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EDDATA II

EGRA: Frequently Asked Questions

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EGRA: Frequently Asked Questions

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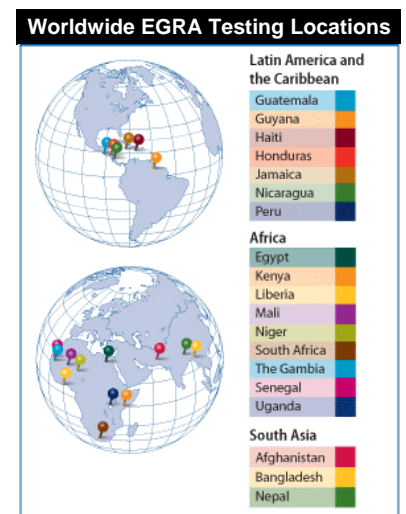
Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA)

Why early grade reading? The ability to read and understand a simple text is one of the most fundamental skills a child can learn. Without basic literacy there is little chance that a child can escape the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Yet in many countries, students enrolled in school for as many as six years are unable to read and understand a simple text. Recent evidence indicates that learning to read both *early* and at a sufficient *rate* are essential for learning to read well. Acquiring literacy becomes more difficult as students grow older; children who do not learn to read in the first few grades are more likely to repeat and eventually drop out, while the gap between early readers and nonreaders increases over time.

What is the Early Grade Reading Assessment? Most national and international assessments are paper-and-pencil tests administered to students in grades four and above (that is, they assume students can read and write). Results for those few low-income countries that participate in PISA or TIMSS (and inferring from the results of regional assessments such as PASEC and SACMEQ)[1] indicate that the median child in a low-income country performs at about the third percentile of a high-income country distribution. From these results we can tell what students did not know, but cannot ascertain what they *did* know (often because they scored so poorly that the test could not distinguish whether the child did not know the content or simply could not read the test).

In contrast, EGRA is designed to orally assess the *most basic foundation* skills for literacy acquisition in early grades, including pre-reading skills such as listening comprehension. The test components are based on recommendations made by an international panel of reading and testing experts and include timed, 1-minute assessments of letter naming, nonsense and familiar words, and paragraph reading. Additional (untimed) segments include comprehension, relationship to print, and dictation. In each of the language pilots conducted to date, EGRA meets psychometric standards as a reliable and valid measure of early reading skills.

How is EGRA administered? EGRA is an individually administered oral assessment of foundation literacy skills requiring about 15 minutes per child. It has been designed as an inexpensive and simple diagnostic of individual student progress in reading. In addition, ministry personnel can use the results to identify schools with particular needs and develop instructional approaches for improving foundation skills (e.g., poor letter naming results may indicate the need for additional alphabet practice).

Where has EGRA been used and what do the results look like so far? EGRA has been applied in a host of countries and languages (see map at right). Results thus far indicate generally low levels of student acquisition of foundation literacy skills. For example, in one country, students at the end of grade 2 were correctly able to name about 23 letters in English in one minute. For the sake of comparison, in the United States, reading norms state that children reading at fewer than 40 correct letters per minute at the end of kindergarten should be considered at some risk, while those reading at less than 27 are definitely at risk. Thus, the *average* level of letter reading fluency in the tested country was, in grade 2, *half* of what in the United States would be considered to put the child at some risk at the end of kindergarten.

Worldwide EGRA Testing Locations

Latin America and the Caribbean
Guatemala
Guyana
Haiti
Honduras
Jamaica
Nicaragua
Peru

Africa
Egypt
Kenya
Liberia
Mali
Niger
South Africa
The Gambia
Senegal
Uganda

South Asia
Afghanistan
Bangladesh
Nepal

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[1] Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA); Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS); Programme d'Analyse des Systems Educatifs de la Confemen (PASEC); Southern Africa Consortium for the Measurement of Educational Quality (SACMEQ).

To provide an overall sense of levels of reading in the countries where EGRA has been tried, the following table provides summary averages for oral reading fluency in terms of correct words per minute (cwpm). Note that country names have been excluded to avoid comparisons (cross-language comparisons are not encouraged due to differences in language structure; see below). In Africa's English-speaking countries, grade 2 oral reading fluency is 10 to 20 words per minute. In the United States, students are expected to read about 50 cwpm at the end of grade 1—thus, EGRA countries are performing below the fifth percentile level of U.S. norms. With a relatively transparent language such as Spanish, performance standards are higher: Children in Spain achieve about 60 cwpm at the end of grade 1—EGRA countries are performing at one half that rate. Oral reading fluency is both an excellent predictor of later reading skills (correlations between 0.7 and 0.9, using high-income country studies) and a warning light: If reading problems are not corrected early on, the gap in reading skills between readers and nonreaders actually increases. Thus, a key task in low-income countries is to get all children reading well by the end of grade 1, or at the latest by grade 2 where scripts are complicated and poverty is rampant.

Oral Reading Fluency Levels (Correct Words per Minute) in EGRA

		Grade		
		1	2	3
Africa	French	2.9	17.4	32.4
(Low Income)	English 1	2.2	4.0	9.2
	English 2		11.4	
Latin America	English		59.0	73.1
(Lower Middle Income)	Spanish 1	9.2	29.3	
	Spanish 2	32.0	59.6	78.8

Can EGRA results be used to compare results across languages and countries? Preparation of the EGRA instrument for use in a particular country generally involves some adaptation, including translation into the language of instruction. It is important to recognize that this limits the ability to make comparisons across countries. One reason for this stems from the research on reading acquisition, which indicates that while all children move through the same stages when learning to read, the rate at which they move through them differs by language (and the degree to which these languages vary in their orthographic complexity). Another reason is related to the technical standards for making such comparisons, which require evidence that translation and other adaptations do not change the difficulty level of the test and hence the meaning of the scores across systems. Despite the challenge of comparing results across countries and languages, finding out at which grade children are typically "breaking through" to literacy, and comparing these grades across countries or regions, will be a useful analytical and policy exercise.

Once EGRA identifies the areas for improvement, what can be done to improve learning outcomes? EdData II has developed a strategy for improving student learning using research-based instructional approaches to remedy critical areas identified by the EGRA instrument. For example, based on the EGRA results, teachers may be taught to monitor students' oral reading fluency and practice decoding strategies. This approach recently was tested in 40 randomly selected schools (20 treatment and 20 control) in Kenya, and a two-year control-treatment intervention is under way in Liberia. This continuous cycle for improving student learning, including evaluation together with specific support for teachers and monitoring for accountability, is a process that has generated average student learning gains on the order of 30 percent or more in South Africa (District Development Support Program) and Zambia (Break Through to Literacy). Efforts in Mali and Niger using EGRA to inform the development of materials and sequenced, scripted teaching and continuous assessment strategies have demonstrated very promising results, even for large classrooms (all children reading within a few months). Research in the United States indicates that early acquisition of foundation literacy skills is an important predictor of later school success; teachers can promote that success by strengthening those skills identified as needing improvement by the EGRA instrument.

How can USAID Missions "buy into" EdData II and how much will it cost? RTI International holds the current EdData II task order contract from USAID/Washington. EdData is a USAID-funded program that has supplied survey-based data on education in countries worldwide since 1997. The data are used for planning, monitoring, and evaluating education policies and programs. Missions can issue a Request for Task Order Proposal (RFTOP) as part of EdData II, detailing the proposed number of schools and students to be evaluated and the degree of representation required for sampling. Costs for application of the EGRA instrument will vary by country and are highly dependent on local inputs of labor and transportation. In countries where ministry staff or other salaried officials are trained as enumerators, the cost of application can be significantly reduced. As a purely illustrative example, local assessment costs (excluding international technical assistance) in The Gambia in 2007 for a baseline testing of 1200 students in 400 schools was about $25,000 (included workshop costs, per diems, printing, and transportation for Ministry staff; paid enumerators were not used for this task). Additional information, supporting documentation and references, and sample instruments can be found at www.eddataglobal.org.