

FACT SHEET

USAID LITERACY PROGRAMS



A second grade student in Egypt who has received improved reading instruction under USAID/Egypt's Girls' Improved Learning Outcomes (GILO) Project. Photo Credit : USAID GILO

The Challenge

While primary school enrollment has increased significantly in the developing world over the past decade, recent studies show that in many low-income countries very little learning is occurring in the classroom. In some countries, even children enrolled in school for six years are unable to read and understand a simple text. Adult literacy is now estimated at almost 1 billion worldwide. Most adults who lack basic literacy skills live in developing countries; two-thirds of illiterate adults are women.

Economic and health crises, conflict, and natural disasters all exacerbate this problem by negatively impacting school quality and access.

Why is Literacy Important?

Literacy is the foundation for personal and political freedom—the ability to read a newspaper, fill out a job application, complete and election ballot, and note warnings on prescription labels brings independence and self-sufficiency. Studies have shown that literacy rates are directly related to a country's economic growth. A 10 percent increase in the share of students reaching basic literacy translates into a 0.3 percentage point higher annual growth rate for that country. Literacy also contributes to overall wellbeing. It has been found that women who participate in literacy programs have better knowledge of health and family planning and are more likely to adopt preventive health measures or seek medical help for themselves or others. Moreover, recent studies have shown that **early grade reading** competency is vital to future school success. Children who do not attain reading skills at the primary level are more likely to repeat grades and eventually drop out, putting them on a lifetime trajectory of limited economic and developmental opportunity.

USAID's Response

USAID launched a new Education Strategy in February 2011. The Strategy's first goal is to **improve reading skills for 100 million children in primary grades by 2015**. In support of this goal, USAID is:

- improving reading instruction by strengthening teacher effectiveness, increasing the availability and use of reading materials, and improving school management

- strengthening primary education systems, improving policies, standards and benchmarks for reading
- building parental, community, and private sector engagement in reading improvement efforts

In all of its efforts to improve reading skills, USAID emphasizes the importance of country-ownership, sustainability, the need for gender-sensitive approaches, the importance of measuring outcomes and the use of innovative technologies and practices.

Illustrative examples of USAID efforts to improve literacy include:

- **The Girls' Improved Learning Outcomes (GILO) Project in Egypt** works to re-energize thousands of teachers by introducing active-learning approaches and enhanced reading instruction. In 2010, the project conducted an early grade reading assessment in Arabic in grades two through four in Upper Egypt. The assessment revealed that 50 percent of those tested could not identify a single letter sound, and that nearly a third of students in grade four could still not read a single word. Based on the assessment results, the project designed a package of reading lesson plans that improved the teaching of phonics. A year later, preliminary analyses indicate that students in supported schools identified an average of 19 more letter sounds per minute than students in control schools at the end of the school year, an increase of nearly 200 percent.
- In **Liberia**, USAID's **Early Grade Reading Assessment Plus Program** engaged more than 10,000 students in grades 2 and 3 and 500 teachers in 180 schools in an effort to improve the teaching of reading. Three groups of 60 schools were randomly selected to receive "full", "light" or no program interventions. In schools receiving "full" treatment, continuous assessments of student performance were used to improve the quality of instruction and resource materials and to enhance accountability for outcomes in reading. At the end of the program, children in the full treatment schools were found to have improved their reading skills at rates two to three times faster than children in control schools.
- In **Mali**, where only 23 percent of boys and 10 percent of girls can read a simple sentence in French by the end of grade four, USAID has launched a nationwide **Road to Reading** program. The program aims to improve literacy instruction in more than 40,000 grade 1-6 classrooms through improvements in teacher training, evaluation systems, supervisory practices and the policy environment. The program also uses Interactive Radio Instruction to reinforce French literacy skills and has developed reading kits to accompany the broadcasts.
- USAID is evaluating the use of cellphones, tablets, PDA devices, micro-projectors, and eReaders, among other technologies to improve literacy and learning outcomes. In the **Philippines and Tanzania** the USAID-supported **Bridgeit** initiative is using mobile technologies to provide educational content to teachers. By providing primary school teachers with cell phones and a rich catalog of educational titles for download, the program offers locally relevant educational videos and other media for schools that would otherwise have extremely limited access to such material.