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From Chalkboards to Cultural Relevance: A Mixed-Methods Study on ELL Support in Post-Conflict Higher Education

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- Culturally responsive teaching
- Resource constraints
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Abstract: This study investigates the relationship between access to institutional resources and student satisfaction among English Language Learners (ELLs) at the English Language and Literature Department of Bamyan University, a post-conflict, resource-constrained higher education setting. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates quantitative data from surveys and academic writing tests with qualitative insights from classroom observations, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews. Spearman correlation analyses revealed a weak but statistically significant positive relationship between student satisfaction and access to online learning platforms ($\rho = 0.184$, $p < .05$) and language labs ($\rho = 0.127$, $p < .05$), while access to library resources ($\rho = 0.082$, $p = .095$) and textbooks ($\rho = 0.041$, $p = .412$) showed minimal or no significant association. Qualitative findings reinforced these results, with students reporting outdated materials, limited lab availability, frequent power outages, and heavy reliance on lecture-based instruction. The study further found that scaffolded instruction improved student writing scores by 22% ($\rho = 0.286$, $p < .001$), and culturally responsive teaching increased engagement by 15%. Despite their effectiveness, these strategies remain underutilized due to a lack of faculty training and institutional support. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive reforms, including investment in infrastructure, professional development in inclusive pedagogy such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), and curriculum revisions to incorporate local cultural content. These interventions are crucial for enhancing English language education and promoting academic equity in post-conflict and low-resource university settings.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, English has become the dominant medium of instruction in higher education across many non-English-speaking countries. This shift has been driven by the increasing need

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for global academic integration and the pursuit of enhanced employment opportunities (Dearden, 2014). Consequently, English Language Learners (ELLs) students who pursue their education in a language other than their native tongue have become central to efforts aimed at promoting educational equity and academic achievement.

English-medium instruction provides access to international scholarship, fosters intercultural communication, and broadens career prospects for students (Kirkpatrick, 2011). Moreover, diverse classroom environments promote creative problem-solving, critical thinking, and meaningful cross-cultural exchange (Banks, 2015). However, many ELLs continue to encounter significant obstacles due to limited English proficiency, financial constraints, and the absence of instructional strategies tailored to their specific needs, particularly within resource-constrained educational settings.

A significant concern is the distinction between conversational and academic English. According to Cummins (2000), Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) used in everyday interactions are generally acquired within one to two years. In contrast, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), necessary for understanding academic texts and producing analytical writing, can take five to seven years to develop. Thus, conversational fluency does not guarantee readiness for higher-level academic tasks.

Cognitive Load Theory highlights the difficulty faced by ELLs when processing academic content in a non-native language. The additional mental effort required to decode unfamiliar vocabulary and complex structures can overwhelm learners, reducing their ability to absorb and retain new information (Sweller, Ayres, & Kalyuga, 2011). This burden is often exacerbated in environments where students have limited access to textbooks, technology, and qualified instructors. Institutions in low-resource or post-conflict regions often lack the necessary infrastructure, professional development, and inclusive curricula to support diverse learners effectively (Brock-Utne, 2001; Tikly, 2011). As a result, ELLs in these settings are more likely to experience academic underperformance, disengagement, and a decline in self-confidence (Norton & Toohey, 2001).

Several pedagogical approaches have been proposed to address these challenges. Differentiated instruction, which adapts the content, teaching process, and assessment methods to meet individual student needs, is widely recommended (Tomlinson, 2001) and supported by empirical evidence (Shareefa & Moosa, 2020). However, its implementation can be difficult in overcrowded classrooms lacking adequate teacher training (Singh, 2024). Scaffolding strategies such as visual aids, peer support, and guided tasks can also enhance academic performance among ELLs (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976; Rezaee, Farahani, & Mubarak, 2018). Their effectiveness, however, depends heavily on the expertise of educators and institutional support. Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) encourages educators to affirm students' cultural identities and incorporate their backgrounds into the learning process. This practice promotes engagement, motivation, and achievement (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sleeter, 2012). Despite its potential, CRT is unevenly applied outside Western education systems. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides inclusive and

flexible instructional design principles that accommodate diverse learning preferences and linguistic backgrounds (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Even low-tech applications, such as oral assessments and peer learning, have been shown to be effective in under-resourced settings (McKenzie, Karisa, & Kahonde, 2023).

Educational technology also holds promise for personalized learning, offering opportunities for increased engagement and exposure to authentic English content (Chapelle, 2003). Nevertheless, its effectiveness is often limited by infrastructural challenges, including unreliable electricity and internet connectivity (Naqawi, Hassan, & Rajath, 2022). Despite these constraints, innovative efforts, such as solar-powered devices and preloaded offline tablets, have demonstrated encouraging results in similar environments (Pham & Cuong, 2021).

Despite the availability of these strategies, key gaps remain. Many studies assume the existence of an institutional infrastructure that may not be present in resource-limited or post-conflict settings. There is also limited research on adapting CRT and UDL to multilingual universities, and the impact of differentiated instruction and scaffolding on ELLs in higher education is not well understood. Furthermore, few studies use mixed-methods approaches to capture both statistical and experiential insights into ELL support mechanisms. This study aims to address these gaps through the following objectives and research questions:

1. What teaching strategies are currently employed to support English Language Learners in English language and literature programs?
2. How do students and instructors perceive the effectiveness of these strategies?
3. What contextual factors limit the implementation of effective ELL support strategies?
4. In what ways can existing strategies be adapted to better address the needs of ELLs in low-resource, culturally diverse educational settings?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate the support provided to English Language Learners (ELLs) within the Department of English Language and Literature at X University. A mixed-methods design was chosen because it enables a more comprehensive understanding of both the measurable outcomes of teaching practices and the real-life experiences of students and faculty in a challenging, low-resource environment. Using only surveys or only interviews could miss important insights. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) note, mixed-methods research is beneficial when a single type of data alone cannot fully explain a complex issue. This approach strengthens the credibility of the findings through triangulation, which involves bringing together different sources of data to reveal both patterns and underlying causes (Clark & Ivankova, 2016).

To gather quantitative data, the research team conducted structured surveys and academic writing tests with a sample of 427 students. The surveys examined students' access

to essential learning resources, including textbooks, online libraries, language labs, and support services, and inquired about their satisfaction with these resources. Students who received extra help with academic writing also completed pre-tests and post-tests. They assessed their progress in areas such as grammar, coherence, vocabulary, and structure. Data analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS Version 30. Because the data were ranked rather than numeric, Spearman's rho test was used to find connections between resource availability and student satisfaction.

To enrich these findings, qualitative data were gathered from semi-structured interviews with 10 instructors, direct observations of 8 English classes, and focus group discussions with 36 students. The interviews explored how teachers work with ELLs, what challenges they face, and how the university's limited resources affect their efforts. Focus group discussions helped capture students' perspectives on how engaged or frustrated they felt, as well as whether they believed they were receiving sufficient support. All qualitative data were carefully analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis method, which helped identify key themes about teaching practices, learning environments, and institutional responses.

The study employed a convergent parallel design, meaning that both quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously and then compared side by side during the analysis stage (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For example, a small but statistically significant link was found between access to language labs and student satisfaction ($\rho = 0.127$, $p = .049$). This result was further explained by student interviews, which mentioned outdated lab equipment and restricted lab hours, providing deeper context behind the numbers. This combined approach strengthened the overall conclusions by connecting data patterns to lived experiences.

Ethical standards were fully observed throughout the research. Approval was granted by the university's Faculty Review Board (Approval Code: FRB-2024-EL-16). All participants provided informed consent and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. To protect privacy, all data were anonymized, and no personal information was recorded. Interviews and focus group sessions took place in quiet, neutral spaces to ensure comfort and confidentiality.

FINDINGS

This study aimed to investigate the challenges faced by English Language Learners (ELLs), assess the effectiveness of instructional strategies, and examine the role of institutional support at the English Language and Literature Department of X University. The analysis of quantitative and qualitative data revealed three major thematic categories: systemic challenges in accessing academic resources, the effectiveness of instructional support strategies, and stakeholder perceptions of teaching practices and institutional support. The findings are presented below, incorporating evidence from surveys, interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations.

Systemic Challenges in Resource-Constrained Contexts

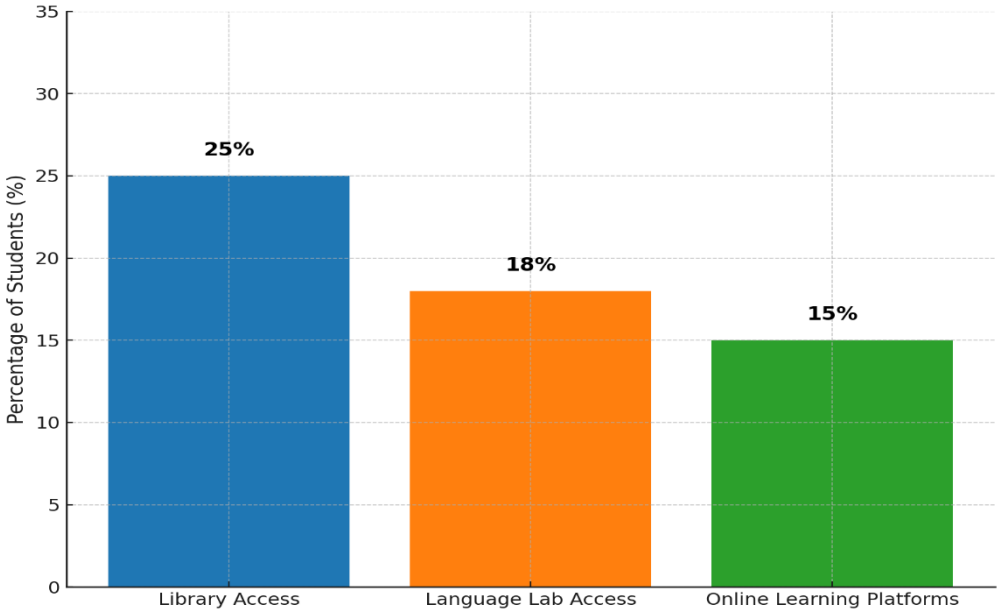

Figure 1: Accessibility of Academic Resources for ELLs

Initially, Limited access to academic resources emerged as a critical barrier to effective English language learning. Survey data revealed that only 25% of students regularly accessed the university library, while just 18% reported using the language lab. Online platforms were the least accessible, with only 15% of students using them, mainly due to frequent electricity outages and poor internet connectivity. These challenges significantly affected students' ability to engage in language practice outside class.

Secondly, Spearman's rho correlations revealed statistically significant relationships between resource access and student satisfaction.

Table 1: *Correlation Between Access to Resources and Student Satisfaction*

Resources Access Types	Correlation Coefficient (ρ)	Significance (p-value)	Sample Size (N)
Online Learning Platforms	0.184	.021	427
Language Lab Access	0.127	.049	427
Library Resources Access	0.082	.095	417
Textbook Access	0.041	.412	427

O means the correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The following could be summarized from Table 1. Statistical analysis using Spearman's rho showed a weak but statistically significant relationship between access to specific learning resources and student satisfaction. Access to online platforms (ρ = 0.184, p = .021) and language labs (ρ = 0.127, p = .049) showed a positive correlation with student satisfaction. However, library access (ρ = 0.082, p = .095) and textbook availability (ρ = 0.041, p = .412)

showed little or no significant relationship, indicating the need to improve not just access but also the quality and relevance of available materials.

Qualitative data reinforced these quantitative findings. In focus groups, students described severe shortages in academic resources. One student explained, “Five of us have to share one book in the library, and this resource is often outdated or not very relevant to our coursework.” Another noted, “Electricity cuts last for hours, and we cannot charge our devices or use projectors, which makes it impossible to complete our assignments.” Classroom observations confirmed that over 90% of learning spaces lacked visual aids, updated teaching materials, or digital tools. Instructors primarily relied on lecture-based methods due to these limitations, which reduced opportunities for interactive and visually supported learning.

Instructional Strategies and Their Impact on ELL Learning

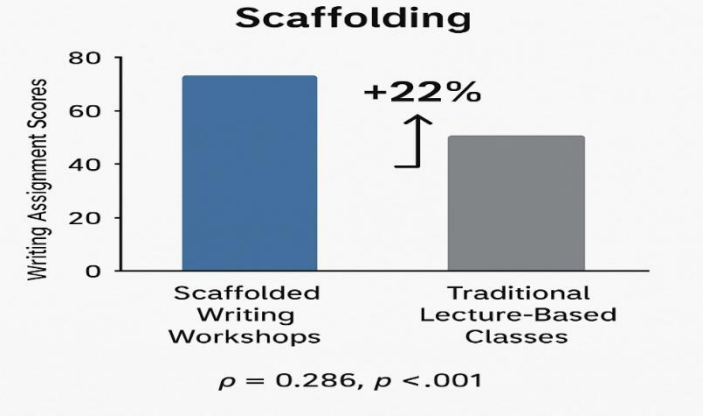

Figure 2: Instructional Strategies and Their Impact on ELL Learning

The study found that instructional strategies such as scaffolding and culturally responsive teaching (CRT) had a positive impact on student learning outcomes and classroom engagement when implemented. Quantitative analysis revealed that students exposed to scaffolded instruction, such as step-by-step writing support and structured outlines, scored 22% higher on writing assessments compared to those taught through traditional methods ($\rho = 0.286$, $p < .001$). This suggests that structured academic support has a significant impact on enhancing language development and academic performance.

Instructors interviewed affirmed the value of scaffolding but cited challenges due to large class sizes and a lack of instructional support. One instructor remarked, “With over 100 students in a class, I simply cannot give individualized feedback or guide them step-by-step.”

Similarly, culturally responsive lessons that incorporated Afghan folktales or local poetry resulted in a 15% increase in observed engagement. Data from classroom observations and surveys showed that participation, attendance, and assignment completion were consistently higher in CRT-based lessons. Specifically, participation increased from 70% to 85%, attendance from 75% to 90%, and assignment completion from 65% to 78%.

Table 2: *Engagement Levels with CRT*

	Engagement Levels	
Engagement Metric	With CRT (%)	Without CRT (%)
Participation Rates	85	70
Attendance	90	75
Assignment Completion	78	65

Students voiced strong support for CRT practices in focus groups. One participant shared, "The Lion's Share felt deeply resonant and significant." However, they expressed frustration at the limited use of such materials, with another asking, "Why do we only use Afghan stories once a semester?" Instructors also acknowledged the potential of CRT but admitted they had little training in how to implement it effectively. This indicates a need for professional development focused on inclusive, culturally relevant pedagogy.

Stakeholder Perceptions on Instruction and Institutional Support

The third central theme revealed mixed perceptions among stakeholders regarding the effectiveness of instructional methods and the level of institutional support provided to ELLs. Survey results showed that only 35% of students rated current teaching methods as "effective," while 45% found them "somewhat effective" and 20% considered them "ineffective."

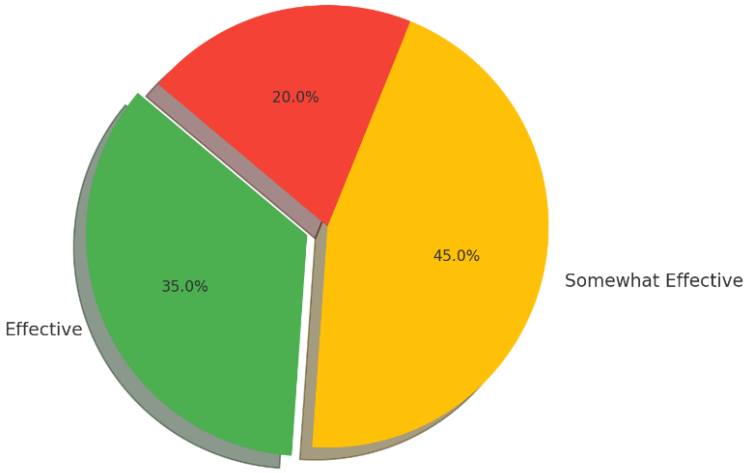

Figure 3: Students Satisfaction with Teaching Strategies

Focus group discussions revealed dissatisfaction with the overuse of rote memorization. One student commented, "We memorize grammar rules, but we cannot hold a conversation." Others pointed to the cultural disconnect in course materials, asking why Afghan writers in English were excluded from the curriculum. These perceptions reflect a demand for more communicative, relevant, and engaging instruction.

On the institutional side, 70% of instructors reported lacking formal training in inclusive pedagogies such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and CRT. As one faculty member explained, "Even when we try to use technology, frequent power outages and lack of Wi-Fi limit us. Without electricity, slides and relevant videos lose their impact." Instructors

emphasized the need for teaching assistants, faculty workshops, and administrative support to implement more effective strategies.

These findings demonstrate that while faculty and students recognize the importance of inclusive, scaffolded, and culturally relevant teaching, actual implementation is hindered by infrastructural, curricular, and professional development constraints.

DISCUSSION

This research examines the various structural, educational, and cultural elements influencing English Language Learners at X University. The mixed-methods approach revealed that access to online platforms and language labs is weakly linked to student satisfaction; however, systemic issues hinder their overall effectiveness. These findings confirm that in post-conflict, low-resource higher education, simply improving access is not enough without relevant teaching, cultural inclusivity, and infrastructure improvements.

The Spearman correlation analysis revealed a weak positive relationship between online learning platforms and student satisfaction, as well as a weak but statistically significant correlation with access to language labs. These findings suggest that students who engaged with these tools were slightly more satisfied with the university's support and that even in low-quality conditions, institutional resources can contribute to a better learning experience. The associations were weak, indicating poor quality, limited availability, and inconsistency of resources, as reflected in students' feedback. Many cited digital platforms as “non-interactive” or “outdated” and language labs as “under-equipped.”

These challenges closely reflect international findings from conflict-affected or under-resourced higher education systems. For example, Rezaee et al. (2018) found that at Iraqi universities, issues such as unreliable electricity and outdated laboratory facilities hindered students’ ability to participate in immersive language learning activities. Likewise, UNESCO (2021) reported how digital inequity in post-conflict regions undermines the promise of technology-assisted learning. A student at Bamyan University faces issues similar to those experienced at rural institutions in Ethiopia and Bangladesh, including power outages, limited internet access, and a lack of browsing tools.

Furthermore, access to library resources and textbook availability were not statistically significant predictors of students’ satisfaction. Students view the holdings as outdated, inadequate, and not relevant to their coursework, which highlights the issue. In many cases, textbooks were considered outdated or available in limited copies. This supports Sweller’s Cognitive Load Theory (2011), which indicates that when materials are poorly designed, students focus too much on finding information instead of understanding it, hindering their learning.

A key finding of the study is that students exposed to scaffolded instruction show better writing performance. Participants in scaffolded classes, which included outlines, modeling, peer feedback, and guided practice, scored 22% higher on writing tasks than those

in traditional lectures (ρ = 0.286, p < .001). These results are consistent with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, which emphasizes that learners perform better with support and teamwork.

Leading classes at Bamyan University, which are based on scaffolding principles, encounter significant challenges. Overcrowded classrooms, often exceeding 100 students, make personalized instruction nearly impossible. Instructors also noted the absence of teaching assistants, lack of breakout space, and insufficient time for differentiated support. These findings align with issues observed in public universities in Pakistan and Afghanistan, where logistical challenges hinder the adoption of advanced teaching methods (Singh, 2024).

Regardless of this pledge, the implementation of CRT at X University still lacks uniformity. Instructors reported curriculum restrictions, lack of training, and institutional hesitation as key barriers. Research from post-genocide Rwanda and other unstable areas indicates that faculty members are reluctant to incorporate local literature due to fear of academic criticism or disapproval (Purdeková & Mwambari, 2021). Moreover, the dominance of Eurocentric texts in English syllabi further alienates students by reinforcing unfamiliar norms and idioms.

Students often struggle with academic English, particularly in understanding complex grammar and idioms. While many students can communicate effectively in conversation, they often face difficulties with academic language due to inadequate support and the transition from Dari or Pashto to English. Students at universities in Tanzania and Kenya called for the inclusion of African-authored English literature to help ease their transition and make coursework more accessible.

Technology integration and the SAMR Framework: While educators expressed greater satisfaction with online learning tools, classroom observations revealed that digital tools were often limited to basic substitution, primarily projecting PDFs or reading slides, rather than fostering interactivity or personalization. This stagnation embodies Puentedura’s SAMR model, highlighting that substitution is the elementary stage of technology integration. For genuine enhancement or redefinition, X University requires better infrastructure, more faculty training, and strategic planning. Components that have been underestimated. The initiative in Bangladesh suggests that low-tech, offline methods can significantly enhance language education in rural communities (Era, 2024). Solar-powered devices, audio lessons, and printed guides can enhance education in Afghanistan, particularly in areas where electricity and internet access are unreliable.

Finally, systemic forces are another element that needs to be considered. Ells' experiences at X University serve as a microcosm of the larger ecological systems that shape their learning and existence. Bronfenbrenner’s theory suggests that broader factors, such as poverty, political turmoil, and inadequate public infrastructure, have a significant impact on the smaller environment of the classroom. Frequent power outages, inadequate training

support, and resistance to curriculum change highlight how larger issues affect education, contributing to ongoing underperformance.

CONCLUSION

ELLs at Bamyan University face numerous challenges that impact their academic progress. These challenges include limited access to learning resources, teaching methods that do not meet students' needs, and a lack of cultural relevance in the curriculum. While teaching strategies like scaffolding and culturally responsive instruction have shown promise in improving students' writing and classroom engagement, their use is limited by deeper institutional problems. These include insufficient teacher training, rigid academic programs, and weak support systems. Environmental issues—such as power outages, inadequate infrastructure, and large class sizes—also hinder students' ability to succeed.

One key finding is that teachers are not opposed to using culturally responsive teaching (CRT); rather, they often lack the support and training needed to apply these methods. Without professional development and encouragement from administrators, instructors feel unprepared and unsupported. These local challenges reflect broader patterns in post-conflict countries, where a lack of funding continues to slow educational progress.

This study also has limitations. It relied on self-reported data and focused on a single university, which means the findings may not be applicable to all Afghan institutions. Future studies should include multiple universities and track progress over time to better understand how inclusive teaching methods can be scaled across the country.

To improve support for ELLs, universities must invest in infrastructure, provide printed and offline learning materials, and offer teacher training in flexible and inclusive frameworks like Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Updating curricula to incorporate local cultural content can also enhance student motivation and make learning more engaging and meaningful. Additionally, simple solutions—such as printed study guides and peer learning groups—can help mitigate resource shortages.

Higher education leaders should push for policy changes and work with international and regional organizations to secure funding for long-term improvements. Building partnerships with NGOs and signing Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) can also support knowledge sharing and resource exchange. By acting on these recommendations, Bamyan University can better support its English learners and offer valuable lessons for other institutions facing similar cultural and resource-related challenges.

Suggestions and Recommendations

First, improving access to essential academic resources should be a priority. Enhancing library resources, providing digital materials in language labs, and implementing robust offline learning platforms will enhance student engagement with their studies. Investing in alternative energy sources, such as solar devices and wind turbines, can reduce the impact of frequent power shortages.

Second, the training of faculty members in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) must be strengthened. Professional development workshops and peer mentoring programs should be promoted to help instructors learn strategies for differentiated instruction, scaffolding, and incorporating culturally relevant materials. Small-group sessions or teaching assistant programs could also help manage the overcrowded classrooms and improve individualized student support.

The curriculum should be updated to include more locally relevant materials, which can enhance student engagement and comprehension. Incorporating Afghan folktales, poetry, and contemporary Afghan writers into culturally responsive teaching (CRT) can help students link their cultural identities with English studies, enhancing their learning experience.

Furthermore, leveraging low-tech learning methods can be an effective strategy for overcoming infrastructural limitations. Printed learning guides, peer-assisted study groups, and community-based language practice sessions provide valuable alternatives when technology-based instruction is unavailable. Additionally, encouraging student-led discussion forums or study clubs can create informal spaces for collaborative learning and peer support.

Higher education leaders must advocate for policy changes and improved funding systems that benefit students, faculty, and academic units, particularly to enhance capacity development programs in post-conflict areas. They should consider seeking external funding from organizations such as the World Bank, USAID, and international development banks, including the Asian Development Bank, which support educational projects in post-conflict countries. They could collaborate with regional sponsors, such as UNESCO, GIZ, or Education Cannot Wait, to obtain financial and technical support for higher education in post-conflict nations. Higher education leaders can create resourceful exchange opportunities for faculty, staff, and students by collaborating with regional NGOs or universities through Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) and seeking funding through humanitarian aid. These collaborations will establish the basis for educational reform and promote the ongoing sustainability of teaching improvements. Bamyan University can strengthen its support for English Language Learners (ELLs) by focusing on key areas that enhance their English development and academic achievement. These recommendations can help students at Bamyan University and provide useful strategies for other universities facing similar challenges in resource-limited and culturally diverse environments.

Limitations of the study

The study presents certain limitations. First, the second phase included self-reported data only, which may have introduced reporting bias (either due to social desirability or memory). A limitation of the research is that it was conducted at a single higher education institution, restricting the applicability of the findings. Future research should conduct longitudinal and multi-institutional studies to explore how pedagogical practices can be scaled in various Afghan higher education settings.

Improving ELL support in post-conflict, resource-limited universities requires investments in infrastructure and offline learning materials, as well as faculty development focused on teaching, reflection, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). While institutional change is warranted, pedagogical revisions to address cultural and linguistic factors for students need to be made holistically.

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AUTHORS CONTRIBUTIONS

Rasool Dad Islam and Esmail Qasemyar contributed equally to the conceptualization, data collection, and analysis of this study. Rasool Dad Islam drafted the manuscript with input from all authors. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

FUNDING INFORMATION

No funding is available for the manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request from the corresponding author, subject to ethical approval.

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