

# An investigation into how best to design an English course for digital freelancers in Palestine

**A LearnJam report**

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# Introduction

As increasing numbers of governments and organisations turn to remote employment and the digital economy as a strategy for economic development, especially during the Covid-19 crisis, it is critical to better understand the professional and language communication skills digital workers need to pursue a successful career in their fields. With English being the global language for business today, advanced English communication skills are an important factor for sustainable employability, successful collaboration within international business teams, and accessing a wider range of professional opportunities in the global market.

In regions that suffer from a high rate of unemployment, such as the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in Palestine, people have turned to the digital economy as a source of employment (British Council, 2020). Yet, due to the limited attention given to customising pedagogical design and assessment of English language courses to meet international business and digital freelancing requirements, Palestinian digital freelancers continue to identify limited communication skills in English as a restriction to their employability and access to professional development opportunities (British Council, 2020).

With the abrupt decline in global economic activities due to the Covid-19 pandemic, obtaining advanced English language communication skills becomes a critical component of digital freelance training programmes in Palestine. If these language training programmes are to achieve their goal in building an internationally admired and competitive information and communication technology (ICT) sector that creates high-salary jobs and supports leadership across Palestine (Gaza Sky Geeks, 2020), they need to develop English language training programmes that help them do so.

This internal report was carried out by LearnJam as part of our work on the @Palestine project. The main aims were to:

- identify core pedagogical components for designing an English course for digital freelancers in Gaza and the West Bank
- explore the essential English communication skills digital freelancers need to compete in the global digital economy today.

The research relied on secondary data from published literature and primary data from semi-structured interviews and focus groups with EnglishLance learners and trainers at Gaza Sky Geeks (GSG),<sup>1</sup> in addition to an international digital freelance employer. Writing and course samples were also collected from learners and trainers on the EnglishLance course.

# Executive summary

## Findings

- Language skills and soft skills are inseparable. Critical-thinking, problem-solving, initiative-taking and negotiation skills are identified as primary when communicating with clients. Furthermore, the ability to communicate one's progress, needs or challenges faced in a project to team members is considered to be critical for the successful completion of projects.
- Writing samples and demonstrated speaking abilities show a lack of language skills that need further attention, as writing practices seem to be more advanced and freelancing-related than speaking tasks. Appropriate word choice, professionalism and accuracy are communication areas learners need to improve in their written and other forms of communication in English generally.
- EnglishLance learners are frequently challenged by freelancing tasks due to their limited English language skills and their lack of awareness of cross-cultural communication.
- Instruction at the moment is delivered synchronously through Zoom and asynchronously through Google Classroom and a Facebook group for each course.
- Course tasks and teaching approaches are similar in nature despite each trainer conceiving their own course as they rely on presentations, role plays, small and big group discussions, and writing tasks to scaffold learning.
- The tasks help learners apply grammatical knowledge by getting them to produce sentences then longer paragraphs in each writing assignment.
- Besides the pre- and post-course assessment, assessment tools include evaluating general progress through quizzes, writing and speaking tasks, with a lot of trainer feedback provided.
- There is currently no training of trainers (TOT) programme in the EnglishLance course and trainers interact informally only during each cohort.
- Participants favour a blended approach to instruction, with a preference to keep face-face instruction, when applicable.



## Recommendations for the new course

The new EnglishLance course should:

- define learning objectives and expectations of learners for each EnglishLance course with clear criteria on placement and assessment
- be designed in a blended mode, with an option to deliver it fully online
- have a new scope and focus, through which learning development and nonlinear communication practices are addressed more appropriately
- include complex and integrated real-world tasks, with exposure to intercultural communication and communication etiquette
- include more professional opportunities for language practice, through language partnerships, interacting with experienced digital freelancers in Palestine and neighbouring countries
- use a variety of assessment tools that are suitable for productive and receptive skills
- use social media platforms as informal spaces for interaction and resource sharing, while the GSG platform should be dedicated to formal instruction
- provide learners with a course completion certificate
- include a TOT programme to provide trainers with interactive learning strategies and training in the assessment tools needed for the course. The TOT should also provide opportunities for trainers to share best practice and knowledge to help advance their teaching skills in the digital freelancing domain.

For a complete list of recommendations, see Chapters 4 and 5 of this report.

# 1 Literature review

## 1.1 English language communication in the digital economy

When examining the issue of teaching English for digital business communication purposes, it becomes important to recognise the rising number of English language speakers whose native language is not English (Goby, 1999). Because English is central to communicating with global companies and international business clients, language barriers can not only lead to irritations and task interruption among team members, but also result in misunderstandings, stereotypical attitudes and feelings of indifference between clients and digital freelancers (Burman, 2017). Unlike in face-to-face interactions and task management approaches, digital freelancers need a range of strategies that help them successfully navigate intercultural differences, professional expectations and the various online communication styles of their team members.

Furthermore, it is equally important to remember that when people interact, not only do they exchange information with one another, but they also see each other as individuals of specific social and cultural groups (Byram et al., 2002). In other words, the way individuals view one another has an impact on how they interpret what others say, how they say it, what response to expect and, therefore, how their response should be (Byram et al., 2002). Thus, identifying the primary focus of teachers and designers of English for digital freelancing training materials can help us better understand the language-related challenges and professional and interpersonal communication restrictions faced by digital freelancers today.

## 1.2 Palestinian digital freelancers and English communication skills

Although Palestinian youth in Gaza and the West Bank have demonstrated high levels of education and professional ICT skills, developing English communication skills is among the most important things they require for promoting themselves as internationally competent digital freelancers in their fields (British Council, 2020). A focus group with Gazan digital freelancers outlined some language-related challenges they experience in their English communication training (British Council, 2020). These challenges include, and are not limited to, language learning assessment mechanisms, relevance of course materials to learner goals and needs, their specificity to the requirements of digital business, and limited opportunities for further practice outside their English language learning environment (British Council, 2020).

In fact, these challenges are not unusual for learners of English as a second language (ESL) in Palestine and other Arab countries in the Arab World, where English language teaching gives primary attention to grammar knowledge and vocabulary acquisition, with limited opportunities for communication-based learning (Alkaff, 2013; Alkhaldeh, 2012).

With the rise of global competition for digital employment opportunities, developing English language learning experiences which address the professional needs of Palestinian digital freelancers is a major priority. This will help highly educated digital freelancers in Palestine achieve their professional aspirations by developing the communication skills they need to succeed in digital business and handle language barriers in multinational business mediums more effectively.

## 2 Methodology

This research aims to explore:

- the English communication challenges digital freelancers in Gaza face in the different projects and roles they take on
- the EnglishLance course and experiences of learners and trainers in it
- the learning needs that should be addressed in the new EnglishLance course to support learners to pursue their aspirations in digital freelancing more successfully.

To understand the individual profiles, learning experiences, needs and aspirations of different learner personas better, three individual interviews were conducted with GSG learners who are currently enrolled in or have successfully completed the EnglishLance course. Three writing samples were collected to triangulate interview data on learners' language ability. To get as many diverse perspectives as possible on collective learning and teaching experiences within this programme, a focus group of two EnglishLance trainers was facilitated and two lesson samples were collected. Since there is a high demand among Gazan freelancers to work for international clients, one interview was conducted with an international employer, who has been hiring Palestinian freelancers for many years, to explore the current and future global digital market needs and identify core skills digital freelancers need to compete in this medium.

### 2.1 Participants

A total of four individual interviews with EnglishLance learners with different digital freelancing profiles and an international employer were conducted, in addition to a focus group with two EnglishLance trainers. The participant profiles are as follows.

- **EnglishLance Learner 1:** a female university student in her third year who is majoring in software development and has no digital freelancing experience. The persona this participant represents can be found [here](#).
- **EnglishLance Learner 2:** a male young professional who graduated in 2018 with a BA in Multimedia and Branding, with recent digital freelancing experience. The persona this participant represents can be found [here](#).
- **EnglishLance Learner 3:** a female young professional who graduated in 2018 with a BA in Business and Office Management and has sustained digital freelancing contracts for the past two years. The persona this participant represents can be found [here](#).
- **EnglishLance trainers:** the focus group involved one woman (referred to as EnglishLance Trainer 1) and another male instructor (referred to as EnglishLance Trainer 2). Both participants have been teaching their independent EnglishLance courses for the past few years, and recently in synchronous and asynchronous mode in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. They are both professional English language instructors with a BA in English Language and Literature. They are also SkyLancer graduates and professional digital freelancers in their fields.



- **The international employer:** this male participant is a specialist in designing projects on entrepreneurship and employability in Palestine and has been doing so for the past eight years. Through his various positions in international corporations in North America and Palestine, he has hired hundreds of entrepreneurs and digital freelancers from Gaza and the West Bank.

## 2.2 Research questions

This research explores the following questions.

- What are the core English communication skills that digital freelancers need in the global market?
- What communication skills are EnglishLance learners lacking?
- What are the affordances and shortcomings of the current EnglishLance course that influence the development of learners' English communication skills?
- How does this influence the design of the new course?

# 3 Findings

## 3.1 Core English communication skills in the digital economy

When asked about the core communication skills digital freelancers need to be successful and competitive, all interviewees seemed to believe that language skills and soft skills are inseparable. Critical-thinking, problem-solving, initiative-taking and negotiation skills are perceived to be of primary importance when communicating with clients:

*It is not only about technical or language skills. It is also about the freelancer's ability to deal with complex tasks, to think with the client, rather than doing what he/she is being told only.*

International employer

All interviewees agreed that knowing how to communicate suggestions, alternative approaches to product design and management, and negotiating expectations and deliverables are communication skills that support freelancers to successfully secure more contracts and create a positive impression among the clients they work with.

Both EnglishLance trainers, who are also experienced digital freelancers, emphasised the importance of reflecting on one's communication approaches in every hiring process freelancers go through:

*When you communicate with clients, your strategies develop; sometimes they work and sometimes they don't. You reflect a lot about: What are the things that work/not work? and How to communicate with clients next time? ... Every client is different.*

EnglishLance Trainer 1

Similarly, the ability to communicate one's progress, needs or challenges in a project to team members is considered to be critical for the successful completion of projects. As explained by the international employer, miscommunication can at worst cost incubators and clients their business.

As much as Gazan freelancers have exceptional talents and technical skills in their fields, communication skills and limited English proficiency continue to be among the challenges young professionals in Gaza face today in digital freelancing recruitment:

*Unfortunately, incubators in Palestine and in other countries prefer to hire older people with more established skills because they want success stories rather than working and investing in fresh graduate/junior freelancers.*

International employer

One way to work around this challenge, as the international employer shared, is to emphasise a culture of collaboration among freelancers and organisations that work with and train young freelancers to support one another and learn from their shared experiences. Among the success stories of Gazan freelancers the international employer shared, working collaboratively and bringing new skilled freelancers to the core team are two innovative approaches that made three Gazan freelancers impress a US-based web development company: 'They collaborated effectively without the need for the US client to hire a new freelancer to do the job.'

## 3.2 The English communication skills of EnglishLance learners

Learners mentioned that English was the main language of instruction in their faculties and so they gained knowledge of English terms relevant to their fields of study. However, limited practice in English has hindered their ability to use the language broadly. To improve their English language skills, they enrolled in English language courses at AMIDEAST and the International British Centre, and the continuous learning programme at the Islamic University in Gaza. By joining the EnglishLance course, they all hope to improve the English communication skills they need to succeed as digital freelancers in their ICT fields.

All three learners seemed to be confident in their ability to write job proposals, emails, CVs, cover letters and profiles in English. As for presentations and real-time conversations, Learner 3 and Learner 2 talked about their ability to successfully deliver brief presentations on a variety of general topics, including those in their field, and participate in discussions without the need to prepare their responses ahead of time. Furthermore, Learner 2 seems to be confident to do branding in English, including conducting research about companies and their design approaches. For Learner 1, although the EnglishLance course has tremendously helped her improve her speaking confidence, she still feels more comfortable preparing for such tasks before engaging with others.

However, all three learners believe that their grammatical knowledge and speaking ability in English remain as areas for continuous learning development. Learner 3, for instance, has been using Duolingo to help her with grammar, while Learner 2 thinks that immersive learning environments, where he could interact with English-speaking individuals from different cultural backgrounds, would help him improve his speaking skills rapidly.

However, the learners' writing samples and their speaking ability demonstrated in section 2 of the interview show a lack of language skills that need further attention. When asked to talk about reasons for joining the EnglishLance course and the different course components, a familiar task that B1/B2 learners should be able to deal with competently, none of the learners managed to speak in English for longer than 1–2 minutes. They switched to either Arabic only or a mixture of English and Arabic. During their period of speaking, some showed a level of hesitation and discomfort, in addition to a lack of language accuracy. The writing samples, on the other hand, show more control of tone and an advanced use of language.

As learners described, the course seems to contextualise freelancing through writing assignments, while speaking tasks mainly address more general and everyday life topics. Moreover, the time and amount of feedback dedicated to developing writing skills, in comparison with speaking, has enabled learners to advance their writing ability. These two instruction factors can explain the gap between the speaking and writing ability they demonstrated in this research.

Overall, the learners' tendency to use informal language such as 'hey there' and emojis when addressing the employer, the lack of sufficient details and uncorrected grammatical errors suggest that appropriate word choice, professionalism and accuracy are communication areas learners need to improve in their written and other forms of communication in English generally.

This gap between what learners believe they could successfully do with English and their actual ability in the language can be explained by the inaccuracy of the pre-course placement assessment

and, therefore, the lack of clarity on the language proficiency expectations and how they are communicated to learners in the course. As shared by the course trainers, the language ability of learners in levels A and B is not very different, and B learners are usually in need of revising their basic English language skills. As one of the learners said, when her English level was first assessed, she was admitted to the technical training but she chose to join the EnglishLance course to improve her skills. However, when interviewed, this learner could only speak in English for a few seconds. This gap between what this learner was told about her English ability and what she could actually do in English raises a question about the accuracy of placement and track of learning progress in the course. Furthermore, one of the course trainers commented that one of the challenges many of his learners face during the course is when he teaches about freelancing:

*The freelancing tasks are a bit challenging and they find them difficult – they need to be updated, especially as they are central to the training.*

EnglishLance Trainer 2

All of these observations about level placement and what learners can and cannot do in each of the EnglishLance courses become important and give rise to a number of questions.

- How can the pre- and post-course assessment determine language ability and communication skills more accurately?
- What knowledge and skills do learners need in each course level if they are to be successful at developing communication skills as digital freelancers?

### 3.3 Affordances and shortcomings of the current EnglishLance course

#### 3.3.1 Professional development for EnglishLance trainers

There are currently five active EnglishLance trainers who are English language and literature graduates with a professional background in English language teaching and learning. Both EnglishLance trainers earned a TESL Certificate from AMIDEAST in Gaza. According to what they shared, other EnglishLance trainers are either TESL Certificate holders or teachers in international schools in the strip. GSG doesn't currently offer any professional development programme to trainers before teaching. However, each EnglishLance teacher has a GSG professional whom they follow up with for quality assurance and evaluation purposes. Each trainer develops their own course materials and runs the course as they see appropriate to their teaching beliefs and learners' needs:

*For this cohort, GSG shared the structure with us and told us to follow it, but it was left to us to create materials and Sereen shared business English resources that were helpful to use in the course.*

EnglishLance Trainer 1

In fact, the other trainer helped create the course structure on behalf of GSG:

*I made the structure of the course, and we piloted it with learners and then we developed the structure for the other two courses we have now.*

EnglishLance Trainer 2

When asked about what they desire to receive in future professional development programmes, both trainers mentioned online teaching skills and active learning (both face-to-face and online) as a priority to guarantee an interactive learning experience for future learners. Since trainers seem to be connecting informally about their teaching from time to time, the trainers expressed a desire to work with EnglishLance trainers more formally in the future:

*We haven't met yet unfortunately, but I think we should because it is core to share experiences and discuss how students receive the curricula and learn about their learner experiences as well.*

EnglishLance Trainer 2

### 3.3.2 Course structure and task design

Although materials and approaches differ from trainer to trainer and from one cohort to another, the learners' experiences with the course seem to be the same. Each EnglishLance class has 20–25 learners. Trainers meet with their learners three times a week for two hours (currently via Zoom after switching to a fully online mode due to the Covid-19 pandemic). All course materials, assignments, feedback, discussion forums, questions and answers are posted on the Google Classroom and Facebook group that each trainer sets up for their class. The course covers three main areas: basic English skills, business English skills and speaking.

Trainers tend to start their class with a speaking activity on a familiar topic to engage and motivate learners. Some trainers choose to follow up on an assignment from the previous lesson to share feedback with the class or have students collaborate on a task such as watching a video and inserting new vocabulary words and idioms that are mostly relevant to freelancing on a Google sheet. Grammar is prioritised in every lesson and trainers have learners practise it, mainly by forming different sentence types and short paragraphs, as well as through different speaking activities:

*I focus on sentence structure; simple sentences then compound and complex sentences and then a paragraph ... Starting with sentences then building on it, so when we hit the paragraph level, they would have practised a few times and they can utilise what they wrote later.*

EnglishLance Trainer 1

*The trainer starts basic grammar with us; sentence structure and then we contextualise the rules in freelancing.*

EnglishLance Learner 2

After this, learners get to practise some basic English skills. They focus on a variety of freelancing exercises planned for the week. Most of the writing and speaking assignments are scenario-based, prompting a response to an enquiry proposed by the trainer. Role plays, games, watching videos and small group discussions are mostly used in every lesson. Some trainers also share extra resources with their students via Google Classroom and the Facebook group in case they need further practice outside of class time. Below are some examples of tasks shared in the lesson plans:

*I am the HR manager at a company recruiting web developers, UX/UI designers, motion graphic designers, graphic designers and machine learning specialists. Convince me why I should hire you. Record 30 seconds and send it to me in a private message.*

EnglishLance Trainer 1

*Write an email to a client of yours to schedule a Zoom meeting next week to discuss the details of the future plans for the project you are working on.*

EnglishLance Trainer 2

All learners seem to appreciate the variety of activities and how their trainers facilitate them among their groups. Everyone emphasised that working on sentence structure before paragraph writing helps them build a strong writing base. Similarly, they all enjoy the small group discussions they have in their breakout rooms.

*In EnglishLance we took verb tenses in a different way, which I found very helpful. The trainer starts by identifying the form, then he shares more examples on the Facebook group, he asks us to write a sentence with that form and share with others, and finally we work on a paragraph-level task at home.*

EnglishLance Learner 1

*What I like the most is that in every session I get to speak and discuss in English.*

EnglishLance Learner 2

The materials and activity samples the trainers shared show a variety of interactive activities that are adjusted to the students' English proficiency level and well situated in the freelancing context. The teaching approaches both trainers implement in their classes demonstrate scaffolded learning, as well.

However, the current structure seems to be limiting development of skills in three ways:

1. the scope and complexity of communication in individual tasks
2. the lack of communication components in international work environments
3. the gap in the level between writing and speaking tasks.

As shared earlier, digital freelancers will be expected to engage with individual clients and small teams via video calls and email communication. These nonlinear interactions involve back and forth negotiation, proposing alternative approaches, making suggestions and engaging in discussions of project complications and challenges. In other words, for freelancers to feel prepared for real-

world communication and interaction complications with clients and team members, language communication tasks should be multi-layered. This would challenge students and help them develop their communication ability.

Similarly, and as emphasised by Trainer 2, the current course doesn't expose learners to a variety of intercultural communication practices and, therefore, how to approach work challenges when working in international business environments:

*Because the students are not culturally aware of the global world, they are not exposed to cultures and this makes it challenging. Maybe we could include a cultural element in the course but we should at least raise awareness about it.*

EnglishLance Trainer 2

Both Trainer 1 and Learner 2 emphasised the importance of interacting with English speakers from across the world to help learners immerse themselves in the language and understand the different speaking communities better.

Finally, and as highlighted earlier, learners' writing ability seems to be more advanced than their other language skills. This can be explained by the long time periods trainers dedicate to teaching writing, and the quality of feedback given for written communication.

As shared by all three learners, one of the disappointments they have is having peers who refuse or are demotivated to speak in English during the lesson, which seems to negatively influence their own speaking development. With limited access to the course materials and live lessons and the variety of instruction styles in each cohort, it is challenging to conclude how instruction time is distributed. Thus, all communication tasks need to be streamlined to ensure greater consistency between the language learning context (digital freelancing) and the desired learning goals in the course.

### 3.3.3 Learning assessment

All trainers depend mainly on assignment performance to assess their learners' progress throughout the course. Some give a number of tests and quizzes to check for understanding, and others give grades for participation. Self-assessment tools, however, don't seem to be used much in the course. Both course trainers prefer to conduct regular check-ins with their learners in groups and individually. In these check-ins, they ask how their students feel about the materials, whether the course is fulfilling their expectations, and challenges and concerns students have about their own learning.

Furthermore, the feedback trainers provide the learners with is very well received. The encouragement and follow-ups each learner receives, as all three learners explained, have a tremendous impact on their confidence and progress. All learners highlighted that trainers respond to their enquiries efficiently, share detailed feedback on their task performance privately and on the Facebook group, and encourage them to improve their writing drafts and speak more in class. Because instruction seems to essentially depend on the individual beliefs and practices of trainers, however, not all learners seem to receive the same amount and quality of feedback on their performance:

*I talk to a friend who is also enrolled in the course but with a different trainer, and we usually talk about the materials we study and the feedback we receive from our trainers. I noticed that the amount of feedback she has received on her assignments is less than mine, and this can be unfair.*

EnglishLance Learner 1

### 3.3.4 Modes of teaching

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, most of the EnglishLance course was conducted face-to-face and learners connected with their trainers via the Facebook group and applications such as Messenger and WhatsApp. When asked about their current online experience with the course and their preference of instruction mode in future courses, some interviewees didn't mind working in the course fully online, while others seemed to prefer some face-to-face instruction.

All interviewees acknowledged the benefits of online learning as it made learning resources more flexible and accessible. On the other hand, the poor infrastructure and limited accessibility to the internet have made learning online challenging and overwhelming for many. To cope with these challenges, all EnglishLance sessions are being recorded and shared with learners to access at a time of their convenience, and trainers have been responding to learner enquiries in a timely manner.

From a trainer's point of view, learner attitudes and willingness to learn are very different in online mediums, which makes it more challenging for trainers to manage activities and know their learners well. As shared by Learner 3, the only learner who completed the course in a face-to-face mode, the range of activities in face-to-face environments helped them connect with the wider freelancer community in Gaza and internationally, as well:

*We looked at good samples and we spoke to foreign clients in class to learn about the market, and we also connected with advanced freelancers to learn from their experience but then switched to online after corona.*

EnglishLance Learner 3

However, all interviewees seemed to agree that trainer–learner interaction is essential to the course. Whether online or face-to-face, real-time interaction supports language learning, provides practice opportunities with peers and helps trainers monitor learning progress more efficiently.



## 4 Recommendations for the new course

### 4.1 Defining the learning goals for each course

At the moment, the only clear distinction between Level A and Level B courses is the length of each (60 hours and 40 hours respectively). Before starting with designing the new Level B course, it is important to be clear on the learning objectives for each course, which will orient the pre- and post-course assessment procedures. More importantly, these objectives and learning expectations should realistically address the learners' current level and be communicated openly to all learners.

As suggested by one learner, setting criteria that help learners assess what they can really do with the language after completing the course is very important for learning development. Thus, we recommend restructuring both courses to meet the needs of learners at each level and help them progress as desired.

### 4.2 Course structure

Based on the feedback shared by trainers and learners, we recommend that the new course is delivered in a blended mode, with an option of providing it fully online. In case of online instruction, participating in both synchronous and asynchronous learning would be essential to completing the course successfully.

Thus, the new course design should include instructional strategies that are compatible with these different instruction modes such as flipped classroom and mobile-based learning. This flexibility would also meet different preferences and needs of learners in Gaza and in other regions, if applicable. Similarly, involving community building activities will be core to establishing a sense of community among all participants in the course.

### 4.3 Scope and focus of the course

Learners complete the Level B course in 40 hours of instruction (six hours/week of synchronous instruction) in 2–3 months. We recommend changing the scope and focus of the new course to meet the language learning development expectations for Level B learners and realistically tackle the nonlinear communication practices that have been emphasised by all participants in this research.

### 4.4 The integration of real-world tasks

The new course should include complex (different types and levels of communication) and integrated tasks (the use of different English language skills) that develop productive and receptive English language skills. Tasks should reflect the enquiries and challenges digital freelancers face in their communication with clients today, with exposure to intercultural communication and communication etiquette.

Tasks at this level should involve description, narration, hypothetical situations and giving opinions, with an escalation to some advanced skills such as supporting opinions with examples and facts, elaboration, negotiation and argumentation when progressing in the course. Therefore,

it is important to include individual and group tasks to encourage a culture of teamwork and collaboration.

Since ICT tasks can be different from one subfield to another, tasks should be inclusive of those subfields and make learning context-based, when applicable. Samples and scenarios of successful oral and written communication in digital freelancing will also be important to illustrate successful communication and set expectations for performance among learners. Finally, it is important that tasks are motivating and engaging so learners can enjoy the EnglishLance class.

## 4.5 Opportunities for further practice

As much as this is a continuous problem that cannot be addressed and resolved during one course, there are ways to engage learners with other speakers of English, including advanced freelancers in Gaza or in other countries in the region. Options for virtual language partnership programmes (e.g. Interpal and Conversation Exchange) and physical language partnership programmes (with the support of language centres such as AMIDEAST, the British Council and the International British Centre) can be suggested for individual practice outside of class.

Hosting visiting client and entrepreneur speakers from Gaza and neighboring countries whom learners can practise their English with and benefit from can be integrated in the course design, with the support of GSG and their international partners. Trainers can also be consulted for other speaking practice platforms they have been recommending in their cohorts, as well.

## 4.6 Assessment tools

We recommend using a variety of assessment tools that are suitable for productive and receptive skills. The new course design should be mindful of assessment issues such as clarity on assessment construct, purpose and impact, validity and reliability, fairness, assessment takers, and assessment administration. Similarly, learners should be involved in the assessment procedures, including collecting learner analytics during the course period. Furthermore, it is important to explore the learner data the hosting platform generates to use for monitoring and evaluation purposes in each cohort.

## 4.7 Digital platforms

We recommend that social media platforms are used as informal spaces for interaction and resource sharing. All materials, assignment submission, discussion forums and trainer feedback should remain on the GSG platform for consistency.

## 4.8 Course completion certificate

Some learners shared that obtaining a certificate of completion gives a sense of achievement and supports their CV, as well.

## 4.9 The TOT programme

We recommend that the TOT programme addresses areas such as:

- the rationale behind the course design
- blended learning instructional strategies
- interactive online learning
- assessment tools and providing quality feedback
- interactive activities where tutors get to learn about the different learner personas in their classroom, how to identify their needs and provide the appropriate support.

Since all the EnglishLance trainers are English language and literature graduates, their freelancing experiences are limited to translation, teaching and content writing. Thus, other TOT activities should include increasing knowledge of the different ICT freelancing communication needs and the forms of communication ICT freelancers are expected to engage with in the future. As the international employer highlighted:

*There are niche markets they can work with and get this competitive advantage compared to freelancers in India, for instance. So they need to understand what key products they need to build skills for and be successful. This is really critical.*

International employer

## 5 Other recommendations

### 5.1 Revisiting the course placement procedures

Since this problem seems to be beyond the scope of this research, it is important to acknowledge the need to revisit how EnglishLance learners are currently assessed for placement in both courses. Inaccurate placement can have a tremendous impact on instruction and learning expectations. Thus, it is highly recommended to reflect on the quality of the current assessment procedures and follow the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages benchmarks more closely when designing a new assessment. Some basic training on how to conduct assessment and place learners in their appropriate levels is important to help trainers give a valid indication of learners' language ability and achieve fairness for all assessment takers.

### 5.2 English use in the SkyLancer programme

Although the SkyLancer training is delivered in Arabic and English (60 per cent and 40 per cent respectively), it is important to reflect on how and when English is used in this training. Teaching more topics and conducting more technical tasks in English during the programme would provide learners with further opportunities for practice and help tackle the shortfall in hours on the Level B course (see 4.3 above).

### 5.3 Establishing collaborations across Palestine

Aside from English communication skills, the poor infrastructure, time differences and limited utilities are other barriers that stand in the way of Gazans working with international clients. As the international employer highlighted, the stereotypes Western media create about the situation in Gaza have limited recruitment of digital freelancers from Gaza for many international clients. When asked about why international clients hire Gazans, he shared that showing solidarity through business and the ability to have the support from a third party (e.g. digital enterprise hubs in Palestine and other Middle East and North African countries) are what mainly encourage international clients to recruit Gazans. However, due to the barriers mentioned earlier, Gazan youth continue to face challenges finding sustainable international opportunities for employment.

Furthermore, international clients prefer to work with well-established digital freelancers who are usually over 30 years old. In addition to providing English training to fresh graduates and young freelancers, it was highly recommended that digital learning hubs, incubators and individual freelancers should work more collaboratively by establishing shared networks:

*Working across organisations in Gaza, Ramallah, Jerusalem or group collaboration where people work together to bridge each other's gaps/lack of communication skills would build confidence for the international employer to hire Gazans. So, working collaboratively rather than individually to mitigate such stereotypes is critical.*

International employer

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