

English Language Teaching:

The criteria for supporting ELT as part of a VSO country programme



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Acronyms and abbreviations

ELT	English language teaching
ESP	English for specific purposes
HDI	The UNDP Human Development Index measures a country's achievements in terms of life expectancy, educational attainment and adjusted real income.
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
IQuEST	Improving the Quality of English in Schools and Teacher Education (Ethiopia)
NGO	non-governmental organisation
STEP	Secondary and Technical English Project (Mozambique)
TESO	Teacher Education Overhaul System (Ethiopia)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

Purpose

This paper is designed to clarify VSO's position in British English Language Teaching (ELT) development assistance, a distinctive but often controversial contribution which began in the 1930s. A detailed discussion of these debates and the rationale for a VSO position paper on ELT can be found in the Appendix.

This position paper aims to guide VSO staff and volunteers on the role of ELT in VSO's country programmes. It is based on a workshop held in Laos in February 2003, involving VSO staff, volunteers and partners in-country, from other countries, and from VSO UK.

The paper lays out guidelines to inform decision-making within programme offices (supported by other VSO staff) on the appropriateness of supporting ELT as an element within a particular country programme. These basic parameters are accompanied with case studies (where possible) drawn both from VSO's own experience and the experience of other organisations. It is important to emphasise that this paper relates only to VSO's ELT programmes per se and not to ELT placements supporting other aims, ie it does not refer to one-off individual volunteer placements that may very appropriately contribute to VSO's development goals¹.

'The people whom we seek to empower are disadvantaged both within their country context and in absolute terms. In less developed countries, in which disadvantage is widespread, our work is likely to benefit a wider range of the population. In more developed countries, VSO's efforts should be more tightly focused to benefit the most disadvantaged people in society... We seek partners who are committed to change and who can provide the organisational structure and resources needed for volunteers to be effective. For this reason, VSO is rarely able to work directly with the very poorest people in society. Instead we work with partner organisations that work with or for the benefit of disadvantaged people.'

Source: Focus for Change, VSO's strategic plan, 2002

¹: VSO's development goals are outlined in **Focus for Change**, VSO's strategic plan (2002), as education, HIV and AIDS, disability, health and social well-being, secure livelihoods, and participation and governance.

The criteria for supporting ELT as part of a VSO country programme

Many governments articulate the need for English as essential to national development, but without suggesting how it relates to a poverty-alleviating strategy. As the extract from **Focus for Change** on the previous page indicates, VSO needs to assess ELT initiatives within the broad context of our poverty focus and the support of the most disadvantaged people in society. This focus is particularly difficult to achieve in a more developed country² that is able to invest in an education system, leading to higher primary enrolment rates, higher gender equity in secondary education, and skills training in support of economic growth, for example. In this context, support for the formal education system rarely reaches the most disadvantaged people, who often lack access to education due to a variety of factors, including location, social class, gender, disability, or lack of literacy, fees or associated costs.

When considering ELT support as part of a country programme, appraisal therefore needs to include:

- 1. the function of proposed ELT assistance within the national development context**
- 2. the likely benefit, ie the level of direct, and in some cases indirect, impact on disadvantaged individuals and groups, and the nature of the benefit it will confer**
- 3. the nature of support.**

It is impossible to lay down hard and fast rules for making an assessment of this kind in all contexts, but the following guidelines will enable VSO programmes to meet our position on ensuring VSO's ELT support is focused on disadvantaged individuals and groups.

1. The function of proposed ELT assistance within the national development context

- In most cases, VSO aims to support ELT in the formal education sector only in poorer countries. We define these as countries with a low Human Development Index ranking (HDI) where disadvantage is widespread and our work can benefit a large number of people who, by global comparison and within their own country context, lack access to fundamental human rights such as education.
- VSO works in some medium HDI countries, for example in disadvantaged regions within those countries. In such cases, VSO support should be for a clear time-bound period with clearly articulated

Case study 1

Rural education in disadvantaged parts of China

For a time-limited period (until 2009), more than 100 VSO volunteers are working in teacher training colleges in the poorer western, southern and central provinces of China. The greatest need is still to improve English language skills among teachers themselves. During their two years in-country, each volunteer is likely to train up to 400 trainee teachers in English language, with a focus on improving teaching methodology. Seventy per cent of these trainees will go on to teach classes of around 100 pupils in schools within the disadvantaged provinces. The exposure of Chinese teachers to active, student-centred teaching methods, as opposed to traditional 'chalk and talk' learning, will also enable them to engage more effectively with their students in classes of such a large size.

Source: VSO China Annual Country Report, 2002

outcomes for disadvantaged individuals and groups.

- The vision or goal the ELT programme contributes to should fit within VSO's country strategic aims. Clear rationales include:

- where English is an official language and is therefore needed for participation in society; in exercising and asserting important rights; in dealing with bureaucracies, officialdom and with vested interests such as landlords; in opening bank accounts; or in participating in the political process at local or national level
- where English forms part of a political process such as reconciliation or transition, in which the population as a whole needs to participate on equal terms in developing new relationships and resolving past antagonisms
- where English is needed to access secondary and post-secondary education and where specific groups are disadvantaged if they are not able to operate in the future medium of instruction
- where disadvantaged sections of society can be helped to access employment opportunities in industries where English is essential, such as tourism where, because of globalisation, English is vital for access to essential knowledge that is unavailable to less disadvantaged groups.

However, in all these cases, it is crucial to distinguish between the provision of English to those who already have easy access to it and to those for whom it is relatively inaccessible. So, it would not be appropriate to support ELT simply for 'national development' purposes, where ELT is accessed only by the more educated 'middle class' on the assumption they will contribute to increasing economic growth, some benefits of which may 'trickle down' to the poorest people. Experience shows this does not necessarily happen.

2. The likely benefit to disadvantaged individuals and groups

Case study 2

Mozambique – helping a country break out of linguistic isolation

VSO supported the Secondary and Technical English Project (STEP) in ten provincial capitals in Mozambique. A total of 16 volunteers worked for over four years to improve quality of English language training and professional support for teachers. The Ministry of Education is using the STEP model to continue training teachers, and local institutions have taken over most elements of the project. This means the innovation will be sustained and will reach more people.

Source: VSO Mozambique Annual Country Report, 2002

If the development context of a proposed ELT project fits some of the above criteria, the following questions must be answered:

- Is there a strong national and local VSO–government partnership and a national strategy that addresses the causes of disadvantage, including any teacher shortage?
- Is there an enabling environment to learning English, an understanding of the role VSO can play in support of ELT, and an openness to change?
- Does VSO have the potential to work at a range of levels or with others who are working at different levels, where VSO’s grassroots experience informs policy-level decisions by government and those addressing the causes of educational disadvantage?
- Is VSO aware of the plans and activities of all the other development players in education (eg INGOs, government, donors, local NGOs, etc) and can it add value without replicating or competing with other agencies and volunteers?
- Will VSO be able to recruit the volunteer skills requested?
- Does the potential cost to VSO of an ELT programme correspond to the potential impact on the relevant groups and communities?
- Are minimum levels of funds available from either government or donor sources to fund travel, resources, workshops, salaries, etc in the area of activity identified? If funds are available from a separate donor, can these be used in a sustainable and integrated way (rather than through a parallel programme)?

In summary, Programme Area Plans³ need to answer these questions to ensure ELT directly addresses the needs of disadvantaged individuals, groups and communities, and therefore fits with VSO’s mandate.

³: The Programme Area Plan is the working document that sets out the aims and objectives, indicators, strategies and activities for the individual VSO programme office’s work in a specific area, eg. education, HIV and AIDS, disability, health and social well-being, secure livelihoods, and participation and governance.

Case study 3

IQuEST in Ethiopia – teacher education: from service delivery to influencing policy

Ethiopia is ranked 169 (out of 173) according to the United Nations Development Programme Human Development Index – 64% of the population live below the poverty line (UNICEF). VSO's programme in Ethiopia is involved in development work in education, regional government capacity-building, infrastructure development and HIV and AIDS interventions.

English is the language of government and a unifying linguistic force in Ethiopia. It also enables participation in economic, cultural, educational, social, technological and political relationships with other nations. The role of English in Ethiopia's social and economic development is acknowledged by the aim 'to enhance the quality of English language instruction in primary grades' in Ethiopia's poverty reduction strategy paper. But there is concern at the relatively poor levels of attainment in English in the country.

In the context of Ethiopia's education system, which lacks teachers, materials and infrastructure, VSO's ELT programme includes direct teaching at secondary, teacher education and tertiary levels. However, we want to tackle the causes of problems in education, as well as the symptoms. And while VSO classroom teachers play an important role, gap-filling in chronically understaffed schools is not enough to improve, in a sustainable way, the standard and quality of English language teaching in the country. We need to work with our partners in Ministries of Education to address the fundamental causes of the teacher shortage and issues around improving structural and methodological constraints to English teaching at policy level.

The Ministry of Education invited a group of VSO volunteers to assist in planning the Improving the Quality of English in Schools and Teacher Education (IQuEST) programme. Although VSO has in previous years been involved in reviewing and developing course materials, our involvement has been restricted mostly to the immediate institution level.

Resulting from research by a VSO primary education adviser at the Ministry of Education, a nationwide programme of teacher education development – the Teacher Education System Overhaul (TESO) – began in August 2002. TESO includes revision of the English language teacher training curricula, the introduction of a higher diploma qualification in teacher education, and a variety of other policy changes to increase teacher motivation and teaching standards. As a result, the country's teaching methodology is currently undergoing a major 'paradigm shift' (Wzo Gennet Zewide, Minister of Education).

Source: VSO Ethiopia Annual Country Report, 2003, and interviews with VSO UK and Ethiopia programme office staff

3. The nature of support

Following on from the guiding parameters above, programmes also need to consider what type of support would be appropriate in the various different contexts where support for ELT may be beneficial.

- Service delivery placements should only be arranged where a link to the causes of disadvantage can be made.
- VSO's entry point should, where possible, be at middle district/regional level. Learning from our education programmes tells us we have a distinctive competency in supporting district- and regional-level capacity-building.

Case study 4

ELT at regional level in Laos

Six VSO volunteers working in teacher training colleges in rural areas are using improved teaching and learning methodologies and child-centred approaches to support all subject areas. Student teachers question more, are more relaxed about social interaction in the classroom and more comfortable about the English language.

Laos is an excellent example of a programme where the teacher training colleges in rural areas provided an entry point for VSO's work in ELT. But the achievements within the teacher training colleges had a ripple effect, in which progress on child-centred learning filtered into the national-level teacher training curriculum beyond ELT to general methodology for a broad range of subjects.

Source: External ELT Review (Laos), February 2003

- ELT support may not necessarily involve conventional classroom teaching, but it may support non-formal education through support to instructors by other means.

Case study 5

An NGO that helps a socially disadvantaged group learn self-confidence

Henry runs the Dalit Liberation Education Trust in Chennai dedicated to supporting a large socially disadvantaged group by providing legal and educational support to their community. It aims to help them learn self-assertiveness and acquire the confidence to stand up to discrimination from officials, police, landlords and employers. The NGO regards competency in English as an important element in establishing self-confidence and the ability to exercise legal rights. It arranges evening classes for young adults, which enable them to access further education and training opportunities. Groups like this have a great need for external expertise to help them gain access to teaching and curricular skills that can be adapted to the needs of young adults in a culturally appropriate form.

Source: Professor Roger Iredale, University of Manchester

At a national level, country- or region-wide support for ELT may be appropriate where a newly independent population requires skills in English for economic development or to break out of former restrictive or oppressive language constraints. This level of support must always be for a time-bound period with clearly articulated expected outcomes.

Case study 6

Mongolia – supporting linguistic diversification at a key transition stage

This case demonstrates the impact a VSO programme in ELT can have over time. Over 100 ELT volunteers have worked in Mongolia since VSO started working there in 1992 – the same number that go to China in just one year. But the percentage of secondary school English teachers that have at some time been taught by a VSO volunteer is at least 25% of all English teachers in Mongolia. In some parts of the country it is near to 100%.

The teaching of English in secondary schools was introduced after the democratic revolution in 1990. At that time, there were very few teachers, or indeed citizens in general, who could speak English. But the country needed to diversify its means of communicating with the international community for economic, political and cultural reasons.

English is now an entry requirement for colleges and tertiary study and training. VSO was invited by the Mongolian Ministry of Education to help train English teachers. For many years, volunteers taught Russian teachers to become English teachers, starting with the alphabet and progressing as far as they could in the course of a six- or ten-month programme. Volunteers then began working in secondary schools, alongside teachers who had been on short re-training courses, to work on their daily language and methodology skills. We now run a varied ELT programme in Mongolia. Volunteers are working in secondary schools, education centres and training colleges, where they are training the country's future teachers through an integrated programme of pre- and in-service training and classroom support. We have also placed volunteers in a few tertiary institutes.

More significantly, VSO is now receiving requests from other organisations – increasingly from NGOs. Now the country has shifted its linguistic orientation to an international language, our programme will need to scrutinise future requests with a view to slanting them increasingly towards disadvantaged groups who have so far not been able to access English skills.

Source: Mongolia programme office staff

Case study 7

Namibia – preparation for independence

For at least a decade before independence from South Africa, Namibians both inside the country and in the external liberation movement prepared themselves by formulating a clear set of policies on all aspects of a future Namibia. This included an English language policy. Various agencies and donors assisted in this process across a range of activities, including facilitating international workshops to formulate an ELT policy, creating literacy manuals, assisting church adult-teaching groups, and developing distance-learning materials. After independence, a huge coordinated effort was made at all levels involving VSO volunteers to establish English as an alternative medium to Afrikaans and as a common language unifying more than nine indigenous language groups. As with Mongolia, VSO's English language teaching has effectively re-orientated people towards being able to operate in English, and future policies will undoubtedly look at how groups previously excluded from the development can be included.

Source: VSO Namibia programme office staff

Appendix

The distinctive nature of ELT: why a position paper is necessary for VSO

ELT has traditionally been viewed as a tool for the promotion of British trade, a means of extending British cultural influence abroad a highly profitable commercial industry both in Britain and abroad, and as a necessary element in the development of countries' education systems.

Adopted in the 1930s by the UK Foreign Office, and through it the British Council, ELT was seen as an important way of winning hearts and minds in the promotion of British culture across the world. Along with this there has been a long-held, though largely unsupported, belief that the spread of the English language would benefit British trade. As English has developed as a world language, commercial organisations, as well as the British Council, have responded to the widespread demand for competency in the language, enabling British-based language schools to open and flourish in most parts of the world.

Simultaneously, ELT has been viewed as an important element in UK overseas aid programmes. It has, however, also figured in those of some other countries – not only those where English is the mother tongue, but in Finland and Sweden, and some multilateral agencies such as UNESCO. ELT was perceived to be so crucial to international development that until 1983, a fixed element of the UK overseas aid programme was specifically set aside to support it. This was largely due to the sustainable belief that Britain leads in both methodology and experience in delivering effective ELT programmes, combined with an overwhelming demand from international governments for British support in this area.

The provision of highly motivated and well-qualified English teachers has frequently provided an important entry point for VSO into country programmes, where it has responded to priority requests from international governments. In VSO's experience, the views of our partner organisations have often been far less concerned with the colonial burden and much more concerned with the support to enable poorer countries to access the knowledge, information and power that linguistic ability in English can provide.

In providing complementary support to the UK overseas aid programme, VSO has shared in the delivery of effective, high-quality programmes, and it has naturally reflected to some extent the underlying assumptions and approaches of the programme as it has developed. In specific circumstances, the provision of ELT on a limited scale can still be an important means of establishing or developing VSO's credibility in a particular situation.

With the increased focus on poverty in the UK overseas aid programme in recent years, it has become important to **identify how ELT provision can work as part of a broader strategy for assisting less privileged individuals, groups, communities and even nations**, rather than viewing it – as in the past – as a programme in its own right and separate from other activities.

In this context, VSO needs to consider three broad points:

- No subject can be culturally neutral. However, ELT carries heavy cultural overtones, and associated hazards need to be recognised clearly at pre-planning stage. ELT can therefore occupy an ambivalent position in some contexts, especially where it is provided as an alternative to the mother tongue in early stages of education. We need to be clear that indigenous culture and language are not being undermined.
- Many governments and partner organisations believe English to be increasingly important for national development, and have turned to VSO for support on this basis. However, the need for ELT is rarely identified as part of a government's national poverty reduction strategy. This creates a specific need for VSO to clarify its reasons for working in ELT.
- Although much ELT provision takes place in the classroom, it is far more than a school-based activity. It should be recognised as extending into adult education, employment-related teaching (usually known as English for specific purposes or ESP), support for educational NGOs and community organisations, and even policy definition and strategic planning. There is therefore significant potential for VSO to have an impact on the most disadvantaged members of society through our support for ELT in these sectors.