

RTI International: Transforming Reading Instruction

Across the developing world, teachers, students, and parents are approaching one of the most basic skills, reading, with renewed energy and enthusiasm.

“Using the phonemic approach not only enhanced my students’ ability, but has enhanced my Arabic language as well,” —Teacher in Al-Minia, Egypt.

“My son is now reading bit by bit and so other friends in the community had been asking me so I told them that the school has a special reading program that all of us should listen to our children when they come home,” —Parent in Lofa County, Liberia.

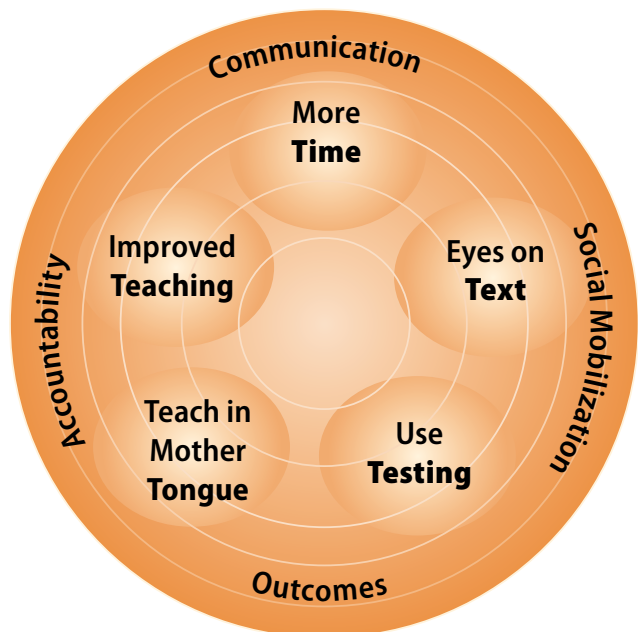
What are they so excited about? With RTI International’s help, teachers across many countries in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and elsewhere are changing what they teach and how they teach, making learning to read cognitively engaging and motivating. Moreover, they are getting kids to read.

What works?

RTI has been compiling evidence of what works to improve reading in the most challenging environments. The lessons can be summarized conveniently as the “5 T’s”:

1. More **time** devoted to teaching;
2. Better techniques for **teaching**;
3. More **texts** in the hands of students;
4. Teaching children in the mother **tongue**; and
5. **Testing**, or measurement, of results.

Alongside the 5 Ts, there must be an explicit focus on outcomes, a culture of accountability both inside and outside of the classroom, and sufficient communication and social mobilization to sustain progress made.



How do we make it happen?

Our goal is to ensure that children learn to read in the first two years of schooling. To that end, we are committed to ensuring that teachers are prepared to teach reading and that children are ready to learn. We support ministries and educators to institutionalize proven approaches and empower them to improve reading. We communicate assessment results along with recommendations to support governments in their efforts to improve learning outcomes, as well as to mobilize parents and communities to support children's reading development. Using the 5 Ts as a guide, specific strategies that we promote and implement include the following:

Time

Reading has to be taught every day. Teachers, therefore, need to maximize the amount of time spent on reading. This means dedicating specific time for reading instruction, as opposed to only teaching grammar or language. We recommend teachers spend at least 40 minutes a day teaching reading. As part of reading instruction, children should have ample time to have their “eyes on text” to practice what they learn. Moreover, the teaching of reading

needs to start early—schools must not wait until children are in the second grade. If teachers, principals, and parents have high expectations and provide what is required to teach reading, children can and will learn to read by the end of grade 1. Time for reading should not be restricted only to the classroom, however; time with text—and a culture of reading—also needs to be fostered in homes and communities. This can be done through community reading competitions and parents promoting reading at home. In Liberia, for example, parents are being asked to listen to their children read aloud for at least 20 minutes per day.

Teaching

To teach reading effectively, teachers need to be familiar with the components of reading and with effective practices for teaching each component. We promote simple yet effective teaching practices, such as use of a perky pace, instructional routines that guide teachers through lessons, activities that motivate students, and formative feedback and scaffolding. Training accompanied by explicit lesson plans and regular coaching from mentors support teachers as they learn the new practices. As a result, students are cognitively engaged, on task, and have opportunities to interact with text.

In Egypt, under the U.S. Agency for International Development-funded Girls' Improved Learning Outcomes (GILO) program, reading instruction was increased by 20 to 30 minutes per day; it was improved through the inclusion of phonics; and the quality of instruction was enhanced by training teachers on how to teach phonics and providing them with teaching aids. Result: After one year of instruction, students gained an average of 10 more words read correctly per minute—an increase of 82% over baseline—compared to three more words read per minute in the control group.



Photo: Infonex

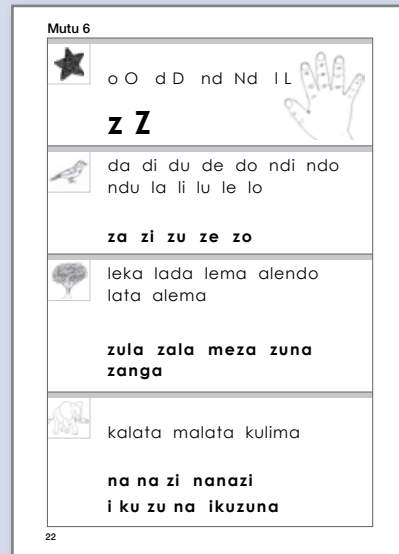
Instructional routines, such as those employed by RTI in Liberia; Egypt; and Kenya, include the following components:

- Instruction is interactive and briskly paced to ensure that students are actively engaged throughout the lesson;
- Teaching is provided in small steps, with student practice after each step to ensure that all students experience a high level of success; and
- Children are provided opportunities to apply what they are learning in other contexts.



Photo: Medina Korda, RTI

In Malawi, RTI introduced new, cost-effective early grade readers in Chichewa. These comprehensive readers include locally developed text, with content arranged in a letter-syllable-word-sentence sequence. Sections are marked by a recognizable symbol so students can follow along in their books even in classrooms with large numbers of pupils, and print size is appropriate for children. These readers are inexpensive to produce, at less than US\$1 per book.



Moreover, a safe learning environment is created because students are given the support needed to acquire new skills, as well as multiple opportunities to practice.

Text

RTI's approach to reading emphasizes the need to provide text to all students to ensure that they have their eyes on text every day. Materials for learners should be adapted for specific contexts, and they should be leveled appropriately to match the children's skill level. Leveled texts provide students with an opportunity to apply what they have learned, gradually increasing their ability to read more letters and words. Text and materials should also be provided to teachers to read to students and further build their own comprehension skills.

Tongue

Learning to read in a familiar language facilitates children's ability to learn to read, as well as their ability to learn another language and other subjects. When children learn to read in a language they already understand, they are able to use their knowledge of vocabulary, the linguistic construction of the language, and their ability to pronounce the sounds of the language that they already know to decode and comprehend. Being able to read and understand language in turn facilitates academic learning. Mastering reading in a first language promotes cognitive development that is needed to learn a second language, as many key skills

related to reading are transferrable from one language to another. Our work in Egypt, Kenya, Malawi, and South Africa supports students' learning to read in languages that are familiar to them.

Research and RTI's own project experience have revealed the benefits of mother tongue instruction. For example, the Systematic Method for Reading Success (SMRS), implemented by RTI in South Africa in collaboration with the Molteno Institute of Language and Literacy, focused on mother tongue instruction, as well as simplified materials and use of step-by-step lesson templates. Implemented for less than a year, this approach showed that even in such a short period, children in treatment schools could learn two to three times faster than children in control schools.



Photo: Melinda Taylor, RTI

Testing

Effective instruction responds to students' needs. Teachers therefore must have knowledge of methods for evaluating student learning and of how to use that information for instruction. In effective classrooms, teachers use assessments in a variety of ways on a daily basis. During a lesson, they check students for understanding before moving ahead in the lesson and on to independent practice. At the end of a lesson, they check for understanding to determine whether they should move on to new material. The results of more formal tests of reading can be used to inform decision making about teacher training, curriculum design and materials development, and even national policy (i.e., provide actionable data to improve systems and to know whether investments are paying off).

In Liberia, reading levels are being assessed; parents and communities are informed; teachers are trained how to continually assess student performance and are provided frequent school-based teaching support; and specified lessons plans, resource materials, and books for students to use in class and take home are provided. Result: By the time of final program assessment in June 2010, the average scores of children in full treatment schools exceeded those of control schools by nearly 80%.



Photo: Medina Korda, RTI

“Without information about which areas need improvement, we cannot decide which course of action to take. Assessments such as [EGRA] are especially important as they identify which skills need reinforcement—information that can directly inform teaching and learning.”—Nobel laureate and Liberia’s President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

What results are we seeing?

Across different countries, the following results are similar:

- Student reading outcomes are improving; not only are more students becoming readers, but more students are meeting benchmarks.
- Students are moving from passive to active learning, and are becoming aware of how they learn.
- Teacher practice has been transformed; teachers have the knowledge and skills to teach reading effectively, and this has boosted their confidence.
- Governments are recognizing the importance of using assessments to inform practice and of the importance of making reading acquisition a key goal in the early grades.

Results from national early grade reading assessments (EGRA, or EGRA-like assessments) have prompted education stakeholders and decision makers into action. Government and civil society in Egypt, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guyana, India, Kenya, Mali, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, and South Africa, among other countries, have launched significant efforts to improve early grade reading. RTI is committed to help governments around the globe move from access as an indicator of “Education for All,” to improvement in reading outcomes as an indicator of education quality and the promise of “Learning for All.”

More Information

Amber Gove, Team Leader, Teaching and Learning
RTI International
+1.202.728.2078
agove@rti.org
www.rti.org/idg_education

RTI 7856 11-11



RTI International is one of the world’s leading research institutes, dedicated to improving the human condition by turning knowledge into practice. Our staff of more than 2,800 provides research and technical services to governments and businesses in more than 40 countries in the areas of health and pharmaceuticals, education and training, surveys and statistics, advanced technology, international development, economic and social policy, energy and the environment, and laboratory testing and chemical analysis. For more information, visit www.rti.org.

RTI International is a trade name of Research Triangle Institute.

