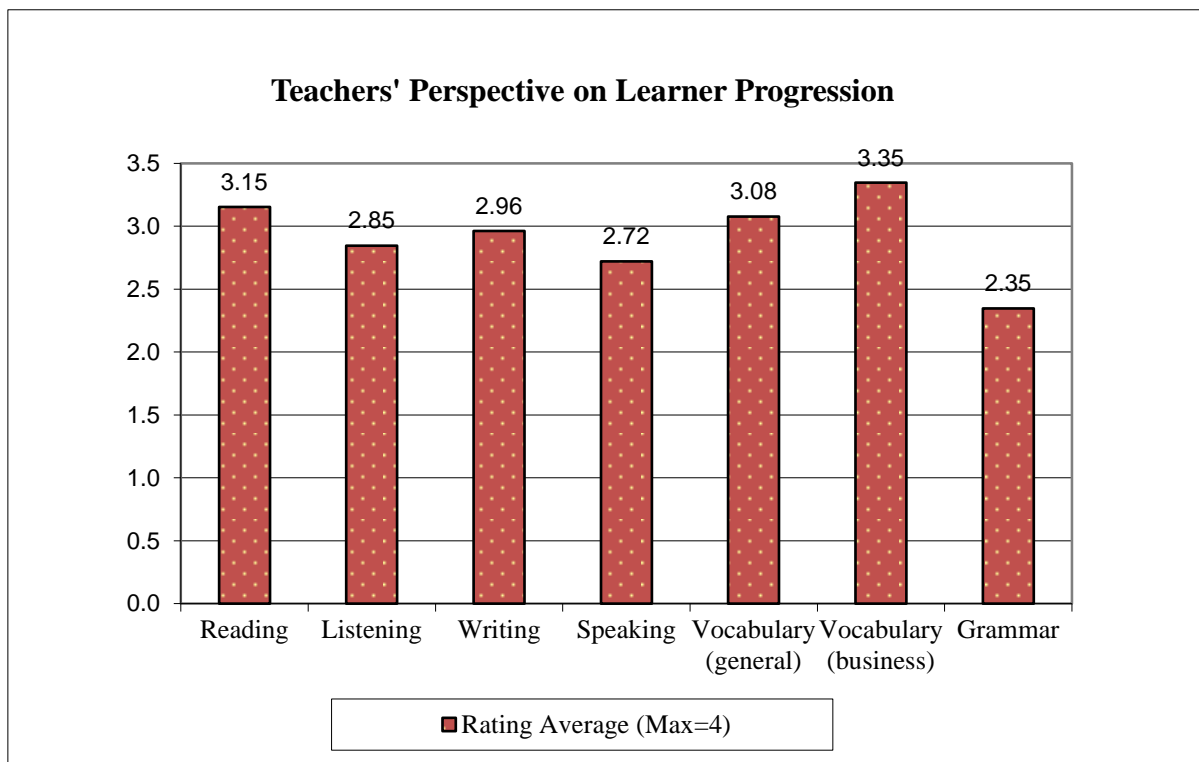


**Figure 6.** Students' perspective on language progression

Teachers were also asked to indicate the extent to which they believed students' skills and abilities had improved following the course. Amongst the four skills, reading and writing were perceived to display the most improvement with speaking displaying the least improvement which is in line with student perceptions.

Knowledge of business vocabulary was also perceived to have improved quite a lot (Average=3.35) with knowledge of grammar receiving the lowest rating (Average=2.35) which is once again, similar to the student results and reflects the communicatively-oriented nature of the course (see Figure 7).

When brought together, findings generally suggest a positive impact of the course on improvements in students' English language skills and abilities as observed in three forms of assessments: score data from standardised tests of English, student self-assessments and teacher assessments.



**Figure 7.** Teachers' perspective on learner language progression

The two sources of data that were drawn on for evaluating the impact of the upskilling program on learner autonomy were student and teacher surveys:

The student surveys contained specific statements regarding the influence of the online component of the course on developing learner autonomy with very positive results. The majority of respondents (between 85% and 90%) agreed or strongly agreed that the online course (a) 'has helped them become more independent learners', (b) 'has had a positive impact on approaches to English language learning and the learning of other university subjects', (c) 'has helped them identify their strengths and weaknesses in English', (d) 'has raised awareness of how to improve English without a teacher', and finally (e) 'has helped in self-assessment and in monitoring learning progress'. Average ratings for the statements hovered around 3.25 (Max= 4).

The teacher surveys supported the above findings. The following open comment by one of the teachers captures the strengths of the blended approach:

Generally speaking the course allows trainees to absorb training on their own time, as it is self-paced learning, and it also emphasises the importance of practice, leaving valuable classroom time for more skill-building activities.

It should be noted, however, that not all students found it easy to take responsibility of their learning as illustrated in the following comments:

It's easier for me to learn when the teacher tells me what I have to do.

I found it difficult to manage my learning on my own.

One of the teachers pointed out that motivation can play an important role in the extent to which students make use of the online opportunities available to them with some students becoming 'more active in their learning and gaining technological empowerment that expands beyond the required course' but some others not taking the online course seriously, as they were not used to such an independent type of learning.

Another emergent theme from the student surveys is the issue of internet access and technical support for all course participants. Results suggested that in spite of all the efforts placed on facilitating digital learning, technical issues with the online delivery was one of the most problematic aspects of the program. Moreover, some course participants commented on not having had internet access once the face-to-face component of the course had finished which did not allow them to follow the online module and consequently led to higher dropout rates or lack of motivation.

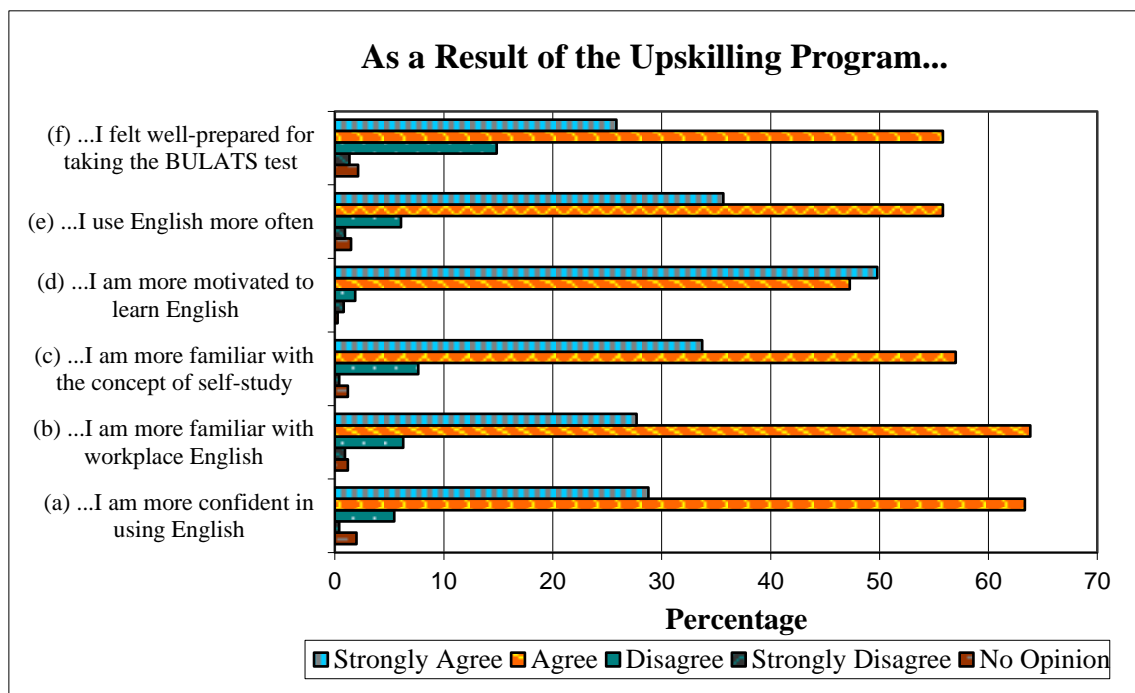
These are findings which have important implications for not only this upskilling program but for similar ones which are delivered online. To summarise, while the online course can help learners become more independent and to take responsibility for their learning, it is crucially important to provide support in time management and autonomous learning, to cater for differences in student learning styles, to ensure fairness and access for all by providing necessary infrastructure and technical support for the online component of the course and, finally, to play on the strengths of face-to-face and online approaches and to minimise any weaknesses.

The two sources of data that were drawn on for evaluating the impact of the upskilling program on learner autonomy were student and teacher surveys.

The student survey aimed to establish an explicit link between the upskilling program and students' perceptions of the course impact on their English language learning and test taking experiences by including statements which started with 'as a result of the upskilling program...' (Figure 8). A quick glance at the bar chart and the high percentage of agreements suggest a very positive impact of the upskilling program on students in increasing learner confidence and motivation to use English, increased familiarity with workplace English,

increased familiarity with the notion of self-study and increased preparedness for the BULATS test.

Students' views of the assessment elements of the program, i.e. the placement test and end of course assessment were also elicited. Results suggested that the majority of students (83%) were worried about taking the placement test. Possible reasons for this finding is that on the one hand, this was the first time many of these students took an online test and on the other hand, the placement test was used as a selection criterion for placing students into the course and as such could have been considered high stakes. A positive impact of the CEPT was observed in the high agreement rates (86.8%) for the statement 'the CEPT accurately placed me in the course' suggesting that the students found the course to be at the right level for them which substantiates the decision made by Pathways-Egypt to include a screening test for student selection. This view was also corroborated in the teacher survey, the majority of whom (73%) believed that the CEPT results correctly placed students onto the upskilling program.



**Figure 8.** Student perspectives on the impact of the upskilling program

The student surveys also sought views on the BULATS test (see Table 3 for a list of statements and corresponding results, in percentages). Findings show that the majority of respondents (a) were 'worried about taking the test' (88%) and (e) 'found the test difficult' (72.4%). This is to be expected, as on the one hand

the certified BULATS test is high stakes and on the other, the test is computer adaptive, assigning items which approximate test takers' abilities. Nevertheless, there was a strong agreement rate for the following statements (j) 'I think the test is an accurate measure of my English language level' (82.3%) and (g) 'I think that in my daily life I may be expected to perform tasks similar to those on the test' (86.4%). A positive attitude towards the test is also evidenced in the results of statement (l) 'I would recommend this test to other students' with which 92.5% of the respondents agreed.

Evidence of the positive impact of assessment on learning comes from the results of statement (k) 'taking the BULATS test motivated me to study harder during the blended learning course' with a 94.4% agreement rate.

**Table 3.** Student perceptions of the BULATS test

Statements	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %	No Opinion %
(a) I was worried about taking the test	42.5	45.5	9.1	2.0	1.0
(b) I found the pre-test online practice (tutorial) helpful	39.6	55.1	3.8	0.7	0.7
(c) I felt comfortable using the computer for taking the BULATS test	35.5	52.0	11.3	1.0	0.3
(d) There were technical issues when completing the test	26.8	47.7	19.9	3.7	1.8
(e) Overall, I found the test difficult	20.8	51.6	22.8	1.4	3.3
(f) I performed to the best of my ability in the test	29.2	54.0	12.7	2.6	1.6
(g) I think that in my daily life I may be expected to perform tasks similar to those on the test	31.0	55.4	11.0	0.6	2.0
(h) The topics in the test were interesting	28.5	52.8	15.3	2.1	1.3
(i) I had enough time to show my language abilities	25.1	44.1	24.2	5.3	1.3
(j) I think the test is an accurate measure of my English language level	23.7	58.6	14.5	1.9	1.3
(k) Taking the BULATS test motivated me to study harder during the blended learning course	39.4	55.0	3.2	0.9	1.6
(l) I would recommend this test to other students	40.6	51.9	5.6	0.9	1.0

Students' perceptions of the impact of the program and particularly BULATS certification on their future professional prospects were elicited using a series of statements in the student surveys. Results indicate that participants attribute a strong positive impact to BULATS certification in enhancing their future employment prospects. The highest agreement rates were observed for statements: I think that BULATS certification has (a) 'helped me move closer to my future professional goals', (b) 'increased my employability in the job market', and (c) 'opened new employment opportunities for my in Egypt' with 96.3%, 91.2% and 89.6%, respectively. In light of the nature of the course and the assessment, which are oriented towards equipping students with English language skills for the workplace domain, the findings are highly encouraging, as they show that the external assessment is functioning as intended from the perspective of the students.

To summarise, findings from different sources of data illustrate a highly positive impact of the upskilling program on students. Score data, student self-assessments and teacher assessments suggested a positive impact of the initiative on English language abilities across the skills while survey results showed evidence of increased confidence and motivation in using and learning English, increased familiarity with workplace English, increased familiarity with the notion of self-study and increased preparedness for the BULATS test. Lastly, participants attributed a strong positive impact to standardised assessment, i.e. BULATS certification in not only motivating them to study harder during the course but also in enhancing their future employment prospects.

### **Upscaling the initiative: Factors for consideration**

While the impact of the upskilling program on teachers and students was largely positive, findings also pointed to some limitations and areas for improvement which would need to be taken into account for upscaling of the initiative and for ensuring maximisation of positive impact. The discussion below focuses first on factors affecting the students' upskilling program followed by those affecting teachers' upskilling program and ending with issues related to the use of external assessment.

One of the key factors which may affect the upscaling of the students' program is the selected mode of course delivery. Technical issues with the online delivery of the course were commented on as one of the most problematic aspects of the program by both students and teachers. Internet access was highlighted as an important consideration. Pathways-Egypt focuses on under-privileged students, many of whom did not have access to the Internet once the



face-to-face tutoring had finished and as a result, these students were not able to finish the course and depended only on the face-to-face part, leading to a number of dropouts. Open comments by teachers also touched on the socio-economic status of some students (e.g. not having computers, no Internet access in remote villages especially for female students) as a hindrance for making full use of the opportunities presented in the online component of the course. Another key factor is students' readiness to become more autonomous. While the online part of the course is designed to promote learner autonomy, survey responses suggested that some students faced difficulties in taking responsibility for their own learning and needed more support.

With regard to the upskilling of teachers, teacher observations pointed to the need for more emphasis on certain pedagogical aspects such as increasing shared responsibility for learning between teachers and students, fostering learner autonomy and encouraging students to take more control of their learning, reducing the 'lecture style' kind of teaching, decreasing teacher talking time, increasing paired interactions, varying the pace of the class and including more engaging materials. Teacher surveys indicated that the training course had the lowest impact on knowledge of areas relating to assessment and testing with open-ended comments by teachers also highlighting a need for training in assessment literacy.

When considering the use of external assessment at a national level, human and financial resources would be key factors for consideration. During the course of the initiative, some transfer of knowledge has taken place which helped reduce the cost of using external assessment. Local staff have been trained in administering the assessment according to international standards while a cadre of local examiners for the productive skills has been created. This trained and internationally certified cadre can further cascade knowledge and skills gained nationwide. However, the cost of the assessment itself (i.e., tests) may remain an issue for consideration when upscaling. Findings from the study illustrated the usefulness of incorporating external assessments and international standards in local contexts for the careful selection of students who would be at the right level to benefit the most from the initiative, as a motivator for learning and finally as potentially instrumental in job applications. Decision makers would need to weigh the value of external assessment in terms of currency, mobility, credibility, and fairness against financial considerations.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Higher education in Egypt has been facing various challenges since the expansion in the number of public universities, dealing with socio-economic circumstances to reform education quality. Attempts to overcome such obstacles have been carried out by both governmental and non-governmental bodies to equip students with the skills needed for the job market. The current study sheds light on efforts made to bridge the gap between formal education and job market needs by implementing a multi-phase upskilling program to enhance the workplace language skills of undergraduates at Egyptian universities as well as the teaching methodology of English language teachers.

Results of the present study indicated that, in general, both students and teachers regarded their relevant upskilling program favourably, giving the former an opportunity to develop their language skills and to acquire an international qualification that would increase their job prospects, and the latter both a career development opportunity and an internationally recognised certificate.

The initiative aimed at enhancing the pedagogic knowledge of HE English as a Foreign Language teachers, application of that knowledge in practice, improving professional development opportunities and cascading the initiative across HE institutions in Egypt. The national-level implementation of the initiative would therefore require certain strategies in order to meet the program objectives. These could include, for example, the selection of teachers who display the expertise necessary for delivering the students' upskilling program but who can also benefit the most from the career opportunities that *TKT* certification can offer, such as early career teachers and language instructors. Teacher programs could also be adapted to the needs of the teachers, e.g. by placing more emphasis on practical communicative approaches to teaching for those with strong theoretical backgrounds or focusing more attention on successful delivery of a blended course for those who are more experienced in traditional classroom teaching. Lastly, the inclusion of an assessment literacy module is recommended, not only for enhancing the teacher training program but also building local capacity in terms of assessment expertise. This would facilitate a smooth transition from using international assessments to using assessments which are developed locally but aligned to international standards; hence making the initiative a more cost effective and sustainable solution.

The initiative also aimed at enhancing the workplace language skills of students and promoting learner autonomy while ensuring fairness and access for all. The

concept of blended learning attempted to provide the balance between fostering learner autonomy through online learning and catering for students who need to remain engaged in the course and require face-to-face communication with their tutors and fellow students. However, one cannot ignore the challenges which come with online learning in terms of student dropout levels and internet accessibility issues. It is therefore recommended to: (a) revisit the face-to-face and online components of the program and decide on an optimum balance playing on the strengths of face-to-face and online approaches and minimising any weaknesses; (b) provide more support to students in terms of managing their own learning during the online component and create opportunities to use online forums as a means of interaction with tutors and peers; and (c) enhance the infrastructure necessary for the successful delivery of the online component of the course through provision of technical support. Last but not least, considerations would need to be given to technical expertise and financial resources necessary for delivering online courses.

The use of external assessment within the local context helped Pathways-Egypt to reach its objectives by: (a) facilitating the targeting of students who would benefit the most from the initiative using the placement test; (b) examining the extent of learner progression using score data from the two forms of assessment and as a quality control measure; and (c) increasing access to national and international job opportunities through the provision of an internationally recognised certificate. However, as mentioned earlier, the value of using external international assessment needs to be weighed against financial considerations especially when upscaling of an initiative is a desired outcome.

To conclude, the findings from the study demonstrated a positive impact of the initiative. The results and the lessons learnt can be drawn upon in planning a road map for the national level implementation of the program through international collaborations, building on the strengths of the initiative and taking corrective action to minimise limitations.

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