

## **ENGLISH KADHAVU: Bridging the Language Divide in Tamilnadu, India**

This project seeks to alleviate poverty in India through education. English Kadhavu aims to bridge the language divide that perpetuates poverty by creating resources to help schools and teachers educating children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. English is a required subject in all schools in the Indian state of Tamilnadu, even if all other subjects are taught in Tamil. However, students in Tamil-language government schools struggle with learning the English language because of a lack of exposure and the absence of books and other learning resources. Tamil students progress through the grades acquiring a very rudimentary knowledge of the language – often just enough to pass exams – and are unable to cope when proficiency in English becomes necessary in higher education or in seeking careers. My goal is to design and develop resources that will help underprivileged students acquire a foundation in English, eventually allowing them to pursue higher education and take advantage of opportunities that would otherwise not be available. Currently, I have developed and tested the content for grade levels 1 and 2. With the support of the Donald A. Strauss Scholarship, I propose to use my knowledge of designing and implementing educational tools to involve students from UC Davis and educators in India to develop resources for grade levels 3-6 along with a teacher development program.

### **Background**

English has become a sign of the elite and a requisite for success in India, where a population of over 1 billion people communicate in 22 official languages. Most higher education programs, especially in STEM, are at present only offered in English. A basic proficiency in the English language has also become a requirement in many job sectors. However, only about 30% of the population is able to speak English, and only a third of those are able to read and write the language. India's language divide endures because children in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods and rural areas grow up with very little exposure to English.<sup>1</sup> In the state of Tamilnadu, the medium of instruction in most public schools is the native language, Tamil. Over 60% of the nearly 1.5 million students in Tamilnadu attend these Tamil-language schools.<sup>2</sup> Even in the rare cases when English language books are available for educational use, they are not culturally appropriate. The English language education of these students would benefit from books and educational materials that are set in the context of their lives.

I started English Kadhavu ([www.englishkadhavu.org](http://www.englishkadhavu.org)) to work to reduce this divide by developing resources that could be used in classrooms or afterschool programs. Because a solid foundation is necessary to build language proficiency, I began by designing resources for use in lower elementary grades. In this I was guided by a research publication of the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) that emphasizes the importance of phonics, vocabulary building, and reading comprehension strategies.<sup>3</sup> During these initial development stages, Lakshmi Suryanarayanan, the director of Olcott Memorial school in Chennai, Tamilnadu, acted as an invaluable advisor because she has extensive experience in developing programs and content for underserved students at the elementary grade levels. This scholarship will allow me to connect with more ESL teachers in California and in India who can read through and proofread what we have already developed, as well as consult on material development for higher grade levels.

The building block for the resources my team is developing is what we call a "Book Box." Each book box contains multiple copies of a book (enough to distribute in a full classroom), along with games and activities to reinforce language acquisition. Games focus on vocabulary development, using tools such as memory, bingo, and sentence formation games. Group activities develop comprehension strategies, such as story sequencing and role playing to act out stories as in a play. The themes of the stories that we develop are loosely tied to lessons in the pre-existing Tamilnadu state textbooks. For instance, the first book box we created had a story titled "The Three Headed Teacher," which reinforced the school's curriculum on the parts of the body. The stories are also set in the context of the lives of the students and include characters who look like them in order to increase engagement. I tested the first book box in three schools in Tamilnadu and, upon witnessing the enthusiasm it received from both teachers and students, I incorporated English Kadhavu as a 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation in order to raise funds and continue developing more book boxes.

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<sup>1</sup> Aula, S. (2014, November 06). The Problem With The English Language In India.

<sup>2</sup> Gupta, A. (n.d.). Education Status Report - Tamilnadu Elementary Education. *Center for Education Innovations*.

<sup>3</sup> Armbruster, B., Ph.D, (2001, September). Put Reading First - The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read.

Thus far, English Kadhavu has

- Finished development for the first-grade level, including a series of 36 books and activities focused on specific phonics sounds, and four book boxes for the second grade level (with 12 activities in total).
- Distributed the book box sets to seven schools in Tamilnadu, India, three of which are already supported by nonprofit organizations, and four of which are entirely government run. (Each set contains twenty to thirty copies of a book and five each of three activities.)
- Received initial funding of over \$3000 through Start Some Good, a crowdfunding platform, and a \$1000 grant from the Pollination Project. I was subsequently selected as a Blum Center Summer Fellow for 2017 to continue user testing and gaining connections with more schools in India.
- Developed an invaluable network of professionals that help us make our material successful. This includes writers, illustrators, and proofreaders for our books and activities, other nonprofit organizations such as the Sudharma Foundation and the Altias Foundation, the directors and English teachers of seven public schools with enthusiastic faculty that test our material in their classrooms and provide us with important feedback, and curriculum experts at the UC Davis School of Education whose feedback will help ensure that our material is as educationally valuable as possible.

### **Proposal**

My next goal is to complete the development of book boxes for grade levels 3 to 6 and to create teacher training material to help teachers use our book box program effectively, and I believe that the Donald A. Strauss Scholarship will help me achieve this. After we have completed the development and testing of all book boxes, we will focus on distribution and expanding to more schools all over Tamilnadu, and eventually to all of India.

My overarching objectives for this project are to:

- Increase student engagement by designing books and activities that feature Indian characters whose lives are similar to those of the students. Children gain role models and inspiration through books and feel validated when they see successful characters who look like them. However, few books feature Indian children; fewer still feature Indian children in books for English language acquisition. As we move into developing books for older students, I will introduce the real life success stories of people who grew up in poverty in India.
- Provide more practice material for students to read in their free time as well as in the classroom.<sup>4</sup>
- Make it easy for teachers to use our materials regardless of their level of English proficiency by creating appropriate teacher training materials.

The research I did in India this past summer with the help of the Blum Center's Poverty Alleviation Through Action grant showed me that it is imperative to assist teachers who have lower English proficiency by developing teacher training material for each book box. I will be hiring an educator with experience in developing teacher training material locally in India to develop these resources. One of my contacts, Kaavya Ramachandran, who currently works for Chrysalis Education and previously for Teach for India, will be working with us to find this person through her professional network. Our hope is that the teacher training materials will not only help the teachers teach more effectively, but will also help them gain proficiency in the language themselves, thus benefitting future students who will develop a stronger foundation in the English language.

We will continue to measure the effectiveness of the program by testing each book box in multiple schools and maintaining communication with the teachers in each school to get qualitative data about the ease of use of the book boxes and student engagement with materials. As a designer, I know that having the user involved throughout the design and development process is extremely important, and thus developing the materials in the US without being able to continuously interact with the users will be a challenge. In order to continue to gain this important feedback and make adjustments to our material, I have formed a partnership

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<sup>4</sup>Cullinan, B. E. (2000, November). Independent Reading and School Achievement.

with the Sudharma Foundation, an NGO I worked with last summer when they helped me test some of my book boxes in corporation (public) schools in Chennai. The Sudharma Foundation will be visiting these various schools to test our our book boxes in the classroom setting and will send us feedback from teachers and observations of student engagement. I am building a team of dedicated people in India who have a passion for the work that we do. A small printing firm based in Chennai, Hikey Media, helped us print our earlier test book boxes and we will use them for printing the next set of book boxes as well. We have an onsite volunteer, Uma Krishnakumar, who will oversee the distribution of the content to the NGOs that will test the content in the classrooms. By having dedicated people working with us on the ground in India we are ensuring that we can get current and consistent feedback from the schools we work with throughout the development process, easily expand to more schools, and thus benefit as many communities as possible.

In addition, with the help of this scholarship, I will begin involving more people at UC Davis in the design process. My goals in this are to benefit from my peers' wisdom to improve the overall layout and setup of the books and activities, while learning with them what research tells us about how best to communicate understandable information to young kids in India. After all of our material has been developed, I would like to raise funds to organize volunteer trips for UC Davis students to travel to the schools we support in India to further test our resources, conduct research, and help us expand to more schools. Such a venture would be modeled on other campus organizations, such as Global Medical Brigades, which sends students to Nicaragua to distribute medicine and teach public health. This would not only be a great help for this project, but would provide invaluable hands-on learning opportunities for students to witness firsthand the issues facing developing nations. This can also be achieved through partnerships with other grant programs, such as the Poverty Alleviation Through Action grant from the Blum Center for Developing Economies, which funds students' travels to work on projects aiding in poverty alleviation.

### **The Future and Sustainability**

I have already taken the first steps to ensure that the project continues after the development of the book boxes by establishing relationships with key NGOs that are connecting us with schools that need our resources, especially in rural areas. For instance, we are currently building a partnership with Asha for Education, a large organization with over 50 chapters worldwide that supports over 400 projects that provide education to underprivileged children, spanning 24 of the 29 states in India. With their support, we will be able to heavily expand our connections with schools and bring our book boxes all over the country. I have also connected with a few smaller organizations, including the Altias Foundation, which currently has active projects all over Tamilnadu, and the Vetrivel Foundation, which works in various schools to create Tamil translations of Khan Academy videos for students. These organizations have in the past connected us to schools for initial testing and have agreed to help us expand further after book box development has been completed. In the long term, we hope to partner with the governmental Department of Education in each state to distribute our materials throughout all public schools in India.

I am also in the process of developing an online database of our resources — a section of our website with downloadable versions of all of our books, activities, and guides that can be accessed by NGOs or underfunded schools that request them, on top of the request for printed book boxes that already exists on our website.

To work towards making English Kadhavu self-sufficient and less reliant on donations, I am planning to launch an online store to sell our books to individuals who can afford them in America and India, and also to sell an iBook version for the iPad. I foresee that the sale of our books will be a useful source of revenue for printing and distribution. Although this anticipated revenue could theoretically be used for the cost of development of content for grade levels 3 to 6, this would still be a slow process. We will also need to commit a large amount of our time to marketing in order for the online store to become profitable. If this is our only source of revenue, it will take English Kadhavu many years to finish developing the content that we are planning. A grant from the Strauss Foundation will make it possible for us to focus on completing the development of the book boxes for all elementary grade levels within one year, thus providing these resources to all students who need them sooner.

*Timeline*

<b>GRADE LEVEL</b>	<b>ACTIVITY</b>	<b>TIMEFRAME</b>
3	Curriculum Development	May - July
	Printing	July
	Initial Testing + Feedback	July - Aug
	Development of Teacher Training Materials	Aug
4	[same steps as above]	July* - Nov
5	[same steps as above]	Sep* - Dec
6	[same steps as above]	Nov* - Feb
ALL	Final testing and research (by Sudharma Foundation)	Feb - April
	Compile and Analyze Research	April

\* I will begin the development of each subsequent grade level's books and activities after the curriculum development for the previous level (concurrently with printing and initial testing, which will take place in India)

*Expenses*

<b>CATEGORY</b>	<b>DETAIL</b>	<b>AMOUNT</b>	
Curriculum Development	Writing*	\$1000	
	• 24 book boxes total	Proofreading (\$30/book)	\$720
	• 1 book + 3 activities each	Illustrations (\$200/book box + extra \$400 allotted for potential increase in number of illustrations/detail of illustrations for more advanced books)	\$5600
		Formatting/Layout (\$20/book)	\$480
Teacher Training Material Development	Hiring employee in India to research and develop the material	\$1000	
Testing	Printing 5 sets of each book box for the Sudharma Foundation to take to India schools	\$1200	
Scholarship		\$5000	
<b>Total Requested</b>		<b>\$15,000</b>	

\* Most books will be written by the English Kadhavu team and writing expenses are only for some of the advanced level books (e.g., for the 5th and 6th grade levels), by professional writers based in India via a freelancing platform called Upworks.