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EdData II – 2015 Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) National Baseline Assessment in Mali

The early grades form the foundation of a child's lifelong learning. Developing a strong cognitive and linguistic foundation helps a child learn to read, which in turn, helps ensure a child's success in upper primary school, secondary school, and beyond. The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) is a tool that monitors key aspects of reading acquisition. As a baseline assessment, the results help determine whether early grade students are currently learning how to read in Malian schools, and if not, what specific skills may be lacking. The information collected from the EGRA can inform the design and development of strategies to improve overall learning outcomes in the country.

Gross school enrollment rates in Mali have improved substantially over the past decades, increasing from 23% in 1971 to 59% in 2000, and climbing to 83% in 2011 and 2012. In addition to the efforts put forth by the Government of Mali to expand access to schooling, national plans have consistently recognized the need to improve the quality of basic education. The momentum developing around reading improvement included efforts such as the 2009 EGRA, conducted with the Mali Ministry of Education, as well as a number of other large scale assessments such as the *Programme d'analyse des systèmes éducatifs de la CONFEMEN* (PASEC) in 2011 and the *Œuvre Malienne d'Aide à l'Enfance du Sahel's* (OMAES's) Bèekunko in 2011 and 2012.ⁱ In 2011, the Ministry of Education set the standard for familiar word reading for students in Grade 2 in *curriculum* and *classique* schools. It was established that students should be able to read 31 familiar words per minute in French and Bamanankan.ⁱⁱ

The 2015 EGRA study of early grade reading skills and classroom practices was conducted in May, 2015 in three regions of Mali—Koulikoro, Sikasso, and Ségou. Children in Grade 2 in *classique* and *curriculum* schools were assessed respectively in French and Bamanankan in letter-sound identification, familiar and non-familiar word reading, short story reading, and reading comprehension. Both sets of Grade 2 students were also tested in oral French. Grade 4 children in *medersas* were assessed on the same basic oral French but did not receive the full EGRA. Classroom observations were conducted and student questionnaires were administered in all schools to better understand prevailing teaching practice in the sampled schools.



In 2015, more than 2,800 learners from 149 schools were assessed.

This brief memorandum summarizes the findings of the 2015 Mali EGRA study and describes the situation in classrooms in the three regions where data were collected.

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Key findings: The 2015 EGRA found that 66% of children in Grade 2 cannot read a single word in Bamanankan and 70% cannot read a single word in French, compared with 83% and 94%, respectively, from the 2009 EGRA. Although the 2009 and 2015 findings cannot be directly compared due to differences in the sample, in general, the two studies indicate a slight reduction in zero scores, yet the situation for the majority of children remains the same—they are not learning how to read in French or Bamanankan in the first two years of school.

Overall, across the three target regions, only 2% of students met the national standard of reading 31 familiar words per minute. In Ségou, 5% of students in *curriculum* and *classique* schools met or exceeded the standard; in Koulikoro, the percentage was 2%; and in Sikasso, zero met the standard.

Nevertheless, assuming equal inputs, children who are learning to read in the language they speak at home (Bamanankan) have fewer zero scores and better accuracy (percent correct out of those attempted) than children learning to read in French.

Performance in curriculum schools.

EGRA results in Bamanankan in <i>curriculum</i> schools in the three regions	Overall
Letter sounds (clpm)ⁱⁱⁱ	15.3
Familiar words (cwpm)^{iv}	4.2
Invented words (cwpm)	2.5
Short story reading (cwpm)	4.1
Reading comprehension^{*v}	3.7%
French vocabulary[*]	32%

Grade 2 children attending *curriculum* schools learn to read in Bamanankan. On average, they could read a short passage of text at a fluency rate of 4 correct words per minute (cwpm). Regionally, children in Sikasso had consistently lower scores on all Bamanankan reading subtasks. Children in *curriculum*

schools are acquiring some basic understanding of oral French, but this understanding is mostly related to classroom objects.

Performance in *classique* schools.

EGRA results in French in <i>classique</i> schools in the three regions	Overall
Letter sounds (clpm)	10.4
Familiar words (cwpm)	2.4
Invented words (cwpm)	1.4
Short story reading (cwpm)	3.2
Reading comprehension[*]	3.2%
French vocabulary[*]	28%

Students in *classique*-type schools have French as the language of instruction and the language in which they learn to read. On average, Grade 2 students read 3.2 cwpm, but 70% of children could not read a single word of the reading passage they were given.

The scores in French oral vocabulary are similar to the scores of children in *curriculum* schools who are learning to read in Bamanankan and acquiring French as a second language, although one would expect students in *classique* schools to perform better because they receive more exposure to the French language.

In both *curriculum* and *classique* schools, there was no significant difference between boys' and girls' performance on the core reading subtasks in either language.

Performance in *medersas*. Performance on the French vocabulary subtask was similar to Grade 2 performance in other regions—learners demonstrated limited French ability. More testing is needed to determine children's reading ability in *medersas*, but acquiring French oral language skills is a necessary precursor to children becoming fluent readers in French.

Findings from the classroom observation exercise indicate student attention was high, with little observed off-task behavior on the part of the teacher. Teachers themselves demonstrated reasonable fluency when reading a short text in Bamanankan and even more so when reading in French. A key recommendation for teachers is to structure day-to-day classroom time to include more opportunities for students to build vocabulary of familiar words and practice decoding skills. More time is needed for children to individually practice reading short, decodable stories. Most observed reading lessons were teacher-directed; on average, across all school types, students asked questions in approximately 11% of classrooms.

There is a critical need to improve children's opportunity and provide teachers with strategies for making use of print materials in varied and effective ways.

ⁱ The 2009 EGRA was supported jointly by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and USAID.

ⁱⁱ As per Décision No. 04336/MEALN-SG, *Portant standards en lecture dans les classes de l'Enseignement fondamental*, November 4, 2011.

Performance in 2015 is still strongly skewed toward the low end of the distribution, with most children able to read only 1–10 words, if any at all. It is encouraging that in both *curriculum* and *classique* schools, children are learning some basic letter identification skills (either name or sound), but more work is needed. Poor performance in reading may be related to the lack of print materials in classrooms and homes.

The survey data primarily pointed to the importance of having the opportunity to read, either in school or at home. In *curriculum* schools, children who said they have a textbook at school were two times more likely to be able to read at least one word. Similarly, if a child reported having any kind of reading materials at home, he or she was 1.8 times more likely to be able to read at least one word, and 1.6 times more likely if he/she reported having someone else at home who knows how to read.

ⁱⁱⁱ Correct letters per minute (clpm).

^{iv} Correct words per minute (cwpm).

^v *Mean score for these subtasks is expressed as percent correct out of total possible.