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# **R-ACADEMY**

## **Providing Education & Skills to the Stateless**

Report on Rohingya Project's  
R-Academy Pilot Programme

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# INTRODUCTION



The Rohingya Project is a grassroots initiative to uplift and empower the stateless and financially excluded Rohingya people by creating a secure and transparent digital ecosystem. The R-Academy is a new initiative under the Rohingya Project which aims to provide Rohingya people with skills that they would find applicable and necessary in their lives. The pilot programme for the R-Academy was conducted over a duration of 8 weeks. During the pilot programme, English classes were conducted twice a week -- once over Zoom, and once through a pre-recorded video. The Zoom class was held every Saturday at 1pm GMT, and the videos were uploaded every Tuesday.

A preliminary poll conducted among some of the Rohingya people indicated that there was a high demand for conversational English lessons and this was taken into consideration when choosing the topic for the pilot programme. The programme started with eighteen students who had indicated interest and availability for the timing of the class.

We observed the lessons that were conducted, and are writing this report to cover the pedagogical methods of the classes, its effectiveness, areas for improvement, as well as possible ways the programme can be scaled up.

# CONTENTS

1	Academy's Pedagogical Philosophy
2	Syllabus
3	Analysis of Effectiveness
4	Areas for Improvement
5	Scaling Up
6	Acknowledgements

# R-ACADEMY'S PEDAGOGICAL PHILOSOPHY

R Academy's Pedagogical Philosophy represents our core beliefs about teaching and learning. We believe that our students should be placed at the heart of our educational decisions - and that their priorities should guide the design and implementation of our curriculum. In the context of our Rohingya students, R-Academy has specifically identified language, relevance, and the accessibility to learning as key considerations that underpin our educational practices. These guide our teaching actions so that every student has the opportunity to participate as an engaged learner. The following sections will elaborate on the aforementioned considerations and our teaching strategies.

## LANGUAGE

With regard to learning English, one barrier students typically face is the steep learning curve. In the context of our Rohingya students, this is exacerbated by the fact that most English educators cannot speak the native language. As a result, students who do not have any prior experience with the English Language can find it exceedingly difficult to follow the lessons.

R-Academy is acutely aware of this difficulty and has incorporated innovative teaching strategies to circumvent this problem:

The R-Academy educator was accompanied by a translator. This is beneficial for the following reasons:

- Some parts of the lesson were taught in the native language. This ensured that lesson delivery was not compromised by the language barrier.
- According to a post-programme survey conducted, all our students indicated Rohingya translation motivated them to participate in class. Students were able to articulate their thoughts and questions with greater ease.
- Students were able to associate what they learned with the corresponding words from their native language. This enabled students to build upon their prior knowledge.
- Inputs from our translator enabled our curriculum to incorporate semantic nuances from both languages. This allowed our students to be more aware of cultural connotations that exist in both languages.

The R-Academy educator used non-verbal cues to facilitate instruction.

- While some educators may find it difficult to communicate directly with students, the educator for the programme used non-verbal cues to facilitate clearer communication.
- One example is the use of pictures in our programme slides. The slides used during our lessons necessarily incorporate visual representations of the subject being taught. This facilitated greater student participation by allowing students to better follow the class, even if they face some difficulty in understanding what was being said.

# RELEVANCE

In order to ensure that what is being taught was directly relevant and applicable to our students, R-Academy incorporated a student-driven curriculum design.

When it comes to learning the English Language, each student has their own motivations. Because these motivations are not necessarily the same, there is no curriculum that can truly be considered as 'one size fits all'. As such, there is a need to identify what students hope to achieve from the lesson. This is so that we are able to cater to their differing needs - and work towards that goal.

By allowing students to voice what they feel is most important, our students become active learners who have a stake and agency in their learning process.

# ACCESSIBILITY TO LEARNING

Given the challenges that stateless individuals face, R-Academy understands the importance of having the flexibility to accommodate challenges and unpredictabilities that might hinder our student's ability to engage in lessons.

For example, our decision to conduct our lessons online stem from the fact that some of our students lack mobility or are preoccupied with other important work. Conducting our lessons online alleviates this problem because students are able to attend our lessons without the need to travel or meet in person. This also cuts down on travelling time and allows immobile or working students to attend lessons as well.

In this programme, students attended the same class from different locations around the world -- Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia. By conducting the lessons on an online platform, these students were all able to attend the same class under one educator. This allows the programme to gather students with common learning interests across geographical boundaries together to feasibly conduct a class.

Despite this, we also understand that students will not be able to attend every lesson due to various reasons. Normally, this will result in students finding it increasingly difficult to keep up with subsequent lessons. However, R-Academy circumvents this problem by making it a point to record lesson material for future reference. This creates a repository that students can access to bolster their learning at their own convenience.

In this sense, R Academy's curriculum and pedagogy is characterised by its flexibility. This creates an inclusive learning environment where students do not fall behind because of unpredictable developments or external commitments, which are common barriers to learning.

# SYLLABUS

With regard to our syllabus, R-Academy is continually in conversation with our students to find out what content is most relevant to their lives. While our syllabus is constantly being changed to suit these needs, feedback from the ground has helped us identify recurring themes that are widely regarded as useful. This has helped us to develop a general syllabus for the English Language pilot programme. The following is the syllabus used:

WEEKS	TOPICS	THEMES
<b>1</b>	<b>Introductory class &amp; initial assessments</b>	<b>Myself &amp; My Family</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>My Family and My Future Plans</b>	<b>My Future Plans &amp; My Goals; Wealth &amp; Money</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>My Land of Origin</b>	<b>My Land of Origin &amp; My Culture</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>My Current Country</b>	<b>The Country Where I Live &amp; Other Cultures</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Comparing and Contrasting</b>	<b>Comparing &amp; Contrasting Cultures</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Asking Questions to Understand; Asking for Directions</b>	<b>Medical Care Asking Questions &amp; Interacting with Personnel</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Medical Care Vocabulary</b>	<b>Medical Care Advocating for Myself &amp; Others</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>Assessment Preparation</b>	<b>Assessments &amp; Graduation</b>

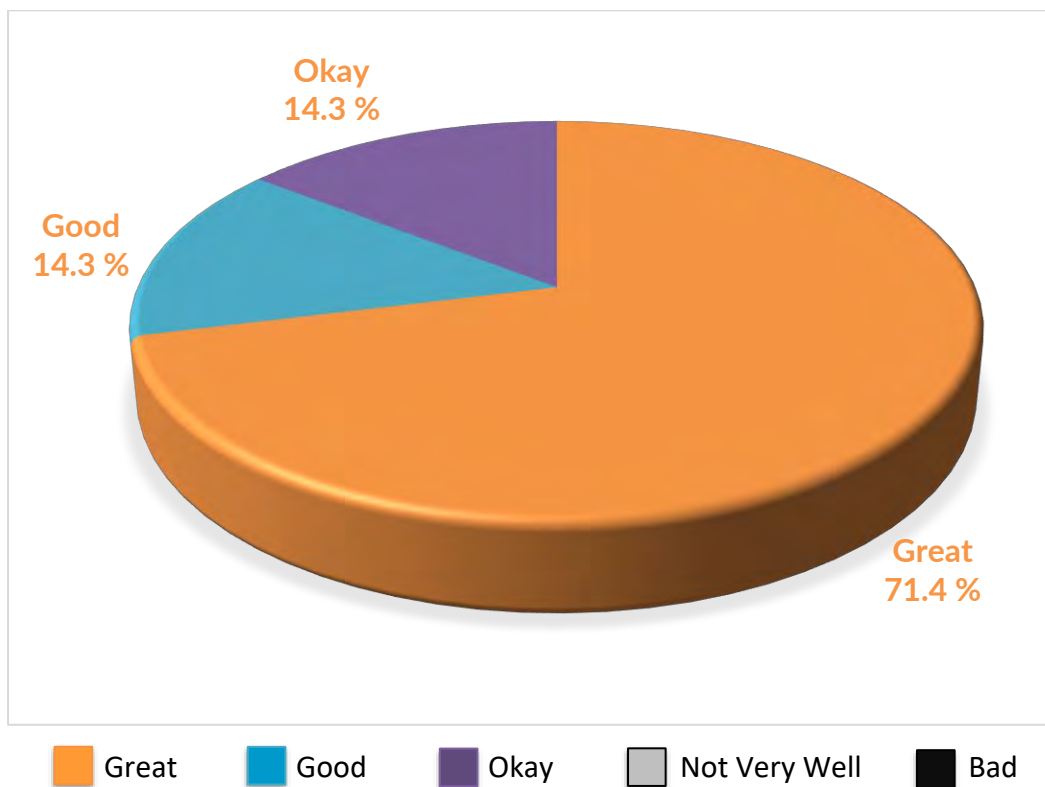


# ANALYSIS OF EFFECTIVENESS

The effectiveness of our classes was measured broadly in two ways. The first was through a survey response from the students, and the second was through an assessment conducted by the educator at the end of the eight weeks.

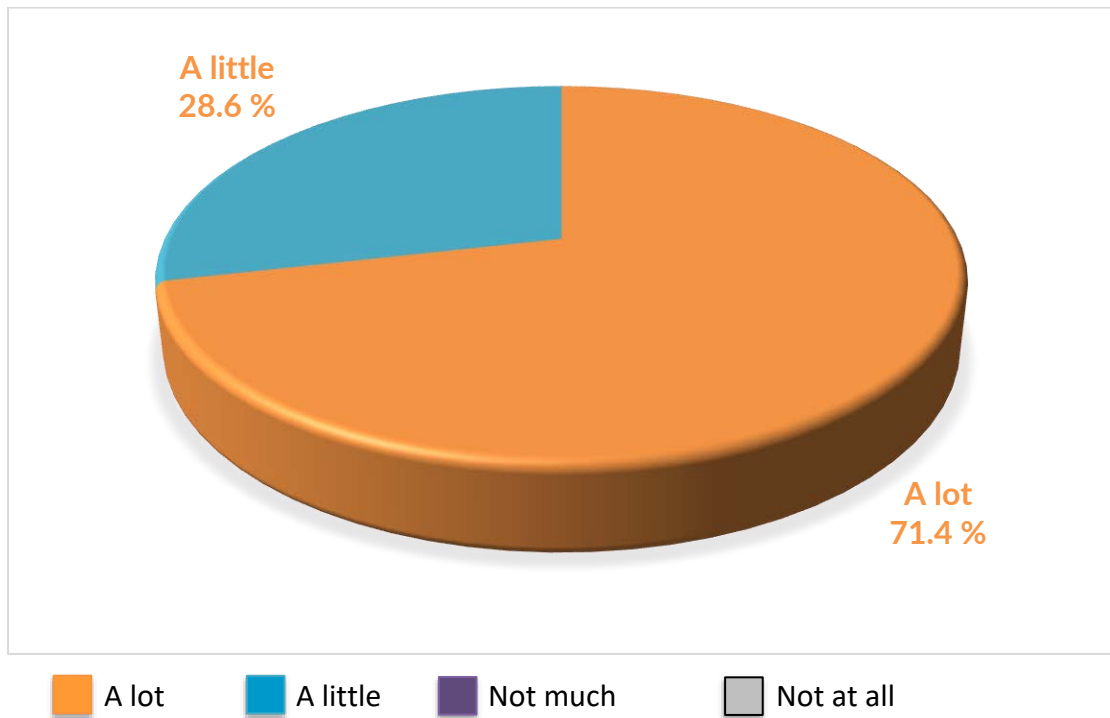
## SURVEY

How do you feel the class went overall?



**Fig 1:** The survey responses for a general consensus of the class indicated that the majority of the students felt that the class had gone well for them.

## How much do you feel your English skills have improved?



**Fig 2:** Survey results indicate that all students feel like their English skills improved.

Overall, the survey shows that our programme was useful for students and generally well received. All our students responded that the programme had positive effects on their grasp of the English language, which translated into practical benefits in their professional and personal lives.

# ASSESSMENT

Besides the survey conducted, students' proficiency in English was recorded when they first joined the class, as well as in the last class in the form of an oral assessment. The scores of the students' proficiency was based on the scoring system below in response to being asked questions in English:

**1**

**Does not understand the question**

**2**

**Responds with one-word phrases**

**3**

**Speaks in complete sentences but provides little additional context; some grammatical errors and sometimes difficult to understand**

**4**

**Speaks in complete, complex sentences with some additional context and some minor grammatical errors, but understandable most of the time**

**5**

**Speaks in complete, complex sentences with some additional context and few or no grammatical errors and understandable all of the time**

7 out of 19 (37%) students completed the programme. Completion of the programme was determined based on attendance, and students with 70% attendance rate were considered to have completed the programme. From the assessment, it was




concluded that all students made improvements in the language with an average score improvement of 1.5 (for example, a student may have gone from beginner - high oral proficiency to between intermediate-low and intermediate-high oral proficiency).

Through the classes, the improvements recorded were in: the breadth of the vocabulary used, the pronunciation of words, and grammatical structures.

Overall, there were improvements in the students' grasp of English for those who underwent the final assessment. However, there were students who were unable to continue attending classes for various reasons, and these students were not assessed. The programme started out with nineteen students, and at the end of the programme, seven were eligible to receive a certificate of completion. 4/19 students (21%) stopped attending the course around the midway point. For at least three of these students, the course appeared to be too hard. This dropout rate will be addressed in the next section.

## AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

This section will address the limitations of this programme and suggest possible ways for improvement. According to Ms Sarah Godek, the educator for the programme, the programme was unable to retain students for the following reasons:

-  **Students attended only the classes with the content they wished to learn.**
-  **The course was either too difficult or too easy for students.**
-  **They were unable to attend due to internet connection and timing issues.**

While R-Academy takes into consideration what our students deem as most relevant, it is difficult for us to cater to all our students' differentiated interests at once. This creates a situation where some students become disengaged and choose to drop out from the programme. In this regard, expanding R-Academy into an online platform where videos for lessons are pre-recorded and uploaded could resolve the issue. This is because students will then be able to selectively watch the videos that are most relevant to them.

For students who are unable to attend live online lessons due to other commitments or internet connection problems, continuing record classes and uploading them online will help the students access it whenever they are able to. During this programme, 2 students (11%) never attended a live class, likely due to unstable internet connection.

The issue of classes being either too difficult or too easy for some students can be resolved by expanding the breadth of the programmes being offered. The expansion of the programmes would allow for the banding of skill levels, especially for language courses, where it can be split into beginner and intermediate courses. Feedback from the students also reflected a demand for classes to be given level by level to be accessible to learners from all skill levels.

In terms of being able to continually practice the topics that they have learnt, a possible suggestion is to form partnerships with universities for students from R-Academy to be able to continue practicing the skills they have learnt with another student who is learning or has learnt the skill. This would help to reinforce the skills that the students have learnt. Specifically for the languages that they have learnt, being able to converse with a native speaker of the language will be helpful in giving the students an opportunity to continue practicing the language, as well as to get native advice on grammar and vocabulary.

# SCALING UP

Moving forward, R-Academy hopes to expand their reach through three main strategies: providing adequate remuneration for educators and translators; improving our student retention rate; and diversifying content.

R-Academy will require an official position with remuneration for the educators of the courses. The time commitment for running the pilot programme was 15 hours a week, excluding the time it took to conduct and record the classes. Designating an official role for educators would make it possible for the educators to devote their time full time into crafting the content of the classes. With specific regards to language programmes, being able to provide Rohingya translation for the language was helpful to many of the students. Thus, for future expansion of the courses, designating a role for translator with adequate remuneration would allow students in the programmes to access courses with appropriate translations.

R-Academy also hopes to improve our student retention rate. As mentioned above, some students stop attending lessons once they feel the knowledge they have is sufficiently useful. They also stop attending lessons if the class is too easy or too hard for them. One solution to this problem is to introduce class banding. By splitting the classes according to proficiency, educators will be better able to alter their lessons to suit the appropriate level of difficulty. This will allow educators to set a better pace for every student (regardless of proficiency) and help students to make the most out of each lesson.

R-Academy also hopes to diversify its content. Currently, R-Academy focuses primarily on teaching English. However, it would also be helpful to determine if there are other training programmes that could benefit our students. For example, training in IT or hospitality could enable our students to better find employment in their respective fields. These will work in tandem with the English training they have received to better empower our students.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## Sarah Godek



Sarah Godek is a United States educator whose work is based in culturally responsive teaching practices. In addition to drawing from her experience in working with English language learners, Sarah considers her work through the lenses of students' cultural backgrounds and individual educational needs and works to tailor her instruction accordingly.

## Student Acknowledgement

We acknowledge in this report the students who enthusiastically participated in this pilot program and made it possible, sharing feedback and their lived experiences along the way. Their energy and dedication demonstrate how Rohingya students relentlessly challenge unimaginable barriers to pursue education.



## About the Contributors

Misaki Tan is a prospective Psychology major at Yale-NUS college. She enjoys reading, journaling, and has an interest in human behaviour especially when it comes to the realm of crime. She also has a passion for learning about conflicts around the world, and the people who are impacted and involved in them. Misaki has followed the Rohingya crisis since she was 14, and joined R-Academy to fulfil a longstanding dream of doing her part to make a difference.

Lucas Hsu is a prospective Environmental Studies major at Yale-NUS college. He joined R-Academy in August 2020 as an intern because he believed that they were doing good work in making a positive difference in the lives of displaced Rohingya people. He is also an aspiring educator who hopes to teach Geography at the secondary school level. Recently, Lucas has completed a school attachment programme with Choa Chu Kang Secondary School and has a newly renewed sense of respect for the teachers who have taught him. Lucas also enjoys taking part in lifesaving and is learning to get his motorcycle license.