

Leveling the Playing Field: Artificial Scarcity in Language Education and Strategies to Resist or Overcome It

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Jocelyn Wright

Mokpo National University, South Korea

<jocelyn@mokpo.ac.kr>

George M Jacobs

Kampung Senang Charity and Education Foundation, Singapore

<george.jacobs@gmail.com>

Abstract

Artificial scarcity occurs when individuals or groups face an inability to access or are excluded from sufficient or desired resources, even when those resources might be available (Daoud, 2015). This results in situations that work contrary to the aspirations of inclusion, diversity, equity, accessibility, and sustainability. This conceptual article attempts to introduce artificial scarcity into discussions of language education, looking at four areas where it arises: (1) languages and language varieties; (2) ranking; (3) materials and resources; and (4) opportunities for teacher professional development. In doing so, it raises complex issues, presenting differing opinions, and offering strategies for resisting or overcoming artificial scarcity in order to bring about greater abundance and transformation in and through language education.

Keywords: abundance, accessibility, artificial scarcity, diversity, equity, inclusion, language education, strategies, sustainability

This article examines the concept of artificial scarcity (AS) in relation to significant issues in language education (LE). To start, scarcity refers to situations where insufficient means are available to meet an end (Daoud, 2015). Under these conditions, it is difficult to satisfy needs or wants. People require nutrition and clean water, good health and well-being, opportunities to learn, and more. Yet, for hundreds of millions of people, these needs remain difficult to fulfill, as shown by their inclusion in the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2024). Besides basic needs, people also desire “luxury” items and services. Examples include cosmetics, designer clothing, new gadgets, and exclusive travel experiences. Needs can be manipulated, such as when speculators create shortages to boost prices and profits (Quelch, 2007). Similarly, wants are often manipulated through marketing, advertising, and public relations that encourage individuals and nations to desire products that may be harmful to them personally, socially, or globally, such as

junk food, cigarettes, high-emission vehicles, and nuclear arms (Rubin, 2022). Therefore, scarcity can be genuine or artificially created.

AS specifically relates to the experience of encountering an inability to access or exclusion from sufficient or desired resources, including where those are potentially available (Daoud, 2015). To the authors' knowledge, little or nothing has been written on AS in LE, although this phenomenon seems important for achieving the aspirations of inclusion, diversity, equity, accessibility, and sustainability (**IDEAS**). To address the current gap, this article looks at four areas where AS arises in LE: (1) languages and language varieties; (2) ranking; (3) materials and resources; and (4) opportunities for teacher professional development. For each, the authors present issues, discuss differing opinions, and offer strategies for resisting or overcoming AS and bringing about greater abundance and transformation in and through LE.

Languages and Language Varieties

The human species is blessed with many languages, and languages have varieties. It is axiomatic among linguists that

All language varieties are equal: there is no significant difference in the complexity of their linguistic structure; they all have resources for creating new vocabulary as it is needed, and for developing the grammatical constructions their speakers require. Any variety can be developed for use in any situation. (Holmes, 2013, p. 202)

However, in reality, languages, varieties, and their users are still not valued and treated equally due to a complex of such factors as societal attitudes and values, political and socioeconomic power structures, and historical developments (Galloway & Rose, 2015) despite the existence of landmark documents such as the *Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights* (UNESCO, 1996) and the efforts of many.

AS-related Issues

AS rears its head when certain languages, varieties, and their users attain exalted status because others consequently have lower or diminished ones. An obvious example of a “prestigious” language is English, and particularly two “standard” varieties, U.K. and U.S. Englishes. Mainly by virtue of their birth, so-called “native speakers” of these have basked in the varieties’ reflected glory and benefited from the attendant advantages. The ability to function in English and these varieties becomes an artificial scarcity when others think of them as resources they need to compete for and attain, and speakers of other languages and English varieties feel inferior and/or are undervalued, marginalized, or excluded despite sometimes holding high levels of proficiency.

In English language teaching (ELT), the two “standard” Englishes have long enjoyed special treatment, having been used and preferred in teaching materials and assessments, including on high-stakes exams, like standardized tests (e.g., TOEIC, IELTS, and TOEFL). As to employment as English teachers and elsewhere in the education system, “native speakers” of these varieties have often enjoyed privileges and higher salaries, especially if they looked like “native speakers” (Yeo et al., 2017). The authors of this article have had non-Caucasian “native speaker” colleagues who felt discriminated against by administrators and other stakeholders.

As noted, a goal is to present differing viewpoints. In the case of maintaining the “standard” Englishes, two arguments can be made. First, because so many varieties exist, learning, teaching, and evaluating fewer simplifies the task. Second, as those varieties have been dominant for so

long, a great deal of potential language learning resources that can easily be adapted or used to create new materials exist and are readily available.

In response to these arguments, first, the history of English (e.g., from Old English to Middle English) presents evidence of many changes (Fischer, 2013). This leads to the more important point in favor of moving away from the supremacy of two varieties: it reinforces inequities by privileging some, disadvantaging others, and limiting diversity.

Strategies

What can LE professionals and institutions do to speed change toward increased IDEAS related to languages, language varieties, and their users? Fortunately, there are many cases to learn from and ways to engage.

1. *Promote attitudinal change*: Global Englishes (Galloway & Rose, 2015) refers to the idea that English, as a global language, belongs to all users, not just those who speak a high-status “standard” variety. Scholarship related to a parent term, World Englishes, previously established that other varieties of English (e.g., Thai English and Filipino English) should not only be recognized as legitimate but also celebrated (Davies, 2023).

Multilingual teachers of English have come together to educate colleagues and other stakeholders about why attitudes need to change (Selvi et al., 2024). For instance, TESOL International Association has a “Non-Native” English Speakers in TESOL Interest Section (NNEST-IS). Also, a special interest group (IP & SEN SIG) of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) hosts a webpage listing ten inclusive movements in ELT. “Native speakers” alike need to support this attitude change, even if it means sacrificing privileges.

2. *Diversify voices, representation, and experiences*: More LE textbooks than before feature different varieties of English and diverse users (e.g., National Geographic Learning’s *Voices* series). Also notable is the rise in audiobooks where narrators use accents according to story characters (e.g., Bajaj, 2022). Fortunately, more publicly available materials do as well. One of the best-known media examples is the BBC’s shift away from using the royal’s English, Received Pronunciation (RP), to a variety of British accents.

One way of respecting not only different languages and varieties but also cultures is for language learning materials to be set in different contexts, rather than mostly in English-speaking countries with relatively high-income levels. For instance, Ruas (2020), on behalf of IATEFL, edited a book of lesson plans on global issues written by teachers from Africa and set in their countries. Additionally, the second author co-edited a set of English lessons for environmental education (Lie et al., 2025). Both books are free online.

3. *Adopt inclusive pedagogies*: Previously, a dominant view of ELT was that students were best off using only English. Rather than adopting a monolingual stance, translanguaging (Cummins, 2019) values learners’ rich linguistic repertoires and their use in language learning, highlighting that this is an additive, not a subtractive, process (Bartlett & García, 2011). More broadly, implementing a culturally sustainable pedagogy, one that “seeks to perpetuate and foster – to sustain – linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 1), could be desirable.

4. *Empower professionals and learners: Equal Voices in ELT (EVE)* promotes diversity and inclusion by changing who speaks and what topics are covered at ELT conferences. This involves including more women, multilingual individuals, people of color (POC), individuals living with disabilities, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and novice speakers. To reach this goal, EVE members mentor speakers to help them deliver better presentations with greater confidence. Freedom Speakers International (FSI) is another grassroots example, specifically for North Korean refugee learners.

Ranking

According to Article 1 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (United Nations, 1948). However, in reality, people are rarely valued or treated equally, since comparison pervades sociocultural institutions through socialization, media, etc.

In education, students are often ranked in their class, in their school, and based on their scores on standardized exams. Teachers can also be ranked (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2021), as can schools (Doris et al., 2022) and universities (e.g., by QS World University Rankings). Even countries are ranked on international measurements. Santos and Centeno (2023) study “reference societies” based on the relative results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which tests 15-year-olds in mathematics, science, and reading. Notably, nations are ranked according to their English proficiency as per this index (Education First, 2025).

AS-related Issues

Ranking becomes an artificial scarcity in LE and research when individuals and institutions prioritize high rankings. In some countries, even where English is not an official language (e.g., South Korea), English is considered important, even a gatekeeper, for college entrance, employment, or promotion (Choi, 2021).

Two reasons advanced by advocates in LE are: (1) ranking provides various stakeholders with information on students’ relative progress and professionals’ and institutions’ contributions (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021); and (2) it provides a form of extrinsic motivation that encourages students, teachers, and researchers to improve their rankings or to maintain high ranks (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Nevertheless, many criticisms exist. First, ranking discourages sharing and other forms of mutual assistance necessary for collaboration. For instance, students worried about their rank may be reluctant to coach peers who encounter learning difficulties (Chen et al., 2012). Similarly, teachers concerned with their rank may be unwilling to share materials with colleagues (Little, 1990). Second, rankings are not necessarily relevant to real-life matters and may be based on incomplete information. Regarding the rating of teachers, Hanushek and Rivkin (2010) stated that, “The consistent finding over four decades has been that the most commonly used indicators of quality differences are not closely related to [student] achievement gain” (p. 267). The third and perhaps major counter to ranking argues for intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). According to this, rather than studying or teaching to earn rewards, such as high rankings for students or salary increments for teachers, people study and teach because they enjoy learning and helping others. Previously, Dewey (1916) urged that education should be a tool for improving society rather than one’s own social standing. That inner drive can mean more to students and

teachers than any ranking or other reward. Intrinsic motivation also fits well with lifelong learning (Vidigal-Alfaya et al., 2025), the goal of which lies in encouraging people to continue learning after they have completed formal education, when their relative performance no longer matters.

Strategies

Many ways exist for LE professionals and institutions to resist or overcome the harmful effects of ranking and foster IDEAS, even when they have little or no power to eliminate the use of ranking.

1. *Collaborate and model teamwork:* Educators can work with colleagues, both locally and beyond, such as in and through professional organizations like Teacher Voices, a Facebook group of language teachers with over 12,400 members. Ways teachers collaborate with colleagues at the same institution include opening their classrooms for observation, providing coaching, sharing materials, combining skills. For example, one teacher talented in music works with another who enjoys designing visuals) can produce materials or team teach, and do action research together. Educators also need to let their students know about, or better demonstrate, their teacher-teacher cooperation, to serve as models. Doing these has the potential to lift everyone up.
2. *Foster positive interdependence:* The literature on cooperative learning offers many techniques and principles, including some for positive interdependence, the feeling that students' outcomes are positively correlated with those of their groupmates (Lim et al., 2023). Positive interdependence can be promoted via rotating roles and resources. First, students can take on a range of roles, such as questioner (who asks thinking (e.g., "why?") questions), checker (who checks understanding), facilitator (who seeks mutually-acceptable solutions), language captain (who focuses on target language use), and timekeeper. Positive interdependence can also be promoted when each group member has a unique resource, such as personal information (e.g., related to cultural background), information obtained through research (e.g., on regenerative leadership), or information provided by teachers (e.g., about fair working conditions). Groups can only succeed communicatively if everyone plays their roles and shares their resources.
3. *Encourage peer mentoring:* The inaccurate idea that learning is a zero-sum, win/lose, game contributes to AS. According to this scarcity-linked idea, if a student teaches a partner something, their partner may surpass them. This is wrong on two counts. Jacobs and Greliche (2017) used statistical data to show that a change in class rank due to peer teaching is a very unlikely outcome, and a change in percentile rank on a standardized exam taken by thousands of other students is even less probable.

There is a still more powerful argument to convince students to avoid letting concerns about rank inhibit them from helping peers. That research-based argument (Webb et al., 2009) flows from studies showing that by teaching peers, mentors learn, too. However, whether either party learns, the student needing or the one providing assistance, depends on how that help is given. When it consists merely of answers, neither party benefits; learning for both parties occurs only when it involves explanations. Jacobs (in press) recounted a story from over 50 years ago of a high-ranking primary school student in Malaysia who was caught letting classmates copy her answers during an exam. The teacher knew she was altruistically motivated; so, after punishing her, as per school policy, he suggested a more beneficial way. Thus, instead of letting classmates copy answers, she started teaching them how to find the answers themselves.

4. *Don't grade*: Not everything students do needs to be graded. For example, group activities can help students prepare for norm-referenced assessment, and research suggests that such activities are associated with enhanced academic performance (Kyndt et al., 2013; Slavin, 1995). They resemble the Three Musketeers with their spirit of "One for all and all for one."
5. *Change assessment*: Ranking, which stems from the use of norm-referenced assessment, also known as grading on a curve, often sets students up to compete against each other. Johnson and Johnson (2004) recommended criterion-referenced as an alternative. Here, people are assessed in comparison not to others but to fixed criteria. Thus, passing depends only on one's understanding of a task and their effort to complete it. Another possibility is ipsative, or self-referenced, assessment (Hughes, 2014), where people are scored based on past and present performance and growth over time.

Even when competition is the mode of assessment, rather than students competing against each other, students can compete against a standard or to achieve a goal. For instance, with extensive reading, instead of students competing individually to see who reads the most, a whole class can set a goal for how many books to read. In this mode, students motivate each other to reach that goal.

Materials and Resources

There is an abundance of available print and multimedia materials and resources for language learners and educators, including traditional ones (e.g., literature, television, film, linguistic analyses, and learner dictionaries) and more recent innovations (e.g., blogs, podcasts, vlogs, online games, and assistive AI, like chatbots). Still, textbooks and academic journals are among the most widely used. Students need access to textbooks to meet the goals set for them in curriculum documents, and educators need access to academic journals to stay abreast of current practices and trends in LE and education generally, as well as to contribute their own ideas, approaches, activities, and techniques.

AS-related Issues

AS arises when language learners and educators are unable to access or are prevented from contributing to various materials and resources they should otherwise have equal opportunities to. The business of publishing materials is dominated by for-profit enterprises whose primary focus is providing value to their shareholders (i.e., the people and companies who have risked their investments). Publishers rightly require capital to attract skilled staff and authors, without whom they could not produce quality materials as easily, so they charge fees for their publications.

However, is it AS when printed textbooks cost a hefty sum even without delivery, and online ones come with various "protections," such as expiring access, which make them difficult, if impossible, to share and resell? Even though online materials involve no printing, storage, or shipping costs to publishers, prices remain high (Mir, 2021). As students are required to have textbooks to successfully complete courses, they have little choice but to purchase or "rent" them, leaving some disadvantaged.

Academic journals play an important role in dissemination, and they seem to be the most common publication venue for language educators and researchers. These need to reference previous publications, a phenomenon called scientific citation. To protect the quality of these ideas, manuscripts undergo a review process, often double-blind, where reviewers do not know who the authors are and the latter do not know who read their submissions (Tvrznikova, 2018). Scholars

can use various search tools to consult articles and find journals to submit to. Nevertheless, the current situation with academic journals complicates access to diverse materials and resources and limits inclusion in discussions.

One way to classify journals involves three categories. Free, online journals charge neither authors nor readers. A second type of journal has been given the pejorative name “predatory journal.” Normally, these are free to readers, but authors need to pay. Demir (2018) described these as ones that “promise rapid, unsubstantiated peer review, leading to a short timeline to publication; they also tend to have a fake foundation or management addresses and fake editors and reviewers ... [and] have further claimed that they are indexed by prestigious indices and have high impact factors” (p. 1296). The third type is published by commercial publishers. Normally, authors do not need to pay (although sometimes there is a requirement to pay for open-access), and readers must pay, unless their institutions (e.g., university libraries) subscribe to them.

Another way to classify academic journals which contributes to inequalities is according to prestige, which can be measured in various ways (e.g., by citations and impact factor). At some universities, researchers must publish in highly-regarded journals (e.g., Scopus or SSCI) to be eligible for promotion and other rewards. They can even lose their jobs if their publication record, including being first or second author, does not meet their institution’s strict criteria. In other institutions, publishing anywhere is satisfactory. The need to “publish or perish” explains the attraction of predatory journals, some of which are indexed in commonly used search tools such as Google Scholar.

Strategies

To bring about transformation in publishing that serves IDEAS, LE professionals and institutions can resist or overcome AS if they:

1. *Take advantage of free, online materials:* Authentic digital materials can be accessed through public domain services like [Internet Archive](#) and [Project Gutenberg](#). Quality, peer-reviewed, pedagogical materials such as university-level textbooks are available at [OpenStax](#) and can also be purchased low-cost in print as a result of their initiative to break down financial barriers to knowledge.
2. *Advocate for and support diamond open-access publishers:* Non-commercial book and journal publishers such as Applied Linguistics Press, Language Science Press, and *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching* aim to maximize reach by engaging in what Plonsky (2024) calls “the accessibility-income trade-off” (pp. 3-4). In turn, he states that “It’s time to dedicate our expertise and our efforts as authors, reviewers, and editors to book publishers that serve scholars instead of shareholders [to] advance knowledge more equitably, more justly, and more efficiently” (p. 5). Andringa et al. (2024) emphasized the need for those in privileged positions to lead the way. Initiatives, such as Creative Commons, deserve attention here.
3. *Publicize free, online learning materials:* For example, the newsletter of the [Global Issues in Language Education Special Interest Group](#) of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) has been appearing for 35 years and offers a wide range of resources. Another, ELTon-winning, resource with an ecological focus is [ELT Footprint](#).

Due to their media, many of these materials and resources are also environmentally friendly.

Opportunities for Teacher Professional Development

LE contributes to individual and socioeconomic development (Coleman, 2010). For this, educators who are continuously and sustainably renewing their competence are needed (Sadeghi & Richards, 2021). There are many independent and institutional, individual and collective, and informal and formal types of professional development (PD), as varied as self-initiated and directed learning, journaling, conversations, study groups, seminars, workshops, and conferences. Anticipated benefits include learning that upgrades knowledge, skills, and resourcefulness, improves attitudes (e.g., more energy, motivation, and a sense of empowerment), and, consequently, enhances pedagogical practice or learning experiences in addition to strengthening communities of practice. Not all PD is equal, of course. Borg (2015) showed that some, especially “externally-driven, ‘teacher as consumer’ modes” (p. 5), may be labelled irrelevant, impractical, unfeasible, minimally effective, or even a waste of time.

AS-related Issues

AS arises when teachers miss out on desired PD. Both internal (e.g., self-efficacy, commitment) and external (e.g., availability of training and school support) circumstances may prevent teachers from accessing and participating in diverse and meaningful opportunities (Li, 2024). Among other examples, difficulties include obtaining leave to participate, workload pressures, insufficient financial resources, materials unavailable in educators’ preferred languages, online learning challenges, and no clear career path based on completion of PD.

Strategies

To resist or overcome AS issues that block opportunities for PD, LE professionals and institutions can show that they value and prioritize PD while taking various actions to enhance IDEAS:

1. *Ensure access to a range of PD opportunities:* There is no one-size-fits-all PD. Language educators in different contexts have different needs at different times. Ensuring access to a variety of formal and informal opportunities is important. It may be helpful to provide opportunities in local languages as well.
2. *Reduce financial constraints to PD:* Employers can provide paid time off and/or financial support for PD to facilitate participation. Organizations can also play roles. A noteworthy conference is the annual [Free Linguistics Conference](#), whose mission is to provide an accessible forum for people to come together, to break down disciplinary borders, without the burden of conference fees. In addition to hosting free events, many conferences these days offer sliding scales, and some, like the 23rd ELTA Serbia Conference, offer travel support grants to potential presenters and attendees.
3. *Make PD accessible:* Many learning communities’ activities can be done online via engaging and interactive platforms. Various KoreaTESOL (KOTESOL) SIGs have previously hosted book clubs, lesson study, and reflective practice via Zoom. Online learning, which has become common, can greatly increase access to LE by lowering costs and eliminating the need for travel. The [Electronic Village Online](#) (EVO) offers free, annual training sessions. Hybrid and online conferences, of course, break down barriers, allowing those who might otherwise not attend to participate, and access for all the other attendees to those people’s insights and experiences, if “disturbances and contradictions” in online conferences, related to hosting, attending, technology, and design (Carr & Ludvigsen, 2017) can be mitigated.

4. *Make PD inclusive*: Another innovation, initiated by the Society of Pakistan English Language Teachers (SPELT), to overcome financial, logistical, and mobility issues, especially for women and those in remote areas, was to decentralize and host “traveling conferences,” ones held over multiple locations (Sarwar, 2011). A further initiative adopted by AsiaTEFL is to include spaces for various faith groups attending conferences to worship or pray.
5. *Aim for sustainable PD*: Another reason to favor localized, hybrid, and online events and conferences is that they may contribute to a cleaner climate through environmental preservation (e.g., reduction in carbon emissions related to commuting, reduced paper use due to digital materials) and energy saving (Alqahtani, 2025).

Conclusion

AS, which unnecessarily limits and blocks access and inclusion to sufficient and diverse resources, is pervasive in LE. This modest article has described AS in four areas concerning the use of languages and varieties, ranking, materials and resources, and teacher professional development. For each concern, issues were discussed and strategies proposed. While this work only scratches the surface of AS in LE, the authors of this article hope it stimulates further reflection, discussion, and action among students, educators, researchers, and other stakeholders in institutions that may promote IDEAS and, thereby, bring about greater abundance and transformation in and through LE.

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About the Authors

Jocelyn Wright is a Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at Mokpo National University in South Korea, where she has served since 2007. Her interests are diverse and usually not mainstream, such as matters at the heart of the intersecting fields of peace linguistics, peace (language) education, and peace literature. ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5449-9087

George M. Jacobs holds a Ph.D. in Education and teaches at Kampung Senang Charity and Education Foundation in Singapore. He teaches courses for seniors, including Communication, Reading Aloud with Children, Sharing Selected Stories, and table tennis. Elsewhere, he writes and teaches on more academic topics, such as cooperative learning, ecolinguistics, extensive reading, animal advocacy, and environmental education. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-7640-1842

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