



Unlocking Learning

The implementation and effectiveness of digital learning
for Syrian refugees in Lebanon

Thomas Dreesen, Akito Kamei, Despina Karamperidou, Sara Abou Fagher,
Lama Marji, Javier Santiago Ortiz Correa

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Correspondence should be addressed to:

UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti

Via degli Alfani, 58

50121 Florence, Italy

Tel: (+39) 055 20 330

Fax: (+39) 055 2033 220

florence@unicef.org

www.unicef-irc.org

twitter: @UNICEFIInnocenti

facebook.com/UnicefInnocenti

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**Thomas Dreesenⁱ, Akito Kameiⁱ, Despina Karamperidouⁱ, Sara Abou Fakherⁱⁱ,
Lama Marjiⁱⁱ, Javier Santiago Ortiz Correaⁱ**

ⁱ UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti

ⁱⁱ UNICEF Lebanon Country Office

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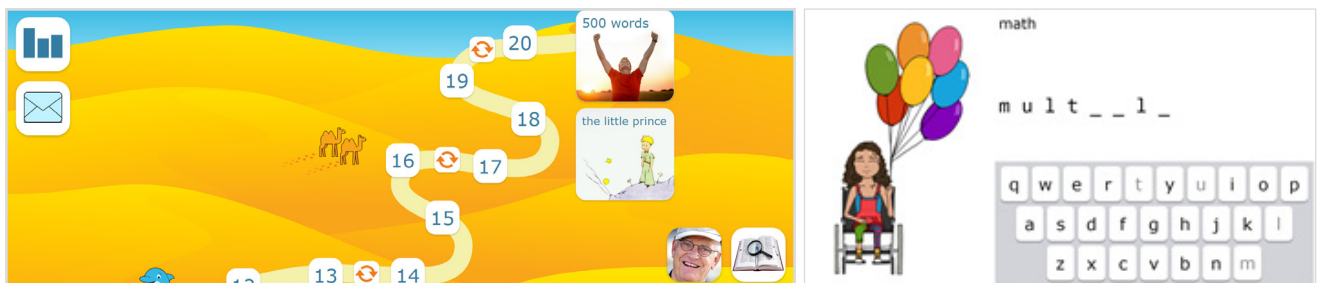
Executive summary

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in school closures around the world, at its peak affecting 1.6 billion students worldwide (UNESCO, 2020). This crisis has underscored the importance of resilient education systems that can support all, especially the most marginalized, to learn during times of crisis. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly one in four children globally were living in countries affected by conflict or disaster, unable to routinely access quality education (UNICEF, 2016). The growing use of digital technologies in education (commonly referred to as EdTech) during COVID-19 school closures has heightened the need to understand how to best use EdTech in humanitarian and crisis contexts.

This report presents findings from the UNICEF-Akelius Foundation Innovation in Education Partnership and its implementation of a digital course used on tablets and mobile phones for language learning in Lebanon, where 40 per cent of school-age children and adolescents are Syrian refugees. The digital course was introduced in non-formal education (NFE) classes for Syrian refugees to strengthen English or French language learning and help their transition to Lebanon's trilingual education system, where classes are taught in Arabic, French and English.

The goal of the digital course examined in this research is to provide students and teachers with a tool to accelerate language learning for marginalized children. The digital course is free, includes no advertising and requires no prior user information to access. It can be accessed online via a web browser, or online and offline (when content is downloaded) through a mobile application on tablets or mobile phones. The content and features of the course are developed through a co-creation approach with frequent communication and feedback from implementing teachers based on the real-world use of the course with students (see Image 1).

Image 1. Examples of the Akelius Digital Language Course content



When first implemented in Lebanon in 2019, the course was used in three centres serving 246 students as a teaching tool within traditional face-to-face classrooms. In class, students used the course on individual tablets with headphones and were guided by teachers who were present. However, when schools and education centres in Lebanon closed in March 2020, the course was implemented in a fully remote learning environment and expanded across the country to 64 NFE centres covering a total of 7,237 refugee students.

As a result, this report presents analysis on the implementation of the digital course in three key areas: First, the report investigates the digital course's use in a blended learning environment where it was used on tablets by students as part of traditional face-to-face classroom instruction with teachers. Second, the analysis examines the transition to remote learning where the course was used on devices owned by the household, supported by teachers remotely. Third, the report estimates the effectiveness of the use of the digital course during this period of remote learning from August–November 2020.

Summary of key findings:

1. When used during in-person classes, qualitative evidence from teachers indicates that the course led to improvements in their classroom environment, students' confidence, motivation to go to class and speaking skills.
2. The successful transition to remote digital learning relied on frequent, clear communication between educators and households and ongoing support from educators to overcome challenges, including unreliable internet connectivity and distrust of technology within the community.
3. In both face-to-face and remote settings, teachers remained the key to successful implementation of digital learning. When centres closed, teachers gave additional support to students and families beyond their already challenging role of teaching from a distance. They provided psychosocial support to families, as well as technological support by developing and delivering guides on how to use technology, providing data package top-ups and even helping to install internet routers within communities.
4. When implemented in a fully remote learning environment, students from classes that introduced the digital course showed statistically significant improvements in foreign language (French or English, 21.2 per cent increase; Arabic, 21.1 per cent increase), and art (11.1 per cent increase) competencies compared to students from centres that didn't use the digital course. These findings are robust when controlling for baseline learning levels of students, demographic characteristics and the location of the learning centre.



Recommendations for policymakers, education practitioners, and EdTech developers

Education systems and practitioners were unprepared for the unprecedented school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic and rapidly adapted to provide learning for children. Governments need to build resilience in education systems and, as part of that process, have a systems approach to providing equitable digital learning whether the classroom is physical or virtual. The following are recommendations from the experience of the UNICEF-Akeli Foundation partnership in Lebanon:

- **Governments should prioritize investments in reliable electricity and connectivity infrastructure, especially for hard-to-reach and marginalized areas and populations.** Work must be done at the same time with the private sector to ensure low-cost and affordable data, all of which are needed to enable equitable digital learning. Education partners across Lebanon cited connectivity as the major barrier faced when providing digital remote learning, compounded by the high cost of data.
- **Frequent communication with families and communities should continue beyond remote learning to sustain increased caregiver engagement in their children's learning.** Education coordinators noted that caregivers were more engaged in their children's learning while using the digital course at home. For refugee families with low trust of institutions, the trust and relationships built with community-based NFE actors continues to be critical to encourage families to pursue education for their children.
- **Education providers must invest in the digital skills of teachers and facilitators and their readiness for digital learning, whether in the remote or physical classroom.** Implementation of digital learning during school closures varied between centres, partners, and teachers. Many times those differences were based on the capacities of teachers and various technological constraints in communities. Investments in the digital skills of teachers and facilitators need to be met with ongoing support and guidance for them on how to effectively integrate technology into their teaching practice.
- **The support system needed to enable digital learning must be invested in, and the key role of teachers in successful implementation of EdTech must be acknowledged and supported.** Teachers provided extra-academic support to families in alleviating technology and connectivity issues throughout school closures. The use

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