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Jesuit Worldwide Learning
Higher Education at the Margins

Language as a Tool to Recover and Rebuild

The Impact of the Global English Language (GEL) Programme in Iraq and Kenya

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Research findings from displaced and marginalised communities

Introduction

For young people in displaced and marginalised communities, access to English can be life-changing: opening doors to further education, employment, and wider opportunities. The Jesuit Worldwide Learning (JWL) Global English Language (GEL) Programme was built on this belief. Since its launch in 2017, the programme has, as of April 2026, reached 32,000 learners (around 65% female) across 100 centres in more than 30 countries, predominantly in Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. The GEL programme serves young people in crisis regions, including forcibly displaced persons and returnees. Facilitators are recruited from within local communities and given structured training and ongoing professional development, ensuring the programme is both culturally grounded and sustainably delivered.

Cambridge University Press & Assessment (Cambridge) has been a partner in this work since 2017, contributing learning materials (Unlock and English Unlimited) alongside language assessments, including Linguaskill and the Cambridge English Placement Test. As of 2026, more than 30,000 Cambridge tests have been taken in JWL learning centres. Provision of globally recognised qualifications matters in this context: for learners who may relocate multiple times due to displacement, an internationally recognised English qualification can make a tangible difference to their prospects. Cambridge colleagues have also provided teacher training and professional development support for GEL facilitators, often on a voluntary basis.

Our evaluation¹

In collaboration with JWL, we recently completed an evaluation that focused on the impact of the GEL programme in Iraq and Kenya. The student profile in Iraq is mainly Yazidi returnees, while that in Kenya is mainly refugees from neighbouring countries. We gathered survey data from 172 participants and interviewed 16 learners and facilitators. We also

analysed learner data from JWL's information system and 1,804 end-of-course feedback forms from the two countries.

The evaluation investigated whether the GEL programme equips graduates with the language and communication skills needed to continue their education or access professional opportunities. It also looked at GEL's impact at the individual and community levels, exploring how participants and their communities benefit from the programme. The findings offer a deeper understanding of the transformative impact of language learning in contexts shaped by displacement, adversity, and limited access to education.

Key Findings

Across Iraq and Kenya, evaluation findings consistently pointed to positive changes:

90% of the respondents to the evaluation survey agreed that learning English with GEL had **improved their lives**.

81% of the respondents agreed that learning English with GEL had given them the opportunities to **improve the lives of those in their communities**.

90% of the respondents agreed that learning English with GEL had increased their **confidence** to interact with others in English.

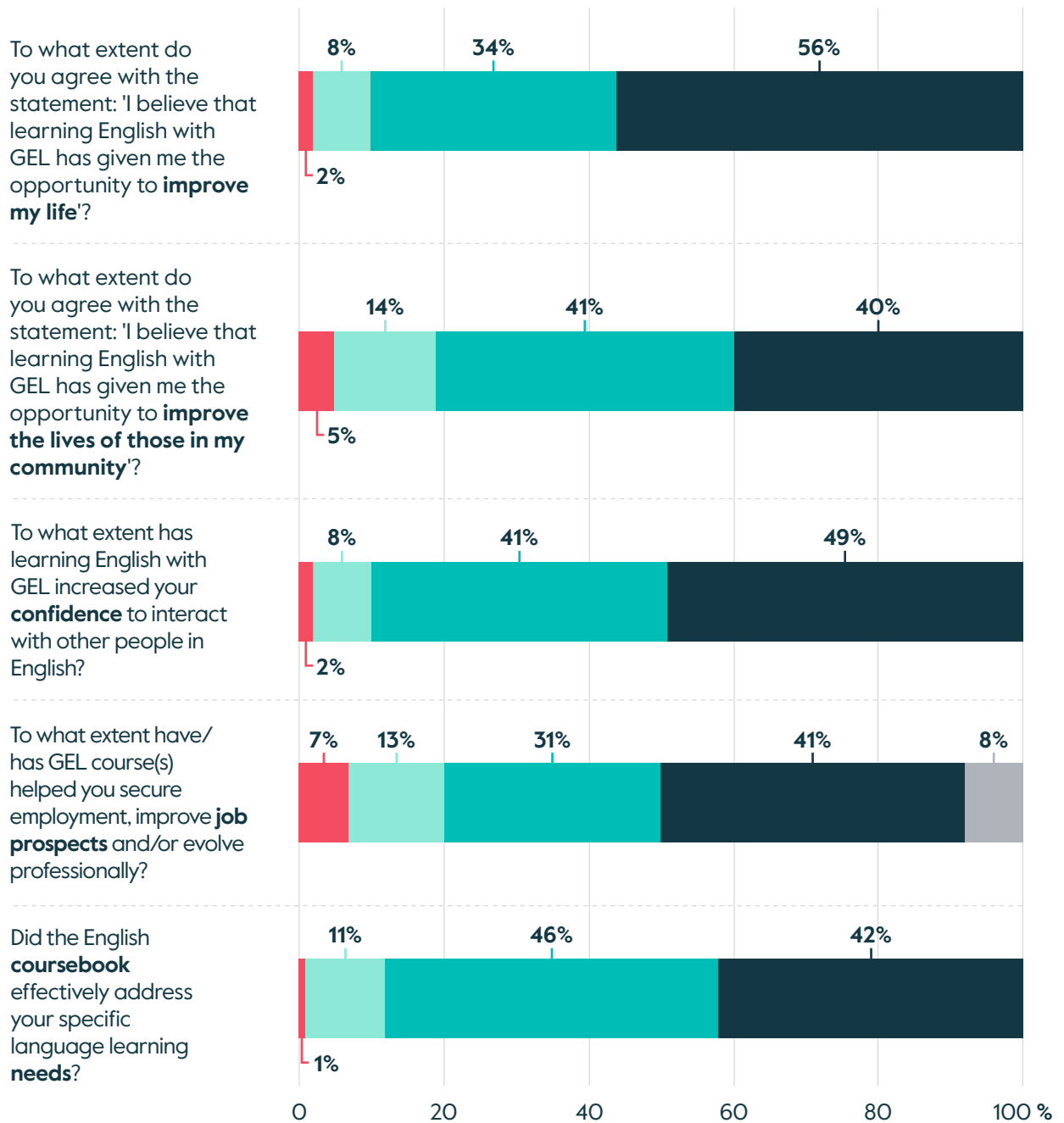
72% of the respondents said that GEL courses had helped them improve their **employment prospects or professional development**.

88% of the respondents said that the English coursebooks, provided by Cambridge, **addressed** their specific language **learning needs**.

¹ This is an abridged version of the evaluation report delivered to JWL, developed to communicate key findings to a wider stakeholder audience.

Students' responses to evaluation survey questions

■ Not at all
 ■ To a small extent
 ■ To some extent
 ■ To a large extent
 ■ Not applicable



Our findings

Voices from Yazidi returnees in Iraq

In northern Iraq, the GEL programme operates in locations deeply affected by conflict and displacement. Community learning centres have been established in partnership with initiatives to support refugees from Syria and returning members of the Yazidi community, who have endured centuries of marginalisation culminating in the 2014 genocide carried out by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Many of the GEL learners have experienced significant trauma and disruption to their education. This study focuses on examining the impact of the GEL programme on the Yazidi community.

The findings of the study show that the GEL programme has had a positive impact on the participants at the individual level. These improvements to learners' lives were driven by gains in confidence, new friendships and stronger employment and study prospects.

"Learning English has helped me [...] in my academic life, especially in understanding certain academic subjects and accessing foreign references."

Student, Iraq

"Learning English with GEL has given me the opportunity to improve my life by enhancing my communication skills, building my confidence, and opening doors to more educational and professional opportunities. It has also helped me connect with people from different cultures, participate in global discussions, and express my ideas clearly in both spoken and written English."

Student, Iraq

Many students in Iraq went to extraordinary lengths to attend classes: relocating to another town, walking for hours in the heat, or flagging down passing cars just to reach the centre.

"I had to walk about 3 kilometres in the summer heat every day to reach the highway that leads to the centre of Sinjar. There I would start to wait and raise my hand for every car passing. Sometimes I would leave home 2 hours before the class start time. For me, it was worth it, and I would do it again if I had a chance."

Student, Iraq



Photo 1. GEL learners in a learning centre in northern Iraq.

The study also showed that learning English as a community has contributed to healing and rebuilding, as evidenced by interviews with students and course facilitators.

"In the beginning, I felt uncomfortable because I didn't know my classmates. I didn't want to share my life with them but now we are like a family."

Student, Iraq

"I remember that moment I wanted to speak and share my ideas and thoughts, but I couldn't because my English was not that good, so I felt it made me silent, like I had a voice to speak but I couldn't."

Student, Iraq

The study found that teachers played an important role in encouraging students and providing them with support, which contributed significantly to their learning and increase in confidence. Locally recruited teachers, who understood the contexts well, deliberately created psychologically safe spaces wherein mistakes became opportunities for students.

"I tell them [the students] a lot like we are not native speakers that nobody expects them to speak English 100% correctly. So, making mistakes means that they are trying."

Facilitator, Iraq

Facilitators treat us with kindness and respect. They make us feel comfortable. We are almost like friends. This creates a great learning environment where we all feel supported. When I don't get something or I don't understand something, I ask them [...] they will explain more.

Student, Iraq

The learning centres in Iraq admit not only students from the Yazidi community but also those from other communities, ensuring equal opportunities for all. Participants reported that bringing a diverse population of students together in the GEL classes has helped foster greater levels of understanding between different ethnic and religious groups.

'In my class, I tell them at the beginning – treat all the people equally. You don't judge them based on their race or religion. You just make friends.'

Facilitator, Iraq

Importantly, our findings highlight how learning English has given the Yazidi people a voice on the international stage to advocate for themselves and their rights after the genocide.

'ISIS committed genocide against the Yazidi people in Sinjar. About 5,000 Yazidi people were killed or kidnapped. Before the course, I wasn't able to explain this. I would like to let people from outside know what happened here.'

Student, Iraq



Photo 2. Yazidi GEL learners remembering those who lost their lives in the genocide perpetrated by ISIL.

Voices from refugee communities in Kenya

In Kenya, a different but equally powerful story emerged. The GEL programme in Kenya operates across Kakuma Refugee Camp, the Kalobeyi settlement, and Nairobi, supporting individuals from multiple nationalities who are navigating displacement and rebuilding their lives with limited access to formal education.

Like learners in Iraq, those in Kenya also reported positive impact that learning with GEL has had on their lives. For instance, a survey respondent wrote that,

'Learning English with GEL has helped me gain more confidence in everyday situations, like speaking at work, helping my children with school, and even applying for better job opportunities. It's opened new doors for personal growth and independence that I didn't have before.'

Student, Kenya

Findings from interviews indicate that English is not only perceived as a tool for learning and mobility but also a key factor in maintaining peaceful co-existence within the camp. Participants described how a common language helped prevent misunderstandings and reduced tensions among refugee groups with different linguistic backgrounds.

'In 2016, we experienced conflict in the camp. And the main source of it was the language barrier. So, we decided to have this initiative to build the community together, to teach people some basic English skills. At least they know how they can communicate. Say "sorry", ask "pardon" when [one] offends another.'

Student, Kenya

Just like in Iraq, our study participants in Kenya acknowledged the importance of coming together as a community to heal and recover from trauma, while also looking towards the future, highlighting the role that the GEL classes play in supporting this process.

'People have been traumatised [in] the countries where they came from, so I believe education is a way to manage some of these traumas. When you come to study, you come together with other people. They share their experiences. Some of them give you ways of

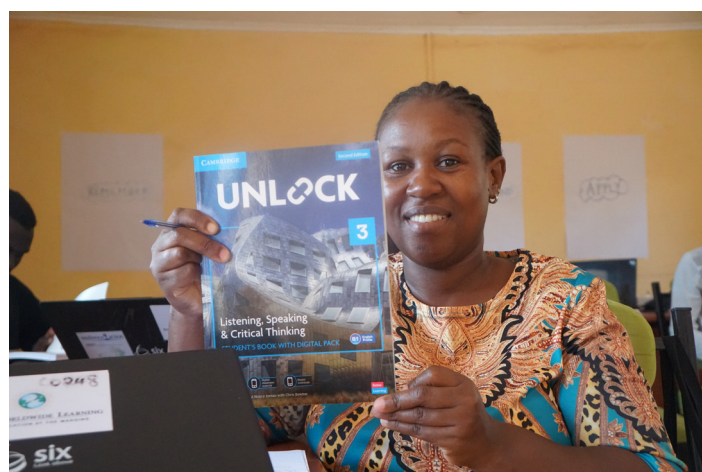


Photo 3. A GEL facilitator at a learning centre at Kakuma Refugee Camp.

how they've come out of their trauma. It's a community, so you're not centred like you stay at home, you're just on your own.'

Facilitator, Kenya

One classroom practice that contributed to the increase in students' confidence and job prospect was the intentional focus on practising speaking and group discussions on various topics in the class; the teaching and learning materials provided by Cambridge supported this practice, with a majority of survey respondents agreeing that the Cambridge coursebooks addressed their specific language learning needs.

In addition, the study found that there was a ripple effect from the programme, as some of the students in Kenya were able to support non-English speaking members within their communities, by sharing information and opportunities with others who struggle with the language.

'GEL English learning has not only helped me personally, but it has also given me tools to support my community. I help translate documents and guide young people in applying for programmes or writing simple CVs. This has empowered more members of my community to access global opportunities and education. English has become a bridge that connects us to the world.'

Student, Kenya

Our impact

We have drawn on the findings of the study to create a comprehensive set of recommendations to improve the design and delivery of the GEL programme. These include making sure that students gain practical, real-world skills to secure work and perform well in the workplace, and strengthening technical support to facilitators and students so they can get the most out of the course app.

One outstanding recommendation is on supporting community learning centres in Kenya to recruit and retain more female students. The study found that, despite making up 51% of enrolled learners in Kenya between 2019 and 2024, female students were half as likely to complete three GEL courses than male students. Recruitment and retention were challenging due partly to roles of traditional beliefs and gender stereotypes. Based on the recommendations of the study, JWL has strengthened support for female learners and is now implementing the GEL programme in high schools reaching female learners earlier on; supported by 18 facilitators many of whom are female.

The evidence from Iraq and Kenya points to something that goes beyond language acquisition. For learners who have experienced displacement, conflict, or marginalisation, the GEL programme offers a space to rebuild confidence, reconnect with a sense of possibility, and find community. As the programme continues to grow and evolve, Cambridge remains committed to supporting JWL in ensuring that this opportunity reaches those who need it most, and that the learning it enables is recognised and valued wherever students go next.



Photo 4. GEL learners at a centre at Kakuma Refugee Camp.

Acknowledgement

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Contact

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