

What Works to Improve Reading

The importance of being able to read is widely accepted. The ability to read is associated with improved quality of life, not only for the individual, but in the case of adults, also for their families and communities. Students who learn to read within the first few grades of school have a greater chance of succeeding in and completing primary school. As a result, the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID's) 2011 education strategy focuses on improving the reading outcomes of students by enhancing teacher practice.

Several recent USAID-funded projects have targeted improving reading outcomes in primary school. Based on project results, there is growing consensus that in effective classrooms, teachers are knowledgeable; they have materials that support teaching and learning; and they have adequate time to teach reading. Each of these key elements is described the following section.

Teachers Must Know How to Teach Reading

Teaching a child to read requires specialized knowledge and practices. Effective teachers of reading

- understand the essential components of reading instruction (e.g., phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension);
- implement effective practices for teaching each component;
- demonstrate knowledge of methods for evaluating student learning; and
- utilize information from their own and external assessments to inform their teaching practices.

Nonetheless, many teachers around the world need support to understand these key elements and become effective teachers of reading. Well-designed professional development programs are distributed over time, demonstrate both how and why new practices are effective, and include ongoing feedback from peers and coaches as teachers adopt new practices. To support the implementation of new practices, teachers need



Children practice reading as part of the Systematic Method for Reading Success (SMRS) initiative, South Africa. Photo: RTI project staff.

comprehensive, well-structured, and scripted materials that are directly tied to student texts. Ensuring that pre- and in-service teachers have adequate content knowledge and develop these skills requires a common understanding by faculty at teacher training institutes, professional development centers, and instructional leaders of how best to approach teacher preparation and professional development. This cohesion and vertical alignment should be reflected in standards and expectations held by parents, classroom teachers, and Ministry of Education personnel, in particular among those who oversee curriculum development and teacher preparation.

Texts Are Essential

Just as we would never expect someone to learn to swim without getting in the water, we cannot expect children to learn to read without appropriate texts. Texts for beginning readers should have a small number of words and simple sentences. These texts support children's acquisition of letter sound correspondences needed to read words. As children develop their reading skills, they are able to generalize the use of those skills and apply them to other texts. The complexity of texts should increase as children's reading skills develop. It is possible to improve student outcomes with materials that support and build students' emerging literacy skills.

Time Must Be Devoted to Teaching Reading

Reading instruction and reading practice have to take place every day for at least one hour. Equally important is how that time is used. On a daily basis, there must be explicit instruction in and time for practice of each of the core components of reading. In the first year of formal reading instruction, the five essential components of reading should be taught and practiced every day. In subsequent years, phonemic awareness merges with phonics instruction and is not taught as a separate component. To the extent possible, instruction should not be interrupted by recess or other content.

Testing Is an Important Component of the Instructional Cycle

Effective instruction responds to students' needs. To understand what students know and do not know, teachers must conduct assessments. In the classroom, 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 to independent practice. At the end of the lesson, they check for understanding to determine whether they should move to the next lesson. On a regular basis, they assess students to determine whether or not they have retained what they have learned and then adjust their instruction, as appropriate. In addition to the classroom assessments, education systems must be aware of students' and teachers' performance to provide sufficient support. Therefore, regional and national assessments serve as indicators of a system's well-being and as a mechanism for accountability and making systematic changes for improvement.

The key elements discussed earlier are necessary whether instruction is in the children's **mother tongue** or in a second language. In multilingual contexts, language and literacy instruction that incorporates evidence-based practices is most effective. It is important to recognize that reading requires development of oral language; students whose first language is not the language of instruction must build their oral vocabulary. Instruction in the second language can be facilitated when reading instruction in the mother tongue is well implemented. Students can then use what they know in their mother tongue to acquire language and literacy skills in the second. However, to ensure that students become literate in the second language, vocabulary has to be built systematically over time.

Coordination and Commitment Are Essential for Success. Instruction in the classroom is one piece of the educational system. To improve reading, all components of the system must be strengthened, which is best accomplished through a cohesive system that includes common and clearly articulated goals.

Moreover, everyone involved in education—parents, principals, national authorities, and regional officials—has to work together to ensure that the least successful students improve. This does not happen accidentally or without effort. Improving reading outcomes requires careful planning and commitment to quality teaching and quality instructional materials.

Impact from Selected Reading Programs

EGRA Plus (Liberia, 2009–2010). Teachers were provided with scripted lesson plans; students received text for practice; and dedicated time was allocated to the teaching of reading. Compared with a control group, students in the program outperformed their peers in all reading skills, nearly tripling the gains made by the control group in oral reading fluency and reading comprehension.

Integrated Education Program (IEP) (South Africa, 1998–2009). Overall, a 17% improvement in learner performance in literacy was seen in IEP across all grades in target provinces. Project evaluations found that use of structured lessons, student workbooks, and assessment practices played a key role in driving results.

Systematic Method for Reading Success (SMRS) (South Africa, 2008). Instructional improvements focused on time use; mother tongue instruction; simplified materials; and using step-by-step lesson templates. Implemented for less than a year, children in treatment schools learned to read 2–3 times faster than children in control schools.

Read-Learn-Lead (RLL) (Mali, 2008–2012). RLL focused on time usage, simplified and direct lesson plans, and use of mother tongue. The project produced improvements of several hundred percent in just one year of intervention.

Early Grade Reading (EGR) Intervention (Gambia, 2007–2008). Implemented by the Ministry of Education, the EGR intervention included a teacher handbook of reading activities and specific focus on phonics, resulting in tripling the percentage of students who could read with understanding.

Girls' Improved Learning Outcomes (GILO) (Egypt, 2010–2011). GILO included a package of reading lesson plans for teachers that improved the teaching of phonics. Students in the reading program increased their oral reading fluency scores 82% over baseline, compared with a 38% increase in the control group.

More Information

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